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1 The study of language in its socio-cultural context

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1.0. Introduction

It does not seem far-fetched to hold Chomsky indirectly responsible for the accelerated development of sociolinguistics and ethnolinguistics at the end of the 1960s and for the emphasis laid upon pragmatics and discourse analysis in the mid 1970s. Paradoxical as it may seem, his revival of the Saussurean *langue–parole* dichotomy (under the names 'competence' and 'performance'), and, even more important, his assertion of the autonomy of syntax, sparked a renewed interest in the study of language in its socio-cultural context. Both these twin pillars of Chomskyan linguistics seemed to many to shut out most of the more interesting questions about language, in particular those relating to its functioning in society. As a consequence, a sizeable number of linguists struck out on their own, as it were, and devoted themselves to building alternative conceptions of language, in which its social function was regarded as paramount.

The reaction to Chomsky's position that the systematicity of language is confined to competence took a number of different forms. Some, seeing systematicity outside of competence in Chomsky's narrow use of the term, attempted to extend the notion of competence to cover most of the aspects that Chomsky ascribed to performance. An example is Hymes's (1972) 'communicative competence,' which he defined as the knowledge of the abstract rules of a language required to produce sound/meaning correspondences, and the ability to use those correspondences between sound, meaning, and form in socially and culturally appropriate ways. On the other hand, some saw system in performance as well as in competence and began to develop theories specifically of the former (e.g. Labov 1969, 1972a). But whichever path was taken, a growing core of investigators was united in the conviction that the Chomskyan paradigm was too narrow to accommodate most of the interesting questions about language.

In the following pages, I will survey and comment upon the principal trends in the study of language in its socio-cultural context. I do not aim at

exhaustive coverage of the topic, nor do I plan to conduct a survey of the chapters of this volume (a survey of surveys hardly seems like a useful enterprise!). Rather, I will here and there refer briefly to the chapters to illustrate general points and to use their content as a sounding board for my own views on the general problem of language and social context.

1.1. Some dimensions of the study of language and socio-cultural context

Approaches to socially oriented linguistics do not pigeonhole themselves into neat divisions, each of which is distinct from the others in terms of its subject matter, goals, methodology, and so on. The situation is much more complex: we find among the various parts of the field considerable overlapping along many dimensions, so that two areas that share the same basic subject of investigation may disagree on methodology, while the methodology of one of them may be shared by researchers in an entirely different area of investigation. The following subsections outline what I feel are the three most important dimensions along which approaches to language in its socio-cultural context may be described: their basic subject matter, i.e. their conception of what is meant by 'language use' (1.1.1); their fundamental goals (1.1.2); and their willingness to employ formal methods of analysis (1.1.3).

1.1.1. Language use

All of the subfields represented in this volume share a common feature – their aim is to study language in use. Yet 'use' is understood in deeply divergent senses, each of which for all practical purposes defines a semi-independent discipline. For example, in the area known as 'ethnography of speaking,' which was pioneered by John Gumperz and Dell Hymes (see Gumperz 1971; Gumperz & Hymes 1972; Hymes 1974) and is represented by Duranti's chapter (12) in this volume, 'use' refers to the use of the linguistic code or codes in the conduct of social life. Studies in this area are dynamic and interactional and, in most recent work, adopt Goffman's theory of social order (1971, 1974, 1981). The data of analysis in the ethnography of speaking tend to be utterances or collections of utterances, features of the speaker, hearer, and speech situation, and the presumed purpose of the speech.

The 'quantitative paradigm' shares with the ethnography of speaking a body of data defined on the basis of produced utterances. However, in this area, which originated in work by William Labov and his collaborators, the *object* of analysis is no longer an utterance or collection of connected utterances. Rather it is the 'aggregate statistical data' that result from

quantifying linguistic variables and correlating them with external variables in all the utterances of the corpus, which itself is obtained from a socio-economically representative sample of speakers (cf. Labov 1972a). Three chapters in this volume deal with the quantitative paradigm from different angles: Guy's 'Language and social class' (3) relates it to the hard issue of appropriate social theories for sociolinguistics; Walters's 'Dialectology' (7) presents the practitioners of this model as modernized urban dialectologists; and Sankoff's 'Sociolinguistics and syntactic variation' (8) advocates this paradigm in the strongest terms and endows it with (I think questionable) social goals.

