Political Economies of Language: Power, Epistemology and the Representation of Research

by Alexandra Jaffe

Both sets of questions raised in this virtual seminar make the important point that the political economy involved in how we conduct, and then represent our ethnographic practice has both linguistic and epistemological dimensions. With this in mind, I take a critical look at linguistic and discursive practices involved in both the conduct and the representation of ethnographic work on Corsican that I have produced both alone, and in concert with actors on the ground. In discuss some of the conditions in which anthropological frameworks and accounts of practice may be coordinated with the explanatory frames and discourses mobilized by local social actors and scholars. This is no easy task, and it involves careful, reflexive assessment of audience(s) and venues, as well as a delicate balancing of different forms of expertise and knowledge frameworks. In short, it involves the creation of a new community of practice, defined by concertation around a set of shared goals and at least partially shared "savoirs-faire" and "être" [knowing how to do and to be]. It also points to the different--and competing--circuits of knowledge production and circulation that are linked to research on a minority language. That is, communities of practice are not necessarily internally unified. Nor is a harmonious coordination of discourses across disparate communities of practice always possible; the activity is often fraught with tension.

Language is implicated in numerous ways in this activity: as expertise/competence and their attendant social consequences and values, as a research focus and as medium of action and discourse. Let me begin with the question of my own language learning, use and competence in the focal language: Corsican. On a most basic level, it's clear that understanding Corsican is a critical research tool; without this knowledge, I would be unable to interpret the bilingual (Corsican and French) practices on the ground that I observe and study. Moving beyond this self-evidence, the fact that Corsican is a minority language that is simultaneously heavily invested with identity value but is not spoken (or spoken "well") by all Corsicans inflects what it means for me to acquire and use both spoken and written Corsican. First, there is the significance of my investment in learning and using Corsican. This investment, with a minority language, is made all the more visible and salient because it is not required; like everyone else on the island, I have recourse the dominant language, French, a (dominant) lingua franca. For me, as is the case for many Corsicans, it is also much easier to speak French, and my experience and proficiency in French academic and professional registers is higher than it is in Corsican. In one sense, then, the choice to use Corsican in the conduct of professional activities (especially in public contexts), is a sacrifice of expert footing and voice. Corsican is my third best academic language. So using it is a way of displaying my willingness to pay linguistic dues associated with participation.

But if we look closely at the notion of sacrifice, it is important to note that it is not one I make for the sake of intelligibility, but rather, for the "cause" of the Corsican language. Thus these public uses--and some more private ones as well--implicate me in the local political economy of language and constitute an ideological stance. We can look at this stance-taking in two ways. On the one hand, it shows the impossibility of neutrality in contexts where language choice is the symbolic terrain on which broader ideological struggles play out. No matter what language one chooses, it is and will be read as a political-ideological choice. At the same time, as a non-Corsican, exclusive use of French for communication is more unmarked than marked. In this light, we have to interpret my choices to speak or write Corsican as

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fundamentally elective; as claims on a certain kind of membership/participation: to being "in the game" as opposed to an external observer of it. This claim is neither true nor false—but the ways in which I am necessarily (vs. voluntarily) implicated in the local political economy of language and how those compare and contrast with Corsican social actors' is quite nuanced and both shapes and is shaped by the linguistic choices I make and the reception of their implicit claims.

The significance of learning and using Corsican is also conditioned by the fact that there are relatively few outsiders who learn this particular language (though this is beginning to change) compared to some other "minority language" contexts such Ireland, Catalonia or Wales. My efforts to learn Corsican are therefore perceived as extraordinary, and often, as extraordinarily meritorious. This footing is different from that available to "native" learners and novice speakers. I am likely to be judged as exceeding expectations; they are more likely to be judged as falling short of them and by extension, falling short at the level of identity. This special status motivates the knowingly hyperbolic public assessment "She speaks Corsican just like us" that I have been the object of many times over the years. My acquisition of Corsican has also, as I have described at some length (Jaffe 1999), routinely been instrumentalized by (linguistically proficient) language activists to shame Corsicans who don't speak the language ("If she can learn it, so can you"). Less-proficient Corsican speakers have also spontaneously expressed sentiments of regret or shame to me when they perceive my knowledge of the language as higher than their own. My use or knowledge of Corsican, then, plays into the reproduction of minority language insecurities brought about by language shift and language revitalization. This is not a comfortable position, either personally or epistemologically. On an interpersonal level, this heightens the attention that I pay others' competence, and leads me to avoidance of gratuitous displays of my own. But these experiences have also pushed me to take every opportunity to introduce a a sociolinguistic discourse and perspective on language and power. That is, whenever my case is held up as an example, I say "But you know it's very different for me than it is for a Corsican. I have nothing to lose if I make mistakes, but for a Corsican, it's problematic for identity." This often leads to interesting conversations and I think, both contributes to the circulation of sociolinguistic perspectives in everyday contexts and treats my interlocutors as analytically competent as opposed to as pawns of circulating linguistic and cultural ideologies.

