

Language Ideologies

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Abstract:

Language ideologies are beliefs and feelings about language which shape the way we use language. Language ideologies constitute a bridge between linguistic and social structure as they rationalize and justify social inequality as an outcome of linguistic difference. To explain the complexity of language ideologies this entry draws on examples of the standard language ideology and the one-nation-one-language ideology in the context of global migration. The multiple and contested nature of language ideologies and their relationship to broader socio-political ideologies is explored with reference to the role of language in neoliberal globalization.

Main text:

Many people from around the world are likely to agree on the following: English is the most useful language for global commercial, scientific, and cultural exchange. The best kind of English is spoken by native speakers, particularly those from the United Kingdom and the United States of America, and everyone else should try to emulate their English. American English sounds professional and competent while African-American English sounds streetwise and cool and Indian English sounds nerdy and funny.

While most readers will recognize these common-sense assumptions about English as a global language, it is also easy to see that they are nothing more than beliefs and feelings and that they are impossible to confirm or refute. This is most obvious in the case of value judgements about accents: whether you think Indian English is funny or not depends on who you are and what your experiences with Indian English are: if you are a speaker of Indian English, it is unlikely you consider it funny; similarly, if you regularly interact with Indian speakers of English, you are unlikely to find the way they talk funny. On the other hand, if your main exposure to Indian English is through the character of Apu in the animated television series *The Simpsons*, you are likely to find Indian English very funny.

While it is relatively easy to see through the idea that “Indian English is funny,” it is a bit more difficult to question some of the other assumptions in the introductory example such as its many language names: the meaning of terms such as “English,” “American English,” “African-American English” or “Indian English” is not as straightforward as it may seem. Indian English, for instance, is usually taken to mean English spoken by people from India (and sometimes from other parts of South Asia, as well), irrespective of how well they have learnt it (a person without much education and only a few years of rudimentary English instruction will speak English differently from an engineer with a PhD) or irrespective of what their mother tongue is (the English of a person whose first language is Hindi will sound different from the English of a person whose first language is Telugu). So, Indian English refers to a vast variety of different ways of speaking and using English and the boundaries that the term “Indian English” imposes upon all these different practices are fictitious: the term makes it seem obvious that Indian English is, on the one hand, internally homogeneous (irrespective of education or first language) and, on the other hand, externally clearly different from other varieties of English.

If you have found yourself balking at the notion that Indian English is a fictitious concept, a product of the imagination and that the term “Indian English” brings the entity it refers to into being, let’s go back to the character of Apu in *The Simpsons*. Apu’s speech is probably the most widely-recognized example of Indian English globally. However, the voice artist who speaks the character of Apu, Hank Azaria, is not a speaker of Indian English by any stretch of the imagination: he grew up in New York City in a Ladino-Greek family (see <http://www.broadway.com/buzz/11238/hank-azaria/>; last accessed 2013-12-28) and he modeled the speech of Apu on that of Los Angeles convenience store clerks and that of another fictional character, Hrundi V. Bakshi, an Indian actor who was played by the British comedian Peter Sellers in the 1968 movie *The Party* (see <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4679119>; last accessed 2013-12-28). The globally most widely-recognized example of Indian English thus turns out to be a fiction based on a fiction.

“Indian English” is no exception. Like all language names, it is an invented term that creates a particular way of seeing language. The concept of “Indian English” – like all language names – is ideologically constituted and does not refer to any objectively constituted linguistic reality. In the following quotation marks around language names are used occasionally to remind readers of their ideological nature but will not do so consistently for the sake of readability.

Such beliefs about language (“Indian English is an identifiable entity”) and such feelings about language (“Indian English is funny”) that have been introduced here are commonly referred to as “language ideologies.” The following sections explain what language ideologies are and why the study of such seemingly banal – or even misguided – beliefs about language is important: they provide a link between linguistic and social forms and structures. The entry closes by sketching out language ideologies under conditions of contemporary social changes as they arise from neoliberal globalization.

What are language ideologies and why do they matter?

In the introductory example it is relatively easy to expose as a fallacy the idea that “Indian English” refers to a clearly bounded entity, that it is spoken by a clearly defined group of people or that it has any particular inherent quality such as funniness to it. Philologists and anthropologists have long noticed that beliefs and feelings about language such as these are common in all human societies. However, because these ubiquitous beliefs and feelings about language are often quite obviously irrational, these same social scientists used to dismiss them as irrelevant to a principled understanding of language and social interaction. The founding father of American anthropology, Franz Boas, for instance, referred to them as “the misleading and disturbing factors of secondary explanations [...] so clearly affected by [...] faulty reasoning” (Boas, 1911, pp. 69-71).

