On the conditions of authority in academic publics

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Abstract

The discourse of some of the most powerful public figures in today's world is often incoherent and nonsensical. Incoherent yet authoritative discourse shows that authority does not rest in language but results from non-linguistic and pre-textual conditions. The non-linguistic and pre-textual conditions are exemplified in an Australian case-study of a media debate between the Immigration Minister and a refugee, drawing on research by Smith-Khan (2019a, b). Two such conditions are then examined with reference to academic publics. First, I ask which languages do or do not carry authority, before moving on to speaker identity as a condition of authority. The close association between English and academic excellence has resulted in diminishing the authority of academic publications in languages other than English. The same is true of publications by women and people of color. I close by reflecting on referencing practices as forms of extending authoritativeness to voices in excluded languages and from excluded scholars in academic publics.

Chinese Abstract

关于学术群体和权威性的探讨

当今世界有权势的公众人物话语时常缺乏逻辑且荒谬。缺乏逻辑但却具有权威性的话语表明权威并不源自于语言本身，而是来源于非语言因素和先语篇的条件。非语言因素和先语篇条件可以从 Smith-Khan (2019a,b) 在澳大利亚进行的一项案例研究体现，这项研究对移民部部长和一位难民在媒体上的争论进行分析。本文要探讨的是非语言因素和先语篇条件在学术界的问题。首先，本文探讨哪种语言具有或不具有权威性，其次，本文讨论说话者的身份如何影响话语权威。本文指出英语和学术能力的密切关联导致非英文学术作品失去权威性。同样，女性和有色人种的学术作品也无法获得权威性。最后，本文指出文献引用应顾及被学术圈排斥在外的语言和学者们，因为文献引用是话语权威的延伸形式。

Incoherent yet authoritative

One of the most public global figures of our time, the current US president, Donald Trump, is widely considered to be of "alarming incoherence" (Taylor 2019). Some of his nonsense pronouncements, such as "the constant negative press covfefe", have almost achieved cult status. In examples such as these, meaning is entirely beside the point, as became obvious during the White House press conference on the day after the infamous "covfefe" tweet:

> Reporter: Do you think people should be concerned that the president posted somewhat of an incoherent tweet last night, and that it then stayed up for hours?
>
> [Press Secretary]: Uh, no.
>
> Reporter: Why did it stay up so long? Is no one watching this?
>
> [Press Secretary]: No, I think the president and a small group of people knew exactly what he meant.
>
> [Reporters speaking all at once]
>
> Reporter: What does covfefe mean?
>
> Reporter: What does it mean?
>
> Reporter: What does the president mean?
>
> Reporter: What is covfefe? (Quoted from Lafrance, 2019)

That one of the most powerful men on earth can talk incoherent nonsense and still command authority suggests that authority is not necessarily constructed in discourse.

The papers in this special issue ask how authority is established in contemporary public discourse and provide illuminating analyses in a range of contexts. They show that public discourses can derive authority from rhetorical strategies that incorporate oppositional voices (Gal), from the combination of appeals to emotion and reason (Bucholtz, Deumert), and from the invocation of associations with authenticity and "wildness" (Spitzmüller). These analyses enhance our understanding of the ways in which legitimacy is produced in right-wing political discourse, in settler-colonial discourses of whiteness, and in linguists' professional discourses. These are discourses that we already know to command authority and therefore the analyses imply that at least some of their power is produced linguistically. However, the

nonsensical incoherence of President Trump calls the idea that authority is mostly produced linguistically into question.

Nonsensical yet authoritative public discourse suggests that publics are, to a significant degree, produced outside discourse. In this closing commentary, I will therefore change perspective away from discourse and reflect on the conditions of authority. That "authority comes to language from outside" (Bourdieu 1991, p. 109) is not a new observation. However, is it still relevant for sociolinguistic inquiry into 21st century publics?

Equal opportunities in public discourses?

The fundamental premise motivating this special issue is that 21st century publics are different from previous publics: they have become "wilder", more diverse, more complex, less prone to hegemonic domination. Even the most cursory glance at digital publics will certainly confirm that impression. But does this mean that all these diverse voices have an equal chance to command attention and to make an impression? Or is it still the case that opportunities to achieve authority are highly unequally distributed?

