Exclusive boundaries, contested claims: authenticity, language and ideology

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Notions of authenticity have helped to structure the values and frames of reference of linguistics and applied linguistics, without being widely discussed, at least until recently. After briefly tracing its historical background, this paper examines: (1) the dichotomous nature of authenticity; (2) the ideological implications of authenticity claims.

Despite recent critical attention, authenticity remains problematic and paradoxical. It is problematic in various ways. (1) It is notoriously hard to define. According to Trilling (1972:120), it is one of those words “which are best not talked about if they are to retain any force of meaning.” (2) It is often vacuous, as in the claims of travel companies to offer tourists ‘the authentic Finnish experience’, ‘authentic Ireland’, and the like. (3) And yet, it still matters; we seek to achieve authenticity for ourselves and our forms of life, and may have strong views about what that means in a given context. To acknowledge the plurality of the term’s potential meanings, therefore, is not necessarily to avoid conflict about it in any particular case.

Authenticity is paradoxical in part because it always eludes us. As soon as we become reflexively aware, so that authenticity is something to be achieved, or restored, or recovered, etc., it is already lost (cf. Coupland 2001; Culler 1988). Its close counterpart in linguistic studies is Labov’s observer’s paradox, which involves both (a) the impossibility of hearing what is said by our informants when we are not present, and (b) an ideological move by which this unrecoverable, idealized vernacular has been assumed to be the most ‘real’ / most basic form of the language. Similar idealization has occurred in relation to the speech community – the more authentically itself the more untouched, internally coherent, etc, it is (cf. Bucholtz 2003) – and to the ‘native speaker’, the unreflectingly fluent and competent language user, against whose effortless performance that of ‘non-native’ language learners has generally been measured.

Authenticity in its present sense emerged at the end of the 18th century, as part of the romantic flight from the modern. This had two main aspects: (1) a revolt against industrial/commercial culture, typified by Wordsworth’s attempt to recover “the real language of men” from the vernacular speech of Cumbrian peasants (Wordsworth 1800); (2) the retreat of religion and rise of the self, the ‘interior turn’ central to the emergence of Romanticism (cf. Taylor 1989, 1991). The former celebrated timeless folk ways and solidarities, the traditional, locally embedded life of the community, in contrast to the dynamic social forces of the city and industrial mass production which dislocate and destroy them. The latter linked the history of the modern concept of authenticity to that of the private self as the setting for what is most characteristically human. It is here that authenticity acquired the status of a defining property, and in the relation between the self and its identities that authenticity, or its absence, came to be most directly experienced. In this view, the ‘real’ is an interior quality and this inner reality legitimates or guarantees outward behaviour / appearances (cf., in their different ways, Marx, Freud and Chomsky). In relation to the first of these aspects, authenticity appealed to ideas of origin, essence, place, and antiquity; but also to shared values, marginality, purity and vernacular mundane. In relation to the second, its most relevant features were connection to self, instinct, and private experience; also to creativity and self-expression. So conceived, authenticity became a constitutive aspect of the western world view, and our sense of who and where we are, of what matters to us and why.

It has also shaped views about the features of ‘authentic language’, a legacy inherited by much modern (socio-, etc.) linguistics. Among its most familiar features are the following: it is native, spoken, verbatim, unrehearsed, off-the-record, sincere, vernacular and non-standard. Unsurprisingly, many of its features have also been taken to characterize male speech (Eckert 2003).

Today the notion of ‘authentic language’ and what it means across global contexts has been the subject of extensive discussion. Older certainties have been challenged. In place of asking what authenticity is, we ask what it means to be authentic in a particular setting. However, perhaps as a symptom of nostalgia for these lost certainties, late modern social arrangements tend to make the quest for authenticity more rather than less urgent. In this context, a key aspect of its appeal is that it resists relativizing. As Coupland puts it: “The power of the term ‘authentic’ is to succeed in asserting absolute values in necessarily relative circumstances, and in asserting a singular essence when competing criteria for authenticity exist” (Coupland 2003:429, note 2). It is also final: i.e. in need of no further explanation or justification (cf. Rorty 1989:73).

The following general features of authenticity can be identified: (1) it is relational, (2) connected to origins, (3) currently relevant, (4) absolute, (5) “final” / self-legitimating, (6) the goal of some kind of quest / discovery / retrieval, (7) time-bound, (8) normative / desirable, (9) value-laden, (10) dichotomous, (11) it makes an ideological claim, and (12) requires gatekeepers, authenticators or certifiers. The discussion here focuses on the last three of these.

Authenticity draws an absolute boundary between the entities, etc. deemed to be authentic, and those that are not. No particular set of things is by nature authentic; yet, in a given context, not just anything can be
authentic: the condition of its authenticity is necessarily the exclusion of the inauthentic. This division clearly cannot be regarded as a matter of fact, although the rhetorical trick is to present it as such. Compare here other similar dichotomies, for example, truth vs. myth, the literal vs. the metaphorical, fact vs. fiction, basic to modes of understanding in the Western tradition (cf. Lloyd 1990). As usual with such dualisms, the preferred side enjoys a special privilege. In relation to ‘authentic language’ or ‘authentic text’, for example, a corollary is the delegitimization of those kinds of language or text supposed to be inauthentic (for example, that of the RP speaker; the academic text, institutional discourse, etc.), although this is often left implicit.

The crucial questions are, then: who has authority to draw this boundary? Who validates authenticity claims? Gate-keeping rights tend naturally to belong to those in power and so readily become a focus for conflict between (e.g.) politicians, linguists, media commentators and various interest groups. Claims are often made strategically to validate particular ideological positions. For example, authenticity may be invoked to justify the choice of a particular language norm or efforts to ‘purify’ a given variety and exclude outside influences, etc.: as such, it forms part of the rhetoric that sustains these ideologies. This may serve the interests of monolingual nation states by drawing on the ‘original essence’ / ‘native’ aspects of the term, denying authenticity (hence legitimacy) to the foreign, the hybrid, the mixed – for example creoles, mixed codes, or bilingual speakers in general. On the other hand, the centrality of authenticity to linguistic issues reflects the field’s concern for the outsider and distrust of the institutional, etc. The very fact that a boundary of this kind is drawn stimulates efforts to rehabilitate the excluded categories. Authenticity claims, in this case drawing on the term’s marginal, local, vernacular connotations, are thus made by (or on behalf of) those groups, language features, etc. that are marginalized by the mainstream. In either case, however, what counts as authentic tends to be partly or wholly imposed (for example, in ethnographic field work, often centrally concerned with the position of excluded or non-mainstream groups, it is often the decision of the analyst, backed by institutional authority, not that of the people being observed, which determines which aspects of the data should be regarded as authentic; cf. Bucholtz 2003).

Authenticity presents itself as a matter of fact, but asserts a value, or rather, a particular hierarchy of values. In this sense, it is necessarily ‘ideological’. In the transition from modernity to postmodernity, the poles of the familiar, romantic value system have largely been reversed: most interest is now directed towards the urban, the fragmented, the stylized, etc. Yet, while we are becoming more aware of the difficulties attaching to authenticity – and celebrating ‘new’ forms – the earlier, romantic ideas still exert an influence. We therefore need to tread carefully when questions of authenticity arise; even in hybrid,