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## **EMOTION AND LANGUAGE POLITICS: THE BRAZILIAN CASE**

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*ABSTRACT: The long tradition in Linguistics of relegating the politics of language to the status of a peripheral concern has to do with the fact that in the Western tradition, language faculty has been viewed as essentially an attribute of the reasoning mind. In this sense, Linguistics is heir to mainstream Philosophy as it has been pursued from Plato on. The objective of this paper is to make a case for the claim that exclusive focus on the rational has only helped isolate the linguist and prevent them from having a say on important political issues relating to language. Evidence is adduced from an ongoing debate in Brazil over the supposed need to protect the country's national language, Portuguese, from what many see as the unbridled advance of English into their daily lives. The Brazilian case is shown to be comparable to what typically happens elsewhere in the world. One important feature of the ordinary person's view of and involvement with language is that emotions play an important role in both. And it is precisely this feature that linguists, as a matter of general rule, fail to take into account when addressing issues related to practical affairs involving language. And language loyalty, bilingualism, code-switching etc. can only be fully addressed provided we also take into account their emotional connotations. Theoretically oriented in its thrust, this paper discusses (a) how Linguistics has from its inception sought to downplay or altogether ignore the importance of emotions as they figure in what is depreciatively referred to as 'folk linguistics' and (b) how, largely in consequence of that inaugural decision, the science is threatened with becoming a body of knowledge with very little impact on what happens in the real world.*

*KEY WORDS: linguistics – rationality – emotions – folk linguistics – language debates*

## 0. Introduction

A graduate student of mine was working on his Ph. D. dissertation on code-switching practices among bilingual speakers on a Kaiowa-Guarani reservation in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul in Brazil. One day, during a routine interview, one of his informants made a casual remark that caught the researcher completely unprepared. Indeed so unexpected was that remark yet so embarrassingly straightforward its implications, that the episode made him rethink his whole research project from scratch. The informant, a young man who identified himself as a local school teacher who taught Portuguese, Brazil's national and official language, to fellow tribesmen and women, told the researcher point blank that he had no problem whatsoever with his conscience whenever he made promises in Portuguese and failed to keep them. In fact, he went on to confess to his by now flummoxed interlocutor that he had made a fine art of promising in Portuguese with a straight face without having the remotest intention of living up to it—something, he hastened to add, he would not even dream of doing in his own native language.

As it turned out, the informant, like many others from his village, was one of those who could be classified as fully "assimilated" to the community outside the reservation. His Portuguese was absolutely fluent and indeed practically indistinguishable from that of any other native speaker of Brazilian Portuguese. If anything, it was his knowledge of his own "native" *Guarani* that was rather "shaky" and, to be sure, left much to be desired. Yet, when asked to explain the different attitudes he had in relation to the two languages that made up his bilingual repertoire, he was quick to come up with this ready-made and well-rehearsed response: "Well, what else do you expect from us? For the past five hundred years, this is just what the paleface has done to us. We are only paying his tribesmen back in the same coin."

The episode narrated above highlights a key aspect of natural languages, one that is nonetheless often ignored or downplayed by linguists. Ordinary people attach a great amount of emotional value to their language. Indeed, languages are powerful flags of allegiance (Rajagopalan 2002; forthcoming). A bi(multi)lingual speaker typically has different degrees of emotional attachment to the languages that make up their repertoire. On the strength of several empirical studies carried out by themselves as well as other researchers, Dewaele and Pavlenko (2002: 264) state that "when a second language (L2) is learned postpuberty or even after early childhood, the two languages of an individual may differ in their emotional impact, with the first being the language in which personal involvement is expressed, and the

second language being the language of distance and detachment.” Pavlenko (2002) takes the discussion a step further when she hypothesizes that the reason why researchers have mostly confined their attention to the emotional impact of different languages on bi- and multilingual individuals may be that there has been a tendency to theorize languages and emotions as independent phenomena. Instead, she argues that “the social constructionist view of emotions as discursively constructed phenomena—which may differ cross-culturally—allows researchers in bilingualism, emotions, and cognition to investigate emotion discourses of bilingual speakers” (Pavlenko 2002: 50).

Interest in emotional reactions to language and emotion discourses of bi- and multilingual speakers is relatively recent (cf. Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990, Duranti 1994, Wierzbicka 1992, 1995). As already pointed out, many researchers prefer to go about their business as though such reactions didn’t exist or, even if they did, they were of marginal interest to the understanding of code-switching practices. Armed with knowledge accumulated on the basis of considering language in the abstract or individual languages in splendid isolation from one another, they approach multilingualism and related practices such as code-switching with a view to either confirming already formulated hypotheses or honing them in light of wider data. “For linguists in general,” writes McCormick, “code-switching raises metatheoretical challenges. These include how to conceptualize boundaries between languages; how to develop criteria for classifying loanwords; how to use the scope of analytic models using binary oppositions and those using the idea of a spectrum; and how to exploit the heuristic value of system-based and speaker-based perspectives on data.” (McCormick 1998: 115) In other words, code-switching is interesting because it provides an ideal testing ground for theories conceived in the abstract and attending to “pending issues” such as how to decide on the boundary between individual languages. The fact that speakers have different emotional attitudes vis-à-vis the languages they speak and that their code-switching practices are, to a considerable extent, governed by their emotional reactions is simply treated as of little or no consequence.

