

Language and gender research at the intersection of the global and the local

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Abstract

While globalization has become a central lens through which social scientists have reframed old questions in the last couple of decades, students of language and gender in their sociocultural context have been slower to do so. Yet global processes are of concern to people's daily lives in all contemporary societies, as they gender themselves and each other through the intersubjective negotiation of the intersection of the global and the local. This paper illustrates these processes with two examples from Tonga, and proposes that attention to the global can enrich our understanding of both the gendering of everyday life and global processes.

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Globalizing life

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, 'globalization' is on everyone's lips, from politicians of the New Right to ecology activists, from CEOs to unemployed factory workers in the post-industrial zones of North America, from tourists to scholars. We owe to David Harvey the short-hand definition of globalization as 'time-space compression' (1989:240), meaning the dramatic increase of interchanges of abstract and concrete entities, as well as the acceleration of the speed at which these interchanges take place. In its most simplistic conceptualizations, globalization challenges, in unprecedented ways in the history of humankind, local arrangements and the conduct of human activities in local contexts. From perspectives that allow greater complexity, the global and the local are in a mutually constitutive relationship, in which local arrangements and global ones constantly define and challenge one another.

Of course, how politicians, activists, CEOs and scholars utilize notions like 'the global,' and to what ends, is rife with ambiguities and contradictions (Kearney 1995). These uncertainties stem from the fact that globalization is a multifaceted, multilayered, and sometimes contradictory set of dynamics, which is why globalization can be celebrated by proponents of radically opposed political platforms (Haugerud 2005). People, objects, ideas, technologies, images and symbols can circulate on different levels at once, which can bleed onto one another as easily as they can also contradict one another. For example, the resistance movement against neoliberal economic policies and their enforcers (WTO, NAFTA, the World Bank, etc.) involves many agents around the world, even though these people may stay grounded in their local contexts, which means that economic ideology and action circulate autonomously from the way in which people themselves circulate. Appadurai (1990) proposes usefully that we understand the disjoined effects of these autonomous levels through the metaphor of 'flow,' which can be a matter of economics, finance, politics, communication, social movements, population movements, ideology, and so on. However, Meyer and Geschiere (1999) demonstrate that globalization is a dialectic of both flow and closure. In short, globalization is a protean concept, a meta-trope that no one 'owns,' but which affects everyone in one fashion or another.

Globalization overlaps in part with a number of other categories, with which it shares some of its characteristics but not others, including transnationalism, internationalism, (post)modernity, diasporic dispersal, center-periphery relations, deterritorialization, and cosmopolitanism. Transnationalism, for example, refers to processes that are grounded in more than one nation-state at once and that cross national borders, but in doing so recognize, at least tacitly, the nation as a powerful institution. It is this last characteristic that

distinguishes transnational from global processes, the latter being autonomous, in ideology at least, of national borders and territories (Kearney 1995:548). (Of course, whether global processes can ever operate autonomously of national boundaries and territories remains an empirical question.) So for example, workers who migrate from North Africa to Western Europe, from the Pacific Islands to New Zealand, or from Central America to the United States are better described as transnationals than globalists, because they are constantly reminded, often in dramatic fashion, of the oppressive power of residency laws and other means of criminalizing movements across borders by the poor.

Cosmopolitanism provides a slightly different perspective on these very general matters, denoting, in most usages, a particular disposition (in the sense of Bourdieu's *habitus*) towards difference associated with super-national flows. In its most common usage, cosmopolitanism assumes access to particular symbolic capital that transcends and puts into perspective the local context. The cosmopolitan Western urbanite, for example, 'controls' symbols of other locales, including languages, exotic foods and tastes, and non-local ways of apprehending the everyday. Not surprisingly, cosmopolitanism is often associated with privilege, which both derives from and is reinforced by one's ability to marshal a material affluence (money, travel, education) of global dimensions that cosmopolitan symbolic capital presumes (Hannerz 1996:103). However, as I will demonstrate here, cosmopolitanism can be largely imagined without the support of privilege, while remaining very real and consequential for the people doing this imagining. Cosmopolitanism is therefore one way of apprehending and producing the global.

