

# Language Under Construction

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Jan David Hauck

## **Language Under Construction**

**Bilingualism in Paraguay and  
Some Unsettled Thoughts About Language**

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## Preface

The book you are about to read tells two stories. One of them is about *a language* (or maybe two), the other is about *language*. In fact they are about how *the* language and language came into being. The first story takes place in Paraguay, a rather small landlocked country in South America that may not have attracted too much attention from news reporters and academics, but which certainly has a lot to offer in regards to thinking about our contemporary worlds. I would like to particularly mention the hospitality with which I have been received whenever I traveled there. The second story takes place mainly in Europe and in the United States of America. The first story is primarily about speech practices and educational politics, the second focuses on scientific practice and its political implications. The two stories might seem to have little in common at first sight. What do the philosophical investigations of eighteenth century European philosophers have to do with problems in Paraguayan bilingual schools?

I think the text itself will explain the peculiar junction of these issues. And while of course some of my previous theoretical contemplations have inspired my fieldwork in Paraguay, it has become clear to me that it was the observations I made there that set the course for what has become my theoretical reflections on the concept of language in the present text – and the course of my engagement with Linguistic Anthropology.

Some minor corrections and a few additional footnotes aside, the text is basically the one that made its way into my MA thesis submitted on October 20, 2008. Since then I have been able to continue observing the political and linguistic developments in Paraguay and remain convinced that my observations have not lost any of their relevance.

I owe thanks to many people that have made important contributions helping me to finalize this work. First and foremost I wish to thank the people in Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil: my interviewees, those that provided me with contacts and information, and those that provided accomodation and hospitality. They are: Adrián Rodríguez Godoy, Alberto Portel, Ana Camblong, Ana Carolina Hecht, Ángel Fleita, Ángel Maldonado, Aurora García de Molina and Heriberto Molina, Celina Molina, César Silva and Silvina, David Galeano Olivera, Dennes Albert Rebouças, Diana García, Dionisio Fleita, Edith Correa Huerta, Edith, Liliana Soledad Mieres, Lorena, and Serafina, Graciela Barrios, Graciela González, Javier Aiger, Julio Peña Gill, Ligia Chiappini, Manuel Domínguez Ferreira, Maria Antonia Rojas, Mario R. Bogado, Michael Kuhnert, Nancy Oilda Benitez Ojeda, Néstor Álvarez, Omar Gimenez, P. Bartomeu Melià SJ, Patricia Cabrera de Vergara, Roberto Abínzano, Roberto Bein, Sigi and Marcelo Larricq, and Waldemar Ferreira, as well as various Guaraní teachers in Asunción and Encarnación, and salespersons, and officers at the border of Argentina and Paraguay.

Before, during, and after my fieldwork as well as throughout the last months of preparation of this thesis I have profited enormously from discussions with friends and colleagues which are: Beatriz Pantin, Caspar N. Wolf, Elisabeth Mänzel, Eva-Maria Rößler, Gundo Rial y Costas, Julia Eksner, Manfred Ringmacher, Maria Lidola, Pepijn Born, Settimio Presutto, and Warren Thompson. A special thanks has to go to my workgroup consisting of Anne-Seline Moser, Daniela Manke, Diana Ortloff, Marion Amler (thanks for the title), and Sarah Müller for providing an excellent environment for exposing and discussing my ideas. Jason Kirkpatrick did a great job curing my linguistic shortcomings in English. My sincere apologies to whomever I might have failed to mention here. The mentor of this thesis, Jeanne Berrenberg, has to be mentioned particularly. No day of the week, no time of the day, and no question seems to be inappropriate for providing her students with competent advice. Many of my scientific basics I owe to her teaching. Needless to say, I alone remain responsible for the uses I have made of the advice, for the views expressed, and for any and all errors or misinterpretations.

Leslie Loreto has been at my side during this work one way or the other, and was always a great support and an invaluable source of inspiration. I would especially like to thank my parents Ilse and Ulrich Hauck not only for their unconditional support during the last two months of writing but as well for the singular fulfillment of their role as parents during the last 28 years, no matter if I was distant or near, without which I would not be standing where I am now.

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## On orthography and typography

I use American English orthography. Foreign terms are in italics as are emphases. Emphases in quotations are always as in the original if not noted otherwise. Sometimes I found it useful to point additionally to an original emphasis. Added emphases are marked as such and are always mine. Quotations in separate paragraphs are always in the original language and orthography, in-line quotations most of the time. A few times it was necessary to render quoted terms or phrases in English for the sake of readability. In all other cases the translations are provided as footnotes. In cases where I have consulted already translated works the quotations appear as in the published book. An indication of the original title is included in the bibliography. Modifications in quotations are marked as usual through brackets []. Ellipsis ... are used to indicate omissions. The ellipsis in parenthesis (...) indicates omissions of more than one sentence. Single and double quotation marks have been adapted even in quotations. Double quotes are always used first, single quotes only inside of double quotes.

