Comment on Alexandra Jaffe

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Jaffe points out that in any diglossic (or polyglossic) situation, choosing one language is more than choosing the best way to communicate: it is also a political choice, on the background of an asymmetry between languages. French (my native language) is dominant in relation to Corsican (Jaffe’s focal language), but dominated in relation to English (Jaffe’s native language, and the hegemonic academic language in which I reply to her). Indeed, Jaffe describes situations where she chooses to talk Corsican, although she is more at ease in French — as a number of her interlocutors. This allows her to claim honorary membership (“Elle parle corse comme nous”) in a we-group whose members define themselves by their linguistic commitment, rather than linguistic competence. Similarly, the choice of a language for writing anthropology defines whom you address as your privileged interlocutors.

Jaffe explores different universes of discourse, in which she uses different languages. This is indeed a distinctive feature of anthropology, where often the language of interaction in fieldwork is not identical to the language of writing. The common situation is that of a disjunction between the language(s) of fieldwork, which defines the universe of discourse where we interact with our interlocutors in the field, and the language of theorizing, in which we write and address our interlocutors in the academic world (this is both an issue of language and of levels of discourse).

Jaffe rightly points out the effects of the language of publication for the circulation of knowledge, but leaves out its effects on the very process of thinking. It is not only that writing in different languages addresses different audiences: what is said is different, in so far as it resonates with a different body of literature. Language proficiency is more than an ethnographic skill, a communicative tool, or a strategic way to gain informants’ trust; it is essential in the process of intellectual elaboration. English has become for a large part the “language of theorizing”, even for those of us who do not write only or mostly in it, because the literature in English (or in translation from it) is more and more a mandatory reading for students everywhere, —whereas it is virtually impossible to assign a text in Portuguese in France, and increasingly difficult to assign a text in French in Brazilian post-graduate programs.

I recently had the experience to be part of a panel evaluating a research center in a Portuguese-speaking country. Following the requirements of the official agency, eager to promote ‘internationalization’, reports were in English, but we also had discussions in Portuguese with the scholars involved. It was striking that in various cases, the short presentations in Portuguese were richer and more original than the English reports. This was not of course because English is an inferior language, but because using the language of English-speaking academia tends to impose a series of notions or concepts which may bring specific situations in a common mold.

What gives anthropology its edge by contrast to other social sciences is that it had to think through various languages. Ethnocentrism is embedded in language, as we spontaneously think that our ‘natural’ language fits the world as it is; it is from this ‘natural’ language that we try to account for other languages and their deviations from ours. This is why circulating between various languages is a condition for the progress of our knowledge.