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Language reform, social imaginaries, interlocutor reference*

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Abstract Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life." Here I suggest that the inverse is also true: to imagine a form of life involves imagining a language, or at least, a way of speaking. More specifically, I argue that those who imagine an alternative way life very often target the practices of interlocutor reference (reference to speaker and addressee of an utterance) for reform, apparently seeing such practices as in various ways constitutive of their social existence, including their relations with others. I discuss some of the ways in which thinking about language is constrained and shaped by the very character of language itself. I then turn to consider two cases in which advocates for social change sought to bring about a hoped-for future through reform of the practices of interlocutor reference.

Keywords interlocutor reference; linguistic anthropology; language reform; Quakers; Vietnamese.

1. Introduction

Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009 [1953]: 11) suggested that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life." By "a language" Wittgenstein apparently meant a finite set of practices – e.g., asking and answering questions, giving orders etc. – such as he had discussed in the immediately preceding sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*. While what he meant by "a form of life" is less obvious (see Hacker 2015), it is nevertheless clear that Wittgenstein was concerned primarily, here as elsewhere, with what are commonly termed 'thought experiments', exercises of the imagination as a method of philosophical elucidation. Approaching things from a quite different direction, Benedict Anderson (1983) described the way in which, during the 17th and 18th centuries, Europeans came to imagine the nation as a bounded, sovereign and fraternal community composed of persons who understand themselves to be related to one another not through occasions of interpersonal contact but rather by virtue of their common participation in print capitalism. Likewise, with his notion of social imaginary, philosopher Charles Taylor (2002: 106) points to the ways in which ordinary people (i.e., not philosophers doing philosophy) think about "their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met", all this being most often expressed not in theoretical terms, but "in images, stories, and legends." What Taylor and Anderson have in common, and what distinguishes their interest from that of Wittgenstein, then, is a concern with the social functions of imagination, the uses to which it is put.

Now, although Taylor (2002: 107) notes that the understandings which make up the social imaginary are both "factual" and "normative", his emphasis is squarely on "the background": "that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world become evident." This, according to Taylor (2002: 107), "can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its very unlimited and indefinite nature." My focus in what

follows, in contrast, is on more explicitly articulated projects which seek to close the gap between the way things are now and the way they might be in some hoped-for future alternative. These collective acts of imagination are, in other words, attempts to bring about a way of life, they are ethical projects in the broadest sense. Moreover, I aim to show that, to paraphrase and invert Wittgenstein, imagining a form of social life very often involves imagining a language (or at least a way of speaking), and for good reason.

Language mediates much of our experience (if not our perceptions, then certainly our *conceptions*), and all of our social relations (though perhaps not in their entirety). Our social relations with others are mediated by language in at least two ways. First, when we encounter others, we engage with them primarily through language and our relations are, in large part at least, constituted by the way we talk (etc.) to them and what we say (etc.) to them (see, *inter alia*, Rosaldo 1982, Agha 2007). Adopting the otherwise problematic practice of glossing action for purposes of exposition we can ask, for any encounter, do we confide in the other or confront them? Do we comfort the other or complain to them? Do we praise the other or placate them? Or, to take an example from Taylor (2002: 109), do we meet them with humble supplication, forceful protest or the threat of armed insurrection?[1] While the details are complex, the general outline is clear: our ways of speaking, to various degrees formalized (Bloch 1975), are largely constitutive of our relations with others. Second, language mediates social relations in so far as it provides a means by which to classify, to group, and thus also to typify the others that make up the social world (see Rumsey 2014). Some are 'brothers', others are 'sisters.' Some are 'siblings', others are 'cousins.' Some are 'well-meaning neighbors', others are 'nosy parkers' (see Kockelman 2013). These two ways in which language mediates our social relations – through modes of engagement and through forms of typification – converge in the practices of speaker and addressee reference, or, interlocutor reference which form the focus of my discussion here.[2] Not surprisingly such practices often bear much of the weight of a social imaginary and, as I discuss below, they are a frequent target of reform in efforts to bring about a hoped-for way of life.

2. (Meta)-semiotic constraints on the linguistic imagination, or, why interlocutor reference?