Other areas focus on the utterance as well, but typically at an interpersonal level, abstracted to one degree or another away from the social context. This is the case for most work in discourse analysis and to a lesser extent in conversation analysis, represented in this volume by the chapters (13 and 14) by Blakemore and Schiffrin, respectively. Of all the subdisciplines covered in this volume, discourse analysis shares in its methodology and results the greatest number of features with Chomskyan linguistics. While its subject matter may be real speech used in real speech situations, it tends to approach this subject matter in the autonomous way that generative grammarians approach the patterning of grammatical elements.

Finally, there is an approach to language use that is very different from those just described. This approach (or, more properly, set of approaches) falls under the heading 'macro-sociolinguistics.' Here the data are not utterances, but systems, in particular languages or language varieties that occur within the same community. The task of the linguist becomes to study and analyze the relationships among such systems. Some branches of macro-sociolinguistics represented in this volume are bilingualism (Chapter 6), dialectology (Chapter 7), language planning (Chapter 11), language birth (Chapter 9), and language death (Chapter 10).

1.1.2. Goals of the study of language in context

While approaches differ in their subject matter, they also differ in their ultimate objectives. Not surprisingly, in an area as diverse and far-ranging as that of the study of language in its social context, we find widely diverging goals. Dell Hymes, in a 1972 address at a Georgetown Round Table (published in Hymes 1974), outlined what he saw as the three most important distinct goals of practitioners of sociolinguistics (in the widest sense of the term). Since I find Hymes's trichotomy a useful one, I will present it in this section.

Hymes referred to the first orientation as 'the social as well as the linguistic.' This category involves socially oriented work whose immediate

goals are practical ones, such as that involving language as it relates to education, to minority groups, and to language policies. To pursue such goals one need not challenge normal mainstream linguistics. Indeed, as Hymes pointed out, such luminaries of grammatical research as Sapir, Bloomfield, and Swadesh involved themselves in practical concerns. Work in this tradition continues today, and is represented in this volume by the chapters by Baugh on 'Language and race,' (4) by Christian on 'Language planning,' (11) by Dressler on 'Language death,' (10) and by McConnell-Ginet on 'Language and gender' (5).

Hymes called the second orientation 'socially realistic linguistics.' This orientation, represented in the 1970s especially by the work of Labov and his colleagues, challenges existing linguistics by drawing on data from the speech community itself and by developing new methodologies which in turn result in new findings about language. Nevertheless, Hymes did not see its goals as deviating significantly from those of normal linguistics, in that it has typically addressed itself to very traditional problems: the nature of linguistic rules, the nature of sound change, and so on.

Hymes saw the third orientation, 'socially constituted linguistics,' as possessing goals fundamentally different from those of the first two. In his words, it represents

> the fundamental challenge to whose threshold we have come; [it] expresses the view that social function gives form to the ways in which linguistic features are encountered in actual life; [it] must begin by identifying social functions, and discover the ways in which linguistic features are selected and grouped to serve them . . . it shares a concern for social realism and validity . . . A socially constituted linguistics is concerned with social as well as referential meaning, and with language as part of communicative conduct and social action. (1974: 196)

Hymes, whose advocacy of this orientation toward language and society was explicit, saw as its most important distinguishing feature the fact that it strives toward a 'theory of language,' not a 'theory of grammar.' Normal linguistics has principally been involved in constructing the latter. That is, it has been concerned with the study of regularities in language that pertain solely to the relative frequency of occurrence or cooccurrence of various structures. Thus the quantitative paradigm is an example of an approach devoted to a theory of grammar.

A theory of language, on the other hand, studies the use of utterances in discourse within a communicative situation undivorceable from its social context. Thus the phenomena of social order are systematically incorporated into the linguistic analysis and priority is given to the social over the linguistic

in order to achieve a better understanding of language. This orientation insists as well on the role of function in determining the distribution of linguistic forms.[1]

1.1.3. The question of formalization

A further important division among 'socially concerned' linguists, and one which does not dovetail with the first two, centers around the issue of formalization. Three important (and contrasting) positions are those of William Labov, Dell Hymes, and Teun van Dijk. Labov, for example, shares many of the assumptions about formalization inherent in mainstream generative grammar; indeed, he sees his own theory as not only compatible with that theory, but also contributing to it. Specifically, through the mechanism of the 'variable rule,' he incorporates social variables directly into already existing generative mechanisms. He has even expressed the hope that his variation theory might provide answers to all (or at least some) traditional questions that have occupied generativist theory. It is worth noting, however, that while Labov still sees variable rules as beneficial (as pointed out by the Walters chapter, 7, in this volume), he has backed off considerably in recent years in the degree of explanatory power he feels is attributable to them. Labov now states that 'Linguistic variables or variable rules are not in themselves a "theory of language." They are all heuristic devices . . . Thus a variable rule analysis is not put forward as a description of the grammar, but as a device for finding out about the grammar' (1978: 10–13).