The episode reported at the beginning of this paper is a fine example of how the practice of sweeping such details underneath the carpet can actually skew results by covering up vital clues as to how the emotional attitudes of speakers vis-à-vis their languages can threaten the foundations of many a prestigious theory about natural languages and how they work. In this particular case, the remarks of the informant strike at the very heart of the Theory of Speech Acts, at least in its “received version”, according to which an act of promising could only be

deemed to have been successfully carried out provided the speaker had the intention of delivering on the promise at the moment they spoke the magic words "I promise to ..." (Austin, 1962, Searle, 1969). Indeed, Austin even spoke of "some of the more awe-inspiring performatives such as 'I promise to ...'" (Austin 1962: 9). At a critical stage in his attempt to capture theoretically the concept of promising, Austin recalls a passage from *Hippolytus*, the great tragedy by Euripedes, which illustrates a mismatch between what is said and what is intended. In his own words:

The classic expression of this idea is to be found in the *Hippolytus* (l. 612), where Hippolytus says

*ἡ γλῶσσ' ὀμῶμοχ', ἡ δὲ φρήν ἀνωμοτος*

i.e. 'my tongue swore to, but my heart (or mind, or backstage artiste) did not. Thus 'I promise ...' obliges me—puts on record my spiritual assumption of a spiritual shackle. (Austin, 1962: 9-10).

What this remark also illustrates is a certain abiding theme in Western thinking about language, according to which human linguistic faculty is ultimately tied or tethered to an interior language, an idea that has recently resurfaced in the literature in cognitive theory as the concept of 'homunculus'—a mysterious midget humanoid existing, as it were, in the head. Notice that Austin does express some unease over such extensions of the concept, referring somewhat disparagingly to the whole idea of there being some "backstage artiste" stage-managing the show from behind the curtains.

Now, neither Austin nor Searle was interested in what people do with the different languages that they may speak with different degrees of emotional involvement. Indeed, like most theorists who busied themselves doing armchair reflections on the nature of language, they were primarily thinking of monolingual speakers and their knowledge of the only language they speak. No doubt, the theory they formulated works relatively smoothly so long as attention is confined to monolingual contexts, where the speakers' emotional attitudes and discursive constructions of emotions are relatively uniform and can, therefore, be "factored out" of the discussion—although, even this is being called into question by a growing number of scholars. (Felman 1980; Butler 1997)

Besides, in virtue of the strong tendency among theorists to base their hypotheses on one (generally European) language or another, many have fallen into the trap of claiming as universal what under closer scrutiny turns out to be culture-specific (Rosaldo 1982, Duranti 1994). As Wierzbicka (1985: 145) put it in no uncertain terms: "From the

outset, studies in speech acts have suffered from an astonishing ethnocentrism and, to a considerable degree, they continue to do so." But such navel-gazing kind of theorizing is just what one cannot afford to do if one is interested in the complexities of inter-ethnic communication, as the Ph.D. student, the narrator of the episode related above, discovered in a totally unexpected way. Of special relevance in this particular case is Gumperz's distinction between the 'we-code', used for in-group, informal settings and 'they-code', used for formal, out-group settings (Gumperz 1982). It is clear that the use of exclusive 'we' by the informant signals his self-identification with his own tribe and simultaneous exclusion of the interlocutor—a gesture suffused with emotional and, in the final analysis, political significance. Or, to go straight to the heart of the matter, the informant in the episode, when he opts for the use of the exclusive 'we', is taking an eminently political stand, because he is recognizing himself as an outsider and making a point of declaring that he is. In Judith Butler's words: "The act of recognition becomes an act of constitution." (Butler 1997:25).

Also of interest to us in the episode involving the bilingual informant from the Indian reservation is the way his language loyalty is determined, by neither familiarity nor competence, but by a felt need to distinguish himself from his monolingual interlocutor. Thus when Sebba and Wootton (1998: 262) claim: "The opposition of 'we-' versus 'they-' codes ..... presupposes a particular relationship between monolingual and bilingual communities...," what one must hasten to add is that what is at stake here is how speakers identify themselves linguistically.

## **1. Objectives**

My central aim in this paper is to make a case for the claim that an important part of the reason why we linguists have traditionally had little or no appreciable success in influencing public opinion in respect of language, let alone having a say in language planning and state policies, is that we have by and large tended to overlook or downplay the emotional aspect of the linguistic phenomenon. Instead, human linguistic faculty is typically viewed as an attribute of the reasoning mind. In other words, it is believed that man is *homo loquens* because, unlike any of the other, lower order species in the animal kingdom, he is *homo sapiens*. On the other hand, as far as the person in the street is concerned, the language issue is full of emotional connotations.

Exaggerated emphasis on the rational dimension of language to the almost total negligence of the emotional has, I shall argue, created a wide gulf between the linguist and the lay person. Although there has

been some awareness of late of the importance of paying attention to lay opinion in respect of language (cf. Aitchison 2001, Cameron 1997, Garret 2001, Johnson, 2001, Preston 1997), it is by and large still the case that professional linguists continue to distrust and dismiss lay opinion and, in Hutton's words, treat the court of public opinion as a "kangaroo court" (Hutton, 1996: 209).

