Prospects for language studies in our era of globalization

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Abstract: The idea of the "situatedness" of all scientific endeavour has been proven beyond the shadow of a doubt by the so-called 'sociologists of knowledge' and is today beginning to be recognized even by some hard-core, dyed-in-the-wool philosophers of science. Linguistics, like all other human and social sciences, cannot help being socio-historically situated. Neither can linguists. It is also no secret that the science of language came into being at a time when the world lived by a completely different set of rules. Today the world we live in is a far cry from what it used to be in those times and the phenomenon of globalization has changed it unrecognizably. It only stands to reason that our science is in dire need of being rehashed or, who knows, radically revamped, so as to bring it more in tune with the changing times. This presentation addresses the mind-boggling prospects ahead, including that of having to rethink some of the fundamental concepts and categories with which we have got used to working in the field of linguistics.
*Key words***:** linguistics, sociology of knowledge, globalization, rethinking fundamental concepts

Since the dawn of history, man has marvelled at the phenomenon of language. How come that, of all living creatures, man and man alone has this incredible capacity to communicate thoughts by producing certain vocables? How is it possible that different languages came to exist at all? Is it possible that all human languages can be traced to one common source, one common ancestor? Is it the case members of other biological species have what may turn out to be rudimentary forms of language, akin to ours, albeit structurally poorer, or who knows, contrariwise, incredibly more complex? This is but a tiny portion of the long, seemingly endless, list of questions that we have got used to asking over the millennia of our existence on this planet? And, from the looks of it, we are destined to be asking these very questions or questions very similar to these for years to come and beyond.

However, one grave mistake that we tend to make is in thinking that these are perennial questions, that is to say, questions valid for all times and climes. Seldom do we pause to think of the possibility that the questions we ask may themselves have to do with the specificities of the historical moment where we happen to be located. In the final analysis, the reason why we refrain from raising such doubts may have to do with the fact that most of us seem to be convinced that there are certain first order questions about the objects of our curiosity. But, especially in regard to things like language, it is worth the while starting our enquiry by wondering if there can be any first order questions or, at the very least, if we can be certain that they are any such things as first order questions at all. Note that I used the expression "things like language" well-advisedly. This is because the only thing about which we can have hundred per cent certainty here is that we have "thingified" (or "reified" if you want to sound more academic) language by the very morphology in which we have opted to frame our question. (cf. Hermann 2008; Love 2009).

If only to drive home the point that there are conceivably other ways of going about jump-starting our enquiry, consider that many scholars have instead preferred to use *language* as a verb, using the gerundival form *languaging* as their point of departure. The name of Humberto Maturana, the Chilean biologist, immediately comes to mind. In his classic *Tree of Knowledge*, written in collaboration with his colleague Francisco Varela, Maturana pleaded for a theory of language, conceived as inalienably social and, so to speak, always in the making. At the very outset of the book, they claimed:

> We tend to live in a world of certainty, of undoubted, rock-ribbed perceptions: our convictions prove that things are the way we see them and there is no alternative to what we hold as true. This is our daily situation, our cultural condition, our common way of being. (Maturana and Varela, 1987 : 18)

More recently, Elana Shohamy (2006) has explored this idea with telling effects in her book *Language Policy: Hidden agendas and new approaches* (see Rajagopalan 2007 for a review of the book and Shohamy 2007 for a response by the author). The title of a not-so-recent book on conversations between Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and his North-American counterpart Myles Horton (Bell, Gaventa and Peters, 1991), nicely sums up, in my view, the reigning spirit of what we are talking about: *We Make the Road by Walking*. In their introduction to the book, Bell et al. remarked:

> How could two men, working in different social spaces and times, arrive at similar ideas and methods? Underlying the philosophy of both is the idea that knowledge grows from and is a reflection of social experience. It is important, therefore that these conversations and the ideas of these two men are linked to the social context in which they grew. (pp. xvi – xvii)

There is a lot of food for thought in the idea of making a road by walking. We need roads for moving from one place to another. At the very least, we need footpaths which are the precursors from yester-years to modern, asphalted roads. But what if there aren't any already existing? What if the territory one is seeking to traverse is uncharted? These are the situations when one is to be creative and innovative by making one's way by walking. The pathway doesn't exist as such already; rather it begins to exist only as the result of our walking. Like one's footprints one leaves behind one; but in order to do this, in order to leave a footprint in one's trail, one must walk first.

