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Language ideology revisited

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Abstract: In her contribution, Jillian Cavanaugh tells the story of the emergence of the concept of "language ideologies" that mediate "between the social practice of language and the socioeconomic and political structures within which it occurs." The concept became an embedded component in analyzing the treatment of minority languages and dialects, and how power relations can be revealed through everyday language use. Today, rather than an overarching framework, language ideology has evolved into a critical point of departure for understanding the intersection between language and various forms of inequality that also require other intellectual tools to fully grasp.

Keywords: language ideology/ideologies, political economy, language and power, language politics, intellectual genealogy

Language Ideologies was one of the first courses I took as a graduate student in linguistic anthropology in 1995, and it was the first time Bambi B. Schieffelin, my advisor and a key figure in the development of this paradigm, had taught it. In the course, we explored the myriad ways in which language articulates with systems of power, reading current scholarship on the subject – some pieces in draft form – as well as the work of foundational scholars whose work was being drawn on, such as Raymond Williams, Pierre Bourdieu, and Mikhail Bakhtin. We learned that language is not just social practice (a central tenet of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics) but is also and always infused with and caught up in the political economic, national, (post)colonial, and political circumstances that shape its use and its role as an object of study, political manipulation, and cultural value.

This course set the baseline for me and others: to study language in use was to study not just what people did with language, but also what they believed and felt about language, and how both are part of larger structures of power. Scholars at other US universities were teaching their graduate students about language ideologies as well, and when I went to the field to do my dissertation research in northern Italy, I was one of a cadre of graduate students taking up such projects in fieldsites all over the world. Once in the field, I encountered

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evidence of language ideologies everywhere – on menus, some of which featured poems in the local language; uttered as asides in everyday conversations when people critiqued or praised their own or others' speaking; and writ large on billboards that asserted the political value of local culture and language. Language ideologies were voiced by poets, journalists, my landlords, the guy who sold me newspapers every day, as well as my transcription consultants as we wrestled to transcribe and understand recordings of everyday conversation that contained complex mixings of standard Italian and the local language. By approaching language as not just an object or even a set of practices, but as an "enactment of a collective order," (Gal and Woolard 1995), I was able to consider how language is part and parcel of the political economic and historical forces that structured everyday life in the community in which I was doing research. Through this lens I saw not just what people were doing with language, but crucially, what was at stake when they fought over language and when they used it in everyday life.

Language ideologies are this collective order, that is, the beliefs and attitudes that shape speakers' relationships to their own and others' languages, mediating between the social practice of language and the socioeconomic and political structures within which it occurs. From the 1980s, when the concept was developed, through the early 2010s, language ideology was a dominant organizing frame for many who studied language in use. Its apotheosis in the United States represented a moment of relative unity, as scholars with otherwise disparate research concerns and geographic foci united around this framework that brought together signifying practice with political economic concerns. Here, I trace the history of language ideology in linguistic anthropology[1] in order to ask what it can offer us right now, what type of questions it might provoke, and the answers it might lead us to. After many decades, language ideologies has become taken for granted in the field, but continues to play an important role as the springboard from which scholars of language use can study the relationship between language and power.

1 Language ideology: Power and meaning

A language ideology perspective like the one I adopted starts from the premise that power shapes all interactions to some degree, and the development of this

1 I use "linguistic anthropology" here to refer to the study of language in use, including sociolinguistics, linguistic ethnography, and other fields who are part of the same conversations, though not always in the same terms.

concept grew out of a widespread desire to understand and chart this dynamic. Understanding how power works in society has occupied a great deal of social scientific attention, though language, particularly language in use, rarely played a part in understandings of power. But in the 1970s and 1980s, it became increasingly clear that in order to understand language use in all its particulars, scholars would need to take power into account, and so would need to build new conceptual models.

The case of Jacqueline Urla, who contributed to conversations about language ideologies from the start, is illustrative. Trained in both sociolinguistics and cultural anthropology in the early 1980s, Urla learned to investigate how language works as a communicative resource, and about scholarly understandings of ideology and power, but had to put the two together on her own. By reading the likes of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu in order to engage with political economic and discursive conceptualizations of power, she composed her own notions of how these frameworks helped illuminate the dynamics of minority language struggles of Basques she studied in Spain. Language in the Basque country was highly politicized for those who strove to separate from the Spanish nation-state, but also a site for enacting certain types of political subjectivities (such as when speaking Basque or Castilian Spanish "felt" right or wrong).

Around the same time, numerous other scholars were engaging in similar projects linking language and power, but also elaborating the multifunctional nature of language in use, recognizing that language, for instance, doesn't just express ideas, but also forms relationships and moves people to action. The works of Antonio Gramsci, Valentin Voloshinov, Roman Jakobson, and Charles S. Peirce, in addition to that of the scholars mentioned above, were particularly resonant for linguistic anthropologists like Susan Gal, Monica Heller, Jane Hill, Judith Irvine, Michael Silverstein, and Kathryn Woolard. In widely cited pieces in high-profile journals in the 1980s, these linguistic anthropologists and others applied these scholars' insights to particular case studies where linguistic and social inequalities and hierarchy called for explicit theorization of power in social relations. These works largely focused on national or colonial (or recently postcolonial) contexts, in which minority languages were variously pitted against standard or national languages such that minority language speakers were similarly ranked, promoted, constrained, or evaluated. Ideas about what language was, could, and should do abounded in such contexts, and these authors developed the concept of language ideologies to capture the complex interplay between how language was viewed, how language was used, and the hierarchies within which this use occurred.