The continuing standoff between the two—the linguist and the lay person—is highlighted by an ongoing controversy in Brazil over the growing influence of English in the country and what many see as a threat to the integrity and survival of the country's national language, Portuguese. The Brazilian case has interesting parallels elsewhere in the world, notably the United States, where occasional bouts of language-related paranoia have prompted concerned citizens to rally behind proposals to scrap bilingual education projects already in place. As I hope to show, in all these cases, the failure on the part of professional linguists to intervene effectively in the evolving debates must be attributed, in large part, to their principled neglect of how the lay person *feels* about the language issues that directly impact their lives—an attitude whose origin in turn may be traced to certain crucial inaugural decisions made by the discipline's founding fathers.

## **2. Linguistics and the neglect of the emotional aspect of language**

### *2. 1. Language and reason*

That language and rationality have typically been viewed as going hand in hand in Western thought hardly needs to be stated. Ancient Greek philosophers thought of the use of reason as constituting a significant part of the *summum bonum* of man. Later philosophers such as Kant and Hegel argued that it was what made the crucial difference between a man acting on his own free will and someone acting impulsively in response to base emotions. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole published in France a monumental work of grammar, referred to in the literature as the Port-Royal Grammar. The exact title of this work was *Grammaire générale et raisonnée* "the aim of which was to demonstrate that the structure of language is a product of reason, and that the different languages of men are but varieties of a more general logical and rational system." (Lyons 1968:17). Indeed so powerful has the temptation been to locate and identify a rational hard core in human languages that Leibniz, impressed by the beauty and

perfection of the language of mathematics, is believed to have exclaimed that, if God Almighty were to descend from Heaven and address ordinary mortals (made after His own image), he would speak to them in that language—it was simply inconceivable from the German philosopher’s point of view that an all-perfect God would resort to any language other than the all-perfect language of mathematics.

Traditional grammarians typically equated ungrammaticality with illogicality. The use of double negation to express a negative proposition just can’t be grammatical, they said, because binary logic, incorporating as it does the law of the excluded middle, would automatically assign positive polarity to a sentence containing two negatives. A good deal of traditional grammar was an effort to put natural languages and their grammars on the procrustean bed of classical logic. In many ways, modern linguists, who initially established their scientific credentials in stiff opposition to the claims of traditional grammarians, rarely, if ever, questioned the guiding principle of their adversaries. It is significant in this respect that when Labov (1972) undertook his pioneering work on Black English, his immediate concern was to show that the so-called non-standard English did obey its own logic, albeit a logic different from that which underwrote Standard English. In his own words, his primary target was the then prevalent mainstream view—so-called ‘deficit theory’—among educational psychologists who held that “the children’s speech forms are nothing more than a series of emotional cries” (Labov 1972:205) and that children ought to be removed from their family environment where they “maintain primary emotional relationships” to “hopefully prevent the deceleration in rate of development which seems to occur in many deprived children around the age of two to three years.” (Caldwell 1967: 17, cited in Labov 1972: 233). The very title of his classic paper ‘The logic of non-standard English’ is itself very suggestive indeed in this regard. As he put it elsewhere,

African American Vernacular English shares most of its grammar and vocabulary with other dialects of English. But it is distinct in many ways, and it is more different from standard English than any other dialect spoken in continental North America. It is not simply slang, or grammatical mistakes, but a well-formed set of rules of pronunciation and grammar that is capable of conveying complex logic and reasoning (Labov 1997).

The question of logic or the rational basis of language became a major bone of contention within the generative paradigm of grammatical analysis in the 1970s, when a group of linguists took the stance, *contra* the mainstream view, that the deep structure of natural language sentences should be identified with their logical form. Although the

group that originally raised the alternative view is widely believed to have been overcome by more powerful arguments from Chomsky and his followers (cf. Newmeyer 1980), the idea itself of grammar somehow containing the nucleus of logical forms of sentences has continued to exercise a great fascination.

In *Rules and Representations*, we find Chomsky (1980) speculating that, insofar as they lack even the rudiments of the computational structure of human language, apes can be loosely regarded as “humans without the language faculty”. He draws attention to the crucial differences between his claim and the traditional view linking reason and language. To quote him,

These speculations are not to be confused with a traditional view that *reason* is a distinctively human possession, with normal use of language an indication of possession of reason as in Descartes’ *Gedankenexperiments*, or that “the express manifestation or work of reason ... is evidently reduced to what is possible only to abstract, discursive, reflective, and mediate knowledge that is tied to words,” that is, that *ratio* is reduced to *oratio*, and thus distinctively human. (Chomsky 1980:57-58)

Nonetheless, Chomsky goes on to observe that, although clearly different, the two views are extensionally similar, once it is granted that “*ratio* devoid of the projective mechanisms of the computational system of human language is severely impaired, almost mute.” (*ibid.*)

