Editorial

Language in the Amerindian imagination: An inquiry into linguistic natures

What are the natures of language? This is the question that unites papers in this special issue. We can gloss this question as a question about "differences in what language is," although by the end of this editorial we hope to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of what we mean by "natures" and why we should ask the question in the first place. Let us being with a few ethnographic observations:

Human members of collectives as far apart as Athapaskan peoples in the Canadian Northwest territories (Smith, 1998) and Amazonian groups such as the Achuar (Taylor, 1993) or the Runa (Kohn, 2013), frequently enter complex communicative relationships with numerous nonhumans, often by using special linguistic forms. In the Southwestern United States, as reported by Keith Basso (1990), the land itself speaks to the Western Apache through the names that certain places bear, thereby reminding them how to live right. Recently deceased Marubo (Cesarino, 2011) or Araweté (Viveiros de Castro, 1992 [1986]) communicate with their living kin through the songs of shamans. In the Vaupés basin in the Northwestern Amazon the language that one has learned from one's father is the primordial link to one's own kin group, determining who one can and cannot marry (Chernela, 2013). Harry Walker (this volume) observes that in the Peruvian Amazon Urarina patients are cured by ingesting the language of their healers. Among the Mapuche in Southern Chile (Course, 2012) as among the Arizona Tewa (Kroskrity, 1998), particular ritual contexts prescribe the use of specific languages or linguistic forms. And Gary Witherspoon (1977) reports that for the Navajo the world itself originated in language.

Examples such as the above are not unfamiliar to the anthropologist. As different as they may be, they all point to some of the fundamental insights that our discipline has contributed to an understanding of language and communication, and we have numerous concepts ready at hand to describe and analyze them. Words "taste" (Bakhtin, 1981 [1975]) of their previous contexts of use, people "do things with words" (Austin, 1962) and not only talk about them, linguistic forms inevitably index aspects of the participants and their relationships. And while humans are believed to be unique in their ability to use symbolic signs (Deacon, 1997), communication with all kinds of nonhumans is ubiquitous.

Nonetheless, we believe that the above cases also point beyond the ways in which we usually understand the phenomenon "language." Thereby we do not mean to suggest that language in use is not indexical, performative, or historical, but that *what language is* is not exhausted by the linguist's or anthropologist's descriptive categories, and that placing this question back at the center of inquiry can reveal something important about the ethnographic phenomena that we encounter. Language is a sign system, a form of action, a social practice, and a cultural resource, but it is also something more than that, something that we might not yet have the right vocabulary to describe. And maybe not all communicative phenomena can be understood as instances of a general phenomenon "language" at all, as different varieties, genres, registers, modalities, or other "forms" of discourse, that are nonetheless somehow commensurable. They may all be different things. It is these differences in what language may be, the *multiple natures of language*, that we set out to explore in this special issue.

To begin, we would like to acknowledge some sources of inspiration to this endeavor and situate ourselves in relation to prior research. The most immediate influences are, on the one hand, linguistic anthropological studies of language ideologies, and on the other, research on ontologies in the social anthropological or ethnological tradition, particularly what has come to be known as Amerindian perspectivism. In very different ways, both areas of research emphasize the importance of taking seriously people's "beliefs" about phenomena, while also moving beyond the notion of belief in important ways.

We see here a potentially very productive and heretofore underexplored confluence of interest that might help us think through the issues raised by the first paragraph. By briefly reviewing the main tenets of these areas and offering some suggestions how to move ahead, in the following sections we will lay out how we might begin approaching "linguistic natures."

1. Language ideologies

At first sight, the question of what language is seems to fit squarely into the language ideologies paradigm. Language ideologies, by now a well-established concept in linguistic anthropological research, refer to "sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use," as Silverstein (1979, 193) first formulated it. People's assumptions about the languages they use and experience in their everyday lives inform their linguistic and social practices, their relationship to a particular community, and relationships between communities – they mediate between language use, linguistic structure, and socio-cultural context. Thus, in a very straightforward way, what a language "is" is the result of what people "believe" it is. As language users, we orient our linguistic behavior on what we believe to be "correct," "valuable," "appropriate," and the like – language ideologies mediate our linguistic practice.