To imagine a language is to engage in metasemiotic reflection, that is, to use signs to think and talk about other signs, and such discourse about language is universally subject to various kinds of systematic distortion. For instance, as Michael Silverstein (1979) noted a referential bias is apparent in that, when we think and talk about what someone did in saying something, we draw upon a vocabulary of 'speech act' verbs to do so. Just as speakers project onto 'time' the referential structure of a maximally expanded noun phrase (e.g., "500 days of summer", "just a moment of your time" etc.) so they project onto 'action' the

[1] Two problems with such glosses can be mentioned. First, there's no reason to believe that we in any way rely on such terms (e.g., confide and complain) in producing the action that might (adequately and accurately but not uniquely) be described by them. And, when so describing them, we are inevitably doing something in addition to simply 'describing action' (e.g., we are assigning blame or holding someone accountable for telling our secret). Second, as I discuss in the next section, the range of things we can accomplish through talking and the range of ways in which we can accomplish them always exceeds by a wide margin the limited vocabulary we have available for describing what we do. This introduces various kinds of systematic distortion which shapes reanalysis through reflexive semiotic processes.

[2] The two modes of mediation converge here in so far as ways of speaking are often, perhaps always, conceptually tied to typified roles, thus, "don't talk to your father like that!", or the as the title of one popular book has it, *How to Talk So Teens Will Listen and Listen So Teens Will Talk.*

referential structure of speech reporting (e.g., "He {said to/ordered me to/asked me to/requested that I, etc.} go."). It is, however, not only the semiotic properties of the instrument of representation that exert a distorting effect, but also the semiotic properties of the represented object itself (i.e., particular modes of language function). Thus, in a related discussion from the same period, Silverstein (1981: 2) suggests that, "(f)or the native speaker, the ease or difficulty of accurate metapragmatic characterization of the use of the forms of his or her own language seems to depend on certain general semiotic properties of the use in question." He goes on to identify five factors that appear to shape and partially constrain metasemiotic (and specifically, metapragmatic) reflection. Simplifying a complex argument in a few sentences, Silverstein proposed that native speakers exhibit greater awareness of language functions that (1) can be identified with continuously segmentable elements of speech (e.g., words and continuous phrases rather than discontinuous grammatical constructions such as English progressive or passive), that (2) unavoidably refer (e.g., *formal* vs. *familiar* pronouns rather than phonetic markers of region or socio-economic class), and that (3) are relatively presupposing by virtue of being linked to some "independently verifiable contextual factor" (e.g., English demonstratives such as 'this' or 'that' rather than markers of politeness or deference).[3] In the present context, all these factors converge to make the practices of interlocutor reference available for native speaker reflection and comment and, by extension, a target for reform.[4]

This brings us to what is, perhaps, the central insight of contemporary linguistic anthropology: language use involves a complex relationship between object signs through which interaction appears, to users, to be conducted, and metasigns by which the significance of such object signs is construed. In the most obvious case, metasigns take the form of explicit metapragmatic discourse that glosses in so many words the object signs. This includes everything from in-situ responses such as, "So you're saying that it's okay to skip to the front of the line?", "How dare you!", "That's not what I meant", "I'm not asking you to come down" to more distal and generic discourse such as "You should always say please and thank you", "Never use the passive where you can use the active", even, "Just be yourself". In the more common and more complex case, a textual configuration of co-occurring object signs implicitly and metasemiotically construes the very object signs of which it is composed. For instance, when, at the beginning of a phone call to a friend, the speaker says, "we do sign painting, antiquing..." she thereby casts the talk of the moment as a part of a commercial exchange or service call.[5]

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[3] The other two factors Silverstein identifies are: (4) *decontextualized deducibility* (e.g., "my brother" entails, "I have a brother"), and (5) *metapragmatic transparency* (i.e., "the degree to which the same form is used both to produce some pragmatic effect and to describe it, e.g., "I promise to stop talking soon" vs. "just a few more minutes" as a commitment to conclude an academic presentation). It must be admitted that there's some wooliness to all of this and not much empirical evidence, either in Silverstein's original discussion or in the subsequent literature, to support the argument. The notion of *relatively presupposing* is particularly mercurial – deference, for instance, is given as an example of a relatively presupposing indexical function in 1979 and as a relatively creative one in 1981. This apparent inconsistency can, no doubt, be fudged by reference to the "relatively" qualifier, but it nevertheless points to the fact that these ideas are better thought of as suggestions for further investigation than as research findings *per se*.

[4] Although it is worth noting that, in some languages, interlocutor reference is achieved by elements that are discontinuous (e.g., marked both by an independent pronoun and verbal agreement) and in which such functions are fused with others (e.g., marked only by verbal agreement which simultaneously conveys tense or mood).

[5] More subtle still are practices which involve recognizable avoidance of a form (e.g., a tabooed name, a word referring to a sacred or profane object, a term considered vulgar etc.) thereby drawing attention to, and contextualizing, what is said.

