

CONSTRUCTING LANGUAGES AND PUBLICS: AUTHORITY AND REPRESENTATION

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1. Introduction

Cultural categories of communication, such as named languages, dialects, standards, speech communities and genres, are constructed out of the messy variability of spoken interaction. Such bounded and naturalized representations are the products of experts and expert knowledge as well as of more widely-shared linguistic ideologies. These representations are enacted and reproduced in familiar linguistic practices: Translation, the writing of grammars and dictionaries, the policing of correctness in national standards, the creation of linguistic and folklore collections or academies. The work of linguistic representation produces not only individualized "speakers" and "hearers" as the agents of communication, but also larger, imagined and emergent social groupings, including our focus here, "publics." Such representational processes are crucial aspects of power, figuring among the means for establishing inequality, imposing social hierarchy, and mobilizing political action.

The essays in this collection investigate the public construction of languages, the linguistic construction of publics, and the relationship between these two processes. Using both historical and ethnographic approaches, they examine empirical cases ranging from western industrial to Asian and 'small scale' societies. The papers were first presented at a session of the American Anthropological Association's 92nd meeting, held in Washington D.C., November 1993, and have a longer history of development in the discussions of a working group on language at the Center for Transcultural Studies in Chicago.¹ In turn, those discussions grew out of the 1992 special issue of *Pragmatics* on "Language Ideologies," itself a result of an AAA symposium.² All of these activities have been rooted in the interest in the

¹ Many thanks to Ben Lee, Director of the Center, for support of the workshop, and to the participants for many of the ideas contained in this introduction. Two participants in the AAA session, Elizabeth Mertz and Hy Van Luong, have not had time to revise their papers for this publication. We wish to thank our discussants for the session, William Hanks and Don Brenneis, for very helpful insights that shaped these final versions, although they too decided not to submit their comments for this issue. Finally, we are greatly indebted to Kari Robinson. Her generous investment of time and energy in the final phases of editorial work proved indispensable.

² That earlier collection also gave rise to a 1994 workshop on Language Ideology organized by Paul Kroskrity and sponsored by the School for American Research. A volume of that group's papers is now in preparation under the editorship of Kroskrity. The present collection has benefited from the influence of the SAR workshop, whose membership and conversations overlap significantly

relationships among language, political economy, and ideology that had emerged in a series of AAA sessions in the late 1980s.

The immediate point of departure for these essays on the historical construction of languages and publics is the larger project of understanding language ideologies, and the ways in which they mediate between social structure and linguistic practices (Woolard 1992). In the simplest formulation, language ideologies are cultural conceptions of the nature, form and purpose of language, and of communicative behavior as an enactment of a collective order (Silverstein 1987; Rumsey 1990; Irvine 1989). These are phenomena that, under a variety of labels, linguistic anthropologists and scholars in related fields have long noted and studied. The current reformulation emphasizes the social positioning, partiality, and contestability of practical and discursive ideologies, as well as the way they reflexively (re)shape linguistic and social structures. (See Woolard 1992; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994 for a discussion.)

The papers gathered here explore two related questions: First, how different images of linguistic phenomena gain social credibility and political influence, both within the academic disciplines of language (linguistics, folklore, philology) and in larger social fields; and, secondly, the role of linguistic ideology and practices in the making of political authority. We will take up these two themes in turn in this introduction, aiming to make explicit some of the questions, critiques and arguments that form the background to these concerns.

2. Authoritative representations of language

An ongoing project in the field of sociolinguistics is the critique of the concepts on which its growth in the 1960s was founded. For instance, despite its evident usefulness in theorizing the functional diversity of codes within linguistic repertoires, the notion of speech community has directed attention to consensus and sharing of interpretations within a bounded social unit, while neglecting processes of conflict, competition, exclusion, boundary relationships and differentiation, which are at the center of current social scientific investigations of identity formation (Rickford 1986; Irvine 1987; Irvine and Gal 1994).

In the present collection, several papers contribute to this critical exploration of the analytical categories we work with - including not only sociolinguistic concepts, but much older notions as well - by locating their historical sources in discursive fields and particular social and often political processes. The notions of "oral literature" (Bauman), and "genealogical relationship" (Irvine) are most fully discussed in this perspective.³

In examining the scholarly production of basic units of analysis such as "language family" and "folklore" or "oral literature," these papers do for linguistic

with those of the group at the Center for Transcultural Studies.

