Transformations and linguistic alienations

by Christine Jourdan

We were asked to reflect upon the political dimension of language in our professional practice as anthropologists, and in particular the hegemonic position that English holds in anthropology today.

My response is informed by two concerns. First, I am deliberately making use of a light, conversational tone, removed from the usual technical and theoretical jargon, which lets theory appear in filigree throughout the text. This is a methodological choice as much as a political one, in the broad sense. Second, I beg forgiveness for starting with personal experiences; they allow me to perform a kind of archaeology of what I know and of how this knowledge was acquired. I do so by using something of a reflexive epistemology that leads to larger and more political considerations of anthropological practice, and the place (and representation) of language in anthropological awareness. After all, linguistically and professionally speaking, the anthropologist is often the result of the life experiences that constructed her. Her anthropological practice and knowledge are strongly embedded within these experiences.

Formation and transformation

It is only upon arriving in Montreal from my province in France, at the age of 20, that I became aware of the fact that I spoke French. In other words, that is when I became aware of the ideological weight attributed to standard French. Until that point, the only thing that mattered was the quality of the language I employed, due to the brainwashing I was subjected to in school about the beauty of the French language, and at home as well, regarding the necessity to speak properly as a sign of ‘self-respect’, I was told, above all not to speak like hooligans! It was also in Montreal that I experienced the political value of language as an index of ethnic identity and political claims. The discordant frictions that characterized the cohabitation of French and English in Montreal were coupled with similar frictions between the standard French spoken by the “damned French” of that time, and the Québécois French spoken by the Quebecers. I delved into the study of ethno-linguistics at Université de Montréal in order to understand what I was seeing and hearing around me, and also, what I was experiencing. I would leave the ethno-linguistics courses given by Gillian Sankoff completely shattered, crying over my lost innocence and the fact that I was lied to my whole childhood. This construction, called “French”, was but a founding myth of the French nation, and, above all, a source of oppression for others. Implicit as well as explicit relationships between language and power suddenly jumped out at me. In France, I was part of the silent majority. In Quebec, I was now one of the audible minorities. I quickly became silent. After writing two articles at the beginning of my career on the ideological dimension of language in Quebec, I moved on to the study of Pijin in the Solomon Islands, a more neutral topic for me on an emotional level. It seemed to me that focusing on ‘elsewhere’ was less perilous.

At the ANU in Australia for my doctoral studies, I discovered another kind of linguistic hegemony and insecurity. It was not about performance from an ideological point of view. Rather, it was simply about linguistic competency. How can one be taken seriously in discussions or seminars when one has trouble with things as simple as tense or lax vowels in English, and instead of answering I’d like to live on a ship to insignificant questions about one’s life choices, one would answer, much to the listeners’ astonishment, I’d like to leave on a sheep? How can one resist the opinion of fellow PhD students from my cohort on my ability to speak Pijin “well”, my fieldwork language, which I learned with love and with much success, when
one is being told: “Oh, isn’t she cute. She speaks Pijin with a French accent”. French accent? Since when did speaking Pijin with an English accent become the norm that strangers had to adopt? But, of course! Since the English colonization of that part of the Pacific! I should have known! Any derogation from this norm became a socio-linguistic anomaly, even if it was in regards to a language foreign to us all.

**Representing the language of the other**

It is in the Solomon Islands, a former English colony that I grew aware of another hegemonic aspect of English: After independence, English remained the language of power and social promotion, to the detriment of local languages. Post-colonial relationships morphed into neo-colonial relationships. I also discovered large-scale multilingualism and the harmonious cohabitation of sixty-four vernacular languages. Soon, the question arose as to which fieldwork language I would use. Which language was I to choose from the sixty-four?

The question was important because the language of fieldwork is not only a tool of communication that facilitates research. As we very well know, by way of the networks and the fields of knowledge it opens up, the language used in fieldwork guides our understanding of this world. To this day I am convinced that the decision I made to work in Pijin, a pragmatic, methodological and theoretical choice, guided my intellectual construction of the developing urban world, removed from the disciplinary concerns of that time that focused on ethnic groups. Everyone’s language, yet no one’s language, Pijin is the medium of urban life and the necessary step to the status of being a city dweller. Trying to understand the urban through the prism of a vernacular language would have plunged me into the ethnic perspective that I wanted to avoid. In order to do so, I had to, on the one hand, resist the wish of local people, friends and interlocutors, to appropriate the anthropologist on a symbolic level through the intermediary of language. On the other hand, I also had to represent the language, belittled by years of ideological and practical oppression at the hands of colonial administrators. What could be better, I thought, than compiling a dictionary to give linguistic legitimacy to a language that was, until that point, described by its detractors and some of its speakers as a formless jargon? In anthropology, a dictionary is often a by-product of one’s main research. But the choices we make about publications, and the subjects we embrace, are not insignificant, even if, in some cases, they go against what we like. Often, they also go against the wishes of some of our interlocutors and what they would like to see us publish.

