WHAT MIGHT WE MEAN BY ‘MULTIPLE' LANGUAGES OR LITERACIES?

By

Hervé Varenne

Teachers College, Columbia University

There is a classic danger in talking about “multiplicity” in the context of language (or literacy). It is the same danger that has confronted all those who, since the early Boasians, have talked about the multiplicity of “cultures” to be found around the world. And it is a danger that we cannot ignore, if we are to avoid falling into the trap of “multiculturalism” that has been the bane of educational research for the past thirty years.

Multiplicity, whether we like it or not, necessarily implies postulated units, that is “unities” of the same order: thus Benedict appeared to postulate the unity of Zuni or Kwakiutl cultures (1934), S.B. Heath appeared to postulate the unity of Trackton or Xxxx (1983). But we have been taught repeatedly that, in the domain of language, culture, and literacy, any apparent unity is a construction. It can be a native construction with political overtones, like the continuing construction of “French” (from the 17th century onwards, and continuing in governmental attempts to fight the inroads of “English” into the vernacular and the media). It can be a scholarly construction with theoretical overtones, like the writing of grammars for unwritten languages or the reconstruction of possible languages, for example early Indo-European. And it can be a combination of those, as in the case of Irish (Gaelic) in the late 19th century.

If the units that may be multiple in a global city such as New York are dealt with in our research as objects that we further specify (perhaps on the model of Labov’s attempt to
'MULTIPLE' LANGUAGES OR LITERACIES?

constitute “Black English” for certain political purposes), we run afoul of all the theoretical work that has been emphasizing continuity between such forms (and fluidity, hybridity, etc.). Not that we can ignore political constructions like “English” or “Spanish” in New York City. But our task cannot simply be to “deconstruct” these and leave our audiences wondering what this has accomplished (as if the demonstration that something human is, after all, indeed human was a major contribution). Rather our task is to investigate, in the details of everyday life in the streets and in school, the practical consequences of the tension between, on the one hand, old construction that remain very much real (like the layout of the streets, or “English,” or “school literacy”) and, on the other hand, the fluidity of experience where neither parents nor teachers can exactly be sure of which language the children they are responsible for speak at any particular time.

Multiplicity as emerging discontinuities within a range of practices

What are we to do? It is tempting to adopt the vocabulary of fluidity, continuity, uncertainty, etc.. Many have been using this vocabulary recently as they have tried to move “beyond culture” (Abu-Lughod, Lila 1993; Gupta and Ferguson 1992). The world “multiplicity” would thus be intended to index ranges rather than points: English, we might say, merges into Spanish like blue merges into green in the rainbow of human possibilities available on the streets of New York City.

There may be some wisdom in this. It is the same wisdom that reminds us that our eyes are sensitive to a range of light waves; they are not—to speak exactly—sensitive to “colors.” This may be anatomically true but to stop here is to escape what is specifically human about light, and it is that, as light enters communication, it always transforms into (hegemonically con-
‘MULTIPLE’ LANGUAGES OR LITERACIES?

structured) “colors.” Indeed, breaking continuities is the human means to communication. It is the only means available to externalize personal experience and make it available to others. From the breaking of the vocal box into phonemes, to the breaking of speaking practices in New York City into “languages,” the production of discontinuities with consequences is an inescapable fact that must be our concern. All such breaks, of course, are always “arbitrary.” They are arbitrary in the sense that they need not be grounded fully in non-communicative “reality.” They are also arbitrary in the sense that they are enforced by various political powers. The breaks could have been placed in difference places, and they may have been enforced through different means. What is essential, for communication, is that some discontinuity be constructed or, better, “constituted” (since the word indexes both construction and politics). We know that these discontinuities will leave gaps and will hide aspects of “reality.” We know that patterns of discontinuities can be enforced using different means. As scholars we must pay attention to these zones of darkness, to the political means, and to the price individuals will pay when they are caught having to deal with such patterns. And we must do so for analytic as well as ethical reasons.

The fact that it may be through the constitution of discontinuities that all political practice proceeds is not to be taken however as giving us license to study any of the units so constituted by themselves. On the contrary, it requires us to explore the set of the discontinuities that can be shown to be locally consequential.¹ In this perspective, the emphasis on “multiplicity” is not an emphasis on pluralized units but instead on the unity within which discontinuities are

¹ As we will be explained later, the word “consequential” in this context is more exact than the word “meaningful” given the confusion induced in all discussion of the meaning of meaning in the 20th century by the fact that it can index both the Weberian “verstehen” and other forms of deep empathy some anthropologists have presented as the goal of their analyses, and also, the structuralist position that communication is dependent on systems of differences.
used and thereby reconstituted. In the case of language, it means that we can only study “English” by itself in the context of a local monolingual polity. In a place like New York City, the unity of constituted discontinuities would require us to study “English/Spanish/etc.” in the multiple interactional modes that the reality of the discontinuities allow—say, having fun on a Saturday night, or electing one’s candidate in a city-wide or national election.

