

Language and Culture **Shifting Boundaries in a Postmodern World**

George Fulford

Volume 25, Number 2, 2003

Language and Culture / Langue et culture

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/008045ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/008045ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Fulford, G. (2003). Language and Culture: Shifting Boundaries in a Postmodern World. *Ethnologies*, 25(2), 5–17. <https://doi.org/10.7202/008045ar>

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Shifting Boundaries in a Postmodern World

George Fulford

University of Winnipeg

“...a definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world.” (Williams 1977: 21)

This special issue of *Ethnologies* explores the interrelated themes of language and culture, and particularly how language and culture contribute to self-definition in local, regional, national and global contexts. The contributors approach these themes from the perspectives of ethnomusicology, Canadian studies, cultural anthropology, and linguistics. Their topical foci range from Celtic, Métis and Iroquoian music, to minority language issues affecting French and Ukrainian Canadians in Alberta and Muslims in Northern Ireland, the feminization of job titles in Québec and France, and language ideologies among Muinane of the Colombian Amazon. The authors use ethnographic, ethnohistorical and archival methods to obtain their data, and exegetical analysis of key texts and cultural performances to derive insights into patterns of language use and identity formation. They contextualize these patterns within particular communities, make comparisons with other communities and use theoretical frameworks which are broadly sociolinguistic and postmodern.

A recent review article by Duranti (2003) identifies three paradigms in scholarship pertaining to the relationship of language and culture. The first — associated primarily with Boas (1911, 1942), Sapir (1924, 1949) and Whorf (1956) — has roots stretching back at least to German Idealism and Romanticism (Chomsky 1966) and focuses on the relationship between grammar and worldview. The second grows from

the work of Gumperz and Hymes (1964) on the ethnography of communication and emphasizes pragmatic aspects of language use. The third and most eclectic paradigm explores the role of language in identity formation. Butler's (1990) work on performativity, Woolard and Schieffelin's (1994) study of language ideology, and Trechter and Bucholtz's (2001) analysis of hegemony and race are all examples of the third paradigm.

The contributors to this volume nearly all fall within the eclectic third paradigm. However, as Duranti remarks, "paradigms do not die" and "researchers have had no difficulty moving back and forth from one paradigm to another" (2003: 333-334). Indeed, by its very nature, the third paradigm transcends the boundaries between grammar and pragmatics that are implicit in the other two paradigms. Thus, it is no surprise that the following articles are ultimately a mix of all three paradigms, seeking what Spitulnik characterizes as "a breakthrough into a different kind of relationship" (2003: 339). This relationship between language and culture is integrative, local and counter-hegemonic, yet embedded in an increasingly global discourse.

Two of the contributors to this issue have explored the issue of francophone minorities in Canada. Their research is highly original, departing from the tendency of our mainstream press to continually juxtapose the language policies of Québec with those of the rest of Canada. In her exploration of the tensions between the desire to foster athletic performance versus francophoneness at the Alberta Francophone Games (AFG), Christine Dallaire observes "[o]rganizers generally acknowledged that the sport agenda was dominating the process of staging the AFG." Reasons for this included organizers' desire to gain credibility from sports funding agencies that target funds based exclusively on athletic performance, to attract high-performance bilingual and monolingual English athletes from the dominant (Anglophone) community, to depoliticize and dehistoricize the event, and to focus on technical management issues rather than confronting the problem of how to reverse the ongoing decline in the number of francophones in Alberta. In this way, "the focus of the AFG slid from promoting francophoneness to the staging of a large competitive sporting event." Nevertheless, Dallaire ends her article on a positive note. She suggests that by expanding the number of certified francophone coaches and sports officials in Alberta, AFG organizers may one day resolve the apparent contradiction between sporting excellence and francophoneness in their province.

