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Alexandre Duchêne and Monica Heller (eds): Language in Late Capitalism: Pride and Profit

**Routledge, New York/London, 2011, ix + 269 pp, Hb £80,
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This book offers a rich collection of case studies looking at how perceptions of, and approaches to, language have shifted in recent years, particularly since the mid or late 1990s. The opening chapter, by editors Heller and Duchêne, proposes a framework combining (critical) discourse analysis and a sociological perspective firmly anchored in the Bourdieusian tradition. Their approach rests on a set of assumptions regarding the nature of discourse about languages [“during the 1990s and into the twenty-first century (there is a) widespread emergence of discursive elements that treat language and culture primarily in economic terms”]. “Pride” and “profit” are posited as contrasting frames of reference for discourse on various language issues illustrated in the subsequent chapters. The editors espouse an interpretation of capitalism as having “as one of its fundamental characteristics the continual expansion and serial saturation of markets”, and go on to state that “we find ourselves now at a particular moment in this process that we can call late capitalism [...]. The resulting tensions in the nation-state regime give rise to new discursive tropes in which language plays a particularly central role not only because of its place in [the] regulation and legitimization of political economic spaces but also because of the emergence of the tertiary sector as a defining element of the globalized new economy”. These quotes (all from p. 3) simultaneously highlight the limitations and the strengths of this framework. Regarding the former, readers may regret an exclusive reliance on concepts developed in a specific type of sociological discourse, which provides sharp social commentary but which, despite its professed ambition to the contrary, does not integrate the economic processes that are presumably relevant to the questions raised—notwithstanding the frequent use of terms like “capital” and “markets”. As for the latter, the strength of this framework is that it encourages the reader to think critically about language in social and political context.

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Chapter 2, by Gal, focuses on Europe and appropriately questions the notions of “pride” and “profit” as necessarily at odds with each other. She stresses the continuity of discourse between nation-states and the European Union, observing that “national standards seem to *combine* the opposed values.” Chapter 3, by Del Percio and Duchêne, will prove very informative to those readers who, like this reviewer, are blissfully ignorant of football culture. The chapter highlights the divergence of interests between the owners and fans of a football (soccer) team, and describes how competing claims to authenticity crystallize around language. Chapter 4, by Urla, examines language advocacy for Basque. Past a couple of turgid sentences that contribute little to the argument, it offers a crisp discussion about “quality management” in minority language promotion, pointing out that “a sociological perception of language [...] is now linked to much more rigorous modes of measurement and to a more intentionally depoliticized understanding of language relations” (p. 87). In Chapter 5, Pujolar and Jones show how landscaping can be put to the service of a nationalist message; they conclude that landscape is “commoditized” by a heritage industry (p. 93), placing this strategy at odds with resistance to the global spread of consumption patterns viewed as carriers of potential threats to Catalan identity. In Chapter 6, Blackledge and Creese discuss the appropriation of the notion of “heritage” by members of the Bengali community in four cities in England and show that heritage languages can also be harnessed as markers of social rank in strategies of social differentiation.

In her chapter about her experience on a ship of the Canadian Navy, Daveluy observes that “pride in a national order sustains profitable management of language use in the context of military operations” (p. 143) and highlights the continuity, rather than opposition, between “pride” and “profit”. In Chapter 8, Heller and Bell describe the lives of some French speakers in the Northwest Territories. A French-language center set up to serve their assumed linguistic and cultural needs is struggling because, “they [the informants] are [in the NWT] to work, not to build a community” (p. 177). This chapter offers a fine example of sharp sociolinguistics, pinpointing key aspects of actors’ relationships to their languages, and their implications for language policies. Lorente proposes, in Chapter 9, a detailed description of policies regarding expatriate Filipino workers, whose employment abroad is encouraged because of the remittances they send home; language skills are shown to represent an important facet of the associated discourse. Chapter 10, by Boutet, offers the familiar message that work at call centers in low-wage countries often exemplifies “an extreme merchandizing of the natural resource that the human faculty of speech represents” (p. 209). The closing chapter by McElhinny brings in the notion of “community of practice”, which provides, as a unit of analysis, a promising alternative to the more usual focus on place, moment or group. A link-up with research in language policy evaluation would certainly prove valuable.

Language in Late Capitalism contains much to interest readers with very different areas of specialization. However, the actual meaning of the message is not always unequivocal, and it leaves unexplored some connections that could have broadened its appeal. The first query is linked to the book’s tendency towards a form of self-referentiality, reflected in the frequent use of stock phrases that demonstrate obeisance to a particular genre but do not contribute much to the argument. What is

at issue here is not the strictly sociological relevance of the approach, but some ambiguities that unavoidably arise from the repeated use of terms like “profit” or “market”, which purportedly refer to economic processes, but are in fact employed in a sense that bears little relationship with the economic processes they usually denote outside this particular genre. The text is ripe with references to “late capitalism”, “circulation” and “commodification”, but these terms, when defined, turn out to be used in an idiosyncratic or metaphorical way.

The second query has to do with the (admittedly elusive) distinction between discourse about discourse and discourse about reality. Perhaps it would have been worthwhile to explore connections between the line of sociological inquiry developed in this book and research in language economics, which addresses (among others) issues like the labor market value of language skills, the contribution of language to measurable added value, the interplay between language, trade and globalization, the inclusion of symbolic values in economic estimations, etc. After all, such issues *might* just be germane to the understanding of the links between language and profits.

If anything, this volume is rich in examples suggesting that very stimulating research, banking on a concerted interdisciplinary effort, may be waiting just around the corner; and the valuable sociolinguistic insights this book already offers are more than enough to recommend it.

Author Biography

François Grin is full professor of economics at the University of Geneva. His research focuses on language economics and language policy design and evaluation. His latest book, *The Economics of the Multilingual Workplace* (with C. Sfreddo and F. Vaillancourt) was published by Routledge in 2010.