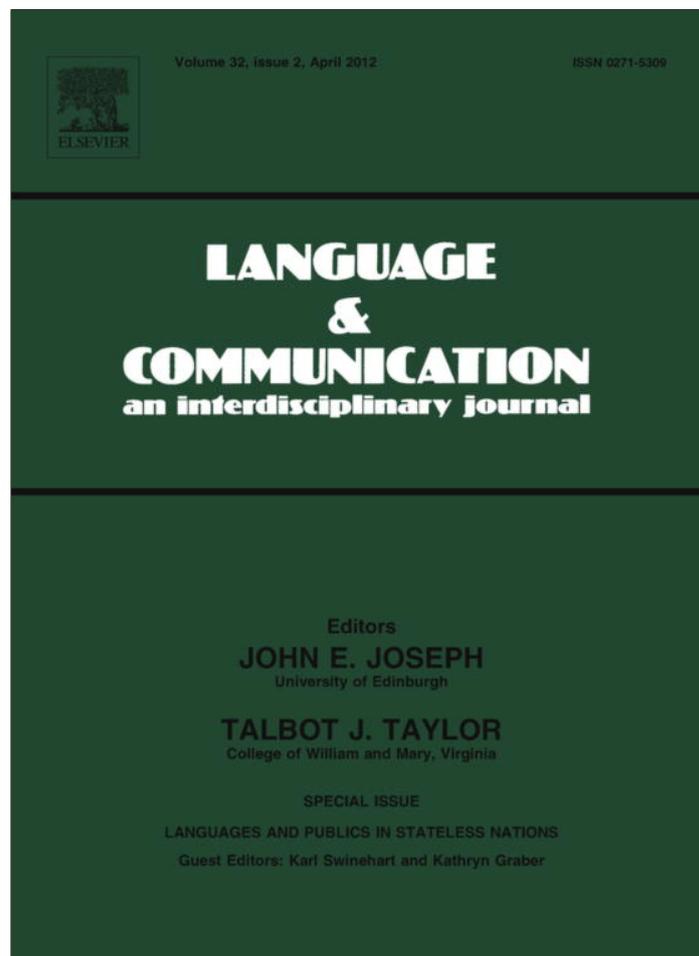


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Mediatized projects at State peripheries

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ABSTRACT

The articles in this volume discuss identity projects that unfold through the communicative activities of organizational employees (journalists, teachers, lawyers, etc.). These activities are organized in each case by specific protocols of communication whereby categories of personnel (or organizational wage-labor) describe and address target populations through emblems linking specific languages and cultures to each other, to those they address, and to populations elsewhere. The localespecific vividness of these emblems and their indexical selectivity for target populations (whose purposes they appear to serve) tend to obscure the mediatized practices that give rise to them, and the uptake formulations that recycle them.

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1. Introduction

The accompanying articles describe institutional projects that link the thing called “language” (Agha, 2007a) to specific populations and their practices in order to re-make social groups. We see a diversity of institutional agents and agendas, of forms of success and failure, and of outcomes unforeseen by those whose projects these are. In each case, the use of a language variety is linked to a wider array of performable diacritics, the array is internally motivated as a diagram whose parts motivate or imply each other, and a composite sketch of attributes is disseminated as an emblem of group distinction through institutional discourses organized into value-projects, participation frameworks, and protocols of communication.

When a speakable language is part of the emblem, it is often an unspeakable register of the language (one that is no-longer, or not-yet, or not-often, or, indeed, *never* spoken by very many) that is made salient in typifications of the group’s attributes (its “authentic” past, its habits, its hopes, its entitlements) by practices that rely on specific ways of describing social groups, but also of addressing them as groups, whether explicitly or implicitly, as populations of certain imagined kinds. Such protocols of description-and-addressivity organize the reflexive work of mediatized institutions of every kind (Agha, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c)—including the ones discussed here, such as schooling (Peery),¹ social science (Muehlmann), the law (Berson), tourism (Smalls) or what we nowadays call the “media” (Swinehart, Graber). And when institutional discourses are cycled through organizations that rely on the activities of their employees, the organization’s collective work depends on a mediatized division of labor internal to it, where distinct employees carry out communicative tasks tied to occupational positions of wage-labor (and to occupation-differentiating goals and ideologies), and where the coordination of specialized tasks itself increases the effectiveness with which institutionally configured emblems are disseminated to, or become enregistered for, the populations they reach.