But I also want to emphasize that using Corsican at a reasonably proficient level is not only a claim or stance but also, a precondition for participation in specific domains of shared practices, knowledge production and circulation that are integral to my research agenda. Let me give two examples from my most recent research experiences. The first is not so much focused on linguistic competence as outcome, but on process. That is, the process of learning Corsican itself constitutes entry into a community of practice and experience, since having partial competence and seeking more is something that I share with Corsican learners. In 2011-12, I attended a 6-month "immersion weekend" course in Corsican with other intermediate to advanced speakers, and my linguistic profile--and very heterogenous set of competencies--was not so different from many of the heritage learners'. It is also the case that in contexts of minority language shift and revitalization like this one, classroom learning of the language rather than everyday use is becoming the shared experiential ground of speaker practice and experience. This apprenticeship has been invaluable for me in thinking about the kinds of subject positions or stances offered to learners by different kinds of classroom practices and the language ideologies (for example, of "polynomic" or pluricentric norms) on which they are based. The shared experiential ground includes both specific kinds of linguistic knowledge as well as participation in metalinguistic discourses about Corsican. It is both a form of membership and the basis for "learning how [and what] to ask" (Briggs, 1996) and has been invaluable in my efforts to theorize what it means to become a speaker of a minority language as well as what kinds of ideological content are attached to different speaker categories ("native;" "new" etc.).
The second example comes from another project from the 2011-12 academic year in which I conducted research on the teaching of a Corsican genre called the chjamb’è rispondi (call and response)--an improvisational poetic joust-- in two Corsican bilingual schools. This research was collaborative and project-based, and involved a series of exchanges of texts, audio recordings and videos between the two geographically separated schools and the organization of a culminating field trip to a museum where the children met and took part in workshops. One of the teachers I worked with was a poet himself and an active participant in the chjamb’è rispondi "circuit" on the island. He and his students were invited to participate in a two-day poetry festival in June 2012. The first day included student recitations and prizes; the second included a roundtable performance of Corsican poets and performances by Sardinian and Tuscan poets who were experts in similar genres. A forum on teaching the chjamb’è rispondi was also scheduled on the second day of the festival but the teacher I was working with was unable to attend since it was a regular school day. In these conditions, I went in his stead, and delivered, in Corsican a powerpoint on the project that written in Corsican and included annotated video footage. I also answered questions from the audience. This amounted to significant linguistic preparation on my part. In this specific context, I viewed it as quasi-obligatory in order for me to be taken as a legitimate reporter of the project, given the extent to which the focal practice and the kinds of issues and questions surrounding its teaching in the schools was defined by very specific esthetic (formal poetic and linguistic) and pragmatic/cultural features. In fact, it would be fair to say that this same linguistic and cultural capital, acquired over years of doing fieldwork, had been a precondition for my ability to conduct the research. Of particular note, in the context of what I said above, was that neither my role as a "reporter" nor the language of my presentation were particularly dramatized or instrumentalized in this event. This, I believe, was in part because the event was focused around a creative linguistic practice rather than on Corsican language promotion per se. The informal patronage I enjoyed from one of the senior poets at the event may also have been a contributing factor: he both presented me as being "from" the village that we shared, and spoke to me in Corsican in informal gatherings during the event, thus displaying me as a legitimate interlocutor rather than stating that this was the case ("she speaks Corsican just like us").

