

Comprehending Amma: The Influence of Linguistic Ideology Upon A Contemporary Godperson

Karen Esche-Eiff

Abstract

This paper examines the significance of differing linguistic ideologies present within the international religious following of contemporary Indian godperson, Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi. With particular reference to A.K. Ramanujan's discussion of speech typical to Indian and American individuals, it argues that the varying linguistic ideologies present within this linguistically diverse community inform contesting worldviews that are manifested in equally contesting perceptions of their spiritual leader; thus, bringing about different ways in which She is engaged.

If, as Raymond Williams (1977:21) attests, “a definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world,” then it is also one of social action. As noted by Alessandro Duranti (1997:46), language, in describing the world, “its inhabitants, objects, places, and periods,” carries with it a capacity to construct relationships; hence, “to speak a language means to ... participate in interactions with [the] world” (Duranti 1997:46). But not everyone participates in the same way. Influencing one's engagements are, among many things, linguistic ideologies, which William Hanks (1987:670) defines as the “orienting frameworks, interpretive procedures, and sets of expectations” that shape verbal practices within a language community. As they are founded in community-specific beliefs, values, and attitudes, these linguistic ideologies act as facilitators for unique engagements in and reimaginings of the world.

This paper is concerned with the capacity of linguistic ideologies to facilitate engagements in and reimaginings of the world amongst followers of contemporary Indian godperson, Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, known affectionately to Her devotees as Amma, meaning mother in Malayalam. With particular reference to A.K. Ramanujan's (1989) discussion of context-sensitive and context-free speech typical to Indians and Americans respectively, it argues that the linguistic ideologies present within this highly international and hence linguistically diverse community inform contesting worldviews that are manifested in equally contesting perceptions of and thus engagement with this spiritual leader.

Method

George Marcus (1995) argues that during this current period of globalization, as people and institutions become increasingly mobile, it is no longer appropriate in ethnography to treat subjects as bounded and isolated. For this reason, he suggests that ethnographers employ what he calls the method of multi-sited ethnography. Because the subjects of linguistic ideologies in an international devotional following are transnationally mobile, research for this project was conducted via multi-sited ethnography.

The primary research activity was participant observation, which took place in India between the months of December 2007 and January 2008 at Amma's main ashram, i.e. Hindu monastery, the Mata Amritanandamayi Math, or MAM, located in Amritapuri, India. Chief informants here included Brahmachari Karthika, a young American woman who has resided at the MAM since 2002, and a young Indian swami, also residing at the ashram for several years. I refer to him as Swami Avilash for his faithfulness to Amma. In the United States, participant observation took place on March 30, 2008 at a MAM branch, or *satsang* center, in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. Main informants at this location were Gloria and Manu, a middle-aged American woman and a middle-aged Indian man, respectively. Both devotees live in the United States. Please

note that all people involved gave their personal consent to be included in this project. They have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Linguistic Diversity

“Brahmachari: What is your mother tongue?”

Lay Devotee: Show Mother my tongue? Okay.”

December 27, 2007, 11:00AM – With two small cushions held tightly against her chest, Karthika runs towards me, kicking up sand in her wake. “I have an extra cushion,” she calls out. With that, it was decided I was to attend *satsang*. Meaning “the company of the good; in the MAM, *satsang* refers to devotee gatherings where participants engage in spiritual activity” (Warrier 2000:190). “Where are your sandals? In the garden?” I give her a nod, indicating that my sandals were, in fact, in the garden, and we sprint up the temple stairs. From the way Karthika rushes inside, I expect to see throngs of brahmacharis stumbling over one another but instead notice only a few, their white saris with enough room to flutter in the salty sea breeze. Why did we hurry? I push my confusion aside and follow Karthika to the center of the temple. There, she carefully arranges our cushions so they are adjacent to one another, facing a small platform on the western side of the room. At some point during our rush, I must have allowed my bewilderment to surface, for, without my knowing solicitation, Karthika turns to me and whispers, “It will be very crowded.”

