Midterm Essay

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**Why is Language Ideology Important for Ethnographers?**

Language ideology, as defined by Silverstein as the “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein 1973: 193), is a crucial concept in the field of linguistic anthropology. Centered closely around Silverstein’s notion of metapragmatics (Silverstein 1976), or Lucy’s notion of reflexibility (Lucy 2010), language ideology, serving as a form of metacommunication, is constantly framing what is being talked about. Yet language ideology is much more than the statements about the use of language, but is of anthropological importance to a broader group of ethnographers. In illustrating this point, I will first point out the double insights of language ideology regarding why it is not only about language alone. Then, I will argue that language ideology is the “mediating link” for ethnographers to discern the various aspects of society, including fundamental social institutions, identities, power relations, social values, etc., from the forms of talk, as well as to understand social changes and innovations through successive ideological changes. Last, I will turn to the work of ethnographers, and argue that language ideology could both enhance their reflexivity and provide them with methodological inspirations in looking for sites in their field work.

Language Ideology: Double Insights

To begin with, the first thing to note about language ideology is that it is never about language alone –– it carries a much wider range of knowledge about the society, and it could entail real consequences and changes in the material world (Gal & Irvine 2019). For the first part, in analyzing linguistic as well as a set of other semiotic practices, language ideology goes beyond the present linguistic form and use, and can be seen as closely tied to various social spheres, including ethics, politics, power relations, moralities and so on. Since language ideology much depends upon differentiation among signs, to pay attention to differences as well as similarities already carries the implication of certain social positions and background knowledge about the society. Take Basso’s study of Western Apache’s imitation of the white men’s talk as an example. For an Apache to discern the sign of such an imitation during their talk, he has to possess some basic knowledge of the habitual ways of speaking by both white men and Apache, as well as the Apache’s claim on a distinctive tribal identity against the cultural domination of Anglo-Americans, so that he could take up the speaking of English as a marked form of talk in the Apache setting. Furthermore, conjectures of the differentiation can provide insight into the relationship between the addresser and addressee, as well as cultural values and principles. Staying with the Apache case, we’ll find that the conjectures of the Apache to take up this sign as a joke signals the maturity of their interpersonal relationship which can be publicly affirmed by the joking practices, and the conflicted cultural values between Apache and white Americans regarding what constitutes deferential comportment (Basso 1979).

For the second part, language ideology is not only about language in that it is much more than “commenting on.” The influences of language ideology do not stay within the discursive level, but enter the material world and have real consequences for social action and social change (Gal & Irvine 2019). One illustrating example would be how women, though under many circumstances excluded from participating in the use and production of various genres, nevertheless could draw on particular genres, such as ritual wailing, to express their complaints about the injustice they’ve encountered, and sometimes even to gain a more active role in promoting social and political changes (Briggs & Bauman 1992). Another example would be how adoption of different registers along the axis from the economic position to two different kinds of reformist position within World Bank could mean actually forming solidarity with colleagues or breaking up with them on the human rights issue (Gal & Irvine 2019). The second part of the insight points to an active role of language ideology rather than merely a conceptual one (Woolard 1998: 12), emphasizing the power of linguistic practices in inducing actions and changes.

Taken together, both the two points above suggest the deeply engrained connection between language and society. It actually requires substantial ideological work to establish such a connection, and that is part of the reason why ethnographers have to pay particular attention to this process –– they are to unpack the frames, to trace the ideological work, and to ask “how seemingly essential and natural meanings of and about language are socially produced as effective and powerful” (Woolard 1998: 10). Among all the key mechanisms in the process, one of them is erasure. Erasure is defined as “that aspect of ideological work through which some phenomena (linguistic forms, or types of persons, or activities) are rendered invisible” (Gal 2019: 20). The goal of erasure is to ignore the misfits in the ideological work and create a totalizing vision (Gal 2019: 21). The mechanism of erasure pervades all the process of ideological work, including picking up a sign, creating an axis of differentiation, rhematization, fractal recursivity, and some others. I will here pick two processes where erasure is at work, and pay especial attention to its role in creating or destroying authority in society.

Erasure and the Naturalized Authority

The first process I want to focus on is the work of erasure during rhematization. Rhematization is the process where the grounds of sign relations are shifted, by a conjecture, from merely index to icon, and sign relations are thus apprehended “as part of a schema of contrast that is invoked (indexed) to characterize a scene” (Gal 2019: 123-124). Rhematization is a huge conjecture to make in that a contrast of indexes suddenly becomes a contrast of qualities between different personae. Erasure is an inherent requirement in efforts to achieve rhematization, because to form a totalizing view of similarity, one has to ignore or deny the qualities that do not fit the schema.

