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# Language ideologies and social positioning: the restoration of a “much needed bridge”

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the intersections between, or entanglements of, local action and translocal patterns gained renewed interest in sociolinguistics. Received distinctions such as *micro/macro* or *practice/structure* have been challenged and confronted with more granular concepts such as *sociolinguistic scales*. Consequently, established disciplinary orientations such as *micro/macro* or *qualitative/quantitative sociolinguistics* have also been questioned: rather than one of two options, sociolinguistics is now supposed to embrace “complexity”. This fundamental discussion also centrally concerns research into language ideologies. While it has always been acknowledged that language ideologies frame and shape, or manifest in, local action, they have long been construed as a translocal social order, a “macro phenomenon”. In the wake of the general discussion outlined above, however, this has been challenged. Language ideologies are now increasingly located at the intersection of structure and practice, construed as structuring practices and as dynamic, scalar phenomena that emerge from, and are subjected to, ongoing local processes of social positioning and indexical enregisterment (which they reversely frame). This special issue takes up the discussion and asks where we can get to with such a complex notion of language ideologies and/as social positioning, how far we have come already, and which obstacles lie ahead. The authors address these questions from different perspectives. This introduction sets the scene, recapitulates the discussion and state of the art, and provides an outline of the issue.

**Keywords:** language ideologies; scale; social positioning; sociolinguistics

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In memory of Alexandra “Misty” Jaffe (1960–2018)  
and Michael Silverstein (1945–2020)

Language ideologies have attracted wide interest in sociolinguistics and Linguistic Anthropology since Michael Silverstein (1979) introduced the term, rather incidentally, a good four decades ago in a now often (if very selectively) cited contribution that appeared in a hectographed and rather heterogeneous collection of a *Parasession on Linguistic Units and Levels* held by the Chicago Linguistic Society the same year. Mainly driven by US (and particularly Chicagoan) Linguistic Anthropology (see Joseph and Taylor 1990; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994; Kroskrity et al. 1998; Irvine and Gal 2000; Wilce 2017; Gal and Irvine 2019), but continuously also adapted by sociolinguistics scholars in Australia (e.g., Pennycook 1998; Eades 2013), Asia (e.g., Park 2009; Lee 2009; Zhou 2019), Africa (e.g., Yakpo 2016; Kamwangamalu 2019), Europe (e.g., Cameron 1995; Blommaert 1999; Mar-Molinero and Stevenson 2006; Johnson and Milani 2010; Verschueren 2012) and the other Americas (e.g., Duchêne and Heller 2007; McElhinny 2007; López-Gopar 2016), an overwhelming body of literature circulating around this topic has emerged and keeps emerging (for recent surveys, see Rosa and Burdick 2017; Busch 2019).

From the very beginning, one central impetus of research has been to find a way “to mediate between the terms of [...] the (micro) study of face-to-face discourse strategies, and studies of macrohistorical processes” (Gal 1989: 349), that is, to link communicative practices and the way communication takes place *in situ* with larger-scale structures, i.e., the social, culture, and power processes. At the outset of their review of no less than 329 titles related to the field up to 1993, for instance, Woolard and Schieffelin (1994: 55) note that

[a]lthough there are varying concerns behind the studies reviewed, we emphasise language ideology as a mediating link between social structures and forms of talk.

The review concludes with the statement that

The topic of language ideology is a much needed bridge between linguistic and social theory, because it relates the microculture of communicative action to political economic considerations of power and social inequality, confronting macro social constraints on language behavior [...]. (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994: 72)

Language ideologies thus, as Woolard (1998: 27) adds in a later revision of the text, “connect discourse with lived experiences”.

The “mediating” role of language ideologies has thereby been construed in different ways. Silverstein (1979, 1985, and 2021) is particularly concerned with

the mediating function of language (or linguistic) ideologies between language structure and linguistic practice. The language ideological “rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein 1979: 193) mediates from structure to practice in the sense that it renders specific forms in specific context preferable to others (more “‘appropriate to’ particular contexts of usage”; Silverstein 2003: 212), and it mediates from practice to structure in the sense that “justified” or “rationalised” language use also gets regularised in the system (Silverstein 1985: 223) – “to rationalize, to ‘understand’ one’s own linguistic usage is potentially to change it” (Silverstein 1979: 233).