In her research note on Protestant francophones in Québec, Marie-Claude Rocher explores a fascinating disjunction between linguistic and religious hegemonies in Québec. Dating back to the time of New France, Protestant francophones in Québec have been doubly ostracized — first by the Catholic francophone majority and then by the Protestant anglophone minority. “Cette double trahison — ou double appartenance, selon la perspective — plaçait la communauté dans une tension constante entre l’attrait de l’anglicisation, si le choix était de demeurer protestant, ou la conversion au catholicisme, si le choix était de demeurer francophone.” Nevertheless, members of this unique community have remained a vital (albeit little understood) community in Québec.

Rocher pays particular attention to two Protestant colleges established in the mid-nineteenth century — the Institut Feller in Grande Ligne (now called Saint-Blaise) and the Institut de Pointe-aux-Trembles in Belle-Rivière (now called Saint-Eustache). These two schools were important centres for the development of the francophone Protestant intelligentsia in Québec for the next century. However, in 1968 a fire destroyed the main building of the Institut Feller. The Pointe-aux-Trembles facility closed at about the same time. Books, correspondence, student records, photographs and other valuable archival materials that were originally housed in the college libraries and archives have over the years become lost, stolen or dispersed, making the job of writing the history of francophone Protestants in Québec increasingly difficult.

The problem of the destruction of Franco-Protestant heritage materials is so acute, according to Rocher, that unless action is taken quickly, writing a history of francophone Protestants in Québec will be almost impossible. Given the gaps in archival documentation, she suggests that scholars adopt a multidisciplinary “ecological” approach integrating oral and written records, along with material culture. This approach is consistent with ethnohistoric methods employed by anthropologists and historians (see Stevenson 1996, Nicks 1996) to reconstruct indigenous histories.

While it is common to assume continuity between language and culture, both Dallaire and Rocher demonstrate that this is not always the case. The idea that inhabitants of politically autonomous and semi-autonomous regions necessarily speak a single language reflects assumptions that have proliferated since the advent of modern nation states. The situations of Franco-Albertans and Protestant francophones

in Québec counter such assumptions; however it is clear that disjunctions have developed between their cultural and linguistic identities. Organizers and participants in the Alberta Francophone Games conceptualized francophoneness in predominantly cultural terms (i.e., being of French ancestry), reflecting the reality that an increasing number of athletes participating in the Games lack fluency in French. Francophone Protestants in Québec, in contrast, base their francophoneness primarily on linguistic, rather than cultural factors. Their sense of alienation has grown primarily from cultural (specifically religious), rather than linguistic differences between themselves and the majority population in Québec.

Another fascinating disjunction between linguistic and cultural identification has developed among Muslims in Northern Ireland. As Gabriele Marranci shows in his examination of language use in the Belfast mosque, Muslim immigrants have abandoned both their vernaculars and Arabic in order to avoid negative stereotyping by English-speaking Protestants and Catholics. This trend is unique among Muslim immigrants to Europe and the British Isles. "The Islamic Cultural Centre and its mosque have become the symbol of the Northern Irish *ummah* [community] unity," according to Marranci. "Shi'a and Sunni (from several countries), Arab and Pakistani, Indonesian and Malaysian, Moroccan and Algerian, Indian and Afghan Muslims are sharing (in contrast to other European situations) the same mosque and social-political space."

Marranci provides convincing evidence for the predominance of English among Muslims in Northern Ireland. Meetings and informal discussions at the Islamic Cultural Centre are always conducted in English. Sermons in the Friday service at the mosque are in English, which is also the medium of instruction at the Islamic school. According to Marranci, Muslims camouflage their ethnicity in Northern Ireland by refraining from using their vernacular languages as well as Arabic. They do this, he suggests, in order to avoid being implicated in "the troubles" afflicting Protestant and Catholic communities.

Marranci's observations provide an interesting insight into post-9/11 debates over the wider "troubles" afflicting the Muslim world and the West (Geertz 2003; Said 2003). His observation that linguistic assimilation seems to encourage cultural unity could be interpreted as a hopeful sign, were it not for the terrible spectre of sectarian hatred

and violence that has motivated the emergence of an Anglophone Islamic *ummah* in Northern Ireland.

