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Power and Critique

Eva Codó and David Karlander

Introduction

Whenever critical sociolinguistics engages with questions of social difference and social inequality on the terrain of language, as Heller (2011) emphasizes, it must seek to grasp how power works. This ambition beckons us to sort out our heuristic priorities and agendas. A sociolinguistic engagement with the workings of power calls for a close analysis of how patterns of social categorization and social stratification are made and remade in the actuality of social practice (see Heller 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2011). Moreover, as Heller (2011) argues, it should also ‘take some distance from the idea’ that critique must:

be first and foremost aimed at showing the powerful what the consequences of their power is, or at providing access to power for those who typically have none, so doing by shaping the research around a pre-existing idea of who occupies what position in a system of relations of inequality (Heller 2011: 11).

In this spirit, Heller proposes a critical understanding of the workings of power as an alternative to other radical strategies, such as speaking truth to power or speaking on behalf of those who are prevented from using their own voice (ibid.). Instead, the central remit of any critical project is to first grasp *why* some agents, ideological positions, and symbolic goods ‘become hegemonic and others marginalized or erased’

(Heller and McElhinny 2017: 8). A critique *that goes to the bottom of things* is a prerequisite for any attempt at grappling with the social order. This mode of critique comes down to ‘describing, understanding, and explaining the relations of social difference and social inequality that shape our world’ (Heller 2011: 35).

This standard of critical sociolinguistic inquiry stands strong in Heller’s work, following several decades of elaboration. We, the authors of this chapter, have previously engaged with it in various studies straddling somewhat dissimilar fields of research (e.g., Codó 2008; Codó and Pérez-Milans 2014; Karlander 2017, 2020). In what follows, we return to it in two reflections on our respective takes on questions of power as an integral part of our research, revisiting fieldwork at a Spanish immigration service unit in Barcelona (Codó, section 2) and fieldwork with Övdalsk language activists in Sweden (Karlander, section 3). We use these first-person retrospective reflections to explore questions of power, social categorization and social stratification – difference and inequality – in dialogue with Heller’s work. Our aim is to discuss not only some of the ways in which Heller’s work has informed our own research, but also to illustrate how this work resonates with two distinct conceptualizations of power, namely Foucault’s idea of *capillary power* (section 2) and Bourdieu’s idea of *symbolic power* as an integral element of *state power* (section 3).

The intricacies of institutional power at the Spanish immigration system (Codó)

In April 2000 I started visiting one of the units of the Spanish immigration services in Barcelona where I had been granted permission to conduct fieldwork for my doctoral research. One of the first things I noticed as I sat behind an information counter and listened in to how immigration officers communicated with applicants for resident status was how strikingly similar, controlled and short most encounters sounded. This

was unexpected considering the variety of migration trajectories, legal situations, personal concerns and language abilities, among others, of applicants. I also observed that a few key words or phrases, most notably *trámite* (in process), *falta* (something is missing) and *tres semanas* (three weeks), were repeated over and over again by officers and were taken up, struggled with or questioned by applicants. I began to wonder why communication sounded so tokenistic and what it all meant.

My initial interest in researching communication in such a site was straightforward: I wanted to know what language policies were put in place (if any) by the Spanish state to accommodate the linguistic needs of such a diverse clientele, and how that translated into specific multilingual practices. For the first time in recent history, Spain was a net receiver of foreign populations that were arriving from all corners of the world, so I was keen to know what institutional adjustments were being made. It took me a very short time to realize that, practically and symbolically, Spanish was the default code.¹ The only other language that was regularly employed was English, but rather reluctantly and only by one of the officers. However, as I got to know, Russian, French and Modern Standard Arabic were also fluently spoken by at least one member of staff. Why were those multilingual resources not brought to bear?

The situation puzzled me and I could not help ask myself why the interactions took the shape they did, both in terms of language choice and of communication routines, who had decided, why the constant repetition of the key terms I mentioned earlier and what connection they bore to the actual administrative procedure that was supposedly being represented. This procedure had been put in place to process petitions for resident status under a one-shot large-scale legalization campaign (*proceso extraordinario de regularización de extranjeros*) for non-EU foreigners who were residing (and working) in the country without legal authorization. The Spanish economy

was booming and it urgently needed unqualified labour for the expanding service sector and other labour-intensive economic fields, most notably, construction and agriculture. The 2000 legalization campaign, as it was informally known, was the first of a number of such campaigns that unfolded during the first decade of the 21st century. It was temporarily bound (only lasting from 21st March 2000 to 31st July 2000) and this made it ideal to be investigated closely.

I turned to Monica Heller's work fairly early on in my project. I had been trained in the tradition of the close interactional analysis of code-switching in institutional communication, and for this reason, my initial focus was on the details of multilingual face-to-face talk. However, I quickly realized that the interest of what I was observing was not so much in establishing how migration officials and applicants communicated (or rather, did not communicate) and when they managed (or rather, did not manage) to achieve mutual understanding, but in the political import of it all. That is, how the shape of frontstage talk (Goffman 1959) was the result of a number of conflicting and interlocking interests and trajectories linked to institutional and political economic conditions that actually re-created, practically and symbolically, the terms under which migrants were being incorporated into the fabric of Spanish society (Codó 2011). To comprehend all this, I needed to go beyond interactional analysis and turn to ethnography, for 'its ability to discover how language works as situated social practice, and how it tied to social organization' (Heller 2011: 10). Otherwise, the significance of the intricate face-to-face negotiations I witnessed (and audio-recorded), and of the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) interactional moves, shifts and strategies participants engaged in, could not be grasped. As the quote above suggests, I needed to have a clear understanding of individual and institutional interests, constraints and possibilities, and of how they intersected.

