

Language, skill and authenticity in the globalized new economy

by Monica Heller

Abstract

This article focusses on the ways in which language plays a central role in the globalized new economy. Not only is language itself central as a means of production and as a product, but, contrary to expectations about the ways in which standardized English may be taking over the speech economy of the planet, in fact linguistic variability and multilingualism have become vital. The first part of the article discusses the ways in which language becomes part of work-related competence, whether as a measurable skill or as an innate talent. The second focusses on how this is linked to the market value of authenticity, in an economy where local and regional markets, and local authenticity, are sources of value in an economy based service and on symbolic value. Finally, it considers what the implications of these developments might be for the merging category of "language workers".¹

Summary

1. Language as economic activity
2. Authenticity in the globalized new economy
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1. Language as economic activity

The purpose of this article is to explore some of the ways in which language figures in the globalized new economy. Most sociolinguist work on contemporary social change focusses on language rights (in the face of the putative spread of English) or on language learning; very little focusses on where language fits in the daily experiences of people working and living in the shifting conditions of the new economy. This essay aims at sketching out what major sociolinguistic issues may be related to the current expansion of the service and information sector, and indeed argues that a sociolinguistic perspective is essential to understanding the nature of activity in that sector. These issues include: the centrality of language as both mode of production and product; the treatment of language as a work-related competence, either as a measurable skill, or, conversely, as a talent; the tension between defining the value of language in the workplace in terms of ideologies of language as technical skill or as authentic possession of groups considered legitimate "owners"; and emerging consequences of those choices for the new "language workers". My main argument is that the new economy has difficulty managing the new centrality of language, since it is caught in contradictions between standardization and flexibility, horizontal management and quality control, and technical versus authentic understandings of the value of language itself.

One of the major features of the new economy is the central role that language plays, both as a means of production and as a product itself. In activities associated with primary resource extraction or its secondary transformation, communication, and in particular written communication, tends to be the work of management, not of labour. It is management that uses language to produce reports, to make plans, to send memos, to conduct meetings. Relevant information is transmitted to the workforce through middlemen, who occupy a position in the hierarchy between management and labour. Labour itself is often working in conditions that make communication difficult; too much noise, too much danger. Moreover,

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the specific form of industrial organization of labour which we know as "Fordism" or "Taylorism", that is, assembly-line work in which tasks are separated one from the other, and supervised in a hierarchical arrangement of workers, particularly relegated communication to the margins as a potential threat to the social order which made Fordist production possible.

In a factory in which I did fieldwork in Montreal in the late 1970s (cf. Heller 2002), industrial production was located on the ground floor. The noise was so loud that most workers wore earplugs, and most also wore a variety of safety equipment. In order to communicate the minimal amounts of information that were in fact needed, they had developed a set of hand gestures as signals. Foremen worked alone in soundproofed, glassed-in booths, emerging regularly to make the rounds of the lines or sometimes receiving single workers, other foremen or superintendents in their booths for brief exchanges. Among themselves, when workers and foremen could talk, the language was French, with a significant portion of technical vocabulary in the English in which it arrived either from the (mainly British and American) sources of industrial production or from the anglophone management. Communication with management was mediated through a team of three bilingual superintendents, all of Irish origin, that is, from the Catholic working-class background which allowed them to learn French from their francophone Catholic working-class neighbours. Management was English-speaking, including those few francophones who found themselves up one rung of the ladder, inhabited the upper floors of the building or the building across the street, working in quiet, carpeted offices. But those conditions are rare in the First World these days. As Boutet (2001:56) asserts:

"Dans le taylorisme, parler et travailler sont considérés comme des activités antagonistes. Parler fait perdre du temps, distrait, empêche de se concentrer sur les gestes à accomplir. (...) La mise en place de nouveaux modes de production et en particulier l'automatisation, la robotisation et l'informatisation des activités, comme la mise en place de nouveaux modes de gestion des salariés (management participatif, responsabilisation, équipes semi-autonomes, auto-contrôle...) auront deux conséquences majeures en ce qui concerne le statut du langage au travail. L'une c'est la généralisation du recours à l'écrit (lecture et écriture) dans tous les métiers et activités y compris déqualifiées (...). L'autre c'est l'émergence d'une compétence de communication".

