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Aesthetics, politics, and sociolinguistic analysis

Mary Louise Pratt

New York University, USA

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that aesthetic analysis is a necessary tool for sociolinguistic explication, especially of translingual and intercultural verbal activity, and especially for understanding its political dimensions. The suggestion is that to grasp what Doris Sommer has called the 'real world of living language' (2004: 34), sociolinguistics needs analytical tools to make explicit the aesthetic dimensions of the materials it studies. I explore this question using theories of democracy and examples from the contemporary language-scape in the United States.

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1. Introduction

In 2004, the Afro-Cuban American writer H. G. Carrillo published a novel titled *Loosing My Espanish*. The three-word sequence performs a delightful and complicated play between Spanish and English, between orality and writing, and between writer and reader. The word 'Espanish' melds the English term 'Spanish' with its Spanish equivalent, 'Español', and reproduces a common interference feature of Spanish-accented English speech: the insertion of the /e/ sound before initial consonant clusters, following Spanish phonology. This is English written with a Spanish accent. But much more is going on. 'Loosing' plays on the phonological fact that in English the sounds s/z are separate phonemes, while in Spanish they are not. It plays on the graphological facts that (a) in English both the /s/ and /z/ sounds can be carried by the letter s; while the phoneme /u/ can be carried graphically by both oo and o. Hence, in English, *loose* and *lose* are a minimal pair, both graphically (o/oo) and phonemically (s/z). In Spanish the sound /z/, i.e. the voiced fricative, does not exist, though the written letter z does.¹ Hence native Spanish speakers speaking English typically pronounce the /z/ sound as the /s/ sound—turning 'lose' into 'loose.' This phonetic generalization is another common marker of a Spanish accent in English, and Americans are very familiar with it. Carrillo reproduces this Spanish interference graphically in the title by adding in the letter o which changes /z/ to /s/, and 'lose' to 'loose.' The change produces, as if through magic, an additional set of meanings, a semantic pun: the book is about both losing and loosing Spanish. The pun is perceptible only by combining audio and visual cues. The reader sees the extra o but also has to hear it in order to figure out the phonological play and the double meaning. That can happen only if the reader also knows that two graphic and phonological systems are interacting here using the same alphabet: the Spanish system where s/z are not phonemically distinguished and written oo does not exist, and the English system, where s/z are phonemically distinct and written oo does exist. This requires a reader with a degree of competence in both languages. That reader figures it all out quite instantaneously and, presumably appreciates (or knows s/he is intended to appreciate) the artfulness, playfulness, inventiveness and intentionality of Carrillo's construction, its aesthetic dimensions.

E-mail address: mlp7@nyu.edu.

¹ The written letter z is pronounced in the Americas as unvoiced /s/, and in Spain as a dental fricative like English /θ/.

Loosing My Spanish defamiliarizes English by enmeshing or infiltrating it with Spanish. The phrase intensifies and estranges linguistic experience by placing two languages in play at the same time, at the levels of sound, meaning, and graphics, skillfully entangling them so they cannot be deciphered separately but must be grasped simultaneously. These aesthetic dimensions carry the politics of Carrillo's project. 'Loosing' and 'losing' have distinct, partly contrasting meanings: loosing implying centrifugal expansion, losing implying contraction and disappearance. Collapsing them into a single word calls on the reader to hold both meanings simultaneously. With respect to 'Espanish,' loosing and losing are two of the main processes that are happening in the United States. With increased immigration from Latin America, Spanish has been let loose as the de facto second language of the country. Across the United States, people hear it every day. Automated phone calls routinely include the ubiquitous *para español oprima el dos*, 'press two for Spanish.' Spanish is overwhelmingly the choice for second language study at all levels of schooling, which creates the bilingual familiarity Carrillo relies on in his readers. At the same time, monolinguist ideologies persist, even at official levels, and Spanish is particularly stigmatized.² Immigrant offspring are losing it in favour of English at an accelerating pace. The implied speaker of Carrillo's title is indeed losing/loosing his español into a Spanish-inflected form of English. Through the pun, Carrillo situates his novel, and his reader, in the space of bilingualism and in the interplay of these two dynamics in the contemporary United States. In his title, the aesthetics enact the politics.

