
Interactional methodology for endangered language documentation

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Interactional methodology for endangered language documentation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Researchers have long used methods such as direct elicitation, complemented by recordings of speech such as narratives, to document languages. While these methods can be useful, they neglect the fact that they place language in an artificial context, isolating language practices from their natural setting within interactions. Studying language-in-interaction not only can provide rich linguistic descriptions of a language, but is also an essential way for a researcher to study SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS, as these representations are actualized within – and structure – language practices.

Semi-structured interviews, for instance, are a means for researchers to collect data on social representations of language, while retaining language-in-interaction, throughout which participants can negotiate representations and roles. These negotiations can then be analyzed by the researcher using discursive methods in order to determine the participants' adherence to representations, as well as evolving ways in which they position themselves, and others, throughout the interaction. The case study presented in this paper, on a language spoken by a small community in South India, uses this methodology in order to study how members of the community negotiate social representations which were introduced into the interaction by the researcher (myself) presenting an outsider perspective on languages and language communities. A preliminary result, as demonstrated in the analysis of an extract, shows that certain representations of language and communities, such as conceiving them as bounded and essentialized entities (Dobrin et al. 2009), were not strongly adhered to by interviewees.

Social representations of language and their intimate relationship with language practices are a way of understanding how 'ordinary' actors in a localized context interpret and construct their reality. Studying social representations of language, in conjunction with other ethnographic methods, can help researchers discern the evolving nature of both social representations and practices in localized contexts and how activities of language documentation and revitalization can fit into these contexts.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & METHODOLOGY

2.1. Theoretical framework: social representations

The notion of social representations was first introduced by Moscovici (1976 [1961]) in the field of social psychology. Inspired largely by Durkheim's concept of collective representations (Moscovici 1976 Gillespie 2008:375), the reformulated notion of 'social representation' was also developed as a way to transcend the long

held dichotomy between the individual and society, and as part of a move away from behaviourism and the individualized view of ‘attitude’ that had gained ground in psychology (Farr 1994; see below). Taken up and expanded on by researchers in social psychology in Europe and more recently elsewhere (e.g., Abric 1994, Jodelet 1989, Moliner 2001, Parker 1987), the concept has also attracted considerable attention in other fields, particularly sociolinguistics. In this field, however, the term is still employed with a certain amount of variability and ambiguity (Petitjean 2009:40-41). Only recently has the concept of social representations been defined more explicitly in sociolinguistics¹ and methodological questions have started to be addressed (see notably Petitjean 2009, Matthey (ed.) 1997, 2000, Py (ed.) 2000a, 2000b, 2004, Gueunier 2003, Tabouret-Keller 2004, see also Mondada 1998).

Social representations of language can thus be defined as forms of socially elaborated and shared knowledge which individuals and groups use to interpret, organize and co-construct their common linguistic reality through and within contextualized verbal interactions (Petitjean 2009:67). In this dialogical view, social representations are an integral part of the interactional history of the individuals and the social group in which they are produced. Yet they are reproduced, reformulated and modified by participants in each successive interaction, as each interaction is a unique situation in which representations are brought into circulation. Social representations thus have several purposes: they enable communication between members of a group, as well as allowing individuals and groups to interpret and construct the reality surrounding them. Individuals and groups can thus orient and accommodate their behavior and relationships with others towards this reality (Petitjean 2009:39, Gillespie 2008:377, Py 2004:10).

Social representations are fundamentally dynamic; however, they can reach a certain level of relative stability within discourse. Py (2000b, 2004) refers to relatively stable representations as ‘social representations of reference’ (*représentations sociales de référence*), as opposed to ‘social representations of usage’ (*représentations sociales d’usage*). The latter are representations which are highly dynamic and contextualized. This distinction is also apparent in that members of a community are able to communicate through their *access* to social representations, but they do not necessarily *adhere* to these representations (Py 2004:10; Petitjean 2009:67).

