1 Introduction

1.1 AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE

In an earlier book in this series, Spolsky (2004) began by observing that studies of the social life of language are often too 'language-centred'. Any investigation of language that considers only language will be deficient, and inappropriate limitations and restrictions can cripple insights. This is not a problem for this area alone, of course, but it is especially significant in a context where the hope of application fuels much of the effort. Nonetheless, any cursory examination of, say, the language-planning literature or work in the social psychology of language will quickly reveal an undesirable narrowness of perspective. Studies of 'endangered languages' and 'language revival' seem particularly prone to tunnel vision, to the curious notion that these phenomena can be understood and then ameliorated in more or less isolated fashion. Except in the conceits of 'pure' linguistics, no analysis of language can rationally proceed from a 'stand-alone' perspective. Spolsky writes that

> while many scholars are now beginning to recognize the interaction of economic and political and other factors with language, it is easy and tempting to ignore them when we concentrate on language matters. (pp. ix–x)

In fact, while one still reads too many disembodied, decontextualised and, therefore, essentially useless studies, the observation here is not quite accurate. For some writers – more nowadays than in the past, I would guess – 'temptation' is not an apt term at all, for the simple reason that a more extensive purview seems simply beyond them. For most of those who do have a sense of the disembodied nature of much of the work, the temptation is of course powerful. It is often reinforced by the intertwined influence of career imperatives of the 'publish or perish' sort, and of the relative ease of committing incomplete theses to print. The best scholarship has *always* paid attention to the bigger social picture, however, and has always resisted the temptation to narrowness.

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In this book, as in previous work, I have tried to present something of the bigger picture of which language is an important but not unique element. I have tried to make my points and draw my illustrations from what seem the most interesting and compelling settings, and I have not hesitated to stray from the most well-trodden pathways in the sociology of language. The incentive here derives, in part, from Spolsky's cautionary note, but also from the particular thematic thread that underpins all the specific points that I touch upon in this book. The intent throughout is to illustrate the connections between language and identity, and this implies a stronger focus upon the symbolic and 'marking' functions of language than upon the communicative ones. This, in turn, necessitates attention to the social and political settings without which that symbolism, that group 'marking', would be empty. So, in this case at least, contextualisation is not something whose absence would merely be regrettable; rather, its absence would vitiate the whole enterprise.

1.2 CHAPTERS AND TOPICS

Chapter 2 presents a brief discussion of the way in which 'identity' has become a very popular topic; indeed, the currency here has become considerably cheapened. Fashion aside, however, it is clear that identity is at the heart of the person, and the group, and the connective tissue that links them. People need psychosocial 'anchors': it is as simple as that. It is also clear that identities very rarely exist singly: on the contrary, we all possess a number of identities – or facets of one overarching identity, if you prefer – the salience of which can be expected to wax and wane according to circumstance and context. While my emphasis in this book is upon the identity markers and attributes of 'groupness', I begin by arguing that personal and group identities embrace one another. The elements of individual identity are not unique but, rather, are drawn from some common social pool; there is uniqueness at the level of personality, to be sure, but it comes about through the particular combinations and weightings of those broadly shared elements. On the other hand, the social store in which these elements are found is an assembly of personalities. Limitations of time and space prevent further discussion here – of, for instance, the very old notion that the assembly is more than the collection of individuals, that the societal whole is greater than the sum of the personal parts, that there is a sort of *Gestalt* that summarises but goes beyond specific components. This speculation has fuelled discussions of 'crowd psychology', from the Greek golden age,

to the reactionary impulses of nineteenth-century commentators worried about revolutionary upheavals in the wake of *Quatre-vingt-neuf*, to contemporary social-psychological investigations.

The second chapter further sets the scene by noting some restrictions on the sort of groups that will receive the greatest attention here: those that, if not always completely involuntary in nature, are of the broadest general significance. More attention, then, to ethnic, national, religious and gender affiliations, and rather less to the linguistic facets of membership in voluntary organisations. It is important to realise from the outset, however, that what appear immutable memberships to some may seem more 'constructed' or 'contingent' to others; equally, some memberships that are more self-consciously or voluntarily acquired may involve linguistic features of great depth and importance. This chapter also illustrates the ease with which groups can be created, how their existence can readily spawn 'in-group' allegiance and solidarity, and how manipulation becomes all too possible. Finally, there is some discussion of the depths and dynamics of language repertoires; the general intent is to show how the multiplicity of identities, or facets of identity, is matched by a range of speech styles and behaviour. It is not only bilinguals who have more than one variety at their disposal: if we are not all bi- or multilingual, many are at least bi- or multi-dialectal – and all of us are bi- or multi-stylistic.