This of course is a call for expanded versions of what Hymes called “ethnographies of speaking.” But we must move from a purely descriptive emphasis, to a search for practical consequences both a priori (what kind of world makes a particular type of utterance sensible? What does the speaking take into account?) and a posteriori (what world does an utterance constitute for future speakers to take into account, even if only to resist what was constituted). This is a call to a definite turn to the most local of settings where people interact face to face and where consequences are actually meted out. It is only through such close ethnographies that we can hope to go beyond both our own common sense (as everyday participants in New York City) and the common sense of our informants. By starting with local, mutually constituted, multiplicities we index our postulate that there are many more ways of speaking or reading than are generally recognized and we allow for these to become visible through our work. The issue is, first, to recognize that, to stay, with “English/Spanish,” it is not simply a matter of facing two languages (or two ethnic groups, or any finite number of nationalities) but rather a multiplicity of forms and practices that have arisen in the historical encounter between what may have been separate earlier. “English/Spanish” is not two languages but one emerging and still self-organizing system. The issue is, second, to identify which of these ranges of forms and practices actually become consequential for whom and when.
On distribution of personal participation in the various positions constituted by the organization of multiplicity

There is a further and more subtle problem here that we must now face. Let us say that our research agenda will focus on organized sets of discontinuities characterizing a population for certain purposes (e.g. residents of District X in NYC). This leaves us open to the common sense interpretation that this characterization is a property of the persons (all, some, significantly more than in other populations) that may make up this population. Theorists of language or culture have often refused the social psychological implications of this common sense, but, so far, their formulations of alternatives have not been quite convincing. My solution is to work with consequentiality (what difference does something make for co-participants) rather than distribution (how many exhibit behavior A or B). In this perspective, whether language/culture changes individuals through internalization remains an open question for (socio/cultural psychologists to elucidate). The anthropological question now focuses on the impact language/culture as it is externalized (used, played with, etc.), and thus as it can be observed in the unfolding of everyday life. The research questions then become:

1. Is a particular way of speaking/doing publically recognized as “different” by any one in the audience (whether positively or not);

2. Are some members made to pay some consequences (or receive specific rewards) for their performance (or lack thereof);

[actual vs. labeled consequences...]

[on multiplicity-1.rtf – v.1.0 – 2/1/05]
3. Is it possible to specify the mechanisms for entry into, to simplify the two sub-polities implied by the first two questions: first, the polity of those who pay the consequences or receive the rewards (the reference to the first would be “degradation ceremonies” and to the second to all that has been written about “peripheral legitimate participation”) and, second, the polity of those who mete consequences and distribute rewards;

The case studies could involve, in a mostly poor neighborhood, strongly marked musical styles like rap as it has become one in a range of ways that is politically real (factual), or elite academic success (from parochial schooling to Harvard).

Modeling a kin group of reference

The somewhat abstract considerations\(^2\) above are meant to help me deal with the situations I expect, based on our current knowledge of diasporic lives in NYC. I model a kin group with members across local and national boundaries making lives that use all the resources available in all settings.

I model, say, a Dominican man arriving thirty years ago in NYC with some English learned in school, skills as a plumber, married with a child on the way, and an extensive set of kin relations in the Dominican Republic. Besides knowing some English, this man would have some sense of dialectal variations in the DR (and possibly some Haitian Creole as well); his wife would

\(^2\) Most of these considerations are developed further in several of my publications with Ray McDermott (McDermott and Varenne 1995; Varenne and McDermott 1998; McDermott and Varenne forth; McDermott, Goldman and Varenne 2005).
‘MULTIPLE' LANGUAGES OR LITERACIES?

not know any English. In NYC, this man parleys his plumbing skills, and his ability to organize work teams drawn through kin relations in the DR, into a small contracting business that place him in regular contact with mostly Jewish real estate management companies in the Bronx and Harlem. During that time, his wife develops some English, three more children are born and are sent to various schools. They speak mostly Spanish at home, the children start bringing home various modes of popular genres. One of them gets in trouble and is sent home to the DR to complete his schooling. There are tensions between the parents and the wife goes back to the DR with the two younger children, while the other two, now teenagers, come back to NY. One is given a scholarship to a Catholic High School, the other drops out of the public high school and may be involved in illegal activities: the two brothers do not interact much. Etc....

The idea here is to realize that all such complexities have a linguistic and literacy aspects and that the multiplicity of possibilities that we are concerned with are not simply a matter of differences across broad groups, but rather of the everyday constitution of differences within local groups using the available symbolic material available through the major institutions local actors enter into (school, work, media, etc.).

A model for the schools available to such diasporic populations should also be built so that we can continually keep in mind the multiplicity of schooling possibilities (public, parochial, back to the home country, etc.)–even though many in the population may not have the financial resources to avail themselves of it (“not being able to afford parochial schooling” is structured by the availability of such schooling). We should also imagine the generation of differences within large schools–whether they are “multi-ethnic” or heavily dominated by one “group.” We know that in both situations student bodies differentiate themselves using scholastic
and media symbols. These patterns of differentiation then interact within kin group differentia-
tion.

In conclusion

The issue here is not only to preserve the reality of multiplicity but expand it radically by emphasizing the indefinite number of local possibilities. Having demonstrated the range of these possibilities, we can then focus on the structural constraints that limit what can be said and impose identifications (say Spanish vs. English, Black vs Hispanic, etc.) that remain completely real even as one resist them, or appropriate them, or otherwise play with them.