Review Essay & Interview:  
Peter Ives on Gramsci’s Politics of Language

Boulou Ebanda de B’béri  
University of Ottawa


Introduction
In the first section of this review essay, I present my sequential but crisscross-referential reading of Ives’ book setting aside a critical lens. In the second section, I report a dialogic exchange I had with Peter Ives. This exchange, which took place via several emails, could qualify as a real dialogue because Ives was not only willing to clarify some of the points I considered to be problematic in his book, but also willing to share with me other, less obvious issues that would have been relevant for his overall analysis.

Four main chapters constitute the body of this book. At the book’s centre, Ives suggests that the study of Gramsci’s politics of language could allow us to question, for example, the signification of English as a global language in our contemporary world. Throughout this book, Ives attempts to make the point that Gramsci’s work continuously brings back language as a social issue and that we could use the same application to understand the impact of linguistic realities on national constituent collectivities, which can articulate and mobilize language as social weapons. This reminds me of the political use of language in Québec, where the topic of language is always related to that of self-determination. Nonetheless, Ives’ book makes the case that language is a central topic in Gramsci’s writings. He restates Gramsci’s claims that language is formed historically, comparing language with the economy and the state, which are human communication, rather than a political site of struggle in which ideology and hegemonic practices are deployed.

Reading Gramsci’s Politics of Language
The title of this book sets its central argument, as well as Ives’ position, vis-à-vis Gramsci’s work. Indeed, the book is really about the politics of language and not an exploration of the complexity of Gramsci’s political engagement per se. The route leading to Gramsci’s linguistic politics, however, cannot be dissociated totally from his political engagement. This direction is indeed made up of multi-
ple interventions by actors—mostly theorists of language Gramsci met during his life—that shaped the interjunction between his understanding of language as a political weapon and his subsequent overall political engagement.

In the first chapter, Ives introduces us to the foundation of Gramsci’s approach to language. He uses the work of Lo Piparo as a basis to demonstrate “how Gramsci’s linguistic theory can elucidate his political theory and to provide the basis for a Marxist theory of language” (p. 17). In addition, Ives shows “how Gramsci’s linguistics should be seen as part of his more general reaction against positivism and mechanistic social theory on one hand, and Crocean idealism on the other” (p. 19), and he argues that “since, for Gramsci, language is based on a metaphor, the philosophy of praxis can use linguistic terms and models metaphorically in other realms of social inquiry and action” (p. 19).

Throughout this analysis, we learn that Gramsci considered the lack of a unitary, national language in Italy to be problematic. In other words, Gramsci believed that a unifying language is necessary for the nation of Italy because “the non-existence of a national language creates friction among the popular masses” (p. 47). This friction is brought on by hegemony; Gramsci characterized it as “the relationship between spontaneous grammar and the prevailing normative grammar” (p. 50). Later on in the book, Ives makes some clear distinctions between Gramsci and the Bakhtin Circle, first drawing on Gramsci’s dedication “to the possibility of a unified national-popular force and language that has not yet existed in history and that could oppose bourgeois and fascist hegemonies that rely on the fragmentation wrought by capitalism” (p. 73).

This is somewhat paradoxical, because other works focusing on Gramsci seem to paint an individual fully against any sort of national common sense, especially when there is a risk of hegemonic domination. For example, in discussing Gramsci’s and Marx’s views of faith, Ives shows that Gramsci does not reject the importance of faith but is concerned with the Roman Catholic Church as an institution that creates world views. For Gramsci, Ives notes, “rational arguments do not exist in a vacuum” (p. 121) and are not (or should not be) sufficient to change one’s opinion, “convictions, criteria of discrimination and standard of conduct”; he calls those shifting minds irrational and schizophrenic, because “faith is an integral component of any progressive hegemony” (p. 121). At another level, Gramsci would criticize Croce’s, Adorno’s, and Horkheimer’s approaches to “thought in general,” “which for them means bourgeois thought developed by Enlightenment philosophers” (p. 161), for leaving out vernacular thought and thus “obliterating historically grounded places from which to challenge the dynamics of bourgeois reason” (p. 161). In other words, through the reading of this book, we have a very selective picture of Gramsci, ideologically speaking, because he is always positioning himself against both the religious ideology and certain central articulations of the Enlightenment philosophers, as well as preaching for national unity, a concept subjected to both religion and Enlightenment.

Ives shows the presence of a strong nationalistic feeling in Gramsci’s work, especially when it comes to language; Gramsci believed strongly in common sense as a weapon to fight social classes. We need to take some steps back at the beginning of this book to appreciate this nationalistic feeling in Gramsci’s work.
Indeed, Ives’ book begins by locating “the tenets of a historical materialist approach to language and a linguistically concerned theory of politics and society” in Gramsci’s writings (p. 3). Ives uses a vernacular approach, or *vernacular materialism*, to explain the hegemonic conflict between high and low classes. In this context, the vernacular is related to the vulgar or “the common or everyday language of a region or country” (p. 4). This understanding of the vernacular allows Ives to “emphasize Gramsci’s attention to the historical shift in Europe” (p. 8) from Latin to vernacular; to draw on religious overtones as well as to identify tension between vernacular models and linguistic models and, finally, to demonstrate how “language consists of more than formal elements” (p. 9) under which, nonetheless, complex philologic and linguistic operations take place (p. 10). For example, Gramsci’s political understanding of “coercion” and “consent” is tied to his views of language. For him, “consent does not mean individually based agreements, as portrayed by naïve and much simplified liberalism. On the contrary, consent like coercion” is a human construction, “and the processes of its production cannot be characterized by any absence of coercion and consent” (p. 11). He contends that one cannot be found free of the other and that “our experience of both depends on meanings and practices that are produced with languages” (p. 12). In characterizing this Gramscian view of language, Ives argues that Gramsci rejects the idea of language as nomenclature or as a medium of representation. He sees language as “culture and philosophy [that] is very much a substantial part of social reality” (p. 13), because there is “no concept of a meta-language or a universal grammar of all languages” found in Gramsci’s work (p. 12). Ives claims that Gramsci “understands meaning as constructed by relationships within language” and that he “views language as system whereby meaning is constructed through signs” (p. 13).

