

INTRODUCTION TO:

When Languages Collide: Perspectives on Language Conflict, Language Competition, and Language Coexistence

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Language Conflict, Competition, and Coexistence: Some Preliminary Remarks

by Brian D. Joseph, Johanna DeStefano, Neil Jacobs,
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1. Conflict and Controversy in Language and in Linguistics

It is virtually axiomatic that language is a fundamental component in nearly all areas of human endeavor, activity, interaction, intellectual inquiry, emotion, and more. It is thus not at all surprising that issues of language usage, language origins, and language meaning, both denotative and connotative, as well as style, variation, and diversity, have from ancient times constituted a — perhaps the — focus for discourse on the nature of human beings and human society. One need only consider, for example, the presence of myths about the origin of language in many societies, the importance of language as a topic for Socratic disquisitions in Plato's Dialogues (e.g. especially the *Cratylus*), and early 20th-century language riots in Greece, as well as conflicts in Belgium and Canada, among numerous other examples. In tandem with this, language has always constituted — and likely will always constitute — the raw material for academic debates in arenas as diverse as literary studies, history, political science, journalism, and gender studies, to name but a few.

Nevertheless, even in the face of such pervasive human-centered and sociolinguistic issues, for many linguists, the field of linguistics is defined primarily in terms of the formal description and analysis of language structure, as the investigator looks at language as a complex system in and of itself and as a manifestation of human cognitive abilities. And, to some extent, such a view is justified, since language is enormously complex and in some way, even if not fully understood at present, must certainly tie in with, and reflect — or be a reflection of — cognition.

There is thus both a social/community side to language and a psychological/individual side. All too often, it seems that practitioners of a cognition/structure-based view of the field overall have relegated the social side of language investigations to the margins, labeling it as "sociolinguistics" (presumably as distinct from "(other/real)" linguistics). As a counterbalance, though, it has been asked, e.g. by William Labov, whether there can in fact be a linguistics without the socio-, suggesting that ALL aspects of language have to be viewed ultimately through the prism of the society in which speakers live and function.

Thus while for many linguists, there are no greater issues to worry about than which node a particular noun phrase hangs from in a tree structure or what the internal geometry of the features making up a sound are, or the proper characterization of the relation between quantifiers and negation in the formal representation of the meaning of a sentence, it is fair to ask whether any of this matters to those who provide the raw data that linguistics

typically operates on, i.e. the speakers themselves of natural human languages.

The contributions in this book, while diverse in their foci, nevertheless share a common orientation: their fundamental approach is one grounded in the lives of speakers, individually and societally. They examine from a number of different perspectives a variety of language-related problems that affect real people in real situations. Language, as it emerges from the papers in this volume, is at the heart of a number of social issues that are an inescapable part of human growth, human interaction, and human development, including but not restricted to: access to economic opportunity and education, development of literacy, elimination of prejudice and bias, formation of individual and group identity along numerous parameters (including ethnicity, gender, nation, and religion), sharing in societies' power structures, etc.

Comments on a couple of these points may be in order. With regard to literacy, we note that its valuation is in itself a culturally loaded construct. Thus, for example, the contributors and editors and readers of the present volume are of necessity participants in this particular socially constructed value system. Literacy undoubtedly brings great benefits, but it is not uniformly positive. For example, one could argue that societal literacy can contribute to a de-emphasizing and subsequent loss of a group's collective memory.

With regard to the last point above, we note, ironically enough, that even the practice of scholarship on language can serve to further hegemonic constructs. Thus, for example, while 20th-century German-language linguistic scholarship on Yiddish has come to recognize Yiddish as an independent language (and not simply a "dialect" of "German"), this scholarship has frequently continued framing the discourse and the investigation itself in terms of German linguistic discourse and constructs (see, e.g., Frakes 1989, Jacobs 1996), and has all but ignored the insights and contributions from Yiddish linguistic scholarship.

