

Language politics and the linguist

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This paper focuses on language politics as it is currently unfolding in Brazil. Thanks to a legislative bid by a member of the House of Representatives to curb the wide-spread use of English in the country, large segments of the country's population have suddenly become interested in language-related issues. Professional linguists were taken by surprise and have, by and large, been reduced to the status of mere spectators. In an attempt to address the issue, I argue that there is an urgent need to attend to the wider public and engage them in a fruitful dialogue.

Este trabalho tem como foco a política lingüística tal qual ela vem se processando no Brasil. Graças a uma tentativa empenhada por um deputado no sentido de coibir o uso descontrolado de inglês no país, grandes setores da população têm mostrado interesse repetino em assuntos relativos à questão lingüística. Os lingüistas profissionais foram pegos de calças curtas e, de forma geral, foram reduzidos à condição de meros espectadores. Ao tentar compreender o desenrolar dos acontecimentos, argumento que há uma necessidade urgente de atender aos anseios do público e dialogar com ele.

When it comes to talking about language, let alone theorising it, the linguist and the lay person are notoriously known to diverge drastically from each other. The former tends to dismiss the views of the latter as “pre-scientific” and at best deserving of some vague anthropological interest. In fact, as pointed out by a number of scholars and historians of ideas, modern linguistics itself was founded on an outright rejection of what it has since then systematically reviled as “folk linguistics” (HUTTON, 1996; AITCHINSON, 2001; JOHNSON, 2001).

The lay person typically does not know (or, for that matter, does not even *care* to know) what the linguist really does for a living and, when pressed for a response, all too frequently comes up with such oft-repeated platitudes as that the linguist is a polyglot or someone interested mostly in dead or “outlandish” languages. “I am not half good a linguist as you are, Holy Father” – these were the opening words used by President Clinton as he welcomed Pope John Paul II on the Pontiff's last visit to the U.S. Whereas the President of the United States may arguably be excused for not knowing what an academic speciality is really all about, one cannot

but lament the fact that many dictionaries confer the stamp of authority upon the common misconception just referred to. Thus the *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1976) registers two meanings for the word *linguist*, the first of which says “a person accomplished in languages esp: one who speaks several languages” (rather unhelpfully, the second says: “one who specializes in linguistics”) (p. 669). *MacMillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (2002) follows suit by rephrasing the two meanings as “someone who studies or speaks a lot of languages” and “someone who teaches or studies linguistics” (p. 832). Both dictionaries, though, do make up for the lack of clarity in the definitions by defining linguistics in separate entries that say “the study of human speech including the units, nature, structure, and modification of language” (p. 669) and “the study of language and how it works” (p. 832), respectively. *Cambridge Dictionary* (2002 – CD-Rom) does register a reasonably accurate account of what a linguist specializes in but only in the second part of the following two-part Boolean definition: “someone who is learning a foreign language or can speak it very well, or someone who has a specialist knowledge of the structure and development of languages.” (Needless to point out that the first part of this definition gets it even more hopelessly wrong than the entry in the other two dictionaries).

When the lay person is confronted with the sort of things linguists routinely say about language (for instance, the claim that all human languages are equally complex in their structural configurations, provided one considers them in their totality), their reaction is usually one of stultified incredulity, followed by a dismissive shrug of their shoulders, indicative of their disapproval of the way specialised knowledge has distanced itself from common sense views and developed its own “convoluted” lines of reasoning (RAJAGOPALAN, 2002a).

In fact linguistics stands apart from probably every other academically consolidated discipline in one respect: the kind of authority that it commands with the public at large. Physicists and biologists have no problem in getting the admiring attention from the lay public. Members of the lay public fondly nurture stories about the eccentric scientist – usually a chemist or a biologist – engrossed in research in a crowded and dingy laboratory, teeming with gurgling test tubes, Kipp's apparatuses emitting strange-smelling gases and what have you. The fact that no one outside a close-knit group of peers has the remotest clue as to what the fellow is up to is considered no problem; rather, that is just what really makes him so charming.

Even radio and television weather-forecasters are listened to, albeit with some distrust, since most people do know that meteorology is as yet far from being an exact science. So too many newspaper and magazine readers are often caught taking a sneak look at the kind of things the astrologer has to say about what their zodiac signs have in store for them, even though many of them may not have any faith whatsoever in the scientific pretensions of astrology or may not be willing to admit in public their real convictions on the matter.

