



## INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR THOMAS P. BONFIGLIO (University of Richmond)

Verona, May 30th, 2012

*Professor Thomas Bonfiglio (University of Richmond) was in Verona last May to deliver a series of lectures on ethnolinguistic nationalism, and on the ways language functions as an implement of racial and ethnic discrimination. Throughout the seminars, Bonfiglio first looked at such concepts as the ideology of the native speaker, the historical origins of ethnolinguistic nationalism, the biologizing of language and, in particular, of the notion of 'mother tongue'. Then, he focused on the rise of Standard American English as a crucial stage where the articulation of racial and linguistic prejudice combined with wider ideological issues, and briefly discussed the present hegemony of English in the USA as a synonym of 'literature' in general terms.*

*As doctoral students interested, respectively, in the ideological construction of language and the historical and cultural development of such construction in the US, Annalisa Tosi and I had the chance to interview professor Bonfiglio on the day of his last lecture, and made him talk about some specific issues that occurred to us while attending the seminar cycle.*

**SB:** Stefano Bosco

**TB:** Thomas Bonfiglio

**SB:** Throughout your lessons, you have argued that the myths of the native speaker and the mother tongue have been used as instruments of, at the same time, empowerment and disempowerment, inclusion and exclusion etc. And we have seen that such myths gain their strength by their being rooted in folkloric beliefs. But do you feel this is to be understood only in a negative sense? In other words, can you see any positive aspect in the perception of the mother tongue as a symbol of cultural identity and a vehicle of national pride? Or is there always the risk of doing so at the expense of other minority cultures?

**TB:** That's a wonderful question. I think the question reverts to the construction of identity. In itself, it's not evil, bad, or damaging, the problem is that it's easily used as a tool of discrimination. We are all free to construct our own identities. If you were to see a random person on the street and say, "that person, what is the proper circumstance, a or b?: a. he tells you who he is and his identity, or b. you tell him who he is and his identity." There's no discussion on that: the individual has the right of determining his own identity, no matter how 'crazy' it might be. But I think the important thing is that we have to remember that identity is constructed, it is not an ontological given. It's a symbol from a lot of different cultural factors, and it's also fluent, it can change. There is such a thing as a national identity, a cultural identity, a linguistic identity, an individual identity, but these are also very easy to deconstruct, and that doesn't mean we shouldn't have one, of course. But also with ourselves, I think we need to remember that our own identities are not fixed and stable: there are parts of ourselves we don't like, there are memories we've had of what we've done in the past that we'd right now like to say "I don't know who that person was, who did that when I was sixteen or seventeen?" That still does impact the present identity. So these are constructions based upon things we do like about ourselves and our country, or things we don't like. The 'healthy' identity is a good integration of those things, and so is the healthy nationalism. But the danger is we must not look at those things as permanent; and the danger is biological, because we tend to see them as innate, inborn, coming from the mother. Often this is used to exclude people, like immigrants, and to separate. There's one Indian linguist who claims that the notion of the native speaker is something that a given country invents in order to exclude a part of its own population.

**SB:** Regarding the "native speaker construction", in the process of second-language learning, we have the impression that what tends to be valued first and foremost is the accent, or in other words the ability to 'sound native', rather than to use the language in a correct way, grammatically speaking. And you can find examples of this in everyday situations, for example in foreign language schools recruiting new language teachers. Many times, a student who has graduated in

Foreign Languages, even with very high marks, has very few chances to be employed if a native speaker is available for the same position, regardless of any title proving the latter's real competence in linguistic and grammatical knowledge. What do you think about that? Is that true also in the US?