In chapter 3, I turn to naming practices and some of their ramifications. This is not a topic commonly covered in books about the language-and-identity linkage, but the discussion clearly reveals the centrality of names and group labels to the relationship. Names influence our perceptions of others, these perceptions then enter the psychosocial contexts in which we all find ourselves, and these contexts contribute to, and frame, both personal and group identities. Furthermore, the choice of names by which we call ourselves can influence those same contexts. In fact, the socially circular reactions of which names are a part constitute a specific example of Herman's (1961) general observation that language influences our perceptions of the setting, and the setting influences our choice of language. Names are important, as are the 'naming narratives' by which we describe ourselves. Consequently, the misuse or the appropriation of names and stories can be both an insult and an attack on identity. At the same time, an extension of the 'voice appropriation' thesis that has appealed in some quarters – that only like should speak or write about like – leads to some immediate problems. I conclude this part of the discussion by showing how 'popular' treatments of group voice and social description are not unrelated to on-going scholarly debate about dispassionate observation versus committed activism, of

sensitivity versus objectivity, and so on. When real identities and real languages are 'at risk', what is the appropriate intellectual posture?

Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion of ethnocentrism and relativism, matters of which naming and 'voice' are elements. Ethnocentrism is surely bad, and the relativism that has acted as a corrective is surely good. And not only good, but often more accurate. How, after all, are we to judge societies as better or worse than one another? What celestial yardstick exists here? And yet, as eminent scholars have argued, a thoroughgoing relativism can lead us into unpleasant cultural byways. Are we seriously to believe, asked Gellner (1968), that a belief in witchcraft is simply an alternative to scientific understandings? Isn't it the case that, given specific matters to consider, we draw non-relativistic conclusions all the time: that, for instance, modern-day Burma is inferior to Denmark in terms of the freedom it allows its citizens? And aren't we right to do so? Gellner also reminds us that societies themselves constantly engage in self-evaluations that involve judgements, not only with other societies, but with themselves at earlier times, times now thankfully in the past. These are deep waters, to be sure, and my conclusion is, simply, that cultural relativism is itself relative. That is, it applies to some things but not to others. A society that believes in witches and practises cannibalism is, I think, worse than one that does not; a society that *used* to believe in witches but no longer does is better than it once was – but why should I also feel obliged to accept that the language of those who eat their enemies is inferior to that spoken by their neighbours, who always turn the other cheek? It is quite possible to argue that, in at least some of their social practices, groups are better or worse than others. It is not possible, as we shall see, to argue that some languages are better or worse than others.

In chapters 2 and 3, then, the discussion is largely concerned with drawing out some of the connections between individual and group identities, considering language and identity at rudimentary levels, pointing out that the general thrust of the book will concentrate more upon the group than the individual and – in the brief notes on relativism – opening the door to the possibility that some aspects of some identities might reasonably be submitted to judgement. In chapter 4, I move more specifically to a discussion of the chief components in this treatment of 'groupness'. My initial emphasis here is upon the distinction between the communicative and symbolic aspects of language. While these generally co-exist in 'mainstream', or majority-group, cultures, they are in fact separable: a language that has lost most or all of its communicative value because of language shift can nevertheless retain something of its symbolic value for a long time. Whether the two

facets are joined or not, it is the symbolic charge that language carries
that makes it such an important component in individual and group
identity. I also pay some attention in this chapter to questions of the
relative 'goodness' of languages, and to the related matters of linguistic
'decay' or 'impurity'. *All* languages, it is argued, constitute valid and
adequate systems for the needs of their speakers; if these needs change,
then languages are more or less infinitely adaptable. But change is not
'decay' and the existence of notions of 'deteriorating' or 'debased' vari-
eties says more about the symbolic and psychological weight with which
languages are laden than about communicative loss or lapse.