2.2. *Why study social representations?*

Understanding social representations is essential because of their relationship to social practices: a relationship which has been debated at length. This study considers representations as a means of constructing reality and orienting practices towards this reality, but also as being actualized through language practices, therefore the two notions are considered as determining and being determined by each other, and therefore must be studied together. Thus, if one wishes to understand language practices which may be considered to be ‘endangered’, representations constitute a key element to the relative vitality of practices themselves, whether representations

¹ Influenced by e.g., interactional linguistics, ethnomethodology and other disciplines.

are considered as a type of language practice (Mondada 1998) or as an entity actualized through language practices (Py 2000b, 2004, Matthey 2000). Of course, social representations and practices, along with the reality they interpret and construct, are constantly evolving.

Literature on language endangerment is generally concerned with ‘attitudes’ (e.g. Giles, Bourhis & Taylor 1977, UNESCO 2003, Baker 1992:9, Bradley 2002, Gardner-Chloros 2007). However, this notion is seldom explicitly defined, which makes it difficult to define a protocol with which to study it. In addition, attitudes as defined in psychology are a more individualized notion than social representations and are not necessarily shared by a group; methodologies used to study them reflect this theoretical position (Farr 1994, Fraser 1994; see definitions in Baker 1992:11 and Garrett 2010:19). Thus, the concept of social representations approached from an interdisciplinary theoretical framework and methodology is appropriate to endangered language research.

Social representations of language can be studied by language endangerment researchers as a means of bridging the gap between themselves and speakers of a language. In addition to – and combined with – other ethnographic approaches, qualitative studies on representations can help determine support for language endangerment activities in a very contextualized, local manner (among individuals in a community at a certain time and place), something that is often ascertained more generally without detailed study. This method can also help researchers evaluate the evolving form of representations and language practices and elaborate new, pluralistic models of language ‘vitality’.

2.3. How can social representations be studied?

A variety of approaches are used within the different domains in which social representations are studied, depending on the theoretical framework adopted. The point of view maintained in this sociolinguistic study is that social representations are only actualized within discourse and must be studied through this medium. Traditional techniques, such as written questionnaires and surveys using closed formats are still widely used in sociolinguistics (see, for example, a review of French language studies by Maurer 1999:181 and Barbéris 1999:126), as along with techniques such as attitude scales (Baker 1992:17). However, these are not adapted to studying social representations, as they do not provide a context in which representations can be constructed and modified between participants in an interaction. This study therefore aims to use a technique that would: (a) provide a space in which asymmetrical roles could be adjusted and repositioned throughout the interaction and (b) consider the researcher as a participant in the co-elaboration of representations. These representations can be introduced, reformulated, modulated, and appropriated to various degrees by all participants in the interaction.

Different techniques have been used to study both the interactional process in discourse and language as the object of social representations. While representations can be studied through conversation, a large amount of data would be needed to study particular representations. There are also practical and ethical issues with recording (Matthey 2000:26). Thus, more structured techniques have generally been chosen in

sociolinguistic studies (such as Matthey 2000, Petitjean 2009, Py 2000b, Serra 2000); in these cases the semi-structured interview or debate. These methods remain instances of fully fledged interaction in which the researcher participates as an interactant, as opposed to surveying methods. The studies presented in Py (2000a), for instance, use semi-structured group debates which allow the participants to negotiate representations amongst themselves, starting from an initial question or statement (*déclencheur*), a type of representation of reference, introduced by the researcher (Py 2000b:10,14).

3. CASE STUDY

3.1. Introduction to the field study

The qualitative methodology described above was used in the case study of a language spoken by a (traditionally) hunter-gatherer adivasi² community, the Kattu Nayakas or Jenu Kurumbas³ (KN/JK). They are commonly said to reside in the north-western part of the Nilgiris District, Tamil Nadu, India, as well as in adjoining parts of Kerala and Karnataka (see Figure 1; Bird-David 1989, 1997, Lewis 2009). The KN/JK have lived in close contact with other communities in the forest area, which formerly covered the entire lower plateau of the Nilgiri mountain range (also called Nilgiris-Wynad), for hundreds of years (Bird-David 1989, 1997, Demmer 1997). Under British colonization in the 19th century, the first tea and coffee plantations were established in the Nilgiris⁴ and British forest policy began to be implemented, laying the foundation for ideologies on state control over land use and ownership that were perpetuated in post-colonial India.⁵ After several decades of intense migration to the Nilgiris-Wynad area combined with land/forest management issues, resulting in major changes to the landscape as well as political battles, the KN/JK are now also facing the effects of recent legislation which applies to the national park in which they live.⁶ The KN/JK language is cited by UNESCO as ‘critically endangered’⁷, though the criteria used for this classification are not made explicit.⁸