Other scholars have been more concerned with how language ideologies reflect and maintain social inequality or differentiation and thereby link concrete communicative practices with larger-scale social processes and hegemonial discourses of exclusion, access, authority, legitimacy, and identity (e.g., Kroskrity 2000; Bauman and Briggs 2003; Blommaert 2005; Duchêne and Heller 2007; Gal and Irvine 2019). In these terms, language ideologies mediate, as Woolard and Schieffelin (1994: 72) put it in the aforementioned quote, “the microculture of communicative action” with “macro social constraints”.

Particularly through the latter strand, language ideology research has put forward a strong counter-argument against the assumption widely held in conversation analysis that semiosis primarily takes place at the “micro level”, that actors somewhat “freely” construct meaning and social relations in interaction (see Schegloff 1997; Deppermann 2015). Language ideology research, thus, has helped to give back prominence to the “macro level” in interactional sociolinguistics. This “macro level” was mostly equated with what Silverstein (1993) termed – as a special case of metapragmatics (and the case he is least interested in himself) – *metapragmatic discourse*, with *discourse* mainly meaning *Discourse* (“with a capital ‘D’” sensu Gee 1996: 151), that is, discourse beyond the level of local practice.

However, as Woolard (2008) (self-)critically notes, this focus on trans-local patterns led to a tendency to ignore the level of concrete, situated action in favour of language ideology analysis as mere *Discourse* analysis:

[...] some linguistic anthropologists now worry that there is a trend toward the construal of ideology solely or primarily as metalinguistic discourse and a consequent lack of analytic attention to linguistic form and practice. Much of the recent work – and I include here my own – focuses on discourses about language rather than on linguistic practice and tends to flatten the original three-dimensional model (as proposed by Silverstein (1985: 220) in his account of the “total linguistic fact”). (Woolard 2008: 437)

In consequence of this trend, the focus was primarily shifted towards the question of how communicative practices are framed or shaped by supra-local values and beliefs. What was thereby often neglected is the reverse direction of the dialectical

process: the question of how communicative practices constitute supra-local values and beliefs. The “bridge” was used more and more as a one-way street.

Yet it is apparent that language ideologies do not come out of nowhere. They manifest in (meta)linguistic practices, but they obviously also emerge – or *emanate*, as Silverstein (2013) depicts it – from concrete (meta)linguistic or discursive practices. That is to say, it is the actors and their actions that constitute, maintain and change language ideologies, even if processes of constitution, maintenance and change exceed individual interactions by far. Although this has never really been denied in language ideology research, it still seems fair to diagnose that the influence of local practices on trans-local social structures (i.e., *ideologies*) is far less clear than the reverse process, i.e., the impact of ideologies on practices. Even more unclear is the reciprocity of the two directions of relationship that, after all, language ideology research initially set out to explore. Woolard’s (2008: 440) statement still generally holds in 2021:

How and why, in short, do particular linguistic icons become iconic? Even in the most compelling work in linguistic ideology, the question of why particular variables emerge is rarely directly addressed. More work is needed to explain just how and why specific features become ideologically salient and drive change [...].

However, as Woolard also reports, as of the early 2000s serious theoretical paths have been taken that help to connect the local and structural levels bi-directionally, and over that good decade since her plea was published, these paths have been continued. Relevant attempts include the concepts of *iconisation* or *rhematicisation* (Irvine and Gal 2000; Gal 2016b; Gal and Irvine 2019), *enregisterment* (Silverstein 1993, 2003, 2016; Agha 2007; Johnstone et al. 2006; Spitzmüller 2013, 2015), as well as Silverstein’s notion of *recursive* or *ordered indexicality*, introduced as “the concept necessary to showing us how to relate the micro-social to the macro-social frames of analysis of any sociolinguistic phenomenon” (Silverstein 2003: 193; see also Silverstein 2004; Blommaert 2005; Johnstone 2007; Briggs 2018). All these (highly seminal) accounts attempt to model how ideological associations emerge, spread and thicken from (recurrent and reflexive) local practices, and how they are maintained and challenged by such practices.

