



Register and artefact: Enregistering authenticity in an engagement with Övdalsk descriptivist texts



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 7 September 2015

Keywords:

Authenticity
Indexicality
Enregisterment
Metapragmatics
Descriptivism
Engagement

ABSTRACT

This article deals with the symbolic and material formation of an authenticated register of Övdalsk – a Scandinavian local language – unfolding in a situated engagement with grammatical artefacts. Seeking to refine the often underspecified category of the indexically 'pre-shift,' 'traditional,' 'old' or, in some other way, temporally authenticated register, it intercalates an analysis of linguistic exchanges with histories of production of authoritative discourse. Through a stepwise analysis of the production of metapragmatic discourse, it explores the indexically presupposing and entailing relationship between artefactual objectivation and novel registers of language. Thus examining the enregistering interpretation of genred regimentations of language-as-form, it argues that such focus is apt for creating a reflexive and less essentializing understanding of linguistic authenticity.

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1. Introduction

Indexically authentic ways of speaking have recently been recognized as comprising a significant degree of sociolinguistic complexity (e.g. Wilce and Fenigsen, 2015; Coupland, 2014; Muehlmann, 2012, 2008; Pennycook, 2012:164ff.). Historically contingent categories of 'pre-shift,' 'traditional' or otherwise indexically 'old' language, that is to say, categories of temporally construed authenticity (e.g. Coupland, 2014:17; Jaffe, 2013:451), form a case in point. Indeed, any rationalization of linguistic authenticity bespoken with such, largely interchangeable, temporal labels (see Bauman, 2004:Ch.7, 2001; Hymes, 2003:Ch.1; Briggs, 1996) obscures more nuanced inventories of semiotic value, which are more or less invisible in the naturalizing observation that there seems to exist some kind of contingency between certain temporal configurations and certain models of language (Coupland, 2014:16–19; cf. Williams, 1992:Ch.9). To be sure, indexicalities of authenticity presuppose a range of social and symbolic oppositions, and are, hence, truly dialectic (see Silverstein, 2014a:149ff., 2003a). For instance, while a given linguistically reflexive activity may symbolically dissociate linguistic authenticity from its temporal unfolding, authenticity is still evoked and elaborated in precisely such seemingly synchronic exchanges (Heller, 2011:171; Bauman, 2004:146–149; Bauman and Briggs, 2003:94–98; Hymes, 2003:3; Briggs, 1996:449). This particular kind of enregisterment, which synchronizes symbolic presences and absences, situating them in a temporally deep but expandable discourse, is a persistent condition of production of many complexly crafted indexicalities of linguistic authenticity. Thus, like any means of differentiating one register of language from other registers, all conceptualizations of linguistic authenticity are reflexive achievements. The social existence of any indexicality relies on metapragmatically sensitized practice (Silverstein, 2014a:146, cf. 2010:347, 2006, 2003a, 1993; Caffi, 2006; Lucy, 1993), that is to say, on contingent and pervasive linguistic exchanges,

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which take some aspect of language as their object of interest and reflexively imbue it with social, semiotic value (Silverstein, 2014a:153, 2006, 2003a:212–213; Agha, 2007a:55, 80, 2003). Accordingly, it seems highly appropriate that any analysis of indexically authentic language engages seriously with these aspects of the metapragmatic discourse and discursive practices in which linguistic authenticity is central.

This article furthers the inquiry into these matters. It analyzes these micropolitics of enregisterment (Blommaert, 2014:107ff.; Silverstein, 2014a, 2006, 2003a; Agha 2007a:passim, 2005, 2003), in which indexicalities of linguistic authenticity are entangled (Wilce and Fenigsen, 2015; Coupland, 2014; Goebel, 2012). Moreover, it demonstrates how and why the social prevalence of such authenticated, indexically old, pre-shift registers is not merely a reflex of observable diachrony, mirrored in the linguistic repertoires of certain individuals, but derives from facts of social practice. The article accounts for 14 months^[1] of recurrent participant observation at the fortnightly meetings of *the Grammar group*, an informally organized practice of engagement with Övdalsk, a Scandinavian local language commonly perceived as endangered (e.g. ECRML 4:7)^[2]. At the meetings, five long-term members met and spoke in and about Övdalsk. Their languaging about language was dominated by the figure of grammar, to paraphrase Jakobson (1968:604), to the extent that the group's interaction was primarily preoccupied with prior textual objectifications of Övdalsk as linguistic form.