One illustrating example is the rhematization of Catalan and Castilian languages in Catalonia. Catalan was frequently depicted as “elegant,” “refined,” more “cultured” and more “intelligent,” while Castilian was more often characterized as “coarse,” “vulgar,” and “cruder.” Iconicity was established in this process, and the differentiation between languages were subsequently mapped onto the differentiation between the qualities of people. The students’ words that “the people who speak Castilian are people who don’t have much culture, let’s say” is such a typical move (Woolard 2016: 233). Catalans, not only Catalan language, were seen as “more refined,” while Castilians were seen as “ruder,” thus constituting stereotypical personae of the two ethnolinguistic groups (Woolard 2016: 255).

Erasure plays a key role in this process, functioning especially as a way of register stripping for both languages. Of course, Catalan can be used roughly and Castilian can be used in a more formal and refined way, but these registers for the two languages are denied since they do not fit the iconic contrasts described above. Erasure thus ensures that only particular linguistic features and kinds of speakers are paid attention to so that the contrast is maintained (Woolard 2016: 222). Within Catalonia, this ideological work of erasure is crucial to the upholding of the authority of Catalan because it strengthens and solidifies the naturalizing relationship between the linguistic form and the essence of the person, namely, the ideology of authenticity, which is one of the two major ways of underpinning linguistic authority (Woolard 2016). Also, erasure work in this process further undermines the authority of Castilian in Catalonia, despite its status as the state’s official language. As discussed by Inoue, the alternative linguistic market of Catalan works at odds with the national linguistic market, thus challenging the hegemony of Castilian. The erasure work, and especially the process of register stripping, unevenly favors the “price setting” of Catalan and threaten that of Castilian, leading Castilian to be more negatively valued and thus possess less authority (Inoue 2006).

Besides rhematization, erasure is also at work in the process of standardization. Institutionalized efforts to make a form of language accepted as the standard, the unmarked, and the most “correct” one within a certain (usually national) territory were often rendered invisible. Take the standardization of French language as an example. Exemplary linguistic forms, namely, the language form located in Paris, were disseminated throughout the country via facsimiles and educational reforms in the First French Republic, in an attempt to rationalize the language of the nation and to “invigorate the sciences, the arts, and military technology” (Gal & Irvine 2019: 237). Other standardization efforts included various metrics to calculate the numbers of people controlling the French language in various ways, and the number of dialects, and of words, etc. (Gal & Irvine 2019: 238). Over the subsequent years till today, standard French is still maintained through various state institutions such as education, labor markets, administration, the military, the media (Inoue 2006). While so much effort is involved in the process of standardization, it is still largely ignored to a degree that the hegemony of standard language is taken for granted by speakers, and the correctness of French is closely associated with moral superiority, belongingness, and “culture.” As a result, those who do not speak standard French are placed at the other end of the axe of differentiation. For example, when Antilleans were colonized by Europeans, they were offered the “promise” of being identified as part of European culture by gaining mastery of French. However, since their way of speaking were constantly demoted as “accented” for their struggles with the [r] of metropolitan French, they were thus “primitivized and decivilized” by the French Republican language ideology, and actually excluded from full belonging in a French national community (Gal & Irvine 2019: 157-158). In this process, standard French as the unmarked language took upon a sense of universalism, claiming its correctness beyond here and now, while the various “accented” languages, dialects, and also minority languages were marginalized and degraded. The authority of standard French is thus upheld within such a linguistic hierarchy with the efforts of erasure.

Ideological Change and Social Consequences

Note that analyzing conjectures about differentiation is not only useful in revealing existing naturalized hierarchies, but also helpful in understanding how people often end up making new contrasts, proposing new ideologies, entering into new social relations, and forming new organizations. Differentiation is more of a productive power in this sense, as the always ongoing and open-ended differentiation process constantly changes axes, which would in turn transform the social realities they organize (Gal & Irvine 2019: 163). This is no less important for ethnographers, because it enables them to examine how people can intervene in historical process, conservatively or creatively, and how the consecutive uptakes produce influences across time and space. Returning to our previous two examples, I’ll locate a more creative ideological change constructed by young Catalans in the way they took up the differentiation between Catalan and Castilian, and a more conservative change adopted by minority language speakers in France in the way they contest the dominance of standard French.