In this context, the relevance of *re-iteration*, *seriality*, and *citationality* (see Nakassis 2012; Hassemer 2021; Deumert 2021) or *inter-relatedness* (*intertextuality*, *interdiscursivity*, *intergenerativity*) (see Agha and Stanton 2005; Bauman 2004) has been stressed, often with reference to Foucault’s (1981 [1971]) central notion of *Discourse* as a regulated series of events and to Butler’s (1993, 1997) ensuing concepts of *iterability* and *resignification* as well as to Bakhtin’s (1981 [1975]) *dialogic principle*. These concepts attempt to explain how singular practices

connect to “chain-like processes” (Agha 2007: 205; see also Wortham and Reyes 2015) that feed into cultural patterns and metapragmatic associations.

With regard to this nexus, concepts of *social positioning* (Bamberg 1997; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; De Fina 2013; Deppermann 2015; Wortham and Reyes 2015) and *stance* (Du Bois 2007; Jaffe 2009, 2016; Johnstone 2007; Ochs 1996; Spitzmüller 2013, 2015; Thompson 2016) have helped to more precisely pinpoint how local practices of evaluation and inter-personal alignment connect with, and fuel, trans-local values and beliefs.

As far as the attempted connection of “discourse with lived experiences” (Woolard 1998: 27) is concerned, finally, promising new attempts have been made in recent years with the re-strengthening of phenomenological perspectives and their application on the praxis-practice nexus (Bucholtz and Hall 2016; Busch 2017; Jaffe 2016; McNamara 2019). This new interest on the interplay of Discourse, lived experience, subjectivation and embodied action helps to understand how language ideologies are not only distributed in Discourse, and materialised in concrete practice, but also inscribed into human bodies and densely connected with affect (Park 2021; Busch and Spitzmüller 2021).

For the issue at hand, we have invited colleagues to take on these current approaches and to revisit the strand-constituting question of how language ideologies intersect with trans-local discourse, local practice and lived experience/subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> We called for a discussion of how the “much needed bridge” (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994: 72) that language ideology research attempts to build between local interaction and social structure, or practice and Discourse, is construed today, a good four decades after sociolinguistics and Linguistic Anthropology started the endeavour, a good quarter of a century after the bridge-building has been declared its core aim, and a good decade after first traces of corrosion and needs for restoration have been identified. Does the bridge need restoration? And if so, which tools do we have at our disposal nowadays to achieve this in a most solid way? Where, anyway, are the weak points in the construction that would need special attention?

As the responses we received, and the papers assembled here, show, the theoretical attempts outlined above indeed prove to be suitable bases for such a critical revision of the fundamentals. Social positioning, subjectivation, affect,

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1 The thematic issue is rooted in two events: (1.) a colloquium with the title *Language Ideologies: Bridging the Gap between Social Structures and Local Practices* organised by two of the editors (Busch and Spitzmüller) in the context of the 21st Sociolinguistics Symposium in Murcia (June 21, 2016), where a part of the authors presented first versions of their papers. (2.) a PhD Summer School titled *Metapragmatics, Language Ideologies, and Positioning Practices* organised by two of the editors (Flubacher and Spitzmüller) at Vienna University (July 16–20, 2018), where another part of the authors, acting as instructors, presented and discussed the concepts and approaches that are condensed in their respective papers in this issue.

enregisterment, re-iteration, and embodiment were taken up and applied by the contributors, combined with additional concepts such as “indexical calibration” (Silverstein 2021) and chronotopy (Park 2021), in order to show how ideologies, power, the social and the local intersect.

