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Conclusion: Final Thoughts on Agency and Affects

James Costa

In his paper on 'The Economics of Linguistic Exchange', Pierre Bourdieu (1977: 664) wrote that '[t]o forestall any "interactionist" reduction, it must be emphasised that speakers bring all their properties into an interaction, and that their position in the social structure (or in a specialised field) is what defines their position in the interaction'. Bourdieu's approach consistently sought to understand how forms of agency are possible within structural constraints. He proposed that within existing frames, humans develop practical strategies that form the logic of practical action. Strategies are ways for agents to maximise the use of the various forms and amounts of capital (symbolic, social, economic) we can muster, and to navigate within the structural conditions of which they are part. Unsettling those conditions is yet another step, and the articles in this volume show how complex this is in the case of minority language revitalisation. This book is therefore an account of the multiplicity of individual and collective strategies implemented towards language revitalisation in a wide array of Western European minority language settings, and on several different scales – from Griko villages to the Occitan territory comprising a third of France.

Agency is at the heart of this volume. This issue is a particularly fraught one in sociolinguistics (Carter & Sealey, 2000). Despite a number of elegant proposals by Monica Heller (2001) or by Susan Gal and Judith Irvine (2019), the discipline struggles with the micro/macro and structure/agency conundrums. This question is perhaps especially problematic when it comes to language revitalisation: as anthropologists such as Margaret Sanford (1974) have shown, far from representing a form of newfound collective agency, revitalisation movements can be understood as a form of acculturation. A cultural element only ever becomes the object of revitalisation or reinvention because it is deemed valuable by an outside, dominant group which a dominated group seeks to emulate in order to gain recognition from those who hold power (see Costa, 2016, for a discussion of this approach in language revitalisation issues). Language advocates thus find themselves in a particularly tortuous predicament:

while in order to exist in the eyes of dominant group they must adhere to its cultural norms (such as 'having a language' – see Hauck, 2018, for an Amazonian example of what this entails), they are in no position to mobilise the full strength of the institutions of modernity such as the media or educational institutions that ensured the success of their model, the national languages.

Agency in language revitalisation is thus already constrained by the very existence of 'language' as an object (see also the general introduction in this volume), one which language advocates first need to develop – based on a model of dominant languages imposed from outwith – in order to then defend and promote it. There were indeed no language revitalisation movements before the 19th century, i.e. before languages as we know them came to be invented and promoted as the normal form to organise speech in legitimate social spaces. Agency is thus from the onset entangled in issues of (often class-based) conflict and in politics of recognition. What, then, can agency even mean in this situation?

All the texts collected in this volume pose the question of the tension between a structuration of language contact that acts against minority languages and the agency of their promoters. Authors thus analyse the centrality of conflict (explicit, as in the Galician case – and perhaps in the Occitan case too – or implicit, in all other cases) as a central element around which revitalisation is organised. This is particularly palpable through the consistent emphasis across all texts on how those engaged in revitalisation negotiate the centrality of language both in language policy and in the politics of identification (i.e. regarding representational issues), rather than in actual language practices.

This, however, should come as no surprise. As Manuela Pellegrino carefully suggests, in contexts where minority languages are used less and less, there are many ways of putting the language to use beside speaking it. Agency is thus conceptualised throughout the volume as a way of getting into the cracks of structure, and of developing strategies that enable people to become actors. Or, at least, to develop a sense of being able to act in a more satisfactory way, rather than of being acted upon by superimposed structures.

This debate interestingly echoes older discussions in Marxist theory about whether language is part of base or superstructure (Williams, 1977). The position adopted in sociolinguistics since at least the 1970s is that language is no mere reflection of social activity but a form of action, a praxis (Boutet *et al.*, 1976). But while theory of action seems not optional, there can be action without agency.

We thus need other ways of thinking about agency, to understand the dynamics which change the course of structural action –other ways that 'foreground different types of agents' (Kockelman, 2017), and that enable us to conceptualise agency beyond Laura Ahearn's oft-cited definition 'the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act'. As Noémie Marignier (2020:

16) notes, this definition is unsatisfactory because of its vagueness, which leads me to depart further from Ahearn's framework.

The articles in this book do in fact, at times perhaps unwittingly, point to another, more concrete type of agency, namely 'evaluative agency'. As humans we are not only instrumental agents, but also evaluative agents, selective agents: 'agents who not only act instrumentally, but also evaluate instrumental acts in reference to values and, in particular, in reference to values that could be otherwise' (Kockelman, 2017: 19). This does not mean that agents should be seen as free of structural constraints and that they can make pure, rational judgement based on transparent information. Yet, no matter how minoritised the language or small the number of speakers (the Lower Sorbian and North Frisian cases are particularly telling), individuals may also transcend the dominant strategy of shifting entirely to the dominant language to develop strategies to position themselves in society in ways which render the minoritised language meaningful or necessary. However, to arrive at a full theory of this type of strategy, we may need further conceptualisation, the lines of which I suggest below.

