

Language and Culture

Master 1

DLE

Language, Culture and Discourse

By Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasinski

(The last part of the first chapter)

These are the main ideas discussed in the remaining sections of the first chapter:

Ethnography has a personal and poetic nature that differs from the scientific objective account. To be more specific, ethnography enables the discovery of marginalized and noticed voices, projections and interpretations. From an ethnographic perspective, physical sciences, that are attributed the qualities of objectivity and truth, are mere projections of social solidarity and social consensus. "Scientific `objectivity' is a matter of procedural solidarity and social commendation rather than universal accuracy."(24)

Language is fundamental in the process of projection and the quested accuracy in terms of knowledge transmission. The importance of language leads to the questioning of translated texts. Universal or absolute objective truth is rejected due to the failure of the word-world correspondence or projection. Words have different layers of meaning which make of the translated text open to a misunderstanding or a deviation from the targeted idea or representation. It is impossible to deny the role of translation for it enables us to be introduced to new and different facets of life (meaning knowledge, philosophy, culture ...). But it is important not to claim universality and absolutism in terms of truth through translated texts or reported experiences because when you trace back the whole process of translation, subjectivity is highly present.

The problems of ethnography are problems of translation and justification, not of universal or objective truth. Since all languages are culture-bound and knowledge is positional, then languages, along with cultural and political

discourses, can be incommensurable for there is no meta-language of translation.(19)

The aspect of translation is of problematic nature for it is linked to language and the accuracy of words in the transmission of ideas.

Suffice it to say that ethnography's main objective is to voice the plethora of ideas existing in the world. It grants the chance the marginalized ideas of our own culture to be voiced and to be called out to the world. Such exposure of different ideas lead to Rorty's "cosmopolitan conversation of humankind". In other words, ethnography supports the multiplicity of interpretations for it participates in questioning the settled mechanisms in order to construct a better future and a better understanding of others (from an idealistic point of view).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the version adopted in cultural studies, tackles the issue objective knowledge. CDA does take into account on the place, the aim of the speaker and the audience to whom he is speaking or writing. "CDA focuses upon the social meanings of linguistic structures, whether lexical, syntactic or other."(25) When taking these factors into consideration, the neutrality and objectivity of knowledge is questioned if not proved to be a fallacy.

The personal is regarded as part of the cultural for knowledge in ethnography rejects any quest for universality. The individual, in his lived experience, may be culturally dislocated once he is separated from his environment. The experience of cultural dislocation affects the individual accounts and perspectives. The degree of dislocation may differ from one individual to another leading to endless productions or insights through which the writer voices his observations (the examples of Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasinski capture the notion of cultural dislocation and justify the diversity of descriptions). Such accounts that are part of the private experience of the individual embody cultural patterns through which others are able to compare, contrast and even discover new facets of understanding.

Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis

By Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasinski

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The Language of Ethnicity

This chapter is concerned with ethnicity and nationality as discursive performative constructions manifested through the achievements of speaking subjects. That is, ethnic and national identities are unpredictable and unstable cultural productions with which we identify. They are not universal or absolute existent 'things'. Rather, ethnicity is a cultural accomplishment. In particular, we set out to demonstrate that ethnic identification is attained through the linguistic action and interaction of specially located speaking subjects.

The Concept of Ethnicity

Traditionally, the concept of ethnicity has stressed the sharing of norms, values, beliefs, cultural symbols and practices. The formation of 'ethnic groups' relies on common cultural signifiers which have developed under specific historical, social and political contexts and which encourage a sense of belonging based, at least in part, on a common mythological ancestry. As Hall writes:

The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual.
(Hall, 1996c: 446)

However, ethnicity is not based on primordial ties or universal cultural characteristics possessed by a specific group for identities are unpredictable productions of a specific history and culture. What it means to be a person is a social and cultural construction 'all the way down'. As our data

below suggest, there is no universal 'essence' of ethnicity, rather, what it means to be Polish, English, Australian, Ukrainian, etc. changes over time and from place to place. Consequently, we hold to an anti-essentialist concept of ethnicity (see Chapter 2). Whereas essentialism takes verbal descriptions of ethnic groups to be reflecting a stable underlying identity as its referent, anti-essentialism takes words to be constitutive of the categories they represent to us so that ethnicity is a malleable discursive construction. That is, ethnicity is formed by the way we speak about group identities and identify with the signs and symbols that constitute ethnicity for us.

