April 14, 2003

17 LANGUAGE, CULTURE, ETHNICITY

Read:
Jackson, 1995. Culture, genuine and spurious: the politics of Indianness in the Vaupés, Colombia.

I. Introduction

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

B. A given language is often seen to represent non-linguistic qualities, differences
   1. “Italian is musical, just like the Italians”
   2. Discuss: other examples?
   3. Sometimes the language is seen as being the cause, not just a symbol, of these non-linguistic characteristics
      a. Classic example: in English we say “time runs,” whereas in Spanish they say “time walks”
      b. The semantic difference is said to explain the supposed “mañana” (“tomorrow”) attitude (procrastination, lack of the work ethic, procrastination)
      c. Discredited today—not so simple
   4. In addition to the referential messages being sent, speakers communicate other ones
      a. Speech indexes (points to) identity
      b. Sometimes totally unconsciously on the part of the speaker
         1) Discuss: Examples?
      c. Vaupés languages are a symbol of, an emblem of a person’s patrilineal clan membership

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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.
II. Language linked to ethnic, national, racial identity in complex ways

A. These identities will also be gendered and often classed

1. Remember “Women are more Indian,” the article on Peru?
   
   a. Women are more likely to be monolingual
   
   b. The feeling is that this is appropriate, because they’re seen as safeguarding the language, of their specifically indigenous identity

B. A study in Norwich, England²

1. Men rated themselves as speaking a more lower-class version of English than they really did

2. Women rated themselves as speaking a higher-class version than they did

3. (Linguists made the evaluations)

4. Association made between masculinity, social class and male solidarity, working-class culture—not “putting on airs,” or wimpy

   a. Upper-class British men and accents seen as effeminate—“twits”

5. Whereas the women aspired to “speaking properly” as a marker of their class position

   a. Working-class men agree with this, support it—their wives should “speak better”

   b. They are the ones to teach the children, to know about manners, etc.

6. Femininity requires refined, grammatically correct, soft speech—coincides with middle-class speech styles

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.

C. An article by Jane Hill³ shows the correlation between languages and class—ethnic/race prejudice of a very subtle kind

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1. Shows how nuanced and subtle some of this majority linguistic dominance can be

2. We tend to see Anglo Spanish as funny, harmless
   a. But she shows how it enacts dominance every time it’s used

3. Discuss: Other examples?
   a. “The Big Enchilada”
   b. Remember: just because a racist joke is funny doesn’t cancel out the fact that it is racist

D. Quite often when languages are in contact and there’s friction, there will be significant class as well as ethnic issues

1. Asymmetric power relations, different economic options

III. Languages, like other concepts we have discussed, should be seen in terms of relationships between people (individuals and groups of people)

A. It is not the linguistic attribute that’s important in itself, but the group and group differences that make the attribute important.4

B. 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 simplistic

4. This idea is very old
   a. In the Old Testament: the story of Babylon—the beginning of failing to understand one another’s speech seen as was the beginning of all misunderstandings

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A conflation of “understand the other” with “comprehends the language being spoken”

b. Whereas in fact there are many ways of misunderstanding in addition to not understanding a language

5. Corollary idea: Esperanto-like global languages will solve these problems

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 Norway

   a. The language Nynorsk was created because the Norwegian being spoken was seen by nationalists as too “polluted” by Danish

   b. In addition, the goal of having a truly unifying, democratic national language led the linguist who created it to gather content, grammatical constructions from all over Norway

2. Esperanto is also an invented language composed of several languages

   a. But Esperanto was a language intended to overcome nationalism as well as improve communication

B. Linguistic problems arising from nation-building projects in other European countries

1. Basque regions: Urla article

   a. Discuss: similarities with Eriksen’s discussion of Norway? Differences?

2. Wales, Scotland, Catalonia, many other places

3. Ireland

   a. A powerful illustration is Brian Friel’s “The Translation,” a play about English government agents traveling throughout Ireland in the 19th century, assigning English names to all the features of the landscape

V. Colonial heritage and language nationalism, problems outside of Europe
A. In the U.S., because the dominant language, English, is VERY dominant

1. We don’t have many of the problems other countries have

2. What problems do we have?
   a. Arguments about bilingual education
   b. The article by Hill discusses the political context of language policies in the Southwest and the country as a whole
      1) Legislation that prohibits the use of Spanish in schools
      2) “Official English” legislation

