Language Ideology and “Common Sense”
By Bonnie Urciuoli (Hamilton C)

When the Joint CIHR (Committee for Human Rights) Task Group/SLA Committee for Language and Social Justice met at the 2011 AAA in Montréal, discussion arose about instances of language use and policy that can affect public perceptions of social groups, such as the use of illegal in reference to undocumented labor. Several examples of public language issues within social justice impact were discussed, including the evergreen issue of official English (proposed in Minnesota in January 2011). Two in particular seek to pressure businesses to demonstrate their national allegiance by how they perform English to customers. One is a proposal by a Flushing, NY City Council representative to mandate that storefront signage be at least 60% English. The other is email that legislation exists allowing customers who suspect they are talking to service representatives outside the US to demand they be transferred to customer service representatives within the US, thus helping restore jobs to the US. The US has no such legislation (www.snopes.com/politics/business/service.asp). The same text, except for place names, exists in UK and Canadian versions; neither the UK nor Canada have such legislation (www.hoax-slayer.com/ask-transfer-uk-rep-law.shtml).

These examples depend on people’s “common sense” beliefs that clear communication in the US (and Britain and Canada) can only take place in a national language (English) and that consumers are entitled to specific form of clear communication. The existence of any other language, or any index of any other language such as an accent, interferes with that entitlement, the point presumably being that if customers are imagined to have to make any extra effort in the act of understanding, then businesses are being un-American (or un-British or un-Canadian). One example involves written English and one involves spoken English. The allegiance of the written performance is indicated by the degree of English in the signage. The allegiance of the verbal performance is indicated by the lack of accent. In the circulating email, the key phrase is “you can always ask if you are not sure about the accent”—key because the detection of an accent is the only way to come to a firm conclusion about the location of the customer service center. The circulating email also holds forth the hook that by asking to switch to an internal service center one is actively “preserving” or even better “creating” jobs at home, allowing customers to perform national allegiance. In both cases, the focus is on individual actions: by doing X the individual is bringing about condition Y, with attention directed away from the structuring principles generated by contemporary capitalism over which individuals have no control, which appears to many people—not all conservatives—as “common sense,” obvious and unproblematic. For example, the “restore jobs” email was forwarded to me by someone who, while self-described as “liberal leaning,” generally sees the world in terms of individual actions and

Society for Linguistic Anthropology

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SMA 2011 “Gaveling” and Awards Ceremony at AAA in Montréal

On Friday, November 18, outgoing SMA president, Carolyn Sargent (Washington U St Louis) passed the gavel to Douglas Feldman (C Brockport, SUNY) and presented our 2011 SMA Awards.

Frances Barg (U Pennsylvania School of Medicine) received the MASA Mentoring Award for excellence in graduate student mentorship. The selection committee included chair Mary Rebecca Read-Wahidi (U Alabama), Kara Bensley (U College London), Elizabeth Lewis (U Texas-Austin), and Karoline Truchon (U Laval, Canada). Kenneth Macleish (Rutgers U) received the MASA Dissertation Award. The selection committee included chair Peter Brotherton (Yale U), Sandra Hyde (McGill U) and Sera Young (Cornell U).

The Eileen Basker Memorial Prize went to Leslie Reagan (U Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) for Dangerous Pregnancies: Mothers, Disabilities, and Abortion in Modern America (U California Press, 2010) and Ida Susser (CUNY Graduate Center) for AIDS, Sex, and Culture: Global Politics and Survival in Southern Africa (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). The selection committee included chair Juliet McMullin (UC Riverside), Virginia R Dominguez (U Illinois, Urbana-Champaign), and Rebecca Lester (Washington U St Louis).

The New Millennium Award went to Barbara Rose Johnston (Center for Political Ecology) and Holly M Barker (U Washington) for Consequential Damages of Nuclear War: The Rongelap Report (Left Coast Press, 2008). The selection committee included chair Clarence Gravelle (U Florida), Peter Benson (Washington U St Louis), Carole H Browner (New School for Social Research), and Lesley Sharp (Barnard C).

The WHR Rivers Undergraduate Student Paper Prize went to Shannon Ward (Wellesley C). The selection committee included chair Matthew Wolf-Meyer (UC Santa Cruz), Kristen Bright (Carleton U), and Melissa Pashigian (Bryn Mawr C).

The Polgar Prize went to Sarah Horton (U Colorado-Denver) and Judith C Barker (UC San Francisco) for “Stigmatized Biologies: Examining the Cumulative Effects of Oral Health Disparities for Mexican American Farmworker Children” (Medical Anthropology Quarterly, 2010:24[2]). The selection committee members included chair Holly Mathews (East Carolina U), Fran Barr (U Pennsylvania), Kristen Borre (Northern Illinois U), and Jon Poelman (Research Triangle Intl) with assistance from MAQ editors Mark Luborsky (Wayne State U) and Andrea Sankar (Wayne State U).

The Critical Anthropology for Global Health (CAGH) Rudolph Virchow Professional Award went to Sharon Abramowitz (U Florida) for “Trauma and Humanitarian Translation in Liberia: The Tale of Open Mole,” (Culture, Medicine & Psychiatry, 2010:34[2]). The selection committee included chair Heide Castañeda (U South Florida), Leslie Butt (U Victoria), Hansjoerg Dilger (Freie U Berlin), and Sarah Willen (U Washington). The Virchow Graduate Student Award went to Amy Moran-Thomas (Princeton U). The selection committee included chair Heide Castañeda (U South Florida), Elizabeth Cartwright (Idaho State U), Seth Holmes (UC Berkeley), and Catherine Timura (George Washington U). The Virchow Undergraduate Award went to Claire Wagner (Harvard U). The selection committee included chair Heide Castañeda (U South Florida), Karin Frederic (Colby C), Hanna Garth (UC Los Angeles), and Ben McMahan (U Arizona).

The Council on Anthropology & Reproduction (CAR) Graduate Student Paper Award went to Meghana Joshi (Rutgers U) and to Chen-I Kuan (Syracuse U). The selection committee included chair Crystal Patil (U Illinois-Chicago), Rachel Chapman (U Washington), Robbie Davis-Floyd (http://www.davis-floyd.com), Jill Fleuriot (U Texas-San Antonio), and Catherine Maternowska (UC San Francisco).

The AIDS & Anthropology Research Group (AARG) Clark Taylor Professional Prize went to Richard Eves (Australian National U) for “Resisting Global AIDS Knowledges: Born-Again Christian Narratives of the Epidemic from Papua New Guinea” (Medical Anthropology, 2012:31[1]). Jennifer Carroll (U Washington) received the AARG Graduate Student Prize and Ryan Whitacre (UC Berkeley) received the AARG Undergraduate Student Prize. The selection committee included chair Alexander Rodlach (Creighton U), Delia Easton (New York State Department of Health), Emily Frank (Indiana U), and Adriana Garriga-Lopez (Kalamazoo College).

The Science, Technology & Medicine (STM) 2011 Graduate Student Prize went to Amy Moran-Thomas (Princeton U). The selection committee included chair Ian Whitmarsh (UC San Francisco), João Biehl (Princeton U), and Marcia Inhorn (Yale U).

The Alcohol, Drug & Tobacco Study Group (ADTSG) 2011 Paper Award went to Brian Anderson (Stanford U School of Medicine) for “Classifying Ayahuasca: The Role of Subjective Experience in Psychiatric Research with Psychoctics.” The selection committee included