A crucial point here is that while there are indefinitely many ways to perform action and to convey social alignments in talk, the means for describing or typifying such actions and alignments is always limited. In the case of lexicalized speech act verbs and social role designators the means are strictly finite and while combinatorial possibilities allow for more complex and more nuanced descriptions, practically speaking, this can be taken only so far (see Agha 2007: 97).

In relation to the focus of the current discussion, we can note that while speakers exhibit a high degree of awareness of the practices of interlocutor reference and thus frequently make them the target of reform, their reflective understanding of the way these forms function is always limited in various ways. Two such kinds of limitation can be very briefly pointed to here. First, as Silverstein (2003) insisted, for interlocutor reference forms such as the "familiar" T and "formal" V pronouns of many European languages, the proper unit or analysis is not the individual occurrence of one or the other pronoun but a minimal two turn sequence of symmetrical or asymmetrical exchange. That is, the significance of French *tu* is, at least in part, determined by the form used, by the one referred to, in return. Simplifying somewhat, if *tu* is reciprocated this casts the original usage as "familiar" whereas if it is not, and the speaker responds instead with *vous*, this casts the first form as "condescending" or "superior" etc. Second, an interlocutor reference form always occurs along with other co-occurring signs which serve to contextualize it.[6] For instance, when then President Nicolas Sarkozy responded to a man who refused to shake his hand during an annual agricultural fair with, "Casse-toi pauvre con!", it was, in part, the configuration of co-textual and contextual signs that gave his use of *toi* its deeply insulting significance.[7]

3. "The pronouns of power and solidarity", revisited

In their classic work of sociolinguistic analysis, "Pronouns of power and solidarity" (1960), Roger Brown and Albert Gilman considered the use of T and V forms (from Latin *tu* and *vos*, e.g. French *tu* and *vous*) in a number of European languages including French, German and Italian, describing an historical shift from what they called a "power semantic" in which the default was for asymmetrical usage indicating a difference of status (based on age, social station etc.) to a "solidarity semantic" in which the default pattern is for symmetrical usage with reciprocal T indicating familiarity (or solidarity) and reciprocal V indicating distance. And they further suggested that, from an historical perspective, "the nonreciprocal power

[6] As Agha (2007: 307) puts it: "Honorific lexemes (...) are neither deployed nor encountered as isolated signs in events of interaction. They are relevant to social interaction only under conditions of textuality or co-occurrence with other signs. The range of effects – and social relations – that are enactable under these conditions is much larger than the range of functions reportable by language users in explicit stereotypes of use. In every language the actual use of honorific lexemes serves many interactional agendas such as control and domination, irony, innuendo, masked aggression, and other types of socially meaningful behaviors that ideologies of honor and respect do not describe. Yet the common-sense stereotype that these forms are 'honorific' in value nonetheless shapes default perceptions of their social relevance."

[7] With respect to the first point that the unit of analysis minimally comprises a two-part exchange, it may be noted that Sarkozy's insult was produced as the fourth turn in the following dialogue:

Sarkozy: ((reaches out to touch the man's arm))
Farmer: Ah non, touche-moi pas.
Sarkozy: Casse-toi alors.
Farmer: Tu me salis.
Sarkozy: Casse-toi alors pauvre con.

It is, then, the farmer who uses the T form first, conjugating the verb as *touche* rather than *touchez*.

semantic" is associated with a "relatively static society in which power is distributed by birthright and is not subject to much redistribution" (Brown & Gilman 1960: 264). The "reciprocal solidarity semantic", on the other hand, emerged in the context of greater social mobility and the development of an egalitarian ideology. And in some cases, such as France, there were attempts to bring about more abrupt changes. Brown and Gilman (1960: 264) write:

> In France the nonreciprocal power semantic was dominant until the Revolution when the Committee for the Public Safety condemned the use of V as a feudal remnant and ordered a universal reciprocal T. On October 31, 1793, Malbec made a Parliamentary speech against V: "Nous distinguons trois personnes pour le singulier et trois pour le pluriel, et, au mépris de cette regie, l'esprit de fanatisme, d'orgueil et de feodalité, nous a fait contracter l'habitude de nous servir de la seconde personne du pluriel lorsque nous parlons à un seul".[8] For a time revolutionary "fraternité" transformed all address into the mutual *Citoyen* and the mutual *tu*. Robespierre even addressed the president of the Assembly as *tu*. In later years solidarity declined and the differences of power which always exist everywhere were expressed once more.