A recent Australian media debate between the Immigration Minister and a refugee provides an excellent example to examine precisely this question. The fortunes of the Minister, a wealthy white Anglo-Saxon male, and the refugee, a young woman from Somalia, could not be more different and yet they squared off, in a kind of "he said, she said" contest in front of the eyes of the Australian public. Did that mean that they had an equal chance to be perceived as credible? Far from it, as critical discourse analyst Laura Smith-Khan (2019b, a), on whose research I draw here, explains.

What the media called a "debate" between the Minister and the refugee, who was widely known by the pseudonym Abyan, involved two sets of statements presenting conflicting truth claims. Abyan's story was that she had been raped in Australian offshore immigration detention on the small island nation of Nauru. As a result of the rape, she sought a transfer to Australia for medical care and an abortion. This was granted but she was returned to Nauru within days without her pregnancy having been terminated. According to the Minister, the speedy return to Nauru was due to the fact that Abyan had changed her mind about wanting an abortion. In his account, the abortion request, and possibly also the rape claim, was nothing but a ploy to get to Australia; a ploy which it was the government's duty to foil.

The media represented these claims and counterclaims as a debate, where the Minister and Abyan seemed to be on an equal footing and seemed to have equal chances to be believed.

After scrutinizing both claims, the Australian public would be able to distinguish between truth and lie, or so the assumptions went. As Smith-Khan (2019b, a) demonstrates, this framing of a seeming debate among equals is incorrect. As it erases the unequal conditions under which Abyan and the Minister spoke publicly, the framing is also injurious to Abyan.

The researcher identifies four conditions that systematically enhanced the Minister's credibility and diminished Abyan's. The first is linguistic, in the sense that the Minister is a native speaker of English, the language of the publics in which this particular contest for authority took place. Abyan, by contrast, seemed to have relatively low proficiency in the language. Second, the Minister is a well-known public figure with status as a Member of Parliament. Irrespective of whether members of the public share his political views or consider him likable, he has an established identity and institutional authority. Abyan, on the other hand, remained little more than a stereotype. She is an anonymous figure about who hardly anything other than her gender and her country of origin, Somalia, are known. Two aspects of her identity that were known – that she is a refugee and a rape victim – are identities that in themselves tend to invoke questions as to whether the identity is genuine.

Third, the Minister's statement was communicated on an official government website, with a stable URL, standard formatting, and all the insignia of government. This contrasts sharply with the material conditions of Abyan's statement, which was circulated as a photo of a handwritten notice on a piece of paper torn out of an old calendar. Finally, although the "debate" was presented as pitting two single statements against each other, the Minister, in fact, had many more opportunities to present his version of events through press conferences, media interviews, and a range of public speaking opportunities. Other senior government figures also had ample platforms to repeat his statement and support his point of view. Abyan, by contrast, was barred from media access through a visa regime that severely restricts media access to Nauru. Her supporters in Australia are volunteers whose media access is limited in comparison to the government.

In sum, Smith-Khan (2019b, a) demonstrates that the conditions under which Abyan and the Minister communicate publicly differ significantly with regard to their access to linguistic, identity, material, and platform resources. These conditions are such that the Minister's communication commands attention and authority while Abyan's communication lacks credibility.

Smith-Khan's (2019b, a) research goes to the heart of the question of authority in contemporary publics: while publics have become more diverse and a greater variety of voices have entered the fray, their chances of being heard continue to be highly unequal. To a significant degree, these communicative inequalities relate to pre-textual conditions under which different voices enter public spaces. In the following, I will examine two such conditions – the value of the language that constitutes the medium of communication and the identity of the speaker – to examine how authority is constituted in academic publics.

Which languages do or do not carry authority?

That English is the dominant medium of contemporary academic communication is so obvious it hardly needs to be stated (Ammon, 2001; Coulmas, 2007). What is less frequently discussed is how the dominance of English bolsters or diminishes different forms of academic authority. In the field of multilingualism research, for example, English dominance has resulted in specific ways of seeing multilingualism as a generic and context-free phenomenon. Multilingualism research that pays close attention to specific contextual and historical linguistic repertoires and abilities, by contrast, has come to be dis-preferred (Piller 2016b, Liddicoat 2016).

In fact, context-specific and historically-contingent knowledge has been devalued across the disciplines as academic excellence has come to be equated with the production of knowledge in English (Piller 2016a). The association between English and academic excellence hinges on the fact that researchers who are affiliated with highly-ranked institutions or who publish in highly-ranked journals command the highest levels of authority. As it so happens, the vast majority of highly-ranked institutions and journals operate through the medium of English. This can lead to the bizarre situation that simply changing the medium of instruction to English may increase an institution's ranking (Piller and Cho 2013).