One point that proved to be particularly in need of revision is the micro/macro-binary that determines many imaginations of the gap to be bridged. Here, we connect to current discussions in sociolinguistics that have pointed out that the “micro-macro question” that has haunted sociolinguistics since its infancy misses the complexity, fluidity and dynamics of processes of structuration or institutionalisation. As Heller notes:

Conceptualising social life in terms of a dichotomy implies that there are different types of data for each, equally observable (or not, as the case may be), and that, in addition, the linkages should be identifiable. And yet, empirical work fails to identify such types. (Heller 2001: 212)

In recent times, the notion of *scale* has been proposed as a more appropriate account to structuration (cf. Blommaert et al. 2005; Blommaert 2010: 32–37; Carr and Lempert 2016b; Goebel and Manns 2020), and we take up and audit this proposal here, for the reasons that follow. To begin with, the notion of scale reminds us that no clear line can be drawn between structures and practices, since structures only manifest in practices and practices are always (reflexively) structuring (Giddens 1984). Hence, as Alexandra Jaffe notes:

Language ideological processes are taken to be, not just reflect, processes of social structuration. Language ideologies, like other ideologies, are rationalizations of hierarchical social orders and are thus implicated in their reproduction. (Jaffe 2020: 72)

This reflexivity of language ideological structuration, i.e., the circular interdependency and mutual integration of structures and practices, seems crucial to us. Secondly, the notion of scale reminds us that structures are scalable in terms of contextual, temporal and local scope, as well as in terms of subjective experience. Particularly with regard to the lived experience of language ideologies and linguistic inequality (Busch and Spitzmüller 2021; Deumert 2021) and the “groundedness” (Park 2021) of ideological typifications in concrete spatio-temporal contexts, this strikes us as eminent. And finally, the notion of scale highlights that scales are the result of *scaling* (or “scale-making”; Gal 2016a), a social and ideological action:

[...] the scales that social actors rely upon to organize, interpret, orient, and act in their worlds are not given but made – and rather laboriously so. For *to scale* is not simply to assume or assert “bigness” or “smallness” by way of a ready-made calculus. Rather [...] people use language to scale the world around them. [...] Although things can be made big though

analogy, scale-making always also entails drawing distinctions, between the bigness of a whale's rib and the smallness of a marble, for instance. (Carr and Lempert 2016a: 3)

This also, of course, includes aspects of power and agency since scaling is not done from social *terra nullius*:

Like any ideological project, scaling implies positioning and, hence, point of view: a perspective from which scales (modes of comparison) are constructed and from which aspects of the world are evaluated with respect to them. (Gal 2016a: 91)

This will become apparent in many of the contributions. For instance, the scaling of the phonetically “minima” (in all senses of the word) affricate pairs *č/dž* to an uncrossable border of exclusion Busch and Spitzmüller (2021) report on is the result of a social scale-making process, controlled by the actors who claim power in and over the context at stake.

In this issue, therefore, we take the relation of structure and practice, as well as all things ideological and indexical, to be scalable in the sense outlined (and we are well aware, incidentally, that the analyses of structure and practice we present here themselves involve scale-making from the prestigious academic and observational positions we hold).

Language ideologies and social practice, thus, are not considered here as frames and processes that are to be located at one of two interlinked but separated (and “to-be-bridged”) strata in an exo-discursively or heuristically devised binary opposition (either “the local”/practice or “the social”/Discourse), but rather as two scalable phenomena that relate to, and co-constitute, each other within dynamic scopes whose boundaries themselves emerge from the interpretive process within which they operate. Methodically, hence, the interactive and interpretive (co-) construction of contextual scopes becomes part, rather than the hermeneutic prerequisite, of the analysis. This is the particular take of the scalar approach embraced here as opposed to a micro-/macro-related account to the phenomena.

The contributions to the issue approach the scalability of language ideologies and/in social practice from different points of view and hence focus different aspects of the questions just outlined.

