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**How we feel and think about language:
Language ideologies and
the 'total linguistic fact'**

Ben Rampton (*King's College London*) &
Sam Holmes (*Causeway Education*)

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How we feel and think about language: Language ideologies and the ‘total linguistic fact’

To analyse people’s thoughts, beliefs and feelings language and languages, sociolinguists have developed the concept of ‘language ideology’. The goal is to understand

- how our thoughts, feelings and belief about language are tied into our social lives, our biographies, our histories and our day-to-day communication.

In fact, say sociolinguists, if you overlook these language ideologies, you can’t really understand language and language use – they are an essential part of the ‘total linguistic fact’. At the same time,

- there are a lot of different ideologies of language, varying in how elaborate and influential they are and the types and aspects of language they focus on;
- particular language ideologies grow and decline over time;
- they often privilege some people rather than others, generating inequalities, arguments and conflict (large and small), although
- there is still some scope of creatively reworking well-established ideologies in practical activity.

To help make sense of the complicated multilingual situations that we operate in on a daily basis, this short paper introduces the idea of ‘language ideologies’. Language ideologies circulate very widely in society but they are also very closely integrated into everyday linguistic practice and often feel very personal. Indeed, they are so fundamental to communication that we need to include ideology in our basic definition of language, as a core element in what sociolinguists have called ‘the total linguistic fact’.

But first, to see how the idea of ‘language ideology’ can be useful, it is worth setting the scene with the short case-study of a GCSE Portuguese class for 14 and 15 year-olds in a London secondary school, bringing out a few of the complexities in what might at first seem rather a straightforward linguistic environment.

GCSE Portuguese: A case-study

Sam did his PhD fieldwork in a mixed comprehensive secondary school in South London, and here is a statement from the website:

“We also enter students for GCSE and entry level qualifications in community languages. Native speakers of Portuguese, Bengali, Arabic and Turkish, amongst many other languages, have had the opportunity to gain a qualification in their mother tongue.”

The school had two reasons for setting up these classes. First, there was an ethos of cultural inclusiveness at the school, and the recognition of languages used in local minority ethnic communities expressed this. Second, it wanted as many of its students as possible to get English Baccalaureates (EBacc), which involve a language GCSE. Offering GCSEs in Portuguese, Bengali etc capitalised on the fact that there were a lot of students who the school saw as ‘native speakers’ of these languages.

But when Sam took a closer look at the Portuguese class, he found that the situation was more complicated than this. The students in the GCSE class who had ‘Portuguese’ as a “home language” were mostly European Portuguese, because Brazilians at the school tended to arrive in the country at older ages and were already literate enough to pass the exam without formal study, and there was also one Polish and one Palestinian student with good language skills. But when he carried out a survey of 58 pupils of Lusophone descent, only 10.6% actually recorded the exclusive use of ‘Portuguese’ at home. Here are some of his findings:

Language use in the home	Pupils
Portuguese dominant plus English	32
English dominant plus Portuguese	14
Portuguese only	5
Portuguese, English and Spanish	2
English only	1
Portuguese, English and French	1
Portuguese and Italian	1
English and Fula	1
English and Jamaican	1
Language use at school	Pupils
English dominant plus Portuguese	34
English only	12
Portuguese dominant plus English	8
Portuguese, English and Spanish	2
Portuguese only	1
English, Portuguese and Patois	1

Digging a bit deeper, it soon also became clear that “home language” didn’t guarantee stress-free participation in the lessons. Vinício, for example, might anticipate effortless achievement – “chillax total marks” – but the experience in lessons could be rather different - “I can’t say it, I can’t say it”:

Teacher (to Vinício): Patrycja já fez mais que tu
(Patrycja has already done more than you)
 Vinício: Do I care about Patrycja? ‘Ilow it, like I’m jealous

Questions of cultural identification also arose, as in this exchange between Vinício and Jim, whose parents both originally came from Portugal:

Vinício: I hate people like Jim. You’re Portuguese and you say that you’re English
 Jim: I am English. I was born here.
 Vinício: You’re not English, man

Being Portuguese was contested in banter drawing on national stereotypes – “your grandma don’t even know how to make chouriço” – and ‘Portuguese’ was itself a far from being a unified category free from division: “that’s why I hate Madeirans” ... “go back to your island”. The course materials included Brazilian texts alongside European ones, but some of the students dismissed them as “incorrect”: “no it’s Brazilian” ... “no grammar!” And there were also complaints about reductive accounts of Portuguese ‘culture’: “that’s a lie” (referring to a textbook account of school in Portugal). So clearly, there was rather a lot going on in this classroom. How can we best make sense of it?