Institutional discourses give the cultural forms they disseminate a degree of fixity and salience through their own protocols of communication. Yet since emblems disseminated at State peripheries tend to lack the degree of naturalization they acquire at the center, a comparative glance at the cases documented here allows us to see that focusing on institutionally salient cultural forms readily obscures the processes of uptake and recycling through which they are remade by those

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¹ Citations of author name without year of publication refer to the articles collected in this special issue.

who encounter them, whether in acts that repurpose them to new institutional projects near and far, or renovate them in the more varied forms of footing characteristic of social interaction in everyday life.

2. Assimilation by analogy

In the New Deal era of Navajo language planning (Peery), language documentation is often conceived as apolitical by linguists, yet viewed as politically charged—in fact, “assimilationist”—by Native Americans. Since the Standard Navajo implemented through language documentation is modeled on the idea of a Standard English, political formations that exist outside the reservation become models for political processes inside it. Here is assimilation by analogy (in the sphere of politics, not phonology), namely, an analogy between external and internal norms of institutional conduct. In mainstream US society, Standard English informs public discourse in a variety of institutional spheres—politics, law, education, and commerce, for example—configuring them as elements of a national public culture. If a Standard Navajo is modeled on it, Navajo society becomes an analogous partial of mainstream society. In particular, if a Standard Navajo imports analogous criteria for discursive conduct into tribal government and education, such criteria facilitate the calibration of distinct spheres of local conduct with each other, and of local politics with national politics. And, if a school curriculum is devised to normalize Navajo language use, literacy in English can also be imported through that schooling, equipping Navajos to seek jobs in the US labor market, allowing Navajo labor to be exported into the larger US economy. And, conversely, as oil and mining corporations begin to extract natural resources from the Navajo reservation, these corporations can now more easily find countable and appraisable units of “human capital” on the reservation itself, now available as local labor inputs to global trade.

Standardization also ventriloquates Standard social roles into a population through a variety of mediatized text-artifacts, such as dictionaries, classroom texts and newspapers. Whereas dictionaries and grammars normalize the Navajo denotational system (lexis and grammar), schoolbook primers normalize Navajo social types by linking them to this Standard, often introducing new figurements of familiar social types—such as “the herder”—now depicted as speaking the new Standard Navajo when taking sheep to pasture. The Standard speech register is indexically linked to Standards of entirely distinct kinds, including those described in text-artifacts written in Standard speech. When the school primer depicts “the herder” as someone who has internalized the government’s conservation policies as her own, its instructional use in classrooms ventriloquates this sociopolitical persona into student learners through language drills. Meanwhile, newspapers not only disseminate Standard register by writing news stories in it, they depict graduation from government funded schools (and thus competence in Standard Navajo) as a gateway to new job opportunities (in bakeries, foundries, factories and the military), making these options available as a package deal—as a metasemiotically configured diagram of motivated partials, each a type of conduct, each implying an other as its analogue—to readers seeking employment, introducing new possibilities of achievable personhood into Navajo repertoires of conduct.

Yet such hybrids also enable forms of footing quite distinct from those they are designed to promote. Such a “dialectic of norm and trope”—as I have termed it elsewhere (Agha, 2007b)—makes intelligible, and therefore performable, a far greater variety of roles and relationships than any stereotypic emblem implies, including countless forms of propinquity and othering, sameness and difference, closeness and distance, in the entextualized scenarios of lived experience. Yet seeing this requires looking beyond the value-projects and protocols of specific institutions to the kinds of uptake that follow in the activities of those exposed to their work.

In the African-American Gullah/Geechee community of South Carolina (Smalls) two prestigious private schools offer distinct forms of assimilation by analogy to two distinct target populations—urban middle-class students (Avery School) vs. rural poor students (Penn Normal School). Yet both schools leave out Gullah language instruction from their curricula. Rather than re-configuring a minority language on the model of a mainstream Standard (as in the Navajo case), these mediatized institutions purvey the mainstream Standard directly to their clientele. Although the curricula of both schools conform substantially to wider US norms, they adapt them to different target markets: the Avery school teaches classical languages to students from urban middle class families, while the Penn Normal School offers vocational training in carpentry, cobbling, and blacksmithing to children of the illiterate poor. These differences schedule their alumni along distinct occupational trajectories of wage-labor.

The omission of the language of their homes (Gullah) from their education is grasped in tropes of split identity by school alumni: while the Gullah spoken at home is merely a bad or broken English, the “good English” they learn at school is a gateway to jobs, and to assimilation into mainstream society through entry in its places of work; and yet Gullah remains available as a cryptoglossic register of in-group communication among African-Americans even in the workplace, enabling private exchanges among Gullah speakers in the presence (and earshot) of white people.

