



Editorial

Language revitalization and the future of ethnolinguistic identity



This issue emerges from a panel that I organized for the 2013 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, which had as its conference theme “Future Publics, Current Engagements”. Language loss, reclamation, and revitalization represent significant themes of contemporary linguistic and linguistic anthropological engagement with minority and Indigenous peoples. In this issue, we raise questions about how these engagements are shaping the publics with whom they are engaged, and specifically, call attention to the reconfiguration of ethnolinguistic identity in contexts not just of endangerment, but of active efforts to combat it.

If the prediction of widespread language “extinction”¹ – the oft-repeated claims that up to 90% of the world’s languages will disappear within the next few generations (Krauss, 1992) – evokes a view of one possible future, then efforts aimed at fighting against this prediction involve imagining, and working to create, an alternative one. In studies of language loss or shift, the question of identity has played a central role in understanding the meaning of these experiences among the Indigenous and minority populations affected (Battiste, 2000a; Heller and Duchene, 2007; Granadillo and Orcutt-Gachiri, 2011). The idea that languages constitute vital markers of identity, perhaps especially for marginalized peoples, has become almost axiomatic, and the connection is invoked prominently in admonitions to contribute to efforts to “save” endangered languages (Nettle and Romaine, 2000; Grenoble and Whaley, 2006; Evans, 2010). Despite this significance, the issue of ethnolinguistic identity remains undertheorized, especially in work that responds to the challenges of language loss – namely, in revitalization, revival, or reclamation projects. If these points of engagement represent opportunities to imagine the identities of alternative, “future publics” of speakers and users of currently endangered languages, how are these publics brought into being through the actions and activism grouped under the heading of revitalization?

The papers in this issue address how identities are being reconceptualized and transformed by the actors involved in revitalization efforts, including anthropologists, policy-makers and public figures, speakers and learners, and even software companies. The authors interrogate the ways revitalization practices intersect with the politics of authenticity in linguistic communities, the implications of new linguistic and social contexts for language use, and the identification processes that emerge in among learners of endangered languages. The ethnographic examples at the center of these discussions are drawn from different language revitalization situations in the Americas, focusing primarily on Indigenous communities in the United States, Guatemala, and Brazil, but also including an examination of diasporic heritage language revitalization efforts (Giles’ study of Irish immersion camps in Canada). While the papers describe a diverse range of languages, social environments, and revitalization strategies, they all examine situations in which language use is overtly and powerfully politicized, and demonstrate how those involved in revitalization activities work to transform understandings of the relationship between language and identity.

Two broad thematic concerns characterize these papers. First, how do language and linguistic ability contribute to the range of roles and identities that are open to different people, and what linguistic tools are at their disposal for improving these roles and positions? This theme includes questions about how, given the prominence of discourses about the centrality of language to minority and Indigenous identities, non-speakers position themselves and their identities in relation to their communities (Davis), as well as the degrees of authenticity that are afforded to language-learners, including those who may not be members of the ethnically-defined community (Giles). These concerns are further addressed in contexts in which widespread multilingualism destabilizes the presumption of a binary between Indigenous and colonizing languages and identities (Shulist). These questions of authenticity and identity also contribute to discussions about who is able to participate

¹ The term “extinction” has itself been called into question as reifying an assumption of Indigenous languages and cultures as part of a static, unchanging past (Leonard, 2011); its use here is intended to reiterate the extent to which it remains prevalent in linguistic discourses, rather than to reinforce the idea itself.

in different aspects of revitalization activities or political actions either within or on behalf of communities. In the second set of thematic questions, authors examine how the domains and mediums for endangered language use themselves become sites for contesting understandings of what identity should be, and how linguistic forms can or should represent different identities. These range from considering the role of university classes in creating a community of practice (Weinberg & De Korne), to how Indigenous hip hop artists reconfigure the symbolic attachments at work at multiple scales (local, national, and global) in order to contest dominant discourses of unifying and homogenizing nationalism (Barrett). At the same time, the entry of multinational corporations like Microsoft and Facebook into revitalization efforts creates new conditions of commodification for the forms that are chosen (Romero). The central connecting idea running through these articles is that the practices of revitalization involve consciously planning the makeup of the public that speaks, or will speak, these endangered languages, with complex consequences on the ways in which identities are experienced and understood.

