Anthropology News

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DIALOGUE

The Correspondence column is primarily for the use of AAA members for the purpose of addressing issues that relate to the discipline and practice of anthropology. *AN* reserves the right to select and edit letters. All letters must be clearly marked for *Anthropology News* Correspondence, **not to exceed 400 words and consist of a signed original plus an electronic copy** whenever possible. Letters published reflect the views of the correspondents; their publication does not signify endorsement by *AN* or the American Anthropological Association.

Is "Governmentality" Necessary? A Plea for Ordinary English in Anthropology

I was troubled at the 2010 AAA meeting by many talks replete with taken-for-granted neologisms. New language is valuable as new concepts develop. But discourse may be become overburdened with neologisms, impeding rather than promoting comprehension. There is also the intellectual danger that a word joins usage without scrutinizing its coherence or logic. Disciplinary language replete with jargon creates a separation from outsiders; perhaps this is intended. I do not argue that neology is never warranted, but there should be standards for it because it is costly. Two alternatives are neologisms accompanied with explanations until they have entered standard usage, and standard language enriched by an expanded understanding and explanation.

In my early post-graduate years, I also used such language. In retrospect, I am puzzled by what I meant in my own academic writings. When I joined the US Centers for Disease Control, I had to learn simple expression again. I found it cleansing and refreshing. We were strongly encouraged to write for public understanding, which meant clear expression without jargon. When I edited a volume of anthropological studies in public health, I hired a technical editor with a low tolerance for jargon. We wrestled with authors to purge their writing of all but essential anthropologese. If we want to communicate with non-anthropologists, there is little choice. As anthropologists, we are experts in translation and cross-cultural communication, and we should be able to bridge the gap. It is odd and unfortunate that we rarely do so.

Take Foucault's notion "governmentality." In a lecture named for this concept, Foucault describes this form of societal organization in which a government exerts pervasive control of its constituents through its production of ideologies and multiple forms of power. Does this concept merit a new word? The new word obscures a need to elucidate the concept and its coherence, but this shorthand also creates a barrier to comprehension.

Fourteenth-century philosopher John Ockham sagely wrote, "entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity." Guidelines for a neologism might include the following:

1) Is the idea big and new enough to merit a new term?
2) Is standard usage inadequate or too clumsy?
3) Is the new concept coherent and clearly defined?
4) Is the addition worth the price—creating communicational barriers?

If the answers to most or all these questions is yes, then the price should be paid, ie, translation and communication. If not, consider standard usage.

Robert A Hahn
Atlanta, GA

Commentary Policy

AN commentaries are designed to explore diverse views of the discipline from an anthropological perspective. Commentaries reflect the views of the authors; their publication does not signify endorsement by *AN* or the AAA. Authors are expected to verify all factual information included in the text.

Relative Value of Languages

In his October 2010 *AN* column for the Society for Linguistic Anthropology (SLA), "Are we teaching too much Spanish?" James Stanlaw points to President Obama's suggestion that US children should become English-Spanish bilinguals to ask whether the US is "over-emphasizing Spanish" and whether "in terms of personal benefit and national interest…all foreign languages are created equal." Data demonstrating that more US students study Spanish than other languages frame Stanlaw's consideration of whether "this dominance of Spanish" is problematic for the study of other languages in the current context of university budget cuts. He mentions Chinese as an example of a language that is spoken by "a quarter of the world's population" in the nation with "the world's second largest economy." For Stanlaw, this example "seems to make the commercial value of learning Spanish less compelling."

While Stanlaw brings much-needed attention to the decreased support for language study in the US, it is crucial to reconsider how best to understand and respond to this problem. The notion that there could be "too much Spanish" views language education as a consumer product, ranks so-called foreign languages based on market values, and presumes that the study of one language takes resources from others. Such logic produces worrisome ideas about the relative value of various languages, positioning them in a hierarchy and contributing to broader corporatizing trends in higher education.

However, by recognizing the unique history of English-Spanish bilingualism in the US, we can come to value multilingualism more generally. In this sense, support of Spanish language learning can be a way of encouraging the study of other languages. The irony underscored by asking whether "we are teaching too much Spanish" is the reality that Spanish speakers have been longstanding objects of scorn in the US. Contemporary examples of this phenomenon include English-only legislation, anti-bilingual education policies, and angry newspaper editorials bemoaning the increased presence of the Spanish language and the purported unwillingness of its immigrant speakers to learn English. Immigrant xenophobia and English language hegemony stigmatize the Spanish language and its speakers, contributing to unprecedented rates of language shift and loss among second and third generation US Latinas and Latinos. These experiences

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require us, particularly linguistic anthropologists, to link analyses of language teaching in US institutions of higher education to the ideological underpinnings of assessing the relative value of languages, in order to avoid contributing to linguistic intolerance in its not always obvious forms.

Jonathan Rosa
New York U
Joint CfHR Task Group
SLA Committee for Language and Social Justice

Response to Rosa

I wish to thank Jonathan Rosa for his very thoughtful reading of my *AN* column. I believe we agree in most areas, but would like to clarify a few points.

I was actually trying to very much argue against the notion of viewing language education as some sort of consumer product, based on market needs. To use just my own university as an example, neither Russian nor any of the classical languages are taught anymore, German seems always under scrutiny, and each year Chinese gets by largely on soft funding. This is due to money and numbers. To me, this is the notion that "views language education as a consumer product, ranks so-called foreign languages based on market values, and presumes that the study of one language takes resources from others." It is university administrations supporting only languages that satisfy perceived consumer demand that are contributing to the "broader corporatizing trends in higher education." That troubles all of us.

I never intended to say that one should study Chinese rather than Spanish for its economic rewards. I myself have never been convinced by the economic rationale for learning a foreign language. But if one is so convinced—as is apparently President Obama, whom I quoted—then I think there are many languages that offer benefit. It goes without saying that Spanish is tremendously valuable in the United States, with its long history of contact between Hispanic, European, African, Asian and Native American languages and cultures.

But we must admit that politically there is a reason why the State Department—not me—labels some foreign languages of "critical" importance. When the US Embassy in Iran was overrun in 1979, there were only a handful of Americans on staff who spoke Persian. The situation has improved little. Recent events in Egypt and the Middle East have once again surprised us. While it is an over-simplification to attribute this to language, it again shows the growing importance of Arabic, Pashto, Urdu (and a dozen others)—which are hardly taught in US universities, and need to be.

Finally, English linguistic hegemony is indeed a sad fact and must be confronted at every opportunity. For example, as with the case of Spanish pointed out by Jonathan Rosa, almost *every* second-generation Japanese-American (and later) must learn Japanese as a second language. But finding classes is sometimes difficult.

James Stanlaw
Illinois State U

Thank you

I extend my sincere appreciation to our patient members as AAA transitioned to our new member database and abstract management systems. These new systems take advantage of current technology to provide a greater level of efficiency, streamline input, and add new functionality for members and visitors. The success of this transition could not have been accomplished without the hard work and dedication of our staff.

—Bill Davis
AAA Executive Director