A critique of language, languaging and supervernacular

Uma crítica à noção de língua, linguagem e supervernáculo

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Abstract: In an attempt to overcome the structuralist mind set regarding language, a growing body of literature accepts that language does not break down neatly into autonomous, clearly-defined languages. This observation, which is increasingly becoming a mantra of sociolinguistics, is not new at all, despite claims to the contrary. Chomsky (2000) and Davidson (1986) were quite skeptical of the existence of languages. The mythical status of language is concealed by the fact that we have names for languages.
Keywords: Language. Languaging. Supervernacular

Resumo: Ao tentar superar o pensamento estruturalista com relação à língua, um corpo crescente de literatura aceita que a linguagem não pode ser facilmente dividida em línguas claramente definidas e autônomas. Esta observação, que cada vez mais está se tornando um mantra dos sociolinguistas, não é nem um pouco nova, apesar de afirmações do contrário. Chomsky (2000) e Davidson (1986) já eram céticos quanto à existência de línguas. O status místico de língua está oculto pelo fato de que atribuímos nomes para as línguas.
Palavras-chave: Língua. Linguajar. Supervernáculo

In an attempt to overcome the structuralist mindset regarding language, a growing body of literature accepts that language does not break down neatly into autonomous, clearly-defined languages. This observation, which is increasingly becoming a mantra of sociolinguistics, is not new at all, despite claims to the contrary. Noam Chomsky (2000) in *Knowledge of Language* and Donald Davidson (1986) in an aptly titled chapter 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' were quite skeptical of the existence of languages. The mythical status of language is concealed by the fact that we have names for languages. Hausa, Arabic, Wolof, Berber, and Tarjumo are some language names that form the basis of linguistic description in this book.

Two main observations need to be made. First, in the sociolinguistic literature, each language is attributed a single name (e.g., English, Chinese, etc.). Rarely do languages cited in the literature have more than one name. Reviewers and editors often compel authors for the sake of clarity to use a single name. Ethnologue keeps a list of alternative names, but also chooses

one name among many other alternatives. (Obviously, the use of a single name overlooks situations in which many different names are used to refer to a single language, and many languages are named using a single name).

In a manner which is consistent with a sociolinguistic reality in which many different names are used to refer to the same language. The idea of one language, one name, is pervasive in Western monolingual-oriented linguistic metalanguage and makes it difficult to capture the sharp ideological positions that are possible in the use of multiple names for the 'same' language, as the Berber/Amazigh example shows. These names are not interchangeable. The use of the name Berber is an endorsement of official state ideologies, while Amazigh is part of the political apparatus associated with rebel movements.

Second, the controversy about whether languages have names or not is only significant insofar as it is assumed that there exists something called *language*. Languages are not natural objects. Rather,

> 'A language is a metalinguistic extrapolation that has become attached to a particular language name, it does not matter whether the name is English, French or not. It does not matter whether it has an army or a navy. But there has to be a name. No name no language. That is the higher order metamyth...' (Harris 2009: 430).

Integrationists such as Harris (2009) drew attention to a philosophical approach to handling the claim that language does not break down into neat bounded units when he suggested that first order categories do not neatly break into second order categories. *First order* refers to here and now activities, ongoing communicational activity, or contextually meaningful behavior; it is situated in real time and real space and unfolds in unplanned ways. *Second order* refers to metalinguistic categories that include names of languages, societies, communities, etc. Using these terms indicates that first order categories cannot neatly break down into second order categories. Communication does not neatly break into languages.

The idea that language does not break down into neat categories also has radical implications for the nature of analysis because language does not present itself for study as a neatly disengaged range of homogeneous phenomena, patiently awaiting description by an impartial observer, as suggested by the misleading expression 'linguistic data'. On the contrary, language offers a paradigm case of interference by investigation. A relatively large number of scholars have addressed this issue and the notion of *languaging* (Swain 2006, 2009, 2010; Garcia 2007, 2009; Creese and Blackledge 2010; Jaquemet 2005; Maturana and Varela 1998; Becker 1993, 2006; Khubchandani 1997; Ramanathan 2009).

Swain and Lantolf, with their focus on second language acquisition, construed *languaging* as a tool to mediate cognition, an activity, a form of

producing a visible and audible product. From this perspective, languaging is everything. Swain and Lantolf adopt a totalistic interpretation of languaging, leaving very little room for ways of framing alternatives. Languaging in Swain and Lantolf's orientation is too powerful, making it weak as an explanatory construct.