In 1994, Schieffelin and Woolard wrote an *Annual Review of Anthropology* piece entitled "Language Ideology," which outlined what language ideology is

and why it is so vital. Ideology here was not mystification or "secondary explanations" but a central mediating factor that shapes social life via language use.[2] Schieffelin, Woolard, and Paul Kroskrity coedited the two volumes (Schieffelin et al. 1998; Kroskrity 2000) that became anchors in this field, both still widely read and extensively cited.

2 Doing language ideology research

When I returned from the field in Italy, I was lucky to join a dissertation writing group with several students from other universities who had also gone to the field to study language ideologies in Indonesia, India, Scotland, African immigrant communities, and Indigenous communities in Mexico. Various questions emerged while writing: First, when everything was language ideology, what could be left out? Second, if we all had a wealth of evidence of language ideologies from our very different contexts and situations, then what exactly was the essential nature of language ideology? Each of us came to a different conclusion on the latter question. Language ideology could be any configuration of ideas about language that were shared and informed by that community's particular political historical circumstances, which in turn shaped how people used language and understood themselves within these circumstances. But we found ourselves asking: could such a broad concept be useful beyond the recognition that variations of them existed everywhere and must be understood on their own terms?

The first question was equally difficult to resolve, for if everything was language ideology, then the type of explanatory power the concept could offer was limited in its generality. If language ideologies were everywhere, what was the value of mapping their particular contours within specific communities, which required the difficult methodological and analytical work of aligning micro-details of everyday linguistic practice as found in transcripts, for instance, with political movements, national and colonial histories of inequality, or economic structures? Such alignments, we found, required additional theoretical tools.[3]

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2 Other key publications, such as a pair of special issues of the journal *Pragmatics* in 1992 and 1995, emerged from seminal sessions at the American Anthropological Association annual meetings in the early 1990s; a workshop at the School of American Research; and other exchanges.

3 Irvine and Gal (2000) had demonstrated this as well in a seminal piece articulating specific semiotic processes that enabled language ideologies of differentiation.

Our struggles with the concept of language ideologies were illustrative of the difficulties of working with a paradigm largely designed to (re)analyze research that had already been done. As a starting point for new research, language ideology was a productive frame, but nearly overwhelming in terms of the data it could generate. Moreover, our endeavors seemed teleological, aimed at an already known endpoint, rather than revelatory. We found we needed to ask new questions and push the concept in new directions in order, for example, to capture the emotional dimensions of how people interact with language, or to push beyond the confines of the nation-state to see how language ideologies might circulate globally. The book I wrote a few years later looked to the aesthetic dimensions of language use to understand how language ideologies shape people's lives and choices (Cavanaugh 2009). In this and the work of others that followed, language ideologies became a valuable point of departure: researchers started by pointing out that people had language ideologies, and then developed more specific explanations of why they had these ideologies and how they manifested in and were mediated by language use through using other tools, such as turning to Peirce's concept of indexicality (contextually-specific meaning-making that emerges through repeated and shared use).

The sustained attention to ideological formations that shape communicative practices that the language ideology paradigm generated produced rich new theoretical frames, such as media ideologies and semiotic ideologies, which built on insights about the nature of mediated publics and the ways in which cultural beliefs shape how meaning could be made, respectively. In the process, language ideology became something we teach students, a foundational framework for addressing those early questions about power, belief, and language use. It became a point of reference, rather than an organizing concept and force in the field.

3 Language ideology now

These days, I will sometimes hear one of my students say, "Well, that's a language ideology" while discussing how people view their own or others' language use, even if we haven't yet defined or explicitly discussed the concept in class. Too often, this sounds like an ending, an answer that they already know and are ready to move beyond. But seeing language ideologies as simply speakers' views of language evacuates the concept of its explanatory power to understand beliefs as part of how systems of power are organized.

Language ideology was indeed an answer to a vital question: how can we understand how power and language are related? As is the case with scholarly conversations, answers beget new questions. But we neglect the genealogy of our current questions at our own peril, and the connections between what we think about language and how that may serve the powerful, reinforce social hierarchies, or shape our opportunities are as crucial to attend to now as they were then.

Language continues to be a potent political weapon, and scholars of language use can offer trenchant commentary and useful tools for understanding some of our most pressing public concerns, from hate speech and political performance to nick-naming, the #MeToo movement's patterns of accusations, and still-potent conversations about African American English. As Kathryn Woolard (2020) has recently written about language ideology, such work "allows us to comprehend change and stasis in social and linguistic life within one integrated model." Perhaps we need language ideologies and its integrated model now to engage in conversations about language and power with audiences outside of academia, but also as a way to recenter our attention on issues of social inequality and access to power. My students, for instance, seem to grasp intuitively that what you think about language is important, but also find it relatively easy to take the next step to recognize that criticizing how someone speaks might be linked to – and a way to achieve – political aims, like excluding such speakers from the nation-state. A language ideology perspective, or one that works from its basic premises, can shed light on the tight but often invisible connections between speaking and wielding – or being excluded from – power, a perspective that is as sorely needed now as it was when the concept was developed.

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