To achieve academic authority, scholars need to adapt their publication strategies to these realities, as demonstrated by Kang (2009). This researcher asks what the desire to produce highly valued research means for South Korean scholars in the discipline of Communication Studies. The "quality" of their research is, inter alia, judged on the basis of journal indexation. That means that authority – in the form of academic prestige, tenure, and promotion – accrues to scholars managing to publish in journals indexed in the Science Citation Index (SCI), the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), or the Arts and Humanities

Citation Index (AHCI). All these indexes are databases owned by multinational US-headquartered media corporation Thomson Reuters.

More than 70% of SCI, SSCI, and AHCI-indexed journals are published in only two countries, the United States and the United Kingdom. Even those published outside the United States and United Kingdom are overwhelmingly English-language publications. This means that the authority that comes from publishing in indexed journals accrues to those who publish in English. Kang (2009) further demonstrates that articles by South Korean Communications scholars published in SSCI-indexed journals produce specific kinds of knowledge: they mostly engage with "American mainstream theories". Even where they engage with local phenomena, these are framed through these theories.

In other words, while there may be a greater diversity of voices in contemporary academic communication, the pressure to quantify academic excellence means that authority accrues to those voices who publish in English and communicate knowledge that is globally recognizable by being relatively context-free.

Of course, many scholars remain committed to the service of their communities through the production and dissemination of locally meaningful knowledge. However, while operating through the medium of English enhances the authority of some academic communications, the authority of knowledge researched and disseminated in languages other than English is devalued. Hong Kong based academic Po King Choi explains this devaluation of local academic knowledge produced in languages other than English in a comment on the sociolinguistics platform *Language on the Move*:

> […] we dont do research or write merely to get a place in the English-speaking world. We do that because we feel committed to the community or society we are researching on (most likely living in), and we want to communicate with the people with whom we feel a strong sense of allegiance. […] our publications in Chinese (our first language and language of the majority) dont count – or, they count so little that most of our career-minded colleagues just dont bother to write them. The interesting (and sad) thing is that it affects our psyche so much that we who write in Chinese do sometimes feel that we publish very little, or dont have any publication […]. It is not only unfair on

> those of us who feel committed to write for their own community, but it also
>
> closes the mind of academics not only in our own society, but also in the
>
> English-speaking world. (Choi 2010; unedited web comment)

As this excerpt suggests, academic publics – like all publics – operate at a number of different levels. Publications in Chinese – or any language other than English – may certainly carry authority in local contexts or may be considered valuable for reasons of solidarity, service, and engagement. However, when it comes to global academic prestige, publics operating in languages other than English carry only little authority. Those of us who publish in languages other than English have to resign themselves to the fact that their research will not be read or cited in the most prestigious places and is unlikely to attain any measure of academic authority (Mittelstraß, Trabant, Fröhlicher, 2016). This is true even in our own discipline where linguistic diversity is ostensibly celebrated. However, this celebration of transgressive "languaging" occurs in standard academic English. Edgy discourses about multilingualism and subaltern linguistic repertoires may well enhance the prestige of the scholars who produce these discourses (see Spitzmüller, this volume). However, they do little if anything to enhance the authority of non-standard-English forms as mediums of academic communication.

That academic publics are dominated by English does not mean that English-language voices automatically carry great authority. To assume so would be to misrecognize language as the vehicle of authority; a misrecognition that is, after all, "the basis of all authority" (Bourdieu 1991, p. 113). Simply switching to English as the medium of academic communication does not, eo ipso, vest a scholar with authority, as I will discuss in the next section.

Which scholars do or do not carry authority?

Since 2018, *Language on the Move* has been running an annual reading challenge. One of the 2018 challenges was to read a sociolinguistics book "written by an author who is neither male nor white." My personal interest for that challenge was to read a text in African (post)colonial sociolinguistics, an area in which I have no specialist knowledge. I ended up picking *Vernacular Palaver* by Moradewun Adejunmobi (2004) as my read for the challenge (Piller 2018).

