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Speakers, Languages, and Multilingual Thank You Slides. A Cognitive Perspective on Sociolinguistic Categorizations

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Abstract

Linguists enjoy debating the value and legitimacy of metalinguistic categories such as names for languages and varieties (Ebonics, Tussentaal, Macedonian), labels for speaker's languages (mother tongue, first and heritage languages), and categories of speakers (native speaker, second language speaker, bilingual). The linguistic domain of inquiry is intrinsically variable. Understandably, therefore, debates on the best way of referring to languages and speakers take up a lot of energy in the field. Due to unresolved linguistic and sociological problems, these debates do not sustainably advance our scholarly thinking. The well-intentioned terminological innovation on the metalinguistic level only produces short-lived solutions to the problem because of fallacious presuppositions on the nature of fit between categories and linguistic patterns of use. A better conceptual grip on the (unavoidable) human tendency to model and categorize the natural and cultural/social world is required. This can be achieved by taking more seriously fundamental ideas of cognitive semantics. Moreover, I argue linguists should be far more cautious when making claims about the effects of their declarations on social inequalities.

Linguistic Diversity, Categorization, Multilingualism, Linguistic Justice

1 Categorizing Language: The Constant of Variability

Linguistic practices of speech communities are characterized by variability on all levels of language description, as even the earliest sociolinguists have acknowledged. Gauchat (1905: 53) famously describes the francoprovençal dialect of a

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small town as follows: "Rigoureusement, il n'y a pas d'unité dans le parler de Charmey" [There is strictly no unity in the dialect of Charmey].

Linguistics has developed many ways of describing and measuring this variability both diachronically and synchronically. Variability and the degrees of mutual intelligibility associated with it are not sufficient criteria for attributing the language status to speech patterns. If there is one thing on which linguists today agree, it is that the categorization of language behavior as 'a language' is mainly a matter of institutional recognition.

Language is not a natural kind (tulip, sea horse, mountain), and it is not an artifact (Mona Lisa, Maserati, food processor). It is, to use Keller's term (1994), a phenomenon of the third kind: languages – with the exception of planned languages – are not intentionally created by humans but emerge and evolve as a function of individuals' intentions to communicate effectively by applying similar behavioral maxims. Since one of the ways of communicating effectively is to innovate, languages are constantly changing. Codification and literacy norms might slow down the innovation, but they do not stop it. Most of the communicative patterns listed in databases (e.g. Lewis 2009) are written down rarely, if ever. Even traditional Western European language categories (French, English, Dutch) are not definable via necessary and sufficient conditions. From the extensional point of view, they can be described as usage patterns that vary along many different dimensions. Often the folk and linguists agree as to which patterns belong to which language category. Before the time and beyond the space of modern nation-states, however, the foci and the extension of the categories are variable, situated, and often unclear (see De Grauwe 2002 on Dutch/German). Such language categories demand cognitive framing in terms of prototype and other models as is standard in cognitive linguistics (for an overview see Geeraerts 2010, chapter 5).

Language as a collectively organized social practice opens the door for categorization problems: a variety may be considered a dialect of a language or an independent entity for linguistic or political reasons, or because many of its speakers are somehow marked (ethnically, socioeconomically, gender, etc.). Because synchronic variation is in large part associated with diachronic development, linguistic practices cannot be categorized synchronically without construing diachronic continuities. Therefore, when historical (e.g. colonial) attitudes are contested, linguistic categorizations become the stage for negotiating identity and legitimacy. The backdrop of many such linguistic debates is the so-called standard-language ideology, as expressed in Geeraerts' (2003) Rationalist model. It involves stereotypes on the rule-governed nature of classical languages (as opposed to "grammar-free" dialects), and political control through linguistic

imperialism. It is often against such ideas that linguists defend the value and status of non-standard, minority ways of using language.

2 Linguistic Fractals

In 1996, the Oakland school board decided to recognize the status of African American Vernacular English as pupils' first language. The main goal was to acknowledge this first language as a basis for teaching academic language skills in standard English. The pedagogical practice of building upon pupils' dialects in literacy education has a long tradition in Europe (see Ruoss & Schröter 2020 for the Swiss German context). The wording of the decision referred to Ebonics as "a language", which was ridiculed by politicians and the press. The Linguistic Society of America (1997) supported the decision, sensibly arguing that it is not the distinction between language and dialect that matters but the recognition that the minority language is just as systematic and rule-governed as any other language.