Heller's distinct epistemological gaze on language and/in institutions showed me the path to follow. Her perspective brings together the seminal ideas of Gumperz (1982, 1999) and Cicourel (1992). While her approach is distinctively empirical and situated, it is also aimed at understanding how the here and now of institutional talk is shaped by and shapes larger processes that transcend it. From Gumperz, Heller derives her interest in the close analysis of the details of institutional communication as the *locus* where we see the institution being done. She zones in on the analysis of actual moments of sanction and selection, in which the agenda of a specific institution is actualized and (re)produced. However, unlike Gumperz, she aims at broader social critique (2001a) that is grounded in, but transcends, situated encounters. For this, she turns to ethnography and to Cicourel's work in order to find a way of operationalizing and bringing together that which is not visible in situated communication, that is, the larger processes that shape and constrain speakers' possibilities for social action. Heller's understanding of power is, thus, not limited to exposing the consequences of situated communication-based institutional decision-making, important as this might be. It also aims to bring to light the large-scale sociolinguistic processes impacting institutional action.

Heller argues that it is not possible to comprehend the interactional order as separate and separable from the other orders. On the contrary, she goes on to say, '... moral, linguistic, interaction, institutional and social orders are related, not as mirrors of each other, but as trajectories creating discursive spaces where things can neither change not remain the same without the active work of communication in everyday life' (Heller 2007b: 652). The notion of discursive space is central to Heller's theorization of institutions as spaces inhabited by actors with varied positions and interests that struggle for hegemony. Heller's discursive space is inspired by Cicourel's idea that institutional

knowledge is distributed. So, in order to understand how specific bodies and forms of knowledge get constructed as legitimate and normative, we need to trace the evolving discursive struggles within and across institutions, as well as the interests and power positions of the actors involved therein. We can see how power is closely linked not only with interest and position, but also with struggle and legitimation, as we will discuss later.

Power and power relations are a grounding undercurrent rather than an explicit theoretical focus in Heller's scholarship on institutions. This is because her primary concern is with the actual workings of power and its material effects. Differential access to material and symbolic resources is the fabric of social inequality. Since regulating access to resources –in some cases as vital as health care or legal status, as in my case– is what institutions do, Heller defines power as 'the control over the production and distribution of resources, and the ability to attribute value to them, whether those resources are material or symbolic, including linguistic or other communicative resources' (2008: 259). Power is, thus, *the* socially structuring force, a force which operates – again, following Cicourel – in a distributed manner (Heller 2007b). For this reason, Heller systematically shies away from simplistic analyses and naïve academic/political agendas that aim to expose the effects of power (abuse), or alternatively, empower the powerless, as we can see in the introductory quote from Heller. Because power is a multi-polar and multi-scalar force, Heller is more interested in understanding 'the complexities of how power works' (2011: 11) and then decide what to do with that academic knowledge. Heller's focus on the complexities of power echoes Foucault's (1977) theorization of power as diffused and operating in a web-like fashion where individuals can simultaneously endure and exert power. I will come back to this idea later.

Theorizing power and power relations became crucial in my research. At a very basic legal level, a country's migration regime is the most powerful mechanism of state control. It regulates non-nationals' access to resident status, and consequently, also to a number of rights and benefits attached to it. To a large extent (though obviously not completely, depending on economic assets), access to legal residence determines the material circumstances of one's life: the possibility of having legal employment, of accessing welfare services, of renting or buying property, etc. A country's immigration system is perhaps the bluntest mechanism of social categorization, i.e., between those newcomers that meet the requirements to be admitted and those that do not. It is, therefore, not only a system of population regulation and control; it is also a matrix of exclusion and inclusion that legitimizes and normalizes global and local social inequality(ies).

The gatekeeping and high-stakes nature of the bureaucratic process I wanted to examine is self-evident. However, as I observed how information was supplied, I began to wonder to what extent and in what ways that gatekeeping was communicatively accomplished. It must be said that requirements for resident status were strictly regulated by law and that applications were submitted in writing. My context was, thus, different from the screening interviews and hearings for asylum and refuge examined, among others, by Maryns (2006, 2015), Jacquemet (2009, 2015) and Smith-Khan (2017) in that a migrant's situated communicative performance was not the basis for selection. What was, then, the role of the information desk in enabling or disabling clients' courses of actions, and thus, in doing the state's job of selecting those eligible from those that were not? How did this desk work as the synchronous communicative interface between the Spanish State and its would-be citizens?