This is fully understandable because, in part at least, grammatical studies are still today the study of classes of words and their inflections and functional relationships in language. Ives notes that Gramsci studied under Bartoli, who was opposed to the Neogrammarians (a group of German linguists in Leipzig) before developing Neolinguistics, a field of the study of parts of language, nonetheless claiming to study “only a collection of words and not language itself” (p. 21). Bartoli’s Neolinguistics opposed the idea that “phonetic laws were exceptionless. Instead, it emphasized the importance of culture to changes in language” (p. 21).

Another key player in this intellectual genealogy is Croce, who became opposed to Bartoli. Croce “argues that there is no division between language and the aesthetic and that the science of art and the science of language are not two distinct things but one single science” (p. 22). Here, we can see Gramsci’s interest in the practices of expression emerging, or in the impact that individual speech acts can have on language.

Ives places Gramsci at “the nexus between Crocean idealist linguistics and positivist linguistics as represented by the Neogrammarians” (p. 22) because Gramsci attempted to “dialectically overcome the opposite trends of positivism and idealism [by developing] the concepts of ‘normative’ grammar and ‘spontaneous’ or ‘immanent’ grammar.” In doing so, he was able “to appropriate the advantages of understanding the structural and institutional aspects of language
provided by the positivism [side] of the Neogrammarians” (p. 23). Therefore, Ives notes, “Gramsci’s overcoming of the errors of both the idealist and positivist approaches to language yields a theory of language as a historical institution that changes continuously” (p. 23). We learn that the relationship between Gramsci and Ascoli’s theory was somehow ambivalent because Gramsci did not embrace Ascoli’s biological theory; Ives argues that “language is rooted in the materiality of the production of the words” (p. 34), “because language is always historically metaphorical [while] words and linguistic structures are always related to meanings from their past” (p. 35).

At this point, the link between language and power emerges, as well as perhaps, as I suggested above, following Gramsci’s interest in using the grammatical relationship between classes of words in language to develop his philosophy of social classes. Indeed, Ives shows that Gramsci uses normative grammar not only to criticize Croce’s notion of language, which he views as an “expressive act requiring an entirely different, philosophic, method of analysis than what here he calls ‘grammar’” (p. 37), but also to suggest that such an application of language cannot represent normative grammar because this “is constituted by reciprocal control, by reciprocal teaching, and by reciprocal “censorship” (p. 43), whereas spontaneous grammar is “created throughout the molecular processes of learning a language from birth throughout one’s entire life,” a process by which “sedimentation is affected by religion, class, gender, and geographic location” (p. 44).

The second chapter of Ives’ book tackles the notion of unity and looks at the relationship within unified languages, moving from the work of Benjamin, Bakhtin, and Volosinov to draw on Gramsci’s overall writings on a unified national language. Indeed, it becomes understandable at this point that Gramsci’s desire for a national revolution underscores his focus on the concepts of unity. Here as well, Ives compares the beginnings of the Bakhtin Circle, which “emerged from a fundamentally neo-Kantian setting” and Gramsci’s interest in language, shaped by “Croce’s Hegelianism” (p. 59). Ives points out that “Volosinov’s important insight is that Croce, Vossler, and Humboldt all see language as the movement from something expressible that initiates in the inner depth of the psyche and is expressed on the outer surface of perceptible sound that is language” (p. 70). Here we can see that one of the basic conceptions of language shared by both Volosinov and Gramsci is the connection between language and ideology. In addition, Gramsci’s concept of grammar and the historical connection between language, ideology, and “meaning incorporates structuralist and post-structuralist views of language as a system of signs” (p. 72).

Ives then moves on to show that Gramsci is a “political theorist and activist” and that Bakhtin is a “literary critic and philosopher” (p. 73). Finally, he claims that “Gramsci’s advocacy of a national unified language is guided by political issues that are beyond Bakhtin’s explicit purview” (p. 73). Ives emphasizes Bakhtin’s notion of “dialogue,” claiming that “Bakhtin relies heavily on dialogue as a metaphor for ethical behaviour, as an epistemological premise, and ultimately as human ontology” (p. 74). But as he rightly asks, “[D]ialogue is inherently linguistic, but is language inherently dialogical? What does it mean to say that language is inherently dialogic?” These two questions lead Ives to introduce
the notion of heteroglossia, defined as “the principle that meaning is” contextually bounded “but that context is boundless” (p. 75). Its opposite, monoglossia, as defined by Bakhtin, “is the resistance of language’s ‘natural’ and ‘inherent’ dialogic essence” (p. 76). Bakhtin argues that “social diversity and heteroglossia are manifested in languages but are not inherently a part of language” (p. 78).

This claim regarding heteroglossia has two implications: “First, without divorcing language from everyday life, it makes the issue of whether language is heteroglotic irrelevant by focusing on the strong connections between languages and social activity. Second, it avoids the reduction that heteroglossia is necessarily good and democratic whereas monoglossia is inherently bad and antidemocratic” (p. 79). Using Volosinov’s discussion of the reflection and refraction of all ideological products, Ives notes that for Volosinov, “within every sign there is a diversity of its own materiality that also reflect[s] and refract[s] other realities” (p. 80). Ives links this idea with Gramsci’s understanding of class struggles because, he argues, the multiple accents of signs are always “resisted by the ruling class, which strives to impact a supra-class, eternal character to the ideological sign, to extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgements which occur in it, to make the sign uniaccentual” (p. 81).

Gramsci and Bakhtin have many similar views and interests, first regarding the shift from Latin to vernacular languages—they both agree that it is “intricately linked to larger ideological and social changes” (p. 90)—and second on the traditional definition of translation. On the first point, Gramsci believes that “the medieval ages were marked by the crystallization of literary Latin into ‘middle-Latin’, a language used by scholars and intellectuals in everyday life” (p. 90). For Ives, the common ground for Gramsci and Bakhtin is that the “unity does not mean homogeneity, monoglossia, or uniaccentuality. Rather it includes uniqueness and differences that are not ‘transcended,’ ‘overcome,’ or merged” (p. 93).