³ But our workshop discussions frequently turned to many other current ideas. For instance, Olender's (1992) description of the ubiquitous linkage made in the 19th century between religion and language sounded exotic enough to us to throw into ironic relief our own continuing obsession with language and power.

anthropology the reflexive task that has become familiar in the humanities and social sciences. Inspired in part by Foucault, but also by the new history and sociology of science, scholars ask how - through what practices - their disciplines have constituted themselves by inventing (not discovering) their objects of study. The choice of "representation" and "construction" as terms in our title signals a commitment to understanding scholarly categories less as aspects of the "real world," and more as parts of culture, often ideologically-loaded parts of social life.

Not content to note that the categories of a discipline might work as cultural capital for its practitioners, these papers describe in detail the relationship between linguistic ideas and other cultural conceptions, e.g. about the individual, the psyche, sexuality, national provenance, or Christian morality. They attempt to specify, as well, the social location and historical context of the exponents of the different linguistic views. As Silverstein notes, however, the aim is not thereby to discredit such concepts, but rather to get a better sense of the way in which linguistic ideologies have real historical effects. Thus, when Bauman shows the textual strategies, assumptions, and justifications through which Henry Rowe Schoolcraft created a body of "Chippewa folklore" out of a series of oral interactions, he is not dismissing Schoolcraft. Rather, he sheds light on practices of entextualization which create an apparently unified "object" of study, aspects of Schoolcraft's legacy which are still often taken for granted. Or, when Irvine shows that some 19th century philological categorizations of African languages were entangled with assumptions about sexuality and family relations, she is not simply debunking the theory of genealogical relationships among languages, but rather showing how it is, like all scholarly discourse, comprehensible as a principled product of its historical moment. Again, Silverstein is not interested in presenting Ogden and Richards' project of BASIC English as crackpot science, but rather in showing how the great popularity of the movement was made possible by the political structuring of applied science and language not in the academy so much as in the public sphere.⁴

The historical papers in this issue share a number of other general strategies. Rather than a single epochal conceptual schema, they each find, in their historical period, competing images of whatever aspect of language is the focus of analysis. That is, they attend to debates and discursive battles within folk notions of language that reveal not only shared assumptions or presuppositions of the participants but also alternative commitments. Often, as in the papers by Gal and Silverstein, the fights are between professionalizing students of language, and those who will later be defined as amateurs. Thus part of the battle has to do with the definition of legitimate inquiry. The papers suggest that images of linguistic phenomena gain credibility when they create ties with other arguments about aspects of aesthetic or moral life. And, as Silverstein in particular argues, representations of language phenomena gain social authority - in fact may only be thinkable - from the institutional locations from which their proponents speak.

Frequently, one position in such debates is subsequently established as natural, obvious, *objective*. That is, one characterization of language is seen as

⁴ For a very useful set of arguments showing that a constructivist stance towards knowledge does not necessarily imply a denial of reality, nor an embrace of relativism, see George Levine (ed.) 1993.

emanating not from any particular social position but rather from the phenomenon itself. A careful recuperation and contextualization of such debates has the salutary effect of dislodging, for readers, these later assumptions of naturalness. Showing the earlier positionality of a regime of representation that now seems simply a matter of "letting nature speak for itself" is especially important when, as often happens, the establishment of a natural phenomenon is not only warrant for a scholarly discipline, but is also called on to legitimate and authorize political programs.

A familiar example will provide brief illustration. By the end of the 18th century, and in contrast to well-established earlier views, languages were conceived to be natural entities, out there to be discovered, the product of human nature, to be sure, but independent of individual voluntary acts, and therefore not the creation of any self-conscious human will or intervention (Taylor 1990). Exactly because they were understood to be prior to intentional human political activity, they could be called on to justify and legitimate political actions, such as the formation of nation-states. The Victorian linguist Max Müller, for example, commented himself that in his times, "the science of language has been called in to settle some of the most perplexing social and political questions," acting "in favour of nations and languages against dynasties and treaties" (cited in Crowley 1989: 67; see also Irvine, this volume).