Globalization's gender

Among the most important aspects of global processes is the questioning of existing structures of power, variously creating, challenging, or aggravating hegemonic dynamics of various kinds. Not surprisingly, gender figures prominently among the dynamics that globalization centralizes, and it takes little insight into the on-the-ground workings of globalization to understand them as heavily gendered. Labor migrations across national boundaries, for example, affect people in gendered ways, which are sometimes predictable and sometimes complex. The call centers, data-entry industries, and garment sweatshops that transnational corporations subcontract throughout the developing world depend almost entirely on women employees, whom employers expect to be compliant and docile, in addition to being 'nimble-fingered,' nurturing, and able to withstand repetitive tasks (e.g. Cravey 1998; Freeman 2000; Rofel 1999). In contrast, women from the Philippines, South Asia, and the Pacific Islands who become domestic workers in the well-to-do households of the industrial world

(e.g. Constable 1997; Gamburd 2000) are confined to oppressively feminine forms of labor, although they also join a generally masculine-dominated world of worldliness and wage employment. Media images from elsewhere can disrupt but then reinforce gender inequalities in many locales: young men in North India, for instance, consume with abandon the gendered images that they watch obsessively in Bollywood films, in which the 'Westernized' woman is an object of sexual attraction but also one that both the narrative and the viewers ultimately reject as evil, in contrast to the modest and submissive 'traditional' Indian woman (Derné 2000). These examples, culled from a vast illustrative corpus of research, illustrate ways in which the symbolic and material manifestations of globalization are steeped with gender.

The intimate connection between globalization and gender is thus not confined to the reproduction of old patterns and the emergence of new patterns of gendered inequality as the result of global exposure. Rather, the very process of globalization is gendered, despite the masculinism that underlies hegemonic forms of globalization ideology (Gibson-Graham 1996), embodied for example in metaphors of capitalism's inevitable, if painful, 'penetration' and of the 'prying open' of 'virgin' markets (sometimes echoing with blinding a-historicism Western fantasies that date back to the eighteenth century, as in the case of the fabulously large Chinese market 'waiting' to consume Western products – Sahlins 1988). Feminist scholars like Freeman (2001) have called for a serious critical examination of the workings and representations of globalization, including scholarly accounts, provoked by the erasure of gender from the most influential works on globalization or by the tacit conflation of the global and theoretical with the masculine, and the local and ethnographic with the feminine.

Where is language?

To date, linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists have lagged behind in taking an interest in globalization, in contrast to sociocultural anthropologists, cultural geographers, and other social scientists (Blommaert 2003; Coupland 2003; Jacquemet 2005). Nor have they paid much attention to the intersection of globalization with gender, even though their analytic toolboxes have much to offer to the investigation of how people embrace, resist, and negotiate large-scale sociocultural dynamics in their day-to-day interactions. There is of course a long tradition in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics of research bearing on the gendered dynamics that make and contest the constitution of what Silverstein (1998) terms 'local linguistic communities.' Early variationist sociolinguists were aware of the importance, if not the centrality, of gender in the interactional strategies that people utilize to index various positions

vis-à-vis localness. For instance, Labov's (1963) classic variationist analysis of language use on Martha's Vineyard Island off Massachusetts illustrates how the phonological features of the speech of islanders index the relative claims they make to local privilege and grounding in local lifeways (fishing industry, village life, a conservative outlook, etc.), in opposition to an orientation to the tourism industry, socioeconomic change, and the urban mainland. But Martha's Vineyard women have much less to gain than men from the local economy of power, and they articulate this disadvantage by aligning their phonology with the hegemonic mainland standard.

Yet different patterns can obtain in other locales, such as among the Mexicanos (Nahuatl) of Central Mexico, whose linguistic practices range from a code heavily syncretized grammatically with Spanish to a less syncretized code, characterized by the full use of distinct linguistic features like honorifics, in contrast to the syncretized codes (Hill and Hill 1986). The heavily syncretized codes index economic and sociopolitical ambition associated with locally important men, while women and less powerful men index their localness through the use of the 'purer' codes. The interesting twist here is a paradox of prestige and power. While women's and subordinate men's linguistic practices embody Nahuatl ideals of linguistic purity and social personhood, they also signal and reinforce their exclusion from a larger context of economic and political power whose regulating center resides elsewhere.

While these works are not couched in terms of global dynamics, and indeed invoke a national context rather than transnational one, they nevertheless presage ways in which scholars of globalization (particularly anthropologists) would later argue for an understanding of 'localness' as a shifting notion, in constant dialectic relationship with a larger context, be it regional, national, or supranational. Gender of course figures prominently in this relationship, although not necessarily in predictable fashion across ethnographic contexts: women are local among the Nahuatl, while in rural Oberwart, on the Austro-Hungarian border in the 1970s, women (particularly younger ones) aligned themselves with the extra-local, industrialized, urban world, and inscribe their upwardly and outwardly mobile projects in their preference for German over Hungarian (Gal 1979). These seemingly contradictory cases can only be compared in the context of an understanding of gender as one of many other dimensions of difference-making and inequality, as is now well-established in social scientific approaches to gender (di Leonardo 1991). If we approach gender not as a homogeneous category but as a complex bundle of dynamics that other categories transverse (the usual litany of social class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, etc.), it comes as no surprise that certain women and certain men associate with localness in certain contexts, while other women and other men engage in centrifugal projects in other contexts.