December 27, 2007, 12:20PM – The minutes pass, and I find myself scooting closer to Karthika, validating her prediction that the temple would soon be brimming with hopeful *satsang* participants. But so many? Who were all these people? I was sure, due to their colorful dress, that they were not brahmacharis. Again, I must have displayed a facial expression that prompted Karthika to explain. “They knew

Amma would be here,” she whispered. At first, I didn’t understand what she meant by this statement, but as I later learned, the month of December is a popular time for members of Amma’s international community to congregate at Amritapuri. This is because She does not tour during the holiday season. From late November until mid-January, Amma remains at the MAM, spending most of Her time leading devotional activities that are open to the public (Warrier 2000).

So I may better understand the degree to which the ashram becomes busy during the holiday season, Karthika tells me the following story of one woman receiving *darshan* from Amma. In Sanskrit, *darshan* means “visual feasting on the diety’s and/or guru’s form, believed to bring good fortune, grace and spiritual merit to the devotee” (Warrier 2000:187). In the MAM, to receive *darshan* is to receive a hug from Amma. The narrative below is a paraphrase from my fieldnotes:

The ashram is crazy in December. Everyone knows that Amma doesn’t start touring until mid-January, so they all come to Amritapuri over the holidays. We now expect this influx, so every year, we take measures to help things run smoothly. For example, we have a brahmachari sit next to Amma during *darshan*. It is her sole responsibility to ask people what language they speak. Amma wants to know, so She can bless them, at least a little, in their native language. Last year, we had a woman from one of the local villages come for *darshan*. When it was her turn, she knelt next to Amma, and the brahmachari asked her, in a very broken attempt at the local dialect, what language she spoke. The woman clearly didn’t understand, because she had this look on her face like “Huh?” The brahmachari tried rephrasing the question, again in broken speech. This time, she tried asking for the woman’s mother tongue. The woman, thinking the brahmachari

instructed her to show Mother her tongue, turned to Amma and stuck out her tongue! She even made that noise, like when you go to the doctor, and he asks you to “Open wide.” Amma, in Her infinite good nature, burst out laughing!

To an outsider, such a story may seem bizarre. However, to an insider such as Karthika, is not only humorous, but an indicator of the high degree to which Amma’s devotional following is international and, as a result, linguistically diverse. Maya Warriar attests to this high degree of internationality in Amma’s devotional following. She states, “As a globe-trotting spiritual leader, [Amma] has bases not just in India but also in the U.S.A., Britain, France, Australia, Japan, Mauritius, [the] Reunion Islands, and Singapore” (Warriar 2000:2). MAM pressperson Rob Sidon offers a concurring statement. He reported in 2001 that Amma has given *darshan* to an approximated eighteen million devotees around the world (Boncompagni 2001). With this high degree of internationality, members within the community often come into contact with an equally high level of linguistic diversity, which sometimes results in miscommunication such as that depicted in the preceding story. For scholars of linguistic anthropology, this begs the question, what are the wider real world effects of linguistic diversity? To answer this question as it pertains to the devotional following of Her Holiness, Amma, I ask, how do contesting linguistic ideologies influence their engagements in spirituality?

Linguistic Ideology

Genres are now viewed not as sets of discourse features, but rather as ‘orienting frameworks, interpretive procedures, and sets of expectations’ (Hanks 1987:670)

Various definitions of linguistic ideology have been offered in the history of linguistic anthropology. According to Michael Silverstein (1979:193), it is “a set of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use.” With a greater social emphasis, Judith Irvine (1989:255) defines linguistic ideology as “the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests.” Broadly, Alan Rumsey (1990:346) notes it to be “shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world.” Most recent definitions, however, emphasize the world-shaping force of linguistic ideology. As Kathryn Woolard and Bambi Schieffelin (1994:59) attest, “language ideology has been made increasingly explicit as a force shaping the understanding of verbal practices. Genres are now viewed not as sets of discourse features, but rather as ‘orienting frameworks, interpretive procedures, and sets of expectations (Hanks 1987:670).’” For the purposes of this paper, I ascribe to this last definition of linguistic ideology. I highlight its ability to reconstruct perceptions of spirituality through language relating to its focus, which, in this case, is Amma. For assistance, I draw on works by South Asian scholar, A.K. Ramanujan, on the topic of Indian and American linguistic ideologies.