At first glance Muslims in Belfast seem to have little in common with Ukrainian-Canadians in Mundare, a small farming town in central Alberta. Yet residents of both communities continually negotiate their identity in transnational contexts, in the case of Belfast Muslims, as members of *dar-al-islam* [the house of Islam] and in the case of Mundarites, through cultural activities such as the *Obzhynsky* harvest festival. Significantly, whereas Muslims in Belfast go out of their way to use English in public performances, Mundarites prefer to use Ukrainian (though admittedly it must be translated for the young people to understand).

Natalia Shostak's autoethnographic study of Ukrainian-Canadianness focuses on the story of Bogdan and Iryna Pivovarchuk, who emigrated from Ukraine to Mundare in 1992. In recounting the Pivovarchuks' involvement in the local *Zustreech* Cultural Society, Shostak demonstrates the conflict between two competing notions of authenticity in Mundare ("local Ukrainianness" and "homeland Ukrainianness").

Shostak writes poetically. She uses nuanced ethnographic details ("I use the Russian spelling of Bohdan's name for it is how it is written in his legal documents") to great effect (in this case to highlight his cultural identification with both Russia and Ukraine). Through snippets of intermeshed dialogue she captures her subjects' enthusiasm and intimacy (*Bogdan*: "We had to adapt to the local ways, you see... *Iryna*: ... but we could have done more"). And carefully chosen excerpts from *Obzhynsky* folk performances reveal undertones of former Stalinist influences in Ukraine ("It is the Harvest Day, the day of tireless workers").

Shostak documents the Pivovarchuks' failed struggle to establish an authentic Ukrainian (i.e., Soviet-style homeland Ukrainian) *Zustreech* Cultural Society. She reflects that in Mundare identity has almost always been contested, concluding that "local Ukrainianness is just continuing its 'journey' through a new kind of contestation, this time triggered by the consequences of global political change in the 1980s and 1990s and by a new wave of immigration from Ukraine."

The theme of contested identity occupies an important place in Lynn Whidden's study of Métis¹ women's songs. Like *Obzhynsky* folk performances in Mundare, Métis folksongs provide a context for the study of emerging identities. Whidden notes that "Métis women sang in Cree, Saulteux, French, Michif, English and sometimes combined several languages in one song." Indeed, there is possibly even evidence of Ukrainian or Polish influence in the lyrics of at least one song that she transcribed ("First time I met that girl it was at an Appleski dance").

Despite Métis singers' apparent enjoyment of linguistic syncretism in their lyrics, the melodic lines of their songs are predominantly French. Whidden attributes this to "the compartmentalization of Native and European songs" and "the Métis love and acceptance of the new European music" which together suggest to her that the Métis are a distinct nation. She speculates that significant stylistic and functional differences created an intractable gulf between traditional Cree music (conservative in form, chanted only by individuals and imbued with much spiritual significance and efficacy) and French folksongs (often sung in groups for entertainment, displaying considerable melodic variation and harmonic texture).

Whidden analyzes in depth the structure of Métis song lyrics, noting the presence of repetition, parallelisms, and formulaic phrases. She draws attention to their frequent references to European songbirds such as chaffinches and nightingales, the calls of which she suggests, following Feld (1982), are "shaped into human song that then becomes a sound metaphor for longing and sorrow." Further European influence is found in references to the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and a French infantry regiment.