Dell Hymes, on the other hand, has advocated formulating rules of speaking as a means of making an analysis precise, but has cautioned his readers that when dealing with the understanding of human purposes and needs, formal analysis might be indispensable, 'but [it is] only a means, and not that understanding itself' (1974: 64–5).

Hymes, while he talks of 'rules' and 'knowledge of rules,' does not appear to consider them to be the sort that could be incorporated into an algorithm for producing appropriate utterances or for relating utterances to context. Actually, Hymes has never made explicit the form of the rules that he sees in the communicative competence of the speaker–hearer that would represent his or her ability to use utterances in socially and culturally appropriate ways.

Finally, van Dijk's work (1977) is representative of a trend that extends rule formulation to cover many 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 irreduc-

[1] Sankoff's chapter in this volume credits variation theory for the interest within sociolinguistics in function and interpretation, without acknowledging earlier proponents of the use of these concepts in the study of variation, e.g. Hymes (1974), Lavandera (1978, 1982).

ible to formal analysis, van Dijk extends formal analysis to cover these areas and to speakers' and hearers' knowledge, beliefs, and preferences as well.

While van Dijk and others refer to 'pragmatic rules,' one must not be misled into thinking that such rules are highly formalized within an axiomatized system like the rules of generative grammar. In most cases, they tend to be fragmentary or isolated, and used rather loosely, e.g. in the way that Labov (1972b) refers to 'rules for ritual insults.' Such 'rules' are better termed 'statements,' 'conditions,' 'principles,' 'maxims,' 'strategies,' and so on, rather than rules. And to be sure, such terms have often been employed (cf. Grice's 1975 'maxims'; Gumperz's 1982a 'strategies'; and Searle's 1969, 1979 'conditions').

1.2. The need for a social theory

If one's sights are set on a theory of grammar rather than a theory of language, then it is not crucial which social theory the sociolinguist adopts. Such a theory, for example, is not crucial to the variationists, whose goal is to uncover quantitative patterns and correlations that reveal linguistic structures within performance. Indeed, variation theory does not even demand that the correlations be made with social or stylistic factors. As David Sankoff puts it in his contribution to this volume, 'the internal linguistic conditioning of interest to variationists . . . can be amply exemplified in the phonology of a single individual . . . without regard to social or stylistic factors' (p. 141). What could be farther from Hymes's notion of a socially constituted sociolinguistics?

On the other hand, the situation is quite different for those whose goal is to develop a theory of language in its social context, rather than a theory of grammar. The concern with the choice of a social theory becomes paramount, since one of the fundamental questions is which elements of the social context affect the production and understanding of language in natural settings.[2]

Gregory R. Guy's chapter (3) in this volume surveys the possible social theories that might be called upon to define the extralinguistic variables of concern to sociolinguistics. As he rightly points out, practically all work in this area to date has been carried out within Labov's model of social stratification. Guy also discusses, briefly and clearly, what would be involved in a sociolinguistic analysis from a Marxist outlook (see also Rickford 1986). (Marxist variation studies tend, unfortunately, to be highly inadequate. An example is Bordieu & Boltanski 1975, which never went beyond proposing a subjective method for constructing a more representative sample.)

[2] For an excellent example of how social divisions hinder communication, see Gumperz's studies of interethnic verbal exchanges (1982a, b).

I disagree with Guy's statement that a Marxist view of society as a conflict of social classes could coexist with Labov's (1972a) definition of a speech community in terms of a social norm imbued with prestige and shared by all social classes. Guy attempts to rephrase Labov's position in Marxist terms, but fails, in my view. Indeed, Labov himself believes that the choice of social theory is irrelevant to the linguistic result (personal communication, July 1986), and has written:

> As far as the synchronic aspect of language structure is concerned, it would be an error to put for [sic] much emphasis on social factors. Generative grammar has made great progress in working out the invariant relations within this structure, even though it wholly neglects the social context of language. (1970: 78)

Given such an attitude, it is not surprising that Labov could describe the English passive as a sociolinguistic variable even after having found that it cannot be correlated with social factors (see Labov & Weiner 1977 and, for discussion, Lavandera 1978).[3]

The lack of concern with social theory shown by many practitioners of the quantitative model has caused many sociolinguists to turn away from that model.[4] Others have divided their concerns: they continue quantitative formal studies, while at the same time devoting an important and successful part of their research to the use of linguistic evidence and argumentation to shed light on eminently social problems, as has Labov in much work (e.g. 1982).

