

The Commodification of Language

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Abstract

Although language can always be analyzed as a commodity, its salience as a resource with exchange value has increased with the growing importance of language in the globalized new economy under the political economic conditions of late capitalism. This review summarizes how and in which ways those conditions have a commodifying effect on language and focuses on contemporary tensions between ideologies and practices of language in the shift from modernity to late modernity. It describes some of these tensions in key sites: tourism, marketing, language teaching, translation, communications (especially call centers), and performance art.

WHAT IS MEANT BY COMMODIFICATION OF LANGUAGE? WHY WORRY ABOUT IT NOW?

Publications on the subject of the commodification of language have recently increased, including an edited volume devoted entirely to the subject (Tan & Rubdy 2008). This review article is, of course, also a product of this upsurge. One could argue that we could always have analyzed language in many ways using those terms. Why, then, has attention increased now?

Indeed, Bourdieu (1977, 1982) pointed to the many ways in which language forms part of the symbolic capital that can be mobilized in markets as interchangeable with forms of material capital. How one speaks and writes is one basis for deciding one's worth as a scholar, an employee, or a potential marriage partner. Gal (1989) and Irvine (1989) also argued that the study of language needs to be framed in terms of not only the making of meaning, of social categories (or identities), and of social relations, but also the political economic conditions that constrain the possibilities for making meaning and social relations. They further argue that these conditions underlie ideologies of language and therefore help explain why certain linguistic forms and practices play the role they do in the production and reproduction of the social order and of the moral order that legitimates it. Language, in this view, is not a reflection of the social order but is part of what makes it happen; in that sense, we cannot abstract away from the value attached to linguistic forms and practices or from their links to all kinds of social activities and to the circulation of resources of all kinds that social order mediates.

However, the recent interest in language as commodity points to a specific and emergent form of this exchange value and requires explanation on two levels. One level relates to the extent to which forms of exchange (standardized language for jobs, for example) that used to be treated discursively as matters of breeding, taste, intellectual competence, good schooling,

or rational thought are now treated as directly exchangeable for material goods, and, especially, for money. The other concerns the extent to which the circulation of goods that used to depend (mainly or exclusively) on the deployment of other kinds of resources now depends on the deployment of linguistic resources (for example, in some areas getting a job used to depend on physical strength, but now many jobs require communicative skills instead).

Both of these levels are generally understood to be a feature of late capitalism. Put more generally, what we are witnessing is not a rupture with the ideology of language as a whole, bounded system, consistent with the territorial boundaries of the nation-state and the historical continuity of a putatively culturally (and, often, genetically) unified population, and repository of its distinct worldview, but rather an appropriation and extension of that ideology under new conditions that test the limits of its capacity to explain and orient social activity (Heller 2003, Pujolar 2007). We see this shift, for example, in the way struggles over social difference and social inequality on the terrain of language move away from political frames and toward economic ones, changing the nature of discourses that legitimize power and the nature of criteria used in social selection, and therefore also having an impact on the constraints on access to symbolic and material resources for actors occupying different social positions (Fairclough 2002, 2006; Urciuoli 2008). But because this shift emerges out of the expansion of existing political economies rather than from the creation of radically new ones, commodification remains in tension with formerly dominant liberal tropes of language, culture, citizenship, and nation (Bauman & Briggs 2003, Budach et al. 2003, Alsagoff 2008, Wee 2008, Silva & Heller 2009).

Finally, current shifts commodify languages in two, often competing ways: as a technical skill, manageable through taylorist techniques invented for industrialization (Cameron 2001, 2005), and as a sign of authenticity (Coupland 2003a), useful as added value for niche markets and for distinguishing among standardized

products that have saturated markets (Bishop et al. 2005, Jaworski & Pritchard 2005, Comaroff & Comaroff 2009, McLaughlin et al. 2010). This leads to competition over who defines what counts as legitimate and commodifiable language, over what counts as such, and over who controls the production and distribution of linguistic resources (Heller & Boutet 2006).