This fourth chapter also considers dialect, and it is shown that the
usual criterion by which dialects are distinguished from languages – that
the former are mutually intelligible variants of the latter – is not without
its problems. In fact, social and political considerations are important
here, reinforcing the aptness of Max Weinreich's famous aphorism that
'a language is a dialect that has an army and navy'. The single most
important point of the discussion, however, is that dialects, like lan-
guages, cannot be seen in terms of 'better' or 'worse': all dialects are
fully formed linguistic vehicles. But the social considerations that inter-
vene at the boundaries of dialect and language have their analogues
among dialects too. It is one thing to demonstrate that, on linguistic
or aesthetic grounds, no dialect can be seen as superior to another; it
would be quite another to expect such a demonstration to have much
impact on the street. The power of social convention, attitude and preju-
dice regularly translates difference into deficiency. Dialect varieties that
are simply variants of one another in scholarly eyes – whose description
as 'nonstandard' is a non-pejorative acknowledgement of the histori-
cal forces that have elevated one section of society and, therefore, its
ways of speaking – are popularly viewed as 'substandard', a word that
does not exist in the linguist's lexicon. It is completely predictable,
then, that those at the top of the social heap are heard to speak most
'correctly'.

It is important to realise that the power of perception creates its own
reality, and that dialects broadly viewed as inferior *are*, for all prac-
tical intents and purposes, inferior. This is an insight not lost upon
those who have found themselves the recipients of unfavourable or prej-
udicial assessments, and it accounts for a number of possible actions.
These can include attempts to alter one's dialect or, conversely, to adjust
one's sense of it. The first is obvious: many people throughout history
have, with greater or lesser success, moved away from their maternal
varieties. The second involves, most notably, reworked evaluations of
group pride or self-esteem, evaluations that are typically put in train by

changing social circumstances and possibilities. Such reworkings will inevitably include dialect re-assessment: speech forms that were once, largely on the basis of external perceptions, seen as inferior approximations to 'correct' usage may now become the flags of renewed group solidarity. Their speakers may even exaggerate previously scorned features in this process, and the dialect may become attractive to majority 'out-group' members. All of this is clearly relevant for considerations of identity. Regardless, however, of the evaluations – positive, negative, transitional – made by speakers of their own dialect, that variety can always act as a carrier and a portrait of solidarity and belonging. It may be thought of as debased, or incorrect, or slovenly, or vulgar, but it still links people to their group.

The next chapter moves beyond assertions of the basic 'goodness' or 'badness' of dialect varieties, assertions arising reasonably enough by analogy with languages, to consider some of the important evidence bearing upon the matter. The work of William Labov on American Black English is of pivotal significance here, and I follow a discussion of it with an extended treatment of the continuing perceptions of that speech variety, particularly under the heading of 'Ebonics'. Once again, we are confronted with compelling evidence that links linguistic variation to perceptions of identity. Chapter 5 also shows that some further attention to dialect assessment, beyond standard and nonstandard, will flesh out the overall evaluative picture. This part of the discussion begins with the drawing of an important, but often overlooked, distinction between *attitude* and *belief*, particularly as this applies to investigations of dialect. The basic point here is simply that our understanding of respondents' views (of, say, dialect variants) is less comprehensive than it might – and should – be. The bulk of the coverage, however, deals with the social-psychological dimensions that underpin language and dialect evaluations, and with the ramifications of the observation that such evaluations are really about *speakers*; the linguistic samples that we present for assessment in experiments, as well as those that we encounter in ordinary life, are generally triggers for the production of much more inclusive attitudinal or stereotypical judgements.

Chapter 6 discusses the relationships among language, religion and identity. Although there is a reasonably extensive literature on 'religious language' *per se*, there is remarkably little on the interactions between the sociologies of language and religion – even though it is perfectly obvious that both are centrally intertwined in perceptions and postures of identity. As Bill Safran (2008) and others have pointed out, the relative importance of each has waxed and waned with history and circumstance, but neither has ever lost its potency. If discussion of these

matters under sociolinguistic headings is rarer than one might like, considerations that take a broad chronological sweep are rarer still. That is why, in the section entitled 'God's language – and ours', I try to show how assertions of linguistic primacy, with all their implications for the possession and importance of group identities, can be traced to the earliest of times. This is supplemented by several contemporary examples of linkages made, and linkages hoped for, between language and 'groupness': here the focus is upon Gaelic and Hebrew.

