

Language and Identity: Selected Papers of Robert B. Le Page

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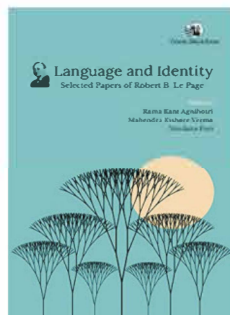
Language and Identity: Selected Papers of Robert B. Le Page

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Agnihotri, Rama Kant, Verma, Mahendra Kishore & Puri, Vandana (Eds.) (2020).

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Reviewed by: Udaya Narayana Singh



While writing about the dramatic art of Le Page, Josette Féral (2009) said that “his audiences, no matter what their cultural origins, unconsciously find in his work the model of today's constructions of identity, and the values linked to them.”(<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10486800902770804>). Way back in 1985, in his magnum opus on the question of 'identity', Le Page had expressed his disagreement with the popular conceptualization of the terms 'language' and 'dialect' that are often taken for granted in the existing literature. For him, sociolinguistics had to begin

looking at the 'individuals' occupying the centre-stage, because it was the speakers who held the clue to the mysteries and intricacies of language. He argued in several of his works that it is usually the decision of the individual to negotiate and arrive at a variety of language that would reflect the identity they had chosen. In other words, linguistic identity is dependent on the speaker's choices. Further, linguistic ecologies change rapidly and are a highly diffused phenomena, a fact that is clearly reflected in the decadal choices citizens of a multilingual country make in

declaring their mother-tongue in the census operations. In comparison to this stand, Christian Mair (2003) argued that in “Labovian sociolinguistics the main emphasis is on the subconscious choice between the linguistic variables in spontaneous speech.” (p.196)

The volume of Robert Le Page so sensibly arranged and ably edited by his students, Agnihotri and Verma, along with Vandana Puri, is an anthology that is meant to provoke theoretically minded sociolinguists to question 'the given' further. It is equally useful for the field workers who work in the area of language mix. It is arranged in four sections, devoted to 'Theoretical Aspects'(nine papers), 'Pidgin and Creole Studies'(five chapters), 'General'(five interesting topics ranging from myths, snobberies, metaphors, vernacularisation and language barrier), and 'National Language and Identity' (three papers). This anthology has not only so much variety, but also a very interesting 35-page long transcript of conversations between Le Page and the first two editors. The discussions on Le Page's ideas on language, identity and speech variation reminded me of 1974 volume of Herman Parret from Mouton *Discussing Language*, in which he had included very lively dialogues with Chafe, Chomsky, Greimas, Halliday, Lakoff, Lamb, Martinet, McCawley and others. Even for someone like me who had seen, met, heard and read Le Page, the discussions are very enlightening.

It was not unknown to Creolists that between a 'ready-to-use' finished patois and a jargon that is still evolving—thanks to the intervention of many codes in use simultaneously by the individuals and in a space—there would be many intermediate speech varieties, creating a multidimensional model and a methodology to study them. Where others

'taught' how to eliminate such heterogeneities, Le Page encouraged all to look into the making of these 'neglectful' varieties. His point was that it was from a close consideration of the speakers' moves in this jugglery of speech that a wholesome conceptualization of 'language' would appear. The 'linguistic flux' was always thought to be too difficult to record, capture and analyse, but it is through these speech strategies that speakers wanted to reveal their identities. If sociolinguists wanted to shove these nuances under the carpet, it would be a great defeat for the discipline, he thought. This outlook took him to “find a more satisfactory way of talking about observed phenomena than current linguistic theory provides” (Le Page, 1973, p.31). Speakers of pidgins and creoles go about “weighing up their chances of being accepted in one role or another role, creating for themselves the [linguistic] stereotypes for these roles” (Le Page, 1973, p.40). This, he strongly argued would truly discover the making of 'communicative competence' of the individuals and their acts of identity, as conceived by Dell Hymes. Le Page's work in Belize, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Lucia, and his analysis of what is often brushed aside as idiosyncrasies make a very strong point for redefining language as a “closed and finite rule-system” (Le Page, 1988, p.21). He rightly pointed out that our aim should be to account for “la langue, that is, the systems inherent in the linguistic behaviour of networks of individuals” (Le Page, 1988, p.22)

Overall, I believe by bringing out these papers in one volume, the editors have done great justice to this scholar of unusual calibre who dared to think differently in the early stages of development of sociolinguistics.

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