

# Language Dynamics and Change

## Introduction to Linguistic Diversity in Anthropological Perspective

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This issue of *Collegium Antropologicum* represents the edited and peer-reviewed proceedings of the scientific conference on »*Language dynamics and change – linguistic diversity in anthropological perspective*« held in Florence, Italy, July 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup>, 2003, under the auspices of the XV ICAES – International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences. For some time there has been an increasing awareness among the members of the International Union of Anthropologists and Ethnologists that the research on language within the context of anthropology should have a more prominent place within its activities. During the last decade we have often heard expressed, and indeed, many among us have voiced ourselves, the need for more active inclusion of linguistic dimension of anthropology into the work of IUAES, which in spite of its unquestionable importance to anthropological science due to interdependencies between language and all other aspects of human existence has somehow disappeared from its congress

symposia. As a matter of fact, the last IUAES linguistic symposium took place 15 years ago during the 12<sup>th</sup> ICAES held in Zagreb, Croatia in 1988.

Over the last century, however, linguistic anthropology has been developing its distinctiveness as an interdisciplinary field based on the fact that in three main domains of human existence – biological, socio-cultural and psychological, language plays one of the crucial roles in establishing human identity. Drawing from the intellectual heritage and methods of both linguistics and anthropology its goal however is continuity between these domains separately studied within independently established disciplines. Such a broad perspective of language as a central characteristic of human behavior and experience enables the study of various cross-disciplinary topics through the prism of language as related to biology and evolution on one hand, and society and culture on the other recognizing both universality and diversity of this unique human capacity.

In addition to always intriguing questions of the origin of language and its evolution in the context of *homo sapiens*, the role of language in cultural identity as well as the preservation of linguistic diversity along with that of species and cultures due to the global processes of cultural and environmental disruption, have become a major concern to many researchers of various backgrounds. Some forecasts indicate that more than half of the six thousand languages spoken today could disappear during this century. It is increasingly evident that the adoption of an integrated scientific perspective is needed to address these problems. Anthropology lends itself naturally to this kind of work because of its holistic and multidisciplinary perspective, which helps us to recognize interrelationships when they exist. Linguistic anthropologists have never considered language in isolation from the real world but have focused on the multifaceted relationships between language and both its natural and social environment, as well as the interaction of the various languages in contact situations.

A broad understanding of language as an open system affected by outside forces allows interdisciplinary approaches to the exploration of the socio-cultural correlates of language dynamics and change as well as the definition of factors that sustain the vitality and maintenance of languages in their environment in the most diverse situations and regions. Current vital issues such as the biological and socio-cultural functions of linguistic diversity and other relevant themes of language ecology including language policies and linguistic rights, require the interaction between disciplinary boundaries and the abandonment of an atomistic, fragmented conception of specialized disciplines.

Addressing a topic of such a broad interest the scientific session on *Language*

*dynamics and change – linguistic diversity in anthropological perspective* brought together a large number of scholars of human language from different disciplines and from all over the world. A total of 40 papers were presented by participants from 18 countries (Belgium, Switzerland, USA, Canada, Italy, Portugal, Ireland, United Kingdom, South Africa, Germany, China, Russia, Greece, Japan, Mexico, Poland, The Netherlands and Croatia). This symposium was focused on some specific topics related to current existing problems within the field. It was organized in five sessions:

1. Managing linguistic diversity in plural societies,
2. Language and ethnic identity in minority cultures,
3. Intercultural contacts and language dynamics – variation and change,
4. Language and culture,
5. Language endangerment, documentation and preservation.

During the sessions the participants discussed many social, cultural, and political issues related to language diversity and dynamics which were addressed from an interdisciplinary point of view and took into account different demographic, sociolinguistic, legal and educational perspectives. The papers presented covered a broad range of topics – from the opening papers on the results of European language policy and language planning strategies undertaken to resolve, minimize or neutralize conflicts caused by monolingualism and multilingualism within this large new community and those on language rights to an overview of universals and tested principles of language maintenance and language change, whose applicability has been established in numerous language contact and conflict situations in different communities.