The following section of this review discusses the nature of the changes in late capitalism (or high or late modernity) that led to these forms of commodification of language. Specifically, I review the argument that late capitalism consists of the expansion of markets and their progressive saturation, resulting in an increased importance for language in (*a*) managing the flow of resources over extended spatial relations and compressed space-time relations, (*b*) providing symbolic added value to industrially produced resources, (*c*) facilitating the construction of and access to niche markets, and (*d*) developing linguistically mediated knowledge and service industries.

The third section discusses the ways in which these processes are tied to struggles to preserve neocolonial relations on new grounds, that is, how relations of power established earlier in the political, social, and cultural terms characteristic of colonialism and the immediate postcolonial period are being recast in economic terms to relegitimize and preserve them. The national and imperial markets set up in previous centuries still operate, but they are re-framed as collaborative rather than hierarchical and as aimed at economic development and competition rather than at servicing the nation or the imperial center. This act requires the erasure of the problem of who defines the value of linguistic commodities or, more broadly, of who regulates the market.

The fourth section focuses on the tensions between standardization and variability in the space between language-as-skill and language-as-identity, both of which are commodifiable in the globalized new economy. This tension represents a gap, or troubled space of contradiction, between established nationalist

discursive regimes and emergent destabilizations of those regimes. The literature certainly provides evidence of new ways of producing late capitalist subjectivities focused on performances (notably communicative ones) as skills that are marketable commodities rather than as expressions of true selves or of relatively good or poor accomplishments of socially located personae (whether within broad categories such as gender, class, or race or within kinship, institutional, political, religious, or other structures, such as femininity, or fatherhood, or adolescence, etc.). It also provides evidence of tensions around this shift, notably in the zone around attempts to use the taylorist techniques of industrial management to regulate and measure the value of linguistic skills at the same time that older regimes of authenticity are brought in to play in the same endeavor (think, for example, of the native speaker as the gold standard of language learning) or, alternatively, in the development of niche markets and their servicing. These tensions are visible in strategies used to manage them, from the concatenation of forms from formerly distinct spheres in a blurring of boundaries variously labeled hybridity, multiplicity, complexity, polynomia, metrolingualism, or transnationalism, just to give some examples; compartmentalization; irony and other distancing stance mechanisms; and transgression.

The fifth section examines how these processes play out in key language-centered economic spaces characteristic of the globalized new economy (tourism; marketing; language teaching; translation; communications, call centers in particular; and performance art). The case studies cited in this section provide much of the empirical material that serves as a basis for making or testing some of the claims made in the fourth section; these studies are also windows into the processes discussed in the second and third sections.

The final section uses this overview to raise questions about what it means for linguistic anthropology to confront these new forms and practices in terms of both its theoretical framework and its methodological tools. It focuses in

particular on how it has become necessary to engage with the ways in which the processes of late capitalism call into question some foundational ideas about linguistic systems and cultural communities as relatively fixed and bounded, producing some alternative approaches centered on practices, speakers, resources, processes, and mobility.

LANGUAGE IN LATE CAPITALISM

The literature on late capitalism and high modernity points to specific features of the globalized new economy that, commentators have argued, lead to an increasingly central economic role for language, both as the means through which work is accomplished (the work process) and as a product of labor (the work product). The interlocked features in question include (a) capitalist expansion or globalization, requiring the management of communication (involving producers, consumers, and national or supranational regulating bodies) across linguistic difference; (b) computerization of the work process, requiring new kinds of language and literacy skills among workers; (c) the growth of the service sector, in largely communication-based form; and (d) responses to the saturation of markets in the form of the development of niche markets (which require localized approaches often including a focus on linguistic specificity) and of the use of symbolic, often linguistic, resources to add value to standardized products.