Just as gender is a complex set of identity resources that people can foreground, background, or negotiate across contexts, the boundary between the local and the global is shifting and contestable, and an attention to language can provide fascinating resources for the negotiation of this boundary. I will illustrate these dynamics with two examples from my own fieldwork in Tonga, South Pacific. The center of gravity of Tongan society is a chain of islands and a nation-state in Western Polynesia, recognized as the homeland by diasporic communities established in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States, whose combined population (close to a quarter of a million) has now surpassed the island-based population (100,000). The diaspora and its global associations (almost universally English-speaking) figure prominently in the everyday life of island-based Tongans. Certain contexts of social life are particularly salient as locations where the global meets the local, like the flea markets where islanders sell to their compatriots objects that they receive as gifts from overseas relatives, particularly clothing. More than just sites of economic activity, these marketplaces have a unique cosmopolitan atmosphere (despite their ramshackle appearance) that encourages browsing, fashion-talking, and similar practices that Tongans do not engage in anywhere else in the local context.

Small talk at the flea markets contains much more English than small talk conducted elsewhere in the country. It is also gendered, in the sense that it is conducted by women much more than men, and in the sense that it concerns 'women's business' like fashion, family life, social relations, and traditional forms of prestation (the traditional realm of women despite men's overt control of them). But small talk is also the occasion for subtle negotiations of the boundary between the local and the moral. My analysis of one strip of interaction (which I analyze at greater length in Besnier 2004 and forthcoming) demonstrates that accents, topics, assertions, and moral evaluations are all the object of scrutiny. A seller, for instance, who declares a particular form of fashion (e.g. women's tops that display the belly-button) can be subtly rebuked for trying to push symbols of overseas immorality onto a local context where people associate respectability with being covered from neck to ankles, preferably in several layers. Yet on-the-edge Western fashion, associated with the diaspora, consumption, freedom from traditional moral strictures, and a focus on the self, are neither irrelevant from the local context nor devoid of appeal (compare Freeman 2001:1025–1029). What this example demonstrates is that there is no single 'script' for globalization and its relationship to local contexts, but a complex series of positions, subtly encoded and negotiated in the kinds of day-to-day interactions that sociolinguists and discourse analysts have expertly analyzed for decades (see also Meyerhoff 2003).

The second vignette comes from my analysis of Tongan transgender beauty pageants, particularly the Miss Galaxy pageant, an event of national promi-

nence held in the most important venue in the capital of Tonga, Nuku'alofa, and supported by female members of Tonga's royal family (Besnier 2002 and forthcoming). The pageant features young members of Tonga's very visible transgender minority of males who behave in a glamorous and inventive feminine manner, have sexual relations with 'straight' men, and often defy conventions of respectability, generating responses from mainstream society that alternate between admiration, amusement, and annoyed impatience. However, the event is not devoid of controversy, in that some (male) citizens in prominent sociopolitical positions actively undermine it, partaking in the transnational circulation of homophobic discourse inspired by American fundamentalist Christian organizations.

What is interesting about the Miss Galaxy pageant is that it is not only a display of transgender glamour, but also one of imagined cosmopolitanism: the 'girls' parade in 'national' costumes associated with exotic locales with which they have no connection, but which piqued their imagination or those of their couturier friends; they embody as much cosmopolitan femininity as their physiology allows them (sometimes with difficulty as flat chests fail to hold women's bras in place); and, most relevant here, they partake in an event in which the dominant language is English, the language of globality, modernity, and their cosmopolitan possibilities, despite the fact that most contestants and audience members are more comfortable in Tongan than in English. For the audience, the real test as to whether contestants are able to pull off their claims to glamorous cosmopolitanism comes with the interview event, when the *compère* gives them the choice of answering either in English or in Tongan. On the one hand, if they choose the former and fail to live up to the fluency associated with the cosmopolitanism they claim, they are laughed off the stage; on the other hand, an answer in Tongan is a tacit admission that they cannot back up their cosmopolitan pretensions with substantial evidence that they can pull it off.