When it comes to linguistics, however, the ordinary person is often unwilling even to admit that he or she needs the help of a science to become wiser about what language is and what it is not. Instead, the lay person is often found boasting that he or she *knows* what language is all about. The only uncertainties they have are about the *correctness* of specific usages (for which they willingly turn to a traditional grammarian who typically has a ready-made answer to each and every one of their queries).

On their part, professional linguists prefer to continue to ignore the lay persons, justifying their reaction on the grounds that theirs is a science and, like every other science, linguistics too is not for the uninitiated. As one of the discipline's most important representatives and, by all means, the one responsible for bringing the name of the discipline to the attention of wider public, put it,

[...] the search for theoretical understanding pursues its own paths, leading to a completely different picture of the world, which neither vindicates nor eliminates our ordinary ways of talking and thinking. (CHOMSKY, 1995, p. 10).

Notice that Chomsky's remark is very carefully worded. He is careful, as the majority of linguists are not, to stop short of claiming that scientific understanding is necessarily at loggerheads with public understanding. The truth remains nevertheless that many linguists tacitly assume that the knowledge that they have accumulated through painstaking research over the years shows how hopelessly muddle-headed the ordinary person is in respect of language and its intricacies. Whereof the usual air of contempt vis-à-vis what is collectively dismissed as 'folk linguistics' (RAJAGOPALAN, 2003a; forthcoming 1).

But, as experience has shown, linguists have had a heavy price to pay and, by and large, continue to do so, for their principled decision not to have any trucks with the lay persons. The 'dogs-may-bark-but-the-caravan-goes-on' attitude assumed by many has often made them

largely marginalized and inconsequential in public debates over language-related issues. Historically, linguists have gone about their business in utter disregard for public opinion. Yet, all too frequently, they are found grumbling, like Achilles in his tent, that their authority is not recognised the way it should be by the wider public. They lament the state of affairs but seldom have any concrete suggestions towards addressing it. The following words by Leonard Bloomfield in his inaugural address to the Linguistic Society of America speak volumes for themselves:

Our schools are conducted by persons who, from professors of linguistic science down to teachers of the classrooms, know nothing of the results of the linguistic science, not even the relation of writing to speech or standard language to dialect. In short, they do not know what language is and yet must teach it, and in consequence waste years of every child's life and reach a poor result. (BLOOMFIELD, 1925, p. 2).

As Geoffrey Nunberg was to remark years later,

Bloomfield, Fries, Hall, and their contemporaries spoke to educators with all the arrogance of an adolescent science that was jealous of its intellectual prerogatives. As a result, their educational pronouncements now sound as high-handed and in some cases as irresponsible as many of the dogmas they were intended to counter. (NUNBERG, 1989, p. 586).

Given the continued stand-off between the two, it comes as no surprise that professional linguists all too frequently find themselves set aside in policy decisions over linguistic matters. As it happens, the policy makers in these cases are veteran politicians who tend to be much more attentive to the *vox populi* than expert opinion. This has been attested to time and time again in countries across the globe.

The present paper is an attempt to focus on the language issue as it is currently unfolding in Brazil. Thanks to a legislative bid some years ago by a member of the House of Representatives by name Aldo Rebelo to curb the wide-spread use of English in the day-to-day life of average citizens, large segments of the country's population have suddenly become interested in language-related issues. The bill has already passed muster in the lower house and has just been returned by the upper house, the Senate, in a completely unrecognisable form. The avowed aim of the original bill and the one that was born out of its ashes is to protect the country's national language, Portuguese, against what it sees as the merciless onslaught of English, by common consent the lingua franca of the globalised world.

The original version of the bill was full of rhetoric embellished with fanfare and verbal pyrotechnics – of the kind that directly appeals to popular sentiments of nationalism and what Fishman (1968) has called ‘nationism’, i.e. the desire to legislatively intervene in the destiny of a national language with a view to furthering certain nationalist agendas. The country’s linguists, initially stunned and stupefied as well as somewhat embarrassed at having been caught with their pants down, soon regained their breath (and their wits) and almost unanimously (there were some occasional discordant voices) condemned what they rightly saw as a xenophobic attempt to stifle the natural development of a language and mould its destiny with perilously chauvinistic objectives in mind. Notable among the discordant voices just referred to is that of Carlos Vogt, a linguist of considerable prestige, who wrapped up a paper entitled “*Português, língua universal*” (Portuguese, universal language):

Safeguarding [...] the Portuguese language is safeguarding ourselves as well as our rich cultural diversity. In this regard, the bill put forward by Congressman Aldo Rebelo, under scrutiny in (Brazil’s) national congress since 1999, could turn out to be an important legal instrument with which to strengthen the conditions for our linguistic and cultural identity. (VOGT, 2002, p. 29).

