The compromised pragmatics of *diversity*

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ABSTRACT

When languages or ethnic/racial identities are imagined as neoliberal objects in corporate, government, and educational discourses, their worth is imagined in terms of 'added value.' Yet they emerge from social formations embedded in inequalities, reflecting the interplay of markedness and unmarkedness. People experience them chronotopically, meaningful relative to specific times, places, and relationships. But once language and identity become quantifiable units of *diversity*, they become subject to rhetorical packaging that eliminates any experiential specificity. Disconnected from context, language and social identity become available for use in institutional promotion and branding. Yet, though marketed in relation to neoliberalized personal properties like *skills*, the marketing potential of linguistic or social diversity is always subject to compromise by the echo of lived experience.

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1. Introduction: how can language and social identity be parallel objectifications?

In contemporary Euro-American corporate discourses, language and race/ethnic identity are routinely objectified as 'things' that people 'have.' This is especially the case when those qualities are marked, i.e. when a language is considered a 'minority' language or when race/ethnic identity is cast as 'diversity.' In neoliberal labor regimes, workers are expected to treat such indexes of their own markedness entrepreneurially. Yet language and identity are inherently neither parallel nor objects, at least not if one thinks of 'language' as, in Silverstein's (2003) terms, a compendium of glottonymically designated phonological, grammatical, and lexical forms, or of identity as a socially-imposed classification signified by selected inherited physical features or other presumably innate properties. That they can be objectified in such parallel ways, says much about the capacity of neoliberalism to reframe and mask the nature of human experience, sociality, and inequality.

I use neoliberalism in the sense analyzed by Harvey (2005): the function of the state is to maximize the market's operational potential, with social practices generally conceptualized as subject to market processes. In this imaginary, workers optimally look upon themselves as an assemblage of commodifiable elements, a condition which Gershon (2011: 540) characterizes as neoliberal agency: an actor's capacity to engage other selves as "autonomous market actors." Each constitutive element of self is valued in terms of its productive deployability, as if one ran oneself like a business. Any capacity for action that gives workers a market edge becomes a 'skill': 'hard skills' as forms of knowledge (including language) or 'soft skills' as modes of sociality (including social identity). Thus imagined as skills, language and social identity are more readily imagined as comparable objectifications of qualities possessed by workers.

That the discursive production of languages and identities are parallel and countable in part reflects the function of markedness in a neoliberal labor regime. By 'marked,' I mean that which is taken as atypical or problematic and consequently inferior, as opposed to an 'unmarked' norm. In neoliberal labor regimes, marked qualities are seen as potentially value-added

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based on their capacity to expand a company's market reach, provide a wider range of services, and so on. This makes speakers of marked languages and bearers of marked identities responsible for finding value for their own markedness, which disguises but does not diminish the conditions of inequality through which people become marked in the first place. Social actors are expected to recast their own marked qualities in rational, modernist terms that readily lend themselves to problem-solving models. Thus, languages spoken by marked populations only take on full neoliberal value when cast as neatly bounded, named, and definable entities not used in messy or problematic ways: no code-switching, no low-status varieties. Languages should be identifiable with text-based standards demonstrating users' continual focus on 'best' practices. Similarly, 'diverse' social identities only take on full neoliberal value when they are seen as exemplifications of good worker qualities, implemented as means to productive outcomes. Thus, good language practices and good identity practices as manifestations of good worker practices become comparable.