² This is a term used for indigenous communities in India, usually used as a synonym for the term ‘tribe’ or ‘tribal [community]’. There is much contention over terminology and its political implications (e.g. Abbi 2008, Bêteille 1998, Mahias 1997, Schleiter & de Maaker 2010, Xaxa 2005).

³ I consider Kattu Nayaka / Jenu Kurumba one of the ‘Kurumba’ languages in this paper, though this is far from unproblematic (e.g. Demmer 1997 and Bird-David 1989, 1997; also Hockings 1989 & 1997, Singh 1997, Zvelebil 1981).

⁴ See Hockings 1989, 1997 for a detailed historical account of the Nilgiris.

⁵ See Menon et al 2009, Bird-David 1997 on the Nilgiris, Guha & Gadgil 1989 and Sivaramakrishnan 1995 on British forestry and land management in India.

⁶ See Taghioff & Menon 2010 for current political battles over areas in the Nilgiris-Wynad.

⁷ <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/index.php>, accessed 10 September 2011, listed as ‘Kuruba’.

⁸ It appears that purely quantitative data (number of speakers) have been taken into account, i.e. the

Figure 1
The Nilgiris (adapted from Maps of India)



data on 'Kurumba' from www.ethnologue.com. None of the denominational issues (footnotes 2 and 3) are addressed.

3.2. Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study is based on the view that representations can potentially appear in a relatively crystallized form in certain types of discourse (i.e. Py 2000b, Matthey 2000, Serra 2000). This methodology is itself informed by a research protocol I developed during and after an initial three month period of fieldwork and research in India. Inspired by *déclencheurs* used in a very different space (Petitjean 2009, Singy 1996, Py 2000, in Europe), I nevertheless attempted to adapt the questions to the local situation. However, I included questions that I was aware of belonging to my own cultural matrix, i.e. so-called ‘Northern’ countries. The adapted questions, of course, retain my social representations as well, with or without my awareness of this. However, I attempted to objectify these in the interviews by avoiding the use of the first person pronoun or by attributing them to members of the interviewee’s community. The interviews were thus conducted, and only after the fact did I analyze my own questions and their links to representations of reference held in a different sphere, i.e. ‘Northern’ countries.

Multiple sources were used to identify representations of reference, essentially those that can be considered as part of a ‘discourse of language endangerment’ articulated by actors in the endangered language movement, as well as sources taking some distance from this discourse (UNESCO 2003, Nettle & Romaine 2000, Duchêne & Heller 2007, etc.). Two representations of reference were addressed in particular: language defined as a bounded entity, and language as a defining feature of identity. These representations do not appear precisely in the same form in each text, but they are often used with a minimal amount of reformulation, appearing in a ‘stereotype’ form, and thus can be considered as having a certain amount of relative stability.

As explained above, representations are grounded in the interactional history of the individuals and the community in which they are produced. As endangered language discourse is mainly produced and circulated among ‘experts’ in Northern countries (myself in this case), the discourse of ‘ordinary’ speakers of endangered languages, especially in non-Northern contexts, has been neglected. In this study, I thus introduced representations into interactions with speakers in a different contextualized space than my own.

Due to different practical constraints, I opted for semi-structured interviews with a limited number of participants: myself, a (non-professional) interpreter, and one or two interviewees, rather than a debate. The three interviews composing this corpus (2h30min of audio) were transcribed phonologically and translated (word-for-word and free translation) by a KN/JK assistant working with me. The norms used were inspired by those of the DELIC corpus of spoken French⁹, but were modified due to different constraints presented in my bilingual corpus. The corpus was transcribed in Word and ELAN, and it will soon be accessible in the DoBeS archive.¹⁰

⁹ <http://sites.univ-provence.fr/delic/corpus/index.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.mpi.nl/DOBES/>

3.3. Analysis

According to the theoretical framework adopted, this corpus was analyzed using various discourse analytical techniques (Marquilló Larruy 2000, Petitjean 2009, Py 2004, Serra 2000, Vion 1992). After the corpus was transcribed, I studied the interactions to determine both specific discursive activities (e.g., indexical pronoun use, reported speech) and how these were used in processes of categorization and the construction of metaphors. I also considered more general conversational strategies (e.g. overlapping speech, parallel sequences) employed by the participants. Participants used and combined different strategies to position themselves with regard to a representation of reference; they also positioned themselves in terms of their roles in the interaction and used strategies to legitimize these roles.