According to Ives,

the most significant difference between Gramsci and Bakhtin is that Gramsci believes in the possibility of an actual, ‘prosaic,’ progressive unified language in which differences are held intact and not obliterated, in which voices exist. For Bakhtin, this type of unity and organization is certainly found in the field of literature with the unity of the novel. But it is an open question whether Bakhtin thinks we should place our faith in constructing such an open unity in a nation or community of people. (p. 95)

The third chapter of Ives’ book focuses on the relationships among different languages and thoroughly compares the notion of translation developed by Gramsci and by one particular Frankfurt Schüler: Benjamin. Although it focuses on Benjamin, this chapter does not deal with the Frankfurt School linguistic theory, but rather opens up to it because, as Ives notes, language is “the highest level of mimetic behaviour and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity” for Benjamin (p. 125). But this appropriation of language does not allow Benjamin to overcome “the subject/object dichotomy at the heart of bourgeois philosophy in a manner that provides a critique or a way forward,” as his work “consistently presumes that the subject, the word, is separate from the object, the world” (p. 127).
It is at this point of contention that we can locate the political split between the Marxist side of Benjamin’s view of language—and perhaps the common cited-heritage of Benjamin’s work in the playing field of Frankfurt School discourses—and Gramsci’s view on the subject/object relationship. As noted in the earlier stages of this review, one of the main paradoxes, and conceivably the most interesting one is to find in Gramsci very strong agency. For example, at the same time as he expresses his faith in nationalism and a search for unity, he also opposes the other kind of unitarianism he considered being hegemony, e.g., religion and bourgeoisie. Indeed, for Gramsci, “the dichotomization of science and reason from faith, religion and belief is spurious, and reinforces common sense world views of bourgeois hegemony” (p. 127). He then argues that “both the ideology of science and most religions are based on the same unexamined presumption that there is a dichotomy between humans and nature. This dichotomy is the same as the separation between subjects and objects of the world” (p. 129). For Gramsci, the division between subject and object is due to “bourgeois modernity, a symptom growing stronger and stronger as new strata of traditional intellectuals attempt to secularize religious world views,” and for Gramsci, unlike Benjamin, “neither a proletarian revolution nor a radical epistemological break can erase the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity” (p. 133).

Based on this reading, the difference between Gramsci and the Frankfurt School’s scholarship seems to be located within subject/object relationships, as we will also see in my review of the last chapter of this book, especially when Ives brings up some Frankfurt School positions on the dominant, hegemonic subject, constructing false consciousness with objective reality. This difference lies within the traditional definition of the notions of science, objectivity, and prediction. For Gramsci, objective means “this and only this: that one asserts to be objective, to be objective reality, that reality which is ascertained by all, which is independent of any merely particular group standpoint” (p. 131). He then defines science as “the collection of methods for distinguishing that which is transitory... from that which is true only for certain portions of society from that which is ‘essential’ ” (p. 131). Much like language, Gramsci believes that science is “conceived historically, and it constantly affects how we perceive the world, all the while correcting and reinforcing our sensory organs” (p. 132).

But Ives’ book articulates many similarities between Benjamin and Gramsci. At the centre of the third chapter, Ives insists that for Gramsci, translation is not only a political act, but also a philosophical concept. Translation consists of “two fundamentally similar structures [which] have “equivalent” superstructures that are mutually translatable, whatever the particular national language” (p. 106). This definition makes some events, concepts, and thoughts translatable and others not. For example, for Gramsci, a qualified translator “should be able not only to translate literally but also to translate conceptual terms of a specific national culture into the terms of another national culture, that is, such a translator should have critical knowledge of two civilizations and be able to acquaint one with the other” (p. 108), which bring into play the concepts of individual innovation as art and social innovation as language. Ives draws a clear distinction between these two levels of intervention and argues that this distinction reinforces Benjamin’s
and Gramsci’s concepts of translation, especially because “unlike artistic works or poetry, translation is directed at the target language as a whole” (p. 109).

Thus, the concept of “translation” points to one of the first converging politics between Benjamin and Gramsci because both of them reject the traditional definition of translation. In this chapter, Ives seeks to illustrate how translation and translatability are seen through Gramsci’s writings. He then suggests that “translation enables [Gramsci] to explain how the presentation of our experience—that of revolution—requires translation and not the mere transmission from one context to another” (p. 101). Gramsci explored the notion of translation to find a way to “translate” the Russian Revolution and make an Italian revolution possible. The context of an event therefore has a significant role in how it will be translated because translation cannot be a “technical activity; instead it requires normative judgment that makes the translation a historical act” (p. 103).

For example, for Benjamin, “linguistic diversity provides the space for translation that he sees as revelation,” whereas for Gramsci, language is “non-parthogenetic” and thus “enables translation as revolution.” In other words, through the notion of translation, Gramsci envisions “how this non-ethnocentric, non-teleological, communal creativity is related to revolution” (p. 105).

Ives makes the point that Gramsci’s “extensive use of ‘translation’ was partly a response to Croce’s drastic position that translation is impossible” (p. 113). Although Gramsci and Benjamin look at Croce in similar ways, “Benjamin argues that idealist historicism ends up with the same problem as positivistic versions of history: it depicts history as what he calls ‘empty time’” (p. 114), which Gramsci never does. However, “unlike Croce’s historicism, Benjamin’s ‘history’ recognizes the ‘flow’ or ‘stream’ within which origins and eddies are contained” (p. 116).

Another point of converging politics between Benjamin and Gramsci is that both of them reject “idealist versions of historicism” (p. 118). Indeed, they consider history to be related to time and context. Benjamin introduces “the concept of Jetztzeit (now-time) to expand history beyond the simple positivistic limits of the linear chronological succession of minutes, days and years of what he calls ‘empty time’” (p. 118). Croce, who makes no distinction between chronicle and history (“other than the spirit by which they are approached”), is highly criticized by Gramsci, who considers Benjamin’s notion of history as “a series of progressive leaps” against Croce’s notion of progressive events (p. 118).