There are a number of implications of these ethnographic accounts, some relatively self-evident. First, my experiences highlight the social and historical bases of forms of membership and participation as they are related to language. A related point is that legitimacy as a social actor is based on multiple, and interconnected sources and criteria and it is clear that not all claims or sources have the same kinds of meaning or value. In different contexts or domains, a speaker (researcher or otherwise) might benefit different kinds of legitimacy based on the particular combination of linguistic competence (of different kinds/levels), communicative competence, social network membership and so on that he or she enjoys. We can also see that the social management and representation of legitimacy by or about speakers varies, and that this variation is salient. The statement "she speaks Corsican just like us," uttered almost invariably outside a context of actual interaction in Corsican (and not infrequently in French) is a message of social inclusion that no one expects to be directly tied to specific linguistic competencies. The public instrumentalization of me as a learner for political purposes has less of a social inclusionary function; this is reflected in the fact that when it takes place, the communicative dimension of what I am able or prompted to say in Corsican is subordinated to its symbolic function. Thus the legitimacy I enjoy is as a token of a type, rather than as a situated, speaking social actor with something to contribute. This contrasts with the legitimacy accorded when the language of interaction is not the subject of metalinguistic comment and the communicative takes precedence over the symbolic. We might characterize this as one of the strategies through which speakers are positioned as having discursive legitimacy. And in fact, I think that this range of researcher experiences of different types of legitimacy illustrates one of the common on-the-ground dynamics of minority language revitalization processes. That is, in these contexts, communicative practice is particularly susceptible to reinterpretation as social, politico-ideological or symbolic. This tension is
omnipresent in the "prise de parole" (speaking out) in the minority language. One of the implicit goals of "normalization" is to reverse the balance between the communicative and the symbolic, but that requires interventions which, by their very nature, work against that goal.

In this final section, I would like to go a step further in the shift of focus from language to discourse that has been introduced in these last examples and address issues of participation, legitimacy, epistemology and power associated with my engagement in different professional discourses and Discourses. I return here to the powerpoint I created for the poetry festival. It was a hybrid document in a number of ways. On the one hand, it took up an "insider" stance on the value of both the expert practice involved (improvisational poetry) and the value of teaching it in the schools. That is, while those values were justified on academic grounds, they were but not subjected to any explicit critical analysis. For example, I said that the project "responded to the challenge, in Corsican bilingual education, of creating meaningful links between school and society" and facilitated "lending vitality to the language and taking it beyond the school walls". This proposition takes for granted the value of both Corsican language revitalization and the importance of creating school-society links to accomplish that goal. It is consistent with both language activist and minority language pedagogical discourses. Undergirding these discourses is a particular model of what "revitalization" might mean--specifically, that it would involve practices that are not exclusively academic, that are collectively valued in some way and whose community or collective dimension is founded on participation by different social actors across different domains of practice. With respect to what was meant by "language," it placed a particular emphasis on language practice over language form. In not making these ideological foundations and implications explicit, I did not mobilize the kind of academic discourse that defines my participation in a professional anthropological/sociolinguistic community.

My presentation was also embedded in the Corsican political-linguistic economy in another way. I was aware that there had been a lot of enthusiasm for teaching the chjam’è rispondi in schools in educational circles for several years. But I also knew that some poets, teachers and bilingual educational specialists were reticent or skeptical. One source of skepticism had to do with ideologies about "being a poet": specifically, that it was a "gift" and therefore, not amenable to being "taught." This ideology is linked, of course, to essentializing discourses about "natural" transmission of the minority language that have historically been used to characterize the Corsican learned in schools as "inauthentic" and to delegitimize the minority language education agenda in general. I also knew that people were skeptical about the ability of novice speakers (children in bilingual schools) to engage in a meaningful way in an "expert" practice. So my presentation was in part structured as a "demonstration" of what children were able to learn and do, and of the kinds of outcomes and values that bilingual education could have. I also explored the implications the outcomes the project had for language pedagogy and linguistic learning as well as wider issues of cultural continuity and change with respect to creative practice and social participation (the notion of a community of practice and the role of exchange and creativity in it). This part of my presentation was a blend: the "demonstration" was a an appreciative stance with a corrective ideological intent; at the same time, the analytical grounds for evaluation were laid out for examination in ways that did not "force" a particular conclusion, but pointed out the nature of the practice and outcomes and the frameworks in which they could be valued.