During my first day of fieldwork, I already found out that, in the same premises, there was a large administrative unit where the applications for work and residence permits were processed. Sometimes (though rather infrequently), information desk officers would consult specific details of applications with their backstage colleagues. Over time, I got to know that most of them were civil servants; by contrast, all desk officers had recently been hired and were on temporary contracts. Even though at least two of them had university degrees and one was officially hired as translator for Arabic, their salary was entry-level and fairly low. I never saw anyone from any other departments –let alone management– visit or help at the information desk even though all employees were inexperienced. I thought this was telling. I began to realize that no one cared about the needs or difficulties of desk staff, who, incidentally, had received no specific training on how to communicate with such a heterogeneous clientele (whether at the level of language choice/policy or interactional strategies). Neither had they been given any institutional guidelines on what information to deliver and how. The institution just wanted the work done and this ideology is what the new employees were socialized into, that is, to get issues sorted themselves and not bother anyone with their practical difficulties.

Issues of power and resource distribution were more complex, entangled and multi-layered than I had anticipated, and the information desk turned out to be a key piece in how the legalization campaign unfolded in the province of Barcelona, where application rejection rates were much higher than the country's average (67.8% vs 34.4%). But let's go back to the ethnographic account.

Even though the law established that applicants needed to show through documentary evidence that they fulfilled the requirements that made them eligible, this turned out not to be the end of the process. A few weeks into the campaign, so around

the time when I started my fieldwork, applicants discovered that through the information desk they could obtain key details that would enable them to reverse the fate of their cases should a negative outcome be anticipated. This was the time when the files that were first submitted began to be decided on. As rumour spread quickly through migrant networks, the number of daily face-to-face queries multiplied. At the time, these could only be made verbally; no online application was available. Despite longer queues, no more staff was hired. Pressure to serve a growing clientele mounted; this led front desk staff to reduce information and minimize contact. In so doing, they were also trying to avoid protracted miscommunication sequences that, over time, began to frustrate and irritate them, as they often commented. No one cared.

Information became a resource that was fought over at multiple levels. On the one hand, the clients wanted more while the officials tried to provide less for the sake of efficiency and personal safeguard; on the other hand, the institution was being swamped with newly submitted extra documentation and decided to curtail information.

Basically, management decided to stop informing clients that their application had received an initial negative review. In practical terms, this meant that the magical word *falta* (lit. papers are missing), which was employed by officers to inform applicants that their submitted documentary evidence had not been approved, disappeared from their talk. This put them in the very uncomfortable situation of having to withhold information. Unlike a work permit that is granted or denied, information is malleable and fluid and, as knowledge or knowledge potential, it is inextricably bound up with the exercise of power and control (Foucault 1977).

It must be said that the relationship between what was transmitted in the face-to-face encounters (that is, between the actual terms the officials used to represent the bureaucratic procedure) and the official categories was never univocal. The officials

took it upon themselves to ‘translate’ technical terminology into plain language and simplify the procedure so that clients ‘could understand it better’. This was obviously very problematic and meant that a number of important bureaucratic distinctions were lost in the process (for a detailed account, see Codó 2008). However, as a set of parallel terms were created that were iconically produced in Spanish, an illusion of truthful and authentic information was maintained. However, the routinized production of what sounded like script-like responses that were always very similar engendered mistrust. The new decision only worked to aggravate the situation. However, it could be said that the scenario was different. Whereas, previously, officials may have obscured information and compounded clients’ understanding through their practices of simplification (even pidginization), repetition and automatization of talk, now the institution was intentionally and purposefully keeping some of them in the dark.

A complex discursive machinery was put in motion to justify that decision, and this takes us back to Heller’s work. Heller argues that the institutional structure requires systematic action on the realm of the symbolic. This is why institutions engage in a lot of discursive and ideological work to justify themselves, their mission and the work they do (Codó and Pérez-Milans 2014). Frequently, this justification is linked to categories and categorization processes. Institutions produce categories (apt vs not apt; competent vs incompetent; language proficient vs not proficient) and these categories create or deny opportunities, enable or disable paths (Heller 2001b). Categorization is the outcome of situated performances that get evaluated by institutional actors. Through categorization, as well as through control, power is done, relations of power are brought into being and have consequences for those in subaltern positions. It is in the consequences of categorization, most notably, being further constrained to access valuable resources, that we can see social structuration taking shape (Heller 2011).

Ideologies of client mistrust form the basis of how bureaucracies work (Sarangi and Slembrouck 1996); mistrust is amplified to entrenched suspicion when the clients are migrants (Jacquemet 2005). If this was not enough, an intense media campaign was launched, spurred by opposing right-wing sectors, to disseminate the idea that the campaign was having a magnet effect attracting undocumented migrants residing in other countries who would forge evidence to prove their arrival in Spain before 1st June 1999 (one of the legal requirements). Work at the front desk became exhausting, and the atmosphere, suffocating. The never-ending queue prompted numerous attempts at jumping it and interaction got increasingly bitter due to clients' mounting suspicions that they were not told the truth. Officers reacted through bluntly dismissing clients' queries, regimenting their bodies in the office and even gratuitously negatively sanctioning their moral worth and categorizing them as undeserving (see Codó 2011 for a full account). This exceeded their job responsibilities and the expected civility of a public servant. However, the discursive regime of migrant un-deservingness, coupled with the officers' feelings of resentment towards the institution, did the self-legitimizing job.