Michael Silverstein opens the discussion with a theoretical review of the metapragmatic dimensions and scales inherent to sociocultural semiosis. Based on a distinction between *implicit* indexical signalling and *explicit* metapragmatic denotation on the one hand, and of *reflexive*, *reportive*, and *nomic indexical calibration* on the other, Silverstein discusses different (interrelated) types and scales of metapragmatic indexicality. He thereby also reconstructs how cultural phenomena emerge as metapragmatic “assemblages” through processes of *indexical signification*, *intersemiotic circulation* and *propulsive emanation* and provides an

elaborated semiotic framework that helps to tackle how indexical meaning is reflexively and dialectically scaled up and down from, and hence (meta)pragmatically calibrated between, the “actual” and the “virtual” in contextualisation.

In his contribution, Joseph Sung-Yul Park focuses on the analytical concept of *figures of personhood*, which he treats as “indexicals of behavior, demeanor, character, or practice that are linked to socially recognizable person types” (cf. Agha 2007) and argues for the attention to time, space, and affect as scalable dimensions of ideological construal which mediate between discursively enregistered typified personae and their enactment in interactive performance. In order to illustrate the analytical potential, the author discusses three distinct examples of figures of personhood: the “incompetent English speaker” in South Korea, the “privileged but empty-headed” *conyo* in the Philippines (Reyes 2017), and the “future-ready graduate” in Singapore. With regard to the topic of the issue, Park demonstrates how stereotypic figures emerge in, and are fostered by, local practices, and how they conversely shape local construals of contextualised action with regard to these three dimensions (time, space, and affect) in flexible ways.

Ana Deumert links reflections on the tensions between micro-macro explanations with the imagination of decolonial futures – exactly on the grounds of coloniality being “a multi-scalar world-system” (Deumert 2021). For this purpose, Deumert offers an elaborate overview of the role of language in revolutionary discourse(s) across time and space, with a focus on South African experiences and practices. She argues for an understanding of the situation as a potential focal point for imagining future worlds and, with Aimé Césaire, for an understanding of the universal as being “rich with all its particulars”.

Drawing on his ethnography in a counselling centre for refugees in Vienna, Austria, Jonas Hassemer describes how individual agency is both contingent and co-productive of institutional and social order. As an exemplary case, he analyses the institutional reiteration of a particular phrase (*We have no apartments*) and its *entextualisation*, *de-* and *recontextualization*, leading to what Hassemer (2021) terms “(meta-)communicative labour”. The author thus demonstrates how the scalability of ideological frames of construal and agency can be tackled by means of revealing how local practices of metapragmatic evaluation, via processes of reiteration and recontextualisation, connect to, and constitute, trans-local indexical chains that frame the actors’ contextualisation.

Brigitta Busch and Jürgen Spitzmüller, finally, propose a scalar metapragmatic theory of the shibboleth as an “indexical border” that accounts for both enregisterment and contextualisation. Their empirical analysis is grounded in biographical reports of remigration from German-speaking countries to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the lived experience with phonologically rather subtle but indexically highly salient affricate shibboleths (*č/dž* and *ć/đ*). Busch and



Spitzmüller identify *discourse*, *performance* and *subjective, lived experience* as three fundamental dimensions that interoperate in the construal of shibboleths by those who are subjected to them (again, in contextually and socially highly scalar ways).

One person is missing, though she was present at both events this special issue has emerged from. She acted as a discussant at the colloquium where our exchange started, and was instructor at the summer school where it continued. And not only that: she turned the crucial screws, inspired and gently, subtly directed our humble attempts to restore the “much needed bridge” between ideologies and practice. For sure, this issue would be so much better if it included her planned contribution. But Misty Jaffe had to withdraw.

Another person is present in this issue, but nevertheless missed. We were glad that Michael Silverstein, without whose work language ideology research would be hard to imagine and whose ideas have inspired so many scholars in the field with his wit and humour, contributed a major synoptical piece to this issue. Yet Michael had to fight a severe and more important battle over the last months, a battle which he ultimately lost to our great grief. This battle did not prevent him from encouraging us to finish this issue and he entrusted us with his contribution for final editing.

With Misty and Michael, we lost two dear colleagues, exceptional scholars and formidable persons. We dedicate this special issue to them.

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