In the English-speaking tradition, speakers’ beliefs and feelings about language were for a long time treated as at best irrelevant and at worst misleading to any serious understanding of language and social interaction. While the ways the concept of “language ideologies” developed in the English-speaking tradition is the focus, it is worth noting that this was quite different in the European tradition, which has always been concerned with the ideological nature of language and interaction. Unfortunately, much of this work, particularly in the Marxist tradition, where the role of ideology in social organization is of central concern, has simply been ignored in the English-speaking tradition, either because it was not translated at all or translated relatively late. For instance, Valentin Voloshinov’s (1986) work *Марксизм и философия языка* (“Marxism and the philosophy of language”), which was published in Russian in 1929 was only translated into English in 1973.

As a result of the neglect of the European tradition, the concept of language ideologies is today seen as the product of a relatively narrow intellectual tradition, namely that of North-American linguistic anthropology. Other subfields also concerned with the relationship between language and social organization include Critical Discourse Analysis and Language Sociology.

In North-American linguistic anthropology, the neglect of speakers' beliefs about language only started to change with a 1979 essay called "Language structure and linguistic ideology" by Michael Silverstein (1979). Silverstein was interested in the ways in which language structures are influenced by language ideologies, which he defined as "sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use" (p. 193). One of his examples is related to the system of personal pronouns of address in European languages: European languages distinguish between a formal and an informal personal pronoun of address, such as French *tu* (informal) and *vous* (formal). Up until the 19th century, *tu* and *vous* were used asymmetrically: social superiors used *tu* to social inferiors such as waiters, common soldiers, or employees, who were expected to use *vous* in return. Parents, masters, or older brothers were addressed with *vous* but were entitled to use *tu* in return. This asymmetrical use of personal pronouns all but disappeared in the 20th century and the system is now a reciprocal one: the use of either *tu* or *vous* calls for reciprocity of the same form and reciprocal *tu* signals familiarity while reciprocal *vous* signals distance. This change in language structure can be explained with changing beliefs about social mores: a highly stratified society has given way to a strong belief in egalitarianism.

In fact, the effects of the belief in egalitarianism on the grammar of personal pronouns of address continue unabated to this day. Similarly to English where the distinction between a formal and informal pronoun of address collapsed centuries ago with the disappearance of *thou*, the realm of the formal form is shrinking fast in many European languages and may well disappear in the near future. In German, for instance, airline crews flying for the national carrier *Lufthansa* are now required to always use the informal *Du* with each other, rather than formal *Sie*, even if crew members on any particular flight may have never met before (Böcking, 2013). The reason for this explicit management of the use of a particular linguistic form lies in the assumption that using the informal *Du* is not only a sign of flat hierarchies and egalitarianism but also creates these desired social structures.

Language ideologies are thus not only interesting in themselves: for Silverstein, their importance lies in the fact that beliefs about language mediate between language use and social organization.

Following the publication of Silverstein's article, language ideologies quickly became a fast-growing field of research in linguistic anthropology because of the concept's potential to systematically link language and society. Kathryn Woolard (1994, p. 72) referred to the concept as an intellectual bridge:

The topic of language ideology is a much-needed bridge between linguistic and social theory, because it relates the microculture of communicative action to political and economic considerations of power and social inequality, confronting macrosocial constraints on language behavior.

Language ideologies are thus best understood as beliefs, feelings, and conceptions about language that are socially shared and relate language and society in a dialectical fashion: language ideologies undergird language use, which in turn shapes language ideologies and together they serve social ends, i.e. the purpose of language ideologies is not

really linguistic but social. Like anything social, language ideologies are interested, multiple, and contested.

Given the fact that language ideologies constitute a bridge between linguistic and social theory, research into language ideologies needs to bring together data and analyses from both these fields. Therefore, Voloshinov (1986, p. 21) insists on the following methodological prerequisites:

1. Ideology may not be divorced from the material reality of the sign (i.e., by locating it in the “consciousness” or other vague and elusive regions);
2. The sign may not be divorced from the concrete forms of social intercourse (seeing that the sign is part of organised social intercourse and cannot exist, as such, outside it, reverting to a mere physical artefact);
3. Communication and the forms of communication may not be divorced from the material basis.

This means that language (“the sign”) only exists in actual interaction but language ideologies give it a life outside interaction and link it to other interactions. Language only exists in interaction in context but language ideologies – including the language ideologies of professional linguists – abstract from interactions in context and thus open language to social manipulation.