In the bibliography I provide the original publication date first and, if different, the date of the publication that I actually use for quotations in square brackets. This is also the case for translations. Missing dates are indicated through *sine data* (s.d.). Internet sources are cited as usual providing the URL and the date of access. If the Internet documents are in pdf-format the page numbers of the pdf-file are used for quotations. In all other cases the quotations refer to the respective number of the paragraph, indicated through § or §§, counted from the beginning of the document (excluding titles and headings).

# Introduction

*We invent an incidental and historical or situational “reality” through the conscious use of language, one that demands “correct usage” from the speaker. If language is arbitrary and capable of correction and change for us, the world of “fact” and “event” is definitely nonarbitrary: our scientific, legal, and historical investigations are (inventive) efforts to find out “what the facts are” and “what really happened.” Like the rational methodologies of these disciplines, we require our language to be a precision instrument (albeit one of our own making) for the description and representation of a stubbornly factual world, and our view of language in general often reflects this bias.*

– Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (1975 [1981]: 107)

**I**N RETROSPECTIVE, I THINK what has started these investigations was an uneasiness about the “word” and “thing” culture. This uneasiness followed from an interest in and reading through the discussions that were provoked by Edward Said’s (1978) book *Orientalism* – I will comment on them with more detail later. What was entailed in these discussions was a problematization of what have been called the “Great Divides,” the master being the classical anthropological problem of we-groups vs. they-groups.

Clifford Geertz (1986) has made an important remark questioning the starting point of foreignness. Why should “Shi’is, being other, present a problem,” while “soccer fans, being part of us,” should not? (ibid.: 112)

The social world does not divide at its joints into perspicuous we-s with whom we can empathize, however much we differ *with* them, and enigmatical they-s, with whom we cannot, however much we defend to the death their right to differ *from* us. (Geertz 1986: 112)

But don't most people divide their world up like this? Aren't these divides something that many take for granted?

The Great Divide between “us” and “them” is overarched by another one between “subject” and “object.” That one is harder to grasp, but it plays a crucial role in contemporary global politics. Who is in the position of the subject, who is the agent of a political action or of a scientific investigation? And who is being affected by this action, who is being spoken of and/or spoken for? It is in particular the subject position of “Western science” that has come to be subjected to critique for relegating other knowledges to being its objects, the flipside of the colonialist and imperialist coin. This topic will be discussed later as well.

I have to admit, it was merely an intuition in the first place that brought me to link these issues and a concern with those “other knowledges” with a “linguistic” problem. And that was where Guaraní – an indigenous language spoken in South America, particularly in Paraguay – came in. My interest in that language with respect to the Great Divides was grounded in the following observation: As Guaraní has a different grammatical structure of verbal persons in comparison to European languages – namely what we would call the first and third person plural would be different – a conceptualization of the we/they-divide must consequently be different as well. That was my guess, and it was based on a conflation of language with world view. “They,” the Guaraní-speakers, would conceive the divide differently. However, it soon became clear that the way I was thinking about it did still lack some crucial insights about the “nature” of that “thing” inevitably being evoked whenever talking about “Guaraní.” A more sophisticated understanding of “language” was needed to come to terms with this and the other issues.

So this is what the main part of the present work is about: language. As I soon realized while reflecting about language, the “nature” of that “thing” is far from being easily conceivable and univocally clear, and many of my presumptions and intuitions of what it “is” had to be reconsidered. But not only that. The presumptive and intuitive “folk meanings” about language were part of the problems that I tried to deal with. So I had to question them. And a ques-

tioning of the “nature”<sup>1</sup> of language helped to come to terms with some other things too, in particular the observations that I made during my fieldwork in Paraguay from October 2005 to January 2006. The starting point of that fieldwork has been an excursion of the Institute of Latin American Studies of the Free University in Berlin. The excursion took place in October 2005 and was a trip to the four countries of the Mercosur – the Mercado Común del Sur, a trade area established in the 1990’s that integrates Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, and recently Venezuela,<sup>2</sup> focusing not only on economic integration but cultural integration as well; it is being modeled on the European Union. The aim of the excursion was an exploration of the cultural, political, and economical dimensions of that project of integration with particular emphasis on the cultural processes at the border areas.<sup>3</sup>

In that context my investigation dealt with Guaraní as an official language of Paraguay and as a language spoken in the border areas of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Bolivia.<sup>4</sup> Although my background concern – having in mind the *we/they*-question – was with constructions of alterity *in* Guaraní, what became far more important during the fieldwork was the construction of alterity *with* Guaraní, making use of the language for a national identity politics in Paraguay. The language in this case became an object to be turned into a national symbol, a metaphor for the Paraguayan nation. On the other hand, what took my attention in Paraguay were ongoing discussions about bilingual education in Guaraní and Spanish – the other official language of Paraguay that has been in that position far longer than Guaraní. The object of these discussions was mainly the language Guaraní and its “nature.” So it was these issues that in a certain way needed a reconsideration of that object, language. In the end this also brought me back to my initial uneasiness about the *we/they*-problematic and other possible ways of dealing with Great Divides. However, the latter issue as such, the “other possible ways,” while I was first thinking about including and elaborating on it here, proved to be beyond the scope of this work and so it remains confined to my longer term interests. This is not to deny that my initial intuitions touch some important points worthy of exploring. I will make some remarks on them in the Conclusion.