But Vogt’s remark is far from being representative of the stance taken by the overwhelming majority of linguists in Brazil (or, for that matter, by our colleagues in other countries, as and when they too find themselves embroiled in public controversies involving language). The position typically adopted by professional linguists all over the world is that the phenomenon of language is best approached independently of social, cultural or even emotional/sentimental connotations it might evoke in the minds of ordinary people.

As a result of the hew and cry as well as tremendous pressure brought to bear upon the legislators by academic associations such as the Brazilian Association of Linguistics (ABRALIN), Brazilian Association of Applied Linguistics (ALAB), and others, the Rebelo bill was drastically altered by the Upper House of the Brazilian national congress and is now awaiting presidential approval. Perhaps, one most important spin-off from the imbroglio created by the entire episode is a sudden awakening on the part of Brazil’s academic linguists. The following remark by Faraco, one of the country’s leading linguists, is clearly indicative of this new sense of awareness:

Linguists are faced with the challenge of approaching these questions as fundamentally political questions and think about ways of making their voices heard, thus contributing to the beginning of an urgently needed cultural war among contending discourses that address the language of Brazil. (FARACO, 2001, p. 31).

As it happens, however, it is becoming increasingly clear that the rignarole is far from over. The popular resentment against the arrogant march of English into their daily lives has gained fillip from unexpected quarters precisely at the moment when it looked as if linguists had at long last gained the upper hand. A self-styled group called “Brazilian Linguists for Democracy” has suddenly sprung up and started to claim the right to speak on behalf of the *vox populi*. In what is best described as a veritable verbal *Blitzkrieg*, its advocates have forced their way into an Internet discussion group called *Comunidade Virtual de Linguagem*, which has been functioning for some time and which is used by professional linguists, graduate students and – as the rules laid down by its founding members state – anyone who has any interest in linguistic matters (where the qualifier is loosely defined so as to accommodate the maximum number of potential candidates to membership). (Incidentally, the more vociferous members of this self-styled “task force” have since been denied access to the chatroom on charges of failure to comply with basic rules of decency).

The scenario as it is currently unfolding has the linguist once again in the dock, being pinned down by accusing fingers and obliged to respond to charges of social irrelevance and pointless erudition. If the current trend continues to progress the way it has for some time, Brazil’s professional linguists will in all likelihood soon find themselves suddenly catapulted to square one (that is to say, if they haven’t been so catapulted already), as in a game of “Snakes and Ladders”.

No matter what sort of ugly or catastrophical denouement awaits the ongoing drama, one thing is increasingly becoming clear. The average person in the street remains mostly impervious to the arguments of the linguists which they find far too academic and often counter to their own much-cherished ‘common sense’. What has gone awry here? Could it be the case that linguists have revealed themselves to be hopelessly wanting in basic skills of mass communication?

In an attempt to address these questions, I suggest that there is an urgent need to rethink some of the basic principles that have governed

our characteristic attitude (as linguists, that is) to public opinion. For there to be a genuine dialogue between the two parties, linguists and lay persons – or, for that matter, *any* two parties – there has to be some amount of give-and-take on the part of either side (RAJAGOPALAN, forthcoming-1, 2). Now, for reasons already spelled out earlier, this is by all means easier said than done. Given that the science of language, Linguistics, was itself founded on an inaugural decision to ignore the ordinary person's point of view and to start afresh on a "clean slate", no frank exchange of views between the two sides will be possible unless and until linguists agree to give up or at least strategically suspend one of the founding principles of their discipline. This is by no means an easy task, especially in view of the fact linguistics itself probably inherited the proverbial distrust of public opinion from a tradition extending to earlier times. This is especially the case in Germany, the one culture that saw the rise of interest in language in the eighteenth century. As Henningsen (1989) points out,

Hegel, who was interested in the unfolding of meaning in the process of universal history, treated [the] *Volksgeist* (the people's *mentalité*) somewhat disparagingly by relegating it to lower levels of meaning that lacked in conceptual clarity. *Vox populi*, the voice of the people, held no promise for him of any truth of any aspect of the process of human history. Truth would emerge from the negation of this commonsensical type of knowledge. (HENNINGSEN, 1989, p. 46).