In my account, I could have meticulously examined officers' practices of power and stayed there. I am not denying the social relevance and critical and ethical imperative of exposing the power abuse exerted over a population that was further vulnerabilized by the demeaning treatment it received. In fact, I did engage in that exercise (see Codó 2008). However, validating the 'pre-existing idea of who occupies what position in a system of relations of inequality' (Heller 2011: 11), as I discussed earlier, would have missed the whole point. Power was capillary (Foucault 1977), traversing simultaneously the different scales of its operation, from the macro level scale of a Global North migration regime, exclusionary by default, to the micro-politics

and practices of information strategizing and interactional abuse. There was no way of explaining one level without the other. Similarly, positioning immigration officers as the powerful actors would have been terribly inaccurate. They exerted but also endured a great deal of power. Their work conditions were precarious (understaffing, low salaries and temporary contracts) and were further precarized by the institution that dumped them at the front desk, provided no support and asked them to be complicit with its misinformation policy, which, incidentally, at least partially explains the high rejection rates at this office. Though there is always room for doing things slightly differently, these officers' precarious position and interest in securing employment with the public service surely discouraged any attempts.

Another example of how impossible it was to disentangle the different levels or to use Heller's words (2007b), the different orders (moral, linguistic, interactional, institutional and social), is the default use of Spanish, to which I referred at the beginning of this piece. Its taken-for-granted currency was simultaneously a way for officers to dispatch clients quickly, make less interactional effort and put their migrant trajectories and moral worth to test (with on-the-spot displayed competence taken as an index of credibility). However, there is more than meets the eye. Institutionally, the need for foreign languages was not part of officers' job responsibilities, and therefore, they did not receive any extra compensation for this. Two of the four officers had been employed as translators; unlike their colleagues, they did receive an extra allowance, but their languages of expertise were either not required (Russian) or not helpful (Modern Standard Arabic). In addition, their linguistic skills were not made known to the public and hardly ever requested. The structural conditions were, thus, set for the practical use of Spanish as default, and for its ideological status as the only legitimate

(Bourdieu, 1991) service code at the bureaucracy that, in the eyes of foreigners, most unequivocally represents the Spanish state.

However, this was not all. The ritualistic use of Spanish through the recurrent repetition of the three key words I mentioned at the beginning of this piece served another key purpose tied up to the exercise of power: to iconically represent in frontstage talk the bureaucratic procedure and its different stages and create the illusion that truthful and accurate information was being delivered. Following Foucault (1977), we could say that power was exercised through its productive capacities, that is, the ability to create a parallel reality to which Spanish was instrumental. As I explain in Codó (2008), the show was carefully staged to simultaneously provide and not provide information, to tell and not to tell. To use Heller's words, not only was power in the institution's capacity to control access to a work permit (and to information that could be crucial for that) but in its ability to attribute value to certain frontstage communicative routines. In this account, I hope to have shown, through a concrete example of my own research in which understanding power and its complexities was central, the way in which critical sociolinguistics can 'remain located in empirically observable local processes, while aiming at a construction of a somewhat broader narrative in which language practices are understood as political processes and elements of structuration.' (Heller 2001a: 139).

Minority language movements and the power of categorization (Karlander)

In March 2022, I received an email from the fact-checkers at the New York Times. They wanted an update on whether Sweden still officially viewed Övdalsk – a nonstandard variety of Scandinavian spoken mostly in the rural Älvdalen district in central Sweden – as a 'dialect' rather than a 'separate language'. The newspaper was

about to publish a piece by John McWhorter titled ‘Ukrainian Isn’t “Little Russian” and Black English Isn’t Broken’, which made a case for the power of descriptive linguistics to reveal ‘the uniqueness of what traditionally have been dismissed as mere dialects’ (McWhorter 2022). Sweden’s treatment of Övdalsk, McWhorter argued, was a blatant example of classificatory error and official misrecognition, as a ‘language’ was wrongly categorized as a ‘dialect. I could confirm that his account was correct: Övdalsk lacks official recognition in Sweden. Swedish authorities refuse to call it a language.

McWhorter contested this stance with linguistic arguments, contending that Övdalsk is ‘a language of its own under any neutral analysis’, since it ‘retains the three [grammatical] genders and other characteristics of Old Norse’, thus differing markedly from standard Swedish. His bearing idea was that a language is defined by a sufficient degree of linguistic difference from other languages and that these relations of difference always ought to be recognized – or at least not obfuscated – by lawmakers. This line of critique should be familiar to all scholars of language. The use of linguistic arguments against the misclassification of ‘languages’ as ‘dialects’ is, at some level, linguistics’ finest hour. It targets an apparent abuse of its specialized terminology and forms of knowledge, employing one of the core theoretical terms of the discipline (‘language’) to attack a linguistic injustice, demasking top-down policy not only as oppressive but ultimately as a gross misclassification of nature.

