
REVIEWS

Donald Lawrence Brenneis and Fred R. Myers, eds., *Dangerous Words: Language and Politics in the Pacific*. New York: New York University Press, 1984. Pp. xii, 284, index. Cloth \$30.00. Paper \$15.00.

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Political anthropology has been reinvigorated in recent years by the infusion of new approaches. Two orientations that have received increased attention are sociolinguistic and symbolic analyses (Bloch 1975; Cohen 1976; Paine 1981; Parkin 1984). *Dangerous Words*, which grew out of a symposium on "Language and Politics in Oceania" held at the 1980 Annual Meetings of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania, provides us with a fine collection of articles blending these two orientations.

Dangerous Words begins with an excellent introduction by the editors, Fred Myers and Donald Brenneis, that integrates the chapters theoretically. Their central concern is to study the relationship between political structure and forms of speaking, a project for which they think the Pacific provides an ideal comparative setting. Two themes dominate the introduction: (1) the role of political language in constituting polities, and (2) the differences of language use in egalitarian and hierarchical political systems. Because these themes are complexly interwoven through the various chapters, I will not attempt to do justice to each author's contribution, but simply single out points to illustrate the book's major themes.

In line with the currents of the action-theory approach in political anthropology, Myers and Brenneis emphasize the need for a processual view of language use in political events. Language is not merely a transparent vehicle for communicating information, but a critical means for manipulating situations. The editors rightly criticize action-theorists, however, for their stress on strategy and contest in the pursuit of political power. Ignored in the individual-centered analyses of action-theorists are the social values that are the foundation of competition. Rather than take such values for granted, the editors argue that we must understand the critical role political speech plays in establishing and reestablishing them.

In his individual contribution to the volume, Brenneis reveals how indirection can be significant in political language. Through religious speeches, Fiji Indians make veiled accusations against opponents that stimulate community involvement in the resolution of their disputes. Such speeches are used to create the polity lacking in a context without formal authority. The community arbitration sessions that follow these speeches entail direct (or “straight”) language so that a community consensus can develop regarding the situation. This does not result in a declaration of guilt or innocence; however, as Brenneis points out, it does serve to restate the cooperative relationships that should characterize community life.

The editors make clear that the contributors to *Dangerous Words* are, for the most part, not linguists, and thus that their primary concern is to situate language within broader social contexts. The chapters vary, however, in the extent to which they emphasize the formal properties of language. William McKellin's intricate analysis of Mangalese political speech highlights the formal aspects of allegory used to communicate indirect messages regarding community issues. By restricting the audience capable of interpreting the correct message, ambiguous language allows allies to “voice” their responses to sensitive issues without threatening their relationship in public debate.

Annette Weiner demonstrates that in the Trobriand Islands a similar respect for autonomy is maintained through the use of figurative speech. By concealing the direct meaning that “hard words” convey, political messages are exchanged without precipitating confrontations. Weiner's analysis also shows the relations between figurative speech, the exchange of objects, and magical modes of communication. Each of the modes allows Trobrianders to express their intentions without openly violating the personal space of others.

Papua New Guinea gender asymmetry is shown by Rena Lederman

to be one aspect of the broader context in which political debate occurs. Focusing on Mendi intra-subclan public meetings, Lederman indicates how such discussion contributes to a public understanding of political activities. Individuals may not agree to accept the group's conclusions, and they are free to disagree; nevertheless, the construction of public understanding of events makes a significant contribution to sustaining the existing political order. Moreover, because this discussion excludes the voices of women, it implicitly restates the male dominance of Mendi life.

The concern for autonomy expressed in the four chapters mentioned above is illustrative of Myers and Brenneis's second theme. Oratory in these situations recognizes individual freedoms at the same time that it gives recognition to the existence of political bonds. Such reestablishment of the polity is unnecessary in hierarchical systems, say Myers and Brenneis, since established political positions continue across generations. Hierarchical political speech serves to validate the distribution of social values as it is constituted. Recognition of this distinctive use of political language in egalitarian and hierarchical systems leads the editors to question Bloch's (1975) simplistic use of the category "traditional societies" in his attempt to relate speech forms and social control.

One of the few weaknesses in *Dangerous Words* is the uneven distribution of cases between hierarchical and egalitarian societies in the Pacific. Only two of the nine chapters are devoted to hierarchical societies. Further, these two examples come from Polynesia, leaving the political complexity of Micronesia unrepresented. Nevertheless, the contributors concentrating on hierarchical systems nicely illuminate the intricacy of political speech in these situations.

One of these contributors, Alessandro Duranti, examines how different social events create "frames" that modify specific Samoan speech genres. The modifications are related by Duranti to interaction and to the social function of speech. George Marcus, the other, shows how political language in Tonga shifts between formal and informal forms in the conversations between chiefs and their estate populations. Marcus explores these shifts through three interrelated perspectives: psychoculture, interpersonal politics, and sociopolitical organization. Through their conversations, middle-range chiefs in modern Tonga are balancing their status and their personal knowledge of the estate's population in order to retain their political power.

Since the Pacific has undergone such dramatic political developments during the past fifteen years, it will certainly be an area ripe for future research on political language. And the theme of language used to

mediate social change is one that emerged from several chapters, though it is given less explicit attention by Myers and Brenneis. Several contributors provide useful insights on how communication styles have responded to the impact of external political forces.

Through the course of years of interaction with coastal state authorities—indigenous states, European colonialists, and Indonesian nationalities—the Wana of Suluwezi have developed a poetic style of speech emphasizing verbal disguise and external relations. Although they have maintained a high degree of autonomy, Jane Atkinson links their shifting settlements and egalitarianism to the need for noncoercive mechanisms for establishing their polities. She shows that a poetic speech form, Kiyori, accomplishes this end, as leaders attract followers through their demonstration of wit and wisdom. Atkinson also notes that frequent references to external authorities in Kiyori increase group unity by creating a sense of shared danger.

A similar form of artistic speech used in public meetings is described for the Ilongot of the Philippines by Michele Rosaldo. The case of the Ilongot represents a different response to change in that they have chosen to give up their use of the “witty” style of speech called *purung*. As a result of growing exposure to education, cash employment, national law, and, most especially, Christian mission teachings, Ilongot are no longer willing to risk the potential consequences of angry confrontation that could emerge from *purung*. Rosaldo makes clear that this rejection of a particular speech form is one part of a broader shift away from a style of life that emphasized energetic exchange and violence.

New political institutions operating at the local level have been a source of change in the Pacific. Deborah Gewertz examines the reaction of the Chambri people, who live along Papua New Guinea’s Sepik River, to alterations in traditional patterns of alliance caused by the Australian-imposed local government council. In this case, ritual exchange becomes the medium of communication selected by the Chambri to reassert dominance over their former neighbors and barter partners from the Sepik Hills. As do a number of other chapters, Gewertz’s contribution shows us the complex role played by items of exchange in establishing a shared political order.

In the best of all possible worlds, *Dangerous Words* would be more representative of Pacific societies and would examine more fully the role of political language in social change. That it does not is evidence of the relative youth of linguistic studies in political anthropology. What we do have in this volume is a fascinating collection of articles sensitive to the symbolic basis of power in political cultures. For Pacific studies, the

volume creates a point of departure for all future anthropological research on politics; for political anthropology, *Dangerous Words* makes a major contribution toward refining our conceptions of language and culture in the political process.

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