The Routledge Handbook of Language in Conflict

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Introduction

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17

Introduction

Conflict with the fabric of language

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17.1 The ‘meanings’ of sounds and letters

A central assumption underlying this book is that language matters; that is, that the words used by speakers and writers and the way they put those words together make a difference – they have an effect on the world. The first two sections in this book explore the effects of the conceptual (Section I) or contextual (Section II) meanings that hearers and readers derive from what people say. This section deals with another kind of meaning, which can be derived “directly” from what comes out of people’s mouths or keyboards, without reference to the sense they are trying to make. This kind derives not from what the words denote, but rather from the form that they take – the exact quality of the sounds uttered, which particular string of sounds or letters are used, how the words are combined. For example, an English person who pronounces the vowel in the word “bath” in the same way s/he pronounces the vowel in words such as “trap” or “gas” gives off the “meaning” that s/he is from somewhere in the north of England; a person who refers to the item of furniture used to hang up shirts, dresses and the like as a “press” (rather than as a “cupboard”) can be placed as probably from Ireland; and when the room in which people wash themselves is referred to by stringing together the letters “b-a-t-h-r-o-o-m” (rather than, for example, the letters “b-a-d-k-a-m-e-r” or “s-a-l-l-e-d-e-b-a-i-n”), those able to decode this string of letters will recognise the language being used as English (and not Dutch, French or anything else).

Very commonly, the way that someone speaks or writes (whether this is labelled as their accent, their dialect, their language or something else) is seen as indicative of one or more other characteristics that may be ascribed to that person. In the examples above, regional or national origin was indicated. Other indications of this type pertain to purely descriptive social categories such as age, gender, ethnicity and religion. But sometimes they are associated with characteristics of a more value-laden nature. It is said, for instance, that what turned public opinion most firmly against US President Richard Nixon during the Watergate scandal (leading to his resignation from the presidency) was his use, heard on audio-tape recordings, of vocabulary associated with gangsters. In any case, the purely descriptive social characteristics are often themselves associated with other, value-laden characteristics (e.g. stupid, criminal, snooty, posh).
17.2 Conflict over sounds and letters

In the chapters in this section, the ideological aspect manifested in text (Section I) and the enactment aspect manifested in interaction (Section II) are often involved, but what unites these chapters is this additional, rather particular aspect of the relation between language and conflict in which language itself is involved; that is to say, situations in which the variety of language used by a person or a group functions as an index of oppositional stances and/or as a means by which conflict is played out and/or is even the main bone of contention (i.e. the object of the conflict itself).

The history of different varieties of human language (i.e. what we know as “languages”, “dialects”, “vernaculars”, “creoles”, “accents”, etc.) as objects, indices, causes or means of conflict is a very long one. In Judeo–Christian mythology, the story of the Tower of Babel, by which we humans no longer all spoke the same language, is presented as a fall from grace, leading to social problems. From the same mythology, there is the role of the shibboleth, by which enemies and friends can be distinguished based on their pronunciation of a particular word. Nor is such history confined to the distant past. In Northern Ireland, the pronunciation of the letter “H” (as either “aitch” or “haitch”) is popularly believed to be an indicator of whether the speaker is from the Protestant or Catholic community. And in 2001, while speaking at a meeting inaugurating the European Year of Languages, the linguist David Crystal reported that 80 percent of respondents to a straw poll he had recently conducted regarded linguistic diversity as “a bad thing”, citing the Tower of Babel and/or a belief in world peace as reasons for their opinion (THES, 2001, p.52). Linguistic variety, it seems, spells trouble.

17.3 Conflict over languages

Of all the different “levels” of variety in language that can have a role to play in conflict, it is the topmost level, that of languages themselves, that is the most commonly involved, presumably because it is the most salient. In many states around the world, choices about which language or languages should be used for which functions, especially which should be “official”, are an abiding source of social tensions.