I was well acquainted with the argument that Övdalsk, by virtue of its ‘archaic’ Nordic linguistic features, *was* a language. I had encountered it many times in the language ideological debates on Övdalsk that had been waged in Swedish media and political assemblies for more than two decades (see Karlander 2018, 2020). In this context, the contention that Övdalsk *is* a language is usually levelled against Sweden’s official opposition to recognizing Övdalsk under the *European Charter for Regional and*

Minority Languages (ECRML), and thereby, grant it symbolic or institutional support. Challenging this policy, Övdalsk language activists have campaigned for official recognition since the mid-2000s, with linguists often joining them in appeals for policy revisions. Their challenge to the present order relies heavily on the idea that Övdalsk *is* a language and this idea, in turn, relies on the idea that there exists a ‘large linguistic distance between Swedish and Övdalsk’, as fourteen linguists had put it in an op-ed for a Swedish daily roughly a year before McWhorter typed up his piece (i.e., Carling et al. 2021)

While I’m sceptical of the weaponization of mythical terms like ‘language’ and ‘dialect’, I’m sympathetic to the contrarian spirit that often suffuses the claim that Övdalsk *is* a language. My scepticism has to do with the arbitrary character of metalinguistic terms like ‘language’ and ‘dialect’ (see Harris [1990] 1998). These terms are not descriptive but constitutive of reality; they do not simply denote preformed linguistic objects but call them into being, with each label entailing a specific set of provisions – material, symbolic, political etc. – in a particular case. At least in the context of Swedish minority language politics, grassroots claims that Övdalsk *is* a language are not primarily invested in ontological or metalinguistic questions but in the symbolic and material politics of recognition. Although Övdalsk language activists bracket the arbitrariness of metalinguistic categorization, they nevertheless refuse to grant any authority to the classificatory arbitrariness endorsed by the Swedish state.

This refusal is compelling. Sweden’s top-down treatment of Övdalsk is a paradigm case of the aloofness and stupidity that lie latent in many of its bureaucratic institutions (see Kulick and Rydström 2015). The official contention that Övdalsk is a ‘dialect’, only intended to maintain status quo, would not have received a pass mark in an introductory class in linguistics or, for that matter, sociolinguistics. Not only is it

oblivious to the critical debates on the many – definitional, sociolinguistic, power-related – problems of the language–dialect binary, but it actively ignores the stakes of Övdalsk speakers and language activists. The only honest thing to do, at least as far as the question of classification goes, is to resist and debunk the state’s misuse of linguistic terminology. At the same time, however, linguistic definitions of ‘languages’ and ‘dialects’ are always complicated by sociolinguistic reality. There is variation between speakers and situations. There is porosity in linguistic borders. There is messiness in actual language use. There is a pervasively language ideological dimension to *all* metalinguistic categories. There is, so to speak, always a sociolinguistic ‘yes, but...’.

Replying to the fact-checker, I recalled an interview I made with an Övdalsk language activist, Annette¹, over a cup of coffee in Älvdalen in the summer of 2014. We talked about Övdalsk language revitalization efforts – about Övdalsk children’s books, scholarships for Övdalsk-speaking children, Övdalsk preschool groups – all aimed at maintaining Övdalsk in the youngest generation, and about ongoing efforts to document Övdalsk (Karlander 2015, 2017). Annette, who was in her mid-sixties, belonged to the first generation of children in Älvdalen of whom many were brought up in Swedish, as their parents often succumbed to the pressures of Sweden’s monoglot educational system, abandoning Övdalsk as a medium of socialization. She had relearned Övdalsk as an adult and was keen to talk about the finer points of Övdalsk grammar. Her mother, approaching ninety years of age, listened to the conversation, occasionally contributing to it. The difference between Övdalsk and Swedish was a given topic of discussion, as seen in the interview excerpt below.

1 **Annette:** Övdalsk demands more from you than simply adjusting the

¹ Names of participants are anonymized.

- 2 pronunciation. Because if you're going to speak Övdalsk correctly...
- 3 I wish I would do someday. I don't do that today.
- 4 **A.'s mother:** No-one does that today.
- 5 **Annette:** *Not many people* do that today, speak Övdalsk with a correct grammar.
- 6 It's getting worse and worse. But that's what we're reversing, right?
- 7 **David:** Yes, but what do you mean by "correct grammar"?
- 8 **Annette:** Yes, well that we inflect words and use case [marking] and the parts
- 9 of speech and [grammatical] gender in a correct way. In general, we
- 10 don't do that today and we don't have a good vocabulary. In general.²
- 1 **Annette:** Älvdalskan kräver *mer* av dig än att du bara ska lägga om uttalet,
- 2 för ska du prata en korrekt älvdalska, som jag önskar att jag nån dag
- 3 kommer att göra. Det gör jag inte idag.
- 4 **A.'s mother:** Det gör ingen idag.
- 5 **Annette:** *Det gör inte många här idag* – pratar älvdaska med korrekt grammatik.
- 6 [Det] görs sämre och sämre. Men det är väl det som vi ska ta tillbaka?
- 7 **David:** Ja men vad menar du med korrekt grammatik?
- 8 **Annette:** ja men det är att vi böjer och använder kasus och satsdelar och genus på
- 9 rätt sätt alltså för det gör vi inte idag gement och vi har inte ett bra
- 10 ordförråd (.) generellt.