Perhaps the greatest European influence in Métis women's songs is the ubiquitous theme of romantic love (a sentiment completely absent from the lyrics of traditional Cree music). A few Métis songs extol the passion of youthful love ("Vingt ans, vingt ans, c'est la belle âge. On trouve l'amour, dans chaque mot dit"). But many more express sadness

-
1. Whidden uses a biological and legal definition of Métis as "the descendants of Aboriginal mothers and European fathers" and "Aboriginal people under the Canadian Constitution." In addition, she situates the original Métis in the Red River area of Manitoba and notes that during the nineteenth century they developed a distinct identity as "*une nouvelle nation*." The definition of Métis both within and outside Manitoba is a hotly contested issue; for further details see Brown (1988).

and a sense of loss: "Pleurez pauvres yeux, mon sort funeste. J'ai perdu, j'ai perdu mon amant!" Whidden suggests that these sad songs accurately reflected the lives of Métis women who frequently experienced long periods of separation from their parents and siblings, the death of infant children and even abandonment by their husbands. "Like many early folksongs," Whidden writes, "they do not protest social structures and situations; they are an appeal rather than an assertion. They reveal acceptance of life as it is."

Whereas Whidden notes a disjunction between traditional Cree music and nineteenth century Métis songs modelled on French lyrics and folk melodies, Lisa Valentine discerns a fundamental unity between traditional Iroquoian music and a protest song composed by contemporary Seneca musician and songwriter Sam Hess. "Sam's use of a very slow-paced country and western melodic structure, accompanied by chords strummed on guitar, immediately marked this song as one where the audience was to focus on emotional turmoil," writes Valentine.

According to Valentine, the lyrics and melody of Sam Hess' song depart completely from those of songs used in traditional Iroquoian ritual and ceremonies. Nevertheless, his song retains key features of Iroquoian ceremonial discourse, including: the repeated use of parallelisms and coordinating conjunctions to convey a sense of dramatic buildup; placing performative utterances at the end of stanzas; and the use of poetic language to convey the concept of transformation.

Whidden and Valentine both embed their ethnomusicological research in living musical traditions. They do this by conducting ethnographic interviews with performers, thereby including emic perspectives in their analyses. Furthermore, they seek to incorporate what Silverstein (1976, 1993) calls "metapragmatic discourse" (i.e., talking about the context of talking). Heather Sparling also employs this reflexive strategy in her study of the relationship between Gaelic music and language in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.

As a Gaelic language teacher, Sparling stresses the importance of renewing and reviving the Gaelic language, which she sees as the key to preserving Gaelic culture. With fewer than five hundred Gaelic speakers (approximately 0.5 percent of the total population) living in Cape Breton, "Gaelic culture is in serious danger of disappearing from the region." While some Gaelic speakers are mobilizing to promote the

language, others question the value of such efforts. Quoting Dorian (1981), who studied the death of a Scottish Gaelic dialect, Sparling articulates a particularly pernicious attitude which she has herself encountered among disaffected and economically-impooverished Gaelic-speakers in Cape Breton: "What advantage is there to learning Gaelic now? It's no help to you, if you're out looking for a job."

One particularly interesting aspect of Sparling's research is her documentation of the metapragmatic relationship, articulated by various Cape Breton musicians, language teachers and cultural activists, between the Gaelic language and Gaelic music. Gaelic culture, in the words of one informant, is "based on a language that people speak and communicate with... and from that comes its literature which is communicated through song."

Sparling juxtaposes two versions of the argument that Gaelic language and music are mutually determinative in Cape Breton. In one, which I label "cultural determinism," she affirms the importance of Gaelic bards as the bearers of Gaelic language and culture and asserts that "[Gaelic] song tradition provides a *raison d'être* for the language, as there is little reason to learn Gaelic in the absence of a living, vibrant culture." In this version "language is music and music is language." In the other version (glossed "linguistic determinism") Sparling quotes an informant who states that language represents "the warp and woof of any culture" and that "other things derive from that".

Sparling moves back and forth between cultural and linguistic determinism throughout her article, generally weighing in on the side of the former. Her apparent equivocation reflects an implicit tension running throughout recent ethnomusicological (Feld and Fox 1994) and ethnographic (Magne 1991) literature about the relationship of language and culture. It may be best to avoid framing the issue in terms of the primacy of one factor over another, however. Such discussions premise a contradiction that is empirically impossible to either prove or disprove. It seems more productive to accept that language and culture are mutually imbricated without positing a unidirectional causal relationship.