What Henningsen's remark goes to show is that any decision to break the ice and engage in a meaningful dialogue with the lay person is bound to be an uphill task.

The first step in this direction is a most urgently needed realisation on the part of the linguist that linguistics, like any other body of knowledge, is invested with the marks of its own discursive origins. This is by no means something peculiar to linguistics. *All* disciplines – *tout court* – begin their march towards academic recognition as discourses. And linguistics is no exception to this rule. It always begins with a group of early enthusiasts who gather informally. Through their diligent discursive practices aimed at carving out an intellectual territory for themselves, they set about the task of laying down the basic ground rules which will from then on delimit the emergent field and mark it off from its neighbouring disciplines. Philosophy began like this in ancient Greece around the figure of a bearded, bald-headed, short-

statured man of exceptional intellectual acumen and power of persuasion who regularly gathered a group of enthusiastic followers in a marketplace, the *Plaka*, in the centre of the ancient city of Athens. Centuries later, this practice was continued in Oxford where J.L. Austin founded the school of Ordinary Language Philosophy during his famous Saturday Morning Lectures.

The important point about informal chats resulting in the founding of great academic disciplines is that dialogism is invariably and inevitably present in the early discursive practices of every discipline. It is not for nothing that the founding texts of Western philosophy are called *Dialogues*. Plato, the author, knew full well the rhetorical power of dialogic interaction. But one misses the whole point if one concludes that the use of dialogue by Plato only served a rhetorical purpose. The truth is that the new discipline that his works inaugurated, namely *Philosophy*, would not have taken the form it did, if it had not been for the Socratic method of *elenchus* that Plato so effectively demonstrated in those early works. Elenchus works by eliciting self-contradiction in one's interlocutor's thought. It is the symbolic presence of the interlocutor that gives the technique of elenchus its extraordinary appeal to readers by far removed from its original enunciatory context.

Elenchus takes place within the dialogic format. Dialogue in turn calls forth real-life communication in progress. And successful communication in turn is only possible when the interlocutors not only recognise each other's presence but address themselves to each other's doubts, scepticisms, anxieties and so on. What this goes to prove is that, in its inception at least philosophy was very much a *pragmatic* enterprise (RAJAGOPALAN, 2002d). Not only was its early diffusion carried out through face-to-face verbal interaction, the very structure of its reasoning was dialogic through and through. It was verbal fencing, where the one who could muster the right argumentative skills won the duel.

True, all this was swept aside by philosophers of succeeding generations who preferred to conduct the business of philosophy as a mostly solitary business. Descartes famously retreated to his self-imposed "solitary confinement" in appalling conditions in a single-room accommodation at Ulm, where the only "luxury" (or sign of modern civilisation) was the presence of a stove that would keep the inside

temperature from dipping to sub-zero levels. Kant too was mostly a solitary figure, with all the eccentricities that usually go with people who shun the company of fellow humans. One might say that, in its modern version, Philosophy has mostly been conducted as an occupation of solitary meditation by hermit-like persons who preferred to communicate to the world outside in the form of monologues, treatises and so on. The popularly cherished image of the eccentric scientist – a chemist or a biologist locked in an inhospitable laboratory for days on end as discussed earlier – harks back to and is modelled on such prototypical figures.

But the appearance of monologue in many philosophical discourses only helps camouflage their essentially dialogic origins. Like Socrates and Plato, who were anxious to debate the views of the Sophists, so too was Descartes concerned to lay to rest the rampant scepticism of many of his contemporaries regarding the possibility of ever attaining philosophical certainty. Likewise, Kant's work, especially of the so-called 'critical' period, has been widely recognised as engaging in a silent dialogue between two unlikely predecessors, Descartes and Hume, both of whom he greatly admired.

What has all this to do with the pragmatic underpinnings of philosophy? The pragmatic dimension comes to the fore as soon as it is recognised that philosophy is a discursive practice through and through – even when philosophical texts succeed in concealing it. By insisting on seeing philosophy as a body of knowledge *more geometrico* (the model here is Euclid's *Geometry*), one not only sidesteps its discursive origins but also momentarily leaves in suspension its inalienably pragmatic mode.