My position is that any theory that aims at understanding social life and organization through a study of the principles governing verbal communication must grant first priority to the choice of social theory.

1.3. **The problem of context**

The diversity of goals and methodologies within the study of language and society and the lack of a consensus on an adequate social theory (or even on the need for one) has led to even greater diversity of opinion on what the relevant contextual features are for an adequate sociolinguistic analysis. The following two subsections review and comment upon some of the issues in this regard. In 1.3.1 I summarize the many aspects of context that have been

[3] Weiner and Labov later (1983) published a corrected version in which they reported the effect of some social factors, including sex, age, class, and ethnicity.

[4] To be fair to the variationists, many of them are now explicitly aware of the shortcomings in the methodology to which I alluded above and have broadened their base in a number of important ways. Also, variation theory is hardly homogeneous; for work within this general framework that introduced important modifications, see L. Milroy 1980, J. Milroy & L. Milroy 1985, and Guy 1979.

deemed relevant; 1.3.2 discusses the (dramatic) consequences of the choice of social versus interpersonal context as the more important for analysis.

1.3.1. A methodological issue: the actual choice of contexts

It is a highly controversial issue which contextual features are most relevant to the production and interpretation of speech, and we find different models stressing different features. This section outlines those that have been considered as having most important effects on the form and/or function of the string of speech under analysis.

Probably the leading factor cited has been the immediate communicative situation within which the speech act is performed (for extensive discussion, see Hymes 1972, 1974). However, there are many ways of looking at the communicative situation. Labov, for example, stresses large-scale factors that are properties of the participants in a communicative situation, like sex, age, race, socioeconomic status, and so on. Labov also includes 'style' as a major external variable, which he defines as 'the amount of attention paid to speech.' Ethnomethodologists, however, disagree, and claim that styles in particular, and institutional arrangements in general, are not associated with linguistic products; rather it is talk that helps to constitute or reinforce them. Hence, for them, 'self' (along with 'other' and 'situation') are themselves social contexts, which have symbolic meanings for participants. Furthermore, individual efforts at expression alone cannot create a self; rather 'those expressive meanings have to be understood and acted upon by the one to whom they are directed' (Chapter 14 below, p. 266).

Others, such as Gumperz (1982a, b) stress the larger noncommunicative situation in which the communicative event takes place and in which the speech act is embedded. Still others stress the divisions internal to the speech community, such as groups, networks, classes, etc., and those cultural patterns prevailing within it which affect the speech behavior of each of the participants in the analyzed speech event.[5]

Other contextual features that have been proposed within different models as being relevant to the production and interpretation of speech include shared knowledge, beliefs, intentions, presuppositions, inferences, and so on that may have a social or cultural basis; meaningful nonverbal action that precedes, accompanies, or follows the speech under analysis;[6] the characteristics of the existing relationships between speaker(s) and hearer(s),

[5] For a thorough review of the competing definitions of 'speech community,' see Guy's chapter in this volume and Rickford 1986.

[6] Goffman's theory places special stress on nonverbal modalities, which work in concert with the purely linguistic means towards achieving social organization. For a good selection of Goffman's most important statements about the problem of the relationship between language and social organization, see the Schiffrin chapter (14) in this volume.

whether symmetric or asymmetric; and the characteristics of the speaker(s) and hearer(s) that are used by members of the community in the laying down of norms, laws, and decisions, such as their sex, age, race, or educational level.

Despite this rather long list of contextual features that have been appealed to by various sociolinguistic models, it is my contention that the main difference among the different models does not reside in their choice of contexts *per se*, but rather in the hypotheses that they set up about the interrelationship *between* language and context, and whether they grant the social priority over the linguistic, as does Hymes, the linguistic priority over the social, as does Labov, or treat the two together, as I feel is correct.

1.3.2. Social context versus interpersonal context

So far in this overview I have used the term 'context' somewhat ambiguously to cover both social context and interpersonal context. Any comprehensive study of language use, needless to say, must appeal to both. Yet the subdisciplines represented by the chapters in this volume do not call upon them equally, as I shall now illustrate.

