MULTIPLICITY AND CONTENTION AMONG IDEOLOGIES: A COMMENTARY

Susan Gal

It is a pleasure and a challenge to comment on this fine set of papers because they bring together a great diversity of ethnographic materials and a range of approaches towards "linguistic ideology." They are all trying to define and use this conceptual category in new ways, while sensing its familiarity. Woolard urged us, in her introduction, to start not with strict definition of terms but from the broad premise that "linguistic ideology is a mediating link between social structures and forms of talk." I hope that the term can provide a reframing or Nekker cube effect: the realization that many of the things we have been studying under different labels - common sense notions, metalinguistics, status/solidarity, rhetoric, language attitudes, worldviews in language - can be brought together, revealing family resemblances, and inspiring novel analytic connections.

Therefore, my aim here is simply to highlight the most important themes that emerge from these papers despite the following important differences in subject matter: The social groups discussed range from face-to-face communities of hunter-gatherers in Venezuela, to Quebecois industrial and clerical workers, Haitian farmers, Catalan students, US, Haitian and Indonesian scholars and academics. The linguistic materials discussed are similarly diverse, including interactional genres in classrooms, in mourning, in shamanistic song, as well as writing systems, details of linguistic elicitation sessions and, most generally, what people explicitly say - or have historically written -- about their languages and language use. One kind of evidence notably missing is full scale formal or variational analysis of linguistic structure.

But common themes are more interesting. It may point to a welcome blurring of the well-known divisions of scale and geography within our sub-discipline that the scholars gathered here include several who have written about social units of more than one scale e.g. national language policy as well as face-to-face interaction (Collins, Errington, Heller, Schieffelin), and have conducted research in several different geopolitical locations (Briggs, Collins, Schieffelin). The themes and questions I would like to emphasize can best be grouped around three points.

1. Idea, practice, power

Ideology is conceptualized - implicitly or explicitly - not only as systematic ideas, cultural constructions, commonsense notions, and representations, but also as the
everyday practices in which such notions are enacted; the structured and experienced social relations through which humans act upon the world. Thus the papers here discuss not only explicit ideas about language. They also infer ideas about language from the way that people use it. This combination rejects the implicit linguistic ideology of much social theory and of structuralist linguistics, which strictly separates the ideational from the material, words from actions. And the combination draws on a number of traditions, some more "local" to linguistic anthropology than others. First, the analysis of systematic ideas - here ideas about some aspect of language - continues ethnoscienctific attempts to get at worldview by specifying the semantic relations between native terms. It continues, as well, symbolic anthropology's intent to treat ideologies as cultural systems and to decipher their logic. Joined to these traditions are contemporary literary and philosophical approaches that have rediscovered rhetoric and the question of how texts make meaning.

Second, in their attention to practices, these papers rely not only on the contextual approach of the ethnography of speaking, but on (Continental) traditions which, though differing from each other in important ways, nevertheless share the emphasis on ideology as embedded in everyday practices. These include structural Marxist "subjectivities," Bourdieu's "symbolic domination," Gramsci's always contested "cultural hegemony" and even Foucault's discussion of the "disciplines" of everyday life.

Thus, Collins infers a set of beliefs about language from Tolowa speakers' unsolicited discussions of "favorite words," DiGiacomo interprets classroom question-sequences between Catalan students and teachers as enacting a set of assumptions about what a language should be like. Briggs infers ideas about intentionality from the recipient design and participant structure of Warao ritual wailing. Errington alludes to the stratification system encoded in the use Javanese variants. All buttress their analyses of practices with explicit statements that speakers make about beliefs and ideas. And it is clear that explicit statements need not be congruent with what practices imply. Indeed, Heller focuses on the recurrent contradictions between the beliefs of bilingual women in Canada, and the bilingual practices that they adopt. Similarly DiGiacomo shows that the classroom interaction contradicts what the teacher explicitly claims about Catalan.

But the papers in this session are inspired not only by the emphasis on practice, but also by social theorists' various attempts to redefine the relationship between language and power. In addition to the familiar idea that linguistic practices provide access to material resources (see Heller) and further provide the means for participation in decision making ("a voice"), there is the important notion that ideas about language and particular linguistic practices provide representations of reality. If such representations are authorized by societal institutions, they serve the interests of some groups better than others, and are thus sources of social power. In one way or another the papers in this session explore this "reality making" aspect of linguistic ideas and practices, and its relation to social power. They reject a view of linguistic ideology as neutral cultural constructions, but equally reject the view that ideas about language and its role in social life are simply distortions of a separately knowable reality. They employ the fruitful strategy of focussing on how actors conceptualize, formulate and
express their disagreements and conflicts, especially concerning particular linguistic practices, e.g. arguing and disagreeing (Briggs), writing systems (Schieffelin, Collins) or grammars (DiGiacomo, Errington).

2. Multiplicity of ideologies and expert knowledge

The focus on conflicts highlights the most important aim of these papers: to document the multiplicity of language ideologies in each of the social orders discussed. This goes directly against two widespread tendencies. In traditional ethnographic approaches, including the ethnography of speaking, we often attributed a single, patterned worldview to a social group. Briggs suggests this in his critique of Rosaldo's well-known description of Ilongot speech acts. Even in variationist studies, which otherwise celebrate heterogeneity, the speech community was defined as the locus of shared evaluations and attitudes towards varieties. This excluded variation from the realm of what we here would call ideology.