In their attempts to bring about the new form of life which they imagined, Malbec and Robespierre sought to change the way in which reference to the addressee was accomplished. As Brown and Gilman note, this proposed reform was not maintained for long, even if it did take hold initially, and "differences of power" continued to be expressed through pronoun selection. And there have been many such attempts to institute reform since. For instance, Robert Lacoste, who, in 1958, was the French Minister Residing in Algeria, was concerned to safeguard "the self-respect and dignity of that territory's Moslem population" (Gilman & Brown 1958: 169). As a first step, he urged Frenchmen to address Muslims with the pronoun *vous* rather than with *tu* as was customary.[9] And similarly, in an essay from 1932 titled *Politique d'égards* ('The politics of respect'), writer, translator and editor Phạm Quỳnh suggested that the common practice of French colonists using *tu* (*tutoiement*) in addressing indigenous colonial subjects revealed an underlying ideology of Vietnamese inferiority (see Vu 2020). These examples involve the imagination of possible futures; one in which all address one another with *tu* (Malbec, Robespierre), one in which colonists address colonial subjects as *vous* (Lacoste, Phạm Quỳnh). As Morford (1997) shows, in contemporary France, such future-oriented thinking often gives way to nostalgia, with speakers imagining a time in the past when the pronouns were used differently and, to their minds, more judiciously. One way this is expressed is in complaints about current patterns of usage which, in their simplest form, amount to the assertion that, "now everyone says *tu*".

In the European context, English is, of course, something of an outlier in the sense that the contemporary language has essentially lost the honorific distinction and also in the sense that the bimodal system eventually (sometime in the 17th century) resolved to the V rather than the T form. In his classic historical ethnography of Quaker language use in the 17th century, Richard Bauman (1983) situates their practices of addressee reference in relation to a broader set of linguistic reforms that they instituted under the banner of 'plain speech'. Bauman's focus is on those aspects of verbal style which challenged the "very fabric of social relations and social interaction" (1983: 43). This includes Quaker rejection of all honorific titles, their refusal to participate in mundane rituals of greeting and leave-taking and their insistence on

[8] "We distinguish three persons for the singular and three for the plural, and, in defiance of this rule, the spirit of fanaticism, pride and feudalism, has led us to the use of the second person plural when we speak to a single person".
[9] Gilman and Brown (1958: 169) write: "The French, in all their African colonies, have been accustomed to say *tu* to the native population and to receive *vous* from them. This is a galling custom for those who receive the *tu* -so galling that a law has been passed against it".

addressing everyone with *thou*. For the Quakers, in other words, the form of life they imagined was to be brought about, in part, through adjustments to otherwise ordinary and customary ways of speaking.

Bauman shows that these proposals for reform were supported by two kinds of rationale. On the one hand, the Quakers suggested that to address someone as 'master' who was not, in fact, one's master amounted to a lie. Similarly, to refer to oneself as alter's 'humble servant' was contrary to truth and therefore an affront to God. In 1663, Benjamin Furly wrote (cited in Bauman 1983: 57) of titles that are "flattering and blasphemous, in which the honour of God is attributed to man whose breath is in his nostrils". These, Furly goes on to say, "we own not, and do trample upon that deceitful mind from whence they came" (qtd. in Bauman 1983: 57). Again, to wish someone who was not a Quaker and therefor living a less than completely spiritual life, 'Good day' or 'God speed' was tantamount to lying. And, of course, by the same logic, to refer to a single addressee as 'you' rather than 'thou' was to engage in falsity – 'you' should be used only when speaking to more than one person. George Fox (1831: 181), one of the founders of the Religious Society of Friends, remarked, in his epistle 191:

> All Friends every where, that are convinced with truth, and profess it, and own it; keep to the single language, (...), if man or woman seek to get gain by speaking the improper, untrue language, and flattering language of the world, which is in confusion, the Lord may take that gain away from them. For plural and singular was the language of God, and Christ, and all good men, and of the prophets and apostles; (...). And so all Friends, train up your children in the same singular and plural language; all masters, mistresses, and dames, or whatsoever ye are called, that do take Friends' children, that are in the singular and plural language, it is not fit for you to bring them out of it, neither to force nor command them otherwise, to please your customers, nor to please men.

Here Fox makes it clear that the use of 'you' in referring to a singular addressee is contrary to truth and thus an affront to God ("For plural and singular was the language of God, and Christ..."). But Fox also brings in the other argument which Quakers drew upon in justifying their proposed linguistic reforms. Specifically, the use of 'you' is cast as "flattering language" employed so as at effect "gain" by "pleasing" the one so addressed. Such ways of speaking were thus seen to build up earthly pride, lust and self-will in those to whom they were directed and, so, by refusing to engage in such practices, Quakers understood themselves to be performing a service to others. As Ellwood wrote in 1676, in defense of plain speech, "Let the ax therefore be laid to the root of this custom, which is, pride, ambition, haughtiness, flattery; and no further controversy will ever sprout from it" (cited in Bauman 1983: 55).

