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THE MYSTERY OF LANGUAGE AND THOUGHTS
Signifying the Person in Southeast Asia

Dwi Noverini Djenar and Jack Sidnell (eds.), *Signs of Deference, Signs of Demeanour: Interlocutor Reference and Self-Other Relations across Southeast Asia Speech Communities* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2023), 260 pages, SGD 52 / US$48.

How we address or indicate ourselves to others—as well as the pronouns, words, and terms we use to identify ourselves—is heavily meaning-laden with how we accept the world as something familiar and structured, that is, "as-the-way-things-are." Our language and the words that constitute our linguistics' universe then reflect our thought, which is in turn a replication of our familiar everyday world, i.e. "as-the-way-things-are." Indeed, the scholar Whorf does reason that language influences thought, arguing that

> actually, thinking is most mysterious, and by far the greatest light upon it that we have is thrown by the study of language. This

> study shows that the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of a pattern of which he is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systematizations of his own language... His thinking itself is in a language—in English, in Sanskrit, in Chinese. And every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness (1956, 252).

Thus, the linguistic terms we use to indicate ourselves are the determinants of our languages that simultaneously regulate the patterns of our thoughts. This book (especially Chapters 2 to 8) suggests this hypothesis.

This volume, *Signs of Deference, Signs of Demeanour: Interlocutor Reference and Self-Other Relations across Southeast Asia Speech Communities*, edited by Dwi Noverini Djenar and Jack Sidnell, is a timely contribution to the linguistic anthropology of Southeast Asia. The work explores the interlocutor reference practices—that is, self-reference and how others are addressed in a conversation or dialogue—of speech communities across Southeast Asia, offering insights into sociolinguistic hierarchies and the underlying dynamics of social relationships. This edited volume provides a panoramic exploration of three major language families: Austroasiatic (Kri and Vietnamese), Tai-Kadai (Lao), and Austronesian (Javanese, Malay, and Indonesian), offering a broad analysis of their linguistic and sociocultural dimensions.

Part 1 of the work provides a foundational exploration (Chapter 1) of kinship terminologies from a descriptive perspective. Chapter 2

examines asymmetries in the person-reference system of Kri, a Vietic language spoken in upland Laos, by highlighting two key axes of asymmetry: hierarchy rooted in the chronological birth order of siblings, and the insider-outsider distinction based on consanguinity and inclusivity. Chapter 3 investigates shifts in the use of kinship terms and personal pronouns across standard and modified varieties among Javanese Indonesians in south-central Java, indicating the transformation of traditional Javanese society to a modern, ethnically diverse Indonesian nation-state.

Part 2 of the volume provides a micro-level analysis of reference practices—how one addresses oneself and others in a conversation, such as I, we, you, me, etc.—focusing on specific linguistic phenomena. Chapter 4 examines the role of vocatives—phrases and words used to directly address a listener, generally in the form of a personal name or term of endearment (such as doctor, John, dear)—in Cirebon Javanese. The chapter reasons vocatives function as explicit markers of relational acknowledgment, serving as intersubjective connectors within the interactional participation framework. [The concept of "interactional participation framework" is derived from the work of socio-linguist Erving Goffman (1981), analyzing how antagonists participate in a conversation or social interaction by examining the different roles or, figuratively speaking, "hats" they take on within that particular interaction. This includes the context of such interaction such as: who is speaking to whom (elder, younger, etc.), who is being addressed directly (among the interlocutors, etc.), and who is considered an interloper. In other words, looking at the dynamics of who is involved and how they are positioned (age-based hierarchy, social-cultural and political hierarchy, etc.) within the communication exchanged].

Chapter 5 investigates the use of English pronouns *I* and *you* in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where the use of such pronouns serves as a marker of social hierarchies and status within urban Malay-speaking communities influenced by modernity and the adoption of Western values.

In Part 3 of the volume, the chapters explore the association between talk and social intimacy. Chapter 6 examines how interlocutors in Vietnam participate in the building of intimate hierarchies through the use of alternative social arrangements and evaluations. Chapter 7 introduces the concept of "*siaw1*" or male friends (p. 138), and examines the worth and durability of friendship among Lao men through material and immaterial actions, such as drinking games, playing cards, playful head smacking, and teasing. Simultaneously such actions also carry with them the risk of endangering friendships. Chapter 8 investigates how social relations, mediated through the selection of self-references and deferential relations—signaled through specific kinship and sibling linguistic terms—set the framework for political interviews in Indonesia. Chapter 9 (Part 4) concludes the volume with a panoramic discussion on the honorific catalogues of interlocutor references from East and Southeast Asia.

The cases of interlocuter references as mentioned in this book suggest how communities relate to their world. Their languages (and their variations), furthermore, evince the medium through which to complete or bring to realization the world to which they relate. The grammar of the various languages or dialects is mechanized to reflect their specific particular worldview. This is especially reflected in the term "*siaw1*" in Laos (p. 139), with the use of common kin terms in Indonesia (p. 160), and use of teknonymy (p. 28) in upland Laos in relation to references to one another in day-to-day conversations. How

interlocuter references are identified or signified through their pronouns or otherwise tells us not so much about the grammar of their languages; rather they illustrate how they perceive their world. Theirs is a world of intricate asymmetrical and symmetrical relationships that defines the fabric of their community. Such relationships are, in turn, reflected in the manner in which they address one another in their daily interactions and conversations. In other words, as Whorf states,

> When linguists became able to examine critically and scientifically a large number of languages of widely different patterns, their base of reference was expanded; they experienced an interruption of phenomena hitherto held universal, and a whole new order of significances came into their ken. It was found that the background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade (1956, 212).

