

Geographies of languages/Languages of geography

Luke Desforges & Rhys Jones

Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of Wales,
Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 3DB, UK

This themed section is based on a session that took place at the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) annual conference, held in Brighton in January 2000, and draws together the work of a number of authors who explore the significance of languages within geography. The inversion of terms in the session title is important, in this respect, since it helps to highlight the broad range of interest of geographers in language. By focusing on 'geographies of language' we signal our interest in the manifold ways in which geographers have examined the spaces and places of various languages. The 'languages of geographies' refers to the constitutive role of languages in the construction of geographical knowledge.

The 'mapping' of languages is a long-standing area of geographical research that has its roots in the large-scale political and cultural changes that affected Europe during the age of modernity. The emphasis within this arena of research is on themes such as cartography and languages; on exploring the links between language and (national) identity; and on the more practical questions of language planning. Significant work here includes Williams's (1993) work on the relationship between language and national identity in Canada, and Aitchison and Carter's (1994) series of language

maps in Wales. Work in this field is important, we would argue, since it helps to demonstrate the constitutive role played by the geographies of language in the formation and contestation of key modernist projects such as the state and the nation. As such, a focus on the geographies of language can act as a springboard to help geographers engage in a novel and alternative manner in broader debates about the constitution of various key socio-spatial formations. A key research question, in this regard, would be the extent to which the much-touted decline of the nation-state—largely as a result of an interrelated set of processes linked to globalization—is being reflected, and possibly sustained, by similar far-reaching changes in the geographies of language use. We argue that our understanding of these processes, and a number of other processes of interest in contemporary human geography, would be enhanced through a focus on the geographies of languages.

Discussion of the 'languages of geography' draws our attention to other recent and numerous studies that have sought to contribute to the 'linguistic turn' within geography: these studies have attempted to show how ontological realities are grounded in the use of language (Barnes and Duncan 1992). This is perhaps a more introverted approach—in a disciplinary sense—to the study of language, with its focus

on the central role played by language in the constitution of geographical epistemologies. Here, attention is drawn to the politics of language, or in other words, the way in which the use of language can imbue meaning and power to certain social and spatial practices. Our emphasis in the RGS (with the IBG) session and in this themed section on the ‘languages of geography’ is critical, in this respect, however, since we did not seek to replicate other studies concerned with the use of language metaphors within the discipline of geography. Studies in this area of research have come to represent well-trodden academic ground within the discipline. By focusing on the ‘languages of geography’ we seek to plough somewhat of an alternative furrow by exploring the way in which the various languages that people speak affect the production, the consumption and the circulation of geographical knowledges.

Some interesting work has already been conducted in this context. Frenk and Townsend’s (1994) work on the life histories of women in the rainforests of Mexico is particularly instructive. In their work, they chart the difficulties in translating women’s life histories from the various Mexican languages to English, and the necessary loss of meaning that this entailed. Here we see the effect that the languages that people speak has on the production of geographical knowledge, as Anglophonic geographers encounter other people, speaking another language, who act and think in distinctly different ways. Similar themes appear in the context of teaching geography through a particular language: in this regard, the emphasis placed on English as the primary language of geographical education raises serious questions about the consumption of geographical knowledge amongst those individuals for whom English is a second language (see Desforges and Jones this issue).

A focus on the ‘geographies of language’ and

the ‘languages of geography’ has the potential, therefore, to act as an innovative and insightful agenda for research within the discipline. Moreover, though some might dismiss the former as something that is of little interest within their own areas of research, we would argue that the latter is of great practical or pedagogic relevance to the majority of geography academics. For instance, issues relating to the ‘languages of geography’ raise serious questions about the learning experiences of overseas students of geography; of the consumption of a predominantly Anglophonic literature by a non-Anglophonic academe; and of the practicalities and ethics of conducting overseas research. These are all questions that are of a direct relevance to the majority of academics working within the discipline of geography. We suspect also that they are questions that require serious thought if we are to improve the ethical quality and inclusiveness of our discipline.

The themes discussed above form the basis of the papers that appear in this themed section. All but one of the papers were first presented at the conference session mentioned above and we would like to thank the individuals who commented on the papers at the time. Four of the five papers relate to the study of the spaces and places of languages. Iannàccaro and Dell’Aquila’s paper, for instance, elaborates on a perceptual dialectological approach to mapping languages. This represents a new methodological approach to mapping languages in which the language-speakers themselves delineate the geographical extent of linguistic areas. Empirical material from language maps of linguistic areas in contemporary Italy is used to illustrate their approach. In this regard, their use of such a ‘bottom-up’ approach to mapping languages is extremely innovative and points to novel and alternative way of invigorating traditional linguistic mapping techniques.

Three papers follow that explore the link between language and identity. All three focus, however, on different geographical and thematic contexts. Segrott's work explores the link between language and identity amongst a transnational community living and working in London. Using interview material based on the London-Welsh community in London, Segrott makes wider claims regarding the link between language and identity for this group of people. Key here are the various institutions—chapel and pub, for instance—that act as loci for the intertwining of Welsh identities and the Welsh language. In this empirically rich study, we gain a powerful insight into the key processes that help to meld together a transnational linguistic community of people.

Issues of language and identity are also at the heart of Mac Giolla Chríost's paper. His focus, however, is on the practical problems encountered within a contested linguistic and ethno-national space, namely Northern Ireland. The Irish-speaking communities of Northern Ireland, argues Mac Giolla Chríost, represent a challenge for the newly elected Northern Ireland Assembly and the associated North-South Language Body. Although there is potential here for the Irish language to further entrench political and ethno-national allegiances within the region, Mac Giolla Chríost sees the model of local language initiatives adopted in Wales as a possible framework for language policy in Northern Ireland. Adopting such a framework, according to Mac Giolla Chríost, would enable the Irish language to become something that has the potential to unite all political groupings in Northern Ireland, rather than being the source of ethno-national divisions.

The Doric dialect and culture are the object of enquiry of Dan Knox's paper. Centred on the north-eastern region of Scotland, in the area around Aberdeen, this is a cultural community based on the use of a particular dialect and

various cultural practices, such as the singing of ballads and promoting of certain regional literary traditions. Knox's argument is that the use of these tropes enables the continuous 'becoming' of the north-eastern region of Scotland as it is progressively institutionalized. Knox's key contribution here is to illustrate the way in which languages or dialects help to give shape to particular regions in which they are used. Echoing points made earlier, his work demonstrates the theoretical purchase that languages provide geographers in their quest to understand other crucial socio-spatial institutions, such as the region, the nation and the state.

The final paper in the themed section relates more to the notion of the 'languages of geography'. In this paper, Desforges and Jones explore the effect that languages have on the circulation of geographical knowledges. Drawing on information derived from focus groups conducted with students, they seek to demonstrate the way in which bilingual Welsh-speaking students engage with the discipline of geography in a distinctively different way to monolingual English-speaking students. The key point made in this paper is that languages play a key role in structuring the way in which individuals consume geographical knowledge, and as such, the paper raises implicit questions concerning the contentious ethics of supporting an academic geographical project that is predominantly Anglophonic in nature.

In this themed section, therefore, we have brought together a number of authors interested in the potential that a more sustained focus on languages may bring to geography. We do not purport to have addressed all possible avenues of linguistic research within geography in this theme section, nor even to have covered the more pressing or interesting themes open to enquiry by geographers. What we have sought to do is to illustrate the breadth of interest in linguistic themes within

geography and to demonstrate some of the possibilities for future research within this field. Our hope, in this regard, is that it will act as a springboard for a re-engagement of geography with language(s) in its varied and manifold contexts.

References

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