As Ives notes, Benjamin’s philosophy of language “reinforces the split between subject and object because his task of translation is directed at revelation” (p. 122). This split between subject and object is rooted in language, more specifically “in the difference between historical language on the one hand, and on the other, the originary Adamic language of the Garden of Eden” (p. 123). Benjamin’s reading of Genesis is based on his three levels of language: “language of things, language of human knowledge, and the creative world of God” (p. 123). He makes a distinction between divine knowledge, which belongs to God, and knowledge of judgment, which came after the fall and is thus “knowledge of the sinner” (p. 124). He claims that “with the knowledge of judgment, subjective names become less and less related to their objects as language becomes increasingly instrumental and concerned with evaluation of good and
evil rather than names” (p. 124). Benjamin believes that “language is a gift from
God” and that “in man God set language” so that “man is the knower in the same
language in which God is the creator” (p. 124). Even after the fall, Benjamin
believes that “language still has a connection to the divine world” (p. 124).

In the fourth and final chapter, Ives creates clear linkages between Gramsci
and some Frankfurt Schulers in bringing up the importance of several personages
linked to that line of thought: Habermas, Horkheimer, and Adorno. The chapter
makes an implicit statement about diverging positions within the Frankfurt
School scholars. For example, Ives notes that Gramsci is in concordance with
Habermas “about the need to thoroughly overcome the subject/object problem-
atic in the philosophy of language found in Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer”
(p. 162), while Habermas “contends that the original mode of language use is
directed toward two or more speakers reaching an understanding.” Ives charac-
terizes this as the main flaw in Habermas’ work, because he is incapable of “[the-
orizing] relations of power” (p. 162) and simply sees language—with Adorno and
Horkheimer—as an instrument, a “communicative action,” which is “the possi-
bility of freedom and democratically reasoned decision making” (p. 163).

Ives further suggests that Horkheimer was interested in “the potential of root-
ing reason in language for Critical Theory” (p. 158); while both Adorno and
Horkheimer’s works “describe the regressive dialectical movement of reason as
understood by traditional philosophy,” they “also illustrate how these concepts
affected society at large by playing into the dynamics of the rise of fascism and
the logic of capitalist culture industry” (p. 159). Here, we see the points of con-
tention with some views held by Gramsci, who together with Bakhtin and
Volosinov considers “language as a site of political struggle and conflict”
(p. 163). Ives’ analysis would suggest that language, as “a vehicle for subjective
pronouncement on the world is presumed to be at odds with the world on which
it lays its dictates” (p. 153). Gramsci claims language to be “an instrumentaliza-
tion resulting from human activity” (p. 154), while Horkheimer and Adorno “con-
nect this process to capitalism and [to] the dialectic of reason and domination”
(p. 154). They see it as “all pervasive, and as a transformation that is distanc-
ing language farther and farther from its origins in mimetic reflection between words
and the reality they represent” (p. 155).

The overall strategy taken by Ives in this chapter is thus to approach these
linkages with the topics of language and reason and to illustrate not only the
points of discrepancy (that of subject/object, as I noted above), but also certain
points of convergence. For example, by arguing that Habermas’ conception of
rationality “is directly aimed at showing how the Enlightenment tradition contin-
uues to hold the promise of moving us beyond a world governed by coercive
nation-states and institutions (or steering media)” (p. 135), Ives is also grounding
Gramsci’s work in the domain of ideology. Another example of this is that the
Frankfurt School sought to better understand the rise of fascism through different
methods, one of which was an analysis of the psyche, an articulation also found
in Gramsci’s work. Indeed, Gramsci and the Frankfurt School believed that “fas-
cism developed out of nineteenth-century liberal bourgeois capitalist society”
(p. 141). While for Habermas reason “is that which legitimates democracy”
“Gramsci’s notions of language and reason, in contradistinction to Habermas’, show how the concept of bourgeois hegemony is useful and entails capitalist economic structures as well as bourgeois cultural and political mechanisms of legitimation” (p. 138). On the same level, Horkheimer and Adorno demonstrate how “Western philosophy defines ‘nature’ as distinct from the reasoning subject. Nature [being] the object of knowledge; this refers to both non-human objects and the nature of human behaviour” (p. 141).

Therefore, it could be said that both Gramsci’s and Horkheimer’s distinction between traditional and critical theory depends significantly on the social location of the subject—or the theorist—because both of them “compare traditional intellectuals” who often present themselves “as neutral and unconnected to any specific class or political interest” to organic individuals, who Gramsci describes as “organiser[s] of the confidence of investors in his business” (p. 148). Gramsci saw Machiavelli’s work *The Prince* as a “live work in which political ideology and political science are fused in the dramatic form of a ‘myth’” (p. 145). According to Ives, Gramsci defends Machiavelli, claiming that his “moral and political aim was to educate the uneducated. To empower those disempowered by lack of knowledge” (p. 145). This reading of Machiavelli allows Gramsci to admit “that the basic innovation of praxis for political science is that there is no such thing as ‘human nature,’ which can only be seen as the totality of historically determined social relations, which can, within certain limits, be ascertained with the methods of philology and criticism” (p. 145).

For Horkheimer, however, Machiavelli’s work brings about the relationship between the notion of myth and that of reason; “myth” as “the anthropomorphic projection of human traits onto the non-human world” (p. 142) and reason as “[having] its roots in self-preservation as opposed to Enlightenment claims of universality” (p. 143). Indeed, Horkheimer would extend the Vichian concepts of myth and nature to social analysis through his interpretation of Machiavelli, a position that Gramsci disagrees with. We can find several other contentions between the Enlightenment philosophers of the Frankfurt School and Gramsci’s work. For example, one of the last topics Ives covers in his book is Gramsci’s position with respect to the concept of mimesis, a position contrasted with that of Habermas and Adorno. Ives notes that Habermas opposes mimesis “with the claim that his own theory is able to ‘capture’ what instrumental reason destroys in Adorno’s work” (p. 167). For Habermas, the nature of “mimesis can be laid open if we give up the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness . . . in favour of the paradigm of linguistic philosophy . . . and put the cognitive-instrumental aspect of reason in its proper place as part of a move encompassing communicative rationality” (p. 167). Ives concludes by accrediting Gramsci as a significant contributor to British cultural studies, stating that he “accepts some fundamental points of Adorno and Horkheimer’s dialect of Enlightenment reason, but he rejects the idea that it is all pervasive and that modern society is totally administered” (p. 171).
Interview with Peter Ives


Boulou Ebanda de B’béri (BB): First of all, let me thank you for accepting to play this game of virtual interview with me.