It is hardly surprising therefore that linguists and philosophers of language have tended to accord primacy to fact-stating sentences, since it is in the declarative mood that propositions—the bearers of truth values—find their true expression. Scholars like Ogden and Richards (1923) and Stevenson (1944) distinguished emotive (or affective) meaning from cognitive (or purely referential) meaning, invariably giving primacy to the latter. Likewise, in the early models of Transformational-Generative Grammar, there were transformational rules generating interrogatives and imperatives from an underlying base structure, but no rule for generating declarative sentences, since the declarative itself was assumed to be the basic, default pattern, from which all the rest were to be derived. J.L. Austin (1962), it is true, did make a great effort to turn the tables, when he argued that the constative (fact-stating) utterances were but performative ones in disguise. But, interestingly enough, the idea of the primacy of propositional meaning was restored by his best-known interpreter and intellectual legatee John Searle (1969) when the latter reintroduced into the framework the notion of ‘propositional content’ and thus positing

within the content of a speech act a hard core of truth-value-bearing form. (Rajagopalan 2000)

Perhaps nowhere else is this close link between language and reason in Western thought more evident today than some of the most influential proposals in the field of cognitive science. Barwise sums up the widely held view when he says:

Reasoning and using language have a number of things in common. Both characterize human cognitive abilities.  
Barwise (1999: 482)

Or, as McGinn puts it,

Pure logic takes possession of my reasoning processes and steers them according to its own dictates. (McGinn 1994: 587)

The overall message then is that, in order to understand the workings of language, all you need is a clear understanding of the processes of reasoning which in turn calls for a full understanding of the immutable laws of logic.

Concentration on rationality has meant simultaneous relegation of emotions to the margins. The real challenge to the dominant paradigm in cognitive science, namely Parallel Distributed Processing or Connexionism, is yet to make serious inroads into the mind-set that has over the years kept it in place.

## *2.2. Language and emotion*

The general distrust of emotions in Western thought is, as just mentioned, but the flip side of the systematic effort to promote reason as the beacon light of human language faculty. Reason is celebrated as the crowning achievement of mankind in its evolutionary progress. Ever since Aristotle defined man as a "rational animal," the idea of rationality as of the very essence of man—essence in the sense of 'quiddity' or the ontological correlate of a definition—has survived unchallenged through the centuries. Insofar as it was opposed to reason, emotion became a synonym for irrationality, the mark of bestiality. In his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Charles Darwin (1872 [1965]) went to the extent of claiming that emotional expressions are behavioural equivalents of vestigial anatomical organs such as the appendix: the implication being that they are, strictly speaking redundant and perfectly dispensable as such at best, or an irksome impediment at worst, being left-overs from an earlier, bestial stage of

evolution. When the 18<sup>th</sup> century English poet Alexander Pope wrote (Pope :1930: 180)

Unlearn'd, he knew no schoolman's subtle art,  
No language, but the language of the heart.

he was simply expressing what has over the centuries been an unargued assumption underlying our cultural practices namely that emotions betray a lack of culture and sophistication and hence need to be brought under the control of cool, dispassionate reason.

A good deal of recent research on emotion has concentrated on how emotions bias cognitive processes during judgement and the making of inferences (Oatley 1999: 275). The idea is by no means new and can be found even in Freud's theoretical incursions into emotional disorder. For Freud, emotional disorders resulted from traumatic experiences so intense that they affected the smooth functioning of the reasoning mind. The tussle between reason and emotion is frequently thought of in terms of an androcentric agenda, so that distrust of emotions is exacerbated by association with the Biblical theme of feminine seductive charm swerving the cool reasoning power of man from the path of righteousness.

Associated with the dichotomy reason vs. emotion are a number of other binary oppositions. Thus side by side with the equations reason/masculine and emotion/feminine one also comes across the associations reason/mind and emotion/body. For instance, William James (1884) famously argued that emotions have no mental content but are merely bodily states. James' position thus echoes a long tradition—dating back to ancient Stoics—of regarding emotions as generally deleterious and in need of being reined in by robust reason: the hysterical woman who must be brought under control by man's cool and sober reasoning power. Incidentally, this tradition is still kept alive in contemporary practices of cognitive therapy for emotional disorders.

Now, someone might argue at this stage that this subsection of the paper is mistakenly sub-titled 'Language and emotion' for the reason that what most of the authors referred to in fact do is pit emotion, not against language as such, but cognition. While there is some truth to this, it must not be forgotten that many of the arguments put forward by these authors carry over to language inasmuch as language is itself often conceived as a cognitive activity *par excellence*. (see the quotation from Barwise in Section 2.1)

### *2. 3. Linguistics and the prejudice against emotions*

As heir to mainstream Western philosophical tradition, linguistics has systematically sought to downplay the role of emotions in language. Emotional aspects of language use are typically considered secondary or marginal to its rational, fact-stating role. In the words of Sapir (1921: 38):

On the whole, it must be admitted that ideation reigns supreme in language, that volition and emotion come in as distinctly secondary factors.

But it is not only with regard to the emotive use of language that linguists have claimed centrality for rationality. The very discourse of linguistics is itself founded upon a claim to (scientific) rationality. The rationality of the metalanguage of linguistics is typically pitted against the irrationality/emotivity of what is pejoratively dismissed as 'folk linguistics'. This is clearly evident in a classic paper by Bloomfield (1944) entitled "Secondary and tertiary responses to language" where the founding father of American linguistics disparages in no uncertain terms lay opinions about language.