4. PRELIMINARY RESULTS

An extract from the first interview in the corpus shows certain discursive activities and strategies used by participants with regard to the initial representation of reference proposed. After the first two minutes of the interview, which begins with questions about the names, ages and living situation of the interviewees, I ask the following question:¹¹

- (1) (1:58) L0: mm ok thanks um so first uh what do you call your community + so
 LT: um
 L0: what is your name

The act of naming is constitutive as well as framed by the social representations of the individual or group who names (Tabouret-Keller 1997). This representation emerges from a larger representation of reference in the interactional history of Northern countries: that of distinct and identifiable social and ethnic groups (see footnote 3). However, Demmer remarks that the idea of a society functioning around a collective institution cannot be applied to the KN/JK (1997:165). With this observation in mind, the following extract was analyzed.

¹¹ L0 = the interviewer (myself). LT = the interpreter ; LF = interviewee (woman), LM = interviewee (man). Transcription conventions: + pause, overlapping speech, : lengthened vowel

Original transcription

LT: naŋga: + naŋga makkane + naŋga ella makkane
 naŋga dʒanane + yanandi kərivadi avarne
 LF: yana
 LM: naŋga: sinna makkane ah kūsəndi hēlitevi
 LT: adi kanena
 LM: mm
 LT: naŋga:: ah::+ **nājkəmarella**
 LM: mm
 LT: avarne + naŋga ella dʒanane + yanandi kərivadi
 avarne
 LM: poduva:
 LT: poduvayi
 LF: ā ja-
 LM: poduvayi: ah um dodɖavarne: naŋga + anna
 LT: uh adi kane
 LM: ante kane
 LF: poduve
 LT: janane
 LF: ah dʒanane
 LT: **yava yava dʒana dʒana hesari**
 LM: **dʒana hesari nājk**
 LT: nājk
 LM: **čola nājkə endihēlidari**
 LT: čola nājkə
 LF: ah

Free translation

LT : our + our children + all our children our
 people + what are they called
 LF: what
 LM: our: small children uh babies say
 LT: that's not it
 LM: mm
 LT: our: uh: **nayaka people**
 LM: mm
 LT: they + all our people + what are they called
 LM: generally
 LT: generally
 LF: those peo-
 LM: generally: ah uh the elders: we + brother
 LT: uh that's not it
 LM: it's not like that
 LF: generally
 LT: people
 LF: yes people
 LT: **what what is the people people's name**
 LM: **the people's name is nayaka**
 LT: nayaka
 LM: **"chola nayaka", that's what is said**
 LT: chola nayaka
 LF: yes

This extract was examined to show how this representation is negotiated by both the interpreter and the two interviewees. The man interviewed does not strongly adhere to the names that he is nonetheless uttering. As an interviewee and friend of the interpreter, he fulfils a role to provide information and uses cooperative strategies in doing so. All the while, he maintains distance from the representation itself.

5. CONCLUSION

This study shows how interactional methods can be used to study and document endangered languages. The case shown here, in which representations with strong links to a Northern context are introduced into an interaction with members of a community in India, show that researchers cannot assume that their representations are shared by speakers of a language. In addition, adherence to a representation is not transparent in discourse; discourse analytical methods can shed light on the dynamic way in which actors construct their representations of language, through language. The relative stability or 'vitality' of language practices and representations can be approached by interactional methods and analysis, though these practices and representations must be seen as part of a contextualized interaction. More generally, this method may help researchers both to document a language in a detailed manner and to further understand how speakers construct and interpret their linguistic reality and future.

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