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Artificial language, natural history: Speech, sign, and sound in the emergence of Damin

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ABSTRACT

The Lardil male initiate language, Damin, is a unique linguistic system. Traditionally employed by second-order male initiates, or *warama*, Damin has a lexicon of no more than 150 distinct morphemes and a phonology employing ejectives and clicks—sound types unattested in other Australian languages. These esoteric features have led scholars to see Damin as an artificial or invented language. I argue that the label of linguistic artificiality forestalls explanation as much as it aids it. In this paper I show that the eccentric features of Damin developed in an emergent and unplanned manner in which conventionalized paralinguistic phonations became semanticized as they were linked up with a signed language, Marlda Kangka, employed by first-order male initiates, or *luruku*.

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1. Introduction

Linguistic anthropology was born of an analytical separation largely eschewed by its adherents today—the Boasian exclusion of language from the operations of "secondary rationalization." This was a theoretical move which was to have profound disciplinary consequences for four-field anthropology. Language was carved off from the rest of culture as much because of its inaccessibility to native awareness as for its sui generis properties.

> 'If the phenomena of human speech seem to form in a way a subject by itself, this is perhaps largely due to the fact that the laws of language remain entirely unknown to the speakers, that linguistic phenomena never rise into the consciousness of primitive man, while all other ethnological phenomena are more or less clearly subjects of conscious thought.' (Boas, 1911: 63)

The conceptual closure of culture to language followed as much from Boas' politico-ethical stance as it did from methodological considerations; epistemological closure was a prerequisite for the rejection of the then dominant evolutionist position in anthropology (Stocking, 1968). If language, culture, and race were seen to develop upon different tracks, then language could not be too open to the synthesizing operations of folk-reflection, operations which might result in the "psychological" merger of linguistic phenomena with cultural ones. These were of course precisely what was figured in various European reifications of "primitive language" (see in particular Lévy-Bruhl, 1985, Chapter 4). The subdisplinary organization of North American anthropology was framed as the empirical consequence of the fact that language, culture, and race represented semi-autonomous zones that were, in the main, causally bounded off from one another.

There is no little irony, then, in the reinvention, over the past generation, of linguistic anthropology under the banner of "ideology" (Woolard and Schieffelin, 1994). Inasmuch as this work is more and more oriented towards cultural ideologies, not just of language but of anything which has a semiotic interpretation in social life (Keane, 2003), its lines of distinction

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with cultural anthropology become more and more porous (Nakassis, 2016). Indeed, such attempts to re-theorize the relationships between language and culture seem also to entail sub-disciplinary reformulations and reorganizations. Evidently, the cultural turn in linguistic anthropology is not unrelated to larger cleavages between positivistic, hermeneutic, and activist anthropologies of the kind leading to departmental splits and other novel non-four-field sub-disciplinary arrangements. Within the current set of disciplinary configurations it seems inevitable that linguistic anthropology should more and more find itself grouped as an adjunct to sociocultural anthropology. Are we then led to the strange conclusion that in order to safeguard the institutional license of linguistic anthropology, one must maintain the fiction that there is some true and natural object called ‘language’ which remains, always safely separate from consciousness and culture?

It is a pity that Boas’ misstep should be one of the only lines of thinking on language which Chomskyan-styled disciplinary linguistics adhered to as it broke with anthropology. Self-styled “Cartesian” linguists seek to project language, in general, as a biological type instantiated in specific languages qua tokens—a move, whatever its category errors, that relies upon the Boasian exclusion. Disciplinary linguistics’ vitriolic attacks on anything which smacks of Whorfianism (e.g. Pullum, 1991; McWhorter, 2014) reflect the need to keep language apart. Whorf’s theory was, of course, an inversion of Boas’ argument—for Whorf, language structure was seen, in part because of its relative opacity to speaker awareness, as a particularly robust motivational stratum for “secondary rationalizations” concerning the nature of referred to things, out there, in the world.