Several peculiarities of these secondary responses deserve further study. The speaker, when making the secondary responses, shows alertness. His eyes are bright, and he seems to be enjoying himself.... The whole process is, as we say, pleasurable. (Bloomfield, 1944: 49)

Several comments are in order here. Notice, first of all, that Bloomfield's remarks are couched in what one may characterize as a philosophical posture with regard to what the enterprise of science is all about. Science is a rational enterprise, cold and methodical. There is no room for warmth or mirth. As a matter of fact, Bloomfield writes as if there was sufficient justification in the very fact that the natives appeared to be having a great time talking about their language for arriving at the conclusion that what they say could not be considered scientifically admissible. His advice to would-be field linguists is to simply ignore such remarks volunteered by the natives and resist the temptation to make the informants realize how mistaken they are about such folk beliefs. Here are his own words:

The linguist's cue in this situation is to observe; but if, giving in to a material impulse (or else, by way of experiment), he tries to enlighten the speaker, he

encounters a tertiary response to language. (Bloomfield, 1944: 49)

And the stage of so-called tertiary responses is the one where the natives are on the defensive and switching on to a disputative, indeed combative, mode.

The tertiary response is hostile; the speaker grows contemptuous or angry. He will impatiently reaffirm the secondary response, or, more often, he will resort to one of a few well-fixed formulas of confutation. (Bloomfield, 1944: 49)

For Bloomfield, to engage the native informant in any form of dialogic exchange at this stage is a sheer waste of the precious time the field linguists have at their disposal. There is little point, he claims, in trying to make the informants change their beliefs. Any attempt to do so will only distract the field linguists from doing what they are there for—collecting data for future analysis.

In so distancing themselves from folk wisdom, contemporary linguists are only being faithful to a long tradition in scientific research, according to which it is absolutely important not to get “involved with” one’s informants or subjects of study, lest over-intimacy with lay and untutored opinion should obfuscate the researcher’s scientific outlook. As Robins (1964: 364) put it, “The informant ... is a familiar and necessary part of the study of any living language. The informant is not a teacher, nor a linguist; he is simply a native speaker of the language.” Interestingly, Darwin, in the work already alluded to, claimed that “animals are ideal subjects for the observation of emotional expression ... because [they] are less susceptible to the highly complex associative psychological behaviors that humans are prone to.” (cited in Prodger 1998: 148)

At the metalinguistic level, then, the distrust of emotion manifests itself as the disparagement of the ordinary person’s views about language. The reason, when all is said and done, why the lay person’s views about language are dismissed as unworthy of serious consideration is that they are believed to be incapable of standing the test of reason. Kay (1987) echoes the typical attitude of linguists vis-à-vis folk linguistics when he argues that it lacks consistency and is not rigorously thought out, implying that most of it is the outcome of subjective, emotional reactions to language which have not been passed through the sieve of rational inquiry.

If only to put records straight, mention must be made here of a rather different sense of the term ‘folk linguistics’ that has gained some currency in recent years. In the words of Preston (1993: 181), “[f]olk

linguistics seeks to discover non-linguists' beliefs about language in general." Clearly, this is a far cry from the way Bloomfield and Kay were using the term. From an earlier sense of, say, "a set of—unscientific or pre-scientific (depending on how charitable you feel towards them)—beliefs about language" the term has suddenly come to mean "the scientific study of beliefs (regardless of their scientific status) held by non-linguists." In the former sense, the term 'folk linguistics' was, strictly speaking, a misnomer, whereas in the latter sense, it is being claimed to be an avenue of new research possibilities, or may be a *branch* of linguistics. What hasn't changed though is the absolute faith in the onesidedness of the gaze: reason claiming for itself the exclusive prerogative to make sense of irrationality.

In point of fact, part of the reason why folk theory is disparaged is that it is mostly of a subjective nature. An objective science such as linguistics can ill afford to heed subjective views about language, so the argument seems to run. In human and social sciences, the fear of being caught using the subjective mode is so great that many researchers avoid using first-person pronouns in the presentation of their findings (of the kind that occurs in the very opening sentence of this paper) and many scholarly journals highlight the injunction in their very style-sheets.

### **3. Politics of language: reason vs. emotion**

#### *3.1. The linguist and the lay person: Incommensurable discourses?*

Given the stand-off between the linguist and the lay person, it is not at all surprising that there is mutual suspicion between the two. The linguist is loath to listen to what the person in the street has to say concerning linguistic matters; as a matter of fact, as we have just seen, it is one of the founding principles of the discipline not to listen to what the non-linguist has to say about language. Most linguists consider it a sheer waste of time worrying about practical matters involving language, because in order to get involved in practical matters one must seriously confront the opinions ordinary people entertain in respect of language. Consider, for instance, the following remark by John Rickford:

The phrase "Not in my backyard"—abbreviated to NIMBY—is commonly used to refer to the stiff opposition which local citizens mount to prevent individuals or institutions that they consider undesirable from moving into their communities. Linguists sometimes seem to have a NIMBY attitude towards Applied Linguistics issues and the Great

Language Debates of our Times, motivated perhaps by the fear that they will distract us from the theoretical and descriptive research we consider our bread and butter (if not our fame and fortune), that they will devour our time and dilute our expertise, or that they will lead us into uncharted waters for which our training and experience provide little preparation. (Rickford 1998)

It is not just that professional linguists are ill equipped to engage with public opinion. The real reason why there is hardly any serious dialogue between the two sides is that the two sides do not have a common language. Their discourses are mutually unintelligible. The metalanguage of the linguists or, if you will, their discourse *qua* linguists is hermetically sealed and closed unto itself (as indeed most technical discourses tend to be) and its basic vocabulary typically consists of terms that (a) are highly "theory-laden" and thus practically incomprehensible to outsiders and (b) have been carefully crafted in such a way that any emotive or sentimental resonance their rough equivalents in ordinary speech may have is deliberately suppressed (in the name of scientific objectivity and non-involvement).