First interpretations

The class that Sam observed carried a linguistic label, ‘Portuguese’, but it was clear on the website from words like ‘native speaker’, ‘mother-tongue’, ‘home language’ that this label was also doing quite a lot of social classification, distinguishing between people who do and don’t know the language, and people who were and weren’t born into it. This socio-linguistic classification obviously also made good sense to the school, and fitted rather well with two things that it was committed to:

the EBacc, and an inclusive multiculturalism. Plus of course, there was quite a substantial educational apparatus that the school could use to flesh out the notion of ‘Portuguese’: syllabuses, text-books, exams etc

But from that point on, it is clear that the school was working with just one version of Portuguese and Portuguese speakers – one *ideology* of Portuguese – and that students didn’t fit into this scheme as easily as the school might have hoped. Both students and teachers actually had a range of different ideas about what Portuguese was and about who could and should speak it, and as we heard, this sometimes led to disagreements and disputes.

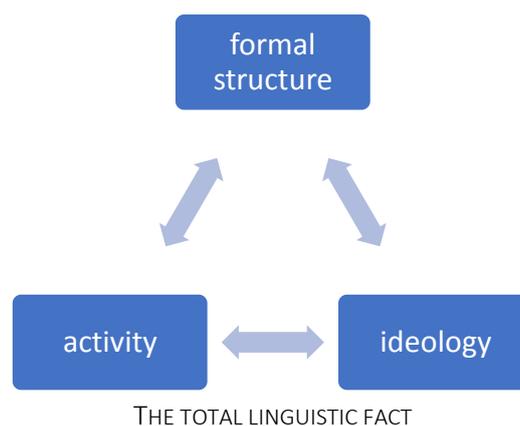
So how can we make sense of all this? Two options jump out right away.

One response is to marvel at multilingual superdiversity of the kind we discussed in the previous paper (Rampton 2019), maybe concluding that traditional models of language and ethnicity just don’t work anymore, and it’s all more much more complex. That might be correct, but on its own, that’s not especially constructive, and doesn’t provide any pointers towards practical action.

Another response might be to pick up on the talk of ‘chorizo’ and ‘provincial Madeirans’, and to dismiss it as stereotyping and ignorant prejudice, based on misconceptions that run counter to reality and the facts. The problem with this approach is that it’s very common to find a big gap between our beliefs about language and language-as-it’s-actually-used. The ‘facts’ often aren’t that obvious, and they also have the habit of changing. In addition, the ‘ignorant prejudice’ argument tends to blame individuals, and doesn’t really go deeper either into the social roots of people’s thoughts and feelings, or the part that our beliefs play in the way we organise our lives. And this is where we can bring the notion of ‘language ideologies’ more fully into the picture.

Language ideologies

‘Ideology’ is obviously quite a loaded word, and in some traditions, ideology is something bad – it’s a source of false consciousness and you need to fight it with systematic analysis to get you closer to the truth. But for the most part in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, researchers use the word ideology to *understand how our thoughts and feelings about language are tied into our social lives, our biographies and histories*. Ideology isn’t something you can transcend or escape – for contemporary sociolinguists, it’s an integral part of language use, and it’s just as important as formal structure and the acts and activities in which language gets used. In fact, these three elements are all brought together in the ‘total linguistic fact’, which involves a dynamic three-way relationship between:



In other words, whenever we speak, write, sign, listen etc, we're not just selecting phonological and grammatical forms ('formal structures') for the tasks we're engaged in ('activity') – we're also operating with a sense of how our words could or should fit the situation, how much weight they're likely to carry, the kinds of place where they could resonate etc. We may well get it wrong, but that just means that for the next time round, we'll need to adjust our model of the do's and don'ts, and of how our utterances fit the social world we're moving in ('ideology').