Theorists of the globalized new economy, such as Giddens (1990), Harvey (1989), Appadurai (1996), and Castells (2000), have argued that the contemporary era is not in rupture with industrial-era modernity, but rather represents its logical continuation. If the central trope of capitalism is growth, then expansion and intensification are unsurprising effects. One particular issue, however, is concerned with the regulation of expanded and intensified economic conditions, given that industrial-era modernity was predicated on markets regulated by the nation-state. The standardized

and vernacular languages (or dialects, patois, etc.) created by the discursive formation of the nation-state now therefore find themselves in greater conjunction as the “time-space compression,” as Harvey terms it, of intensified and expanded exchange produces breaches in formerly less permeable boundaries, and as the networks described by Castells or the flows and scapes proposed by Appadurai allow for the penetration of those breaches or the evasion of those boundaries (Coupland 2003b). In addition, Castells argues, making these flows happen requires more communicative work than the industrial-era economy required, involving a greater proportion and number of workers. This development is linked, in part, to the outsourcing and off-shoring of the two central features of modern economies: the extraction of primary resources and their industrial transformation.

Gee et al. (1996) have argued that one of the ways in which global expansion was facilitated was through the application of computerized technologies; others (Horst & Miller 2006) have argued that communicative technologies, such as the cell phone, have also played an important role. In both cases, work itself, and the wide variety of activities involved in sustaining the relationships on which the circulation of resources depends, now requires degrees and forms of literacy new to our era.

Off-shoring has also opened up space in the First World for work aimed not just at managing the globalized production and circulation of industrialized goods, but also at producing resources aimed at an increasingly saturated market. Intensification takes the form of pressures toward adding value to goods; this added value can be symbolic as well as material. Sometimes a comb made by hand in Amazonia is worth more than a comb inlaid with gold, and sometimes consuming experiences is more valuable than consuming goods. Intensification is also manifested in the development of niche markets, in which it makes sense to sell targeted products at higher values. In both cases (symbolic added value and niche markets), as discussed below, older nation-state ideologies of language,

identity, and culture are appropriated and mobilized in the commodification of authenticity, notably in tourism. T-shirts with linguistic forms indexing English are also popular items in many parts of the world, as are Chinese-language tattoos or multilingual yogurt labels. (The mocking they engender is symptomatic of the tension between old and new discursive regimes.)

One important result of the many ways in which communication in general, and language and multilingualism in particular, has become central to the globalized new economy is the emergence of language work, and therefore of the language worker (Boutet 2001, 2008, Heller & Boutet 2006, Duchêne 2009). Communication is more involved in moving people and goods around, that is, as part of the work process, but information in linguistic form (think call centers, translations, localization) and language as a form of commodified authenticity are also equally products of work.

In the next section, we look at some of the dilemmas the globalized new economy poses for the nation-state, with a focus on some strategies neo-liberal states have developed to mobilize linguistic capital in the preservation of neo-colonial relations.

NEW FORMS OF EMPIRE? OR THE OLD EMPIRE IN NEW CLOTHES?

Linguistic anthropological literature on post-colonialism often focuses on problems connected to the management of multilingualism by postcolonial elites or on the ways in which former colonial powers have used cultural aspects of language to legitimize continued influence. However, the issues raised above point to a new set of concerns, specifically some newer ways in which former colonial powers explicitly attempt to reconstitute their former empires as economic markets and to recast the former language of empire as a neutral and equitable means for gaining access to the global economy.

Among the earliest critiques of globalization are those about the use of English by British and American corporations to open up markets and create consumers, indeed, to eliminate competition and impose the tastes and habits of the English-speaking world on the rest of the planet in ways that, not coincidentally, leave control of products and their circulation squarely in the hands of British and American English-speaking citizens; this process is often referred to as “McDonaldization.” Phillipson (1992) undertook a detailed critique of the work of the British Council in particular in facilitating such expansion, showing how agencies of the state initially invented as agents of postindependence neocolonialism could be mobilized to good effect in this new form of neo-colonialism (neo-neo-colonialism?) based on market share rather than on the *mission civilisatrice* or development work. Texts such as Pennycook (1994, 1998), Canagarajah (1999), Makoni & Meinhof (2003), Lin & Martin (2005), and Tupas (2008) have pursued this line of inquiry, asking difficult questions about what the possibilities may be for appropriation and resistance and what the consequences are for the formation of postcolonial subjectivities. This inquiry has led to heated debate, particularly in applied linguistics, where the issue of what it means to teach a language, or to be a speaker of that language, is framed increasingly in these political economic terms (Singh 1998, Block & Cameron 2002, Kubota 2002, Pomerantz 2002, Shin 2006, Liddicoat 2007, Martin-Jones et al. 2009, Park 2009; see Language Teaching, below).