**TB:** I think it's true, to my knowledge. I think you might remember the example from Singapore, where they were advertising for a native speaker of English to teach English as a second-language, and then a couple of days later they changed the ad saying they wanted Caucasian, because there were a lot of L1 Anglophones in Singapore who didn't look like they spoke English OK, you had to *look* like you speak English OK. There is a lot going on there. First of all, it's quite contradictory that such a thing is done in second language pedagogy, because we know it's very hard to teach your own first language unless you've been trained for that. You have to get critical distance, and that's also why, when the mother language started to be taught in occidental universities, it was the non-L1, so the L2, that was taught first (it used to be just Latin and Greek). Then the foreign languages started to be taught first, and the actual national language of the country came quite late because it was thought that you did not have enough critical distance from your own language, you couldn't reflect on it when it was too close to you. Whereas if you learn French as a second language, then you have that critical distance, then you can analyze. The same thing with teaching: you need an abstract knowledge of grammar, of how grammar works. If you were to ask a L1 speaker of Italian who has had no linguistic training, "do you have pre-positive or post-positive adjectives in Italian?", how would that person answer the question? That gets back to the problem: if you're hiring someone just on the basis of L1 accent, that is someone who grew up in that language, unless they were very technically trained they wouldn't be able to do that as someone who had learned English as a second language and trained to teach it as a second language, and who knows the mistakes that second-language learners make. That's something we've known for a while, that well-trained second-language speakers actually have more success than the L1 speakers.

Also, getting back to accent, I think we still have an idea of a natural accent: our cultures suffered from a concept that a given accent is growing naturally out of the language. There is no such thing as a natural accent. There are a lot of different accents in English, for example the South-African accent that sounds very very strange to, for example, a rural Canadian, who would think, "my God, where's that person from?" Accent can change very readily, very easily. There are only two reasons why we label an accent as foreign: 1. we heard it before, and we can identify it (we heard it in the movies, and we can identify it as Spanish or German or Icelandic), 2. we're not familiar with it, so we label it as foreign and then natural. We attribute naturalism to it when there really is no such thing as a natural accent. When vulgar romance developed into French, how could that accent come about, with so many nasalizations, apocopes, syncopes...where's the naturalism in that? Of course now we would say it's a perfectly 'natural' French accent. Of course, this is changing now. In the past couple of decades, young women in Paris had been starting to sing more as they intonated, they had this upswing at the end of the words that's considered now to be 'naturally' native Parisian, but it's something that's occurred later on. And it really has no relationship to the ontology of language.

**SB:** Let's pass to a question on ethnolinguistic ideology. We are students and scholars operating in a scientific community very sensitive to issues of cultural equality; we have come to appreciate linguistic and ethnic diversity, and we get enriched by this knowledge. So, it is quite easy for us to understand the shortcomings of ethnolinguistic ideology and also condemn its detrimental effects on human communities throughout history. But how could we bring such awareness out of the academia, and make people become more attentive and critical toward these issues in everyday life?

**TB:** Well, we begin by correcting them when they talk about native speaker and mother tongue. That's what I do, I correct them. Basically, we need to explain in very direct terms how language can be used as a tool of prejudice and discrimination, and also engage people who use it as a tool of discrimination. That's very very common. In 'polite', upper middle class society, statements of racial and ethnic prejudice are not allowed. Everything is fine as long as you don't articulate your prejudice. These prejudices tend to come out in displaced ways, in hidden ways: for example, if we don't want to live somewhere, we won't say, "oh, there are too many Arabs or Albanians or Blacks out there", but we'd say, "oh, that's not a nice section", and "nice" is a very polite way to express the prejudice. The same thing is done with language: "well, I've nothing against this immigrant population, but they have to learn our language", and also, "they need to be educated in Italian or German or English, because if they're educated in other languages, then they're not going to learn the language of our country". And there, we can step in as linguists. I've been in a lot of conversations like

that, a lot of people don't know that linguistics exists. I had an interesting conversation about the topic and I said, "linguistics is scientific study of language, I'm a professor of linguistics, I actually wrote a book on the standardization of pronunciation in the USA based on ideologies of race and class..." So, we just need to remind them that's not the way L1 acquisition works. Scholars have determined that children can learn a lot of different languages at once, and acquire very good accents and keep them separated, so you're not confusing them. So just remind them of the scientific data, and engage them, and that helps combat the prejudices. I think language is very important, because the general population is quite familiar with everyday incorporations of ethnic and racial prejudice, but they are not that aware of how it's used in language, they don't reflect on that. They will judge a person by their use of language: "he has a bad accent, he doesn't sound native." We need to tell them there is not such a thing as a bad accent, accent has no morality in it. Just engage them very very politely. That's difficult, because confronting people with their prejudices is difficult.