More recently, as linguistic practices and ideas have been discussed in terms of symbolic domination, there has been a tendency to identify a single, monolithic "dominant" ideology. Similarly, although cultural hegemony implies multiplicity and the likelihood of resistance or opposition, analyses based on this notion have usually juxtaposed one dominant practice or ideology with one form of resistance. In contrast, the papers in this session show that even in small face-to-face communities ideas about language are various and can be contradictory. Briggs' examples about the precedence of the "thinking-speaking" model of discourse over other models among the Warao also suggests that even in such face-to-face communities, some models are more socially powerful than others. In larger social systems it is clear that there are discursive battles among elites for which ideas are to be institutionalized in law, education, industry. And within already established institutions the debates among dominant ideologies continue. These essays are strong in demonstrating the diversity of ideas about language, how they challenge each other, formulate different social realities, and thus support different configurations of power. Further work might suggest that such ideas are not easily resolved into dominant and alternative versions.

An important, related theme is the role of experts - philologists, sociolinguists, grammarians, teachers - and expert knowledge, in producing conflicting linguistic ideologies. The frequent and fertile slippage between analytic and everyday uses of terms, the usage of this slippage in creating cultural capital, the naturalization and later de-naturalization of linguistic facts, and the common strategy of appealing to the authority of science, are issues that all deserve further investigation. Several papers attempt to critique our own academic ideologies of language by putting them in the same analytic frame as those of the people studied (Briggs, Collins).

Drawing on Foucault, Collins notes how ideas about language (e.g. that it is an autonomous system that can be studied in isolation from context) provide self-definition and self-justification for expert groups such as linguists in the US academy, and managers in educational bureaucracy. He describes "multi-party conflicts" waged with
such ideas, in which the stakes are jobs, and other material advantages. Collins and Heller are particularly precise in describing debates among different groups who are in a position to define a broad social reality, as well as the responses of those who must collude and calculate with or resist that reality. Schieffelin and Doucet show that debates about Haitian orthography not only divide the experts, but create/define constituencies among different fractions of the Haitian elite. Literary people, school teachers and parents bent on upward mobility for their children defend the pro-etymology position, and are opposed by those in government agencies working for adult literacy. This study, along with Errington's discussion of debates among Javanese intellectuals and politicians about the refiguration of the Javanese language, bear on my next point.

3. Linguistic ideologies and other conceptual systems

Ideologies of language are important for social analysis because they are not only about language. They envision and enact connections between linguistic and social phenomena. Briggs comments explicitly on this, but all the papers offer interesting examples. As Ochs, Borker and others pointed out years ago, cultural constructions of gender are often linked to ideas about ways of speaking in diverse social groups. Many of the papers I am discussing here focus on another modern category of identity: 'nation.' By contrast, a somewhat different body of literature in linguistic anthropology shows language ideology to be about conceptions we might label aesthetic, moral or epistemological. These concern intentionality, sincerity, emotion, truth and evidence, sources of thought and responsibility, clarity, simplicity. If at first glance these do not appear to be related to group identity, a closer look reveals that they too are often deeply enmeshed with conceptions about the nation.

Both 'nation' and 'language' are terms for cultural categories that are used for analysis as well as in everyday life. In the course of the 19th century, European philosophy, social thought, and political practice did the ideological work of making the connection between them appear a necessary, natural, and self-evident one. Although later generations of linguists and anthropologists would work similarly hard to de-naturalize the link between language, race and social group, the connection was borrowed and recontextualized all over the globe. There are, however, at least two modern senses of 'nation,' as Eric Hobsbawm has recently reminded us, both conceived as having a 'state' as its ideal home. One is a cultural relation between state and subject based on political participation and known as citizenship; the other is based on some imagined, shared cultural unity. Their relation to ideas about language are interestingly different.

In the first case, a uniformity of language throughout the nation-state is understood as necessary for free communication, an informed and mobile citizenry who can exercise political rights. Notice that referential adequacy, simplicity, clarity, and individual intentionality in language and thought are aesthetic and moral notions often invoked in such discourse. In the second case language is understood as an expression
of communal spirit and the uniformity of language is important not for efficient communication and broad participation but as proof that the speaking subject is an authentic member of the nation, linking speaker and language to the past and its (invented) traditions. Different moral and aesthetic issues are involved in each case.

In both of these well known conceptions there is a logic of boundedness that invites us to imagine - against the ubiquitous evidence of variation in language and society - the happy fusion of a circumscribed and internally homogeneous language with a similarly configured nation. There are certainly other cultural relations between state and subjects, for instance one typical of state-socialist societies. Any such relation, like "nation," and in common with other categories of political theory and practice, such as "the people," "the masses," "the public" includes implicit assumptions about language that deserve exploration. Notice too, that both ideas of the nation can be evoked in the same country, can be used by minorities, indigenous populations or competing elites to constitute themselves and argue with each other. Claims to the national self are made not only to internal audiences but to other nations, and as Errington shows for Indonesia, are involved in handling complex relations to international capital.

The implicit logics I have outlined form the background to the more specific discursive battles described in these papers. What part of the population is really Haitian and what standardized written or spoken language will represent them? One version of Catalan is to be the authentic one, but which current speakers will be able to understand it? Why make Javanese - with its levels of social differentiation - into an internally homogeneous ethnic language?

In the course of highlighting the multiplicity of linguistic ideologies - as ideas and practice - these papers begin two further and related tasks: 1. to understand the semiotic processes by which chunks of linguistic material (e.g. orthographic systems, archaic vs. new forms) gain significance as representations of particular parts of populations; 2. to unravel the semiotic and rhetorical means by which our own expert theories as well as everyday and political arguments link together such apparently diverse cultural categories as language, spelling, nation, gender, simplicity, intentionality, authenticity, development, tradition.