The new economy is, then, partly about the reorganization, or restructuring, of what remains of the "old" economy of primary resource extraction and industrial transformation (Gee, *et al.* 1996). Companies eliminated much of middle management, and decentralized decision-making, thereby placing greater responsibility for organizing and monitoring work activity on workers themselves, and on teams requiring members' coordination. The nature of production itself shifted to greater use of computerization, in modes of production requiring complex literacy skills, and ways of moving rapidly between a variety of modes of communication. Moreover, the new economy is in many ways about language, and other forms of communication, themselves. Providing services has a lot to do with communication, whether face-to-face (with the cashier in your supermarket, your financial analyst or your tour guide) or mediated by other forms of communication, notably electronic ones (and these can run from designing interfaces for automatic teller machines, to working between phone lines and computer screens in call centres). The same is true for producing information. But also, tellingly, language itself can be commodified, in a number of different ways.

Boutet points out that these shifts in mode of production and nature of product have as a major consequence the "emergence of a work-related communicative competence". In the context of the "new work order" described by Gee and others (cf. Cameron 2001; Strathern 2000), this means several things. First, the new work order places an emphasis on flexibility, seeing work-related competences as unified "skill sets" which workers can acquire and add on to their repertoire, calling on them as the situation requires, and increasing their value (that is, their mobility) as workers.

This entails treating competences as objectifiable, unified, measurable and standardized "skills". Communicative competences can be treated much the same way: in her work on an Ontario call centre, Roy (2003) showed how several language related competencies were treated in ways similar to other forms of work-related competence.

For example, all procedures, including interaction with clients, were standardized (cf. also Cameron 2001); French-English bilingualism was treated as a knowledge set in exactly the same way as, say, knowledge regarding the company's automobile service sector; linguistic proficiency was subject to standardized testing. To provide an example at the level of policy, the Canadian federal government has recently set up an association (Language Industry Association <www.ailia.ca> /Association de l'industrie de la langue) to promote Canada's language "industry", which is understood to concern translation, interpretation, language teaching, and voice recognition, all in the service of multilingual private enterprise (the website claims, for example, that "Une enquête de Emarketer réalisée en Finlande et aux États-Unis confirme effectivement qu'un site web multilingue constitue un facteur de crédibilité significatif pour l'entreprise". Treating language as a skill in this way means, of course, that language-related work increases (and has to be paid for), whether that concerns developing and delivering the language training programs, the language competence evaluation criteria and instruments, or the capacity to translate from one language to another.

However, some recent research in which I have been involved shows that these procedures are not universal. It is equally likely that companies will treat language not as an objective skill, but rather as an innate talent. The advantage to the second approach is to render communicative skills invisible, and therefore eliminate them from consideration as something to be paid for in and of themselves, as well as rendering unnecessary the related activities which also would have to be bought (language training, translation, etc.). Either way, however, language, or more broadly communication, is understood as a key component of work-related competence, whether objectified as a skill or rendered invisible as a talent.

This dilemma points to another way in which the new work order shapes what counts as work-related language competence. The new work order places equal emphasis on professionalism and quality. This usually refers to two, and in many ways contradictory, sets of values: on the one hand, standardization in the service of "audit culture" -related surveillance and measurement (Strathern 2001), and of Fordist control over production; and, on the other, adaptability and authenticity.

Service providers are meant to reach clients "in their own language" (whatever type of linguistic variability that might refer to), but since clients rarely only come in one size, it is difficult to find standardized routines that correspond to a wide variety of ways of speaking (or writing), as well as workers able to take on a wide variety of guises. While much has been made in the U.S. press about workers in Indian call centres being trained to take on American personae (down to appropriate names, information on local weather in the US and the right "accent"), it is not clear to what extent such attempts to produce and standardize authenticity are in fact convincing. In a New Brunswick call centre in which we conducted fieldwork, representatives varied widely in their commitment to playing the authenticity game, and all but the most routine encounters almost invariably occasioned a removal of the mask. The new work order thus produces paradoxes or contradictions between standardization and authenticity which it is left to individual workers to manage.