Unfortunately, those others rarely saw the Quakers' – for the time – bizarre conduct in this light.[10] Rather, they were described as rude, discourteous, disrespectful and so on (Bauman 1983: 55). As such, adopting the practices of plain speech came to be seen as a burden, as a "cross to bear". But far from discourage adherents from so speaking, the resistance they met only reinforced their resolve – this struggle was accommodated to the more general idea that salvation would necessarily require sacrifice and even mortification, "flesh must be brought low so that the spirit might prevail" (Bauman 1983: 55). Looking back later in life, George Fox recalled that the Quakers were "in danger many times of our lives, and often beaten, for using those words to some proud men, who would say, 'Thou'st "thou" me, thou ill-bred clown,' as though their breeding lay in saying 'you' to a singular" (cited in Bauman 1983: 50).

The historical irony in this is that while the Quaker way of addressing did not spread beyond their own community (and in fact was eventually abandoned even by the Quakers themselves) it nevertheless triggered other highly consequential changes. Specifically, the use of *thou* came to serve as an indexical

[10] Bauman (1983) makes the point that, in the 17th century, social interaction, at least among higher social classes, was governed by an elaborate and strict sense of etiquette.

marker of the speaker's Quaker identity thus motivating others to avoid it, "lest they be mistaken for members of the sect" (Silverstein 1985: 251). The result, as they say, 'is history' – a language in which, unlike its closest relatives, there is no honorific marking in pronominal reference to the addressee.

4. Phan Khôi's arguments for language reform in 1930s Vietnam

In June 1930, a prominent Vietnamese man of letters, editor, and translator named Phan Khôi initiated what was to become a series of essays addressed to matters of language and language reform. Across them, Phan Khôi discussed what he saw as serious problems in the structure and use of Vietnamese that had emerged as obstacles to the modernizing social reform for which he, along with many of his contemporaries, advocated.

The early decades of the twentieth century were a time of quickened change and profound social transformation in Vietnam, especially within intellectual circles. Before the 1900s both education and advanced literacy were elite pursuits available only to a small number of Vietnamese people. Mandarins, trained in the classics of high Chinese civilization, monopolized intellectual life and wielded considerable influence as administrators at all levels of the colonial government. Then, in an effort to undermine the power and prestige of the Mandarins along with the practices of literacy upon which it was largely predicated, the French colonial government introduced local schools and, eventually, the Romanized Vietnamese script that came to be known as *quốc ngữ* 'National Script'. Within twenty years, *quốc ngữ* had all but completely replaced the old system for writing Vietnamese which involved using Chinese characters in somewhat idiosyncratic and often cryptic ways to represent Vietnamese words. The emergence of *quốc ngữ* (which had been invented some 250 years earlier by Jesuit missionaries Alexandre de Rhodes and Francisco de Pina) coincided with the availability of modern printing technology and the result was an explosion of literacy. In 1918, Emperor Khải Định issued a declaration abolishing the traditional writing system based on Chinese characters.[11] And in 1919, the colonial government suppressed the Confucian examination system, thereby forcing Vietnamese elites to educate their children either in French, Vietnamese or some combination of the two.

It was in this context, that Phan Khôi launched a series of arguments for language rationalization and reform. In 'The doctrine of correct names, rectifying name usage among the Vietnamese' (*Theo thuyết chánh danh, đính chánh lại cách xưng tên của người Việt Nam*), published in 1930, he drew upon Confucian ideas about name rectification to shore up his proposal for what he saw as the correct use of nouns and names for persons in particular, advancing a series of proposals such as: "One person should have only one name" (*Một người nên chỉ có một tên mà thôi*) and "A name should be used to refer to its bearer" (*Tên, phải kêu theo chủ nó*), in both cases challenging long standing practices within the linguistic community.

The following year, Phan Khôi addressed the problem more directly in an article titled, "A custom which, if not abandoned, becomes inconvenient: The custom of name taboo" (*Một cái tục, nếu không bỏ đi thì bất tiện: Tục kiêng tên*). Here he reiterated many of the more general concerns he had articulated in 1930. He also suggested that Vietnamese society was in a "transition period": people had been introduced to some innovations and new ways but, at the same time, still held onto many old practices. Some of these enduring traditions were inconsequential, according to Phan Khôi, but others, such as the name taboo, were a matter of extreme inconvenience.