So *first*, language ideology covers a person's almost instinctive sense of what sounds good, what's appropriate and what's acceptable etc in society as s/he perceives it. But a number of other things follow on from this.

Second, people obviously differ in their sense of what's appropriate: so for some of the kids in Sam's school, but not others, the Portuguese from Brazil and Madeira didn't really belong. So we need to think about language ideologies plural.

Third, differences can lead to disputes. We saw "go back to your island" and "do I care about Patrycja" in Sam's data, and this points to the fact that particular ideologies are likely to favour some people and disadvantage others. And that this often leads to disagreement and struggle.

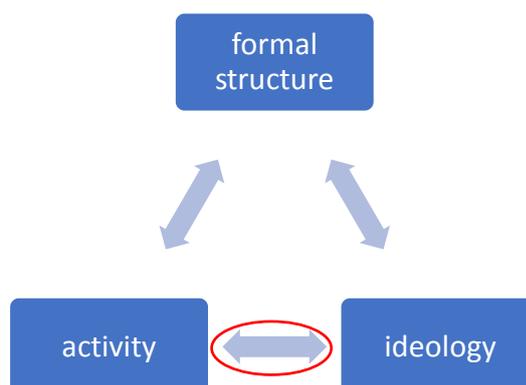
At the same time, *fourth*, it is obvious that there can be big differences in the power, elaboration and codification of the ideas about language that people operate with. The *dominant* language ideology in Sam's data was obviously the school's, backed up with a large array of institutional resources capable of turning a plurality of Lusophones into candidates of GCSE Portuguese. Outside school, though, these kids may very well encounter ideologies of Portuguese in popular culture which are also very powerful and very different, as in, for example, Brazilian hip hop. There are also other feelings and ideas that maybe linger over more from the past – how long in London, for example, is a sense that Madeirans are provincial going to last? Raymond Williams calls these 'residual' rather than dominant ideologies.

So far then, we've got language ideologies plural, which can both feel 'close-up and personal' and circulate very widely at the same time. Particular language ideologies tend to favour some people and disadvantage others, often leading to competition and conflict, and they vary in their power, elaboration and codification, growing and declining over time. This means that when you run into comments about slovenly speech, a rule about grammar, an instruction about the best way to learn new words, there are a number of questions to ask:

- what other ideas, resources, values and practices is this line of thinking associated with? How elaborate and codified is it?
- how, where, when and with whom does this ideology come into play?
- where does it circulate, where does it originate?
- is this ideology dominant, residual or emergent?
- who benefits and who loses out?
- what does it conceal/hide from view?
- with what other ideologies is it in competition or conflict, and how do these other ideologies look when we problematise them with questions like these?

This is quite a substantial list of questions, and they're not at all easy to answer. But this is better than just blaming individuals for ignorant prejudice, and it can help us to start making sense of at least some of the complexities we encounter in a school like Sam's. And it's essential not to forget that even though it might just sound like a sarcastic comment from one corner of the classroom, arguments and beliefs about language – language ideologies – have actually fuelled revolutions and the birth of nation-states. So we need to take them seriously.

At the same time, there's no need to feel completely overwhelmed, powerlessly caught in the massive ideological cross-currents, downtrodden by one ideological regime after another, if we refer back to the 'total linguistic fact':



Between activity and ideology, it's a two-headed arrow, which means that *what people actually do together* can *reshape* linguistic values and beliefs. Raymond Williams has a particular term for this – emergent ideology. Yes, there are dominant and residual ideologies, but in addition, ideologies emerge when people do things which don't fit the mould, when they recognise that they're doing something different, and start to build it up.

The example of this that Ben knows most about involved adolescents in multi-ethnic friendship groups using bits and pieces of each other's languages, non-seriously for the most part. But over-time, this became an important emblem of local neighbourhood community, and it was something that they talked about quite explicitly (Rampton 1997). Indeed, if you were at the last Hub seminar, it was a language ideology that you could hear Anwar reproducing when he talked hyper-mixed Southallian on the phone with his old schoolfriend (Rampton 2019).

But that's just one example. The key point is that although language ideology suffuses everything we say, particular ideologies rise and fall, and with the role that activity plays in all this, there's still room for creative practice to push alternatives. Not fast or easy, but worth pursuing?

References and further readings

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