Similar work has been done for the Spanish-speaking world (Mar-Molinero & Stewart 2006), notably on the Instituto Cervantes, Spain’s corollary agency to the British Council (alongside, of course, the Alliance française, the Goethe Institut, the Japan Foundation, and, most recently, China’s Confucius Institute). [See Delamotte (1999) on the economic role of the Alliance française in Brazil; on postnationalism, language, and the francophone world, see Dubois et al. (2006), Moïse (2006), Heller (2010).]

Del Valle (2005, 2006; del Valle & Villa 2006) has turned his attention to the mobilization not of such paragonovernmental cultural agencies but of recently privatized corporations in such sectors as the media or transportation. These also, of course, played an important role in state unification and centralization, and now seek to establish new markets in areas of the former empire on the basis of shared language. Thus, the shared language imposed by colonialism becomes available for the maintenance of privileged market control and access under new conditions. Under these conditions, however, legitimacy can no longer be framed in terms of the greater value of the language of the empire, or its greater suitability for the activities of civilization or modernity, but rather in terms of democratic access to a shared market that can respond better to the specific needs and interests of Spanish-speaking producers and consumers than can its English-speaking global competitors. However, the English-language market is sometimes approached from the position of the added value (usually exotic in some way) of producers and products from the non-English-speaking world, drawing on old stereotypes about German efficiency, Italian design expertise, or French romance (Kelly-Holmes 2005; see Marketing and Advertising, below).

The work that needs to be done in the neo-colonial project is thus focused less on the language teaching and translation that was the hallmark of earlier forms of empire (although those remain) than on re-legitimizing those activities and constructing new subjectivities (Gal & Woolard 2001, Urciuoli 2008). Equally important and difficult is the work of managing the debates about what counts as legitimate English (or Spanish, or French, or Portuguese) and who defines it—debates opened up by re-framing colonial relations on a supposedly more equitable basis and by extending the construction of consumers beyond the former colonial elite necessitated by the expansion of capital. Finally, as former colonial powers argue for multilingualism as a way to resist the domination of English, they open themselves up to similar claims from within their own putative zones of

influence and are obliged as much as anyone to cope with the management of multilingual networks of production and niche markets.

STANDARDIZATION, VARIABILITY, AND AUTHENTICITY

The previous sections have outlined some of the ways in which the globalized new economy provokes tensions between standardization and variability and triggers debates over which kinds of language, and which kinds of speakers, have legitimacy or authority, or value as commodities, under these new conditions. Although former languages of empire retain value as a means of controlling far-flung and complex networks, niche markets and symbolically added value introduce linguistic variability, both for managing workers and for selling products. Neo-liberal emphases on flattened hierarchies and flexibility open up the possibilities for staking claims for the value not only of a wide range of linguistic resources but also for the very possibility of being able to navigate them expertly (Gee et al. 1996; McEwan-Fujita 2005, 2008).

