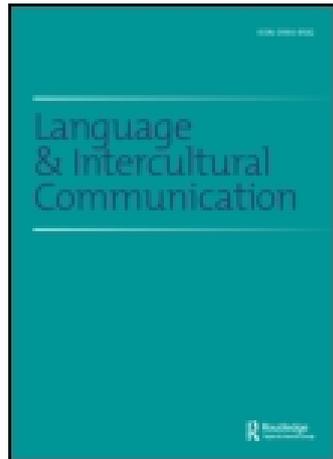


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Language, Culture, Multimodality and Dialogic Emergence

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Guest Editorial

Language, Culture, Multimodality and Dialogic Emergence

It is through attempts to deny this inevitable multiplicity and indeterminacy of interpretation that social institutions (like schools) and elite groups in a society often privilege their own version of meaning as if it were natural, inevitable and incontestable. (Gee, 1996)

In spite of the long history of descriptions of culture in various traditions, the concept continues to pose more questions than answers. Definitions of the culture usually turn on postulations of structures of contents and values of groups, generally nation-sized. A consequence of this is that most discussions of cross- or intercultural transactions also tend to focus on transnational interactions.

The notion of the nation as imagined community (Anderson, 1983) has become commonplace in certain disciplines, but seems largely to have been forgotten in recent discussions centring on intercultural research (Dahl, 2004), which persist in attributing homogeneity to national languages and cultures. Nowhere is this postulated homogeneity of national cultures more difficult to digest than in postcolonial nations, such as Brazil, my present locus of enunciation. Though brought into existence as nations by the former colonial powers, the experience of colonisation of such nations is marked by mid- to long-term, often violent and traumatic, intercultural contact. Settler colonisation, such as that of the Americas, intensified and complexified intercultural contacts to the extent that the nations (such as Brazil) that emerged from the colonial process are, in relation to the former colonial powers, *postcolonial*; simultaneously, these same nations, in relation to the indigenous precolonial populations and cultures that still inhabit them, are *neocolonial*. Nowhere is inter- or cross-culturality more significant than in these nations, disrupting, like a fly in the ointment, the myth of national cultural and linguistic homogeneity.

In their discussion of language, culture and modernity, Bauman and Briggs (2003) trace the origins of concepts of national cultural homogeneity to the roots of European modernity and identify two distinct models of cultural homogeneity: that of Herder in Germany and that of Locke in Britain. Whereas both models similarly aimed at attributing a cultural homogeneity to their national communities, they differed in their recommended strategies and sources of the contents to be admitted into the national culture. Herder valued the distinctiveness of local folk-culture as the expression of the spirit of the nation; Locke, on the contrary, saw no value in the distinctiveness of local folk-cultures and forms of speech, and preferred contents and values that would

erase all reference to the local, in an attempt to envision a supralocal 'pure' national culture. Both these visions of a national culture were based on concepts of cultural authenticity and purity (Herder's grassroots purity and Locke's elitist purity), values that were deemed to be complicit with a notion of cultural and linguistic homogeneity.

The political ideology underlying the quest for cultural purity and homogeneity became more apparent subsequently in the 19th century in Matthew Arnold's clearly drawn proposed opposition between Culture and Anarchy, used to base his argument for a unitary national culture as a means of control over the perceived threat of violence allegedly present in cultural heterogeneity. In this sense, both Locke's and Arnold's arguments in favour of national cultural homogeneity may be seen as, simultaneously, a recognition and a dismissal of the existence of cultural heterogeneity within the nation.

Rosaldo (1989) traces this notion of culture as social control from Hobbes to the anthropological work of Durkheim and his followers, such as Clifford Geertz and Terence Turner. Believing, like Arnold, in the basic violence of human nature, Durkheim postulated the social as the locus of constraint and the law. Deriving from this, Geertz and Turner, according to Rosaldo, saw culture as a necessary stabilising structure for human nature, instrumental for the governing of behaviour, without which man would allegedly destroy himself. In this sense, culture as structure came to be seen as a blueprint for all human actions.

In spite of this notion of culture as structure, and its possible origins in a Lockean–Arnoldian view of culture as control, there are important distinctions to be drawn.

Neither Turner nor Geertz defend views of national cultural homogeneity; as ethnographers, their objects of analysis were local communities within nations rather than nation-wide cultures. For Geertz, specifically, the concept of culture as structure on which human actions are based is important to understand intercultural conflicts (see for example his chapter 'Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture' in Geertz, 1974). Though Geertz sees culture as the necessary structure, which functions as a blueprint, uniting a community not only in its actions, but also in its interpretations, he also perceives the existence of transcommunal heterogeneity, without the need to eliminate it. From Geertz's interpretivist standpoint, a particular social group's shared set of cultural structures is seen as the source of cultural conflict with other social groups whose actions are oriented by differing sets of cultural structures.