One of the most fascinating, if often worrying, perspectives on the interaction between language and religion is provided by the work of missionaries. They have often engaged in various social, political, medical and other activities, but these would not exist in the absence of the religious motive. Missionary linguistic practices and perceptions also take shape within a closed system of belief. The other basic element in this picture is that of zeal: the effort and commitment involved in carrying some specific word of some specific god to the unfortunates whose religious choices have hitherto been restricted give a particular energy to all aspects of the enterprise. A sense that one is doing God's work typically galvanises all the ancillary undertakings, so that the missionary attitude towards native languages and cultures is similarly fired with a sense of rightness. Such single-mindedness can obviously create great difficulties for those whose cultures are invaded, especially when they are confronted with different religious interlopers. The zeal with which benighted populations are approached is exceeded only by the fierceness among rival missionaries in the great competition for souls.

Specifically linguistic postures are revealing here, and they have historically taken one of two forms. In some cases, missionaries have taught their own European varieties as a prelude to spreading the celestial word; in others, they have taught themselves local languages and dialects. The desire is the same in both cases, of course, and it is rarely accompanied by a thoroughgoing concern for language *per se.* Missionaries essentially had their own way for a long time, with few at home doubting either their beneficent intentions or the value of their proselytising efforts. But when scholars also moved into the field, when anthropologists and linguists began to formally interest themselves in native languages and cultures, clashes of interest immediately surfaced. In an increasingly secularised world, the religious workers were generally the ones forced to find defensive positions. The activities of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) – a Protestant missionary organisation – are highlighted here, simply because of the extremely broad scope of its operations in general, and its linguistic activities in particular. The latter have resulted

in thousands of publications over the years, most of them resting upon research conducted by highly qualified linguists who are, at the same time, missionaries. A zeal for classification, not unlike the great Mormon genealogical project, has produced the *Ethnologue*, a regularly updated catalogue of the all the world's languages; and, just as non-believers can make use of the Mormon record-keeping that has been occasioned by the argument that the dead must be baptised 'by proxy', so even those who are vehemently opposed to missionaries and evangelism can accept the linguistic fruits of their enterprise. My description of the activities and impulses of the SIL is meant particularly to illuminate the effects of outside linguistic and cultural intervention on the lives, and perforce the identities, of native groups. I believe that the chief sustaining features of 'groupness' are exploited and manipulated for purposes quite alien to people who are both susceptible and vulnerable. This makes for a particularly sad volume in the story of language and identity.

In chapter 7, I present a brief discussion of a burgeoning and many-faceted area: the connections among gender, language and identity. The treatment begins with some general remarks about the persistence and influence of gender stereotypes generally, as a backdrop to some more focused attention on language. Why should there exist differences in the vocabulary items used by men and women in some cultures, and what might these differences tell us about wider social roles and expectations – having to do, for instance, with relative power and sub-ordination, with the nexus of kinship, with sanction and taboo? Relatively recent work in western cultures has revealed that although gender variations may sometimes be more subtle than in other societies, and although they may be adhered to with less regularity or vigour, they too provide a window into gender-role variance. An overall interpretation of findings here suggests that some of the specifics of women's speech reflect a greater desire to 'facilitate' and support others, or to take the edge off assertions that, in the mouths of men, might be phrased more bluntly or directly. The much-discussed differences in polite usage, on the one hand, and swearing and profanity, on the other, are of course implicated in this broad interpretation. While it is all too easy to cast matters in unhelpful and inaccurate dichotomies, there seems little doubt that – as both scholarly and popular works have suggested – habitual differences can hinder effective communication between men and women. The words 'habitual' and 'hinder' are important here, however: these are not practices that are inevitable markers of one gender or another, or cast in stone, or of which speakers must always remain unaware; neither are they of sufficient depth or weight that communications of intent are fatally compromised. And, as is the case with

many other settings within the social life of language, the linguistic and paralinguistic variants here are more correctly seen as reflections of underlying variabilities in dominance and social power than as entities having some free-standing or isolated influence.

