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In his monograph, John E. Joseph sets out to explore a variety of topics under the rubric of language and politics; and he succeeds in tying together variegated threads to provide a broad yet coherent introduction to the subject. The book, as part of the Edinburgh Textbooks in Applied Linguistics series, is aimed at a master’s level postgraduate audience. Yet the concise format and accessible presentation make it well-suited for a variety of undergraduate sociolinguistics courses as well. In fact, one of the book’s strengths is its explicit articulation of many ideas central not just to language and politics, but to the study of language in society more broadly.

*Language and Politics* is structured into seven chapters that move from language and nationalism to taboo language and censorship to rhetoric and propaganda. Along the way, Joseph shows that politics is central to the study of language and not merely ‘a trivial epiphenomenon’ (p. 2). He begins with Aristotle’s assertion that humans are by nature political animals due to the capacity for language. Even when we do not intend an utterance to be political, the language variety we speak and words we choose position us in relation to others who draw inferences about who we are and where we fit in society. ‘Interpreting language use in this way is a political act. It determines who stands where in the social hierarchy, who can be entrusted with power and responsibility’ (p. 4). In this way, Joseph argues that all language is fundamentally political.

In Chapter 2, Joseph discusses the importance of language in the modern conception of the nation. As he points out, a national standard language carries significant ideological and symbolic importance in carving out a common identity, as with the case of Hebrew in establishing ‘a strong sense of Israeli nationhood’ (p. 23) or the role of French as a badge of affiliation in France. Of course, defining the boundaries of a language is never a clear-cut task; and the ideas of linguists do not always coincide with those of national groups. To shed light on these issues, Joseph details some common examples that have problematized the concepts of language and dialect – e.g. the ‘dialects’ of Chinese that are as structurally distinct as the ‘languages’ of the Germanic family, and the mutually comprehensible Serbian and Croatian which use different alphabets and are viewed by Serbs and Croats as distinct languages even as structural linguists speak of a single ‘Serbo-Croatian’. From such examples Joseph moves to discuss the ‘politics of
knowledge’ and argues for an anthropological view, which ‘takes a culture’s
own shared traditions of belief about itself as the primary reality’ (p. 26). In effect,
Joseph makes a compelling case for delving into the linguistic ideologies (although
he doesn’t use this term) that members of a national or ‘imagined community’
(Anderson 1991) adhere to in deciding for themselves what constitutes a
language. In other words, ‘the question of what is or isn’t a language is always
finally a political question’ (p. 27). The most effective aspect of this chapter is
Joseph’s historically grounded treatment of this political question. As he deals
with conceptions of both language and nation, he takes the reader back to Dante’s
imagineing of ‘an Italian language’ or volgare illustre before returning to modern
times and the emergence of World Englishes.

Chapter 3 follows nicely on the heels of the preceding discussion of language
and nation. Joseph continues this thread in light of the politics of language choice
and linguistic correctness. Here, he considers the effects of writing in national
projects: ‘Written language has the ongoing effect of effacing many of the levels
at which variation in spoken language is manifested’ (p. 46). The result, Joseph
points out, is the ‘denial of heteroglossia’ (pp. 44ff) which further feeds into the
national image of a unitary standard. Education plays a vital role in shaping that
standard, and this moves Joseph into a discussion of the Bourdieuvian model of
social reproduction. Education is central to language and politics, Joseph argues,
because ‘it is through education that language and national identity are created,
performed and above all reproduced’ (p. 49). Of particular interest in this chapter
is Joseph’s extended discussion of linguistic imperialism as he summarizes the
debate in the English Language Teaching (ELT) community over ‘linguicism’
spawned by Phillipson (1992). He then moves into the related issue of language
minority rights, and ends the chapter with a brief look at the role language plays
in performing minority identities as he draws from Rampton’s (1995) work on
‘crossing’.

Chapter 4 deals with politics embedded in language use. Joseph begins by
challenging the Saussurean ‘idealization of a homogenous speech community’
(p. 64). In doing so, he draws from Voloshinov’s (1973) critique of Saussure to
present language as a dialogic, social phenomenon (Bakhtin 1981). A significant
example that runs throughout the chapter revolves around the classic tu/vous
pronominal distinction to index familiarity versus deference. Joseph uses this
to good effect to emphasize the way the politics of social relationships are
realized through language. He further explicates the linguistic performance of
interpersonal relations with the example of high and low registers in Javanese.
Similar to the choices between pronouns in languages like French, the choice
between High Javanese (Kromo) and Low Javanese (Ngoko) is intimately linked
with political considerations among speakers. Absent in Joseph’s account is
any explicit discussion of indexicality even as he succeeds in providing a clear
explanation of the basic ideas underlying this principle. A highlight of this chapter
is Joseph’s treatment of language change, which he explains through an extended
look at linguistic variation and identity. Since linguistic innovations are always

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connected to particular identities in the social world, Joseph stresses that ‘the place to look for the primary explanation of change is not the language, but the speakers’ (p. 81). In other words, backed by the Bakhtinian perspective of language laid out earlier, Joseph shows how the situated use of language by speakers shapes the language and leads to change, such as the shifting use of pronominal address forms over time.