The typical rationale of such terminological innovation is this: a language or variety associated with a group of speakers who are underprivileged and/or discriminated against is focalized, often renamed, and declared legitimate. The goal is to increase the social value of the linguistic category, often also by making institutional resources available to promote it. Similar examples are declarations by adherents of the "pluricentricity" framework as to the equality of national standard varieties, or by second language researchers on the systematicity of inter-languages.

The typical argument regarding a target variety X in sociolinguistics is:

1. X is by no means a less valuable variety/language than Standard S; it is just as systematic and complex.
2. If speakers of X are discriminated against, it is because they are socially vulnerable
3. By declaring X a "scientifically" valid form of human language, linguists support the minority in question and contribute to social justice.

The objectives of these efforts vary across space and time: the Ebonics debate started as a form of transitional bilingualism. The ultimate goal was to more efficiently develop skills in the dominant (standard) language. But today, certainly in the case of the pluricentric framework, the goal is not transition any longer, but emancipation (see discussion below). This emancipatory impetus is also

captured by Geeraerts' (2003) Romantic view on dialects, but it can be extended to variation more generally: X can be multilingual's mixed speech patterns, a pluricentric norm, or an ethnolect. The wording varies across the decades: in the conception proposed by Clyne (1992: 455), the emphasis lies on "nations", "people", and on a sociology of language perspective on the "pecking order" among national varieties. Today, the emancipatory perspective is combined with a social justice regard on language education. Since "linguistics" has recognized the status of a particular variety, these varieties have to be considered equal by social actors and need to be celebrated and/or taught at school. Variationist language pedagogy is expected to address questions of intersectionality:

Activities that encourage a critical engagement with socially constructed norms such as linguistic norms may empower those students who speak marginalized languages or varieties while it may lead speakers of advantaged languages and varieties to interrogate their privilege Such an approach can open the door to uncover intersectional social identities and inequalities and how they are constructed through and connected with language.

(Ruck 2020: 39)

Categorization levels below national varieties can be the object of emancipatory efforts, too. Any variation that deviates from even the most informal norm lends itself to social interpretation and discrimination. This is what I call the "fractal" nature of language categorization: just as in fractal structure in mathematics, zooming in reveals recursively similar structures. Advocacy for the legitimacy of a category with higher granularity may make sense for specific empowerment agendas (known as "strategic essentialism"), but it inadvertently or deliberately erases within-category distinctions, which in turn legitimates yet another round of recategorization. In the words of De Schutter (2020: 148), "interlinguistic equality . . . leads to vast intralinguistic inequality". The idiolect is not even the end of the scale, as empirical scrutiny shows that individuals have variable usage patterns on different levels of linguistic description, a fact that is emphasized in dynamic systems theory (e.g. De Bot 2015).

3 Categorizing Speakers

Another domain in which terminological innovation is commonplace is reference to multilingual speakers and their languages. Terms such as "native speaker" and "mother tongue" have long been criticized and rejected by sociolinguists (Ferguson 1982). The reasons for this rejection lie in part in the variability of the

linguistic norm: is a West Flemish dialect speaker a legitimate native speaker of Dutch? Is a bilingual speaker of English and Spanish a legitimate native speaker of one, both or neither of the two languages? And, as shown by Goebel (1986), the notion of "mother tongue" is often associated with a standard language and not with a dialect: people who don't use the standard simply don't have a mother tongue.

The categorization of people as native speakers and of languages as mother tongues or native languages poses empirical and ideological problems. The notion of native speakers, according to its critics, evokes "perfect" mastery of the language in question, whereas speakers vary notoriously in their mastery of languages, for reasons of social class, individual giftedness, multilingualism or any combination of such factors. This is important for language acquisition research because comparisons among learners, second language speakers and native speakers are an important albeit controversial heuristics in the field. It is therefore unsurprising that scholars have called for the abolition of the terms. A rigid application of the native speaker and mother tongue stereotypes indeed leads to a bad fit of the category to real world empirical facts. But beyond such empirical problems, more recent scholarship advocates such terminological innovation by invoking social justice:

How we name things and people matter, as they reflect how we see and value them. By using terms that reflect equality and equity, we signal that we want to see more equality and equity in society. Banning the use of derogatory terms is a crucial first step to end the hegemonic power structure that keeps NNS/LX users in a position of subordination.