By the 1940s, both Avery and Penn Normal have failed as commercially viable schools, and have themselves, in turn, been assimilated into institutional projects of culture preservation and revitalization, in which Gullah/Geechee speech rises to salience within new institutional projects (and communicative protocols), even as fluent speakers decline in number. Avery and Penn Normal remake themselves as “cultural centers” that rely on semiotic artifacts such as museums and archives (rather than curricula). They become mediatized institutions of a different kind: their new communicative labor (disseminating “Gullah heritage”) is authorized by a new commoditized structure due to a newfound eligibility for Federal funding. Museums make salient what curricula once sidelined. And they are re-mapped and re-scaled. Today, they exist no longer as mere school buildings in Charleston or St Helena Island, but as potential tourism sites along the greater “Gullah/Geechee Cultural

Heritage Corridor” of the US National Park Service, a corridor stretching from North Carolina to Florida. And the diacritics of African-American heritage to which they now link Gullah/Geechee speech include a much wider array of performable behaviors—basket weaving, religion, worldview, techniques of carving, quilting, and fishing—each capable of uptake into specific mediatized products and experiences as items available for purchase in a tourist economy.

3. Language expertise and its uptake in media and law

As the emblems through which groups are allocated widely recognized identities and attributes are reconfigured by shifting institutional projects, the individuals who have stakes in these identities may experience anxieties about their own place in the social order, or about the loss of entitlements accruing from attributes they hitherto thought they had. New projects often employ new metasemiotic procedures for reckoning diacritics of social difference, or bundle them together in new ways, and the institutional discourses through which such projects unfold often make new diacritics (or new bundles) salient as emblems of belonging to those they address. When the emblem includes among its diacritics the thing we commonly call “a language,” there is always the hand of some social category of language expert in the making or remaking of its parts, even when it remains largely an invisible hand to those who encounter its work.

For instance, talk of language diversity and its loss in discourses of language endangerment (Muehlmann) presupposes the countability of languages, which, in turn, presupposes boundaries between discrete languages. How are these boundaries formulated, particularly in regions characterized not by a trans-regional Standard but, as is typical in the periphery of every State, by a network of inter-related dialects that partially overlap with each other in an almost continuous chain of locale-specific variants? Even under these conditions, some communicative varieties stand out in relation to others. Varieties employed in commerce across a region, or those used in towns that are hubs of regional commerce, tend to become salient through trade itself. These varieties are often the ones first described by linguists, and such descriptions invariably transform the object they describe through the act of description. Once a locale-specific variety is represented in print-artifacts of an appropriate kind—grammars, dictionaries, chrestomathies, and the like—the existence of the print-artifact confers upon the language it represents certain social attributes that other varieties lack. The artifact fixes the lexico-grammatical boundaries of what it describes; the commercial circulation of the artifact through points of sale brings news of the bounded object to readerships in many locales; and the relative durability of printed artifacts (compared to uttered ones) tends to preserve the bounded object over time.

The print-artifact is a mediatized object that laminates a process of communication on a process of commoditization. It is a readable object, and hence communicates something to readers near and far. It is a commodity designed to reach a target market, whose manufacture (through print technologies) and sale (through retail circuits) brings news of the bounded object to buyers at varying degrees of institutional remove from it (collectors, curators, archivists, librarians), whose activities, in turn, alter the social domain of the semiotic regularity itself, simply by altering the sociohistorical scale at which persons can encounter the object formulated in its pages. And, as its fragments are recycled and rebundled across diverse practices and purposes, the “object” is itself transformed in a variety of ways. When this rebundling is cycled through diverse institutional protocols—of schooling, the press, the law, etc.—too fond a focus on ideologies that differentiate institutional protocols from each other obscures the partial congruence of their presuppositions, and, indeed, the forms of likeness that make their efforts mutually intelligible to each other.

The diverse projects discussed in these articles—those of Aymara radio stations, Buryat newspapers, Gullah heritage centers, Navajo schools—all orient to a common idea, namely that “social kinds” of persons can be scooped out into discrete chunks by treating a particular kind of emblem—a “language–culture–people” hybrid—as a composite yet partible unit of collective identity, and that populations can be mobilized to diverse social ends by addressing them as units of this kind.