Contemporary Övdalsk language activism began to take shape in the early 1980s. It has always been closely tied to an idea of 'pre-shift' Övdalsk, that is, of an 'authentic' linguistic register associated with old times and old speakers. This concern is manifest both in efforts to document Övdalsk and more recent attempts to foster intergenerational transmission. Arguably, this register of Övdalsk requires a very high standard of faithfulness to linguistic form. 'Not many people', as Annette maintained in the

interview (line 5), are deemed to master ‘authentic’ Övdalsk. Many of the distinctive features of this register, like case inflection and three-way grammatical gender distinctions appear to have fallen out of common use, which Annette deplored. Even Annette’s mother, who was widely seen as a knowledgeable speaker of Övdalsk, regarded authentic Övdalsk as a thing of the past, that is to say, as a language no longer in use (line 4). Despite this sense of loss, Annette was proud to have learnt to speak Övdalsk. She viewed it as a great personal achievement and as evidence that Övdalsk language shift could be stopped. Her view of present-day Övdalsk grammar and lexicon as a watered-down version of the pre-shift language was not a source of personal resentment. Speaking Övdalsk, after all, was better than not speaking Övdalsk. Yet, it could not be denied that Annette’s vision of linguistic correctness reiterated the idea that ‘authentic’ Övdalsk was temporally distant, lingering as an ideal of past perfection and a highly set goal for future mastery.

‘Linguistic minorities’, Heller (2006: 7) notes, ‘are created by nationalisms which exclude them’. The categorical differentiation and social stratification bound up with the separation of majority and minority is a formative force in the history of any minoritized group. These processes are not, however, only a prerequisite to group formation. When minorities are constituted, and their members eventually organize themselves against the order from which they were excluded, they also affect the ways in which the struggle is organized. In this way, ‘the logic of linguistic nationalism is made available to minorities as a way to resist the power of the majority’ (Heller 2006: 7), with language revitalization movements often resembling ‘replications on a demographically smaller scale of the nation-building movements in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’ (ibid.). This appropriation of state-consecrated categories – ‘language’, ‘minority’, ‘rights’ and so on – does not guarantee official

recognition. Yet, it significantly contributes to the effectiveness of state power, which, as Bourdieu (2014) reminds us, owes its legitimacy to the ‘categories of state thought that the state has produced and inculcated in each one of us’ (ibid., 108). Resisting the state through the categories of the state perpetuates state power, legitimizing it and rendering it effective. For Övdalsk language activists, as well as for other minority language movements, this dynamic has proven to be a double bind. The rewards of the game are desirable but the game itself is averse to their explicit interests.

Speakers of Övdalsk typically view themselves as (‘ethnic’) *Swedes* who speak a different *language* than the national standard, and Övdalsk language activists have not opted for another model of identification in their advocacy for official recognition. They consequently fall outside the operative categories of Sweden’s minority political framework, which identifies minoritized *linguistic groups* as minoritized *ethnic groups* (and vice versa). This framework cannot recognize claims on linguistic difference unless they are paired with an acceptable claim of ethnic difference. The struggle to gain official recognition for Övdalsk *could* accordingly pose a threat to the official ideological–institutional order. It risks breaking up the superimposition of language and ethnicity, denaturalizing consecrated assumptions about ethnolinguistic traits, boundaries and communal relations. Yet, despite this acute critical potential, the advocacy for the recognition of Övdalsk, as Heller (2006) would predict, has not fully overcome the statist ‘logic of linguistic nationalism’, which excluded Övdalsk from the possibility of recognition in the first place, thereby legitimating the symbolic violence of state power.

The agents who resist the non-recognition of Övdalsk inadvertently contribute to the effectiveness of fundamentally arbitrary categories – ‘language’, ‘dialect’ and so on – by which state power operates on the terrain of language. The resistance of Övdalsk

language activists to Sweden's regime of language has, to a large extent, been built on the contention that Övdalsk *is* a language. By accepting the rules of the language political game, so to speak, they have also accepted to carry the burden of proof, even if no official criteria exist of how and when a sufficient degree of 'languageness' is attained. Language political deliberations on the 'status' of Övdalsk as a language centre on a moving target, capriciously defined and redefined by Swedish state authorities (Karlander 2018, 2020). This rather malevolent version of logocentrism is indeed a powerful doctrine, not least when it is bound up with real symbolic and material stakes. This became clear in my interview, when Annette turned the conversation around with an unexpected question:

- 11 **Annette:** How can this language be made as vital as possible *in a correct manner*?
- 12 I think this is the crux of the whole situation. How can Övdalsk be rebuilt
- 13 in a long-term perspective? And what kind of material is needed in order
- 14 to succeed?
- 15 **David:** Yes, but then the question is where to set the limit for what we consider
- 16 correct. It is...
- 17 **Annette:** Yes, well, then I would like that someone would tell me where it is
- 18 [located]. What is Övdalsk's highest degree of uniqueness, which we
- 19 Whatever that sets Övdalsk apart so markedly from Swedish, that makes
- 20 it so special.
- 21 **David:** ah (coughs) ah mm
- 22 **Annette:** Yes, because I sort of agree with Bengt [Åkerberg] and [professor] Henrik
- 23 [Rosenquist] that if the grammar disappears entirely, if we ignore it, if we
- 24 *turn it into Swedish, if we use Swedish words and inflect nothing*, well,
- 25 *where is that uniqueness located? [...] Övdalsk Grammar* [Åkerberg,

26 2012] should be made into an abridged version [...] covering the most
 27 important distinguishing features [of Övdalsk]. Could they be pinpointed
 28 like that? Would that work?

