Unequal Personalities: Language Education and the Politics of Difference

Ms. Sara Nyssen

Ghent University

Ms. Katy Highet

UCL Institute of Education

Language is often perceived as an expression of a particular personhood and, by extension, a reflection of one's personality – the 'chaotic' multilingualism of the early 20th century Macedonians as indexical of their 'disorderly' psyche, being one example (Gal, 2013). Different ways of speaking are therefore seen to reflect different ways of being that are linked to forms of morality. In educational contexts, 'personality' is used as a discursive trope to justify the unequal valuation of individuals' linguistic behaviour as well as to point to a type of persona that acquiring certain languages and registers allows them to be. Yet, 'personality' in this context is often understood as a psychological, and thus individual, phenomenon, rather than social and ideological.

This panel is concerned with how the concept of personality is mobilised in language learning contexts. Drawing on various ethnographic studies, the papers will explore how language learners and teachers in different institutional and geographical contexts perceive the influence of personality on language learning, and how moral evaluations are tied to particular languages and personalities. Through this, we will examine how, and under what circumstances, certain languages or registers are seen as linked with particular personalities or traits. In addition, contributors will address how ideas about the link between language and personality, and the moral evaluations connected to them, are connected to wider histories and structures of race, gender, colonialism and class. By critically investigating the idea that language is a transparent expression of an inner personality and by addressing its moral dimensions and the structures connected to it, this panel will explore the social, economic and political implications of the notion of 'personality'.

References

Gal, S. (2013). Tastes of Talk: Qualia and the moral flavor of signs. *Anthropological Theory*, *13*(1–2), 31–48

Keywords: personality, language learning, personhood, morality, ethnography

1. Communicating care: ideologies of personality and morality in a language course for migrant job seekers

Ms. Sara Nyssen

Ghent University

In Flanders (the northern, officially Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), as in many other contexts, language is considered crucial for migrants' professional integration in their host society. Therefore, the Flemish employment agency organizes specific programs for newcomers, which traditionally put a strong emphasis on Dutch language learning. This contribution will focus on one of these language courses, which prepared non-Dutch speaking job seekers for an education and job in the care sector.

Based on ethnographic research in this course, I will demonstrate that knowledge of Dutch was by no means the sole criterion for selection and evaluation in the course. Students were expected to possess particular characteristics in order to be recognized as good (future) care workers, which, I will argue, reflects moral, gendered and racialized understandings about care work. These characteristics were often inferred from students' communication style or from their approach to language learning. The specific traits that students were expected to have, and the general importance of personality in the course, show particular moral ideas about care work, which are linked to the history of care as a religious occupation.

Furthermore, the understanding of personality as closely intertwined with communication and language learning is based upon the idea that language is a transparent expression of one's inner way of being; being caring was seen as part of an individual's unique personality. However, I will show that although being caring was thought of as very individual, it was also associated with certain groups of people, in particular women and people from certain ethnicities. I will argue that such an individualistic view on personality erases its connection to particular histories and power relations, which affect who can be seen as a legitimate care worker, and, ultimately, get access to employment in the care sector.

Keywords: *personality, care work, language learning, communication, migrants*

2. English learning, academic labour, and the making of a professional in higher education

Ms. Yu (Aimee) Shi

UCL Institute of Education

This paper examines the professional trajectories of doctoral students who move from China to the UK's higher education. In contrast to much of the existing literature where attention is paid to how social actors mobilise various forms of capital to engage in transnational education migration, I focus here on what these trajectories do and how they help constitute specific global circuits of knowledge and labor. It aims to describe the semiotic arrangements that not only constrain PhD candidates' ability to move in space but also shape how moving impacts on their relationship with larger regimes of citizenship (Ong, 2006). Adopting an ethnographic sociolinguistic perspective, I follow two PhD candidates at a prestigious university in London. By documenting their language use in a range of institutional settings, it hopes to provide a nuanced account of the negotiation of meanings and contradictions in higher education through close exploration of their discursive/semiotic practices and the models of personhood indexed by them. Data analysis will focus on the enactment of a professional persona with personal traits expected to perform in situated communicative events through the acquisition of a specific set of discursive registers, with language also being a meditational tool when they reflexively talking about transnational experiences. I argue that for these participants becoming a professional is mediated by a process of semiotic "scripting"(Cameron, 2000) in which (English) academic standards play a crucial role in the moral evaluation of their performance. This process requires continuous English learning that is aligned with the formation of a self-enterprising subject and which enables global circuits of transnational academic labor and the forms of social hierarchisation that come with them.