Across these essays, along with others which I have not discussed, Phan Khôi argued for a largely pragmatic approach to modernizing reform, the goal of which was the enhancement and development of

[11] On literacy and rates of publication see Marr (1981) and McHale (2004).

a language that would meet the demands of science, literature, politics as well as public discussion and debate. Along with many of his contemporaries, Phan Khôi clearly saw in Vietnamese and *quốc ngữ* potentially potent symbols of nationalism but his primary interest was in language not as symbol but as instrument, as a means to rational, public deliberation and debate (see Cody 2011). And in this respect, nowhere was the need for reform more apparent than in the terms used to refer to participants in communication.

Before turning to consider Phan Khôi's suggestions in this domain, we must first briefly sketch some important characteristics of Vietnamese. In English, a speaker refers to him or herself, almost always, using the first person singular pronoun in the nominative, *I*, accusative, *me*, or genitive, *my*. The addressee is referred to by means of the second person singular pronoun *you*. As discussed above, the national languages of Europe mostly follow this pattern although some allow for alternation between a so-called T and a so-called V variant in the second person (e.g., French *tu* and *vous*).

In Vietnamese the situation is quite radically different. In most situations, speakers avoid using pronouns altogether preferring instead various common nouns, most prominently kin terms. So rather than, "*I* see *you* are already quite old" a Vietnamese speaker might say, "Younger sibling (*em*) sees elder brother (*anh*) is already quite old". Kinterms such as *em* 'younger sibling' and *anh* 'elder brother' (along with those which denote 'elder sister', 'mother's brother', 'father's sister' and so on) are used across a wide range of contexts and with persons who are not genealogically related to the speaker (see Luong 1990 for the definitive account).

Consequently, it's all but impossible to say anything in Vietnamese without simultaneously, and quite explicitly, positioning oneself in relation to the addressee. Moreover, as Luong (1990: 5) pointed out, "In the metalinguistic awareness of virtually all native speakers, person reference constitutes the most salient domain through which interactional contexts are structured and partly in terms of which the native sociocultural universe is reproduced and transformed." In other words, this is a highly significant and highly fraught domain of social and interactional life, one that is subject to near constant scrutiny through various kinds of reflexive meta-semiotic discourse. And, as Luong (1990: 5) goes on to note, "this metalinguistic awareness is considerably heightened in the modern era" and with the rise of various forms of mediated communication since in this situation speakers must choose "among alternative person-referring forms without being able to ascertain the contextual features which the choice of any of the alternative forms entails, presupposes, and implies."

Thus, one obvious and common complaint about the Vietnamese system is that it forces interactants to constantly signal their hierarchical relation to one another. Such complaints cast Vietnamese as serving the interests of power and social control by forcing some to make explicit and thereby ratify their own subordinate position. When the Việt Minh came to power in the 1940s they focused on precisely this aspect of the system and sought to reform the language in such a way as to level out social relations and minimize differentiation (see Luong 1988). Interestingly, Phan Khôi, ever the moderate, focused attention elsewhere.

For Phan Khôi, the Vietnamese system of person-reference was in need of reform not because it reinforced relations of power but rather because it was inconvenient, and created serious obstacles to public, and especially, written discourse. Phan Khôi was so concerned with this issue that he made his argument for reform twice, once in 1930 in the pages of the periodical *Women's News* and then again 25 years later in a book on the Vietnamese language.

The discussion from 1930, titled "Ways of using pronouns" and appearing as one entry in a series titled *Rules of Writing*, begins with Phan Khôi asserting "Pronouns are used to replace nouns" (1930: 13) and then going on to suggest that in written communication, it is inconvenient to use a noun repeatedly thus making pronouns necessary. But, he continues, what's more convenient still is to have pronouns that

are both "unanimously agreed upon" and "universally used" (1930: 13). French provides an example of such a pronominal system according to Phan Khôi. "[...] the three singular persons are *je, tu, il*; and the plural forms are *nous, vous, ils*. Anyone may use these forms to refer to himself, and to refer to all others. There is no other special way" (1930: 13).

And, although in classical Chinese pronouns were "very troublesome" (1930: 13), in the contemporary language modelled after Mandarin, the custom is to use pronouns that are "unanimous, universal and also convenient" in Phan Khôi's estimation (1930: 13). Vietnamese on the other hand "is still at the troublesome stage of Classical Chinese" (1930: 13). It is worth reproducing Phan Khôi's diagnosis of the problem in full:

> While especially true of the second person, the third person and all the singular and the plural forms are like this, it depends on the person addressed (*kêu* 'call'). A worthy gentleman is *ông* (lit. 'grandfather'), a worthy lady is *bà* (lit. 'grandmother'), a worthy elder man is *anh* (lit. 'elder brother') [...], it is all very troublesome. While this causes few difficulties in speaking, in writing it is inconvenient in every way. Our language is like that. We are accustomed to it. It does not strike us as strange. But people from other countries, they must find it very odd indeed (1930: 13).