Karl Marx recognized this when he said famously in his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that men do not just pass through history as pieces of finished products on a factory conveyor belt. But he perhaps slightly overstated the power of history or at the very least arguably tilted the delicate balance between free will and predestination in one direction when he proclaimed:

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. (Karl Marx 1852)

Nearer home in linguistics, Luis Althusser inherited that idea straight from Marx when he declared that the subject of language, though born in freedom, is everywhere in chains. For him, thus, the subject of language is inevitably *subjected* by the forces of history. But what he failed to take into account was that subjects do offer resistance and many of them do so successfully. From Joan of Arc through Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela and ever so many others—not to mention so many unsung heroes like the solitary man who stood in the way of a column of tanks during the Tiananmen Square protests in Peking in 1989—it has been proved time and time

again that the will of an individual, imbued with the driving force of agency, can simply not be subdued by a hastily constituted ecclesiastical court, the formidable might of the British Empire, forces of apartheid or white supremacists or the mighty Chinese Army. To sum up, there is an urgent need to replace the structuralist subject, trapped in the prison-house of language, by a post-structuralist agent, who while no doubt constrained by the limitations imposed by the structure can nonetheless find ways to transcend and prevail over them. (Rajagopalan, 2009)

I believe that there is a highly exciting and productive way of conceiving of language likewise. While it is no doubt true that, in the terrain of language, most pathways have been laid out and utilized time and time again by our forefathers over generations, it is equally the case that often we are called upon to try new pathways, hitherto untrodden. The most obvious cases are those of poets and literary geniuses in general. But one does not have to restrict them to the likes of Lewis Carroll or James Joyce or think of such ingenious fabrications as Jabberwocky with its opening lines:

> `Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
> All mimsy were the borogoves,
> And the mome raths outgrabe

There is creativity at levels which are much more down to earth. The best proof of its existence is the fact what we call language change is nothing but the collective effect of many tiny instances of creativity or acts of "taking liberty" with the established rules of the game. The expression "rules of the game" invites a comparison between language, insofar as it can be called an object at all (the very use of the word as a noun would seem to guarantee that in some sense, as already commented on earlier), and the game of cricket—my favourite game and the only outdoor one I have ever practiced. Ashis Nandi, an Indian writer, sociologist, critic, and political commentator wrote a fascinating book called *The Tao of Cricket* wherein he says that one of the charms of this great game is that it has, strictly speaking, so few rules that are, as it were, 'structurally imposed'. Rather, the majority of them are imposed from the outside, so to speak, in response to unexpected or whimsical exigencies. Or, if you like, in John Searle's terms, they are mostly so-called regulative rules which, it seems, by far outnumber the constitutive ones. Take the rule governing a "sixer". It has been said (though I am in no way capable of vouching for the authenticity of this story) that the rule that limits the number of runs that a batsman can claim for hitting the ball over the boundary line without it ever touching the ground below before bouncing off was instituted after an episode during a match in South Africa or somewhere else in which the ball landed right between the paws of a rogue lion which was taking a 'siesta' underneath a nearby bush and no fielder was able to muster enough courage to recover it.