References

Cameron, D. (2001). Good to talk? London: SAGE.

Ong, A, (2006). Neoliberalism as exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Keywords: *transnational academic labour, English learning, professional persona, semiotics, space*

3. The Construction of the 'Right' Multilingual Learner-Citizen in Scientific and Institutional Discourses on CLIL

Ms. Caroline Staquet

Ghent University

This paper aims to analyse the learner personality which major scientific and institutional discourses on CLIL construct. Since the mid-nineties, CLIL has been promoted under the auspices of the EU as the ideal educational solution for the fabrication of multilingual citizens for Europe's 'Knowledge Society'. Similarly, an extensive body of research has credited CLIL with numerous extralinguistic benefits (e.g. enhancing learners' future employability). Yet, critics have recently pointed to the obfuscation of sensitive issues in CLIL literature, notably the (un)desired pupil-selection in CLIL tracks and the use of CLIL to promote solely prestigious languages (Sierens & Van Avermaet 2014).

In this paper, I critically show that CLIL has not been egalitarian from its very inception. To do so, I analyse a key hybrid document on CLIL, i.e. the Marsh (2002) Report. This EU-funded report was authored by the founding father of CLIL, David Marsh. Since 2002, the report has been abundantly quoted and validated as a scientific source in CLIL literature. Firstly, I unveil how the report covertly constructs certain selective learner characteristics as prerequisites for future CLIL learners, despite its claim that CLIL is egalitarian. Secondly, I unravel the linguistic capital which the report constructs as the 'right' repertoire to equip CLIL learners with.

In my conclusions, I discuss how uncritical valorizations of multilingualism in applied linguistics contribute to conveying institutional language ideologies, hence legitimizing social inequalities in late modernity.

References

Marsh, D. (2002). *CLIL/EMILE-The European Dimension: Actions, Trends and Foresight Potential*. Public Services Contract DG EAC 36 01 Lot 3. Brussels: European Commission.

Sierens, S. & Van Avermaet, P. (2014). Language Diversity in Education: Evolving from Multilingual Education to Functional Multilingual Learning. In Little, D., Leung, C. & Van Avermaet, P. (Eds.), *Managing Diversity in Education: Languages, Policies, Pedagogies* (Vol. 33). Bristol: Multilingual Matters. 204-222.

Keywords: CLIL, scientific discourses, international organizations, language policy, language ideologies

4 English and the Morality of Personality Development Training in India

Ms. Katy Highet

UCL Institute of Education, University College London

Much research on the high symbolic value of English in India has highlighted how the language indexes education, wealth, high-status, intelligence, progressiveness, politeness and success. Such indexicalities, in addition to the belief in English as a tool for social mobility, have fuelled the desire to acquire English, resulting in an increase in cheaper English-medium schools for those unable to afford expensive education. Yet, there is a growing understanding that the linguistic capital of English is no longer sufficient for one to stake claims to middle-class status. Aside from speaking English, one must equally perform a particular 'middle-class' persona. The resultant anxiety felt by those who perceive that they fall short of this persona has led to the proliferation of 'personality development' institutes designed to coach young urban Indians in their quest to 'do' 'middle-classness'. Drawing on ethnographic data from an educational NGO in Delhi that provides free English and personality development training to disadvantaged students, this paper explores the moral dimensions of (English language) personality development training, highlighting how students perceive themselves to undergo moral transformations in the process of learning English. In doing so, it demonstrates how this training is not only an exercise in the development of neoliberal subjectivities, but is equally an attempt at 'retraining' the habitus in ways that are embedded in the reproduction of class and caste stratification. Further, I argue that such a task is fundamentally based on colonial technologies of discipline which aim to instill particular moral values and dispositions. As such, this paper seeks to demonstrate how the concept of 'personality', ostensibly a neutral and individualized notion, is deeply intertwined in colonial, caste and class histories.