(Dewaele, Bak & Ortega in press)

The authors argue that the terms "native-" and "non-native speaker" are "toxic" and should be replaced by "L1" and "LX user", terms that are considered more neutral and that "emphasize the equal status of first and foreign language users". While I share concerns that a stereotyped view of speakerhood is often implied by the term "native speaker", I am not convinced that numbering languages achieves the goal of equal status: on the contrary, the first rank in a competition is in a non-trivial way not equal to the following ranks. Instead of emphasizing the importance of language from birth, numbering emphasizes the prominent first position in multilingual language acquisition. Be they called *L1* or *native languages*, their mastery varies and can fade away, as in cases of attrition or international adoption (Montrul 2016). Replacing a specific use of language (*speaking*) by a more general term (*using*) does not fundamentally change anything in the variable nature of speakerhood - whatever the category may be.

Both areas - language labels and speaker labels - thus present categorization problems, and will always fit badly with reality, if the categories' intensional semantics are supposed to be captured by necessary and sufficient features. There are two solutions: either one abandons these categories altogether as epistemic tools (the postmodern solution), or one re-engineers them as natural categories (the cognitive-sociolinguistic solution).

4 Postmodern Solutions

Whereas the business of counting and labelling languages has long been criticized by scholars working on linguistically highly heterogeneous contexts (Mühlhäusler 1996), the movement away from language labels has gained momentum recently in multilingualism studies. Among the most vocal advocates are scholars who suggest replacing references to "named languages" with notions such as *linguaging* and *translanguaging*. The rationale for this is psycholinguistic, on the one hand, since multilinguals do not appear to have separable language systems in their minds but a single, highly integrated system. On the other hand, the new framing is claimed to have far-reaching social effects beyond language pedagogy:

[A] translanguaging pedagogy leverages the unitary full repertoire of linguistic features and semiotic practices that bilingual learners use. Rather than starting with named languages, a translanguaging pedagogy starts with the language practices of bilingual learners. By leveraging their entire language repertoire, translanguaging returns the power of language to speakers and engages their communicative human potential, rather than authorize only the conventions of named languages that have been codified by the nation-state to develop governable subjects.

(García & Tupas 2018: 403)

As shown by Geeraerts (2003), the idea that language standardization is related to political control is certainly justified in the context of European nationalism. However, the translanguaging literature does not spell out how exactly linguists' new way of framing languages and the implementation of this new framing in pedagogy leads to more social justice. Moreover, the language labels are still very much in use in these scholars' analyses of classroom interactions (see Berthele 2021 for examples), and their scholarly production is not in translanguaging but in impeccable academic English. A multilingual thank you slide is not enough to mask the gap between scholars' celebration and normative imposition of translanguaging and their own successful use of skills in the standard language.

The widespread belief that the pedagogical celebration of multilingualism will replace target language learning thanks to transfer miracles lacks empirical support (see Berthele & Vanhove 2020 for evidence and discussion). The gap between what is declared and what is practiced is not new: even though Ebonics was declared equal by a unanimous group of American linguists, their own scholarly production continued in the more equal academic English. Notice that first generation sociolinguists did not deny the importance of teaching the standard language to minority children (see De Schutter 2020: 166), and therefore their own use of the standard is unproblematic. Today, however, this priority to the standard or dominant language is considered oppressive and racist (see e.g. Baker-Bell 2020). Nevertheless, the linguistic antiracists still use the "hegemonic" code instead of Ebonics or translanguaging.

I sympathize with the critique of the essentialization of languages as clear-cut categories. I doubt, however, that the postmodern approach will produce beneficial effects, neither on the scholarly nor on the social level. Named languages are declared obsolete but maintained as reference points and practices. A cognitive semantic approach can more fruitfully address the problem.

5 A Cognitive Linguistic Proposal

Several cognitive semantic approaches are useful in tackling the difficult problem of categorizing languages and speakers, most prominently prototype theory (see Berthele 2021 on prototypes and bi/multilingualism).

Rosch's theory of categorization was developed for natural kinds (Geeraerts 2010: 185). However, at least some of the domains she studied (e.g. toys, sports) are social practices. Indeed, phenomena of the third kind such as language are well suited for prototype theory. The four properties of prototypical categories are all relevant for our domain:

- Degrees of typicality
- Family resemblance structure
- Blurred edges/fuzzy boundaries
- No definition by means of single set of criteria

Prototypicality in the realm of languages is less perceptually based than culturally. In a Western model, certain languages are more typical than others (French vs. Luxemburgish vs. Ebonics) because they have a well-established, institutionally codified norm and are typologically relatively distant from neighboring languages. Within a category, varieties exhibit family resemblance: many Germanic

languages have V2 syntax in main clauses, but present-day English only in vestigial constructions. Many Germanic languages have a /t/ phoneme in the word for 'water' but High German hasn't, etc. The boundaries of language categories are blurred, both historically and synchronically. Given their cultural history, language categories can be criticized on ideological grounds.