2. Authenticity in the globalized new economy

A feature of the globalized new economy which has perhaps received more attention in the literature on tourism and community economic development than in that on language is the value placed on authenticity (cf. Craik 1997; Alcaras, *et al.* 2001; Yarymowich 2003; LeMenestrel 1999). Standardized products of the Fordist economy were prized precisely as an index of modernity; a striking passage in the Canadian children's classic, *Anne of Green Gables*, set in early 20th century Prince Edward Island, concerns Anne's longing for a factory-produced pink celluloid hairbrush (although it is likely Anne's authenticity as a symbol of traditional country life which appeals to the thousands of visitors from around the world who annually visit the constructed site of fictive "Anne's home"). A hallmark of the globalized new economy is the opposite, it is indices of authenticity (whether traditional, modern or post-modern is not relevant).

And language is one way to produce authenticity (although by no means the only one). T-shirts and other standardized items can be made authentic through the use of symbols of tradition (such as Celtic crosses) and of slogans in regional or local languages; at a conference I attended recently, a delegate brought with him a T-shirt printed in Picard, a linguistic variety of northeast France. Traditional music, whether done "straight" as an authentic reproduction or stylized through mixing with other, more contemporary, musical forms such as hip hop or reggae, uses minority languages as a symbol of its authenticity. Louisiana recently has invested in issuing brands of authenticity for cultural products identifiable (and apparently certifiable) as Cajun or Creole (Dubois 2004), of which linguistic brands and some linguistic symbols are important elements.

The trick is to balance authenticity (a tie to the local, to the face-to-face scale of human relations) with marketability, that is, the local product with the, if not global, at least international market. Thus while an investment in the capital of distinction (Bourdieu 1979) opens up spaces for regional economies, *produits du terroir* and other marketable cultural artefacts and experiences, the marketing does have to reach its clientele, whose limits on the tolerance of all elements of authenticity remain unclear (how would people feel about using Anne's heating or plumbing, for example?).

In our research, we have been tracking changes in French-language minority communities in Canada whose economic base has shifted from primary and secondary sector economies to tertiary sector ones. The first kind of economy (mining, fishing, the lumber industry, the automobile and textile manufacturing industries, for example) provided a basis for the reproduction of an ethnolinguistic community forged around a nationalist or quasinationalist ideology, as well as around the solidarity of the marginalized. Francophones were over represented among workers, and tended to organize in fairly tightly clustered communities. The nationalist or quasi-nationalist social movements associated with socioeconomic mobility legitimized themselves on the basis of tradition, and focussed on the importance of maintaining such linguistically homogeneous spaces, whether territorial or institutional; their aim however was to use these spaces as a basis for education and the accumulation of other important resources in the quest for access to modern sources of power and wealth (Heller and Labrie 2003).

For a number of reasons too complex to review here (but see Heller 2002; Heller and Labrie 2003), including the social movements described, the political economic basis of community reproduction began to collapse in the 1980s. Building on the basis of socioeconomic mobility already established, and on its sources of legitimacy, many regions have undertaken the move into the tertiary sector through attempts to develop heritage tourism activities (cf. Moïse 2003; Roy and Gélinas 2004). In many cases, the idea is to first target a francophone clientele, placing language at the centre of what would make this heritage tourism experience different from others, playing both on French and Québécois senses of affinity with the rest of francophone Canada, and on the idea of the "added value" of the possibility to obtain services in French. But North American tourism being what it is, it makes little business sense to ignore the English-speaking clientele the continent affords, nor those from other parts of the world whose paths are already leading them into the right regions (notably, at the moment, this includes a large number of Germanspeakers).

Thus the very linguistic homogeneity which is one important symbolic element of authenticity in the heritage tourism market proves also to be a potential obstacle to attracting tourists who speak other languages. The result is usually an attempt at a discursive division of labour which signals a distinction between language practices used to construct local authenticity and those used to manage relations with clients.

Indeed, this concern with authenticity also turns up in local competition over labour market resources. Since language skills, including multilingual ones, are increasingly important characteristics among those that employers look for, both in deciding where they are likely to find an appropriate labour pool, and in evaluating individual employees, they can also be deployed as ways for employee populations or employees to distinguish themselves from each other in order to compete for jobs.

Thus, the province of Quebec, on its investment website <www.investquebec.com/en/int/secteur>, advertises to prospective investors the attractiveness of a bilingual labour pool with extra language skills (meaning skills in more than one language) that employers will not have to pay for²: "In Quebec, there are 2.9 million bilingual people in 2002, or nearly 41% of Quebec's population. The widespread use of French and English affords client contact centres considerable flexibility, this facilitating access to major markets. Quebec's bilingual labour pool, the biggest in Canada, is a key advantage for businesses that wish to gain access to 7 million French-speaking Canadians without paying bilingualism bonuses. Over 80 languages in addition to French and English are spoken in Quebec".