What is true of philosophy is true of linguistics as well. This is hardly surprising, given that it is philosophy that most theoretically-oriented disciplines have traditionally modelled themselves on. Like philosophy, linguistics too was down to earth, and goal-oriented in its origins. Some of the very ancient works of grammar such as Panini's trail-blazing *Asthadhaya* (? fourth century B.C.) were undertaken with a keen interest in language maintenance and standardisation of the Sanskrit language across the several kingdoms in the Asian sub-continent where the language was spoken. It was a *teaching* grammar, with a very precisely defined purpose, a fact that many linguists today tend to overlook even as they recognise the scientific brilliance that went into its making (RAJAGOPALAN, 2003b).

What all this discussion about the dialogic character of academic disciplines such as philosophy and linguistics clearly shows is that concern with those who were not part of the in-group was paramount in the minds of the early practitioners of each of them. Their respective discourses were aimed at convincing – indeed, winning over the hearts and minds of – the barely initiated as well as the stubbornly sceptical. In fact, as Socrates recognised all too readily, that is the only way new knowledge can spread. What Bacon called *argumentum ad baculum* may work for some time (and for the wrong reason) but is unlikely to sway the minds of people over a long period of time.

One thing that has clearly emerged from the ongoing controversy over language in Brazil is that professional linguists have been dismally wanting in the rhetorical skills needed to sway public opinion in their favour. Instead, their opinions frequently strike the general public as arrogant and standoffish. I have discussed some of these views at length elsewhere (RAJAGOPALAN, 2002a) and will not repeat them here. But the gist of the argument presented there is this: when confronted with public opinion, we linguists have typically reacted by exclaiming that such views lack any kind of scientific backing or rigour. We tend to dismiss them outright as childish or unscientific. Rather than address the anxieties of ordinary persons for what they are worth, we characteristically question the academic or scientific credentials of those who voice them. To put it differently, we tend to use *ad hominem* arguments in order to fight our way through adverse public opinion.

The reaction from the public to such abrasive tactics is perfectly predictable. To begin with, it is just as abrasive. As noted at the beginning of this paper, members of the wider public usually have very little idea of what modern linguistics is really all about. Professional linguists' unwillingness to explain their science in a manner accessible to those who are uninitiated in their "craft", coupled with their often dismissive attitude to what those who are uninitiated generally think or believe, understandably leads the general public to conclude that linguistics itself is a body of knowledge with very little practical consequence.

It is by no means enough if we continue to simply insist that linguistics has a lot to contribute to the general welfare. No doubt convictions do move mountains (as the saying teaches us), but this only happens if we convince those around us of the kind of things we claim we are ourselves convinced of.

The lesson to learn from the discussion thus far is therefore fairly straightforward: if we linguists are at all to make any headway in our efforts to influence public opinion and bring the weight of our accumulated wisdom to have any bearing whatsoever on policy decisions involving language and so on, it is absolutely necessary that we adopt new ways of communicating with lay people. Rather than treat them as mere providers of raw data on which to base our studies, we should approach them as our genuine interlocutors. Among other things, this entails the need to put all the emphasis on the right strategies of argumentation, taking into consideration the fact that our interlocutors do have a right to their own opinions, no matter how weird or bizarre they may appear to us at first glimpse (RAJAGOPALAN, 2002b). Furthermore, there is an equally urgent need to recognise that true dialogue can only begin to take place if we are willing to listen to what they, our interlocutors, have to say, instead of dismissing their views as pre-scientific or muddle-headed even before they have had a chance to express themselves freely .

Here is where some of the lessons from pragmatics might prove to be of great help. Pragmatists are in a much better position to break the communicational gridlock referred to above, given that, when all is said and done, pragmatics is precisely about communicating with others. If, from a historical point of view, linguistic pragmatics has been, rightly or wrongly, entrusted with the task of taking care of unsolved (and *unsolveable*) problems left over by the other putatively “nobler” members of the Peircean triad (namely, syntax and semantics), it may well turn out to be case that the greatest challenge awaiting it today is to bridge the biggest of all the communicational gaps it has thus far been called upon to confront – that between the linguists and the lay persons. In other words, pragmatics may turn out to be our last hope for clearing up long-standing mutual suspicions vis-à-vis the public at large – or, at the very least, making a rapprochement possible somewhere down the road (RAJAGOPALAN, 2002c, d).

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