An interest in such matters has led many linguists to investigate how the results of linguistic research can affect public policy issues such as minority language rights, language choice in the classroom, and the viability of endangered languages and dialects, as seen in such recent works as Blommaert (1999), Calvet (1998), Christidis (1999), Conley & O' Barr (1998), Durgunoglu & Verhoeven (1998), Garcia & Fishman (1997), Jaffe (1999), Kontra, Phillipson, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Varady (1999), Lippi-Green (1994), Mattusch (1999), Mazrui & Mazrui (1998), Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas (1995), Ricento & Burnaby (1998), Wolfram, Adger, & Christian (1999), among others.¹

2. The Volume Itself

This volume brings together 15 papers from a conference held at The Ohio State

¹We note as well the Kluwer Academic Publishers 1998 *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, in 8 volumes — each with different editors (and thus not mentioned separately here in this already long list) — covering many germane issues.

University November 13-15, 1998, sponsored by various area studies centers at Ohio State: the African Studies Center, the Center for Slavic and East European Studies, the East Asian Studies Center, the Latin American Studies Center, the Middle East Studies Center, and the West European Studies Center, together with the Office of International Studies, and all made possible with funds from the United States Department of Education.

The themes of the conference were the causes, processes, and outcomes of language conflict, language competition, and language coexistence, and its target topics were given in the call for papers as follows:

“Issues relating to language or dialect hegemony within societies including, but not limited to, language planning, designation of national or official languages, orthographic reform, dialect and language prestige, language endangerment and death, minority language status, gender or race-based linguistic hegemony, and the spread of English as the international language of science, business, etc., and the reaction of non-English speaking peoples to this. Relevant themes include: State-imposed linguistic unity and its implications; the linguistic legacy of colonialism; international languages, their positive and negative consequences; contentious issues regarding national or local languages; race-, ethnic-, gender-, and class-based dialects under siege by the dominant linguistic paradigm; diglossia; orthographies in competition; conflicting romanizations of languages.”

Though at the outset the organizing committee wondered if a suitable set of coherent topics had been identified, it soon became clear that the answer was a resounding “Yes”. Some 100 abstracts from all over the world were submitted, and the conference ultimately consisted of 38 presentations, including 6 by invited speakers.

Coupled with the recent explosion of works on language issues pertaining to the exercise of and access to power within society (see references above), the response to the call for papers clearly demonstrates that the field of linguistics at large is indeed coming around (perhaps again) to matters that supplement the overwhelming interest exhibited by so many linguists in purely formal and theoretical issues.

Several papers from the conference (11 to be exact) were published in more or less their conference form in a special issue of *Language & Communication* (17.4, 1999, edited by B. Joseph), entitled “Social, Cultural, and Political Perspectives on Languages in Conflict”. Other authors were invited to revise and expand their papers, resulting in the present volume.

3. The Papers Themselves: Themes and Organization

The papers in this volume differ in style and in scope, but they actually show considerable overlap in their content. As a result, giving the volume an internal structure was not an easy task. Still, based on the primary focus of each paper, we have organized

them into four meaningful groupings, covering Causes of Conflict, Processes of Conflict, Outcomes of Conflict, and finally, Evaluation and Functionality of Languages in Conflict.

The papers are mostly case-histories that discuss various aspects of language conflict and language competition; for the most part, they are not papers on theory, but rather generally provide original data and original interpretations that others can build on. The range of regions covered is impressive, with North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa all represented; moreover, the language coverage is equally diverse, and there are discussions that focus on quite different time periods. Taken together, this diversity suggests that the issues treated are indeed universal, to be found in all speech communities, in all places and in all times. Moreover, there is great variety in the methodological approaches, ranging from the analytic to the historical, from the sociological to the archeological. Rather than summarize the papers, though, we will let them speak for themselves, since we feel they offer powerful testimony to the important ways in which language continues to be at the center of real-life concerns to speakers.

4. A Final Word

Fishman 1996 talked about “good conferences in a wicked world”, suggesting that sometimes good conferences are not enough since translating conference “results” into tangible action on behalf of speakers and languages can be a significant challenge. We invite the readers to determine for themselves whether the results from the 1998 conference, as embodied in the papers in this volume and the research they report on, can ultimately make a difference to and matter in the lives of speakers, by bringing issues to the forefront and revealing insights into them from which we can all learn and benefit.

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