The comparison between cricket and language is interesting from other points of view as well. Recall that when Searle introduced the essentially Kantian distinction between constitutive and regulative rules, his favourite examples were learning to play a game and learning to drive a car. Rules of, say, football such as the one says that you cannot use your hands to stop a ball in motion unless you happen to be the goalkeeper would be examples of constitutive rules. Driving your automobile on the right-hand side of the street (or on the left, depending on which country you have in mind) would exemplify a regulative rule. If you violate rules of the former kind, you would be, as it were, stepping out of the game. By breaking rules of the latter type, you would still be considered to be in the game, but liable to penalties imposed by an external arbiter. This

distinction that looks so neat and crystal-clear however begins to develop all sorts of cracks as soon as one starts pressing ahead with it. It is not for nothing that it has created so much controversy.

I want to deflect your attention from the philosophical and purely linguistic arguments that have been marshaled to bolster the arguments on either side of this ongoing debate and consider a parallel situation from one with which all of us are familiar for professional and vocational reasons: teaching. In particular, I want to draw attention to testing or student evaluation which is the culmination of all teaching programmes. Now, you may disagree with this or that method of testing. But what you can't deny is the rationale itself for testing and evaluating the students. In this period of collaborative learning and all the rest of it, we often feel tempted to minimize the monopoly or the exaggerated concentration of power in the hands of the teacher and make evaluation also as collaborative as we can. Anyone who has tried this tack is bound to discover, sooner or later, that in all competitive fields, there has to be an external arbiter—call him/her a referee, an umpire or what you will—who is simultaneously part of the game and also, as blatantly contradictory as this might indeed seem, not part of it.

It is my claim that, as an integral and indispensable part of the game we call education, the teacher's role is akin to that of the referee. S/he is at once part of the game and outside of it. That is why most language theorists—from Saussure through Wittgenstein to Saul Kripke—who have dabbled in the analogy, preferred to stick to mostly static games like chess whose moves are mathematically denumerable. With dynamic and seemingly endless and incredibly more complex games like *languaging*, we are literally dealing with a "whole new ball game", where we keep inventing new rules even as the game is being played.

And here we come to an important point. The fact that our role as participants in the "game" of classroom teaching is a curious admixture of player and referee is what makes classroom discourse so dauntingly challenging and not easily amenable to conventional theories of discourse. For all you know, this curious feature of classroom discourse may carry over to the very phenomenon we call language. Among other things, this will have the consequence that the constitutive and the regulative, the descriptive and the normative are fused into one—and inextricably so. The ethical question, therefore, is not something to be added on as a penthouse to the structure of language already erected. It is there at the very foundation of that structure.

No wonder politics of language is increasingly taking centre stage in our discussions. A plethora of books have appeared just in the last few years (Edwards 2004; Spolsky 2004; Wright 2004; Joseph 2006; Fishman 2006; Ricento 2006; Tsui and Tollefson 2006). I would like to draw your attention to the title of Fishman's book: *Do NOT leave your Language Alone*. Many of us will readily recognize a direct reference here to the title of a classic by Robert Hall Junior's *Leave Your Language Alone* (Hall, 1950), written at the height of the structuralist repulsion of anything that smacked of interference in the destiny of a language. It is indeed impressive that, in a matter of less than sixty years, a scholar of the calibre of Joshua Fishman could make a plea for a dramatic change—in fact, for a 180 degrees about-turn. Here's how he justifies the move:

> In earlier and more innocent times, it was widely believed that language, just as any other gift from God, could neither be "planned" nor "improved". As those times were coming to an end, an attempt was made by Professor Robert A. Hall (1950) to foster the complete disappearance of language planning by harsh criticism, discouraging scholarly activity in the language-planning direction. His book *Leave Your Language Alone!*, now stands as a monument to a bygone age. (p. ix)

Fishman was, in my view, contesting the view widely accepted by most linguists that the best thing you can do to language is to refrain from meddling with it. That languages can, as it were, 'take care of themselves' has become something of a *mantra* in contemporary linguistics. However, see what James Milroy had to say in respect of this fashionable idea:

> … many of the 'scientific' claims that linguists have made are not scientific at all. Consider, for example, the claim that a language 'can take care of itself'. This has never been demonstrated by objective scientific analysis, and indirect evidence would seem to favour the opposite view – that languages do not necessarily 'take care of' themselves. For example, there is now something of an industry within linguistics on the question of *language death*, and the fact that languages disappear would seem to suggest that they do not always take care of themselves. (Milroy 2004: 99-100)

It is clear that linguists were prevented from asking important questions concerning language politics—that, no matter how you define it, boils down to a question of *intervening* in the destiny of a language—because of an inaugural decision to treat language as a self-contained entity closed unto itself and proof against outside influence.