As Daston and Galison (1992) have recently argued, our current notion of "objectivity" comprises a number of distinct ways in which the "personal" is systematically censored, denied, or extirpated from the project of scientific observation and analysis. The definition of a phenomenon as independent of human will, as in the example above, creates one kind of objectivity. Another kind depends on the attempt to escape from an individual or socially-locatable perspective; it invokes a view from nowhere (Nagel 1986). This aperspectival objectivity, discussed in several of our papers, is interestingly related to the category of the public.

3. Publics

If the first strategy in these papers focuses on the different sources of authority for diverse definitions of language phenomena, then the second strategy analyzes the ways in which beliefs about languages and habitual engagement in particular linguistic practices create or buttress the legitimacy of specific political arrangements. Needless to say, the two are often related.⁵

We are interested in the category of the "public" as a form of language-based political legitimation. Discussion of "publics" has recently been reinvigorated in American social theory by the translation and republication of Habermas's early work, *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (1989 [1962]). Our aim here is not to add to the large literature of explication and criticism around this text (see e.g. Landes 1988; Robbins 1990; Calhoun 1992). We note, instead, that very little

⁵ Indeed, one can point to a general analytical ploy. Ideologies that appear to be about language can be read as coded stories or "displacements" about political, religious or scientific systems; ideologies that seem to be about religion, political theory, human subjectivity or science can be reinterpreted as implicit entailments of language ideologies, or the precipitates of widespread linguistic practices (Silverstein 1994; Lee 1993).

of this commentary has been sociolinguistically or semiotically informed. How might such language-oriented perspectives clarify ongoing debates, and how could we rework the notion of "public" to advance our own understanding of linguistic ideologies?

In the present context, the category of "public" is perhaps best thought of as one in a spectrum of forms of sociolinguistically-created authority. One of the best-known forms might be that described by Bourdieu for standard French, whose speakers' power is "misrecognized" and perceived as legitimately rooted in, rather than merely indexed by, their control of linguistic structures. Another is exemplary Javanese usage, which Errington reports here to be misrecognized as a quasi-natural attribute of elitehood. While these and many other examples of language ideology link sociopolitical systems to the formal structural properties of a code, Habermas's notion of public sphere valorizes a communication process, a form of verbal interaction: Groups of private individuals who gather to discuss matters of common political concern, bearing on state authority, and whose debates are decided on the basis of reason rather than the relative statuses of the interactants. This is what Kant characterized approvingly as the "conversation of mixed companies, consisting not merely of scholars and subtle reasoners but also of business people or women [who have] besides storytelling and jesting ...another entertainment, namely arguing," (cited in Calhoun 1992). The "public opinion" produced by such critical talk has authority exactly by virtue of being ruled by reason, "openness" and political equality. It was conceived to be as free from the private status-given interests of the participants as from the coercive powers of the state and the economy.

Habermas presents this as a historically specific phenomenon, emerging not just as an ideology, but also as a set of institutions and everyday practices in the western Europe of the 17th and 18th centuries. For him, the category of the "public" is explicitly a product of an emerging bourgeois, urban society - based on an increased traffic in commodities and news - spurred by early capitalist long-distance trade. The institutions that supported it included not only newspapers and the increasing use of print, but also coffeehouses, salons, and voluntary associations of innumerable kinds that provided the forums for reasoned debate. Clearly this is a different sense of "public" than that characteristic of the ancient world or of feudal Europe; and it required a reconceptualization of the "private" as the sphere for the formation of individuals. "State" and "society" were understood as entities set against each other, just as private interest was set against the public opinion of a new category of bourgeois "citizens" who did not fit into the feudal orders.