Languages can be the main object of conflict in two ways. One of these is practical. For example, people want to be able to access public services and broadcast news, take part in political life or participate in court proceedings in a language in which they are fully proficient. They likewise want to be educated in such a language and/or a language that offers the best prospect of personal advancement, even if, as it does sometimes, this puts them at odds with their own language community.

The second way is affective. People sometimes see a language as a badge, so that at the communal level there can be conflict about which language is to appear on public signs, or used for official documents, or for the national anthem, quite regardless of their proficiency. A simple illustration of this latter function can be found in Article 8 of the Constitution of the Republic of Ireland, whose first two clauses state that “1 The Irish language as the national language is the first official language. 2. The English language is recognised as a second official language”, notwithstanding the fact that the population’s relative proficiencies in the two languages are the other way around.

The fact that it is the “languages” level of linguistic variety that is most often cited in conflict situations is in one sense paradoxical, because there is no reliable scientific basis for identifying a language or for demarcating the dividing line between one language and another (Harris, 1990, 1998, Hudson, 1996, pp.30–8). The obvious criteria for making such
identifications, such as mutual intelligibility, structural similarity or historical relation are repeatedly confounded by the social facts on the ground. Moreover, it has been argued that the continued assumption of their literal existence is socially undesirable and different ways of viewing languages that militate against this language essentialism have been proposed (e.g. Blommaert, 2003, p.608, 2005, O’Driscol, 2013). However, as Fishman (1994, p.84) points out in the same context “those factors that are believed to be true have definite consequences, whether or not they are initially and empirically true”. Accordingly, this text makes no apology for proceeding below to refer to “languages” without qualification or quote marks. It just needs to be borne in mind that while language itself is an objective phenomenon, an innate human capacity, languages (plural) are not. Rather, they are human inventions, cultural products whose existence is dependent on their consensual recognition. It is in part this very negotiability that facilitates the embroilment of languages in situations of conflict: they are what people choose to see them as and people can make almost anything out of their significance.

17.4 Language ideology

When dealing with the role of languages in conflict, therefore, we are dealing with ideologies concerning them. The term “language ideology” is one first coined by Silverstein (1979) to circumscribe people’s norms concerning the deployment of language. In this widest sense, therefore, it encompasses norms of all linguistic behaviour, including what kind of thing to say, to whom, where, when and how, a person’s knowledge of and ability in which had earlier been dubbed by the sociolinguist Hymes as “communicative competence” (see Hymes, 1992). Since then, its scope has been interpreted in a variety of ways, mostly narrower than this original. (For a brief review, see Chapter 23 in this section; for a fuller review, see Blommaert, 2006.)

The narrower sense that concerns us most here is when the term is used to refer to the “how” aspect; that is, on formal language variety. It comprises assumptions and beliefs about “good” language use generally and which particular language is “good” (i.e. acceptable, permitted, required, best) for particular people to use on particular occasions. Whenever two recognised language varieties rub up against each other, ideologies concerning them and their relationship become evident and, quite frequently, conflict. (The contributions in Blommaert, 1999 give a good idea of the range of issues that emerge.)

All of the contributions in this section of the handbook deal with language ideology in one way or another, from large-scale, institutional prescriptions right down to single acts by a person. A recurring theme in the contributions is what might be called an ideology of exclusive monolingualism. There appears to be a widespread, albeit often unconscious, assumption in many parts of the world that monolingualism, in both individuals and societies, is the norm and plurilingualism an unfortunate aberration. This assumption is even reflected in linguistic scholarship: there have been numerous works with the words “bilingualism” or “multilingualism” in their titles, suggesting these are phenomena to be explained, but to my knowledge only recently has a book appeared subjecting the notion of monolingualism to scrutiny (Gramling, 2016). And if monolingual communities are perceived as the norm, and plurilingual ones as a departure from this norm, it is but a short step to the idea that contact between languages inevitably leads to conflict – it is even presented this way in some introductory sociolinguistics textbooks (see O’Driscoll, 2000). Such assumptions fly in the face of reality, as Kerswill and Mahama (Chapter 18) show.