The Asian "I" Drop

These "shapers of ideas" program not just how we perceive ourselves but also the terms or pronouns that are utilized to signify oneself that, in turn, correspond to the accepted image of our world, which includes both the material as well as the non-material underpinnings of our realities, and the concepts that frame our cognitions of what is counted to be valid or "reality." This is poignantly indicated, for instance, in the use of pronouns 'I' and 'you' in an asymmetrical (such as age-based hierarchies) conversation between protagonists in Malaysian Malay (p.

101). This is to say that, "in asymmetrical relationships in the Malay system, the party of a lower status is obliged to choose forms that explicitly acknowledge the hierarchical difference while both pronouns and lexical nouns are available to the higher status party" (94). Whether this makes sense depends on the cultural distance or value affinity of one's society with the society in question (in this case, Malay). We organize our world in a manner that makes sense to us to make our world (that is, one's societal realities) more predictable and familiar. Seldom do we care that it may not make sense to others. More precisely,

> Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar, and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars. We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions that has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but *its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees (Whorf 1956, 213-214; italics in the original).

This is an essential aspect while considering how different speech societies relate to the adaptation of pronouns about oneself as well as to others. Even the type of societies—that is, whether the society emphasizes communal harmony over individual tendencies—does play crucial roles, for instance either in the usage or dropping of singular pronouns ('I'). Take for example, languages spoken in collective societies (which most traditional societies are) that drop the pronoun 'I' from sentences when referring to themselves, while in individualistic societies the pronoun 'I' is used about the individuality of a person (Kashima and Kashima 1998). The pronoun-drop indicates how each society has its ways to best assemble its community within its context (contingent on existential realities of society, ecologies, and so forth) to maintain harmony, thereby ensuring its existence. Its knowledge about its own self is tied to its views of the world, which are themselves based on direct expressions of its society.

Thus, one will find, for instance, the Samoan language to have no corresponding terms signifying the Indo-European concept of the 'individual' or 'self'; therefore,

> instead of our [i.e. European] Socratic "know thyself," Samoans say "Take care of the relationship"; instead of the European image of a rounded, integrated personality, like a sphere with no sides, Samoans are like gems cut with many distinct sides. The greater the number of sides, or parts, defined by relationships, the more brilliant the form, the greater the craft and skill of the person. Personal qualities are relative to context rather than descriptive of a persistent and consistent quality or essence (Marcus and Fischer 1999, 65).

As one can see, for Samoans, the personality of a person derives its meaning as a person, as well as its notion, only as a member of society. What this suggests is the ever-flexible and shifting notion of personhood (but always based on relations) as one forms relations with other members under various contexts even within one's own community. From this perspective, it is perhaps understandable why kinship terms are preferred among most Southeast Asian communities, as the book states, since they not only convey relational information, such as (familial) hierarchies, "... but also closeness" (p. 95).

What has been reasoned so far is not about language, but how one's views about the world are influenced by one's social, historical, or cultural circumstances, and how the language one speaks ultimately reflects one's views. The point here is to explicate why it is essential to properly understand societies, especially social phenomena, for societies think differently, and this difference in thinking is reflected in the language one speaks since languages elucidate, and represent societies' worldview. What constitutes human knowledge or understanding, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer, is invariably contingent on society's cultural circumstances. They are neither independent of society nor culture.

Indeed, one of the common patterns that we find among all the cases in this volume is that there seems to be no 'single' or 'exact' meaning for the pronouns or any other self- and other-referential terms, most ubiquitously seen in Vietnam (Chapter 6), Malaysia (Chapter 5), Java, Indonesia (Chapters 3, 4, and 8), and Laos (Chapters 2 and 7). Perhaps this ubiquity is an indication of the perennially changing events of human societies and the plastic nature of our thoughts and speech that enables us to keep up with these changing circumstances, especially evident among the Kri in upland Laos (Chapter 2), Malay in Kuala

Lumpur (Chapter 5), and Lao in Laos (Chapter 7). This way we can fill in any words or terms with meaning appropriate to the circumstance. The following sentences best convey this sentiment:

> Because of the systematic, configurative nature of higher mind, the "patternment" aspect of language always overrides and controls the "lexation" . . . or name-giving aspect. Hence the meanings of specific words are less important than we fondly fancy. Sentences, not words, are the essence of speech, just as equations and functions, and not bare numbers, are the real meat of mathematics. We are all mistaken in our common belief that any word has an "exact meaning." We have seen that the higher mind deals in symbols that have no fixed reference to anything, but are like blank checks, to be filled in as required, that stand for "any value" of a given variable, like . . . the *x*, *y*, *z* of algebra (Whorf 1956, 258).

All in all, this edited book is a timely publication for those of us who are interested in the linguistic anthropology and ethnography of Southeast Asia. Timely in the sense that it enables us to reexamine the concept of a *single* and *one and only* "universal" that has captured the imagination of scholars for the longest time in the fields of human studies. It makes us appreciate, through the study of linguistics among different speech communities in Southeast Asia, the innumerably valid "universals" that exist among various societies. This is especially urgent because the more connected world is ironically becoming a more hostile world, which is evident by how states are flirting with insular and chauvinistic tendencies.

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