This portrait of the early bourgeois public sphere has been criticized on numerous grounds. It is at least as much an idealized and nostalgic image with which Habermas aims to criticize what he considers a debasement of 20th century public discourse, overly dependent on mass media and the "culture industry," as it is a historical study. And there has been much controversy since the work's initial publication about the actual historical processes involved. The institutional and ideological changes were quite different in England, France, Germany and the U.S., and the dating, location and even definition of the processes continue to be matters of controversy. Many question whether there were ever, anywhere, egalitarian, politically significant, public forums based on the rule of debate and reason. Feminists have pointed out that 18th and 19th century public forums were means of exclusion rather than universal openness, and that the discursive construction of

the public/private split was enabled by its association with a gender dichotomy that restricted women by definition (Landes 1988; Fraser 1990). Finally, many scholars have suggested that there have been, since as early as the 17th century, multiple publics: Proletarian, regional, religious, often in competition, contesting each other as well as the state.

But for our more modest purposes here, these criticisms only add to the potential interest of the concept. Indeed, all of the papers in this collection that deal with the construction of publics implicitly take one or another of these critiques as their starting point.

First, many of them (see especially Gal, Lee, Hill and Errington) note a negative logic by which the public, as an ideological construct, works to legitimate political action. One theme that has been developed in Habermasian studies is that publics derive their authority from being in a sense anonymous (most notably Warner 1990). They supposedly or potentially include "everyone" but abstract from each person's interest-bearing and privately-defined characteristics. By this reasoning, publics can represent everyone because they are no-one-in-particular. This disinterested, disembodied public, a form of *aperspectival* objectivity, was constructed against the personified and embodied legitimacy of the absolutist monarch, whose authority was often enacted exactly through spectacle and self-display.

But many of the papers here identify and explore an authority of authenticity (Hill, Errington, Gal, Bauman, Urla) that exists simultaneously with this authority of anonymity in the public sphere.⁶ Although the projection of authenticity (in the sincere individual or the particularistic community) can oppose that of anonymity as a form of legitimation, it does not necessarily do so. The relationship is often far more complex. Strategic glimpses of authenticity may actually subserve the authority of the impersonal, clinching the force of public discourse (see especially Hill and Errington for illustrations), or on the other hand the voice-from-nowhere may be constructed as the most authentic of voices competing for recognition as the embodiment of a particular community (see Gal and Urla; cf. Bauman for a related process in the construction of oral literature).

Further, these papers assume that a public need not be a countable, face-to-face group. The critique of sociolinguistics discussed earlier has recognized the limitations and distortions that result from taking face-to-face communication as the prototype of all communication. To be sure, when we unpack central concepts such as "speaker/hearer" and "audience", recognizing their internal complexity, a focus on face-to-face interaction provides a subtle understanding of interpersonal power dynamics (see, e.g. Goffman 1979). But such analyses have had much less to say about the ways in which linguistic practices contribute to the reproduction and legitimation of hierarchy in larger social institutions such as the state, or about the ways in which speech communities are linked to broader political economic structures (see Gal 1989 for a review). Similarly, within this framework it has been difficult to analyze adequately the processes of mass-mediated communication that

⁶ We thank Bill Hanks very much for highlighting this point in his comments on the AAA session. See also Fliegelman 1993 and Cmiel 1990 for discussion of this relationship in American history.

often connect disparate communities and that are increasingly of interest in social theory.

The papers in this issue attempt to extend the notion of public in order to address some of these questions. Habermas himself attributed the disintegration of the public sphere to the advent of a mass-mediated culture industry, and he has been accused of mistakenly basing his later theory of communicative action on the model of face-to-face interaction. But we can follow Habermas's lead beyond his own confines, and examine versions of "the public" as folk notions about groupness, interest, and communication. Public at this level is a mobile concept, as is demonstrated by the different foci of the papers here: e.g., proto-public as a realm of discursive practices actually constituted by the state for communication with citizens (Errington); a leaky zone of discourse distinguished from the private, with little reference to the state (Hill); a reading public or audience as market (Bauman). This broader approach to publicity enables analyses of mass mediated communication and encourages a re-thinking of speech community. The notion of public need not even rely on the idea of a concrete readership or spectatorship, but rather on the projection or imagination of groups or subjectivities in print or other mass media.