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1 I still stick to these quotation marks; I will comment on the metaphor “nature” below.

2 Venezuela was not a member of the Mercosur in 2005.

3 The results have been published in Chiappini & Hauck (2007).

4 The results of my investigation have been published in Hauck (2007). A few sections of that essay have been reworked here.

The present work is restricted to a discussion of language, and what is being done with it in Paraguay. In Part I, I will give a brief overview of history and linguistic politics in Paraguay with special attention to the problems involved in the question of what kind of Guaraní should be taught in school. As the linguistic reality of Paraguay is very complex and characterized through an ample spectrum of linguistic forms like code-switching, code-mixing, language-borrowing, and linguistic convergence, to answer the question proves not to be easy and in the end turns out to be impossible satisfactorily. The situation is complicated through the existing hegemony of Spanish over Guaraní, to which the term *diglossia* has been applied. While bilingual education was designed to counter that linguistic inequality, little has been achieved and current and past policies of teaching “standard” mostly failed or are likely to fail.

Part II starts with a discussion of the culture concept and its uses to produce Great Divides at the beginning of Chapter 3. I will proceed then to some conceptualizations of language. From an analogy of language and border I will turn to some of the classical discussions of language and its relation to thought and world view. That will leave me with questions about the linking of language with social structures of power. As will become more explicit later, it is in particular an “intellectualist” conception of language as autonomous entity as found in the theories of Saussure or Chomsky that proves to be problematic in the political structuring of social inequality. Therefore the positions of those two intellectuals will be briefly sketched. Chapter 4 will start with a problematization of the ideas of historicism and modernity with relation to the Western subject position and the Great Divide between the Western self and its others before returning to language. The construction of a language that could play a central role in the constitution of modernity and the maintenance of the boundary between the modern subject and its others will be the theme of the remainder of Chapter 4. I will discuss the different contributions of Locke, Herder, Humboldt, and Boas. At the end of that chapter I will employ the notions of language ideology and indexicality from Linguistic Anthropology to conceptualize the process of construction of language. In Chapter 5 I will provide some examples of what is “being done” with language in contemporary politics before returning to Guaraní and trying to employ what I have elaborated about language for an understanding of what is going on in Paraguay. The last part of Chapter 5 opens up to some more general issues about “language” and in particular non-hegemonic ways of speaking. I will conclude my work with some short remarks about poststructuralist treatments of language that bring me back to the Great Divide-issues. Although not explicitly situating my

work in a poststructuralist theoretical context, I employ some vocabulary and theoretical moves that bear clearly that mark.

I should point out that this thesis follows neither the “classical” way, which would be the providing of an ethnographic example from fieldwork and its embedding in and enrichment with a theoretical framework, nor the other option of a purely theoretical discussion. I would rather conceive it as a “hybrid genre” of both. While the main focus is certainly on “theory,” it is the particular situation in Paraguay that gives that theory a certain twist. But it is not an ethnographic “enrichment” of the theory either, as Part I is not at all purely ethnographic. It will focus primarily on academic and activist discussions of linguistic politics in Paraguay and secondarily on my “ethnographic” observations of Paraguayan ways of dealing with Guaraní as an identity marker.

All in all my work is a try to “come to terms” with “that thing language” that has been at the center of my scientific interest for quite a while. I must confess that my coming “to terms” with language failed to a certain degree. However, I have “come to terms” with that fact.

## Terms

In general I have provided explanations of special terms from Spanish or Guaraní as well as scientific concepts in the text. I will explain the most important ones here already by way of glossary, providing additional remarks for some of them:

**Castellano** The Spanish varieties of Latin America are usually designated as Castilian Spanish in contrast to other varieties in Spain.

**Jopara** is the Guaraní word for mixing and designates primarily the mixing of Spanish and Guaraní. It is also used for other mixings and a traditional dish. With regard to language *jopara* has come to be used to point to a range of different kinds of language borrowing and code-switching. Cf. the footnote on page 53.

**Jehé'a** is another Guaraní word for mixing and is used primarily for lexical borrowings that are integrated into the phonomorphosyntactic structure of Guaraní. By metonymy it has come to stand for a version of Guaraní allowing these borrowings. Cf. page 56.