The concept of metapragmatic discourse is closely related to that of "language ideology," which Silverstein (1979: 193) has defined as "any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use."

Silverstein goes on to distinguish “native ideologies,” also called “folk linguistics,” from “scientific views,” which emerged from the “European folk ideology of language” (204). He states that “natives’ understanding of their own systems of linguistic usage frequently conflicts with the comparative-functional [i.e. scientific] perspective” (208). This conflict will be resolved when we begin “seeing language as of the same ‘cultural’ order as the rest of social life” (208, 234).

In his discussion of Muinane theories of selfhood and sociality, Carlos Londoño Sulkin sketches out an indigenous metapragmatic discourse about language ideology. According to Londoño Sulkin, Muinane people believe that the world is a hostile and dangerous place inhabited by powerful substances such as tobacco paste, coca, hot chilies, water and various herbs which can create misfortune for humans. To obviate the harmful effect of such substances, *mambeadores* (adult men who consume powdered coca leaves) must periodically host dance rituals in their longhouses. During these events an *Íimaji* [ritual speech (literally “a path of speech”)] is performed to harness symbolically powerful substances for the good of the *mambeadore*, his kin and his allies. These speeches are conceptualized as forest paths linking *mambeadores* to one another and also to the substances they wish to control in the forest.

Londoño Sulkin suggests that *mambeadores* develop a reflexive understanding of the efficacy of *Íimaji*. At one level, they believe that through speech they control dangerous substances; speech thus functions as what Geertz (1973) terms a “model of” reality. At another, more reflexive level, *mambeadores* understand “paths of speech” to be “models for” reality. That is, their speech assumes a metapragmatic function — they are able, in their own terms, to talk about the meaning of the context of their speeches.

From a Western perspective, Muinane language ideologies seem strongly rooted in materiality. Muinane words do more than denote objects, feelings and thoughts. They inhere in substances and are embodied. Western language ideologies, on the other hand, emphasize abstraction and transcendence. Words are defined by their absence from the material world and their ability to represent ideas. As pure logos, they gather together according to abstract principles of syntax and semantics.²

2. For a fascinating discussion of the impact of the Greek concept of logos on modern and postmodern language ideologies see Iwanicki (2003).

As a counterpoise to Londoño Sulkin's broadly ethnographic and psychological treatment of Muinane language ideology, Elizabeth Dawes' discussion of the feminization of French job titles employs a fine-grained grammatical analysis of gender marking contextualized within particular historical and political situations facing francophone women in Canada, Belgium, Switzerland and France. Dawes describes how the tripartite distinction of masculine, feminine and neuter nouns in Latin has become simplified to masculine and feminine in French, resulting in sometimes counter-intuitive gender marking of words such as "l'utérus" and "l'ovaire" (masculine) or "la prostate" and "la testostérone" (feminine). She outlines how the masculine forms of adjectives and nouns are unmarked and describes how in the Middle Ages feminine endings were added to unmarked masculine nouns describing various occupations in order to signify the role of wife (e.g., "un boucher" is a (male) butcher and "une bouchère" is the wife of a butcher). At the end of the First World War, when women began occupying traditionally male jobs, the feminine ending on unmarked nouns came to designate a female job title ("une bouchère" came to mean "a female butcher"). In an attempt to standardize the feminization of job titles, beginning in the late 1970s the governments of Québec, Belgium, Switzerland and France established *Offices de la langue française*. The feminization of job titles has proceeded fairly systematically in Canada, Belgium and Switzerland. However, in France there has been little or no feminization of high-status job titles (e.g., the terms "un médecin", "un professeur" and "un chef" apply to both masculine and feminine job titles), even though there are ways to distinguish masculine and feminine gender or render such nouns gender neutral. The reason for this, according to Dawes, is that members of the Académie française have been very resistant to pressure from women's lobby groups. The constraints on language reform in France, she observes, do not stem from language, but from the language ideology of French-speakers in France. "La féminisation des titres n'est pas un problème linguistique," Dawes concludes, "c'est un problème de société."