2. The cross-cultural sublime

Sociolinguists have long been fascinated by verbal activity in situations where, as in Carrillo's text, multiple linguistic codes are in play simultaneously. Panels on language contact, language mixing, code-switching, bilingualism and translinguaging pepper the applied and sociolinguistic literature and conference programmes. These phenomena have become objects of particular fascination for their links to vital sociopolitical issues around global migration, colonialism, language and education policy, multiculturalism, immigrant justice, and societal integration. In these few pages, I aim to explore one particular suggestion: that aesthetic analysis is a necessary tool for sociolinguistic explication, especially of translingual and transcultural verbal behaviours, and especially for understanding their political dimensions. The suggestion is that to grasp what Sommer (2004: 34) calls the 'real world of living language', sociolinguistics needs analytical tools to make explicit the aesthetic dimensions of the materials it studies. Verbal aesthetics are too powerful and important to be left implicit or ignored.³

In her important book, *Bilingual Aesthetics: Toward a New Sentimental Education* (2004), language and literary theorist Sommer argues that learning to value the play of linguistic difference is a central building block of contemporary democracy. She proposes a 'new sentimental education' that replaces mistrust and fear of the unfamiliar or incomprehensible with the ability to appreciate and enjoy them. As her title suggests, these capacities have to be taught, transmitted as social know-how, just as fear and mistrust are taught. For Sommer, the challenge is fundamentally an aesthetic one. It is about the cultivation of sensibilities, the aim being 'to reframe a fear of foreignness into an appetite for it' (135). To develop her approach, Sommer surprises us by returning to Emmanuel Kant, never a beacon for multiculturalists. Sommer appropriates Kant's distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful, Kant argues, is created through harmony and symmetry, and inspires love of the world. The sublime is created through the combined experience of beauty and terror, fear and admiration, the beautiful and the horrible. Kant valued the sublime over the 'merely' beautiful, seeing the former as the source of the highest artistic achievement. Sommer is not interested in that hierarchy, but rather in developing people's capacity to appreciate invigorating combinations of beauty and fear, pleasure and unpleasure, certainty and risk, comprehension and incomprehension in contemporary social life. What contemporary democracies need to develop, Sommer argues, is a 'cross-cultural sublime' that gives citizens 'a palate for the unfamiliar, for surprise, even irritation' (134):

Some tolerance for a cross-cultural sublime (the thrill of incomprehension) as well as for humor should spice our talk of aesthetics. Then particular subjects will recognize our own 'migrant' condition as normal double consciousness. Whether more than one culture is inside or alongside the subject, the doubling or multiplying of codes amounts to a humbling consciousness of one's limits. And humility is a sublime double agent that collaborates with reason to make feeling funny feel very good. (134)

I am convinced that developing this 'palate for the unfamiliar, for surprise, even irritation' is what sociolinguists are doing when they find themselves engaged by transcultural interaction, translingual, and mixed language materials, the dramas of communication across difference.⁴ I am quite sure that developing this palate (or what I once called the 'arts of the contact zone'; Pratt, 1991) is also what our subjects are doing in the often skilled and performative interactions that grab our

² Under both presidents Bush and Obama, the U.S. Department of Education has prioritized only the learning of English. Students entering schools with competence in other languages are immediately categorized as "English Language Learners." The hostility to Spanish in the U.S. originates not in immigration but in the fact that Spain was a rival empire in the Americas, against which the U.S. continues to make war long after its defeat in 1898 (Pratt, 2015).

³ I write as a scholar with training in both linguistics and literary/cultural studies, and with a long history of engagement with applied and sociolinguistics (for example, Pratt, 1977, 1991, 2009, 2012, 2015; Traugott and Pratt, 1980).

⁴ Needless to say, sociolinguistics also concerns itself with routine, unexceptional linguistic usage and the social meanings it performs.

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