Ethnicity is a relational concept concerned with categories of self identification and social ascription. What we think of as our identity is dependent on what we think we are not. The Scots are not the English, who are not Americans, who are not Russians, who are not Ukrainians, who are not Poles. Consequently, ethnicity is best understood as a process of boundary formation constructed and maintained under specific socio-historical conditions (Barth, 1969). Further, ethnicity is constituted through power relations between groups. It signals relations of marginality, of the centre and the periphery, in the context of changing historical forms and circumstances. Here, the centre and the margin are to be grasped through the politics of representation, for as Brah argues:

It is necessary for it to become axiomatic that what is represented as the 'margin' is not marginal at all but is a constitutive effect of the representation itself. The 'centre' is no more a centre than is the 'margin'. (Brah, 1996: 226, emphasis in original)

Discourses of ethnic centrality and marginality are commonly articulated with those of nationality. History is strewn with examples of how one ethnic group has been defined as central and superior to a marginal 'other'. Nazi Germany, apartheid South Africa and 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia are among the most clear-cut examples of this phenomenon. However, the metaphor of superiority and subordination is also applicable to contemporary Britain, America and Australia. Thus, ethnicity has been closely allied to nationalisms that conceive of the 'nation' as sharing a culture and requiring that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones (though of course they do).

National Identities

The nation-state is a political concept that refers to an administrative apparatus deemed to have sovereignty over a specific space or territory within the nation-state system. By contrast, national-identity is a form of imaginative identification with the symbols and discourses of the nation state. Thus, nations are not simply political formations but systems of cultural representation through which national identity is continually reproduced as discursive action.

The symbolic and discursive dimension of national identity narrates and creates the idea of origins, continuity and tradition. This process does not necessarily attach ethnicity or national identity to the nation state as various global Diaspora - African, Jewish, Indian, Chinese, Polish, English, Irish, etc.- attest. Further, few states have ethnically homogeneous populations. Smith (1990) not only distinguishes between civic/political conceptions of nations and ethnic ones, but also lists over 60 states that are constituted by more than one national or ethnic culture. Consequently, ethnicity and nationality are different concepts, so that one may be ethnically Polish, but of British nationality. However, for most of the informants in our study the two concepts were conflated. Being Polish was a matrix of cultural, linguistic and religious identifications and practices as well as a political and territorial concept (though the national soil concerned was more likely to be that of the village than of the nation-state).

Narratives of Unity

Cultures are not static entities but are constituted by changing practices and meanings that operate at different social levels. Any given national culture is understood and acted upon by different social groups so that governments, ethnic groups and classes may perceive it in divergent ways. Representations of national culture are snapshots of the symbols and practices that have come to the fore at specific historical conjunctures. They are generated by distinctive groups of people and deployed for specific purposes. That ethnic and/or national identities appear to be unified is the product of those stories that through images, symbols and rituals represent to us the 'shared' meanings of nationhood (Bhabha, 1990). National identity is a way of unifying cultural diversity so that, as Hall argues:

Instead of thinking of national cultures as unified, we should think of them as a discursive device which represents difference as unity or identity. They are cross-cut by deep internal divisions and differences, and 'unified' only

through the exercise of different forms of cultural power. (Hall, 1992b: 297)

National identity is a form of identification with representations of shared experiences and history told through stories, literature, popular culture and the media. It is in this sense that the 'nation' is an 'imagined community' with national identity a construction assembled through symbols and rituals in relation to territorial and administrative categories (Anderson, 1983). Narratives of nationhood emphasize the traditions and continuity of the nation as being 'in the nature of things' together with a foundational myth of collective origin. This in turn both assumes and produces the linkage between national identity and a pure, original people or 'folk' tradition.