Phan Khôi's critique thus revolves around the notions of "convenience" and "inconvenience" particularly in relation to writing and written communication and his argument for language reform is not framed in terms of social and political issues, at least not in the usual sense.[12] In other words, Phan Khôi does not criticize the Vietnamese system of person reference because it highlights, legitimizes and serves to reproduce differences of status and social hierarchy. And the changes he proposes, unlike those introduced by the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam some twenty years later (see Luong 1988, Keane 2016), are not meant to minimize such differences and so encourage more egalitarian social relations. Rather, his concern is with what he sees as the communicative inconvenience of the present system. And Phan Khôi locates this system in an historical chronology when he suggests that Vietnamese "is still at the troublesome stage of Classical Chinese".

Both these aspects of Phan Khôi's argument are elaborated in his later discussion. There, Phan Khôi suggests that at some time in the distant past, kings and commoners addressed each other using plain pronouns that conveyed nothing about the differences between them in terms of status and station. Phan Khôi then goes on to suggest that his goal is to discover the "the original, primitive (*nguyên thủy*) language of the Vietnamese people" (1955). He identifies this, in the first place, with "proverbs and folk songs" proposing that in those forms of verbal art we might find "some trace of the ancient pronouns". After giving some examples to suggest that, in such verbal genres plain pronouns are commonly used, he goes on to "boldly put forth the hypothesis" that ancient Vietnamese, "from the time of the Hồng Bàng dynasty for example", had neutral pronouns (1955).[13] The Hồng Bàng dynasty is a semi-mythical period in Vietnamese historiography, spanning more than 2500 years from the beginning of the rule of Kinh Dương Vương over the state of Văn Lang in 2879 BC until the conquest of the state by An Dương Vương in 258 BC. According to Phan Khôi during this time, reference to speaker and hearer was always

[12] The words used here are *bất tiện* which I gloss as 'inconvenient' and *lôi thôi* which I gloss as 'troublesome'. The words Phan Khôi uses to characterize the ideal system for which he advocates, and which is at least approximated by French and Modern Chinese, are *nhứt trí* (spelled, *nhất trí* in contemporary Vietnamese) meaning something like 'unanimous' and *phổ thông*, 'common, general, universal'. Both are Sino-Vietnamese words.

[13] It goes without saying that the people of Hồng Bàng dynasty were no more Vietnamese than the Gauls of 2000 years ago were 'French' or the Britons were 'English'. This, in other words, is appeal not to history but to mythology.

accomplished by means of the two pronouns: *tao* and *mầy* (*mày* in contemporary Vietnamese). Reference to third party, non-participants was with *nó* or *hắn*. So, reasons Phan Khôi (1955):

> [A] daughter of the Hung Kings would call her father *mầy,* refer to herself as *tao*, call her husband the prime minister (Lạc Hầu) *nó*. And the peasants of Lạc Điền referred to the Mandarins as *chúng nó* and not only behind their backs but right to their faces and also referred to them as *bay* while referring to themselves as *ta*.

At the time Phan Khôi was writing such uses would be considered beyond rude, they would be considered traitorous (even in the shadow of a decisive victory by Communist forces in the 1945). No daughter would address her father as *mày*, particularly not if one's father was a king! Peasants referring to themselves as *ta* in speaking to a group of Mandarins would have likely been understood as the harbinger of riot or rebellion. And yet, according to Phan Khôi (1955), in ancient times, "everyone saw it as natural, there was no sense of rudeness or insolence, because the pronoun was neutral and universal."

Two points here are clear: first, Phan Khôi is not arguing against social differentiation and hierarchy. He accepts, without question, that some people are kings and Mandarins while others are peasants. Second, he situates these different pronominal systems in relation to a horseshoe-shaped chronology. The "Ancient system" is ideal and does not code differences of status. On the other side, the modern languages of French and Chinese also have a neutral and universal system. Vietnamese is still there at the bottom of the horseshoe, still stuck in a stage of development through which other languages have passed.

