

LANGUAGE, INDEXICALITY AND BELONGING: INTRODUCTION¹

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I. The Language, Indexicality and Belonging Conference

The articles presented in this volume are the result of a two-day linguistic anthropology conference organized at the University of Oxford in April 2016 by the present editors and Dr Stephen Leonard of the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology. The conference was a joint initiative of three university departments, the Faculty of Linguistics, Philology and Phonetics, the Faculty of Oriental Studies and the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology. The conference, held at Somerville College, was supported by the John Fell Research Fund. The aim of the conference was to offer a linguistic anthropological approach to questions of the global economy, the state, local communities and institutions while also focusing on the crucial role language plays in processes of group formation, power relations and the construction, destruction and reconfiguration of social boundaries at each of these levels.

The papers discussed at the conference – the first linguistic anthropology conference of this kind at the University of Oxford – presented a range of situations from all over the world where conscious and unself-conscious displays of language varieties, styles and registers are connected to wider social factors. At a time when multiple languages and language varieties are being brought into contact with increased frequency, previously taken for granted categories of social affiliation such as nationality and ethnicity are challenged and redefined. We thus found it crucial to analyse how belonging to a group is

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constructed through linguistic practice. We chose to focus on ‘belonging’ to stress the changing character of self-presentation in the contemporary world, where group formation should be seen as a process rather than a static norm, following the lines of thought drawn by Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000) and by Bucholtz and Hall (2005).

II. Conceptualizing indexicality and belonging

In order to study ‘belonging’ and processes of group formation, we put the focus on the indexical character of language as manifested in communicative practices impacted by social, political and economic processes. The key premise was that language is not a bounded system composed only of grammatical and lexical forms, but rather a socio-cultural process that shapes social relations and modes of exchange. It was also assumed that particular ways of speaking serve as indexes of social relations and presentations of the self as forms of belonging to a given social group.

The indexicality of linguistic forms allowed for a conceptualization of variation in language at every level as indicative of group membership and social differentiation. In this approach, linguistic signs are seen as markers of other social phenomena in interaction, which can only be understood within a given sociohistorical context. The fact that they are context-dependent demonstrates that their meaning is variable and mutable. One linguistic sign provides information about multiple aspects of the context. Such premises allow an understanding of language as a sociocultural formation that both reflects and creates social reality. Thus, we found this concept useful in examining the non-static character and ongoing process of belonging to a group in the contemporary world.

Our tools of analysis can be just as well turned on ourselves, to examine our formation of and belonging in the community around the Language, Indexicality and Belonging Conference. This volume’s ‘group’ of academics came together for a ritual, known in our jargon as a ‘conference’. This ritual has inherited very strict rules of linguistic behaviour in its form and content (English as the lingua franca in various registers; keynote speeches, presentations, coffee-break chats, dinner toasts), and these rules are seldom challenged; rather, they are applied with a view to a ‘standard’ that is aspired to. The rules have evolved into an ‘indexical field’ over the decades and centuries

since an (imagined) baptismal enregisterment of the conference genre. In the times of innocence, before that enregisterment (Agha 2003), speaking and acting in the conference genre would have invoked indexes of the *first* order, performed and understood commonsensically, without explicit metapragmatic knowledge. At our Oxford conference in 2016, our group, now a fleeting ‘community of practice’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992), deliberately came together to perform the rules and reiterate the aspiration to achieve perfect conference standards at the level of the *second* indexical order. Our ‘belonging’ to the conference group was thus produced through our communal negotiation and reiteration of these standards, both formally, in productive session debates, and informally, in personal conversations over drinks.

Less alert attendance, late arrivals and other very common and understandable ‘sub-standard’ conference performances form a counter-current that nevertheless indexes the same genre and, by knowingly violating the rules, pays respect to the very same standards. And then we can use this paragraph in the conference proceedings to analyse the linguistic-anthropological genre of ‘conference’ using the concepts of ‘belonging’ and ‘indexicality’, though self-ironically, now with its indexes ascending to the *third* order... and so the dialectics of our discipline progresses.

The keynote lecture, given by Michael Silverstein and published here under the title *Standards, styles, and signs of the social self*, provides a solid discussion of the basic concepts and analytical tools that are used to talk about group formation processes from a linguistic anthropological perspective of this sort. As Silverstein shows, language can be used to index one’s belonging to nations, political realms, religions, classes, races or genders, as every language community is heterogeneous. In order to comprehend how such belonging is interactionally accomplished, Silverstein reminds us that every language community is an assemblage of enregistered forms that serve as emblems of certain identities and groups. According to Silverstein, ‘complex indexicalities [...] bespeak complexity of crisscrossing and overlapping voicings with which we articulate ourselves to each other as exemplars of social types’ (1999: 108). By examining a number of examples, he demonstrates how, in interactional events, we always position ourselves towards or away from normative sociocultural expectations. It is thus crucial to examine interactional events as sites for the negotiation of social categories and groups

and to acknowledge that the self is always narrated in relation to the sociocultural normativity in which it operates.