Peter Ives (PI): I am very pleased that you’ve invited me to “play this game.” There are some aspects of the format that seem quite suitable for opening new areas of dialogue. Although I’m also aware, sitting alone in front of this computer, here in England, how such email interviews cut short some types of interaction, body-language, and sociability only possible in face-to-face meetings, which I hope we can have sometime. For now, I thank you, the Journal, and our readers for this opportunity.

BB: Indeed, you’re right about the face-to-face aspect missing in this interview; nonetheless this medium allows us to exchange and perhaps communicate, knowing its limits.

I want to start with the notion of vernacular materialism, which I believe, it’d be fair enough to say that this notion helps you illustrate both philosophical and linguistic articulations of language in Gramsci’s work. Therefore, my first question is to ask you to elaborate a bit on this notion of vernacular materialism which, throughout your exploration of Gramsci’s work, seems to be like an un-named, common sense ideology and even hegemony, partly because on the one hand, as you showed (pp. 3-13), or as you suggested later on, a vernacular tone or any sort of vernacular practice is for Gramsci similar to a vulgarised, naturalised practice.

PI: I first came up with or stumbled on the term “vernacular materialism” in the mid-1990s while writing my doctoral dissertation at York University in the Programme of Social & Political Thought. It hit me at first as a funny combination of terms not only because it played on notions of “vulgar materialism” but because it seemed to capture my frustrations with what I saw at the time as futile debates between Marxism and post-structuralism, where language played a central role and was always pitted against either “reality” (by Marxists) or the economy in the form of economic determinism (in straw arguments made against Marxism’s focus on economic inequalities and capitalism). This was before Will Kymlicka started using the term “vernacular” to describe his attempt to save liberalism by incorporating minority group rights into liberalism. But the potentials are similar, in that like much social theory that focuses on language or the vernacular, the material power relationships especially as framed by global capitalism are often ignored. I think this is very true of Kymlicka’s work, although I greatly admire what it does contribute.

On the other hand, those focusing on so-called “material” and economic inequalities often conceptualize these issues as separate from (and more real than) issues of language and culture. “Vernacular materialism” is a concept that tries to bring these areas together, a focus on language from the perspective of people who use
it daily (and face discrimination and oppression through linguistic power relations) and a focus on an analysis of society from a historical materialist perspective.

BB: In addition to this bridging capacity that you’ve just described, a vernacular seems as well not to be different from hegemony, because, as you noted for Gramsci, “hegemony can also be understood as the progressive creation of a popular collective spirit” (p. 30) or as Bakhtin and Gramsci both agree, seemingly having similar views, the shift from Latin to vernacular languages is “intricately linked to larger ideological and social changes” (p. 90). Could you explain what is for you the difference between a vernacular articulation with a purely Gramscian articulation of ideology and hegemony?

PI: Obviously, many are interested in Gramsci precisely because his critique of “ideology” includes an analysis of institutions and practices and not just “ideas.” But I’m pleased that you see “vernacular materialism” as a larger issue that pervades my book. In a certain sense it does resonate with a “history from below” type dynamic where what we are concerned about is language as it is used and experienced by masses of people, rather than rarefied, abstracted and codified. But this codification and standardization of language by elites has an important and complex impact on how language is used by us all.

Marx addressed some of these issues, especially with Engels, in The German Ideology where they discuss how the ideas of the ruling class in every epoch are the ruling ideas. But Gramsci takes that much further specifically looking at shifts like that during the Reformation when the ruling ideas are changed profoundly but there is not necessarily a political revolution. One way in which Gramsci goes much further than Marx and Engels is that “hegemony” includes more than “ruling ideas” and “ideas” that challenge them; it extends to the institutions that disseminate ideas, the complexity and contradictory nature of “ideas” as they make their way into “common sense” and conflict with the lived experiences of those who come to accept the “ruling ideas.” Certainly, Marx did not see “ideology” as purely negative, as totally disingenuous distortions that just need to be debunked and shown to simply be false. But Gramsci goes further in looking at the institutions and the relations among various social groups in societies that support various ideologies which come together in “hegemonic” forces.

I am not sure what you mean by “purely” Gramscian, in that I don’t think Gramsci ever aimed at purity and I would agree. Actually, that raises a key point about what Stuart Hall calls the “Gramscian way of thinking” in that so often concepts like “hegemony” or “passive revolution” are attributed to him when he is explicitly taking the concepts of others and transforming them. So, for example, “passive revolution” was a term Gramsci took from the conservative historian, Vincenzo Cuoco, who used it more like a “bloodless” revolution in a positive sense. Gramsci turned it on its head to see it as a negative process whereby nothing that is causing the structural problems in the society is actually addressed, but changes in the way the dominant classes rule makes it seem as if previous problems have been worked out. Anne Showstack Sassoon has a great article about
how Gramsci uses the concepts of others in ways like this (see Gramsci’s *Subversion of Language in Rethinking Marxism* from 1990).

But to try and answer your question, Gramsci is not trying to dispel the illusions (an approach that many take, for example, Noam Chomsky, which I think makes his work much less effective than it might otherwise be). Rather, he is trying to figure out why and how it came to be that particular ideologies garnered so much purchase, and not solely through coercion, but through the organization of consent. But hegemony includes not only why whole groups of people accept the ideas of the small groups who hold power, but how the institutions of society foster this, and how the various social groupings, including economic groupings but also gender, ethnic and other identities, are organized. Of course, this varies tremendously from society to society, historical period to historical period. But certainly in Gramsci’s Italy, the language question was crucial to this, as it is today.