**Publishing in the language of others**

Anthropologists have codes of ethics that are akin to sacred commandments: thou shalt not deceive thy informants; thou shalt protect their interest; thou shalt not steal their intellectual property; thou shalt not cook thy data, etc. These ‘commandments’ serve as moral imperatives and provide guides for good practice.

If publishing our work is part of our scientific responsibility, publishing in the language of our informants, or in the language they read, is, for me, a moral imperative. I publish in French what I write about Quebec, and I publish in English what I write about Solomon Islands. However, I do so while being aware of the following paradox: among the minority of people in Solomon Islands who read in English, if they read at all, who would want to read something they already know, if not by curiosity to see if I really understood, or to find out how I represent things? This paradox is sobering. It allows us not only to maintain an appropriate simplicity, but also to raise questions about the pertinence of what we do. But, local circumstances at times press us to infringe our own rules. Thus, I write in French from time to time to resist the hegemony of English, all the while knowing that French is also a hegemonic language! And, I write in English to be read more widely since the majority of my Canadian and American English-speaking colleagues do not read French. We publish in English so that our work is read, to spread knowledge, to

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develop our careers (and having access to prestigious journals in the discipline, almost all of which are in English, is part of this). We publish in our own language, or the language of our fieldwork interlocutors, driven by political conviction. This gesture is not insignificant.

When I published the Pijin dictionary mentioned here above, it was important to make it trilingual (Pijin-English-French) so as to place Pijin on the same level as the two international languages of the Pacific, namely English and French. Of course, one can argue that this choice is purely symbolic and ideological as this dictionary did not concretely change the situation of Pijin locally, even though its publication coincided with the emergence of a young generation of post-colonial city dwellers who made Pijin a symbol of their social and cultural distinction vis-à-vis the urban elite that would use English as a social springboard.

But in regards to the representation of the language of the other, it seems that the biggest difficulty is associated with the local cultural expectations about the nature of language, its place in society and the function of text. In particular here, a series of questions become important: how to justify, on the local epistemological level, the act of writing a dictionary of a language that is never written (save for the translation of the Bible by the linguists of the SIL)? What significance should we attribute to the transformation of an oral language into a series of decontextualized words listed alphabetically? Why would one wish to give legitimacy to a language denigrated by its own speakers? Any decision that touches upon the representation of language, be it in a dictionary or elsewhere, is not only an epistemological choice, but an ethical one as well.

The question of the hegemony of English as the language of scientific communication cannot be dissociated from the hegemony of English in other spheres, like the Internet and international relations. This has already been said. Nor can it be disassociated from the general question of the role of killer languages in the disappearance of many languages across the world. In Quebec, the question of the hegemony of English serves as a background to deeper debates about identity, similar to many others in other parts of the world. The conceptual advantage afforded by the act of living in a multilingual society such as contemporary Quebec, a multilingualism long overshadowed by political tensions revolving around French-English bilingualism, have certainly left a mark on my conception of anthropology as a discipline that must be multilingual and multicultural.

Beyond the hegemony of the English language, which, incidentally, allows us to enrich the discipline by way of a creative glocalization, I question the hegemony of American anthropology on the development of the discipline. Supported by a professional association approximately 10 000 members strong, as well as by professional journals which have, because of their impact factor, become the most prestigious, American anthropology has become inescapable. We know how impact factors of journals are established. Taking a close look at the references quoted in the bibliographies of the highest-ranking journals, one notices the overwhelming presence (at times exclusive presence) of texts written in English. Gradually, then, we have before us a mass effect. The production written in other languages seems to be ignored with the result that one has the impression that English-speaking anthropology, and American anthropology in particular, is the most important in terms of its content and impact. Finally, one has to take into account the effect of fashion. If one wants to appear to be in the know, one must be able to show that one knows the fashionable literature (in other words, that which is quoted in the highest-ranking journals, for example), along with the professional jargon used to write it. This is the case even if other authors have previously said the same things in other languages, using different words. I contend that this situation, because it does not allow for all perspectives carried by different languages to be taken into account, curtails anthropological scholarship.

Within our profession this hegemony reinforces power relations between monolingual English speakers and monolingual speakers of other languages who must become bilingual or multilingual in order to
have a voice on the international stage. The hegemony of English and of American anthropology allows English-speaking anthropologists to remain unilingual.

To conclude, I would like to bring up the idea that the hegemony of English may very well be a moot point in 100 years, at which point we will probably be talking of the hegemony of Mandarin on the international scene. Commercial and political empires come and go, and their languages become internationalized and languages of power. But that is another subject.