B. Other examples of linguistic repression in the US?

1. Native American children forbidden to use their language in boarding school

2. Immigrant children forbidden to speak to each other in Danish, Italian, etc., in school even if they were siblings

C. Handout on English and French in Quebec\(^5\); things have softened, bilingualism is growing

1. Use of the one or the other isn’t a political statement nearly as much as earlier

2. The very stringent rules: French for EVERYTHING, the French word coming before the English
   a. Got a lot of people angry—even imported merchandise had to have French (we see it on many packages here)

3. 40 years of turbulence, marches, etc.
   a. Arising out of—guess what?—colonial domination
   b. British seizing Quebec province from the French and dominating ever since

4. The article points out that separatist politics has been bad for business

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a. 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”

7. You will read more about this in Handler’s article for next time

VI. States that have gained independence more recently

   A. Vast majority are plural with respect to ethnicity and language

   B. Example of Malay language

      1. Sign in Kuala Lumpur: “Glorify the National Language”
         a. Suggests that it has been denigrated

      2. “Malayness” a relatively new idea
         a. Earlier, people’s identity was rooted in a region and that region’s language(s), not the territory that became Malaysia upon independence

      3. But the “nation-building” project

      4. Requires the Malay language to represent Malays the people in opposition to Chinese and Indians
         a. Remember Ong’s article?
         b. Note that here those in power and the majority are not dominant economically

   C. What do such linguistically plural states do?

      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

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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. 9 others committed suicide over the same issue the next year

2. A researcher examining these instances of violence⁷:

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

3. Earlier there was no linguistic conflict (linguistic nationalism)—a great deal of multilingualism, in fact

4. The notion of a “mother language” presumably was borrowed from the European notion of a mother tongue

F. Like ethnic claims in general, language claims are made in a moral, categorical manner

1. Problem is that in a multilingual state there has to be a language policy

2. What language will be used in Parliament, in official letters, on road signs, etc.? ⁷

a. Drive around Wales, Scotland, in 1990s one could see road signs in English crossed out, Welsh 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. So clearly much is at stake

2. Policy choices have consequences for careers, for social-class mobility, bureaucratic effectiveness

3. Being given official status may aid a group’s performance

H. In Assam

1. Resentment by the Assamese-speaking people towards the relative excellence of Bengali-speakers who have surpassed the Assamese in economic field, university examinations

I. Also, there will be struggles over suitability of a given language

1. Measured by comparison to European language

2. The appropriateness of a given language is contested

3. N. Sudan deprecates 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

a. Mauritania another example

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

   a. Argue that Sinhala will lose out to Tamil in Sri Lanka

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

J. 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

K. Linguistic parity is transparent code for equality more generally

L. Language standardization will bring more conflict

VII. The Vaupés

A. Fascinating area because language does not equal culture at all

B. The whole region is one single culture in many respects, with some regional variation

C. Language symbolizes identity in several ways

   1. Is a symbol of one’s exogamic patrilineal clan
      a. Everyone has a “father-language” (inherited from their father)
   2. Speaking it “performs” one’s clan membership
3. One must marry someone who “speaks” another language
   a. Doesn’t mean husband and wife can’t understand each other—
      100% multilingualism

D. Languages are maintained distinct in this highly multilingual setting because of
   the non-linguistic identity-marking role they play
   1. Languages are like football uniforms that facilitate the interaction within
      the culture—in this case marriage, agnatic and affinal (in-law) relations

E. No outsider understands the system, so these exogamous patrilineal clans have
   been termed “tribes,” earlier, and “ethnic groups” more recently
   1. Doesn’t matter if the person doing the labeling is indigenous or non-
      indigenous—no one understands
   2. Problems with these terms: what tribe or ethnic group requires you to
      marry outside it?
   3. I use the term “language group”

F. The article you read discusses how leaders in CRIVA (the regional indigenous
   organization), in their speeches and publications, attempt to present Tukanoan
   society successfully to outsiders
   1. Referring to Tukanoan language groups as “ethnic groups” puts CRIVA in
      a stronger political position than if it spoke about “federation of language-
      affiliated patrilineal clans.”
   2. The indigenous rights discourse emphasizes differences and downplays (or
      ignores) similarities
   3. So that the Vaupés as a whole appears more important, “the great
      indigenous nation” of the Vaupés contains many “ethnic groups”

G. CRIVA leaders find themselves facing a quandary when trying to combine the
   pro-indigenous rhetorics they have learned, with their knowledge of Tukanoan
   culture

H. The Vaupés is extremely difficult for anyone to understand because it challenges
   some of our most deeply held assumptions about language and culture:
   1. That the presence of many languages serves to divide, rather than unify
   2. That language equals culture
3. That marriages should occur between people who speak the same language