Language, Identity and Identification

Ethnic identity is not a fixed universal essence, but an ordered way of speaking about persons. Ethnicity is always already constituted by representations formed through regulatory discourses of power. Thus, the language of ethnicity does not reflect a pre-given reality but constitutes the parameters of ethnicity and establishes pertinent subject positions from which to speak about what it means to be Polish, Ukrainian, American, etc. In this way, ethnicity is performative; a citation and reiteration of regulatory discourses of identity.

It is important to note that the regulatory aspects of discourse involve an element of identification or emotional investment that partially suture or stitch together discourses and psychic forces (Hall, 1996a). Identification is understood as an affiliation or emotional tie with an idealized and fantasized object. Further, identification constitutes an exclusionary matrix by which identification with one form of identity frequently involves the repudiation of another (as we shall see below, being Polish for our informants meant repudiating Ukrainians).

Consequently, though identity is constituted in and through language, subjects cannot simply cast off one self-description and adopt another at will. Ethnic identities may be social constructions, but they are regulated and show a marked tendency towards sedimentation. Poles and Ukrainians cannot in one overnight decision stop being the subjects that history and cultures have forged of them. Change is possible but, as most psychologists and therapists argue, it is a slow and difficult process.

Nevertheless, emotional identification with any given form of identity is only ever partial. There is always a gap between fantasy and materiality leaving Butler (1993) and Rose (1997) to argue for the instability of identity. As we noted in Chapter 2, the speaking subject, as contrasted with an unproblematic adoption of subject positions, is capable of inventive and creative use of language. Ethnicity remains an achievement of language users, not a crude reflection of one-dimensional discursive subject positions.

Further, identifications can be multiple and need not involve the repudiation of all other positions. People are composed of not one, but several, sometimes contradictory identities, enabling subjects to assume a variety of shifting identities at different times and places. Indeed, it is not so much that we possess multiple identities, as that we are constituted as a weave of different accounts of the self - we are interdiscursive. That self-identity commonly takes the form of a unity is yet another story of our times. Thus, not only may a given subject enact apparently contradictory identities, but also, ethnic identities are articulated with those of class, gender, nation and age. Subjects cannot legitimately be reduced to ethnicity, nor can ethnicity be represented in a pure form, set apart from other facets of our acculturated selves.

Questions to be answered

Answer the following questions after reading the text above.

1. What does ethnicity stand for?
2. Explain the difference between national identity and cultural one.
3. Discuss in what way ethnic identities are manipulated.

You should email your answers (no more than 700 words)

You should mention your group number

Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory

Cultural studies inspect various forms of power as in the case of gender, race in a given society. There are various aspects or through which an individual could form an opinion on a certain society. Such process evokes the field of Intercultural Communication or Cross Cultural Communication in which culture is bound to nationality. Cultures are compared, constructed and sometimes measured through the adoption of certain generalized constructs. The latter would help in tracing what is believed to be the main pillars of any socio-cultural observation. Geert Hofstede developed a theoretical framework that would lend a hand in the understanding of the values of a given society. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (late 1970s) aimed at determining the dimensions that would enable us to pin down the diversity of cultures. In other words, Hofstede's theory of dimensions helps in the understanding of different countries in terms of culture. The theory became a standard to comprehend the cultural differences and their impact on business setting.

Hofstede pinned down six dimensions through which a culture could be understood:

1. Power Distance Index
2. Individualism vs. Collectivism
3. Masculinity vs. Femininity
4. Uncertainty Avoidance Index
5. Long Term vs. Short Term Orientation
6. Indulgence vs. Restraint

Assignment

Explain the six dimensions mentioned above. (Check the books mentioned below)

Discuss how these dimensions help the individual in his personal engagement with cultural diversity or intercultural learning. (No more than 700 words)

You should email your answer (in a word document including your name and group number)

References

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