Garcia (2007, 2009), Creese and Blackledge (2010), Moller (2008), Jacquemet (2005), and Shohamy (1999) construed languaging as a social semiotic process that is different from code-switching. The critical issue for Creese and Blackledge (2010) and Garcia is that languaging and its other variants, translanguaging and polylanguaging, involve the idea of a code or codes. In such a way of thinking, translanguaging entails movement between different languages (Makoni 2013). The mechanical view of languaging is complemented by a search for meaning that is best captured by the fact that languaging/translanguaging constitutes the utilization of any semiotic resources to convey meaning. From such a framework, meaning exists independently of languaging, and the role of languaging is to articulate the meaning from the sender to the receiver, since any languaging is premised on a theory of communication. In the studies by Garcia, Creese, and others, meaning is articulated through a conduit framework. This framework is founded on a deterministic framework of language and communication and a non-dynamic way of understanding interaction that runs contrary to the idea of language as social action, which I am trying to support in this section of the chapter and is like many other frameworks in that it is speaker-centric.

Maturana and Varela (1998), philosophers from Chile, approached the idea of languaging from a philosophical position. They construed language from a biological perspective in which they construe language in a manner consistent with their perspective on biology. By languaging they are understanding language as a self-organization and self-production system in which human actions occur. The striking aspect of Maturana and Varela's view is that the term *languaging* occurs for the first time in the Spanish translation! Languaging, as used by Maturana and Varela, was preceded by many variations in Western sociolinguistics.

Ramanathan's framing is closely aligned with that of Mignolo (1996, 2000), and both are explicitly political. Ramanathan regards languaging as a form of, and a resistance to, being silenced. From that approach, languaging is a rebellious act, a form of resistance at one point in a historical moment. However, Mignolo adopts a political position and a longer historical perspective. He construes languaging as a product of colonial or elite interruption of communication in pre-colonial or, as I would like to put it, outside elitedom. Languaging is, therefore, a process, a product of communication disruption. Languaging cannot exist outside communication, but the converse applies as well: communication is not

necessary for the existence of language because language is a 'variable extra'. Mignolo's framework has a sharp sense of history and can explain the complex relationship between macro, meso, and micro forces. This sense of temporal history and construction of time is clearly appropriate and might serve postcolonial linguistic scholarship, which the authors in this volume are seeking to develop. The weakness of a framework which is founded on languaging is that it does not escape the idea of a code, a language. You can only translanguage, perform a form of languaging, if you assume in the first instance that there are codes called languages.

The politics of the ontology of *supervernaculars*

The notion of *supervernacular* is increasingly popular and may become the pivotal foundational concept for an emerging sociolinguistic framework' (Orman 2012:349). Because the term is widely used, at least in African contexts, it merits a close analysis. I see this brief essay as part of my effort to make sense for myself of the meanings of the terms and those allied to them. *Supervernacular* is modeled after Vertovec's (2006, 2007) notion of *superdiversity*, which he defined as 'diversification of diversity' (Vertovec 2007, in Simpson and Whiteside 2012:3). *Super* in *superdiversity* denotes hyper, while *super* in *supervernacular* may be construed to mean *trans* The latter can be construed to refer to movements across regions and semiotic boundaries. In short, the *super* in *superdiversity* does not have the same meaning as the *super* in *supervernacular.* The *super* in *supervernacular* resonates with notions such as *trans-languaging* and *poly-languaging*.

Although it is not clear what *languaging* means in *trans-languaging*, let alone *poly-languaging*, if *supervernacular* is based on *superdiversity* then the differences in the meanings of *super* in *superdiversity* and *supervernacular* have to be addressed; otherwise, *supervernacular* might be misleading. This is not to say that *supervernacular* cannot be used to refer to both *hyper* and *trans*. I am, however, extremely uncomfortable with the notion of diversity when used to refer to 'mass movements' for three main reasons. First, writing from a vantage perspective of being an immigrant in a rural university which seeks to bring to fruition diversity, I keep asking myself whether it is not the case that diversity, as articulated by Vertovec, Blommaert and Rampton, is a version of a description of reality that can only be advocated by those who are part of the powerful elite, such as researchers. Second, those of us who have spent most of our professional lives outside our countries of origin find that diversity may be extremely uncomfortable, because it is typically others who do so. It is the powerful who celebrate the notion of diversity; those of us from other parts of the world feel the idea of diversity is a careful concealment of power differences. When we celebrate mass movements we need to be

able to distinguish between those who are compelled by circumstances to travel and those who do so willingly. *Superdiversity* contains a powerful sense of social romanticism, creating an illusion of equality in a highly asymmetrical world, particularly in contexts characterized by a search for homogenization. Third, I find it disconcerting, to say the least, to have an open celebration of diversity in societies marked by violent xenophobia, such as South Africa; at least two chapters in this volume are based on South Africa (Steyn http:www.mmg.mpg.de/research/all-projects/super-diversity-south Africa accessed December 18.2012).Furthermore, diversity stresses the differences between individuals, languages, groups, etc. Whether we are diverse or not depends on the power of the social microscope being used. It is ironic that while sociolinguistics is celebrating diversity, super or not, other strands of research that also address issues surrounding migration, real or imagined, seem to be returning to a notion of assimilation:

> Examining public discourse in France, public policy in Germany, and scholarly research in the United States, I find evidence of a modest "return of assimilation" in recent years. Yet what has returned, I emphasize, is not the old, analytically discredited and politically disreputable "assimilationist" understanding of assimilation, but a more analytically complex and normatively defensible understanding. (Brubaker 2004: 5).

Ultimately, it is worthwhile to stress that notions about diversity are extremely powerful when used as metaphors to describe species. The danger we have to guard against in this case is one in which we unintentionally biologize a social phenomenon! If a social phenomenon is biologized, then social intervention is likely to be construed negatively because it will be interfering with a natural ecology.

A Short Historical Statement

Mass movement of populations is not new to Africa, so if diversity is accentuated by migration, then prior to colonialism there was considerable migration; however, it is framed as nomadism! The differences lie in the terminology: people moved—they simply did not need passports! 'African history, like that of any other continent, reveals plenty of population movements linked to multiple factors such as nomadism, rural exodus, economic migrations and conflicts' (Canut 2009:92).

A Minor Quibble: 'A Storm in a Tea Cup'

I strongly support Blommaert and Rampton's (2011, 2012) project of creating new terms as a strategic way of facilitating understanding and

visualizing sociolinguistic patterns, which cannot be easily understood using existing frameworks. Existing terms are construed as failing to capture the diversity that is rapidly enhanced by new, relatively cheap technology, including cell phones. Even though I support Blommaert and Rampton's project, I have a couple of minor concerns that I outline as part of the commentary in the conclusion to this book. Blommaert and his other associates, Dyers, Velghe, and many others, employ the term *supervernacular* to refer to a widespread usage of sociolinguistic resources that are not constrained by 'territorial fixedness, physical proximity, socio-cultural sharedness and common background' (Blommaert 2011:3).

Blommaert and Rampton (2011) challenge us to frame *supervernaculars* in a wide range of ways. The term *supervernaculars* may be understood to refer to 'semiotic codes, chat codes, gaming codes, standard codes, mobile texting, mini-languages, or as a global medialect of condensed abbreviated English' (McIntosh 2010) and many others. Mobile texting is an example of a *supervernacular* code. In light of Blommaert's argument, the idea of a *supervernacular* code may perhaps be a contradiction because *supervernaculars* are meant to capture rapid and complex variations that cannot be explained through conventional frameworks when languages are understood as codes. However, by describing texting, e-mail messaging, and codes as *supervernacular*, traditional linguistic conventions are reintroduced into the analysis. An example of the problematic nature of moving beyond code-based framing of language is elegantly captured in a quotation about, paradoxically, the search for a metalanguage that goes beyond orthodox linguistic terms (whatever that may mean): 'A hybrid combination of linguistic forms(cf."multi-racial"/"multi-ethnic" … straightforwardly identifiable *lexically, phonologically and grammatically/ syntactical) elements of language*' (Rampton 2011: 289).

On the one hand there is a strong impulse to move beyond the notion of codes; on the other there is a powerful counterforce that restates characteristics of codes -lexical, phonological, grammatical, and syntax elements. Perhaps the notion of a *supervernacular* may not be as radical as we are led to believe because it is based on conventional notions of language, a position reinforced when Blommaert states that '*supervernacular* have all the attributes of a language' (Blommaert 2011:4). It is based on what Harris refers to as 'segregationist' linguistics (Pablé and Hutton forthcoming; Makoni 2011, 2012).

The search for invariant rules in *supervernaculars* reflects the extremely powerful nature of the ideologies of code-based views of language. These views lead to a search for invariant rules, efforts to establish fixed meanings, and efforts to consolidate form-meaning relationships. This quest seems counterintuitive in a framework that is seeking to describe wide circulations of semiotics. The trans-movements and circulations of

'semiotic codes' should render it difficult, if not impossible, to predict the meanings that the discourse practices. The challenge in *supervernacular*-inspired research is how to introduce and sustain notions of indeterminacy and unpredictability that are consistent with the ideological impulse toward mass movements, while still distancing it from code-based views of language.