Examples are legion. Let us consider a single illustrative case: the term *L1* vs. the expression *mother tongue*. To dismiss the difference with a cool shrug of the shoulders and the remark that the latter, in contrast with the former, is suffused with emotive or affective meaning is to state an obvious point but also to close the doors on any possible dialogue between the linguist and the lay person. Because the expression *mother tongue* is embedded in an associative chain of other expressions such as *home*, *mother's womb*, *coziness*, *belongingness*, *motherland* and so forth. By contrast, *L1* belongs to a theoretical universe where there is no room for affective roles. It is based purely on the chronology of acquisition. Furthermore, insofar as it is a theoretical construct, the term *L1* only makes full sense in a discursive universe that has also incorporated such terms as *competence*, *native speaker*, *intuition*, and so forth. To use *L1*, instead of *mother tongue*, is to presuppose that your interlocutor has already bought into the discursive practices of professional linguists.

But the differences do not stop there. *L1* is an objective fact; what makes language *x* someone's *L1* rather language *y*, is the simple objective fact that he or she was born and brought up in a linguistic environment where the language spoken was *x* and not *y*. With *mother tongue* it is a rather different story. It has frequently been observed that for bi(or multi-)lingual speakers, especially those living in societies which are themselves bi(or multi-)lingual, mother tongue is a matter of choice rather than a fact of the matter. It is a category whose defining features include the question of language loyalty, which has been known

to shift in response to shifting political allegiances (Khubchandani 1983). To reiterate a point already made: it is not that *mother tongue* is simply *L1* with an overlay of emotive and political meanings. It is a completely different classificatory grid.

It is interesting to point out here that, not very long ago, *mother tongue* was very much a part of the linguist's metalanguage. Bloomfield's remark "No language is like the native language that one learned at one's mother's knee" (Bloomfield 1970: 151, quoted in Davies 2001: 514) did invoke the powerful emotive element of mother-child relationship to define the notion of 'native language'. But progress in linguistic theory has meant progressive distancing from any point of contact with common sense understanding of ordinary notions relative to language.

The result is a complete communication breakdown. The lay persons find most of what professional linguists say beyond their powers to comprehend. When they do get to grips with what the experts say, they find it contrary to common sense and are apt to dismiss it as excessively academic and pedantic.

The price professional linguists are made to pay for their principled neglect of public opinion or inability to address it properly is very high indeed. As has been verified time and time again, professional linguists are increasingly being sidelined in matters concerning language planning and state policies regarding literacy, language teaching etc. (Rajagopalan, forthcoming). Worse still, when well-intentioned linguists do force their way into public debates about language related issues, the reaction from the public is often vitriolic. John Rickford of Stanford University discovered this to his horror, as he got involved in the Ebonics debate in the U.S. in the mid-1990s—a heated debate over a decision by the Oakland, California School Board on December 18, 1996, declaring that the official language of 28,000 African American school children enrolled in Oakland's public schools was not English, but "Ebonics" (a word combining "Ebony" and 'phonics", first coined by Robert Williams, an African American psychologist, designating the distinctive variety of English spoken by African Americans in the US (cf. Baugh 2001). ■

One example of the hate mail was a postcard I received addressed to "John Rickford, Linguistics Professor (God Help Us All)" which included, alongside a newspaper report of my remarks at the 1997 LSA meeting, the comment: "It's just amazing how much crap you so-called 'scholars' can pour and get away with. Can you wonder, John Boy, why the general public does not trust either educators, judges or politicians? As a brother might say, 'Ee Bonic be a bunch a booshit man, but it get de muny offa de White man. He be a sucka.' " (Rickford 1998)

Here is an excerpt from a heated exchange that took place recently in an Internet chat room in Brazil frequented mostly by linguists (The message below was, needless to say, from an irate lay gatecrasher)

I have the great privilege of not knowing who is who in Brazilian linguistics. Thus, I am in a position to judge their texts for what they are worth, without being induced to 'think' that they contain doses of prodigious wisdom ... just that they bear the signature of Tom, Dick or Harry. Of the scholars whose names you cite, up until now I have only read pure nonsense, here in this chat room and elsewhere. I am not impressed by their names nor their PhDs. This is the great privilege of ordinary citizens who do not care a damn about academy.

### 3.2. Head-on confrontation: the Brazilian case

Differences of opinion between the linguist and the lay public can often degenerate into a noisy verbal duel and, in some cases, a no-holds-barred free-for-all (as borne out by the passages cited at the end of the foregoing section). In what follows, relevant aspects of a controversy that erupted in Brazil some time ago will be discussed (the left-over embers are still smouldering as I write this piece today).