The term "language" in the quotation above must be understood as an umbrella term to include particular linguistic forms – languages, varieties, genres, or registers – as well as what language is in the general sense. These two levels are in a dialectical interplay, as ideologies about specific languages or linguistic forms are always informed by assumptions about language in general and vice versa (Kroskrity, 1998; Irvine and Gal, 2000). Thus, languages "are" not only the result of speakers' assumptions about these languages (with a plural "s") but at the same time the result of their assumptions about "language" (without the plural "s"). And yet, the distinction of these two levels is itself a specific language ideology, one that has its roots deep in the Western intellectual tradition (Foucault, 1966; Taylor, 1992; Bauman and Briggs, 2003). The language ideologies paradigm can thus be seen also as a reaction against that particular ideology, "challeng[ing] any ideology of language and linguistics, which holds that only one approach to language is scientific and worthy of pursuit by serious thinkers" (Joseph and Taylor, 1990, 5; see also Collins, 1998; Silverstein, 1998).

As a century of research on verbal art, ritual languages, ethnopoetics, multimodality, and human–nonhuman communication has made us aware, the people whose language practices we study often have very different ideas about what these are, and taking seriously those ideas also casts doubt on the universality of the above distinction. Are their practices instances of a general phenomenon "language" at all? Is the term "language" still adequate for ethnolinguistic description (Becker, 1988; Makoni and Pennycook, 2007)? Language ideological differences thus end up questioning the translatability of the term "language" itself (Viveiros de Castro, 2004b; Hanks and Severi, 2014).

A solution to this problem has been sought in linguistic anthropology by shifting the focus away from "language," narrowly defined, towards semiosis, discourse, performance, and related concepts. The preference for Peircean semiotics over Saussurean semiology is part of this general trend. While for Saussure, defining language was the basis for linguistics as a science, Peirce established a model encompassing all of reality in terms of how it functioned as a sign system. Language was a minor concern for him, if any at all (Benveniste, 1981 [1969]). This holds for approaches that focus on the performative aspects of the practice of speaking as well. We do not need to know what "language" is in order to understand the meaning of particular signs and to perform a particular action by means of using them.

However, by bypassing the question of a definition of language and confining our theoretical frameworks to concepts such as "semiosis" or "action" removes our analysis even further from the phenomena we are observing, and local understandings thereof. We are simply transferring the problem of linguistic (or semiotic, discursive, etc.) ideological difference onto another level. The gap between native "beliefs" of what they are doing and "our" scientific access to reality is widened. Therefore, rather than abandoning "language" altogether, here we aim at productively exploring the implications of the translational incommensurability of "language." This, however, requires us to move beyond "beliefs" about language (or discourse, or communication). We thus ask again what language is, or, more precisely, what language is *in* a given context, *for* particular people, without stopping at their "beliefs" of what language is.

To be sure, scholars of language ideologies rarely cling to a narrow definition of "belief" and it has become commonplace to define language ideologies more broadly as "beliefs, feelings, and conceptions about language structure and use" (Kroskrity, 2010, 192), to capture the fact that language ideologies can range from "articulated" conceptions of language to those "ideologies of practice that must be read from actual usage," often operating below the conscious awareness of speakers (198). We therefore do not position our proposal as an alternative to language ideologies. Rather, our aim is to advance research on language ideologies further, but without taking language as its ground. In short, we do not explore "beliefs about" language, beliefs about something the ontological status of which has already been established, but rather what we call the *multiple natures of language*. In this way, our project resonates with work associated with the "ontological turn" in sociocultural anthropology (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017).

2. Ontologies

Critics of the ontological turn cast doubt on the epistemological possibility of addressing metaphysical issues. All we can access as anthropologists are people's descriptions of reality – their representations – and therefore the most we can do is describe these descriptions. However, the refusal to take people's descriptions as anything but descriptions and to entertain the possibility that what people say about the nature of things might be actually real, inevitably places "their" descriptions on an unequal footing with "ours" (Viveiros de Castro, 2013 [2002]), i.e., in most cases "Western" assumptions about the nature of reality. Parallel to Joseph and Taylor (1990, 5) quoted above, the ontological turn challenges any ontology which holds that only one approach to reality is scientific and worthy of pursuit by serious thinkers. This is not to suggest that anthropologists can access reality directly through people's descriptions of reality. What reality is, is not at issue here. Rather, the challenge