For example, just in May 2006 the US Senate proclaimed English as the national language of the United States, well over 200 years after the founding of the country. The media barely mentioned it, but it clearly signals crucial political shifts occurring in the U.S. in terms of the growing Spanish speaking population, the limits of US “tolerance” and “pluralism” and how the governing classes are attempting to cope with it. This attempt to use the “power” (or at least resources) of the state to effect language usage could be a small example of the type of hegemonic manoeuvre of which Gramsci would be critical.

**BB:** You may then be anticipating my next question, which is in fact what would have been the difference had you started your analysis of Gramsci with what has been the recognized, and perhaps the most acclaimed nature of his work, e.g., ideology and not language? Do you believe that the results of your analysis would have been different and if so, why and how?

**PI:** I guess I have two answers: one is that it is not an either/or issue, that my work on Gramsci has focused on his studies in linguistics does not rule out or even de-emphasize questions of ideology. But also, my argument in terms of intellectual history is that Gramsci, as a Sardinian university student, went through a political transformation from favouring some sort of Sardinian nationalism whereby the Italians were the oppressors, to realizing that the Sardinian ruling class was complicit in the relationship, and Sardinian subaltern classes had much in common with, and should work with, both Italian peasants and the Italian urban working classes. My argument is that Gramsci found linguistics and language politics particularly related to these political issues and thought about them in terms of language and linguistics more thoroughly than he did with the term “ideology.” I discuss this a little in my second book, *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci*, in terms of the many and various so-called “linguistic turns” in the 20th Century. In *The Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci uses the term “ideology” in a relatively restricted and technical sense of the perspective in terms of a system of ideas. He does not expand it as a concept as he does with most of those ideas associated with his name such as “hegemony,” “passive revolution,” “common sense,” “intellectu-
als,” and “subalternity.” These are the concepts that seem to be generating significant interest amongst a host of recent studies of Gramsci’s writings.

BB: From this departure from language instead of ideology, do you believe you would have been able to break with the practices of ideology Gramsci himself and many of his followers defined to be inescapable frameworks as long as consent and coercion are at play; and, if so, could you elaborate a bit on your own strategy to get rid of this framework?

PI: Well, yes and no. On one hand, I don’t think you can break free of ideology any more than you can break free of the need for language and a degree of linguistic conformism, or of organizing the world and making commitments to certain values and ideals over other ones. Sure, using more consent and less coercion is morally superior, but Gramsci was keen to note that tacit consent can be readily mobilized to legitimate oppressive government policies. Thus, Gramsci was trying to struggle and fight to change ideology, “common sense,” and language, not get rid of them—and I agree with how he conceptualizes that.

On the other hand, my work on Gramsci’s understanding of language provides a lot of support to a theme that many others have appreciated in Gramsci, what early on was labelled his “open” Marxism and his insistence that at least in contexts like his Italy, to change society for the better you cannot impose an “ideology” or a strategy on all the subaltern social groups. Effective politics cannot be conducted by revelation of a “true” analysis or perspective that debunks or replaces the status quo.

The framework that Gramsci was trying to get rid of was that notion of creating consent with a heavy presence of the threat of coercion behind it. He was also trying to get rid of the organization of passive consent that relied on people blaming their predicament on other subaltern social groups. This was typified by the Fascists, who did garner considerable consent in Italy.

But Gramsci was also critical of the Socialists and other Communists, for example, for wanting the urban working classes to be the leaders of the movement, and not engaging with the peasantry or just assuming that the peasants would follow the northern based proletariat. Where Lenin used the term “hegemony” really to describe an alliance between the urban workers and the rural peasants, Gramsci insisted that this relationship would have to be more than a mere “alliance,” but that both groups would have to see how their positions necessarily included each other. The very way of conceptualizing the identities of peasant and worker would have to change. This is why he quickly broadened these questions out to being about more than economic class questions and including issues like those of rural Catholic women and the control over the moral and sexual lives of workers under new Fordist conditions. This is why he was so concerned with theatre, popular novellas and the like. So Gramsci uses “hegemony” to describe the types of political force that he is highly critical of, as well as what he wants to construct by using the Italian Communist Party.

I try to capture the essential difference between the two with the metaphor of lan-
guage. Where Gramsci was in favour of a “common” Italian language (one could substitute “hegemony” here), he did not want that language to be one that was imposed upon all of Italy (even with only minimal levels of coercion). Instead, he desired a new language to be created by a more profound interaction of the myriad of dialects that existed throughout the country. He knew that this would be a long and gradual process based on greater interaction geographically and across different communities.

BB: Tell me a bit more about the paradox I found in your illustration of Gramsci’s nationalism. For example, in your book, Gramsci seems to be someone looking for national constituent common sense, e.g., he would regret the lack of a strong, unitarian national language in Italy, and your analysis somehow indicates that he considered grammar to be a sort of common sense weapon, helping to fight the right of entry of multiplicity of signs into the dominant language; yet I understood from your book that for Gramsci the notion of unity does not mean homogeneity (p. 93); however, how is this search for unity different and perhaps conflicting with his work on class divisions in Italy?

PI: The question of “the nation” is quite a tricky one for us as well as Gramsci. I’ve been thinking about it a lot since I wrote the book. Writing it, I tacitly accepted common readings of Gramsci as being embedded in his historical time and place, to the extent that he was not particularly conscious or concerned with his focus on the national level of politics, which he understood, along classical Marxist lines, as then leading to an international revolution. But several Gramsci scholars have challenged me on this, Ursula Apitsch who is a scholar of immigration as well as Adam Morton, especially his recent book, Unravelling Gramsci. They both emphasize the extent to which Gramsci does discuss “international” issues and does not create stark contrasts between the national and international levels. Rather, his attention to “the nation” as a impoverished conception during his lifetime, but as having progressive potential, comes from the role of the state, which exercised power on a national population and territory.