The prototype of a "native speaker", furthermore, is a very competent speaker of the language who has always used this language exclusively or predominantly. A less prototypical native speaker could be a multilingual who has started somewhat later and/or uses other languages regularly. At the same time, a prototypical native speaker of a language is not a prototypical bilingual. This way, the notion of the native speaker, still very much used by linguists despite the sustained criticism, keeps its value as a reference point without being normatively damaging. If construed as a prototypical category with variable degree of affiliation, as wisely suggested by Davies (2003: 207), there is no need to abandon the notion.

The replacement term *L1-user* as suggested by Dewaele, Bak & Ortega (in press) is largely co-extensive with the category of the native speaker, since the first language used by a person is very often nothing other than the language she encounters from birth on. Here, a useful framework is MacLaury's (Taylor & MacLaury 1995) vantage theory that fosters understanding of overlapping categories that have different meanings, in an interplay of emphasis on similarity or difference. Such theories of cognitive construal, explicitly accounting for both fixed and variable coordinates, account for the cognitive underpinnings of social meaning-making processes, e.g. when categories are strategically essentialized and homogenized in socio-political discourses. The application of such elaborate theories of categorization to the social domain clearly deserves more attention.

6 Discussion

Cognitive sociolinguistics construes language as a social practice by taking into consideration cognitive mechanisms that shape the minds of the language users. It operates on the intermediate level of collective phenomena (e.g. varieties, languages), drawing on high level universal cognitive principles and acknowledging individual variability in their application. Debates on the categorization of language use and users should draw more fundamentally on cognitive linguistics.

Linguistics is rather self-involved in its constant terminological overhaul. Linguists often overestimate the effect of their terminological innovations, arguably led astray by postmodern-Whorfoid tendencies in critical theory ("language

is power and shapes our ideological construction of the world”). In this view, terminological innovations represent a step towards social justice. However, a closer look at the effects of such efforts in the past should lower our expectations considerably: neither the promotion of national varieties or local dialects, nor that of Ebonics and of immigrated multilingualism seems to have made much difference (see Berthele 2017 on the similarities of intra- and inter-language debates). Linguists hardly ever spell out how their conceptual revolutions causally change social inequalities. In an episode of *South Park* (s2/e17), the underpant-gnomes’ business model is presented as follows: phase 1: *collect underpants* – phase 2: ? – phase 3: *profit*. Let us assume that attitudes towards minorities and their languages can be changed, and that these changes lead to a better learning of skills relevant for selection (please note that both assumptions are probably overoptimistic). All of this is still the *first* stage of the business model. It is unclear how more equality of skills in, say, linguistic subjects will translate into more social equality (the profit phase), because the second phase of the business model is not spelled out properly. Attention needs to be paid to the actual causes of inequalities: as pointed out by the early sociologists (see e.g. Weber 1980: 201), if the basic model of society is competition, any (cultural) difference may be used to rationalize inequalities. At best, eliminating one such rationalization relocates inequality. It will not eliminate it. Eliminating competition altogether does not require mere *terminological* revolution. How likely is it that *actual* revolution would see linguists manning the barricades? Not very. The terminological innovations are successful primarily in the world of linguists, in that they allow the promotion of specific terms and frameworks, and thereby the individual careers of linguists.

Paradoxically, the debates on terms and their *meanings in linguistics* do not make use of *linguistic theories of meaning*. A cognitive account of speakerhood, varieties and languages fills in this gap, while avoiding the cul-de-sac of deconstructing categories without offering any workable replacement. Although undoubtedly well-intentioned and based upon correct analyses of problematic construals, the postmodernists’ proposals to ban “toxic” language-related categories are unhelpful both on the scholarly and on the practical levels, as their advocates’ own practices show. On the level of linguists’ construal, an account like the one presented here prevents the discipline from throwing out the baby with the bathwater: yes, a typical standard language or a typical native-speaker do not empirically represent the speakers and languages, but they are important socio-cultural reference points. They are cognitively and socially real. Pretending they should not exist while at the same time systematically exploiting the communicative value of standard languages professionally is scientifically self-defeating.

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