The ideological change adopted by young Catalans involved the process of the reversal of rhematization. While in 1987 the young people in Catalonia insisted a close association between the two languages and the two corresponding ethnolinguistic identities, in 2007 when Woolard interviewed the new generation of the young people, she found that they began to decouple the language from the origins and ethnolinguistic identity of the speaker. Growing up in an environment where institutional use of Catalan was taken for granted, not necessarily indexing an enduring personal identity, the young generation in Catalonia in turn nurtured a new kind of linguistic consciousness that embraced the free and active choices of languages to self-construct their own personal style. To use Woolard’s concepts, a development of the language ideology of Catalan and Castilian towards future-oriented anonymity and project authenticity went hand in hand in this process (Woolard 201). For example, the *quillo* style, though commonly conceived as coarse and vulgar, associated with Castilian speaking and political stance of pro-Spain and anti-Catalan, was also consciously adopted by students who emphasized their own defiance against such stereotypes and claimed their cosmopolitan stance (Woolard 2016: 234-237). This ideological change took up by these young people in Catalonia was more of a creative practice in that it dissolved the traditional authority associated with the two languages, which was based on a strict distinction between the ideologies of authenticity and anonymity, and ended up proposing new values, principles and interests among the new generation.

The ideological change constructed under the standardization of languages is sometimes not as innovative as the case above. In this paper, I’ll take the practices adopted by Corsican speakers, a minority language group on a Mediterranean island in France, as an example. Corsican speakers, in an attempt to resist the domination of the official standard language and establish their own linguistic identity, adopted a revitalizing strategy by a comprehensive and formal codification through “practices of literacy, orthography, dictionary, grammar, or census” (Inoue 2006: 124). While these standardization practices indeed in a way have gained Corsican language a formal recognition and an autonomous status just like standard French, it nevertheless constitutes a fractal recursivity of the minority branch, further marginalizing those heterogeneous variations in Corsican language that do not necessarily conform to the codified standard, but are crucial to the vitality and distinctive character of it. In this sense, the recursively created axe of differentiation within the demoted branch of the minority language “kills the language in order to save it” (Gal 2006), simultaneously challenging the hierarchical relationship between French and Corsican, and colluding in the ideological efforts of building further hierarchy and demoting certain variations of linguistic forms to a lower status.

Language Ideology in the Researchers’ Work

Following the discussions above, I will briefly add another reason why language ideology is important to ethnographers in this last part –– while it is useful in examining others’ conjectures, it helps ethnographers reflect upon their own ideological work as well.

Admittedly, an ethnographer’s gaze is different from that of other people because they have different goals. It is the conjecturing of signs by other people that the researcher is interested in (Gal & Irvine 2019: 169). Nevertheless, ethnographers themselves are also embedded within such ideological work in their meta-moves. Therefore, language ideology reminds ethnographers to keep constant alert for their own erasure work that might have naturalized certain things as universal “truth.” This is especially the case for anthropology which emphasizes comparison as one of the major analytical strategies. As Gal & Irvine argues, many comparison projects assume “a form of objectivism” (Gal & Irvine 2019: 23), or “a view from nowhere,” that ignores the fact that the ethnographers’ view is also positioned, thus erasing the institutional efforts sustaining the unmarkedness of “Western-based knowledge.” Lucy similarly suggests that ethnographers should be careful not to reduce the account of conceptual categories of others to any “a priori, universalist” categories actually based on their own cultural experience in the name of a “neutral” metalanguage (Lucy 2010: 23). Since social scientists, including anthropologists, use language as a guide to reality, language ideology is a helpful tool for them to be aware of the ideological move at work. To be clear, this is not to imply that there is an objective world outside of all the ideological influences, but to recognize that we are part of ideological system, and what ethnographers should do is to figure out the many social actors it takes to maintain the “truth” (Latour 2004).

Besides enhancing reflexivity within Anthropology, language ideology is also inspiring for ethnographers to look for sites for their field work. The open-ended process of semiotic conjecturing and the ever-existing possibility of changes in sign-object relations ensures that there is no intrinsic boundary of a site. In this sense, it is always possible to “look over the fence,” that is, to transcend the initially noticed centerpiece and explore how the differentiation rhizomatically expands from there on to other indexically related phenomena across space and time (Gal & Irvine 2019: 184-185). The spread and the change of meanings of the term “Yankee,” or the Apache’s imitation talk of white men, or just a bench with a series of slogans printed on, could all be sites that could connect to other sites, and the ideological changes connecting them could ultimately have implications within a broader social and political sphere.

Conclusion

In this essay, I argue that language ideology, based on the conjectures of differentiations among signs, is important for ethnographers even though they are not linguistic anthropologists. In illustrating this point, I first point out the double insights of language ideology regarding why it is not only about language alone –– that is, language ideology carries a much wider range of knowledge about the society, and it could entail real consequences and changes in the material world. Following from this, language ideology can help ethnographers better reveal the naturalized authority and hierarchy, with erasure as a central mechanism, and understand social changes and innovations across time and space by tracing successive ideological uptakes. While language ideology is useful in examining others’ conjectures, I also argue that it helps ethnographers reflect upon their own ideological work and possible methodological limitations. All of the points above make language ideology crucial to ethnographers in their studies.