If *superdiversity* is taken seriously at an epistemological level, then a diversity or multiplicity of interpretations of signs must be accepted, if not encouraged. It is conceptually self-contradictory to argue for the importance of *superdiversity* in theory but fail in practice to seriously take into account inconsistency and contradictory interpretations that are consistent with common functioning of anthropolinguistic communication: communication involves vagueness, contradictory meanings and inconsistency between form and meaning which demand frequent reinterpretation in light of pragmatic cues which bring into focus and stabilize forms in context.

I find the notion of a *supervernacular* extremely complicated, not only because of the relationship it has with traditional notions of codes and orthodox ways of framing language, but also because I am not certain how the notion of *vernacular* is comprehended in *supervernaculars*, a situation rendered extremely difficult because of the many different meanings of the term *vernaculars* in sociolinguistics. Mufwene (1998) enumerated at least six different ways in which the idea of a vernacular can be defined:

(i) primary

(ii) native

(iii) indigenous language variety

(iV) vernacular may be a standard, and the best exemplar is definitely written.

(V) non-standard language varieties

(Vi) a continuum ranging from basilectal to colloquial varieties.

Regardless of whether the list above is exhaustive or not (which it is unlikely to be), the critical issue for me is exploring the implications for sociolinguistics if *super* is added to *vernaculars* and if *vernaculars* are defined with more than one meaning.

If *super* in *supervernacular* means *trans* and vernaculars are understood as non-standard, then the only way I can easily understand *a supervernacular* is to argue that *supervernaculars* are manifestations of non-standard language varieties that can either be spoken or written. If *super* means *trans*, the term *supervernacular* might be equivalent to *transidiomatic expressions*. If *super* in *supervernacular* is understood in the way it is understood in *superdiversity* as 'hype', then a *supervernacular*

may mean a *hypervernacular* whose intensity of variation may be characterized and situated along multiple continua, analogous to the meaning of vernacular in (vi).

> *(i) Supervernaculars* 'have all the features we commonly attribute to "languages"'.
>
> *(ii) Supervernaculars* only occur as dialects.
>
> *(iii) Supervernaculars* and their dialects

In (i), *supervernaculars* are languages plus something else. I am not clear what constitutes (all) the features 'we commonly attribute to language'. (i) does not clarify the issue for me because what I regard as attributes of language may be based on what we understand to be a theory of language and communication. From an integrationist perspective (Makoni, 2011, 2013), the following might be regarded as attributes of language: indeterminacy in the relationship between form and meaning, language as a myth, communication as central, and language as an extra. The challenge for me is whether I can integrate the idea of a *supervernacular* within integrationism, and if so, how?

(ii) is difficult to fully comprehend. If *supervernacular* can only occur as dialects, this undermines the very essence of the rationale for creating a term such as *supervernacular* and its intellectual apparatus.

From *Supervernaculars* to Polylanguaging in Superdiversity

The complexity in having a grasp of *supervernaculars* is that in some cases there is a subtle shift from *supervernaculars* to *superdiversity* and the idea of polylanguaging is introduced, as in '*Polylanguaging* in Superdiversity' (Jørgensen *et al* 2011) and 'Superdiversity on the Internet: A case from China' (Wang and Varis 2011). It is critically important to observe that the shift here is from vernacular to *superdiversity*, conflating distinctions between diversity and vernaculars. The argument that *polylanguaging*, also referred to interchangeably as *polylinguistic*, can be situated in *superdiversity* begs the question: what is the postulated relationship between *polylanguaging* and *supervernaculars?* To address this issue, given that *polylanguaging* can be situated in *superdiversity*, one must make sense of what *languaging* means in a wide range of terms. *Polylanguaging*, *translanguaging*, and others may be taken as equivalents. *Polylanguaging* does not resolve the issue because the term *languaging* is in itself ambiguous and has been used in many different and, at times, conflicting ways.

Concluding Remarks

Emerging sociolinguistic frameworks have not been as successful (at least, at this stage, to me) in their description of African contexts. It is, therefore, appropriate to reflect on Canut's (2009: 93) comments:

> It is only when speakers move about or meet a stranger that they become conscious of their particular linguistic features and the processes of comparison and transformation are put in place leading to the overlap of different varieties which cannot be categorized.

I would like to bring my chapter to an end by citing some of the categories in a recent paper by Rampton (2011) that are becoming important, defining features of the emerging sociolinguistic subfield and that demand a sophisticated reading which include: " *multi-ethnic adolescent heteroglossia*, *heteroglossic speech stylization*" "*contemporary urban vernaculars*", "*polylingual languaging*", "*youth language*", "*community English*","*multiracial vernacular*"

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