This allows language ideologies to perform social work: they are beliefs about language that represent the interests of a particular group in society. This principle is best demonstrated with reference to a well-studied language ideology that can be found in many societies, namely the so-called “standard language ideology.” The standard language ideology refers to the belief that a particular variety – usually the variety that has its roots in the speech of the most powerful group in society, that is often based on the written language, that is highly homogeneous and that is acquired through long years of formal education – is aesthetically, morally, and intellectually superior to other ways of speaking the language. While only relatively few members of a society can speak that particular variety, recognition of that variety as superior is universal and thus serves to justify social inequalities. The standard language ideology can make it seem fair and equitable – both to those who benefit from it and those who are disadvantaged by it – that its speakers should occupy privileged positions in society while non-speakers should be excluded from such positions.

In the USA, for instance, the belief is widespread that “Standard American English” is the only appropriate medium for use in education, public administration, employment, the courts or the media (Lippi-Green, 2012). By contrast, other forms of language such as African-American English, Southern English or Spanish are considered inappropriate for these purposes. Consequently, speakers of Standard American English are more likely to be successful in education, public administration, employment, the courts or the media than speakers of “African-American English,” “Southern English” or “Spanish.” The failure of the latter in these fields is not necessarily attributed to the way they speak but the way they speak is believed to constitute evidence that they are not particularly intelligent, that they are lazy, or that they have a bad attitude – all judgments which are used to rationalize their exclusion.

This linguistic legitimization for social inequality is highly effective as it comes to be accepted as legitimate by both the dominated and dominant. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1991) argues that the valorisation of a particular linguistic practice in a particular social space or a particular institution automatically enhances or restricts access to that space or that institution on the basis of having the sort of linguistic proficiency that has come to be accepted as legitimate.

The competence adequate to produce sentences that are likely to be understood may be quite inadequate to produce sentences are likely to be *listened to*, likely to be recognized as *acceptable* in all the situations in which there is occasion to speak. [...] social acceptability is not reducible to mere grammaticality. Speakers lacking the legitimate competence are *de facto* excluded from the social domains in which this competence is required, or are condemned to silence. (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 55; emphasis in the original)

It is important to understand that “Standard American English” is not inherently superior to African-American English, Southern English or Spanish: there is nothing in the structural properties or the communicative patterns of “Standard American English” that makes it uniquely suited to education, public administration, employment, the courts, or the media. Rather, the belief in the importance of “Standard American English” as the one and only language of success in the USA derives from its association with the dominant classes who – in turn – further consolidate their privileged position through this particular language ideology.

While language ideologies are constituted by and continuously re-constitute the interests of the dominant classes in society, they are not monolithic. On the contrary, language ideologies are always multiple, fractured, contested, and changing. This is hardly surprising given their essentially social function: social divisions are always multiple and operate along intersecting lines of class, gender, race, age, and so on; consequently language ideologies share this multiplicity. As Voloshinov (1986, p. 23) explains:

Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e., with only the community which is the totality of users of the same set of signs for ideological communication. Thus various different classes will use one and the same language. As a result, differently oriented [evaluations] intersect in every ideological sign. [Language] becomes an arena of class struggle.

The multiplicity and contested nature of language ideologies can be best exemplified with another US example that is closely related to the example above. The standard language ideology which promotes Standard American English as the most suitable and appropriate medium for public communication in the USA is closely related to another widely-held language ideology that has also been studied in many different societies, namely the one-nation-one-language ideology. The one-nation-one-language ideology is the belief that monolingualism or the use of one single common language is important for social harmony and national unity.

To return to the US example, the one-nation-one-language ideology has a long history there and constitutes a central aspect of the national identity as an immigrant nation: the belief is that English forms an important glue for the melting pot nation and that using English and English only is important for social cohesion. A famous formulation of this language ideology can be found in a 1919 speech by President Theodore Roosevelt, who said “we have room for but one language here, and that is the English language.” (Quoted from Fuller, 2012, p. 23)

Despite the strength of the one-nation-one-language ideology, those disadvantaged by this particular language ideology – immigrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds who, as most adults do, have difficulties learning English to such high levels to be able to fully participate – have often struggled against it and won various concessions such as Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act. Section 203 is a provision for the full participation of non-English-speaking voters in the democratic process and thus mandates that election materials need to

be printed in languages other than English in districts where population thresholds of other-language speakers are reached. First enacted in 1965 to eliminate the disenfranchisement of non-English speakers, it has been controversial ever since. This is not surprising given the strength of the one-nation-one-language ideology and the fact that even a relatively small and contained measure such as Section 203 has the potential to undermine the whole ideological complex. Because Section 203 is so controversial, it needs to be regularly extended by congress. The most recent extension occurred in 2006 and the congressional debate that occurred on that occasion provides excellent evidence not only of the contested nature of language ideologies but also the ways they are constituted and reconstituted in interaction (Subtirelu, 2013).