29 **David:** Well, I suppose someone could do that. But then we're stuck with the
 30 same problem again. It's all about—

31 **Annette:** —It is all about making people take interest in this issue

32 **David:** Yes, that's true. But it's also about... Even if one decides where to draw
 33 the line, maybe not everyone will be able to learn the chosen forms and
 34 that is—

35 **Annette:** Well, *no*. In that case we could say that not everyone is able learn
 36 German. [...] *But most people are* able to learn German grammar, if they
 37 put an effort into studying it [...]

11 **Annette:** hur ska man sen få det här språket att bli så levande som möjligt på ett
 12 korrekt sätt? Det tycker jag att kruxet är i det här. Alltså långsiktigt. Hur
 13 ska man bygga upp det [=älvdalska]? Och vad behöver man i så fall för
 14 material för att få till det?

15 **David:** Men då är frågan var man drar gränsen för vad som är korrekt.
 16 Det är...

17 **Annette:** Ja men då skulle jag vilja att man talade om för mig var [den] ligger.
 18 Var är den högsta individuella särarten med älvdalskan då? [Den] som vi
 19 verkligen måste se till att bevara, som skiljer [älvdalskan markant från
 20 svenskan, som gör att den blir så speciell.

21 **David:** Ah (harklar sig) ah mm

22 **Annette:** Ja, för jag tänker att (.) jag håller nog med Bengt [Åkerberg] och Henrik
 23 [Rosenqvist] försvinner grammatiken totalt, om vi strutar i den, om vi har
 24 gjort om den till svenska, om vi [...] tar svenska ord och böjer

25 ingenting längre – ja, var ligger då den där särarten? [...] *Älvdalsk*
26 *Grammatik* [Åkerberg, 2012] skulle göras om till en lättversion; [...] det
27 skulle behöva vara en kortfattad älvdalsk grammatik med de absolut
28 viktigaste särdragen. Skulle man kunna bena ned dem? Skulle det gå?
29 **David:** Ja det skulle kunna gå men [...] då är man ju på något sätt tillbaka till
30 samma problem igen. Det handlar om–
31 **Annette:** —det handlar om att få folk att böra intressera sig för det här
32 **David:** Ja, det gör det ju. Men så handlar det om [att] även om man bestämmer
33 sig för vad man ska göra så kanske inte alla kommer kunna lära sig det
34 ändå och det–
35 **Annette:** Nej, men då kan vi säga ”alla kan inte lära sig tyska” (.) men det *kan* ju de
36 flesta ifall de sätter sig ned och lär sig tyska [...] man kan lära sig tysk
37 grammatik om man är intresserad

At least two interesting things came to the fore in this exchange. First, it was clear that large-scale linguistic concerns seep into everyday practice. Annette’s interest in linguistic correctness was effectively synonymous with her interest in the continued existence of Övdalsk. Her vision of Övdalsk intergenerational language maintenance blended with a vision of language documentation or textual preservation.² The continued sociolinguistic existence of Övdalsk could not, in Annette’s view, be decoupled from a retention of a tangible ‘degree of [formal] uniqueness’, which would continue to ‘set it apart so markedly from Swedish’ (lines 18–20). It is impossible to ignore the connections of this assertion to the language political debate on Övdalsk and analytically dishonest to reduce it to an expression of personal linguistic conservatism. Annette’s emphasis on maintaining ‘the most important distinguishing features’ of

² Analogously, Swedish allows for a single term – *språkbevarande* – to denote both (intergenerational) language maintenance and (textual) language preservation.

Övdalsk grammar (line 27) – the ‘characteristics of Old Norse’ that McWhorter (2022) invokes – was a consequential attempt, recalling Heller (2006), to resist the power of the Swedish state by refashioning the dominant discourse. In order for Övdalsk to gain recognition and, ultimately, survive, Annette insisted that it had to remain formally distinct from Swedish.