An increasingly strong literature on world Englishes (Bhatt 2001, Melchers & Shaw 2003, Rubdy & Saraceni 2006) and the foundation of a journal of that title attest to the by now well-organized claims to redistributing the locus of legitimacy of the language formerly known as English. These efforts can be read as attempts at staking a claim to legitimate participation in a global market on multiple terms. The long-standing debates between France and Quebec over who owns French (Deshaies & Ouelton 1998, Moïse 2006, Heller 2010) also opened the door to similar decentralization in the French-speaking world. It seems increasingly possible to appropriate Marcellesi's ideas about "polynomia" (allowing for multiple co-existing sources of authority regarding linguistic legitimacy; Marcellesi 1989). His idea was originally developed to resolve the contradiction between constructing a Corsican language that could resist the imposition of French on its own terms (that is, serve as an alternate basis for

state-building) and yet still resonate in the ears of Corsican speakers who attach legitimacy to authenticity and authenticity to local ties (Jaffe 1999a). However, his idea now makes sense to speakers far beyond the borders of Corsica who are caught in a similar dilemma, albeit from a somewhat different source.

By the same token, countries formerly concentrated on building their own monolingual nation-states now explore a variety of ways of promoting multilingualism, whether for ease of navigation across national boundaries in supranational polities and markets such as the European Union or simply to compete on global markets (Extra & Gorter 2008, Francheschini 2009). Of course, this new affection for multilingualism mainly concerns access to English, but it also has room to develop commodifiable local or regional authenticities (Alcaras et al. 2001, Pujolar 2006, Le Menestrel 1999). It is also a terrain of struggle because its distribution is usually unequal (and inequitable). In the European Union, for example, the burden of bilingualism is usually borne by the managers of Eastern European branches of Western European companies in search of cheap materials and cheap labor (Nekvapil & Nekula 2006, Nekvapil & Sherman 2009), just as was the case in the internal colonial regimes of Western Europe (Hechter 1975, McDonald 1990) and the colonial regimes of Africa, Asia, and the Americas (Irvine 2001, Errington 2008).

Dilemmas also arise in the management of linguistic resources and practices in everyday life, especially in the world of language work. Attempts to import standardized, taylorist modes of management into the regulation of language-focused work processes and work products encounter both forms of linguistic variability that are simply hard to standardize and conflicting ideologies of the new service economy that emphasize employee flexibility (and hence variability) and niche marketing (hence meeting expectations of customers constituted as variable consumers). Language has been as subjected to taylorist regimes of regulation as have other forms of work, especially through language standardization. However,

as Boutet (2008) points out, taylorist regulation of language usually meant suppressing its use; industrial workers were not expected to talk and were even punished for doing so. Schoolchildren are taught not to interrupt and to leave their minority language at home (if even that). The globalized new economy tries, as discussed in greater detail in the next section, to apply taylorist regulation to language, not always comfortably; and it does so even as, in an echo of the generalized contradictions of late capitalism, it attempts to encourage workers to be flexible, to respond to the specific needs of niche markets, and to manage the movement of resources across linguistically diverse spaces. The commodification of language confronts monolingualism with multilingualism, standardization with variability, and prestige with authenticity in a market where linguistic resources have gained salience and value.

The next section examines empirical ethnographic work in some specific areas of the globalized new economy, work that illustrates the points raised in the previous sections and constitutes much of the empirical basis for it. It considers some reasons why recent work has been concentrated in these areas, reasons concerning economic importance (for example, tourism is often cited as one of the fastest-growing industries today); symbolic importance regarding current shifts (for example, call centers are highly charged symbols of the shift from industrial, white, masculine, working-class first-world culture to feminized and racialized, off-shore production); and discursive importance as sites of reimagining legitimizing discourses of identity.

SPECIFIC FIELDS

This section focuses on five areas of particular salience for illustrating the ways in which the commodification of language is tied to late capitalism, as well as some of the tensions and contradictions of commodifying language. Some, like tourism, translation, marketing, and language teaching, have been around for a long time and had particular forms and values as

products of modernity. Today, they are increasingly involved in the symbolic dimensions of added value (notably in tourism and marketing), in the distribution of commodified linguistic resources (as in language teaching), or both (translation). Call centers are canonical sites of the globalized new economy, producing and distributing information. The attention they attract from the media and from comedians reveals the many ways in which they function as condensation symbols for the tensions of globalization. Finally, performance art serves more directly for the expression of these tensions, commodifying language while critiquing the alienation that it produces, claiming the local and the authentic on a global market for world music, and hybridizing linguistic forms beyond recognition within a globally recognized performance genre.