During the debate, speakers repeatedly extolled speaking English as a form of civic and patriotic virtue, as Mauro Mujica, the president of the language lobby group *US English*, who was invited to testify, did:

When a person steps into a voting booth, he or she is exercising the highest civic duty. Yet, at that very moment the government sends a signal that English is not really necessary to join our National political conversation. Ironically, this message will not be sent to the Spanish speaker in Burlington, Vermont or the Chinese speaker in Wichita, Kansas. It will be sent only to those who live in high enough language concentrations to trigger Section 203's requirements. In short, it will be sent to the very immigrants who are likely to live in linguistic enclaves where an English-optional lifestyle is a real possibility. (Quoted in Subtirelu 2013, p. 54)

Practically, doing your civic duty means engaging in the life of your community and contributing to the common good: volunteer fire-fighters are often seen as the ideal example of civic service. Volunteer fire-fighting, like most other forms of civic participation, occurs on the local level, "in linguistic enclaves where an English-optional lifestyle is a real possibility," if you will.

Participating in elections, too, is a civic duty – as it is a civic right. However, in contrast to volunteer fire-fighting, voting requires participation not in a local community but in an imagined community. Promoting English as a civic duty only makes sense if civic participation is delinked from the local and is tied exclusively to the national level.

In the process, it is not only the meaning of speaking English that is transformed but also the meaning of civic participation. From being inextricably linked to participation in the real life of a real community, it becomes individualized. This is particularly clear in those arguments that contrast "good" immigrants with their opposites. The following example by another speaker during the debate is a case in point. Here a "good" individual immigrant from Russia who does his duty because he speaks "good" English is contrasted with the community of Chinatown. Chinatown residents are implicitly coded as linguistic shirkers who fail to do their linguistic and national duty:

I just recently came from San Francisco. I was in Chinatown, and we talk about the enclaves. On my way to the airport I rode with a Russian immigrant who spoke probably as good English as I, though with an accent. And I asked him about Chinatown and he said they don't speak English there. You can't live there unless you are Chinese. And in walking in the streets, I heard all the young Chinese students speaking Chinese. That may work in San Francisco, but that would not work in Iowa. In order to participate in the community, you must speak English. (Quoted in Subtirelu 2013, p. 53)

This quote is patently absurd: an obviously existing community group is exhorted “to participate in the community.” The reason its absurdity is not often called out lies in the fact that many people share the belief that English is the one and only legitimate language of the USA and that national unity allows for only one single language to be legitimate (you can join the conversation about this case study at <http://www.languageonthemove.com/language-migration-social-justice/is-speaking-english-a-civic-duty>).

In sum, language ideologies are beliefs about language where linguistic difference is called upon to rationalize social organization. Language ideologies are deployed in the interests of the dominant group in a society and serve to justify social inequality. This makes language ideologies a site of social struggle and contestation.

Language ideologies in neoliberal times

Blommaert (2005, p. 171) suggests that it is particularly important to investigate “the relationship between linguistic ideologies and other, socio-political, or cultural ideologies – the question of how linguistic ideologies can and do become instruments of power as part of larger ideological complexes.” The examples I have introduced so far were mostly concerned with the relationship between linguistic ideologies and national ideologies of the state. However, many commentators have noted that the nature of nation states has been significantly transformed in recent decades due to the global ascendancy of neoliberal free market ideologies. Language ideologies such as the standard language ideology or the one-nation-one-language ideology had an important role to play in maintaining the hegemony of the nation state. How are these language ideologies being reconfigured under neoliberal global regimes?