At their meetings, the group engaged with Övdalsk text artefacts, that is, with discursive regimentations of language as ordered form (Blommaert, 2008; Silverstein and Urban, 1996:4). Centering on the content of primarily descriptive Övdalsk grammars, the interaction was geared toward distinguishing and making known indexically authentic Övdalsk. Focusing on textual representations of Övdalsk as form, the Grammar group's practice extended a 'chain of authentications' (Irvine, 1989:258), initiated in prior descriptivist regimentations of Övdalsk, into its own interaction. In the process, it elaborated and rearticulated the indexicalities of Övdalsk linguistic authenticity. Through this metapragmatic engagement, complexes of performable linguistic signs became socially ordered as pertaining to (or not pertaining to) a recognizable register of Övdalsk (see Agha, 2007a:147–150).

These kinds of reflections on and objectifications of the nature, placement and circulation of linguistic authenticity in social and symbolic space find parallels in many 'battles over authenticity' (Pennycook, 2012:169; cf. Agha, 2012) that unfold in relation to other discourses of endangerment (e.g. Muehlmann, 2012; Suslak, 2011; Heller and Duchêne, 2007; Briggs, 1996). In many ways, the scatteredness of the meetings epitomizes a post-communal speech economy, where linguistic sociality takes place outside traditionalized loci of belonging (see Muehlmann, 2014; Rampton, 2010; Pratt, 1987). Such situated linguistic practices call for a serious analytic treatment of their own logic and conditions of existence (Rampton, 2010:286). From this historically and ethnographically grounded viewpoint, I approach linguistic authenticity as an enregistered, and thus, indexical, socially recognized, higher order property of discourse. Through this lens, the group's modus operandi constituted a particular kind of enregisterment, that is, a practically determined semiotic process, which ordered linguistic signs as distinct registers of language. In seeking to grasp the emergence, resilience and transmutability of registers, the concept of enregisterment pries into the inseparability of symbolic and social relations (Agha, 2007a:81, et passim, 2005, 2003; Silverstein, 2014a:153, 2006:491–492, 2003a:212–213). Thus, it is capable of accounting for a host of metapragmatic activities, through which perceived linguistic difference is made known and ordered as registers, and thereby made useable in discursive typifications of sociolinguistic difference (Agha, 2007a:passim, 2005:39–40; Silverstein, 2003a:226ff.).

Through a close inspection of the transactions that routinely took place at the meetings, the main analysis of this article will focus on the indexical effects of this dialectic between textually fixed representations of Övdalsk language form and the interactional uptake of these entextualizations. Step by step, the analysis moves from an inspection of genesis and rebirth of Övdalsk text artefacts to their subsequent entanglement in the enregisterment of authenticity as it unfolded at the meetings. It treats the group's engaged exchanges over linguistic authenticity as reflexive, discursive oscillations between regimented entextualizations of structured language and their uptake in metapragmatically calibrated exchanges. As has been noted repeatedly (e.g. Coupland, 2014; Bucholtz, 2003; Briggs, 1996; Hymes, 1975), this kind of epistemic reflexivity is capable of breaking with essentializing objectifications of authenticity. To be sure, by analyzing the objectifications of language circulating in linguistically interested exchanges, we are able to create a more versatile point of departure for grasping processes of enregisterment. Thus, when linguistic authenticity is made the object of this undertaking, we are better equipped to produce a more nuanced understanding of the non-formulaic character of all indexicality, which is at once both flexible and constrained.

2. Engaging with Övdalsk

2.1. The meeting practice

The Grammar group's meetings can be understood as an engagement with Övdalsk. Effectively, it was a fundamentally social, linguistic practice through which the group's members engaged in a reflexive, narratively and metapragmatically

¹ September 2012 to December 2013.

² *övdalsk* is one of the local – Övdalsk – names for what in Swedish is referred to as *älvdalska* or *älvdalsmål*. In English, the labels *Övdalian* and *Elfdalian* have been used.

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