Keywords: *India, morality, class, caste, personality development*

5. Latinity, personality, and the exclusionary politics of a universal language

Ms. Alice Yeh

University of Chicago

Latin is often advertised as a *sine qua non* to understanding the "Western Tradition." This paper examines how Latin language education in the United States, in particular the "Living Latin" movement, teaches students to voice and inhabit a masculine, Christian Latinity-qua-personality. Presented as both a supplement and corrective to the grammar-translation method, which is normative in high school and university classrooms, Living Latin adopts the ethical discourses of language immersion, authenticity, and revitalization. Using data from participant-observation in Latin programs from 2010 to 2014, I will show how learning Latin cultivates a "classical" model of personhood that *in English* would be reflexively avoided by students and deemed "politically incorrect." Recent follow-up interviews with students and teachers, along with published critiques by former participants and academics, suggest that the politely covert racial and gendered politics of learning Latin, and of Classics as an academic discipline, has become "rudely" and overtly articulated during the Trump presidency.

Keywords: *language ideology, revitalization, register, Latin, classical reception*

6. Exposing and negotiating moral personhood in child language acquisition

Dr. Lydia Catedral

City University of Hong Kong

Dr. Madina Djuraeva

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Within socially situated studies of language there have been longstanding and renewed calls to attend to the morality of both participants and of scholars (Irvine 1989; Jaspers 2019). Here I focus on how the moralities of these stakeholders intersect in ideologies of child language acquisition, leading to evaluations of particular types of personhood and personalities. I draw from interviews with Hong Kong parents who hire Filipina migrants to care for their children to demonstrate this. More specifically I show how theories of language acquisition are invoked in parents' assessments of specific domestic workers' personalities as 'good' or 'bad' for their children's language development. I argue that the understandings of language competence from which they draw – whether based on the Chomskyan native-speaker or Hymes' image of a context sensitive communicator – function as 'stealth moralities'. That is, though they presuppose neoliberal value systems, they operate under the guise of objectivity in which 'good' language learning is determined through measures of effectiveness. These 'stealth moralities' contrast with some of the alternative moral imaginations of child language acquisition outlined by domestic workers themselves. However, they are particularly powerful in shaping evaluations of what are perceived as 'individual' personalities, because of the relative power of those who invoke them, and because of their apparent objectivity. Situated within this empirical context, I outline possibilities for reframing language acquisition as a dialogic negotiation over what the morals of language learning *are*, and what they *could be* in relation to the unequal personalities that make up our social world.

References

Irvine, J. (1989). When talk isn't cheap: Language and political economy. *American Ethnologist, 16*(2), 248-267

Jaspers, J. (2019). Authority and morality in advocating heteroglossia. *Language, Culture and Society, 1*(1), 83-105.

7. Personhood and English in the Kaleidoscope

Dr. Andrea Sunyol

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Mr. Peter Browning

UCL Institute of Education

Language is constructed as a vehicle through which moral values and idealised forms of subjectivity are conjured, spread and normalised. Existing literature has extensively shown how English has become key in processes of self-capitalization by "self-made speakers" (Martín Rojo, 2019) who seek to render themselves more desirable in highly competitive job markets. By speaking English, one can incorporate a cluster of indexical meanings into one's personhood, and thus become intelligible as modern, urban, educated, cosmopolitan, or international. English is often considered necessary to become a 'neoliberal self'.

In this exploratory, collaborative paper, we seek to map the multiple and complex ways that English interacts with categories of personhood and morality across two different sites of knowledge production: two elite internationalising schools in the area of Barcelona; and a municipal English language teaching programme in Rionegro, Colombia. Drawing from the ethnographic accounts of specific data moments, produced during our respective fieldwork in these spaces, we aim to work kaleidoscopically, that is to say, acknowledging the presence of globalised, hegemonic discourses associated with the learning and teaching of "English", but also identifying how they coexist, and interact in multiple, changing and unstable ways with other pre-existing or nascent ones.

Through this, somewhat experimental enterprise, we hope to begin to unpack some of the resonances/dissonance between the role(s) played by English in the construction, maintenance and enactment of categories of personhood and morality in diverse contexts. With one eye always on the hegemonic discourses presented in the literature, we will ultimately reflect on the primacy of the material conditions in which these discourses are enacted and inscribed in the field of personality.

References

Martín Rojo, L. (2019). *The 'self-made speaker': The neoliberal governance of speakers.* In: Martín Rojo, L., & Del Percio, A. (Eds.), *Language and neoliberal governmentality.* London and New York: Routledge.

Keywords: personhood, subjectivity, neoliberalism, kaleidoscopic, english