Tourism

Tourism is one of the canonical growth activities of the globalized new economy (Rojek and Urry 1997). As an industry, tourism has gone from the standardized product (e.g., the package tour) focusing on leisure, to niche markets focusing on heritage, experience (e.g., extreme sports), and the environment. It has become attractive to economically peripheral regions, which are also those from which linguistic minorities were produced by forms of state nationalism inherited from the nineteenth century, and who now seek to commodify politically produced identities (Macdonald 1997, Coupland et al. 2005, Rinaudo 2005). This process is not without its own contradictions because the commodification of forms of language and culture produced under industrial modernity must face new audiences, new publics, and new Others when mobilized as sources of profit. This can be felt as a tension between authenticity and alienation (Taylor 2001), whether in individual subjectivity (Bunten 2008) or more broadly within the frame of a problem of redefining collective projects of political empowerment into projects

of economic development (Phillips 2000, Roy & Gélinas 2004, Moise et al. 2006, Malaborza & McLaughlin 2008, Heller & Pujolar 2009).

Marketing and Advertising

In much the same way as with call centers, language has become central to niche marketing and to the localization dimensions of globalization (Kelly-Holmes 2000, 2005). In particular, it addresses the linguistic and cultural specificities often found in heritage tourism (as a means of both adding value to products and reaching niche markets), as well as the forms of multilingualism symbolic of globalized cosmopolitanism (Sengès 2003, Bishop et al. 2005, Piller 2007). Finally, language emerges as a central element in the marketing of new forms of globalized circulation, notably the market for female labor and intimacy (as domestic servants, caregivers, or wives; Piller & Takahashi 2006).

Language Teaching

Through the various ways in which language has acquired centrality in the work process and work products of the new economy, language has become a commodity itself and, therefore, acts as a resource to be produced, controlled, distributed, valued, and constrained. Language teaching has become increasingly more about this kind of process, as it becomes involved in attempts to control what counts as legitimate language and who count as legitimate speakers of any given language, whether regarding varieties of what is usually considered one language (Urciuoli 2008) or in terms of access to various multilingual repertoires (Martin-Jones 2007). The tension between the ideology of language as a technical, universally available skill and the ideology of language as tied to identity and to individual talent is most evident in this field (Jaffe 2001, Block & Cameron 2002).

One manifestation of this tension is the growth of the language-teaching industry, in

particular in the form of what Yarymowich (2005) terms “language edutourism.” This notion is described as tourism for the purpose of appropriating authentic linguistic resources or of longer-term forms of language learning–related migration that stem from class-related strategies for the building of multilingual repertoires for access to global markets as well as to local ones affected by globalization. As Park (2009) and Shin (2009) have shown in their analyses of the Korean linguistic marketplace, understanding this phenomenon requires examination of the complex interrelations of regional class dynamics and the globalized linguistic market. A second important manifestation is debate over national and supranational language education policy, especially as it relates to bilingual education (Phillipson 2003, Martin-Jones 2007).

Translation

Translation as an activity also grew out of modern ideas about ethnonational boundaries and how to manage them (Jaffe 1999b). Some countries, such as Canada, long accustomed to such boundary maintenance, now seek to commodify their expertise in the service of the management of the more complex boundary crossing required in the new economy: for example, by promoting the development of language industries as an alliance of translators, language-teaching institutions, and developers of translation technologies (Gov. Canada 2003, Silva et al. 2007). As a field, translation is also experiencing the tension between attempts at introducing taylorist management practices (notably through technology, through speech recognition, and through machine translation) and constructing translation as a form of cultural practice (Cronin 2003, Simon 2006), processes increasingly of interest to ethnographers seeking to determine how translation operates as a site of struggle over who controls what counts as legitimate language and over who controls what counts as knowledge (Sturge 2007, LeBlanc 2008).