Rosaldo's criticism of this view is that these cultural structures should be 'set into motion' and seen as open and changing, rather than as restrictive guarantors of order and defences against alleged chaos. Accepting the existence and even necessity of structures and norms in culture, Rosaldo, however, sees culture as more than a mere series of actions following a pre-established structure; for Rosaldo (1989: 102) culture as fixed structure '[...] reduces to undifferentiated chaos everything that falls outside the normative order. [...] social analysis should look beyond the dichotomy of order versus chaos toward the less explored realm of "non-order"'. To support this

argument, Rosaldo sees dynamic and contingent change as the order of nature, and not static pre-established structures.

The issue here is no longer merely if culture is local or national, if it is homogeneous or not, nor even if culture is structured or not, but the relationship between *structure* and *action* in culture. What Rosaldo calls 'non-order' seems in fact to be a defence of a dialogic, dynamic notion of culture, where people's actions not only follow the blueprint of their cultural structures, but where these very same actions may also alter the cultural structures which 'triggered' and gave form to the actions. Rosaldo's (1989: 105) processual concept of dynamic open structures is based on his notion of an 'excess' ('a certain "something more" that can neither be reduced to nor derived from structure'). This 'excess', which defies fixed structural views of culture (and language), is also identified by Raymond Williams (1977: 132) in his notion of 'structures of feeling', which are said to distinguish a particular culture. As an experiential concept, this is difficult to conceive in static 'structural' terms, and pertains to a dynamic interactive concept of a community.

In a similar fashion, Michel de Certeau (1995) rejects a homogenising, fixed, structural notion of 'culture as singular' and defends a plural concept of culture. Like Rosaldo, de Certeau identifies the view of a singular culture with a desire for the social control of naturally occurring cultural heterogeneity. De Certeau (1995: 244) sees culture as ephemeral 'creative actions' (as opposed to the production of long-lasting 'monumental' products) whose processual creativity resides in the fact that they do not merely follow pre-established structures, rules or codes, but introduce an 'addition, an excess, and therefore also a fracture' in the very systems on which they are based, and from which they cannot escape. In this view, cultural actions are seen simultaneously as the dialogic *actualisation* and *deviation* of pre-existing structures, codes and rules.

Howard-Malverde (1997) situates a similar discussion against static structural views of language and culture as pertaining to notions of both language and culture as *text*, where 'text' is considered to be reified and reductionist, and abstracted from its contexts of production and use. Like Rosaldo, Williams and de Certeau, Howard-Malverde (1997: 9) emphasises the 'experiential' dimension of human behaviour that cannot be accounted for in (and which 'exceeds') structural notions of language and culture. In opposition to the model of language and culture as text, Howard-Malverde proposes the Foucauldian concept of *discourse* as socially situated and as constantly reconstituting itself. In this view, *text* is seen as social process, in an interactive, mutually constructive relationship with *context* where this 'interaction involves participants in strategies of positioning with regard to each other, a positioning process bound up with relations of power, and whose meaning emerges in its performative dimensions' (p. 9).

Rather than a reified 'textual' view of language and culture, which, as we have seen, postulates culture (and language) as actions following pre-established structures, rules or codes, this *performative, emergent* conception sees culture as dialogic *enactment*. Besides *enactment* signifying a 'playing out of experience', it proposes a dynamic concept of linguistic or cultural 'texts' as

occurring not merely '*in* context' but more significantly, '*as* context' (Howard-Malverde, 1997: 11). Thus each realisation or actualisation – *enactment* – of language and culture is constituted by and constitutes context; as such, each *enactment* simultaneously and dialogically follows structures, rules and codes and transforms them. This emphasises the role of agency in cultural actions, where members of a culture (or language) do not merely *reproduce* norms, but also transform them.

Tedlock and Mannheim (1995), decrying the damage done when the study of language was separated from the study of culture, also emphasise that verbal and cultural meaning arise not from static structures but from an emergent performativity attributed to Bakhtin (1981). Bakhtin saw language and culture as socially situated, and *appropriated* by, not *created* by individuals. For Tedlock and Mannheim (1995: 5), 'the traditional relationship between structure and action, in which action is treated as a reflection of a prior mental structure, is rejected in favour of one in which structure emerges through situated action'.