Morton in particular emphasizes Gramsci’s analysis of historical formation of the nation-state system, and Gramsci’s notion that he could not understand his Italy without looking to its European history. He does not then assume that “Italians” have anything that necessarily unites them at the essential level, but sees them historically as being under the sovereign rule of the Italian state. To deny that or work against it, for example to be a Sardinian nationalist, could actually strengthen the negative aspects of state power, and for it to be a Sardinian state would matter little. Gramsci was also critical of “cosmopolitanism” because at his time it was a position of the elites and businessmen who had international contacts due to their position within capitalism, which has always been “international.” Certainly, Gramsci was explicitly critical of biological determinism and other essentialisms that many forms of “nationalism” are based on. So his “nationalism,” I think, is a very particular and strategic position based on the power of the nation-state. For us, this is significantly different, although I do not agree with those globalization theorists who proclaim the death of the nation-state.
To continue with the same idea, you note in your book that Marx placed a lot of importance on religious critique and that Gramsci does not reject the importance of faith but was concerned with the Roman Catholic Church as an institution that creates world views and thus, constitutes a powerful institution. You even push the idea that for Gramsci, “rational arguments do not exist in a vacuum” (p. 121) and are not (or should not be) sufficient to change one’s opinion, “convictions, criteria of discrimination and standard of conduct”; because Gramsci called those shifting minds irrational and schizophrenic.

As I noted in my previous question, one of the main paradoxes and perhaps the most interesting one is the very strong agency found in the personage of Gramsci. For example, at the same time as he expresses his strong belief of nationalism and/or search of unity, he also positions himself against other kinds of unitarianism he considers to be hegemonic, e.g., religious in the example above, but I might also add his opposition to certain positions of Enlightenment philosophers such as their view of an invincible subject-of-power that are institutions.

Don’t you find that to be paradoxical and perhaps contradictory, because this is the “propre” of individual agency?

I guess I would start by noting that Gramsci seemed much more concerned with what we may call collective agency, although this did not mean a devaluation of individual responsibility. I think you are right that there is certainly a tension there, whether a paradox or contradiction, I’m not sure. I suppose it is a contradiction in that capitalism in particular, but also most systems of exploitation, create contradictory consciousness and this works itself out in capitalist society through an ideology of individualism. So Gramsci’s search for unity (which for obvious reasons I like better than the contention that he believed in nationalism as I addressed above) was a reaction against how the ineffective liberalism and democratic socialism in Italy so easily turned into and capitulated to a strong nationalist, authoritarianism of Fascism. I think Gramsci takes individuals’ and groups’ acceptance of ideas, however horrendous and objectionable, more seriously than most do. So, of course, he would hold individuals responsible and I think he was quite hard on himself for his own failure to carry through the wave of socialism of 1919-1920 into something progressive, but it lead to the rise of Fascism.

One of the reasons I like Gramsci’s writings on language so much is that they enable a complex understanding of this tension you raise between individual agency and social institutions that make agency possible. As Noam Chomsky, following Wilhelm von Humboldt, emphasizes, the amazing thing about language is that from a finite set of rules an individual can generate an infinite set of sentences (that are grammatically correct). Gramsci shows much greater awareness of the power relations within the distinctions between what is a “correct” sentence and how effective it might be in a given situation. We can see this as running along a continuum with overt coercion at one end and the organization of
consent at the other; for example, aboriginal children in residential schools in Canada being physically punished for not speaking English to people being ignored and denied jobs, et cetera, because they have “accents” or are “difficult to understand.”

I think about this when people complain to me about “the immigrants,” and are taken aback when I respond by telling them that I am an immigrant, to at least try to make evident their racism, which they show me because of their assumptions about the colour of my skin as well as my accent. But in such situations, it is usually very difficult for individual speakers to use their own “agency” effectively. They must both conform to “standards” to an extent, as well as create institutions and spaces, so that their own creativity, history, and identity can flourish. Gramsci sees collective agency as that part of the process whereby the “standards” that used to be imposed, are then rejected by large portions of the population as being somehow “correct” and “true” without falling into the liberal individualist notion that we can all speak our own language.

BB: In the second chapter of your book, you suggested that both Bakhtin and Volosinov rejected monologic and as suppressing heteroglossia of language, to legitimate the idea that Gramsci was for a national unity of language. However, if we take Todorov’s suggestion of the “heterology” or “heteroglossia” nature of language, what would then be the difference between monologic and unity and between multiplicity and unity, since from whatever angle we approach language, we would end up knocking on the wall of the punctured nature of language, bared by specific societal parameters, values, and power?

Put differently, if as you suggested, “unity does not mean homogeneity, monoglossia, or uniaccentuality” but rather “includes uniqueness and differences that are not ‘transcended,’ ‘overcome,’ or merged” (p. 93), how do you see Gramsci’s view of unity in terms of nation and community building, especially if we consider the multicultural aspect and multiple social classes in Italy back then.

PI: There seem to me two issues here, a relatively straight forward one, and a very difficult one. I’ll start with the first. Todorov’s point here is in agreement with Gramsci, but contrary to many interpretations of Bakhtin and Volosinov. That is that language is not by its own nature “heterogloss,” because this would lead to the problematic contention that monologic language is somehow less linguistic or true to some ontological status of language, or perhaps some idealised abstraction of two or more speakers conversing all their differences with no claim of different evaluations or attempt at reconciliation. This would yield some version of Habermas’ “ideal speech situation”—a utopia that even Habermas has to retreat from when pressed. Todorov argued that “heterology” is the result of social not linguistic diversity. It is a question of political values not a technical aspect of language, which leads us to evaluation heteroglossia.

In the book, I grapple with a similar question with what Gramsci means by stating that language is not parthenogenetic. Just as with heteroglossia being some
how part of the nature of language, at first it would seem that Gramsci is saying that languages cannot grow and change in isolation from other languages by their own nature. I argue, hopefully sufficiently, that Gramsci does not mean to define an underlying ontological essence that all language is based on, since for him, language is a human institution and its “nature” is not defined outside of humanity. Thus, I conclude that he must be making a judgement, like Todorov is about society, about growth and change within language. Languages change and “generate” through contact with other languages and social diversity. Put this way, it sounds as if there is a stark contradiction and paradox with Gramsci’s “search for unity” (or even “nationalism” although I’m hesitant of that label for him). This leads us to the much more complex issue.