The process by which such projection occurs seems closely related to a very general semiotic property of language that is present as much in face-to-face as in other communication: The possibility of decontextualization and strategic recontextualization of linguistic voices and genres to create images of continuity and discontinuity with times, places and people not present in the immediate interaction. Goffman's (1979) notion of footing, Gumperz's (1982) contextualization cues, and Bakhtin's (1981) voicing all address this property. As Briggs and Bauman (1992) have pointed out, the gap between an earlier context and the recontextualization can be denied or highlighted, with different effects. Strategies that minimize intertextual gaps can contribute to constructions of history, authenticity and community.

The impersonality, projection, and intertextuality discussed above are widely implicated in political authority and in the authoritative models of the language disciplines as well. For instance, Warner (1990) argues that the legitimacy of 18th century American republicanism was based on the notion of disinterested individuals who could claim to represent the people because the decontextualized anonymity of print allowed them to be no-one-in-particular (routinely publishing unsigned or patently pseudonymous articles). Ben Lee here follows this line of argument, semiotically analyzing the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution and drawing out the implications for new forms of subjectivity as well as new forms of legitimation. Other papers show parallels in the ideology of language standardization. The standard language, usually best instantiated in print, defines (and legitimates) a political territory, sometimes precisely because it is not spoken by any actual group (Gal), and as in the case of Indonesian, is "devoid of ethnic inflection" (Errington).

As another example, Anderson's (1991 [1983]) notion of the nation as an "imagined community" plays on this same logic of non-face-to-face social groups defined through simultaneous readings as "all of us." The idea of the "Volk" originating in German philosophy and folklore studies accomplishes the same thing: Collections of tales whose authors were deliberately eliminated to produce the

authentic folk who are everyone because no-one. Indeed, as Hacking (1992) has recently argued, it was in the same late 18th century German philosophy that language "went public," not in the strictly Habermasian sense, but rather as part of the related belief that language is primarily for interpersonal communication, secondarily for internal thought, rather than vice versa. We might see Ogden's orthological English, examined in Silverstein's paper, as an attempt to cure the pathologies of thought and social life that were held to derive from this ordered relation.

Finally, the papers allow us to consider the generalizability of a concept of a public.⁷ Habermas located the emergence of an idea of a public in a particular period and set of conditions of European history. A public is not simply the result of a collection of structural features, as for instance, the introduction of print. Rather, it is an *idea*, an idea that, while moveable, highly malleable and borrowable, is hardly inevitable. We need to consider the dynamics that played a part in the production of publics under particular historical conditions, the extent to which they may be identifiable in other circumstances, and what their effects might be in such other settings.

As Schieffelin shows, the Kaluli cannot be said to think in terms of publics, in any of the forms discussed here. Yet they have experienced significant changes in forms of sociolinguistic authority, and the emergence of a new impersonal or anonymous source of authoritative evidence, the book. (Schieffelin's paper is one of the few in this collection to examine closely the reflexive effect of linguistic ideologies of authority on formal linguistic structures). Errington examines another public arena of discourse that is decidedly not Habermas's bourgeois public sphere, but rather a zone of state-to-citizen communication under construction by a post-colonial state. State-sponsored Indonesian linguistic strategies of objectivity reminiscent of the classic public are syncretically entwined with more traditional Javanese ways of indexing authority sociolinguistically.

Although Irvine's paper addresses the construction of languages rather than of publics, she offers a passing glimpse of another possible construction of that idea in Enlightenment France, one that perhaps competed with the ultimately dominant nation-based, state-bounded, exclusionary and hierarchizing public. In phrasing his quest as one for a "universal society" based in the ability to "converse" with "fellow citizens" of other continents, Degérando sketched a very different basis for imagined community that nonetheless shares some of the key features of the public. Such an observation hints at interesting links between alternate constructions of the public and the alternative visions of family underpinning the varying models of African languages Irvine analyzes. Urla examines more directly a self-conscious attempt to construct an alternative/oppositional public sphere, and highlights the linguistic strategies used within that enterprise. If we are to understand the ways in which the ideology of publics creates political authority, it is necessary to locate the phenomenon more precisely in time, space and everyday practice. These papers contribute to that effort by examining sometimes self-consciously contrasting and

⁷ Many thanks again to Bill Hanks who, in his oral comments on the papers, forcefully raised this issue of generalizability, as well as of the detachability of the dynamics of the production of publics from European historical conditions.

limiting cases.

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