Call Centers

Call centers, those outsourced, off-shored, centralized service and information distributors, have been among the most heavily publicized forms of new economy activity, generating dozens of newspaper and television reports, as well as documentaries (Stitt 2002, Addelman 2005, Golati 2005, Belkhdja 2006) and even a feature film (Jeffcoat 2007), not to mention more new media satires than one might imagine (one can simply do a search on <http://www.youtube.com> to find such material). From a first-World center perspective, call centers condense many of the threats entailed in off-shoring, feminizing, and racializing labor as symbols of shifts from an emphasis on production of material goods to production of information and communications-mediated services. The disembodied voice has thus become a kind of condensation symbol for anxieties about the globalized new economy, notably regarding the loss of economic control on the part of the nation-state and of those who formerly were its ideal citizens (Larner 2002, Sonntag 2006). From a global south periphery perspective, they may represent opportunity and access to globalization and white-collar jobs or at least economic opportunities that do not require massive labor migration, but often at the high price of the racialization and feminization used in the service of exploitation (Roy 2003, Mirchandani 2004, Taylor & Bain 2005). In addition, as a field, call centers are traversed by tensions between standardization (the famous scripts that call center representatives are expected to follow, the personae that they are asked to perform; see Cameron 2001, Dubois et al. 2006, Cowie 2007), flexibility (in performing a variety of services for a variety of customers at a variety of times; Poster 2007, Rahman 2009) and variability (in the nature of customers and products; Duchêne 2009). These expectations raise issues for both consumers and front-line producers, who are left to manage the resulting tensions in interaction mediated by telephone and computer technology, whether through transgressive

behavior (Chassey & Case 2003, Mulholland 2004) or by a variety of verbal and nonverbal means of compartmentalizing, distancing, or ironizing (or joking, as documented by material found on <http://www.youtube.com>).

Performance Art

Performance art, and notably art forms linked to popular culture and new media (Androutsopoulos 2007), is a final site for working out the tensions surrounding language in the globalized, postnational new economy. Sociolinguists and anthropologists have examined in particular the appearance of multilingualism and linguistic hybridity in the hip-hop cultural sphere, especially as concerns post-colonial and neocolonial sites as well as sites of new labor migration (Gross et al. 1996, Billiez 1998, Davies & Bentahila 2006, Sarkar & Winer 2006, Caubet 2007, LeBlanc et al. 2007). Performance art is understood as a space for reimagining old relations of power through transcending boundaries and breaking old taboos. Although much of this work attends mainly to the ideological dimensions of linguistic practice in this field, these performances must also be seen as commodified products with value on the world market. Their skillful juxtaposition of recognizable authentic (locally anchored) linguistic and musical resources within a standardized globally recognized performance frame (rap and hip-hop) facilitates their circulation while offering a critique of the nation-state from the perspective of the local.

CHALLENGES TO LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

What does this material mean for linguistic anthropology? It certainly poses a challenge for traditional modes of linguistic anthropological inquiry focused on communities and cultures, with its emphasis on the detachment of language-as-skill from language-as-identity in the commodification process in a number of fields and those focused on the importance of flexible combinations of resources within discursive spaces, in individual trajectories, and in the tension between anchoring and mobility that emerges time and time again. This material also suggests that the attention linguistic anthropology has traditionally paid to the fine-grained workings of semiosis in specific sites needs to be tied to analyses of political economic conditions, and more particularly to the circulation of symbolic and material resources, to their active (albeit constrained) deployment, and to the complex interpenetrations of the construction of subjectivities, of categorizations (that is, of social difference), and of relations of power (that is, of social inequality). It provides a new purchase on the classic question of the relationship between social difference and social inequality, principally by opening up the means by which speakers claim ownership of linguistic resources or at least the right to control their production, their circulation, and the value attributed to them. Finally, it argues for a more central place for the study of linguistic practices in approaches to understanding the globalized new economy from a social theory point of view.

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