**SB:** Let's turn to the US context. In your very insightful book *Race and the Rise of Standard American*, you argue that the conflation of language and ethnicity has played a crucial role in shaping an exclusionary notion of 'Americanness'. Many ethnic groups have been labeled as 'Other' and thus discriminated on the grounds of language and accent. But do you believe that such mechanism functions today in the same way as in the past, given that now the US have had an African American president and that there are no immigration waves like those at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

**TB:** Clearly, no, there is not the immigration problem in the eyes of the dominant group that there was at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These prejudices, though, do exist with some minority groups, especially Hispanics. What I didn't get to in the seminars was the articulation of linguistic prejudice against Hispanofones, the opposition to bilingual education. And again, we get back to the polite prejudice utterances, "I don't have anything against them, against Hispanics, but they need to learn our language". These people act to suppress instruction in Spanish for Hispanofones, often bilingual instruction. The same thing for Ebonics. (Ebonics refers to African American Vernacular English, I prefer the term Black English.) There was the Oakland school board in California in the 1990s that wanted to institute teaching in black dialect, and there was a lot of prejudicial opposition to that: that was exactly like the prejudicial opposition against Jews and Italians (the Ellis Island immigrants) a hundred years ago. A lot had been alluding to a population that's sexually overactive, they're going to reproduce more than white people, and overflow the country. That's still going on.

As to the election of Obama, that's a very interesting phenomenon. Has an African American president really been elected? What has been elected there? His speech is perfectly Standard Midwestern American. Also, if you look at his politics, as the politics of all Democratic and Republican presidents, it's a right-wing politics, based on low taxes. When Kennedy was president, the highest tax rate in the country was 90%: the very very wealthy were forced to pay 90% of their income in taxes. All the presidents since Kennedy have been Republicans or Democrats, and together they have reduced that tax rate from 90% down to below 30%, which results in an insufficiency of social programs for poor people. There are perfectly good socialist parties out there in America, nobody knows about them. They have perfectly black candidates. The important thing is, does the party have social programs that would alleviate the economic problems of the poor? That's the issue. Electing this Democratic president isn't going to change, it's not going to result, as far as I can see for the time being, in more social programs, higher taxes, and the redistribution of income for the poor. I also think that, quite frankly, the election of Obama gives people, the white class in power, the impression that things will be OK now: "we have solved the problem, we have a black president, therefore we've solved the problems of discrimination against blacks." In that case, if you look at it psychoanalytically, it's an inversion of the real problem, that the image of this black person, elected president, is concealing the continuation of an economic policy that's very prejudiced against blacks. In Richmond, the city I live in, there is a black side of town and a white side of town; the east side of town is mostly black. There are districts where nobody owns their own property. In the entire east side of the city there are no supermarkets, the banks have all left, there are no movie theaters; most of the black population lives there, but the whites don't see it, they never go there. These problems have not been solved: districts where nobody went to college, most of the people didn't finish high school, average income is 10,000 dollars a year... To think that electing the image of a black person has somehow solved those problems, I'm very sorry but in my opinion that can only reveal there's some kind of form of sociopathology. I'm very sorry but I believe that.

**SB:** We can see your point. Another interesting point you made is that the accent in the US has become a sort of surrogate of physical features in perpetuating a form of racist ideology. Do you think this is still true today, as of 2012? Since it's certainly a subtler rationale for racial discrimination, should one conclude that it is much more dangerous and

difficult to eradicate?

