THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE IN ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

The revival of the Saussurean langue/parole distinction by N. Chomsky (competence/performance) is indirectly responsible for the accelerated development of sociolinguistics.

CHOMSKY: *Aspects of the theory of syntax* (1965)

Quotation (p. 3)

His asocial view has been received by many linguists as a sterile approach, because it does not consider the relationship between language and its speakers (p. 10).

Chomsky’s position:
The systematicity of language is confined to competence.

The reaction to this assumption took several forms. The most influential views are:

   - Hymes assumes systematicity outside of competence in Chomsky’s narrower use of the latter term by extending the notion of competence to cover most of the aspects that Chomsky attributed to performance.
   
   ‘communicative competence’

   ↓

   knowledge of the rules of a language plus the ability to use these rules in socially and culturally appropriate ways

2. W. LABOV: *Sociolinguistic patterns* (1972)
   - He recognizes systematicity in performance as well as in competence;
   - He began to develop theories concerning systematicity in performance.

*Theoretical linguistics* is interested in the cognitive and biological apparatus of language storing and processing.
Sociolinguistics is interested in describing language as a social phenomenon; it attempts to establish causal links between language and society.

All studies of language in its socio-cultural context assume that

| LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE (=knowledge of a language) ALSO MEANS KNOWING HOW TO USE THAT LANGUAGE. |

But there are different approaches to the study of language in the socio-cultural context. We can identify three dimensions:

1. **Language use**
2. *Goals of the study of language in the socio-cultural context*
3. **Willingness to employ formal methods of analysis.**

1. **LANGUAGE USE**
   ↓
   divergent views on *use*
   a. *use*: linguistic code(s) in the conduct of social life (= ethnography of speaking).

   J. Gumperz: *Language and social groups*  (1971)

   J. Gumperz and D. Hymes: *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication*  (1972)

   Data for their analysis:
   - utterances
   - speech situations
   - presumed purpose of speech
   - communicative features of the speaker/listener

   b. *use*: the utterances are examined as **quantitative paradigms**

   The quantifying of linguistic variables and correlating them with external (social) variables.

   W. Labov (see above!)
c. *use*: the utterances are abstracted away from social context (to a variable degree).

**Discourse analysis:** Of all the subdisciplines of sociolinguistics they share the greatest number of features in methodology and results with Chomskyan linguistics.

d. *use*: ‘systems’ in languages or language varieties:

**Macro-sociolinguistics**

The study of what societies do with their languages (bilingualism, education, law, language planning, language reforms etc.).

(micro-sociolinguistics investigates how social structure influences the way people talk and how language varieties correlate with social class, sex, age etc.)

2. **THE GOALS OF THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT**

D. Hymes (in a 1972 address at a Georgetown Round Table Conference):

The three important goals of sociolinguistics are

a. **Social** as well as **linguistic: practical goals** (education, minority group policies, etc.)

To pursue these *practical goals* one need not challenge mainstream linguistics.

b. **Socially realistic linguistics:**

- challenges existing linguistic theories by drawing data from the speech community itself;
- it typically addresses traditional linguistic problems such as the nature of linguistic rules, sound change, etc.

c. **Socially constituted linguistics:**

- social functions give forms to the ways in which linguistic features are encountered in actual life;
• it must begin by identifying social functions;
• it is concerned with social context in relation to language (= part of communicative conduct and social action).
• it strives toward a ‘theory of language’ instead of a ‘theory of grammar’

‘THEORY OF LANGUAGE:’ studies the use of utterances within a communicative situation inseparable from its social context. The phenomena of social order are systematically incorporated into the linguistic analysis; priority is given to the social over the linguistic; social functions determine the distribution of linguistic forms.

3. WILLINGNESS TO EMPLOY FORMAL METHODS OF ANALYSIS

a. W. Labov (1972) see reference above!
   • He shares many of the assumptions about formalization inherent in mainstream generative grammar;
   • Through the mechanism of the ‘variable rule’ (see later), he incorporates social variables directly into the existing generative mechanism.

   • Formal analysis should be considered only as a means of making an analysis precise.
   • The ‘knowledge of rules’ on the part of the speaker or listener does not have to be incorporated into an algorithm for producing appropriate utterances.

c. T. van Dijk: Text and context (1977)
   • He extends rule formulation to cover aspects of pragmatics, in particular to account for the specific functions of discourse types in certain contexts and social situations.
   • While for Hymes, human needs and intentions seem to be irreducible to formal analysis, van Dijk extends formal analysis to cover these areas.
• His rules are not highly formalized (like the rules of generative grammar), they are better termed as being ‘statements’, ‘conditions’, ‘principles’, ‘strategies,’ etc.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

POSSIBILITIES: pp. 10-11.

SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF LANGUAGE

R. Hudson: *Sociolinguistics* (1996)

He defines:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{SOCIOLINGUISTICS} & \quad \text{SOCIOLOGY OF LANGUAGE} \\
\text{The study of language in relation to society} & \quad \text{The study of society in relation to language}
\end{align*}
\]

Quotation from Hudson: p. 13

This view is adopted by R. Wardhaugh (our book; see p. 13)

P. Trudgill: *Sociolinguistic patterns in British English* (1978)

• He defines sociolinguistics as a discipline aimed at confirming or rejecting linguistic theories.

• His aim is *not* to learn more about society or about correlations between society and language.

• Sociolinguistics is an alternate way of studying variation, language change etc.

• Only studies with linguistic intent are to be considered genuine sociolinguistics.

• Ethnography of speaking, discourse analysis, bilingualism etc. should rather be considered as anthropological linguistics, social psychology of language, etc.
METHODOLOGY

Sociolinguistics must be oriented toward both data and theory → it is an empirical discipline!

Principles for sociolinguistic investigation: pp. 18-19.

A methodological issue: The actual choice of context.

Which contextual features are most relevant to the production and interpretation of speech?

a. W. Labov (1972) see reference above!
   - He stresses large-scale factors that are properties of the participants in a communicative situation (race, sex, age, socio-economic status, etc.)
   - He also includes ‘style’
     - a major external variable: ‘The amount of attention paid to speech.’

   - He stresses the larger non-communicative situation in which the communicative event takes place.
   - ‘Style’ is not to be associated with linguistic products; rather it is talk that helps to reinforce them. Therefore the ‘self’ and the ‘communicative situation’ are themselves social contexts.

The main difference between these two models is not their choice of contexts per se, but the hypotheses they set up about the relationship between LANGUAGE and CONTEXT:

Labov: LINGUISTIC PRIORITY OVER SOCIAL

Gumperz, Hymes: SOCIAL PRIORITY OVER LINGUISTIC

Other studies do not acknowledge priorities, treating the two together, e.g. B. Lavandera: “Where does the sociolinguistic variable stop?” (Language in Society, 1978)