In this essay, drawing heavily on websites, I use corporate or corporatized discourses to show how knowledge of marked languages is imagined in terms of productive 'skills' and how marked social identities ('diversity') are linked to problem-solving and leadership. In this way I show how, in such discourses, language and identity can be construed as at least partly parallel objects similarly invested with market value. The evidence for marked languages is drawn from studies of the neoliberalizing of once historically marginalized languages in Europe and Canada, and from diversity marketing firm websites in the U.S (firms that advise companies wanting to market goods and services to ethnically/racially and linguistically marked populations). These provide comparable but slightly different perspectives on contemporary ways in which languages are conceptualized and assigned value, particularly as disconnected from the messiness of language as social experience. I compare these perspectives to the corporate imagining of 'diversity' as a value-added capacity possessed by workers and students, using material from corporate diversity policy statements by major corporations and from the website of the Posse Foundation, a U.S. non-profit organization that recruits students from 'non-traditional' and 'diverse' backgrounds and secures college scholarships for them with the understanding that these students will undergo 'leadership' training to transform them into 'change agents' on their respective campuses. In both corporate diversity statements and on Posse's website, we see identity disconnected from social experience and connected instead to a complex of institutional values. These comparisons illustrate two assumptions about the neoliberalizing of difference embedded in corporate language: that it is incumbent on people to use their social markedness in value-added ways; and that the inequalities of social experience giving rise to such linguistic knowledge or marked identities matter less than their entrepreneurial value.

Marked linguistic experience and social identity take on meaning in webs of social relations anchored to and shaped by particular times and places. Linguistic elements can index social dynamics in configurations that are not apparent or pre-dictable from the named language alone. For example, Blommaert and Rampton examine a notice in an Antwerp shop window, written in Chinese and advertising an apartment for rent, in which the complex of elements (and their origins) making up this small sign "bears the traces of worldwide migration flows and their specific demographic, social and cultural dynamics" (Blommaert and Rampton, 2011:2). Or to take another example, Welsh and Basque, now heavily neoliberalized (Barakos, 2012; Urla, 2012), had long histories as local languages that became marginalized under regimes of internal colonialism. Simply referring to these situations by the glottonyms "Chinese" or "Welsh" or "Basque" obscures those historical shifts. That said, given the nature of language as "an ideological artifact with very considerable power" that "operates as a major ingredient in the apparatus of modern governmentality" (Blommaert and Rampton, 2011:4), it is somewhat easier to mask the structural dynamics that have made named languages marked than it is to mask the structural dynamics that have made identities marked.

Yet the experiences and relationships in which people learn language are also those in which they take on social identity. Silverstein (2005, after Bakhtin, 1981) characterizes these processes in terms of the chronotopic (time-space) structuring of social relations which in turn organizes the framing semiotic principles by which routine acts of pragmatic interpretation are mutually coordinated. Since chronotopicity is a function of the properties structuring people's social worlds, people's experience of it can range from relatively stable to complex and fluid. The shared semiosis characterizing people's experience of chronotopicity emerges cumulatively from webs of linked interaction taking place in real time and in actual locations, through which social actors build up a sense of discursive continuity, of sharing 'the same' kind of talk through links to other discursive activity. This is the process of enregisterment, the continuous co-occurring emergence of linguistic forms and their governing pragmatics as people engage in common social life. In that sense, people's experience of language *is* the experience of register, always in specific times, place, and relationships. Nor do registers ever stop forming while people use them. Regional and social language varieties, contact varieties, code-switching, convergence, and other non-standard formations emerge through enregisterment processes in socially marked circumstances, while those formations recognized as standard develop (or are deliberately cultivated) in unmarked circumstances. As Agha (2007:145–149) argues, registers are cultural models of action linking discursive production to images of person, interpersonal relations, and types of conduct. Thus, register formation is deeply linked to formation of social personas and identities: patterns of co-occurring linguistic elements are manifestations of social formations, group-relative processes that carry value for that group, and for other groups (not necessarily the same values). Hence the link between 'untidy' registers (non-standards, code-switching, etc.) and images of the people who use them.

Under conditions of neoliberal governmentality, the messiness of language and identity becomes reformulated. The messiness of marked language becomes unacknowledged or explicitly criticized and the recognized language is a standardized form. The messiness of marked social identity is reformulated and tidied up as 'diversity.' In a general Foucauldian sense, governmentality signifies the regimes through which subjects are imagined and imagine themselves, along with the