In this vein, secondly, Annette’s reflection on the linguistics and politics of ‘authentic’ Övdalsk likewise revealed something important about ‘the complexities of how power works’ (Heller 2011: 11). As far as minority politics goes, the competition for symbolic and material rewards, which may be granted or denied by state authorities, requires a certain form of respect for the dominant order. State power is not merely manifested in categorical differentiation and social stratification of languages and speakers, but simultaneously in a validation of difference and hierarchy as such (see also Bourdieu, 2014). While Övdalsk language activists and their academic allies have repeatedly challenged the Swedish state over its regimentation of language, their challenges have been grounded in an acceptance of the categories imposed by the state. Tellingly, their emphasis on the formal difference of Övdalsk from Swedish has made them vulnerable to counterattacks that take its aim on the current – ‘inauthentic’ – state of Övdalsk. What are claims of difference worth if they do not withstand closer inspection? How should we deal with the possibility that some speakers might ‘use Swedish words and inflect nothing’, as Annette put it (line 24)? Swedish authorities have employed this rhetoric to invalidate Övdalsk claims for recognition (see Karlander 2018). For Övdalsk language activists who participate in the harsh game of recognition, participating in the game means accepting an uneven playing field, set up to their disadvantage. Few other options are available apart from the struggle over pre-set categories. Playing the game means accepting the stakes of the game, that is to say, the

visions and divisions over which the game is played. The Övdalsk language activists, it seems, would be damned if they did and damned if they didn't.

This is not unique. State power – just as power at large – is simultaneously exercised in relations of force and relations of meaning. If anything, it is this disciplining arrangement that we should subject to critical analysis, not least when engaging with the politics of minoritized languages. A commitment to state categories and the naturalizing ideologies of language that underlay them, as Heller (2011: 49) observes, can serve to 'make struggle safer' for minority language activists. Yet, it does not readily rise above the workings of the forms of symbolic power by which the state functions and by which it brings itself to bear upon the politics of language. If anything, this seems like an apt characterization of the debates on the recognition of Övdalsk. The acceptance of 'language' and 'dialect' as natural categories, regardless of whether this acceptance is sincere or strategic, has certainly endowed the struggle with a clear goal – categorical and political recognition – helping to rationalize the rationale for striving towards this goal. To acknowledge this effect does not mean that we have to turn our backs on those who struggle, nor that we have to force upon them competing theories of what a language 'is'. Neither does it mean that we have to accept uncritically all counterhegemonic stances. Sociolinguistics, as Heller (2011: 11) contends, should indeed do more than *only* 'speaking truth to power' or 'giving voice' to the powerless, as shown throughout this chapter, placing at its forefront questions of the relationship of language to processes of social differentiation and stratification. The starting point of this mode of inquiry, perhaps embodied in my reluctant stance in my interview with Annette, may often be a 'yes, but...'.

Conclusions

The ideological complexity vested in Annette's claims about authentic Övdalsk illustrates the kind of stance Heller defends for sociolinguistics as a discipline and for sociolinguists as public intellectuals.

I argue for a sociolinguistics that is not a form of expert knowledge, but rather, an informed and situated social practice [...] I want to move away from a position that claims objective, neutral, unconstrained, disinterested knowledge production which can, if called upon to do so, guide social and political action, and toward one that understands knowledge production to be socially situated, but no less useful for that (indeed, perhaps more so). (Heller 2011: 6).

As we have pointed out in the introduction, we believe in a type of critical scholarship that *goes to the bottom of things*. This is a very simple way of saying that we embrace a sociolinguistic mode of critique that seeks to tease out *why and in what ways* dominant discourses successfully (re)produce and naturalize relations of power and inequality in the actuality of practice. In this chapter, we have shown how we have tackled this goal in our own scientific endeavours. We have done so by writing reflexively about questions of power, minorities and inclusion – on the terrain of language – revisiting two rather dissimilar research settings, each of which is entwined with our respective scholarly trajectories and formative of our subsequent research.

Codó's reflection attempted to dissect the multiple threads of power and how they worked to constrain behaviour and disable certain courses of action in a Barcelona immigration service. Following Heller's scholarship, she has carefully woven the material with the symbolic/discursive to explain the full complexity of the socio-institutional power regime. She has brought to bear Heller's distinctive approach to

language in/and institutions – with the pivotal concepts of *resources* and *categorization* – and has articulated it with Foucault’s notion of *capillary power*. In so doing she has problematized pre-conceived ideas of the powerful and the powerless while simultaneously also partially sustaining them. Karlander’s reflection focused on *symbolic power* and the *tacit acceptance of state categories* and as key dimensions of state power – in Swedish language politics and Övdalsk minority language activism, but also more generally. Connecting to Heller’s interest in categorical differentiation and social stratification, his account engaged with the pervasiveness of dominant visions and divisions, as well as their implications for the allocation of symbolic and material resources in institutionalized minority language politics. The tangled relationship of a minority language movement to state power, as Heller has stressed, cannot easily be decoupled from established sociolinguistic categories and hierarchies, and not least from those bound up with the state. The challenge of a contrarian practice to a dominant order might result in a partial reproduction of said order. A critical engagement with difference and inequality – like the one we have attempted in this chapter – can, in Monica Heller’s spirit, direct our attention to these dynamics of power, opening up new routes of sociolinguistic thought and action.

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¹ Readers might be surprised by the absence of Catalan in this account given its official status with Spanish in Catalonia. However, in keeping with what is common in most institutional contexts oriented primarily to foreigners in Catalonia, Catalan was totally erased from service communication and Spanish was the assumed, practical *lingua franca*. However, there was also a symbolic dimension to this erasure. As the office that, to foreigners, most visibly represents the Spanish State, the exclusive use of Spanish sent a clear ideological message to its clientele.

² All excerpts in this section have been translated from Swedish by Karlander.