The nature of my presentation was thus influenced by my knowledge and assumptions about the audience and its ideological orientations (shared and competing). It was influenced by my own ideological orientations. And it was influenced by my understanding of my role in light of the deliberately collaborative nature of the project. That is, I viewed the presentation as a "joint" one and viewed the teachers I collaborated with as participating in authorship (although this is not to imply that that authorship was completely equal or equivalent, or that any of us had the expectation that it would be). But the example

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illustrates that joint projects of representation demand the calibration of different Discourses, each with their own presuppositions about what is "real," "legitimate" or valuable. In particular, academic discourses, by virtue of deconstructing the ideological (and thus socially and historically contingent) underpinnings of various discourses, risk construing them as inauthentic and thereby, also risk being disconcerting to practitioners. Practitioner discourses, on the other hand, can be academically de-authenticating. I was attempting to chart a course between these two representational outcomes and their effect on both my own and my collaborators' perceived legitimacy.

This effort took a different turn in a new context for the representation of the project that took place about a year later, in a conference presentation at the University of Corsica during the biannual meeting of the Réseau Francophone de Sociolinguistique (RFS). I organized a panel on "outsider" research on Corsican language and culture and created a French-language presentation on the chjam’è rispondi. I invited my main collaborating teacher to present with me, but once again his teaching duties precluded it. This version of the presentation framed the project and its implications with reference to issues of authority, legitimacy and authenticity as they arise in minority language revitalization contexts, with reference to particular nature of Corsican metalinguistic discourses associated with school language and the questions raised by the heterogeneity of different communities of Corsican language practice. Some of the comments of our panel discussant, a Corsican sociolinguist -- and another Corsican language planner in the audience -- threw into relief some additional discursive terrains and debates associated with Corsican language politics. What I had considered "balance" in my presentation was heard primarily as uncritical "promotion" of a particular pedagogical practice. The fact that it was linked to a "traditional" practice was interpreted as feeding diglossic representations of Corsican's value as being exclusively associated with the past; the "demonstration" element was interpreted as an exaggeratedly rosy picture of exceptional children's abilities as the norm. This led, as it turns out, to a lively (and continuing) discussion and debate that is interesting because maps out the contours of a particular political terrain populated by specific social actors. The point I want to make is that this kind of reaction was in part predictable just because of the political nature of any knowledge production/representation associated with Corsican. But it was also, I think, in part related to the vestiges of discursive hybridity embedded in the presentation. The elements that provoked response were in fact "there," though not in isolation. In addition to the origins of this hybridity in my own approach to authorship and collaboration, traces of the practitioner stance in the conference presentation can also be viewed as claims, on my part, to be a locally legitimate (perhaps even privileged) researcher and analyst. This kind of claim, to participate in both "insider" and "outsider" production of knowledge about Corsican, is a fairly powerful one that predictably, is not met with uniform enthusiasm on Corsica. It connects with a theme introduced many years ago in an edited volume by Caroline Brettell entitled When They Read What We Write, which addressed what it means to produce ethnographic representations that are read by those they represent. At the time, I reported on the simultaneous hypervaluation and dismissal of "outside" authors writing about the Corsican language. This dynamic is still present, and is one influence in the pattern of "erasure" of outside (and particularly, English-language) literature on Corsican within Corsican academic circles. I consider the debate opened up following my presentation at the RFS to be a positive remedy to this state of affairs--a step in the creation of a shared space of exchange: debate is engagement. This erasure, however, also has academic and market-based origins. That is, English is simultaneously the most important language of publication for a US academic career and a language read by very few Corsican academics--embedded as they are in French academia and in francophone disciplinary networks and circuits of publication. The material conditions of this circulation of knowledge and opportunity thus favored my production of English and not French-language texts and disfavored Corsican scholarly engagement with my own and other English-language scholars and traditions except on a very selective basis. People like me who cross those boundaries can also be seen as accruing "excess" symbolic capital and/or as making claims to
exceptional status that are unlikely to be well-received. In the RFS conference, this was undoubtedly one of the unintended consequences of another panel in which I participated, where a group of franco-american border crossers from both sides of the Atlantic explored the "passerelles" between French sociolinguistic and American sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological perspectives. We circle back here to the implications and management of exceptionalism that I evoked above, and I will end on this note at the nexus of the linguistic and the discursive; the political and the epistemological and their rich and tangled implications.