It all started in 1999, when a Federal Congressman by name Aldo Rebelo (currently, the whip of the ruling coalition in the lower house of the legislature) presented a bill aimed at curbing the influx of word borrowings (called *estrangeirismos*—'foreignisms'—in local parlance) into the country's national and official language, (Brazilian) Portuguese. Although, the text of the bill initially warned about excessive borrowings from *all* foreign sources, it soon became clear that the real target was English. The preamble to the bill was packed with nationalist rhetoric of the sort that appeals to the unwary public. And the Congressman, elected on a ticket from a political party on the radical left called 'The Communist Party of Brazil', knew full well that a threat, real or imagined, to a country's national language—the *mother tongue* of millions of its citizens—is a powerful rallying point. In fact, it was exactly this powerful sentiment that the shrewd politician was hoping to cash in on—an attempt in which he had, by all estimates, a resounding success, initially at least (The bill has now been superseded by a substitutive proposed by a Senator as it moved to the Upper House).

In no time, the Congressman's name became a household word, especially amongst the Brazilian middle class. In educational circles, everybody was discussing the pros and cons of the proposed bill which, if, as and when it was passed and received presidential approval, was to stipulate, among other things, tough penalties, including hefty fines, for anyone caught using English words (*shopping center, drive-thru, self-service, newsletter, delivery, sale, homepage, site, workshop, franchising* and so on). "Unfortunately," pondered Congressman Rebelo in a press briefing, "businessmen and shopkeepers seem to believe that these foreignisms create the impression that the products on display are sophisticated and of a superior quality, which is complete nonsense." (cf. Stábile 2002). Now, clearly, he was wrong on this. Specialists on marketing have long known that products sell on the market not merely on the strength of their intrinsic worth but also the kind of associative attributes that are painstakingly attached to them through sustained advertising campaigns. If foreign words enjoy prestige in a given society, then that is a perfectly good reason for advertisers to resort to them in order to boost the appeal of a product they want to sell. But, be that as it may, that the real point Rebelo was making found a favorable chord in the minds of the ordinary persons in the street was instantaneously attested to by the enthusiastic responses from the public at large, manifested in the form of letters to newspaper editors, remarks made in the Internet chat rooms etc.

Most middle-class people in Brazil have anyway good reasons for being suspicious of these foreign words, especially from English. English is typically seen in South America as the aggressively visible symbol of (North) American hegemony in the region. English words stare at you from billboards, neon lights, shop windows, newspaper and magazine articles, indeed literally anywhere and everywhere (Rajagopalan, 2003; Rajagopalan and Freitas 2002). The wide-spread resentment in many of these countries of what is perceived as the U.S. Government's road-roller diplomacy vis-à-vis their "backyard" often surfaces in most surprising ways, especially as conspiracy theories of one sort or another involving perceived U.S. pretensions in the southern hemisphere reach feverish pitches. In fact, it soon became clear to independent observers of the unfolding scenario that it was this pent-up frustration among the Brazilian public at large that Congressman Aldo Rebelo was aiming to channel into his own private project of anti-Americanism. As José Luiz Fiorin, a prominent Brazilian linguist pointed out: "What the project aims to do is to treat language as an arena for anti-imperialist struggle." (Fiorin, 2000: 71-72)

Initially, the overwhelming reaction from Brazilian linguists as Rebelo and his incendiary legislative bid started attracting media attention was one of stultified silence. There was an air of utter disbelief

and frustration that, despite years of linguistic research with plenty of concrete results to show, linguistics was still, by and large, an unknown field as far as the lay public was concerned. "40 years after its introduction as a discipline in Brazilian universities, linguistics continues to remain invisible and inaudible to the society as a whole," lamented another front-ranking linguist, Carlos Alberto Faraco (Faraco, 2001: 30). The remedy? The almost unanimous recommendation was: "Spread the message of linguistics to the wider public." At the end of his diagnostic report, published in the form of an article in a major national newspaper in Brazil, Faraco pondered as follows:

Linguists are faced with the challenge of approaching these questions as fundamentally political questions and thinking about ways of making their voices heard, thus contributing to the beginning of an urgently needed cultural war among contending discourses concerning Brazil's language. (Faraco, 2001: 31)

Faraco's exhortation to take linguistics to the streets, it is important to point out, is an important and refreshingly different step ahead, insofar as it entails an admission that there is a need to address popular concerns about language if linguists are at all to have any say in language politics. But here is precisely where one detects an important weak point in the position taken by linguists, not only in Brazil but elsewhere in the world. For it turns out that what they are proposing to do is to familiarize the public with the fundamental truths of their science: claims such as that "The defense of the Portuguese language is an old project—conservative, elitist and exclusionary" (Guedes 2000: 35), "Languages, all of them, undergo changes (or do we speak Latin?); this is neither good nor bad" (Zilles 2000: 52), "The best language policy consists of giving total liberty of expression to the language user, letting him/her choose ..." (Schmitz 2000: 45) and so on. The claims just cited are all taken from a special bulletin issued by the Brazilian Association of Applied Linguistics (ALAB). In her introductory note, Motta-Roth (2000:5) claimed:

By and large, the opinions expressed in the articles that follow ... attest to the outdated and misinformed nature of the bill that seeks to legislate over and penalize the ordinary language user for the use they make of their own mother tongue in order to genuinely interact with their socio-historical context.