When we consider how this hybrid comes to be configured in modern European law and, through the legal frameworks of European settler states, finds its way into diverse colonial locales (Berson), we encounter it as a general problem of transnational law, namely the question of how certain legal entitlements (the right to self-determination, land ownership, and the like) are conferred upon some but not other kinds of social collectivities. And when we see that, in each colonial setting, various kinds of language and culture experts—whether the name of their social category be “linguist” or “anthropologist” or “judge” or “civil servant”—struggle to describe the diacritics of this emblem for the hinterland at hand (e.g., Australia: totemic affiliation? single-parent-language descent? custodial rights to land?), and tend to assign scientific priority and legal authority to different diacritics at different times, we glimpse a more complex division of institutional labor (involving scientists, statesmen, and others) that articulates and disarticulates social groups by employing distinct official criteria for recognizing and enabling them as groups at different times.

What institutions like the law appear to do on a trans-national scale, other mediatized institutions attempt to do infra-nationally, rebundling and recycling “language–culture–people” hybrids into locale-specific variants, and, sometimes, into variants whose addressee-design is motivated by an organization’s attempts to ensure its own commercial survival. In the case of the Bolivian radio station RSG (Swinehart), which originally employed Aymara broadcasting to promote Spanish literacy and Catholicism, the rise of grass-roots Aymara nationalism in the 1970s suggests the need for a new “language–culture–people” hybrid within its own protocols of communication. Aymara language programming is now promoted as “the cultural expression of the people,” even though the forms of Aymara employed on the airwaves differ substantially from those in which “the people” speak to each other in everyday life.

The register of Aymara employed on RSG airwaves is metadiscursively termed a “pure Aymara.” But what does “pure” mean here? Spanish (but not Quechua) loanwords are effaced from lexical repertoires and replaced by neologistic Aymara forms. The neologistic forms selected as samples of Aymara purity are either alleged to be the speech of rural speakers today or, with the help of Aymara dictionaries (written by 17th century colonial priests), are forms imagined to have comprised everyday Aymara speech prior to Spanish colonialism. The task of purification is delegated to the radio station's Aymara Language Department (ALD), whose personnel employ a specific protocol of surveillance and speech rectification, called *Seguimiento*: First, all RSG broadcasts are routinely monitored; then, deviations from purity, their date of utterance—along with “correct” forms—are recorded in a ledger; finally, each deviating member of the broadcasting staff acknowledges his or her offence by signing the ledger, vowing not to repeat it. Although the normalization of the airwaves proceeds one employee, one offence and one correction at a time, its cumulative effect is to transmit, through the daily routines of RSG broadcasting, a set of neologistic Aymara forms which, when they reach their radio listeners, become widely enregistered as samples of an Aymara more authentic than the one its listeners speak.

In the Buryat case (Graber), different institutional projects of nation-making themselves orient to different construals of the “language–culture–people” hybrid at different times. To Buryat political activists prior to 1917, the creation of a Standard Buryat language appears necessary to the task of remaking a primordial Buryat ethnicity into a national public; yet the absence of a Buryat newspaper hampers this goal. Later, in the early Soviet era (by which time, local newspapers exist in peripheral regions, but are regulated by centralized Soviet authorities), Leninist projects of assimilation attempt to reorganize the Buryat nation through communicative protocols somewhat analogous to those through which FDR's New Deal found its feet among the Navajo. Buryat newspapers formulate their readers as analogues of citizens elsewhere; although they print language lessons in Buryat (apparently seeking to maintain the language), they also link the use of Buryat to new state-sponsored techniques of animal husbandry (cf. the Navajo's “little herder”). And a variety of other mediatized texts depict Buryat literacy as indexically linked to occupational and civic roles—of tractor drivers, city builders, city dwellers—thereby seeking to assimilate the speech habits of a peripheral minority into local emblems of national modernity. Finally, today, now that Buryat literacy has been eclipsed by Russian literacy among the Buryat people (despite the goals of earlier projects, ironically enough), contemporary newspapers can neither easily find fluent-and-literate Buryat speakers as staff, nor presuppose Buryat proficiency among their readers. The Buryat language has become emblematic of a culture and a people to which you can belong without language proficiency. Peppering your (fluent) Russian with bits of (disfluent) Buryat gleaned from newspapers is akin to attending as a radio listener to the pure Aymara you do not speak, or visiting Gullah/Geechee lexemes housed in museums and archives along a heritage corridor—all ways in which aligning to the language fraction of a hybrid conveys something about your relationship to its other fractions (its people, its culture). And as long as these fractions survive durably in print and digital representations they remain available for uptake in State discourses of collective heritage or national diversity, but also in social movements along the periphery, in which locale-specific populations acquire stakes in them as emblems of their own particularized identities.

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