It's not easy being global in a local context when one is poor, low-ranking, or marginal, as both flea market women and Miss Galaxy contestants demonstrate, because the global is about power and inequality. Nevertheless, cosmopolitan imaginings, whether they take the form of fashion, catwalks, or halting efforts to speak a world language, are 'about conceiving a tauntingly chimeric world of spatial, class, gender and race mobility, where State borders and economic exclusions ceased to be intransigent constraints' (Schein 1999:369). Marginals of all stripes (the unwanted, the dissatisfied, the abject) are particularly attracted to the boundary between the local and the global, for the same reason that they are also particularly predisposed to talk to the anthropologist (e.g. Crapanzano 1980; Stoller and Olkes 1989), and to reflect on the world whose margin they occupy (e.g. Morphy 1996). I am suggesting that one kind of marginality,

such as the gendered and sexual marginality of the transgender, has a way of 'attracting' other kinds of boundary straddling. It is in marginal lives that we can seek particularly revealing insights into how the local-global interface is actively defined and negotiated, and language, as powerful mediator between the world of ideas and the world of objects, exchange, and politics (Irvine 1979), is where we should be looking in particular.

Gender, language, and globalization

Jacquemet (2005) recently commented on the fact that the majority of scholars on language in its sociocultural context have only engaged with the global to bemoan its effect on the linguistic economies of small and marginalized speech communities, by endangering their languages, imposing its imperialism, and replacing the richness of local communicative repertoires with the impoverished codes of MTV, the Internet, and reality television. With Jacquemet, I call for a redressing of this state of affairs. This will be accomplished not by replacing doom with celebration, but by placing on the examination table under-explored questions that traditional approaches to the microscopic analysis of linguistic interaction raise: the assumption, for example, that localness is well-defined; that there exists a natural and unproblematic mapping among code, territory, and community; that the global is necessarily a threat to the local; that code mixing, code hybridity, and linguistic indeterminacy cannot be analyzed in fruitful fashion (cf. Hill and Hill 1986; Jaffe 2000; Makihara 2004; Woolard 1999). Attention to the ways in which people engage with global processes and utilize them critically in the conduct of their everyday lives calls for a different kind of sociolinguistics of gender than has been practiced to date. This sociolinguistics is one that engages more squarely with both a social theory of gender, identity formation, and subjectivity (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992) and the semiotic entanglement of language, society, and culture (Gal 1991; Ochs 1992).

The topics that this sociolinguistics addresses are potentially limitless, as all local contexts that researchers of language and gender have traditionally investigated can potentially be re-studied with an eye on the workings of global processes. The examples from Tonga I provided earlier are both illustrations of contexts that may appear at first glance profoundly local, in that they involve autochthonous agents exclusively, but in fact are settings in which interactions and subjectivities unfold in the shadow of an extra-local frame of reference. A sociolinguistics of gender and globality will also find much to study wherever local agents encounter non-local ones through one medium or the other. The language training that workers at offshore call centers in the developing world receive, for example, to handle calls from customers in Britain and the United

States, has received much journalistic attention, but no ethnographic scrutiny attentive to language to date. How offshore industrial workers utilize their learnt communicative skills in the workplace, or interweave them with local linguistic practices outside of the workplace, would provide fascinating insights into the quotidian experience of the global and its gendering. Linguistic anthropologists could find fascinating topics to explore in development projects around the world, particularly when these are charged with gender or sexuality; a thought-provoking example is Pigg's (2001) analysis of the dilemmas of translation of knowledge about HIV transmission in Nepal and the construction of cultural commensurability by the various parties involved. Identities and subjectivities that straddle the global and the local, often gendered and sexualized as noted above (see also Boellstorff and Leap 2004), offer particularly attractive sites for the investigation of the workings of language, gender, and globality. Sociolinguists can shed light on how the privileged, the underdog, and everyone else in-between enact cosmopolitanism through language and interaction, and how these different practices maintain or challenge social inequalities, be they based on gender or other dynamics.

A globality-sensitive ethnographic perspective on language and gender will enrich not only our understanding of how language is gendered, but also our understanding of how globalization operates in a gendered and intersubjective fashion. We can provide a much-needed understanding of how globalization operates on the ground, how people engage with it variously in their quotidian endeavors, and how they define themselves and as gendered entities through this engagement, concerns that are largely absent from the foundational theoretical works on globalization in the social sciences (e.g. Appadurai 1990; Hannerz 1996; Harvey 1989; Robertson 1992). This project is more than simply inscribing gender and language on a body of work in which they are largely absent. Rather, it proposes to understand how those who engage with globalization do so not as 'generic bodies and invisible practitioners of labor and desire' (Freeman 2001:1010) but as gendered and interacting agents who shape the very processes that make up globalization.

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