According to the argument, then, the original universal system of Vietnamese pronouns was fundamentally altered by the introduction of a humiliative first person pronoun - *tôi* - derived from a word meaning "subject of the king/servant". This had the effect of reconfiguring the system such that the formerly neutral pronoun *tao* came to convey arrogance (by virtue of not being *tôi*). Pronouns in general, according to Phan Khôi's argument, became inextricably tied to the expression of interpersonal deference in such a way as to severely constrain the range of contexts within which they could be appropriately used. And, with the pronoun system now freighted with social meaning, Vietnamese speakers had no other option than to employ nouns, especially kin terms. This introduced further complications, most importantly the ever-present possibility of using the wrong term and thus of giving offense. But the larger issue always, for Phan Khôi, is the inefficiency of the system and its promotion of widespread confusion. The solution, according to Phan Khôi, was to promote the use of *tôi* as a *neutral* first person singular pronoun to be used in writing. This, it is implicitly suggested, would allow for the kind of self-abstraction and neutralization of differentiating features of persons that public discourse, of the kind he imagined, demanded.

While much more could be said about Phan Khôi's proposed reforms, this should be sufficient to convey the general point. Looking both backwards in time at the distant, mythological past and, comparatively at French and Chinese, Phan Khôi identified practices of interlocutor reference as key, constitutive elements of a way of life. And, like the Quakers and French Revolutionaries, Phan Khôi saw the reform of such practices as an important step toward bringing about a hoped-for alternative to the present condition. In this case, however, the imagined form of life was not one devoid of differentiation but, rather, one in which a person might speak or write without having to situate him or herself within a pre-existing set of social relations, one in which, in other words, "inequalities of status" could be bracketed (Fraser 1990). This is an imaginary premised on the possibility of a radical disarticulation of discourse from its contexts of occurrence. In the essays considered here, then, Phan Khôi expounded a liberal vision

of public life in which the relevance of status difference would be suspended in communication, while the social world would otherwise remain unchanged.

5. Conclusion

In other work I, along with Luke Fleming, have sought to describe some aspects of the diversity in practices of interlocutor reference considered cross-linguistically (Sidnell 2019, Fleming & Sidnell 2020). Here I have focused on another dimension of diversity – the diverse ways in which speakers think about, talk about and attempt to reform the practices of interlocutor reference that are treated as normative for their language communities at a given point in time. I have also, by implication, pointed to some of the diverse considerations which motivate such proposed reforms. And, perhaps most importantly, the cases that I have discussed here reveal, to some extent at least, the various ways in which different reform projects conceptualize the nature of diversity and the kind of problem it constitutes. For 17th century Quakers, diversity in the form of social differentiation (of status, for instance) encouraged vanity and worldly pride and was thus seen as an impediment to a properly spiritual life. The solution was to eradicate the linguistic practices that were seen to support such 'diversity'. In the Vietnamese case, Phan Khôi was not opposed to social differentiation per se. Rather, his concern was with practices of interlocuter reference which, by virtue of presupposing and obligatorily marking such social differentiation, constituted an obstacle to the establishment of a particular form of public discourse. His solution was not to do away with social diversity but, instead to eliminate the linguistic practices that served to mark it and so to bring it into any communicative context.

The larger argument here is that imagining a way of life often involves imagining a way of using language and that advocates for language reform are also advocates for social reform. One aspect of language which, for various reasons, attracts special attention from such reformers is interlocutor reference. Underlying this special attention is perhaps the belief that a new way of life might be built up one interaction at a time, from the very materials of social encounter and engagement. But this pervasive concern with ways of referring to speaker and addressee is also a consequence of apparently universal constraints on native speaker awareness which guide the form that such metasemiotic discourse takes.

Any social imaginary must, at some level come to terms, with diversity. In the ideology of democratic pluralism, where the focus is set squarely on social identity, the problem becomes one of inclusion while simultaneously allowing for the maintenance of distinctiveness. How, that is, might a diverse group of persons, subdivided by communal bonds of various kinds, be included in such a way as to avoid both fragmentation and the erasure of identity? The nation is perhaps the most obvious example of such an imagined community but, as I hope to have shown here, other possibilities are set against quite other dangers and conceive of quite other futures. In their advocacy for plain speaking, Quakers rejected what they saw as false claims to distinction based in social position and, in a sense, the very notion of social diversity itself. Indeed, at a deeper level, in their insistence on individual sincerity on the one hand and on the spiritual unity of mankind on the other, Quakers came close to casting the social as little more than a false and vain pretense of human manufacture. In the case of Vietnamese language reform, the form of life that Phan Khôi imagined was one in which social diversity persisted but did not obstruct the free flow of public discourse between individuals. In sum, we should, perhaps, not allow current conceptions of diversity to prevent us from seeing the very diverse ways in which, at one time or another, the future has been imagined.

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