In his article, “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?,” Ramanujan (1989) offers a discussion of what he calls context-sensitive and context-free languages. These genres, he indicates, are exhibited in Indian and American speech respectively. At the center of his argument is word choice employed by Indians and Americans in descriptions of people, noting a preference by Indians for context-laden language. Borrowing a determination made in 1972 by cognitive anthropologist Richard Shweder, Ramanujan argues that Americans characterize people with generic words like good and nice while Indians contextualize. They offer descriptors like “he brings sweets” to qualify a person’s character (Ramanujan 1989:52). This is used in combination with a

flexible syntax that allows objects to obey “different rules, respond to different scents and beckonings” (Ramanujan 1989: 52-53). Unlike speech employed by Americans, that of Indian speakers thus transforms objects into places of convergence. Here, event, act, time, and space intersect at a locus of experience.

Rumsey makes a similar argument with respect to Western linguistic ideologies. As he argues, Westerners view their languages as mere abstractions that are apart from as opposed to a part of the world. A “tenet of [Western] linguistic ideology is the dualism of words and things; talk versus action; real world events versus ways of talking about them. Words in this view are not things, but only stand for things. They are mere symbols or signs, the purpose of which is to talk about a reality that lies beyond them and apart from them” (Rumsey 1990: 352). This world-divorcing view of language strongly contrasts with the Indian tendency to emphasize the significance of the world in language through contextualization (Ramanujan 1989). This results in a different reconstruction of the world. Please note that I include examples of both language types as they are found in Amma’s devotional community specifically in this paper’s subsequent section.

It is important to mention here that neither Ramanujan nor Rumsey perceives of the aforementioned linguistic ideologies as totalizing entities but rather as idealizations towards which Indian and Western languages gravitate. Rumsey (1990:352) declares, “I would not claim that this ideology has a total stranglehold on Western consciousness, or that it is not contradicted by aspects of people’s everyday experience or opposed by other ideologies at work within the same social field. But I would argue ... that it is currently a dominant ideology, in that it is underwritten by our most powerful and prestigious social institutions.” Ramanujan (1989:47) agrees, stating that “cultures ... have overall tendencies ... to idealise, and think in terms of, either the

context-free or the context-sensitive kinds of rules. Actual behavior may be more complex, though the rules they think with are a crucial factor in guiding the behaviour.” What follows in this paper is hence only one example of the ways in which linguistic ideologies amongst Indians and Americans may construct spirituality based on language.

Applications of Linguistic Ideology

*Gloria: Ok, If there's no mother; ...
there's no pillow, then, what is there?"*

March 30, 2008, 1:45PM – Sitting on Gloria's couch, I have my copy of Eternal Wisdom on my lap. “Today, we are going to read about devotion,” states Manu, and I open my book to chapter two. Gloria volunteers to read. She clears her throat, straightens her back, and begins. Though she stumbles in attempting to pronounce several Malayalam words, Gloria reads the passages well, calmly and with compassion for the godperson in the name of whom they were written. I expect the conversation to follow to be equally as tranquil. What instead transpires is a heated discussion between Manu and Gloria on the topic of advaita. In English, this term is translated to mean non-duality.

