

18 LANGUAGE, CULTURE, ETHNICITY

Read:

Rodolfo Stavenhagen, Language and social identity

Peter Whiteley, Do “language rights” serve indigenous interests? Some Hopi and other queries

Uli Linke, “There is a land where everything is pure”: Linguistic nationalism and identity politics in Germany

Jane Hill, 2008. Language in white racism: An overview.

I. Introduction

A. Language plays many roles in addition to being a channel to communicate referential meaning

1. A given language is often seen to represent non-linguistic qualities

a. For example, “Italian is musical, just like the Italians”

b. **DISCUSS:** other examples?

2. Sometimes the language is seen as being the cause, not just a symbol, of these non-linguistic characteristics¹

a. Classic example: arguing that, in contrast to English, where we say “time runs,”

1) In Spanish they say “time walks,” which produces in Spanish-speakers a more laid-back notion of time

2) The supposed “mañana” (“tomorrow”) attitude (procrastination, lack of the work ethic, procrastination)

b. This notion is thoroughly discredited today—the relationship is not so simple, and the “mañana” idea simply an ethnoracial slur

c. These are called “linguistic ideologies (Hill, p. 31)

B. In addition to the referential messages being sent, speakers communicate other ones

1. Speech indexes (points to) identity, it sends messages about identity

¹ This is known as a strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. See Benjamin Lee Whorf, 1956. *Language, Thought, and Reality. Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. John B. Carroll, ed. New York: Wiley.

- a. Sometimes such messages are sent totally unconsciously on the part of the speaker

- 1) **DISCUSS:** Examples?

II. Speech and ethnic, national, and racial identity

A. Example: gender and class

1. A study in Norwich, England² of attitudes toward speaking “proper” English
2. Men rated themselves as speaking a more lower-class version of English than they really did
3. But women rated themselves as speaking a higher-class version than they actually did
 - a. Linguists made the evaluations
4. An association was being made between masculinity, social class, male solidarity, and working-class culture
 - a. The men wanted to see themselves as “regular guys” who didn’t “put on airs,” or who were “wimpy”
 - b. Upper-class British men and their accents are seen as effeminate—“twits”
 - 1) The British comedy group Monty Python enacts this perceived characteristic
5. The Norfolk women aspired to “speaking properly” as a marker of their class position and ambitions for their children
 - a. The working-class men agreed with this, supported it
 - 1) Their wives *should* “speak better”
 - 2) Their wives are the ones to teach the children, to know about manners, etc.
6. In general, femininity requires refined, grammatically correct, soft speech—coincides with middle-class speech styles

² See Peter Trudgill, 1974. Language and sex. In *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. Harmondsworth: Pelican: 78-99.

7. Think of men and women speaking in lower-class registers in the USA—the men retain their masculinity, the women come across as “vulgar,” assertive, crude, etc.
 8. The Hill chapter makes this point using the “double negative” feature of working-class speech (p. 37)
- B. Jane Hill³ studies the correlation between languages and class—ethnic/race prejudice of a very subtle kind
1. Shows how nuanced and subtle some of this majority linguistic dominance can be
 2. We tend to see Mock Spanish as funny, harmless—if you can’t appreciate it, you’re too “PC” (politically correct)
 - a. “No way, José”
 - b. But she suggests that it enacts dominance every time it’s used
 3. **DISCUSS:** examples?
 - a. “The Big Enchilada”
 - b. Remember: just because a racist joke is funny doesn’t cancel out the fact that it is racist

III. *Language as Symbol of Identity*

- A. Example: Gender
1. Quite often when two languages or two dialects of the same language are in contact and there’s friction, it will be about class as well as ethnic issues
 2. Asymmetric power relations, different economic options
 3. These identities will also be gendered and often classed
 4. De la Cadena’s “Women are more Indian,” the article on Peru
 - a. As a rule, indigenous women are more likely to be monolingual;

³Jane Hill, 1999. Language, race, and white public space. *American Anthropologist* 100 (3): 680-689. Also, 2008, *The Everyday Language of White Racism*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