This volume is particularly useful for thinking about the vast range of agents involved in revitalisation, from the more obvious (e.g. the language organisations of the North Frisian and Sorbian cases again) to less obvious ones such as the children of the Tús Maith programme in Ireland, too often reduced to passive recipients of language policies decided for them by adults. Cassie Smith-Christmas and Orlaith Ruiséal's study is an especially telling case of how children are, too, evaluative agents who can exert a choice to use the minority language – or not, as Smith-Christmas herself brilliantly demonstrates in her other work (Smith-Christmas, 2014). Sara Brennan's chapter likewise showcases a particularly diverse set of agents involved in various types of activities, including a wider public with little opinion on the language itself – yet voting in thousands in favour of a regional name (Occitania) based on the very existence of the Occitan language. But evaluative or otherwise, agency needs to be understood in terms other than free choice, if only because studies show over and over again that by and large community members are favourable to language retention – as long, presumably, as they are not asked to do anything about it themselves. What, then, drives people to do something for a language (at least when they do not get asked every day what they have done for the language…) (see Ó hIfearnáin, this volume)? What makes them want to attend clubs, organisations and events that promote the use of Galician, Irish – or, for that matter, High Valyrian?

But we must now return to the question the contributors to this book ask. The SMILE team placed agency at the core of its conception precisely because of how difficult it is for language revival movements to alter the rules of the dominant (linguistic) game. The aim of language revitalisation is precisely one of evaluation, a question that runs through the entire volume: why do speakers cease to pass on their language? What makes

non-speakers decide to learn a language? And, an entirely different question, what makes them use it? It seems that we have come full circle, and are left with the same question that this volume started off with. What, to put it more broadly, makes individuals escape linguistic domination, at least as language advocates see it? In several of this book's chapters, one way of achieving this is providing spaces in which agency (i.e. speaking the minorised language) is possible and normalised. But clearly this is not enough, for it offers no explanation as to how people (and which people) end up in those spaces. We thus risk confusing agency with serendipity.

As a way to conclude this commentary, I would like to suggest a way out of the infernal (and unproductive) circle of structure and agency in a manner that could interest scholars of language revitalisation. This way out is perhaps best captured with the notion of affect, as borrowed into the social sciences from the 17th-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza by the French economist and philosopher Frédéric Lordon. A theory of affects derived from Spinoza's philosophy makes it possible to think of affects *not* as a psychological variable (emotions), but in their social dimensions. Affects, for Spinozas are 'affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections'[1] (Spinoza, 1994 [1677]: 154). They are thus the product of an interaction with an other-than-self, that determine modifications in the body and subsequently result in actions (for an accessible introduction to Spinoza's theory of affects see Robinson & Kutner, 2019; and for an introduction of how the term 'affect' could be used in sociolinguistics see Pratt, 2021). How, then, are bodies (people) affected, and by what? Can their power of acting increased in a way that moves them towards issues of language revitalisation, and if so, how?

The question of revitalisation is indeed one of *Ars affectandi*, as Spinoza put it (Lordon, 2013): how are people affected to do something which language advocates, as activists, deem desirable? One might even argue that both the Galician and Irish cases described in the book are about affect, not agency.

One of the outcomes of modernity is to turn speech into what we call a language, that is to say an institution – into an 'affecting machine' (Lordon, 2013) – as well as an object of desire, something potent enough that in order to exist as a collective on a par with other respected collectives (i.e. nations, or autonomous regions) it is necessary to have one. The difficulty, as traditional speakers point out everywhere, is that there already is a *language* in the modern sense of the term: French, English, Spanish, etc. (Aracil, 1975; Costa, forthcoming). Why go through the trouble of having another one, and turn 'what we speak' (as traditional speakers everywhere often refer to their language practices) into 'Irish', 'Galician', 'Occitan' etc.? Language revival movements thus need to arouse desire, and affect other human bodies to act in such a manner as

to desire what is associated with using a minority language: '*homo* is essentially *passionalis*. He does nothing without having been determined to do so, that is to say without having been determined to desire to do it, and this determination has operated in him through affects' (Lordon, 2018: 18). Interestingly, this echoes the first SMILE report, which insisted on the question of desire (Grin *et al.*, 2003).

I have asked seemingly similar questions throughout this paper, but we have gradually advanced from a question interested in 'How can people act in favour of language x or y?', to one that asks 'What makes them *want* to do so?'. It is thus not a question of (inherent) capacity, as Laura Ahearn puts it, but one of being affected (by circumstances external to one's body) to do something. The ultimate aim here is the constitution of a *potentia multitudinis* (power of the multitude, or critical mass) large enough so as to affect in turn – not through choice, but by its intrinsic capacity to mobilise desire – other sectors of society to act in favour of what it stands for. In this perspective, agency becomes the capacity to harness affects and to direct them towards the constitution of the multitude that language advocates seek to bring into being. This is the condition to change the structure of society, and ultimately the individual interactions I opened this commentary with. This, perhaps, calls for the next research agenda for this group.

Note

(1) 'Per affectum intelligo corporis affectiones quibus ipsius corporis agendi potentia augetur vel minuitur, juvatur vel coercetur et simul harum affectionum ideas' (Part 3, Definition 3). https://la.wikisource.org/wiki/Ethica/Pars_tertia_-_De_origine_et_natura_affectuum

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