In Chapter 5, Joseph provides a fascinating discussion of taboo language as he examines the historical conceptions of obscenity, cursing, and swearing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Joseph objects to the ‘catch-all classification of taboo words’ that lumps together these three distinct types of speech acts (p. 87). The literal oath function of swearing, for example, operated as a guarantor of truth in legal settings. Frequent swearing or swearing in improper contexts watered down that function. Thus, ‘common swearing was seen as diluting the sacred magic of the oath, removing the fear of God from the words’ (p. 93). Even worse, according to many commentators of the time, common swearing was seen as ‘a threat to reason itself’ (p. 93). Given the perceived severity of this threat to public life, numerous attempts were made to suppress such speech through legal means. Joseph’s documentation of these efforts leads into a discussion of the politics of censorship and self-censorship. Joseph follows the regulation of speech up through modern times with attention to ‘politically correct’ language and an overview of the existing approaches toward hate speech. The discussion in this chapter provides an ideal platform for launching a classroom discussion on current issues surrounding free speech.

Chapter 6 provides an appropriate continuation of the topics raised in the prior chapter. Here, Joseph excels at bringing together a plethora of ideas often associated with ‘Rhetoric, propaganda and interpretation’, as the chapter is titled, but typically treated less holistically elsewhere. Starting with ideas on rhetoric and truth in ancient Greece, Joseph introduces the Sophists, Plato and Aristotle. Next, he moves to discuss language, thought and reality, weaving together the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis with a résumé of philosophical thought, including attention to the ideas of realism, nominalism, and conceptualism. His discussion does not forget Nietzsche and Foucault as he touches on the Foucauldian conception of power as operating through language to form what is knowable. With the background set, Joseph delves into an extended discussion of propaganda, drawing from the Orwellian description of social control along with the Chomskyian perspective on the ‘manufacture of consent’ in a democratic society. ‘In Chomsky’s view, “Propaganda is to democracy as violence is to totalitarianism” [Chomsky 1986: 286]’ (p. 121).

An intriguing component of this chapter is Joseph’s attempt to reconcile Chomsky’s notion of linguistic creativity with his ideas about propaganda. Joseph motivates this quest as follows: ‘It puzzled me for a long time how Orwellian manufacture of consent could be reconcilable with “infinite linguistic creativity” for Chomsky’ (p. 123). To get to the bottom of this puzzle, Joseph provides an enlightening dissection of Chomsky’s ideas on linguistic creativity. He concludes...
that ‘the linguistic creativity Chomsky calls infinite is on the production side only’ (p. 124). By contrast, the interpretive aspect of language use is highly constrained and finite. In this way, creativity occurs on the part of the speaker but not the hearer. Once a message is produced, the grammar more or less determines the meaning of a sentence. Thus, the lack of creativity in interpretation is what makes propaganda so dangerous in the Orwellian sense. The result of this perspective, according to Joseph, is what he terms ‘propaganda anxiety’. Joseph argues that much more creativity exists on the interpretation side than the Chomskyan model infers. For Joseph, ‘ordinary people do not simply accept what those in power tell them, but question it, are skeptical about it, resist it, appropriate it and tweak it in order to suit their own ends. That is infinite linguistic creativity, in the truest sense’ (p. 126; italics in original).

Of course, Chomsky himself specifically disavows any linkage between his linguistic theories and political critiques, a position consistent with his decidedly asocial view of language. However, Joseph is not alone in attempting to find consistency here. Notably, Chilton (2004) provides a synthesis that comes to a very different conclusion. He highlights the autonomy given to language in Chomsky’s linguistic theories and places this alongside his anarchist political philosophy steeped in individual freedom. Chilton (2004) concludes that ‘it is precisely the generative creativity of language that makes it possible to overcome any supposed Whorfian constraint’ (p. 27). In other words, for Chilton (2004), Chomsky’s linguistic creativity entails the very capacity to resist Orwellian propaganda. But beyond such attempts to reconcile Chomsky’s linguistics and politics, the larger issue centers on the role of language in shaping, constraining, and even determining social actions.

Further exploring this last point, Chapter 7 concludes with an excursus on agency, which Joseph defines as ‘the extent to which one’s actions as an individual are freely chosen’ versus directed/determined (p. 136). Joseph warns against taking too deterministic a view and argues for looking at language and politics as a set of agentive choices balanced with ‘an account of the limits on the choices an individual can make and bring to fruition’ (p. 137). He points to Bourdieu’s ideas as a potential solution for balancing choices and constraints, yet does not delve any deeper into the implications of practice theory for understanding agency. Instead, the bulk of the discussion tends to create a false dichotomy between structure and agency in favor of the latter. Joseph locates agency at the level of the individual who, while not completely autonomous from society, operates with ontologically prior desires and according to rational choices. This perspective seems to variously equate agency with individuals’ free will, resistance (e.g. to propaganda), and intentionality (cf. Duranti 2004) without explicitly probing the assumptions entailed in these conceptions.

Given the book’s focus on the sociopolitical dimensions of language, one might wish for more details on how the actions of individuals are ‘socioculturally mediated’ (Ahearn 2001) in Joseph’s model of agency. Even if one accepts Joseph’s assertion that choices are not ‘determined’ by social structure or ‘hegemonic
market forces’ (p. 144), we still need to understand how such choices are socially constrained and interactionally achieved. Joseph’s emphasis in this chapter on what he variously terms ‘free’ or ‘real’ choices neglects to fully address how individuals negotiate and arrive at choices in a social world filled with constraints. Little movement is therefore made beyond the structure versus agency divide toward understanding the way relations of power impinge upon agency or ‘how social reproduction becomes social transformation’ (Ahearn 2001: 131).

Overall, Joseph’s diverse coverage throughout the book provides a welcome introduction to an array of topics important to the study of language and politics. Any student of language in society is sure to find something of interest within its pages.

REFERENCES


Reviewed by KOENRAAD KUIPER

Canada, like Belgium, is a much-studied polity on the grounds of its well-documented and long history of having two large speech communities (as well