An often-quoted problematic aspect of this performative, emergent conception of language and culture is its inherent indeterminacy and irreducible contingency. However, as Tedlock and Mannheim (1995: 5) show, exactly because it is the *enactment* of the text which also constitutes its own context, the range of possible interpretations is constrained by the participants, their social positioning in relation to each other, and the resulting perceived 'contents' of the text and its enactment or performance: 'At no point in this process is the individual regarded as autonomous or the guarantor of the integrity (authority, consistency, coherence) of the text'. Besides dissipating the fear of alleged indeterminacy and contingency, this socially situated view of language and culture also dissipates the previously discussed fear of alleged chaos (non-order) and the accompanying alleged need to impose homogeneity as a means of cultural and linguistic control (see Gee, 1996: 102 for a suggestion of resistance to social control by emphasising the multiplicity and indeterminacy in language).

In terms of cross- and intercultural contacts, unlike the view of culture as *structure* or *text* that may predict and explain cultural conflict (in those cases where cultures do not share similar structures), the contrasting view of culture as an *emergent, dialogic, contingent, performative* system not only explains cultural change, but may also explain why (due to contingency) an expected intercultural conflict (based on a perceived difference in cultural structure between the parties involved) may *not* in fact occur.

On a different though related note, in their discussion of multimodality, Kress and van Leeuwen (2001: 111) have rejected the common-sense idea that meaning resides in verbal language alone and have emphasised the interplay between verbal language and other extra- and paralinguistic and semiotic resources of communication, such as the visual, the gestural etc.: 'From the moment that a culture has made the decision to draw a particular material into its communicative processes, that material has become part of the cultural and semiotic resources of that culture and is available for use in the making of signs'.

Similar to the rejection of a static *text*- or structure-based view of language, Kress and van Leeuwen also see the use of multimodal resources in situated social practices as being simultaneously rule-governed and emergent. In confronting verbal with nonverbal communicational modes, meaning-making in multimodality always has an 'excess', unpredictable or unable to be fixed or guaranteed by any of its component modes. Multimodal communication, then, is best seen as *discourse* as described above; that is, as a realisation, a recontextualisation and a transformation of social practice (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001: 118, 128).

Considering that multimodality focuses on the dialogical interaction between social practices and semiotic practices in a particular culture, it may be seen not only as a product of, but also as a metaphor for dialogic emergence and performativity in language and culture and even as a metaphor for intercultural transactions. As an example, Kress and van Leeuwen (2001: 131) show how, with an increase in the availability and use of multiple visual modes in contemporary culture, there has been a move away from a unidirectional, monomodal, page-bound conception of writing to a more emergent multimodal, multidirectional form of writing; in this new mode, alphabetic writing interacts with elements of visual design and the 'page concept' of traditional alphabetic writing is being replaced by that of the computer screen.

In this sense of requiring multiple perspectives in order to make meaning out of various juxtaposed sign systems, and in its focus on the interaction between the social and the semiotic, multimodality becomes pertinent in discussions of cultural and linguistic heterogeneity, and goes beyond the view of language and culture as fixed structures that dictate and control foreseeable actions. The relevance of the concept of language and culture as situated, dialogic, emergent social practices, where text, context and interlocutors are mutually constituted and reconstituted should hopefully be clear for issues of inter- and transcultural contacts. The papers that follow in this volume of *Language and Intercultural Communication* approach this issue from varying perspectives. Three (Festino, Monte Mor and São Thiago) of the four papers are written from a postcolonial, Brazilian perspective.

Focusing on the recent phenomenon of multimodal indigenous writing in Brazil, São Thiago argues for a critical intercultural approach to the reading of these texts; for São Thiago, if these texts are read from a culturally homogeneous, monocultural, monomodal, Eurocentric (albeit a national Brazilian) perspective, they may be easily dismissed as superficial and child-like.

Monte Mor discusses the need for critical literacy based on the multimodal and intercultural difficulties of Brazilian students, located in an urban cultural context, in interpreting a foreign film.

Festino discusses, from a Brazilian perspective, poetry written by the postcolonial Canadian–Sri Lankan writer Michael Ondaatje in which he uncovers the multimodal cultural heterogeneity of one of his parent cultures, where 'writing', more than mere alphabetic inscription on a page, involves a critical process of meaning-making and the construction of cultural identity.

Writing from a (pan-)European intercultural perspective, Aiello and Thurlow analyse multimodal resources used to promote cities vying for the role of European Capital of Culture, focusing on the visual homogeneities present in materials that purport to promote cultural heterogeneity.

Finally, in an interview with Henry Giroux, a prominent thinker of critical pedagogy and 'border-crossings' in pedagogic issues and cultural studies, Guilherme evokes a discussion of critical questions of language and culture.

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