

### **Bauman STILLA Comments**

The program for this conference displays powerfully the diversity—even, I sometimes suspect, the incompatibility—of the conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and ideological perspectives that characterize the field of teaching indigenous language, even down to the bedrock questions of what constitutes a language, what do we need to know about it to teach it, what does it mean to teach it, what aspects of it are teachable, and other such enduring problems.

This panel gives voice to a particular take on the problem, that of linguistic anthropology, centered on culturally defined systems of discursive practice, a conception of language as socially and culturally constituted, a core concern with the interrelationships that link discursive form, social, function, and cultural meaning, and a methodological commitment to sustained ethnographic research.

So, what does linguistic anthropology, as represented in these four papers, have to contribute to the enterprise of teaching indigenous languages?

Rather than commenting separately on each of the four papers, let me be more synthetic, singling out a few of the most interesting, suggestive, and potentially productive issues that they raise. Regrettably, I can't do justice to the full richness of the papers—lobsters, agoutis, donkeys, pissers, and all.

I won't relate these various points directly to issues of language pedagogy, but simply raise what seem to be the shared foci and concerns of the panelists and leave their implications for the teaching of indigenous languages for discussion, if time allows.

1. An argument for the importance of poetics and performance.

All of the papers focus on discursive forms and practices in which the formal features of the act of expression call attention to themselves and become vehicles for the display of communicative virtuosity and affecting power.

These poetic forms and practices are frequently the most highly valorized, ideologized, resonant, memorable, repeatable, and thus shareable forms in the speech economy of a community.

If we consider that whatever their differences, conceptions of culture are founded on qualities of temporal continuity and shareability, it is not surprising that the poetic and performance forms of a community figure prominently in ideologies of language preservation and revitalization, often framed as touchstones of culture, expressions of the *Volksgeist*, traditionalized repositories of cultural heritage, and the like—the Herderian package.

At the same time, these discursive forms and practices are often among the most formally, functionally, and semantically complex elements in the repertoire, requiring virtuosic skill to produce, and special interpretive work to understand.

All of the papers make a point of the linguistic complexity of poetics and speech play, directing attention to how they exploit what John has called in another context the “wrinkles” in the language and here “ unsuspected capabilities of the code...stretching them to the limits and sometimes beyond”—points of ambiguity, structural anomaly or inconsistency, accidental convergences that bring otherwise disparate elements into conjunction.

The papers deal variously with paronomasia, sound symbolism, and a range of tropic devices (metaphor, irony, allegory, simile, etc.) that involve a high degree of linguistic competence, metapragmatic reflexivity and cultural knowledge.

Is it any wonder that these valued forms and practices are in decline in many of the world’s cultures?

2. An argument for the importance of genre.

Attention to poetics and performance highlights the importance of genre.

Poetic and performance forms are frequently the most generically regimented discursive forms in the speech economy.

To be sure, they are always part of more comprehensive genre systems, extending from the most quotidian and accessible to the most complex, esoteric, and virtuosic.

Genres are orienting frameworks for the production and reception of discourse and for the communicative management of recurrent social exigencies.

That is to say, genres are communicative frameworks for the conduct of particular kinds of social business and for organizing participation in communicative practice.

They implicate genre specific participant structures and participant roles, as Janet points out especially effectively in her paper.

Recognition of the pragmatics and social organization of genre provides a discourse-centered perspective on the relationship between social change and changes in the communicative economy of a speech community.

Especially important here is the possible disjunction between the most culturally valued forms and practices and new social conditions that do not foster their continuity.

### 3. Structures of authority

One question relating to the social organization of discourse to which several of the panelists devote attention has to do with the related issues of authority and authorship.

This comes up with regard to the cultural specialists who are the custodians and performers of the most resonant and authoritative genres in the speech economy, the

individuals invested with the traditional authority to perform, conserve, and transmit the discursive forms that are of special interest to ethnographers and community members alike, at least those community members who are interested in language preservation and revitalization.

The ways in which the regimes of traditional authority come into dialogue with so-called “modern” regimes of individual authorship and regimes of rational/legal/institutional authority are especially salient in considering the teaching and learning of indigenous languages.

Our panelists, especially Joel and Tony, also point up how regimes of authorship and authority shift as speakers of indigenous languages experiment with new and emergent forms of expression in new sociocultural and sociolinguistic milieux, writing out of their urban, educated, multilingual experience.

In some frames of reference, the authoritative may be conflated with the normative and the officially valorized aspects of the speech economy—the polite, decorous, “good” ways of speaking.

All of the papers remind us of the attraction of the playful, inersive, licentious, agonistic uses of language, not often incorporated in the kinds of institutionalized and official programs for the teaching of indigenous—or indeed, any other—languages.

#### 4. Inscription, transcription, translation.

Finally, I would point up the concern, shared by most of the panelists and central to several of the papers, with the problematics of inscriptions, transcription, and translation.

I'll emphasize two sets of issues here:

a. the problematics of intersemiotic translation, or what media scholars are increasingly calling remediation:

--rendering oral speech in written form or fixing spoken language by means of other technologies, such as the televisual and digital media—

\*for preservation, archiving

\*for study and analysis

\*for presentation and circulation

\*for pedagogical purposes

\*for heritage politics

\*for aesthetic appreciation—ethnopoetics—capturing the poetic qualities of the performance on the printed page and in translation

\*etc.

b. the enduring problem of the commensurability of languages

\*grammatical

\*semantic

\*discursive

\*pragmatic

All of these have enormous implications for the teaching of indigenous languages. Point up some of the ways in which ethnographic perspectives are a necessary complement—at the very least—to code-based approaches that focus more narrowly on lexicon and grammar.