One reflex of this exclusive monolingual ideology is what we can call the “either/or” assumption. In this volume, De Bres and Franziskus (Chapter 23), Khan (Chapter 22) and
Blitvich (Chapter 21) all point to cases where the sound or sight of an “other” language leads to conflict, the hostile reaction of those who encounter this “other” language being based on the assumption that speaking this language must mean that the speaker cannot – or will not – speak the language they are “supposed” to speak in that environment (i.e. the dominant language in that polity).

Another reflex of this ideology is “one nation, one language”. Moore’s contribution here exemplifies the way in which languages became tied to nationalist movements from the late 19th century. The association of particular nations with particular languages tends to be taken for granted these days, but it was not at all evident in times past. Vilnius in Lithuania had for centuries been a multi-ethnic and multilingual city, but modernist nationalist ideology led to the notion that there should be one dominant language – and since the city is in Lithuania, that language ought to be Lithuanian. One of the effects of this ideology is exemplified in Penman’s contribution (Chapter 19), which recounts how the problems faced by the minority culture of the Mapuche people in Chile have been construed as purely economic, and thus the same as those of any poor Chilean; they are denied any rights to their language, which is an aspect of this culture.

17.5 Identity

Quite clearly, the variety/ies of language that a person uses is/are a central aspect of identity formation. Such identity is bestowed from two directions, from the inside and from the outside (i.e. by others), and in both cases language ideology plays a role. In many places, a language is strongly associated with a particular group (ethnic or national), both by group members themselves and by outsiders. And yet the precise nature of the relation between language X and group X, and the extent to which language X is felt to be essential to identity X, can vary enormously, as the contributions here show. To take just one example, Kerswill and Mahama (Chapter 18) cite the case of South Africa during the apartheid era where, despite strong associations between particular languages and particular ethnic groups, government attempts to institute education in these groups’ native languages were regarded with suspicion, as a divide-and-rule policy, so that, despite this strong association, English became the popular choice as educational medium.

The contributions here also show that, very often, it is not languages themselves that are the main bone of contention, but owing to these strong associations, they become pegs on which to hang other aspects of conflict. Of particular interest here is the identity formation that comes from the outside. Blitvich, for example, notes in Chapter 21 that the category of Latino in the US is an imposed (top-down) one, invented by the authorities. In this respect, it is an example of a very modern phenomenon, with increased global mobility and large-scale migration flows creating pan-national and pan-ethnic categories of identity for immigrants in many countries, even when these are not officially reified, as they have been in this case.

Identity formation from the outside is also important at the person-to-person level. It explains why reactions to the use of a particular language depend crucially on the presumed identity of the person using it. It is not only which language a person uses at a given moment that can elicit hostile reactions, but also which language that person is perceived to be associated with. For example, De Bres and Franziskus (Chapter 23) show that attitudes to the use of French by a native Luxembourger are different from those evinced when that language is used by someone who is, or perceived to be, native French. Given that people carry their ethnonlinguistic identities around with them, language choice can be a resource for interactants and have particular effects on face (see Section II of this handbook and O’Driscoll, 2001a).
17.6 The contributions in this section

The settings for the studies in this section take in four continents: western continental Europe (de Bres and Franziskus – Chapter 23), eastern continental Europe (Moore – Chapter 20), insular Europe (Khan – Chapter 22), South America (Penman – Chapter 19), North America (Blitvich – Chapter 21) and Africa (Kerswill and Mahama – Chapter 18). A feature of the language conflicts examined is their particularity – each one is subject to different social pressures because each one is experienced by those involved as unique. History plays an enormous part. The contributions here are sequenced, loosely, from the macro to the micro – “loosely” because on the one hand, large-scale process are, after all, merely an accumulation of single acts, and on the other hand, even the smallest, person-to-person experience can only be fully explained with reference to the wider societal context.