Neoliberalism is an economic doctrine that has undergirded the global expansion of advanced capitalism over the past few decades. Its basic idea is a resuscitation of 19th century laissez-faire (hence ‘neo-liberal’) capitalism based on Adam Smith’s competitive equilibrium model, in which the unregulated (hence ‘free’) market is assumed to work for the benefit of all if individual competition is given a free reign (Stiglitz, 2002). A central aspect of global neoliberalism is the focus on the free movements of goods, capital and labor across national borders. The free movement of labor is a central aspect of the neoliberal program and migration has come to be evaluated in contradictory ways in recent years: immigration has always been problematic for the nation state and most nation states discourage immigration altogether or, if they do not, have strict admission criteria and procedures that limit and regulate immigration. A central concern is that immigration might constitute a threat to national cohesion and one way to manage that threat on the level of language ideologies has been through the one-nation-one-language ideology, as we have seen in the example above. By contrast, the needs of neoliberal capitalism are quite different: high levels of migration are seen as desirable as they help to ensure a flexible labor supply, increase competition and contribute to economic growth. A language ideology associated with neoliberalism is the belief in the need for a global language and the belief that using English for business or education will increase competitiveness (Piller & Cho, 2013). The continuing rise in English language learning and in English language use around the world is evidence to the contemporary global salience of that particular language ideology.

Research into contemporary language ideologies can provide important evidence of the ways in which individuals and communities engage with ideological conflict and change. Specifically, what happens to language ideologies that came about in the interest of the nation state under neoliberal conditions? To explore this question a case-study with neoliberal workers par excellence, namely Filipino meat workers in Australia (Piller & Lising, 2014) is instructive. Like the USA, Australia has long subscribed to a one-nation-one-language

ideology in which English is construed as a key means to ensure national cohesion. Under a policy of multiculturalism, migrants have been offered full citizenship in the national community, which has been imagined as an English-speaking community. However, in recent years, Australia has experienced persistent labor shortages in a number of sectors and is increasingly using temporal work visas for overseas workers to manage these. Consequently, there is a heavily contested change under way over whether migrants should be seen as prospective citizens and full members of the community or as global labor, i.e. guest-workers whose place in Australia is restricted to their role as workers.

One of the sectors that has seen a significant increase in workers on a temporary visa is agriculture. Agriculture includes a lot of work that is low- or unskilled, difficult or unpleasant and seasonal. In the developed world it has become increasingly difficult to fill these positions from within local labor pools and Australian agriculture, too, has come to rely on migrant workers. Contemporary industrial meat work is not seasonal but subject to boom-and-bust cycles and it is thus advantageous for businesses if meat workers constitute a “flexible labor force,” i.e. can be hired and fired quickly. Industrial meat work is also strenuous and injury-prone and few workers manage to reach retirement age in the industry. It is thus advantageous for the state if workers have no or few welfare and citizenship rights should they become unable to work in the industry. The interests of the nation state and the global meat industry thus coincide at the point of limiting the citizenship rights of migrant workers. While admitting that much would be a taboo in a liberal democracy, tying citizenship rights ideologically to citizenship achieves precisely this end.

On a practical level, it is, obviously, not necessary to speak English to perform butchering work and temporary meat workers are hired without having to meet any language requirements. Once on the job in rural Australia, they have little opportunity to practice and thus improve their English. At work, they work in a conveyor-belt system and there is little time to communicate. As most other workers are co-nationals whatever limited communication does take place usually occurs in Tagalog. This pattern also holds during free time: with exhausting shifts, there is little free time which is mostly spent in the company of other Filipinos to save money through shared housing and to assuage feelings of homesickness.

It is evident that English plays no practical role in the work and daily lives of Filipino meat-workers: their ability to perform their work well is independent of their English language proficiency as is their ability to function as members of the community. However, the conversion of their temporary visa into a permanent visa is disconnected from their valuable work and service and depends on their linguistic performance on a test of English language proficiency. Because they had limited formal education prior to coming to Australia and are busy working in Australia, achieving the required English language proficiency level is out of the reach of most of these meat workers.

A language ideology, namely the belief that English is necessary to live in Australia, serves to secure the permanent contingency of a sector of the agricultural labor force. It also limits resistance as solidarity and resistance around language proficiency is almost impossible to organize – in contrast to concerns such as working conditions or human rights as in traditional labor movements.

What we find in the example is a particular adaptation of the overall ideological complex – one nation, one language – to ensure its continued usefulness under changing conditions: reducing the ideology to a highly specific language requirement, a test score, as a precondition for achieving a permanent residency visa serves the interests of global business while drawing on a modified form of a language ideology tied to the nation state.

Exploring changing language ideologies under changing conditions in the ongoing contest between local, national, and global interests will continue to form a key research agenda in the field well into the future. Language ideological research, which, of necessity, is part of critical analysis has an important contribution to make to enhancing our understanding of language and interaction in advancing the cause of social justice.

See also: bilingualism & multilingualism; citizenship discourse; critical discourse analysis; discourse of capitalism; heteroglossia; ideologies in discourse; interactional sociolinguistics; migration discourse; power discourses; speech community

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