A series of detailed case studies on particular previously suppressed language

ges in different places around the world were presented. We heard and discussed papers that explored differences between common conceptual grounds for the notion of language rights in the context of globalization and different discourses of language rights that can have meanings which shift when they are used in global and local contexts, and when they serve as terms of science, public discourse, or governments and funding institutions. The role of the state and the effects of the domination in terms of linguistic market were empirically studied in particular communities (e.g. Ireland) to verify the symbolic relations of power and the hierarchy of values. Within this context, some papers addressed specific language attitudes and language choice in relation to cultural maintenance, accumulation of cultural capital and pragmatic aspirations.

Another important theme was related to the complex issue of language and identity in various multilingual/multidialectal contexts in which language or dialect is often considered to be the most important dimension of social identity and may represent an indicator of group categorization (*us* vs. *them*) and the perception of the other. In this way, the values attributed to language/dialect can be used to promote identity, contrast, affiliation, power or solidarity and provide a means of operationalising the relationship between language and cultural identity. The relative importance of language usage as a component of cultural and/or ethnic identity has been explored in the context of diasporic and minority communities as well as in relation to trans migratory movements. The contemporary mass transmigration has opened alternative cultural spaces for the development of transnational/transcultural identities or hybridized cultural identities related to language policies of bilingualism or multilingualism.

The inextricable link between language and culture was dealt with in a number of papers ranging from specific cultural connotations of meanings and metaphors in various linguistic domains, through reconstructions of ethno-cultural heritage reflected in vocabulary and onomastic material to loan words in particular languages as a consequence of past linguistic and cultural contacts.

Another series of papers focused on the important topic of endangered languages and the efforts undertaken by linguists and communities for their revitalization and preservation. Different methods used in this respect were exemplified by the descriptions of multimedia documentary archives of some indigenous Indian and Siberian languages under threat which allow the preservation of ethnographically situated speech in such communities and recordings of various levels of linguistic competence of the speakers. Such endeavors, however, raise the question of the definition of intellectual property and the protection of indigenous knowledge in terms of human rights in general.

During the general discussion at the end of the symposium questions were also raised regarding some key terms used in the field. Although some of the participants felt that linguistic diversity and language dynamics were perhaps too vague and that they should be redefined and determined with more precision, the majority of the papers, however, clearly demonstrated that they are on the contrary quite well-defined and understood within the context of general human diversity, both cultural and biological, as the central theme to be studied. It was agreed that the support of the maintenance of linguistic diversity and its promotion are worthwhile goals of the field, but only when taking into consideration power relations in each particular context which can influence the meaning of

the central notions of dynamics and diversity.

Some basic ideas that kept emerging throughout most of the papers can be summarized as guidelines for future research. They concern:

- The need to understand better the power relations of language, in regard to language use as in regard to linguistic diversity,
- The necessity to do scientific research within an atmosphere of not only tolerance but solidarity and moral awareness,
- The respect of emic attitudes of speakers of any language or dialect with regard to language policy and the efforts of language revitalization that could accommodate the interests of speakers of smaller and threatened languages,
- The promotion of linguistic diversity as a general value.

Having received a very good response for our linguistic symposium as an evidence of the existing interest in the topics of linguistic anthropology, we have decided that this would also be an excellent opportunity to initiate the establishment of the IUAES Commission on Linguistic Anthropology which would promote this kind of research within the Union in the

future. We are happy that our proposal was accepted by the governing bodies of the Union, and we believe that the Commission on Linguistic Anthropology will play a useful role in providing the forum for linguistically minded anthropologists and/or anthropologically informed linguists as well as scientists from other academic backgrounds, where vital language questions approached from different disciplines could be shared and discussed.

We are grateful to Professor Pavao Rudan, editor-in-chief of *Collegium Anthropologicum* not only for inviting us to edit this issue but also for his encouragement and inspiring enthusiasm in promoting relevant anthropological research. We also thank Lucija Šimičić from the Institute for Anthropological Research in Zagreb both for the work she contributed toward the organization of the symposium and her painstaking preparation of this volume. We trust that the conference, and this issue, will help shape linguistic anthropology more firmly on the international research agenda and create synergy between different academic disciplines. We thank all the participants for traveling long distances in order to share ideas to enable us to improve our understanding and potentialities of this synergy.

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