Identifying the text I was going to read – a sociolinguistics book written by a black African female scholar – turned out to be surprisingly difficult. To my shame, I could not, off the top

of my head, think of a title that met the challenge specifications. I discovered that I was not alone, either: going through the lists of references of a couple of my favorite sociolinguistics texts and browsing the library shelves, I found … nothing. In the end, I discovered *Vernacular Palaver* more or less accidentally when leafing through the catalogue of the publisher Multilingual Matters.

Vernacular Palaver turned out to be an amazing book and the work of Moradewun Adejunmobi a real gem to find. The book examines the ways in which "the local" is imagined in and through non-native languages in West Africa. There, languages of wider communication have a stronger appeal than mother tongues for people who "seek additional memberships in sodalities forged on the basis of shared aspirations rather than that of shared origins" (Adejunmobi, 2004, p. 205). The research has implications well beyond West Africa as it addresses universal dilemmas related to multilingualism and the linguistic challenges of globalization.

That, in 2018, I did not know about this important book in my field, which had been published back in 2004, causes me embarrassment. It is little consolation that I discovered that I was not alone in my ignorance. When I wrote a research blog post about *Vernacular Palaver* in May 2018 (Piller 2018), the book had been cited only 57 times, according to Google Scholar. Comparable books in the sociolinguistics of multilingualism, globalization and migration based in Europe or North America rack up many hundreds or even thousands of citations. In other words, sociolinguistic research conducted by a female black African scholar and set in Africa carries a lot less authority than comparable research carried out by white male scholars and set in the global north.

Reconfirming the title's Google Scholar citations for this commentary in October 2019, I discovered that, in the one-and-a-half years since, the book has been cited an additional twelve times, and now boasts 69 citations. That is still a very small number for this important text but I like to think that my promotion of the book may have contributed to this increase. Be that as it may, everyone operating in academic publics has a means to level the playing field at their disposal: each citation we reference is an acceptance of authority, and each non-citation of relevant work is a refusal to acknowledge authority.

Can excluded languages and scholars gain authority?

21st century publics have undoubtedly become more diverse. However, the conditions under which traditionally underrepresented voices have entered public spaces mean that they have

to work much harder to make an impress. To speak incoherently and still command authority is a privilege that traditionally underrepresented people can only dream of (Younge 2018). A comparison between the current gaffe-prone incumbent of the US presidency, with who I started this text, and his predecessor, President Barack Obama, the first black man to ever hold that office illustrates the point: President Obama was an exceptionally accomplished politician and orator (Alim & Smitherman, 2012).

That newcomers to the publics have to work harder to gain authority is true not only in politics but also in academia. Evidence comes from research with successful female economics scholars, who have been found to write much more readable prose, measured by automated readability measures, than their male peers (Hengel, 2017). This researcher shows that female-authored papers in top-ranking economics journals are better written than male-authored papers. The gap is particularly stark when it comes to senior academics: female economists write increasingly clearly over the course of their career while the writing of their male peers does not perceptibly improve.

Hengel (2017) explains this gender quality gap with the fact that the work of female academics is subject to tougher peer review, as is evident, for instance, from the fact that female-authored economics papers take around six months longer to go through the review process than male-authored papers. As female academics progress on the career ladder, they come to adjust their expectations about what is required. Anticipating a high level of scrutiny, they invest more and more effort prior to submission and the quality of their submissions rises. Male economics scholars have no such feedback loop and remain blissfully ignorant of the fact that their writing may be difficult to read. They can also churn out many more papers, as they need to invest less time in each.

In other words, academic voices emanating from traditionally underrepresented languages and identities need to be better to be accepted as carrying authority. However, putting in all that extra work and producing qualitatively higher discourse is not enough as long as the extra-linguistic and pre-textual conditions for discourse to command authority do not change. Authority, after all, is constituted by an act of complicity (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 113): it does not emanate from the individual but is conferred by others.

When Britta Schneider and Theresa Heyd invited me to write this commentary, they specifically asked me to consider the relationship between sociolinguistics and public engagement. Having reflected on the conditions of authority in academic publics, I conclude

that we need to shift our gaze from those who already speak with authority – deservedly or undeservedly – and focus on the absent voices; those who do not command authority. What can each and every one of us contribute to raise voices from excluded languages and identities? Within academic publics, I suggest, it behooves all those of us who have achieved a modicum of disciplinary authority to heed the advice of Toni Morrison:

> I tell my students, "When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. This is not just a grab-bag candy game."

Acknowledgment

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