III. The contributions

The remaining papers apply ‘belonging’ and ‘indexicality’ to situations of varying scopes, from the intimate settings of an orphanage in Kazakhstan (Meghanne Barker) and of a nursing home in the Netherlands (Jolien Makkinga), to the transcontinental links of colonialism and conflict with a Belizean island (Britta Schneider) and with Turkish speakers in Cyprus (Dionysios Zoumpalidis). The papers differ also in terms of the types of belonging they describe. The first three articles, by Schneider, Zoumpadalis and Yount-André, look at belonging to sociopolitical constructs such as a nation, a race or an ethnic group. Schneider’s article, *Kaleidoscopes of indexicality: multiplex symbolic functions of language and unfocused social categories*, examines how Belizean Kriol’s indexical properties are embedded within multiple social discourses: on racial subordination and slavery, access to education, transnational ties between Belize and other countries, national identity and colonial history. Despite English being highly valued in Belize, Kriol is widely recognized as a language of national, but diverse Belizean space due to its very subversive character as a non-standard language. The very conceptualization of language as non-standard and heterogeneous operates in opposition to common Western ideologies, successfully refuting the idea that belonging to a national space has to be indexed by a single standardized linguistic code.

Zoumpadalis depicts the extensive efforts exerted by the recently immigrated Turkish- and Russian-speaking community of Pontic Greeks in Cyprus to position themselves as Greek in opposition to Turks. Their determination not to pass on their communal Turkish to the next generation grew out of their acquired sensitivity to the Cyprus conflict, which was not relevant in their former homes in the Soviet Union, and to Greek-Cypriots’ essentialized conceptions of linguistic belonging. It is argued in the paper that Pontic Greeks’ linguistic preferences contribute to a collective language shift in the direction of Russian and Greek multilingualism to the exclusion of Turkish.

The power of language ideologies in shaping social relations within a nation state is also depicted by Chelsie Yount-André in *Indexing integration: hierarchies of belonging*

in secular Paris, where the analysis of legal discourses and interactions within the households of a group of Senegalese migrants in France shows how they replicate and adapt both Senegalese status categories and French judgements of immigrants in performing their integration in France. The study describes how the Senegalese position themselves in relation to normative expectations of French and Senegalese societies in everyday interactional events, which results in them reinforcing hierarchies of class and religion in an immigrant context.

The next two papers, *Longing and belonging in a second home* and *Belonging to the old and unsuccessfully aged: language practices in a nursing home in Maastricht, the Netherlands*, describe how communicative practices index belonging at the institutional level. Both depict how social relations are interactionally created by examining conversations within two institutions, an orphanage and a nursing home respectively. In both cases, we see how categories of belonging are created by means of language in daily practices. Meghanne Barker shows how, in the absence of biological mothers, caregivers in a Kazakh orphanage use language and objects to create narratives of kinship. We see how notions of kinship are incorporated and naturalized into the children's world through interactions, as temporary caregivers rely on imaginary interactions with real kin. In this way, the caregivers' ongoing narrative allows for socialization of the children into expected social relations within the framework of local kinship philosophy. Barker's article on children's socialization can be contrasted with Jolien Makkinga's paper on a nursing home in Maastricht. This seemingly different institutional setting, and life stage, provides an example of a similar process of socialization into expected social roles, in this case into being an older inhabitant of a nursing home. Relying on Makkinga's thorough conversational analysis of exchanges between carer and patient, we observe how the nurse's linguistic moves at the prosodic, semantic and syntactic levels frame the patient as incompetent, passive and powerless. As Makkinga rightly points out, the carer's communicative adjustments do not operate in a vacuum, but are mediated through the ideologies of ageism circulating in the Netherlands and Western societies more broadly.

Finally, the last two articles in the volume, Abbie Hantgan's *Choices in language accommodation at the crossroads: convergence, divergence and mixing*, and Rebecca

Wood's *The power of language: indexicality and the sociocultural environment* investigate linguistic strategies using iconic indexes to express belonging through the negotiation of communal allegiances. Hantgan's article shows how identities and social relations are context-dependent in an area called Crossroads, in southwest Senegal, where speakers from three villages, Essil, Brin and Djibonker, meet and interact on a daily basis. By examining the voicing of word-initial velar consonants in greetings, Hantgan demonstrates that the speakers both diverge from and converge with their interlocutors' ways of speaking, precisely in terms of their phonetic realization of the velar [k g], to mark their alignment with or distance from members of other ethnic groups. The multilingual practices in the Kingdom allow us to see that the fusion of phonetic forms in a multilingual context can participate in the continuous process of expressing and creating belonging to social and ethnic groups. Revitalization efforts in a multilingual setting can, however, have mixed effects, as in the context of the Salish-Pend d'Oreille community of Western Montana dealt with by Wood in her article. In the Salish context, we see that both external, colonial ideologies and practices, and internal power dynamics within the minority community have an impact on the actual linguistic practices of this native community and their indexing of belonging to the Salish community by means of language.

IV. Onwards

The series of articles presented in this volume form a solid basis for further discussion on the role of language in shaping social relations and belonging in the contemporary world, and we are delighted to offer it as the founding texts of 'our group', our belonging to which is now committed to paper. The articles demonstrate the ways in which multiple linguistic and cultural systems constantly interact. The indexical character of language, expressed by means of a variety of linguistic detail, becomes crucial to comprehending how we make sense of existing norms, how we interact with other cultural frameworks, how we adapt to and interpret the changes in political economies, and finally, how we create new categories of identity and belonging that help us make sense of the world around us. Most importantly, we see that linguistic practices always function within a sociohistorical context and are shaped by multiple social discourses that often transgress

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geographical and cultural boundaries. We hope that the volume will trigger further debate on the role of language in shaping social reality in the globalized world.

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