The choice of the expression *mother tongue* is significant and its emotive effect needs no comment. In fact, the remark takes us all the

way back to centuries ago when Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) found it a scandal that a child should go to school to learn the grammar of its own language:

... and so voyd of those cumbersome differences of Cases, Genders, Moodes, and tenses, which I thinke was a peece of the Tower of Babilons curse, that a man should be put to schoole to learne his mother-tongue (Sidney 1905: 70).

But the use of the expression *mother tongue* is about the farthest that linguists involved in the language dispute in Brazil seemed willing to go in their effort to establish a working relationship with their would-be interlocutors, the public at large. The over-all attitude is one of distrust and dismissiveness in relation to the public's capacity to engage in any meaningful (=rational) dialogue. At the end of a retrospective study as to where things might have gone wrong, Garcez and Zilles (2001) register with evident resignation:

When all is said and done, the debate about 'foreignisms'—reedited for the umpteenth time in Brazil—manifests itself in the form of emotionally charged discourses, packed with allusions to sentiments of nationalism and patriotism, based on the unfounded belief that there is only one language in the whole nation, the standard language of power, which must be defended against external threats. (Garcez and Zilles 2001: 35)

Now, needless to say, there is a lot of truth in what the authors are saying. Demands for linguistic engineering and protection of national languages usually stem from a right-wing political agenda and they rally the unwitting masses that readily fall head over heels in love with the chest-pounding brand of chauvinism that they promote. The point, however, is that, by not recognizing that the human languages are invested with powerful symbolism in addition to being the things that linguists customarily say about them, professional linguists often fail to establish a vital beachhead in their effort to make an all-out assault on folk-linguistic beliefs. As a result, they have so far had a rather poor track record in their efforts to win public opinion and persuade ordinary people of the inconsistencies in their own beliefs about language vis-à-vis the soundness of the findings of scientific linguistics. Outside the disciplinary bounds of linguistics, scholars like Bourdieu (1977) in sociology and Rosaldo (1980) and Duranti (1994) in anthropology have shown greater awareness of the enormous gap between specialist and lay discursive practices.

The ordinary persons' engagement with language is inextricably embroiled in emotions and loyalties of all sorts. And they are not being completely irrational in their attitude. Bourdieu (1988: 782) has argued that "[s]ocial action is guided by a practical sense, by what we may call a "feel for the game" — a "feel" he goes on to contrast with "rational action." The fact that, through the employment of the right strategies of persuasion, ordinary people can be made to see the weaknesses in their untutored arguments no more proves that their emotive nature was what stood in the way all along, than the fact that linguists themselves have entertained in the past beliefs they no longer do proves that there is nothing scientific about the conclusions they arrive at.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

If there is one precious lesson to be learned from the episode involving the Rebelo bill in Brazil, it is that linguists can no longer afford to ignore public opinion in regard to language on pain of rendering themselves irrelevant and inconsequential. This entails, first and foremost, accepting the fact that it is not because the ordinary person's views about language are guided by emotions and sentiments that they should be set aside or completely ignored. To think that they can be countered by dint of cool reason alone is to be hopelessly naïve about the whole process of engaging with public opinion. John Rickford concludes his thoughts on his experience of involvement in the Ebonics debate with the following words: "Ultimately, the quality of our contributions will depend on the depth of our knowledge and understanding." (Rickford:1998). Without doubt, knowledge and understanding of one's interlocutors' position is absolutely essential if one is to engage them in any meaningful dialogue. But it is also indispensable to engage your interlocutor in a discourse where he or she is most at home even when your ultimate goal happens to be to convince him/her of the inadequacies and inherent inconsistencies of that very discourse. This means meeting your interlocutor on their turf.

This is the important lesson that the great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire left for posterity. The only way to ensure success in teaching is by engaging our students where they are and not by expecting that through repeated exposure to our discourse of reason they can be won over to our side and made to see the rationality of our arguments. Once again, Rickford seems to miss the point when, after noting how linguists regret the complete ignorance on the part of the general public of the great advances they have made in their science, he goes on to observe:

However, in harboring this frustration, we seem to have forgotten what advertisers of Colgate toothpaste and other

products never forget: that the message has to be repeated over and over, anew for each generation and each different audience type, and preferably in simple, direct and arresting language which the public can understand and appreciate. (Rickford 1998)

To claim that the ordinary persons can only be won over to certain arguments by repeated exposure to them is to tacitly assume that they are incapable of reasoning for themselves or of being made to appreciate by themselves the rationality of those arguments. It is, furthermore, to equate them with lower order animals whose behavior can only be controlled by repeated exposures to the same stimuli. (Or could it be that we are resorting to crude behaviorism in our dealings with the lay public?)

As I have been at pains to show in this paper, what is urgently needed—if we linguists are at all to make any headway in our efforts to establish a working rapport with the public at large—is to rethink one of the founding principles of our discipline, namely, that we have nothing whatsoever to learn from the lay person. Our complete lack of interest in lay opinion, often disparaged as ‘folk linguistics’, makes us turn a deaf ear to what they have to say. So long as we refuse to listen to them and engage them where they are, we will go on complaining about poor results in our bridge-building efforts. Finally, it is absolutely important for us linguists to come to terms with the fact that, as far as the lay public is concerned, the phenomenon of language will always carry powerful emotional connotations.

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