The province of New Brunswick similarly touted its bilingual workforce in working to attract the call centre industry in the 1990s. In the post-industrial Ontario town where Roy conducted her research, the municipality, fighting Canada's highest rate of unemployment after major heavy industry restructuring and relocation, similarly targeted call centres as employers, and produced the following by way of advertising: "(The city) is not just heavy metal any more. (The city) is poised to challenge winds of technology as they breathe life into a new world economy based upon rivers of information through its call centre facilities. An old hand at capitalizing upon waterways of opportunity, (the city) is perfectly positioned geographically to be Canada's high-tech alternative. (...) Fifteen percent of (the city's) population is English/French bilingual and many are multilingual, with Italian being the third predominant language spoken. The benefits of this francophone and ethnic presence are not lost on any employer doing business in French-speaking Canadian communities or in a global marketplace."

But here, the claim goes beyond merely describing the language skills of the labour pool; rather, the claim is explicitly made that ethnicity conveys legitimacy of proficiency, it conveys authenticity of competence. If you want a real speaker of language X, hire a member of ethnic group X. In that sense, the old equation of language, nation and ethnicity still remains discursively valid. But, as Roy showed, and as we have seen confirmed in other sites, this claim to the value of authenticity can run into the contradictions of values placed on standardized ideas of quality, leaving employers and employees alike in a confused muddle of competing language ideologies. In the New Brunswick call centre in which we have been doing research, for example, Acadian workers struggle to meet Québécois and French normative expectations for their French, and acquiesce to the dominance of English as language of communication with management, while symbolically maintaining their privileged access to the bilingual positions which they were hired to fill by using the local variety among themselves in work-related tasks (Boudreau 2003).

In the end, the new economy raises the following contradictions: against the skilling of language, to be measured and paid for, it opposes the idea of language as talent, certainly to be prized (as one might prize punctuality and neatness) but not to be recognized or remunerated; against the value of standardized quality control in the form of normed language forms and standard practices, it opposes the value of adaptability to linguistic variability and of authenticity as linked to ethnicized ideas of language ownership and to unstandardized, variable vernaculars; and against the value of nationalist homogeneity as a guarantee of authenticity, it opposes variability and multilingualism in the service of access to markets.

3. The language worker

What is new then, about the globalized new economy, from a sociolinguistic perspective, is not so much globalization itself (after all, people and goods and ideas have been wandering around the world for a long time), but rather the economic conditions of the new economy. We used to sell our physical labour; now we sell our intellectual and communicative labour, both as skill and as cultural artefact.

The commodification of language in both these ways is beginning to be recognized, for example, by the Canadian government-sponsored initiative on "language industries", and by many European Union initiatives on language training (of which one of the more interesting includes a web-based program called Soccerlingua which uses soccer and soccer players to

² My thanks to Joan Pujolar for bringing this to my attention.

promote learning English, Catalan, Castilian, German and Italian; thanks again go to Joan Pujolar for alerting me to this website). Multilingualism is the major focus of these initiatives, building on local language resources as a guarantee of the quality of the professionalized and credentialized multilingualism-related expertise to be found in certain labour pools.

As this view of language spreads, we are likely to see heavier emphasis on the development of the role of the language worker, a worker whose training, certification and evaluation will spawn a set of related professions (language managers, perhaps). While this is currently concentrated in the area of multilingualism (language teaching and translation), it may also connect to the hitherto less visible forms of communicative work I have described in this article, and that are central to many activities of the new economy. The question remains of how we will resolve the contradictions mentioned earlier, the contradictions between skilling and authenticity that traverse the sociolinguistic new economy today.

The very concept of a language worker is likely to remain controversial for some time to come, since it brings out these profound contradictions in how we see language. It also reveals all the problems connected to the ways in which language norms have long been connected to symbolic domination (Bourdieu 1982), that is, to masking and legitimizing relations of power. A central focus on language as labour, and on authenticity as material capital, threatens to make visible the ways in which language functions in processes of symbolic domination. All the more reason, then, to closely examine how these issues are taken up, not only by States and State agencies, or by NGOs and corporations, but also by those of us who are most closely involved in the new forms of language-related structures of power which may be emerging.

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