- 1) Stavenhagen points this out as well
 - b. We discussed how this is often seen as appropriate, because women are seen as safeguarding the language of their specifically indigenous identity
- B. Languages, like other concepts we have discussed
1. Should be seen in terms of relationships between people (both individuals and groups) performed, enacted through speech
 2. It is not the linguistic attribute being noticed and commented on that's important in itself, what's important is the group that speaks the language, and the differences between groups that make the attribute important.⁴
- C. Fredrik Barth (remember the discussion in Eriksen?) says that in addition to looking at the content of ethnic differences
1. It is always was important to examine boundaries and boundary maintenance
 2. Especially true in politicized situations involving more than one language
 3. Which is why thinking that language differences *create* ethnic tension and conflict, because people don't understand one another, is way too simple
 4. The idea that language differences—inability to understand one another, misunderstanding—produce conflict, is very old
 - a. In the Old Testament: the story of Babylon—the beginning of failing to understand one another's speech seen as the beginning of all misunderstandings
 - 1) What's occurring is that “understand the other” is being conflated with “comprehends the language being spoken”
 - b. Whereas in fact there are many additional ways of misunderstanding apart from not understanding speech
 5. Corollary idea: Esperanto-like global languages will solve these problems
 - a. Again, way too simple: if everyone spoke English, ethnoracial and social class misunderstanding and conflict would not disappear

⁴ Donald Horowitz, 1985. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 50.

- b. Speech would still enact, would still instantiate the differences and the power asymmetry
- c. As does non-verbal behavior
 - 1) **DISCUSS**: examples?

IV. Linguistic nationalism: Language as symbol of the nation

- A. “Nation-building” in Europe linked “nation” with “culture” with “language”
 - 1. Eriksen’s example of the campaign to turn Norway into a nation-state
 - a. The language Nynorsk was created because the Norwegian being spoken was seen by nationalists as too “polluted” by Danish (who controlled the territory that turned into Norway)
 - 1) Ivar Aasens led the effort
 - b. In addition, the goal of having a truly unifying, democratic national language led the linguist who created it to gather lexicon (words) and grammatical constructions from all over Norway
 - 2. Esperanto is also an invented language composed of several languages
 - a. But Esperanto intended to *overcome* nationalism as well as improve communication
- B. Linguistic problems arising in other European countries due to nation-building projects
 - 1. Basque regions,⁵ Wales, Scotland, Catalonia (in Spain), many other places
 - 2. Ireland
 - 3. The Linke article
 - a. Because of Nazism, racialized nationalism is problematic in Germany, so a shift is made to language—which can be seen to represent other domains of Germanness

V. Post-colonial problems and language nationalism outside of Europe

- A. In the U.S., because the dominant language, English, is VERY dominant

⁵ Jacqueline Urla, 1993. Contesting modernities: Language standardization and the production of an ancient modern Basque culture. *Critique of Anthropology* 13 (2): 101-118.

1. We don't have many of the problems other countries have
 2. What problems do we have?
 - a. Arguments about bilingual education
 - 1) Legislation that prohibits the use of Spanish in schools
 - 2) "Official English" legislation
 - a) "Speak American"
 - 3) Nonstandard English spoken by some African Americans
 - b. Hill's 1999 article and 2008 book discuss ethnoracial domination via speech of White English speakers and Spanish speakers perceived as non-white or not-quite-white
- B. Other examples of linguistic repression in the US?
1. Native American children were forbidden to use their language in boarding school
 2. Immigrant children forbidden to speak to each other in German, Italian, etc., in school, even if they were siblings
- C. The class site contains a newspaper article on English and French in Quebec⁶; things have softened, bilingualism is growing
1. Use of the one or the other language isn't a political statement nearly as much as it used to be
 - a. The Handler article you read on Quebec
 2. A lot of people resented the very stringent legislation that required French for EVERYTHING, required the French word to appear before the English
 - a. Even imported merchandise had to have French (we see it on many packages here)
 - b. **DISCUSS:** good thing? Bad thing?

⁶ Krauss, Clifford, 2003. Quebec seeking to end its old cultural divide: Getting along in English and en Français. *New York Times* April 13.