My first response to this “paradox” is perhaps too easy, but I think there is a certain weight to it. That is that language provides a great metaphor for politics here, precisely because the “conformity” required to make a language a language that many people can understand does not prevent an individual from expressing their unique perspectives, arguments, feelings, et cetera. But unless individual expressions alter a language itself, we would not say that language has changed just because people are using it, even using it to express new things, even introducing a new word like the verb “to google.” I can still talk about “searching for information about Gramsci on the internet” even though you might express that by saying you “googled Gramsci.” But when, for example, English acquires a new word from a different language like “Inuit” (from Inuktutatuk), which replaces “Eskimo” (apparently derived from Algonquian), Gramsci would consider this significant language change because it is connected to a more profound change in the entire conceptualization of an identity and how communities get to label themselves. Such changes cannot take place without individuals making the arguments, changing their language, et cetera, but individuals alone cannot make the change, it must become accepted.

Unlike the above “google” example, if you talk about “Eskimos” I will ask whether you really intend such a derogatory meaning and I will tell you that I think it is unacceptable. This is obviously a political and moral point that goes well beyond the question of whether or not I understand who you are referring to. (I suppose I should also add that when talking to people from the US or Britain, depending on the context, I do not always go through the explanation, or least do so differently than I would with Canadians.)

The more complex aspect to this question focuses on the context in which Gramsci was searching for a “unity” and the character of that “unity,” which is not a dogmatic “same-ness” or “homogeneity” but a recognition of the harm done by the way capitalism in particular and exploitation and oppression more generally lead to fragmentation and separation of various ideals and values and especially from our lived experiences and labour (defined very broadly, as Gramsci does). Thus, in terms of nation and community building, as you asked, Gramsci is critical of whenever “difference” is used to increase, legitimate, or create conditions of exploitation, or prevent people from creating the solidarities that enable them to struggle against oppression and exploitation.
Thus, for him, it was really a “unity” within the world views of rural peasants and urban workers, which were being pitted against one another, where it was literally army brigades made up of southern peasants sent in to smash the strikes in cities like Turin in the north. The type of “common language” or hegemonic force was clearly required to be “unified” and even national given the role of the state in creating the army, creating economic policies fostering industrialization in the north at the expense of trade in the south, and the like. But I think the metaphor of language works well here in that such a political force is far from “centralized” and “totalitarian” even if it is pervasive and involved in every aspect of life including the entertainment one enjoys and how we identify ourselves.

BB: What could we learn more from Gramsci’s politics of language? In other words what did you learn in analyzing Gramsci’s work, and how could you apply it to, let’s say, the bilingual system in Canada?

PI: This is obviously a huge question, and one of my current research projects concerns so-called “global English” where I try to use Gramsci to make some headway in such debates. The first line of which is equally applicable to bilingualism in Canada, which is to insist that language questions cannot be divorced from political questions. My own failure to learn French, even though I’ve lived in Canada now for 16 years, is a political failure as well as an educational one. I cannot just hide behind the fact that I’ve had a lot of other things to do and also had to learn Italian in those years. But I also haven’t learned Cree or Hindi.

The second basic point that I think Gramsci drives home very well is that language is about so much more than communication and those other dimensions cannot be separated out from how it functions to allow us to communicate. I wrote an article last year for a new journal called Studies in Language and Capitalism where I tried to show how many scholars divorce the function of language as a vehicle of communication from its role “symbolically” to identity or culture. And I try to use Gramsci to show that this is not feasible. This is probably the most obvious way that the media deals with political language issues. Getting back to Canada and especially bilingualism, while I applaud the federal government’s bilingualism in many ways, and am very thankful I can send my daughter to French immersion, it is important to realize that this is hardly a “solution” to the French/English language question, especially as many Québécois make clear, since their aim is not to foster the use of French across ‘English-speaking’ Canada. Gramsci’s concepts are useful here especially his notion of the formation of different types of intellectuals. His attention to class and the economics of culture would also lead to the point, familiar to many Canadians and Québécois, that language can easily become just a gate-keeping function that reinforces disparities in wealth and resources.

Ironically, though, more and more sociolinguists and people involved in education policy are decrying monolingualism of any sort. David Graddol, a prominent researcher for the British Council, has just issued a dire warning to the UK that knowing English will not be sufficient as it has been in the past. He urges the UK to bolster all its language learning education. I think we need to get beyond the
official bilingualism of the federal government and look to Iqualuit to start thinking about how we can try to redeem the atrocious history Canada has with regards to aboriginal languages. We also need to look at the linguistic realities of our multicultural urban centres and perhaps look to many in Europe who are being more explicit about linguistic diversity itself being a value. This may sound like a repeat of what you called a “paradox” or “contradiction” in my book concerning “unity” and “diversity,” but Gramsci was never against multilingualism per se. He pleaded that his niece and nephews be encouraged to speak Sardinian. But he also realized that political solidarity also has a linguistic component. Thus, if it is primarily only the elite in Canada who speak English and French, we are in trouble. As is also the case, if it is the elite in the Chinese, Indian, and African communities who are capable of communicating effectively to broad sections of the Canadian population.

*BB:* I’d have loved to continue this interesting and enlightening discussion; however, we do have to stop for now. Again, many thanks for your time and wonderful contribution in helping me and CJC readers better understand Gramsci’s complexity.

*Pi:* Well, thank you so much for the opportunity and interest.

**Notes**

1. Ives introduces Bartoli with his starting point, which is “derived from Ascoli’s contention that where two languages come into contact, there is always conflict between them, just as there is between the cultures of which they form a part. Thus Bartoli (like Ascoli) finds that linguistics innovations are not solely parthenogenetic or ‘spontaneous’: rather, they are the result of the relationships between different languages and different ‘phases’ of the same language” (p. 25). However, a conflict arises as “Ascoli also maintained that the ‘oral habits’ of a community are not simply the result of past acquisition and the history of that community; they also have a more permanent character, one that is connected to the anatomical structure of the glottis of different races” (p. 26).