The contribution by Kerswill and Mahama (Chapter 18) studies the role of languages in the conflicts in one region of northern Ghana. They address head on the question of whether linguistic differences alone can cause conflict between different social groups. In a survey of this relationship, they observe that languages are often a “catalyst” for inter-group violence. They make the valuable observation that numerous parts of Africa have always been multilingual, and point out that multilingualism does not inevitably lead to conflict. When reading their survey of African conflict and languages, one is tempted to come to the conclusion that the suggestions or implications about languages being a cause of conflict in Africa may reflect a colonial (i.e. European) notion of the relation between language and ethnic identity, rather than the reality on the ground. This notion, it has been claimed, can be observed in everyday practices of language choice among groups of multinational Europeans, where it appears to be good practice to hide linguistic difference (O’Driscoll, 2001b). In Africa, on the other hand, such differences are sometimes highlighted in teasing/joking fashion (see Rampton, 1995 for an example of the same phenomenon among multi-ethnic youth in modern British cities).

In order to gauge the extent to which language form contributes directly to conflict, Kerswill and Mahama outline a “linguistic ecology” of their chosen region of Ghana, in which the different languages in play can be placed on a hierarchy of up to six levels, from the most locally confined to the global. They then examine the conflicts that have occurred and might occur in the region owing to ongoing tensions and conclude that languages themselves are never a root cause. They can only, by virtue of their symbolic function as representing this or that group, be a catalyst, exacerbating the tensions that are already there.

Penman’s contribution (Chapter 19) analyses the situation of the conflict between the Mapuche people and mainstream Chilean society. His particular focus is the role that language “revitalisation” (in O’Driscoll’s (2013) term, “renovation”) plays, and can play, in the development and possible transformation of this conflict. Here we see a particular relation between a language and an identity and between language rights and other rights. The dominant (“settler”) group historically recognises no distinct Mapuche culture, so that the Mapuche’s language, being an aspect of this unrecognised culture, is not something to which the Mapuche people can have any rights. On the other hand, recent institutional support of this minority language and the culture’s rights can also be seen as an attempt to deflect attention from fundamentally inequitable economic policies, especially when settler society is not especially opposed to establishing language rights for the Mapuche, because they see the issue of land rights as far more important. And yet Penman points to several ways in which efforts to strengthen the role of a minority language can have beneficial effects for the position of its people more generally.

Moore’s contribution (Chapter 20) also concerns language in the public sphere, but this time it is confined to one city. She introduces the concept of linguistic landscaping (LL) and
the various forms that studies in this area have taken over the past two decades. LL involves all and any of the numerous communicative artefacts (shop signs, shop names, advertising hoardings, street signs, street names, names of buildings, graffiti and so on, even those found on moving objects such as vans and buses or people’s clothing) that can be found in any urban space.

It is a valuable point of entry to the study of language-related conflict. In what language(s) is (are) these artefacts written? And if more than one is used, is one given any kind of prominence over the other? Moore takes the city of Vilnius in Lithuania as an example of, and to a large extent representative of, the changes that have occurred in ex-Soviet republics. Her study is largely diachronic, acknowledging that the significance of this or that kind of sign at this time and place can only be understood in terms of its earlier versions, which display different languages, or earlier non-existence. Her historically recursive tours of Vilnius illustrate the extent to which signage can change relatively quickly. Since public messages are consciously composed, LL, as Moore observes, is a clear example of how linguistic objects not only reflect tensions and conflict, but also enact it (and thereby modify the conflict in question). Indeed, as frequently recorded in this study, aspects of LL have often been the subject of legislation. At the same time, as well as these top-down impositions of language choice, LL change is a process that also works bottom-up, with individuals or groups taking it upon themselves to deface or modify existing signage.