3. 40 years of turbulence, marches, etc.
 - a. Its origin was colonial domination; continuing resentment
 - b. British seizing Quebec province from the French and English speakers dominating ever since
4. The article points out that separatist politics has been bad for business
 - a. There has been flight of English-speaking individuals and firms
5. Fear of assimilation on the part of French speakers has eased
6. Attitudes of those English-speakers who remained have changed
 - a. “It’s cool to be bilingual”

VI. The language situation in states that have gained independence more recently:

- A. Vast majority are plural with respect to ethnicity and language⁷
- B. Example of Malay language
 1. Sign in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia: “Glorify the National Language”
 - a. Suggests that it has been denigrated
 2. “Malayness” was a relatively new idea
 - a. Earlier, people’s identity was rooted in a region and that region’s language(s), rather than rooted in the territory that became Malaysia upon independence
 3. But the “nation-building” project
 - a. Requires the Malay language to represent Malays (the people) *in opposition to* Chinese and Indians
 - b. Remember Ong’s article?
 - c. Note that here those in power, who make up the majority are *not* dominant economically
- C. What do such linguistically plural states do?

⁷ This section follows Donald Horowitz, 1985. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley: U Cal.

1. Depends on the politics—and language politics can be volatile, stubborn and, at times, very bloody
 2. Why?
 - a. Symbolic claims tend to be absolute
 - b. If you identify your fortunes with those of your language, if you see the status of your language to reflect your own sense of dignity and self-reflect
 - c. It's difficult to find a compromise
- D. Language links political claims to ownership
1. With psychological demands for the affirmation of group worth
- E. In 1964 a young man in the S. Indian city of Tiruchirapalli set himself afire while shouting “Death to Hindi! May Tamil flourish!”
1. Nine others committed suicide over the same issue the next year
 2. A researcher examining these instances of violence⁸:
 - a. Shows that it's not just “linguistic nationalism” European-style
 - b. She documents how devotional practices to the language are seen as devotion to the embodiment of a language—Mother Tamil
 - c. Devotees say the practice dates from antiquity, but the devotion in fact began in the late 19th century
 - d. Reaction to the colonial government's linguistic literature that classed Sanskrit as the classical language of the Aryans
 - e. And Tamil as a vernacular language of the Dravidians
- F. Like ethnic claims in general, language claims are made in a moral, categorical manner
1. The problem is that in a multilingual state there has to be a language policy

⁸ Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970*. Berkeley: U California Press, 1977.

2. What language will be used in Parliament, in official letters, on road signs, etc.?
 - a. When driving around Wales and Scotland in the 1990s one could see road signs in English crossed out and Welsh or Scottish Celtic spray-painted in
 3. So it's easy for some groups to see a language policy as domination
- G. Language issues are symbolically capable of weaving together claims to exclude others with claims to shore up uncertain group worth
1. Clearly much is at stake
 2. Policy choices have consequences for careers, for social-class mobility, bureaucratic effectiveness
 3. A group's language being given official status may aid the performance of its members
- H. Also, there will be struggles over the suitability of a given language
1. Measured by comparison to European language
 2. The appropriateness of a given language is contested
 3. Northern Sudan dismisses the contribution of the Southern tongues to human culture
 4. Tamils' Dravidian heritage seen as rich
 5. Bengali heritage seen as rich
 6. It can be galling for those who consider their language to have a rich tradition to have to trade what is in their eyes a richer linguistic heritage for a poorer one
 7. One reason English plays such an important role in India, despite its status as the language of the colonial oppressors
 8. Multilingual states usually have to perpetuate the colonial language as the interethnic link
 - a. Thereby preserving the advantages of the advanced, most educated group

9. Or the opposite claim will be made: we need to catch up, therefore the state should help by giving our language official status
10. Language institutes are created to:
 - a. Enrich the language
 - b. Cultivate the intellectuals who work in it (and employ them)
 - c. Directly related to middle-class job and promotion prospects in the civil service
- I. Often minorities want an official policy of multilingualism
 1. Chinese in Malaysia
 2. Bengali as an alternative official language
 3. Berbers in Algeria
 4. Tamils in Sri Lanka
- J. The campaign for linguistic parity is a transparent code for establishing greater equality more generally
- K. Language standardization will bring more conflict

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