

Bodies on the Move: Salsa, Language and Transnationalism



In my [post on English in Berlin](#), I wondered what is required for a language to become 'local', and about the perhaps problematic tradition of defining languages on the basis of territory. Although it has been quite some time since English was primarily the language of the English people in England, the language is still called 'English'. (Interestingly, the etymology of the term is also from 'somewhere else', deriving from northern Germany, and thus already has a history of being on the move.) When do Englishes become 'native'? And if we continue to tacitly invoke concepts based on confined spaces ('England'), whose interests remain veiled under national frameworks and are therefore invisible?

My own interest in what happens to moving languages in a world where rootedness in territory and local community cannot be taken for granted not only made me wonder about the status of English in Berlin, but brought me to places where movement literally takes centre stage. Concerned that essentialist conceptions of language and identity may represent a form of symbolic violence – telling people what they are supposed to speak and identify with on the grounds of their ethnic heritage – I became interested in communities where people identify with a language that is not 'theirs'. The example I chose was communities of practice constituted by salsa dance in countries outside of Latin America. Depending on the particular salsa style, many salsa dancers in these multi-ethnic communities, irrespective of their ethnic origin, learn and/or use Spanish. The number of Spanish speakers, non-native and native, and the competence of language learners can be quite astonishing. Wondering about the reasons for this, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in salsa communities in Frankfurt, Germany, and Sydney, Australia, studying the role of the Spanish language and ethnicity as boundary markers, and the symbolic functions of language and bilingualism in these transnational contexts (you can read more about the study in [my new book *Salsa, Language and Transnationalism*](#)).

What I wanted to know was why people engage in such a time-consuming activity as learning a language, and what this has to do with a passion for Latin dance. It is certainly not because they are striving to become ethnically Latin that German, Australian and other Salsa dancers speak Spanish. Instead of applying a national framework of thought that takes nations, ethnic groups and 'their' languages as a starting point, I

wanted to find out which other concepts and discourses have the potential to inform language choice and linguistic identification. This generated the idea that language may be constituted differently in non-national, non-ethnic contexts.

To summarise my research conclusions in a nutshell, the existing discourses on language (or language ideologies) are often characterised by what I would call 'cosmopolitan' forms of identity. Being able to speak several languages – in this case English or German and Spanish – can index membership to an economically and socially advantaged, mobile and educated group that is oriented towards transnational spheres. At the same time, stereotypical discourses on what it means to be 'Latin' – being 'open-minded', being 'passionate', 'preferring friendship to money' – are also important in understanding what makes people use their Salsa classes to practise Spanish at the same time. Interestingly, therefore, while a transnational discourse does exist in an orientation beyond local/national confines, national concepts of ethnicity and language are reproduced and are somehow also necessary for constructing the 'transnational' (Hannerz (1996) makes similar observations). I concluded that, at the end of the day, languages still signify ethnic or national groups, but this relationship can be appropriated differently and symbolically exploited in multiple fashions in transnational contexts.

Many of the questions I had remain unanswered. For example, I am still not sure on what grounds we are entitled to make languages our own, or at what point we begin to consider someone to be an acceptable – 'real' – member of a speech community. It seems that ethnic heritage still plays a crucial role here. Also, what happens to the systemic notion of 'a language' if verbal practices do not index a particular group? Is the idea of language as a system brought into question if groups that are fluid and not tied to particular territories are established? In other words, being aware of the sociolinguistic commonplace that 'a language' is 'a dialect with an army and a navy' (Weinreich 1945), and cannot be established on linguistic grounds alone, what happens if we are not so sure whose 'army' and whose 'navy' we are talking about as people start to develop social relationships and patterns of identification that go beyond their territorial confines?

National armies and navies continue to be important. At the same time, cultural and discursive norms are increasingly shaped by non-national structures (see also Sennet 2006), which, however, make use of, are co-constructed by and are dialectically interwoven with national languages, discourses, bureaucracies, armies and navies. It is certainly not easy to grasp these intricacies, but it is a worthwhile assumption that moving languages, identities and bodies do not simply carry with them their national symbolic load but are part of a global world order that will require new linguistic theories and methodologies.



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