Languaging

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Short version

Languaging is the unique human capacity to change the world through communication with others by means of language, i.e. systematically organized arbitrary signs. All human beings *language*, and they do so to achieve their goals. Languaging is individual and unique in the sense that no two persons share exactly the same set of linguistic features. Language is at the same time a social phenomenon in the sense that it is shared and exclusively acquired and practiced in interaction with others. Languages in the plural exist only as sociocultural (ideological) abstractions. Sociolinguistics regards boundaries between languages as arbitrary and historically contingent, as the result of particular histories of standardization and regulation. A languaging perspective sees language in actual practice not as bounded, countable entities that are given in the world, but as dynamic, creative potential to produce meaning through the use of arbitrary signs. A languaging perspective conceptualizes language as a verb (as practice or behavior), rather than as a noun (a thing or object) and places the activity and the agents (languagers) in focus rather than the linguistic system (languages).

Longer version

Languaging is the unique human capacity to change the world through communication with others by means of language, i.e. systematically organized arbitrary signs. This capacity enables people to acquire (or develop) a complex system of symbols, and to use this system for creating and negotiating meanings and intentions and transferring them across time and space.

All human beings *language*, and they do so to achieve their goals. Languaging is individual and unique in the sense that every single person possesses her or his own combination of competences and knowledge with respect to language. No two persons share exactly the same vocabulary, pronunciation, etc. More importantly, however, language is *social* in the sense that every aspect of language is shared among several individuals, and that it is exclusively acquired and practiced in interaction with other individuals.

Traditionally the language sciences deal with 'languages'. Languages are thought of as sets of features, i.e. conventions which are believed to somehow belong together. Over the past decade sociolinguistics has come to the conclusion that languages are ideologically constructed abstract concepts which do not represent real life language use: 'languages do not exist as real entities in the world and neither do they emerge from or represent real environments; they are, by contrast, the inventions of social, cultural and political movements' (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007:2). Languages in the plural exist only as sociocultural inventions: 'Languages are conceived and

languaging is practiced' (Mignolo, 1996:181).

The making of languages in Europe is intertwined with the nation-building projects that emerged in the wake of the Renaissance and reached its high point in the nationalist and romanticist nineteenth century. The compartmentalised vision of language as separate bounded linguistic systems is a modernist, Renaissance vision on language. Italian is the product of the creation of an Italian nation-state, while French is the product of the creation of a French nation-state, thereby absorbing, erasing or marginalising the linguistic diversity in their territories. Likewise, the boundary between Dutch and German is the same as the border between the Netherlands and Germany and does not in any meaningful way precede the history of the respective nation-states.

A languaging perspective regards boundaries between languages as arbitrary and historically contingent, as the result of particular histories of standardisation and regulation. Standardizing language means compartmentalizing the free and unbounded languaging of a particular geographical area and class of people as *the* language for that particular geographical area and its people and freezing its evolution. Standardizing language also means enregistering particular linguistic features as normative: selecting particular phonemes, morphemes, words, syntax, etc. as normal, as the norms for *the* language while designating all variation to those norms as sub-standard, dialect, or even deficit language.

Languaging is the use of language, not of "a language". The analytical perspective pointed to by the concept is that of the *feature*. Linguistic features appear in the shape of units and regularities. Individual features are routinely ascribed a range of associations. Features are typically (but not always) associated with one or more sociocultural constructions called "languages". The unit (word) *Durchschnittsgeschwindigkeit*, for example, is generally associated with "German". Features are also associated with values, meanings, speakers, places, etc. (Jørgensen 2010). Learning language in real life means learning new features, including some or all of these associations.

A languaging perspective sees language in actual practice not as bounded, countable entities that are given in the natural world, but as dynamic, creative potential to speak. It emphasises that people do not primarily use 'a language', or 'some languages', but use language, linguistic resources. Bilinguals are not seen as 'speaking two languages', but as languagers making use of resources that are recognized by the speakers or others as belonging to two sets of resources. A languaging perspective conceptualizes language as a verb (as practice or behavior), rather than as a noun (a thing or object) and places the activity and the agents (languagers) in focus rather than the linguistic system ('languages'). As a theoretical notion, languaging therefore reflects 'a human turn' in sociolinguistics, i.e., a move away from languages (in plural) as stable linguistic systems ('codes' or 'varieties') that are used by people, toward language or languaging as a dynamic sociolinguistic system that is constructed and performed by people. The question students of languaging ask themselves is therefore not 'who speaks (or writes) what language (or what language variety) to whom, when and to what end', as Fishman defined the field sociolinguistics forty years ago, but 'who languages how and what is being languaged under what circumstances in a particular place and time' (for futher discussion, see Møller and Jørgensen, 2009; and Juffermans, 2011).

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