But, as soon as we move away from language as a static entity to language as an ongoing process, it becomes evident that outside interventions are not only possible but the sort of things one should normally expect. To make our way, walk we must and clear coppices and thickets and either bypass or surmount boulders as we forge our way ahead.

But we were prevented from looking at such possibilities because somehow got bogged down with the idea of "thingifying" language. Seldom did we pause to think that such of way of thinking of language—or, of thinking of *anything*, for that matter—might itself have had to do with specificities of historical moment at which such ideas were conceived in the first place. Thanks to scholars like Christopher Hutton (1999) and Joseph Errington (2008), we know now that contemporary linguistics itself is by and large a 19th century discipline.

> Notions such as 'mother-tongue' and 'native speaker' are fundamental in contemporary formal as well as sociological linguistics, yet their status within organicist ideology and radical-nationalist identity politics is forgotten or ignored. At the very least it should be recognized that the rise of mother-tongues reflects a particular set of historical circumstances, not a transhistorical law of human identity formation. (Hutton 1999: 287)

These fundamental home truths must serve as a wake-up call to us all. Among other things, we must seize this opportunity to sit back on our chairs, take a deep breath and reflect on our practices and well-trodden paths.

The world we live in today is a far cry from what it must have been to our 19th century ancestors. We hop into a transatlantic jet and within hours we have travelled distances that would have taken them days or even weeks to cover. Information travels faster than we can bat an eye in admiration. From the days of nation-states with their tightly controlled borders, we are now in the age of globalization. It seems to me that we are most of the time still using concepts and categories that no longer serve us any useful purpose. The idea of 'thingified' language is among them.

Over the past two decades or so, I have been looking at the fortunes of what I have been calling 'World English' in preference to English as a Lingua Franca or ELF (Jenkins 2007), English as an International Language (Davies 2003), English as a Global Language (Crystal 2003), World Englishes (in the plural) (Kachru et al. 2006)

and what have you. I have been harping on a claim I made in Rajagopalan (1999) and insistently since then (Rajagopalan 2009b, 2010) to the effect World English is unlike everything else that has ever existed in the history of mankind. If we call it a language, it is only because of a force of habit or because no better descriptor comes to mind. It is certainly not a language in the conventional sense of the word. It is something in the making and destined, as far as I can see, to remain so for years to come.

World English, in the sense I have been using this term, poses incredible challenges for our traditional ways of going about doing linguistics. But it also provides us with the opportunity of rebooting them in a hitherto unimaginable manner by forging new concepts and categories better suited to handling the emerging reality. To repeat a point already made: the emerging geopolitical reality in the world today is a far cry from what used to be the case, say, in the 19th century, when just as languages were 'thingfied'' so too were nations and peoples. To ensure that each one remained confined to its allocated ken, nation-states zealously guarded their frontiers. Now these boundaries have all but vanished into thin air.

Just as distinct languages were thought of as reflecting the national identities that gave them sustenance and in return were often rewarded with " a local habitation and a name', so too the changing geopolitical reality engendered by the phenomenon of globalization has helped to undo the cut-and-dried criteria that once established those identities.

I want to wrap up my rather rambling discussion thus far with a claim which is also a plea: the need of the hour is for us to roll up our sleeves and break fresh ground. We need to throw overboard our already outdated armoury of concepts and categories that have long outlived their usefulness and forge new ways of theorizing language, in tune with the challenging times (and the mind-boggling prospects ahead).

Acknowledgements

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