**TB:** You're absolutely right, that's very difficult to eradicate. I think I'd have to admit that the dangerous stigmatizing of accent is not as pronounced as it was in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the American pronunciation became standardized, when that area of the country, the upper Midwest Inland North (called Standard White Inland Northern English, SWINE), rose to the status of the standard. That was a period, in the wake of mass immigration, of massive prejudices at all levels of government. Presidents were prejudicial: Theodore Roosevelt, and Calvin Coolidge, who was president when immigration to Ellis Island was drastically reduced, and said that America was an Anglo-Saxon country and all of these immigrants were ruining Anglo-Saxon culture. It was also the era when universities started recruiting from the Midwest, and they didn't want to recruit from New York and Boston because they perceived those cities had been contaminated by foreigners. Clearly, that situation has changed. The pronunciation of American English has been fairly well standardized. You will hear slight variations all over the country; in my opinion, the regional accents really are disappearing. Newer regionalisms are developing, but they're minor in comparison with the regionalisms of a hundred years ago, when you had a very strong southern coastal accent, a very strong New York accent, a very strong Boston accent. These have been mitigated, tending toward network standard. Nevertheless, there is a tagging of accent still going on: you'll find that, for instance, when Hispanics and Blacks fully integrate into upper middle class society, their own regional accents will fade. These differences become less perceptible. Obama is a very good example, he has a very Standard Upper Midwest English, but he can also change register: if he is campaigning to a black audience, he will change register and adopt some black colloquialisms, black intonation etc. But the fact that he passes right out of them into SWINE does indicate something, it indicates that there is a process going on of assimilation and cleansing, though not to the extent it was a hundred years ago.

**SB:** Recently, at *Iperstoria* we have been working on the Tucson Book Ban and the abolition of Mexican-American Studies program from TUSD (Tucson Unified School District). Well, this seems to be a perfect example of the ideological intersection between language (together with literature as a vehicle for language) and ethnicity, and of the way their conflation perpetuates forms of racial discrimination. Basically, Mexican-American students are being denied the right to know their own history and culture. Would you like to say something about this?

**TB:** That's crazy what they're doing in Arizona. It's interesting that this question follows the question about the Nazi: there is a similar hysteria, and a form of 'scapegoating'.

**SB:** Well, some argue that the MAS program actually displayed a bias in favor of Chicano culture, proposing a sort of "reverted ethnocentrism", so to speak. One wonders how the curriculum should be devised so as to balance the 'Mexican' and the 'American' part of it...

**TB:** The question is, what is history? History is something that is instructed; history, of course, is a retrospective on the development of the country you happen to be in, and there are a lot of contributing causes and influences to that. The solution is, even at the school level, to familiarize students with all of the contributing factors that have acted to construct history, local identity, state identity, national identity. That's already been done to a large extent: clearly, Italy and Germany had to revise their historical merits after WWII. But also, I think that since the generation of 1968 everyone in the West has changed their attitudes on history. History is seen as a constructed narrative, not as an objective report. Certain histories will valorize a certain population and de-valorize others. When I was in high school, I remember the textbook we used was called "History of a Free People": free people, they don't cost anything! Of course, that was before the break of the Soviet Union, during the Cold War, and the word 'free' was marked ideologically in opposition to the perceived threat of the Soviet Union. We can see that there was a retrospective constructed by an ideological desire to interpret history in one way, as the development of American freedom, but freedom for whom? There wasn't freedom for blacks for a long time. In Virginia, if you go on tour in the old farms, where there used to be plantations with slaves, people will say, "Oh, these were the buildings for the servants": the servants, not the slaves! There's also a tour of the Capitol building in Richmond and this tour does not talk about slavery. It's a very interesting history and it keeps slavery outside. It doesn't mention the fact that right across the street from the building there was the slave market. So, getting back to your question, when you're talking about developing a sense of history for the Hispanophone population of

Arizona, well, of course, why not? Not only for them but for everybody. We all have to see how policausal, not monocausal, how changeable and contingent the construction of our history is, especially when it is enacting a certain ideology.