Blitvich (Chapter 21) addresses head-on an example of the often complex relations between a language, its use and group (in this case ethnic) identity, and the tensions and conflict that arise thereby. The Spanish language in the US is a focus of conflict in itself, with a growing mainstream perception that its increasing presence is a threat to the dominance of the English language. But as so often, this focus is to a great extent merely the peg on which more general ethnic and economic tensions can be hung. Blitvich speaks of Spanish in the US being “racialised”, with the Spanish language and Latinos being equated. But the tensions arise not only with respect to this group and the outside world, but also within the group itself. The focus for Blitvich is the double-bind that many Latinos find themselves in as a result of the either/or assumption (see above). Those heard speaking Spanish in “public” are regarded with suspicion by members of the dominant Anglo group, while those heard speaking English by members of the in-group are thought by them to be guilty of affectation. Blitvich’s enquiry is through the examination of an online forum, in which both essentialist (either/or) and more nuanced views of the relation between language and identity are evidenced. It is an example of the complexity that the negotiation of identity involves for people, intersecting as it does with more general cultural orientations, such as individualism versus collectivism.

Khan’s contribution (Chapter 22), in that it examines two cases of enacted face-to-face conflict, could arguably belong in Section II of this volume. However, it appears in this section because it is an example of recognised languages as factors in the conflict, especially their power not only to index belonging, but also to exclude. They can do this because, as noted above, they are highly salient indices of difference. In both cases, the trigger that starts the abuse is the use of a non-English language on a London bus. Following Derrida, Kahn emphasises that the social effect of using language X or language Y is at the behest of those who receive it. At the same time, his examples again illustrate the either/or assumption. In both incidents, it is the victim’s identification with a non-English language that is used against them, and in both cases the use of such a language is implied to be “rude”, is associated with terrorism and also taken to imply that their abilities in the English language are lacking.
Conflict with the fabric of language

The contribution by De Bres and Franziskus (Chapter 23) could belong in Section I of the handbook, in that it investigates accounts by people of their language use, and therefore how they conceptualise it. And in that these accounts concern the person-to-person use of language at particular moments (i.e. interaction), it could fit into Section II as well. But it is in this section because of its subject-matter: the choice of language. It is a study of what it can “mean” to use one language rather than (an)other(s) in a particular context. As they report, people in Luxembourg are markedly multilingual. Owing to very high levels of inward migration, especially from Portugal and Italy, its three “official” languages (i.e. those used in administration and the law) are only a part of the story. This contribution examines the workplace experiences of cross-border workers in Luxembourg and how they adapt their language – or not – to the situations they are in and the attitudes they perceive. As Khan’s does, this study exemplifies the fact that the role of languages in conflicts is rarely discrete. Instead, it interacts with other tokens or attributes of perceived difference.

17.7 Conclusion: the role of languages in conflict

Language varieties (languages, vernaculars, dialects, etc.) are involved in conflict in multifarious ways. When they are the clear object of conflict (i.e. the conflict is about which variety to use when and where), the extent to which the dispute erupts into violence appears to depend on whether it is perceived as a choice to be made by an inclusive “we”. When it is, choices are made without any violence. Choices about when and where Irish and English should be used in the Republic of Ireland, for example, are simply choices made on various pragmatic and emotional grounds, because there is an overwhelming consensus regarding attitudes to the two languages. But when a “them-and-us” is perceived, tensions become evident. Across the border of the Republic of Ireland, in that part of Ireland that remains part of the United Kingdom, attempts to resuscitate the power-sharing executive for that region have been hampered over conflict between the two groups concerning the role of Irish language. Such tensions sometimes have violent manifestations.

However, although languages may be the overt object of dispute, they are invariably proxies for other issues concerning access to power, opportunities and economic resources and/or ethnic identity. This observation, however, is not to diminish the importance of languages in conflict. The knock-on effects of language ideology on conflict-related matters can be far-reaching. As a final example, it has been shown that decisions on asylum seeker applications in European countries are often made on the basis of the “modernist” ideology of the monolingual nation state that bear no relation to the multilingual practices of the asylum seekers or the multilingual on-the-ground realities of the places from which they come (see Blommaert, 2001, Marijns, 2006). It is worth, therefore, continuing to explore the roles played by language varieties in conflict, not least in order to be able to point out where those in power or those engaging in mediation could make better decisions on which variety or which recognised language to use in a given situation.

References