Recent critiques of Whorfian-styled arguments have been framed in quasi-ethical terms. McWhorter (2014), for instance, would have us believe that Whorfianism dooms boundless human rationality to the straight-jacket of linguistic particularism. But from the perspective of the concerns of disciplinary linguistics, non-linguistic relativism would seem to be the least disruptive aspect of the Whorfian theory complex (Lee, 1996). The theory of ‘Universal Grammar’ [UG] is troubled not so much by the permeability of cultural cognition to language as its opposite—the point of vulnerability for Chomskyans lies in the idea that language itself could be subject to (or object of) transformations stemming from the directed, culturally and cognitively mediated communicative practices of its speakers. To accept this opening is to enter the explanatory space of a ‘functional’ (as opposed to a ‘formal’) linguistics, a rag-tag assemblage of working groups and agendas sharing only the commitment that language adapts to its uses, however these are understood. The recent, and much cited, broadside against UG, “The myth of language universals” was not only authored by Stephen Levinson, a leading architect of neo-Whorfianism, but also by Nicholas Evans, the author of an essay published in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (2003) on the “cultural structuration of language.” And indeed, the Whorfian argument was never a unidirectional one, notwithstanding a literature built upon this misreading. Once cultural cognition is opened to the “exogenous” forces of mind and culture, the relationship between language, culture, and thought becomes historical, dialectical (Silverstein, 1979).

As Joseph (2000) has shown, one way in which the unity and purity of language as an object set apart is maintained within disciplinary linguistics is through the distinction between “natural language” and “artificial language.” The distinction between the two seems precisely to be one between a language whose existence is prior to conscious reflection and intentional alteration, and a species of language—the artificial—which is seen to proceed from intentional purposes, and thus which is seen as a supplement of only marginal and negative interest for linguistic theory. Linguists often rhetorically frame their study in opposition to prescriptive grammar—we are concerned with grammatical description not correct grammar. Fair enough. But some linguists seem to then project this distinction between an empirical and a normative orientation towards language onto the classification of linguistic varieties themselves. Empirically, however, we cannot cleave off some special subset of speech registers within a speech community (e.g. Standard English versus non-standard varieties) as representing a distinction between “prescriptive”, and therefore, “artificial” language, versus natural dialect. All language varieties, by virtue of their being classified as varieties, are subject to socially-based evaluative norms (Agha, 2007b). To be sure, the Standard language is governed by prescriptive norms which have considerable institutional backing, as well as symbolic and moral purchase within class-based, racial, and national linguistic markets (Bourdieu, 1982). But the prescriptive hegemony of the Standard—which consists precisely in creating a consciousness of one’s estrangement from it, and thus in a feeling of its non-naturalness from that zero-point of reckoning—should not lead us to believe that other linguistic varieties somehow exist outside of the sphere of normative evaluations. The importance of “language ideology” in contemporary linguistic anthropology reflects a different set of commitments towards language as an object of study than those revealed in its charter myth. For an anthropology of language there is no pure object called language which exists outside of, or beyond, the “artificial” workings of a conscious, intentional, purposive, and cultural discourse about language. Language is always already subsumed within culture-histories of a metalinguistic sort—histories wherein different ways of speaking, different variants and variables are imbued with different social essences and projections.

In this paper I am concerned with the concept of “artificial language” as a framing which renders its object sterile for linguistic theory. But I am also concerned with how labeling a linguistic variety “artificial” serves to vitiate the work of historical explanation. My point of departure is Ken Hale’s description of a male initiate language called Damin employed by the Lardil and neighboring language groups in northern Queensland. As I seek to show, by defining Damin as an “artificial auxiliary language” Hale (1997: 88) evades the need to account for its phonological and semantic particularities. Because Damin is framed as an “artificial language”, in contrast to the “natural language” of Lardil, its form ceases to embody history but rather comes to reflect the autochthonous “genius” of conscious invention.

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