Chapters 8, 9 and 10 turn to what must really be at the heart of any treatment of language and group identity: ethnonational solidarities. The underpinning of all the specific aspects of the discussion is that the subjective, intangible, non-rational and symbolic pillars of group affiliation are by far the strongest and most enduring. The contribution of particular and more observable markers – most prominently language and religion – can vary widely over time and place, and it is undoubtedly useful for allegiances to have such supports, but none is essential. What *is* essential for the continuation of a sense of groupness is the continuation of a sense of distinctiveness that allows perceptual boundaries to be maintained. As Fredrik Barth (1969) pointed out, the permanence of such borders is much more important than that of any cultural 'stuff' within them. Specific identity markers may come and go, but so long as there exist some affiliative features – objective, subjective or some combination of the two – the frontiers can be delineated. When all belief, of all types, of a boundary between my group and yours has evaporated, then there is only one group. But, as history repeatedly shows, it can take a very long time indeed for this evaporation to be complete.

Discussions of nationalism – and, particularly, of its emergence, its age and its constituents – have increased dramatically in recent years, a fact not unrelated to real-world developments. The interpretation that I defend in this book is that while nationalism as a political force is a more or less modern phenomenon, a cultural arrangement produced and reinforced by radical changes in the old social order, it is not a creation newly sprung from the forehead of political philosophy, not something made of entirely new cloth. On the contrary, it would be better, perhaps, to see it as a 're-arrangement' and amplification of existing elements. Nationalism takes up the ethnic fabric, cutting and trimming it to suit the circumstance, and adding to it the magic elixir of political auton- omy. Every nationalist, then, believes that the borders of the *ethnie* – as some entirely natural division of humanity, and also as some sort of nation *in posse* – should coincide with those of the state. The most just arrangement, then, would be a world of nation-states, in the true sense of that term.

Apart from the arguments that swirl around the provenance and antiquity of the nation, considerations of the virtue of nationalism have proved perennially intriguing. Any form of 'groupness' whose most basic foundations are of the 'blood and belonging' variety is obviously one

that carries a powerful emotional charge. This in turn can be expected
to lead to contact and conflict with others. In fact, of course, if ratio-
nality were to be let off the leash here, even the fiercest of nationalists
would acknowledge similar zeal on the other side of the frontier – and
not merely acknowledge the potency of other national allegiances, but
understand and respect them. Sauce for the goose, and all that. But
perhaps it is too much to expect that solidarities erected, themselves,
on emotion and subjectivity, would be capable of much sensitivity in
this regard. History certainly reveals that a great deal of nationalist self-
definition and identity maintenance is built upon the denigration of the
'other'. This is entangled with the very general psychological tendency
to see individuality and personal variation within one's own group, but
only some indistinguishable and monolithic entity across the frontier:
a variant, indeed, of the classic 'us and them' formula.

But to see national allegiance resting entirely upon blinkered emotion
would be mistaken. As many writers have demonstrated, and as I have
already just hinted here, nationalism can be seen as an arrangement, or
re-arrangement, arising on the shoulders of necessity. If another gener-
ally applicable principle of social existence is that people need affective
psychosocial 'anchors', then it stands to reason that where older forms
fall away, new ones must be found. Thus, as Gellner (1964) observed,
national affiliations do not come about through sentimentality and
myth; they emerge because they are required by the social context. It is
possible, then, to see how sense and sensibility can come to intertwine
as nationalisms emerge, develop and blossom into fully fledged systems.
In any event, whatever we may think of the provenance and the value
of nationalism, it is very clear that it is a phenomenon that, *pace* some
ill-advised predictions, retains a great deal of power in many parts of
the world. Indeed, it is possible to argue that nationalism is undergoing
something of a resurgence, precisely in those areas where it had begun
to weaken. The reasoning here is that large federal political units that
tend to swamp earlier and more localised entities may breed, as a sort of
reaction, a renewed and more regionally focussed sense of groupness. If a
new European Union identity still remains a nebulous or even unappeal-
ing proposition, perhaps it will rejuvenate more traditional affiliations;
perhaps a reworked and much larger political union can co-exist with
much smaller ethnonational allegiances. These are some of the cultural
and political matters that exercise the European mind.

Any investigation of contemporary manifestations reveals, too, that
nationalists are not at all unaware of the dangers lurking in some unre-
strained subjectivity, particularly of course where the power of emo-
tional allegiance is coupled with real social, economic or military clout: