

April 7, 2004

17 LANGUAGE, CULTURE, ETHNICITY

Read:

Rodolfo Stavenhagen 1990. Language and social identity
Peter Whiteley, 2003. Do “language rights” serve indigenous interests? Some
Hopi and other queries
Jane Hill, 1999. Language, race, and white public space

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 characteristics¹
 - a. Classic example is to say that because in English we say “time runs,” whereas in Spanish they say “time walks,” Spanish-speakers have a more laid-back notion of time—the supposed “mañana” (“tomorrow”) attitude (procrastination, lack of the work ethic, procrastination)
 - b. This notion is thoroughly discredited today—it’s not so simple, and the “mañana” idea simply an ethnoracial slur
 - 4. In addition to the referential messages being sent, speakers communicate other ones
 - a. Speech indexes (points to) identity, so messages about identity
 - b. Sometimes such messages are sent totally unconsciously on the part of the speaker
 - 1) **Discuss:** Examples?

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.

- c. Where I did fieldwork in the Northwest Amazon, Tukanoan languages are a symbol of, an emblem of a person's patrilineal clan membership
 - 1) You needed to marry outside of your clan, so you married someone not affiliated with your language—another language was this person's mother tongue ("father tongue" would be more correct)

II. Language is 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; Stavenhagen points this out as well
 - 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 of attitudes toward speaking "proper" English

- 1. Men rated themselves as speaking a more lower-class version of English than they really did
- 2. But women rated themselves as speaking a higher-class version than they actually did
- 3. (Linguists made the evaluations)
- 4. An association was 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 and ambitions for their children
 - a. Working-class men agreed with this, support it—their wives should "speak better"
 - b. They are the ones to teach the children, to know about manners, etc.

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

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. Jane Hill’s essay shows 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. But she shows how 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
- D. 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
1. Asymmetric power relations, different economic options
- III. Languages, like other concepts we have discussed, should be seen in terms of relationships between people (both individuals and groups)
- A. It is not the linguistic attribute that’s being noticed and commented on that’s important in itself, but the group and the differences between groups that make the attribute important.³
 - 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 Donald Horowitz, 1985. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 50.

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. 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 ways of misunderstanding in addition to not understanding a language
5. Corollary idea: Esperanto-like global languages will solve these problems
 - a. Again, way too simple: everyone speaking English will not resolve ethnoracial and social class misunderstanding and conflict

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)
 - 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: recall the Urla article

a. **Discuss:** Basque nationalist attitudes toward the Basque language similar to Eriksen's discussion of the Norway situation?

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

1) Legislation that prohibits the use of Spanish in schools

2) "Official English" legislation

3) Hill discusses the "moral panic" over the possibility of teaching Ebonics in schools

4) Nonstandard English spoken by some African Americans

b. Hill's article discusses 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 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. I am posting on the MIT server an article on English and French in Quebec⁴; things have softened, bilingualism is growing
1. Use of the one or the other isn't a political statement nearly as much as it used to be
 2. The very stringent legislation that required 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. Origin was colonial domination; continuing resentment
 - 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
 - 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”
 7. You will read more about this in Handler’s article for next time
- VI. States that have gained independence more recently: the language situation
- A. Vast majority are plural with respect to ethnicity and language⁵
 - 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

⁴ Krauss, Clifford, 2003. Quebec seeking to end its old cultural divide: Getting along in English and en Français. *New York Times* April 13.

⁵ This section follows Donald Horowitz, 1985. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley: U Cal.

- 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 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
 - 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 violence⁶:
 - 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

⁶ Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970*. Berkeley: U California Press, 1977.

- 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)—there was 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.?
 - a. When driving around Wales and Scotland in the 1990s one could see road signs in English crossed out, 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. So, 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. In Assam, for example
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 the 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. The campaign for linguistic parity is a transparent code for establishing greater equality more generally
- L. Language standardization will bring more conflict
- VII. The Vaupés: Tukanoan languages spoken in the Central Northwest Amazon
- 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: "tribe" or "ethnic group" will not *require* marriage outside of it

3. I use the term “language group”
- F. 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