1. Identity, community, public

As a group, these papers revisit the central linguistic anthropological topic of how language use and linguistic forms shape and reshape the identities of individuals and the constitution of communities and publics. Within linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, it has been established through decades of research that, rather than a fixed psychological or social category, identity is better understood as a category produced through discursive practice and in locally specific contexts (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). Similarly, neither languages and linguistic forms nor the indexed communities of their users can be understood independently of the ideological work involved in their construction. As Gal and Woolard observe “the work of linguistic representation produces not only individualized speakers and hearers as the agents of communication, but also larger, imagined social groupings”, and “such representational processes are crucial aspects of power” (2001:1). The specific aspects of identity that are most relevant in contexts of language loss and endangerment are expressions of nationalism or ethno-linguistic categorization, which depend, ultimately, on both micro-level interactional features and on macro level dynamics of power and ideology (Kroskrity and Field, 2009). In examining these multifaceted dynamics, the papers included here specifically demonstrate the ways in which tactics of intersubjectivity are at work (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). That is to say, relational principles of sameness vs difference, and the Bakhtinian forces through which they are enacted, establish both the identifications that are being produced and the linguistic practices that determine inclusion or exclusion. The categories of authentication and denaturalization, as well as of authorization and illegitimation, play a role in creating the fields within which endangered language identities are expressed.

In these papers, several authors – notably Shulist, Davis, and Barrett – directly engage with the theoretical question of what ethnolinguistic identity is in light of multilingualism and language loss/revitalization. In defining ethnolinguistic identity, Silverstein observes that “people’s intuitions of social categoriality...construe language as constituting the basis for the divisions among types of kinds of people, especially as people conceive languages to be the central and enabling vehicle or channel of thought and culture” (2003:532). In that work, Silverstein raises questions about the nature of ethnolinguistic identity in a context of globalization, change, and multilingualism, particularly as we observe consequences of the “suturing together of language communities and the cultures that support them” (534). He further situates this discussion within the “politics of recognition”, where certain “top-and-center folks”, themselves construed as outside of the paradigm of identity, establish the political economic terms through which ethnolinguistic identities come to matter (535). The degree to which a Herderian logic of connection between language and culture has come to be assumed (Bauman and Briggs, 2003) has created a context in which people understand themselves to *have* an objectifiable language and culture, even if – as is often the case in endangered language contexts – they do not speak the language that is “theirs” (537). The connection between the rise of endangered language linguistics and a kind of “popular Whorfianism” that oversimplifies the relationship between language, culture, and identity, has been widely recognized in linguistic anthropology (Fishman, 1982; Hill, 2002; Errington, 2003). More careful consideration recognizes that in all cases (not just endangered language ones), ethnolinguistic identity is complex – as John Joseph (2006:264) puts it, it involves “a complex interplay of construction and essentialism, in which *resistance* and *appropriation* of essentialized identities are key processes”. In his description of linguistic identities as “double edged swords”, then, he captures a point that is particularly potent in explicitly and highly politicized contexts like endangerment and revitalization, which bring these essentialisms and their meanings to their surface of metalinguistic discourses.

2. The politics of endangerment and endangered language communities

The context of endangerment, in which increasingly large numbers of people who identify as members of an ethnic group are not speakers of the language(s) associated with that group, immediately disrupts assumptions about the nature of the link between language and this form of identity, as well as of the construction of speech communities through the boundedness of a shared variety (Ahlers, 2014). The work presented here productively engages with the ongoing conversations within linguistic anthropology about the nature of “communities”, including through the deployment of concepts like “community of practice” (Avineri and Kroskrity, 2014; Weinberg & De Korne, 2016). The ways in which communities are formed around and through language varies and changes, especially where endangerment transforms the ideological and indexical connections among multilingual practices. Revitalization actions introduce still more questions into the mix. In addition to ideologies of purism or conceptualizations of cultural dynamism surrounding the language(s) themselves (Dorian, 1994; Hinton and

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