Taken together, the articles in this issue reiterate Williams' assertion (1977: 21) that "a definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world." They show how the languages in which we speak, sing, pray and otherwise conduct our daily lives carry information about our individual and collective identities, ideologies and histories. Language and culture are thus mutually

influential. Grammatical, pragmatic and metapragmatic categories project themselves into the world, and our understanding of the world projects itself into what we deem significant in our discourse. Language and ideology overlap, defining not only how we understand the way we speak, but the way we understand the significance of what we speak about.

References

- Boas, Franz. 1911. "Introduction." In Franz Boas, ed., *Handbook of American Indian Languages*. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 40. Washington, Government Printing Office: 5-89.
- . 1942. "Language and Culture." *Studies in the History of Culture*. Menasha (WI), Banta Publishing: 178-84.
- Brown, Jennifer S. H. 1988. "Métis." *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (second edition). Vol. 2: 1343-46.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1966. *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Dorian, Nancy C. 1981. *Language Death: The Life Cycle of a Scottish Gaelic Dialect*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Duranti, Alessandro. 2003. "Language as Culture in U.S. Anthropology." *Current Anthropology* 44 (3): 323-47.
- Feld, Steven. 1982. *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Feld, Steven and Aaron A. Fox. 1994. "Music and Language." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23: 25-53.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Religion as a Cultural System." *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York, Basic Books: 87-125.
- . 2003. "Which Way to Mecca." *New York Review of Books* 50 (10-11).
- Gumperz, John H. and Dell H. Hymes, eds. 1964. *The Ethnography of Communication*. *American Anthropologist* 66, Special Publication. Washington: American Anthropological Association.
- Iwanicki, Christine. 2003. "Living Out Loud within the Body of the Letter: Theoretical Underpinnings of the Materiality of Language." *College English* 65 (5): 494-510.
- Magne, Frank. 1991. "Language and Culture Debate." *Anthropology Today* 8 (4): 17-18.
- Nicks, Trudy. 1996. "Dr. Oronhyatekha's History Lessons: Reading Museum Collections as Texts." In Jennifer S. H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert, eds., *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History*. Peterborough (ON), Broadview Press: 483-508.
- Said, Edward. 2003. "The Academy of Logado." *London Review of Books* 25 (8).

- Sapir, Edward. 1921. *Language*. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich.
- . 1949. *The Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture, and Personality*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Silverstein, Michael. 1976. "Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description." In Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby eds., *Meaning in Anthropology*. Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press: 11-55.
- . 1979. "Language Structure and Linguistic Ideology." In Paul R. Clyne, William F. Hanks and Carol L. Hofbauer, eds., *The Elements: a Parasession on Linguistic Units and Levels*. Chicago Linguistic Society, University of Chicago: 193-247.
- . 1993. "Metapragmatic discourse and metapragmatic function." In John A. Lucy ed., *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 33-58.
- Spitulnik, Debra. 2003. "Comments on Language as Culture in U.S. Anthropology by Alessandro Duranti." *Current Anthropology*, 44 (3): 339-40.
- Stevenson, Winona. 1996. "The Journals and Voices of a Church of England Native Catechist: Askenootow (Charles Pratt), 1851-1884." In Jennifer S. H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert eds., *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History*. Peterborough (ON), Broadview Press: 305-329.
- Trechter, Sara and Mary Bucholtz eds. 2001. *Discourses on Whiteness. Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 11 (1).
- Whorf, Benjamin Lee. 1956. *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (John B. Carroll, ed.). New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Woolard, Kathryn A. and Bambi B. Schieffelin. 1994. "Language Ideology." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23: 55-82.