Gloria reaches the end of chapter two and begins the conversation, asking, “Ok, if there's no mother ... here's my question. There's no mother, then, what is there?” Manu responds with a description of the Indian notion of advaita. R.C. Zaehner (1983:75) describes this concept as “not simply the eternal essence of one single soul ... but [the] Absolute Being or, in Western terminology, the impassible Godhead behind the Creator God ... [There is] only one reality, Brahman, and this [is] identical with every human soul.” Gloria has difficulty grasping the idea, so she switches the conversation to another topic. In doing so, however, she makes several statements about Amma in which she categorizes Her definitively as either mother, guru, or god. This leads Madhu to readdress the notion of advaita, explaining that Her

Holiness, Amma, is ineffable to unenlightened beings such as themselves; therefore, such categorizations are inappropriate without an understanding of their multidimensionality being employed alongside them in speech. Gloria tries to redeem herself, stating that Amma is “everything.” “Ok, what is everything?” Manu asks. “The infinite is what? [Is it] the galaxies, the expanding galaxies? What other galaxies are they expanding into? So, we can only say what [She] is not. We can’t say what [She] is.” He later states that it is due to Amma’s ineffability that many devotees opt to describe Her via stories of their experiences with the Mata. “It’s as close as we can get.” At the end of the conversation, Gloria is upset, with small tears welling up in her eyes. Before I leave, she tells me that it frustrates her not being able to grasp some of the concepts that Amma teaches.

In this exchange, we see the clashing of two linguistic ideologies, namely those of one language favoring contextualization and another favoring compartmentalization. Manu, viewing Amma according to his understanding of advaita, discusses Her as a divine essence that exists in a state of interconnectedness with the world. Gloria, on the other hand, defines Her according to categories that the English language affords, thus maintaining a view of Amma that is partial and, according to Manu, faulty. As depicted in the following example of one *darshan* experience at the MAM, such varying descriptions of Amma may be reflected in the numerous ways devotees choose to engage Her.

January 2, 2008, 7:00PM – Since 10:00AM, Amma has been giving *darshan*. At 11:00AM, I meet Karthika for breakfast, during which she presents me with a small square piece of paper. “Here’s your *darshan* ticket,” she states. I looked at it, surprised. I am number 601. I guess you have to wake up early to get a good number.

January 2, 2008, 7:00PM – I see that my number is up, and Karthika motions for me to run to the stage. Here, Amma

is sitting propped on a small platform in a lotus position. She is surrounded by brahmacharis and swamis, who keep the line moving so as to make sure everyone has the chance to be embraced by Amma. Ten minutes pass, and I am close enough to see Amma clearly. She is bright-eyed and greets each devotee with a smile. I watch Amma for several minutes, astonished that She does not seem tired, but decide instead to switch my observation to the devotees. Looking around, I think to myself, "The devotees are particularly diverse tonight." In the mix are some Western devotees, recognizable by their clothing. Most, however, are from the local villages, also recognizable by their clothing. Most interesting, though, are the ways in which they approach Amma. Westerners, for the most part, are quite formal in their engagement. They drop to their knees, give a solid bow, some with tears in their eyes, and hug Amma with care, loosely so as not to injure Her. Indians, at least on this night, seem to express a wider range of sentiment. Some joke, laughing with Her until they cry tears of joy. Others cry tears of sorrow, requesting from Her a blessing to relieve pain, whether it be physical or emotional. Many, nevertheless, embrace Amma tightly, not letting go or stopping from talking with Her until a brahmachari or swami motions for his/her departure. It is as though the Indians perceive Amma as mother, friend, and spiritual leader all at once, treating Her as an embodiment of advaita as opposed to a particular category.

Conclusion

According to Duranti (1997:46), language carries with it a capacity to construct relationships; hence, "to speak a language means to ... participate in interactions with [the] world." Nevertheless, not everyone participates in the world the same way. This is due, at least in part, to the influence of linguistic ideologies, or "orienting frameworks, interpretive procedures, and sets of expectations" (Hanks 1987:670). These shape verbal practices and, as a result, inform our experiences. As demonstrated by this project, the devotional community of Sri

Mata Amritanandamayi Devi is, due to its internationality, linguistically diverse and hence full of competing linguistic ideologies. Though devoted to one guru, they experience Her differently, leading to differing, yet all equally valid and personally significant, engagements with Her.

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