**SB:** We can extend this discourse to other minority cultures, for example Native Americans, even though that's a completely different story.

Well, to conclude, let's turn to the *New York Times* article about the benefits of bilingualism. In short, recent scientific studies seem to prove that bilingual competence is beneficial not only for interpersonal/intercultural communication, but also in cognitive processes at large. Could this be a first step toward a debunking of the myth of the mother tongue, intended as a source of purity and authority? Or, instead, is there the risk that a bilingual person may even experience a sort of 'negative stigmatization', given his or her ambiguous 'linguistic identity' and therefore the difficulty to mark him or her with definite, and reassuring, social and ethnic labels?

**TB:** That's a very good question. I'm wondering why we need biological experiments to validate multilingualism. This is another point. This research comes out of the US, and the US is now very comfortable with biological explanations, it wants biological explanations of behavior but also wants biological solutions to mental illnesses (drugs). This is a market situation, which is largely influenced by pharmaceutical companies that control experiments. One contributing factor is the temporary state of health insurance: it will not pay for mental care, psychological counseling for the long term. So, at a certain point, it's easier to terminate the cure and prescribe a medication. So there's a very strong desire in the US to locate instances biologically.

As far as the stigma against multilingualism, that's a very interesting question because, clearly, what percentage of the population would have read this *New York Times* article? The NYT circulation should be under a million, I believe around 700,000. The average American is still quite startled by proficiency in a language other than English, they're very surprised. The wife of one of my colleagues saw me reading Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa*, and said, "Oh, you're reading it in Italian, but you don't sound Italian!", and I answered, "Well, I grew up there so I have this accent etc." There's a very strong passive resistance in the US to multilingualism, in spite of the fact that a lot of college students will study abroad, and colleges generally have second-language environments. In spite of that, there's still skepticism toward becoming functional in a language other than English; it's considered to be not that possible. My colleagues and I, working with languages other than English in the US, we all had the same story: "When you go to France, you speak French? When you go to Italy, you speak Italian? They understand you?" I think we need not to look at that as an innocent reaction: clearly, this skepticism toward being functional in bilingual communication is not an intentional reaction, but we shouldn't look at it as innocent. Often when I'm speaking a non-English language to someone, somebody else will come up to me and say, "Doesn't he or she speak English? Why weren't you speaking in English together?" The idea is, if you can speak English, then you must. That's what my research project now is also about, I'm looking at this apparently innocent passive resistance to the idea of the bilingual, and Americans are more surprised than everybody I've ever met. This surprise is a denial, in psychoanalytic terms. I think it's because the perceived integrity of the country is seen as threatened by the presence of an allophone, of another speaker, and that explains the attitude of Americans: "I'm sorry, I could never speak French, I can't understand it", and no effort is made. Whereas, if it were you, if you were in Romania, you wouldn't say, "No, I can't" but instead, "OK, let's try to". You wouldn't fall back in your own regional way of speaking (in Brescia, for instance). You wouldn't just walk around in Romania speaking your own sociolect from Brescia. I always say to my colleagues that Americans abroad all sound like they're from Ohio.

**SB:** So there is a strong resistance even toward the effort of practicing bilingualism...

**TB:** There is, in spite of the article. The fact we do need a research article to prove to us something that is obvious—what is wrong with multilinguals?—is revealing. Americans have a lot of problems with that. My wife's father from Moscow did not speak Russian in the USA during the Cold War. A lot of it may have been due to the fact that there was a tremendous stigma against the Russians. The US did not distinguish between Russia and the Soviet Union, they were the same thing.

**SB:** Thank you. We are very proud to have had the opportunity to interview you, we are very grateful for that and we hope you'll come back in a near future to talk again about these issues.

**TB:** Well, thank you so much. This has been a fantastic experience, please let's keep in contact. As you can tell, I love to talk about these issues, and once you get me talking it's hard to stop me. Thank you very much for this wonderful reception, and I do hope to come back soon.

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