In the ethnography of speaking and in most branches of sociolinguistics, it is social context that is most relevant (though there are both ethnolinguists and sociolinguists who would reject this characterization). The context is 'social' in the sense that it encompasses the internal organization of a society, with its tensions, internal differences, subgroupings, and so on. Thus the study of language in a social context consists of the study of the linguistic material produced within the structure of the society. It pays special attention to the way in which particular characteristics of the society affect the structures of variation and change of the language spoken, and, conversely, to the way in which different uses of language and different attitudes about its varieties affect the internal dimensions and forces of the recipient community.

It is worth citing a couple of examples of the mutual influence between linguistic structure and social structure that forms a primary topic of investigation by ethnographers of speaking and sociolinguists. Take for example the adoption by increasingly large members of a speech community of a stigmatizing attitude toward the use of some particular linguistic variant, which in turn is likely to result in a linguistic situation affecting internal relations among groups. Another example might be the way in which upwardly mobile members of the lower middle class will manifest a concern for hypercorrection that is likely to have linguistic manifestations.

On the other hand, in subdisciplines such as pragmatics, discourse analysis, and conversation analysis, the interpersonal or 'interactional' con-

text typically takes priority over the social. These areas are not devoted to understanding the interaction of the linguistic structure with the structure of the society; rather, the focus is devoted to (usually two) interacting individuals – a speaker and a listener. The context that is assumed to be essential to the understanding of the exchanged utterances or texts includes elements rooted in psychology, such as intentions, beliefs, and rationality. In these subdisciplines, even when social factors like 'power' and 'status' are appealed to (as in Brown & Levinson 1978), they enter the analysis through the psychological configuration of the individual. The kinds of acts described and explained by pragmatic theories in particular (those of Grice 1975 and Searle 1979 are good examples) are primarily oriented to the psychological setups of the interacting individuals.

To give an example, studies of politeness strategies tend to focus solely on the state of the relationship between the participants themselves, in particular to their state of psychological satisfaction or offence. The approach to personal relationships is thus a 'punctual' one: one or both of the participants are pleased or insulted by a single act. Yet they typically ignore the social fact that such strategies reflect the distribution of power in the society. How power is assigned and maintained linguistically in the society remains outside the scope of conversation analysis and pragmatics.

This is not to imply that all investigators who focus on participants in a speech event put forward the image of a thoroughly passive speaker–hearer. John Gumperz's 'discourse strategies' framework, for example (see Gumperz 1982a, b) upholds an active dynamic view of the speaker and hearer, in which the speech actors themselves can modify, and even create, many of the features of the social context of their speech. Some of these changes, which can be the result rather than the conditioning factor of the speech exchange, are easy to pinpoint, such as the formality of the situation and the symmetric or asymmetric character of the relationship between speaker(s) and hearer(s). Indeed, as Gumperz demonstrates, the power of both speaker and hearer to modify social contexts can go well beyond the rather obvious modifying factor just mentioned.[7]

1.4. **Discourse analysis**

This discussion will close with a more detailed look at an approach to the study of language use that typically appeals to the interpersonal rather than to the social context, namely discourse analysis. I hope to show that such an appeal, with its consequent exclusive focus on internal properties of discourse such as cohesion, coherence, and relevance is not mandatory. Rather, it is

[7] A large body of literature builds upon Gumperz's active view of the speaker and hearer (see especially Ervin-Tripp 1972). For an alternative view of politeness strategies, see Lavandera 1987.

possible to go beyond the interpersonal to the social and establish external connections with the social context within which discourse functions.

I should begin by pointing out that the term 'discourse' has been used in the literature of the last decade as the synonym of two terms with quite different meanings: 'situated speech' and 'text.' The former use can be found in research carried out in the ethnography of speaking, sociolinguistics, and (occasionally) pragmatics; the latter use is the one most commonly applied by the field of discourse analysis itself and the related field of text grammar. Indeed, 'discourse' (in the latter definition) constitutes the sole object of study of most work in discourse analysis, whose purpose (abstracting away from various differences among its practitioners) is to understand the difference between a collection of unconnected sentences and a well-formed text (for a good example, see van Dijk 1977).

Reading a representative paper from the field of discourse analysis as represented in the English-speaking countries ('Anglo-Saxon discourse analysis,' one might call it) is often a disappointing experience. Typically, such a paper will fall into one of two categories. In the first, the analyst deals with an antiseptic parceled text, cleansed of ideological load, and isolated from the chain of discourses of which it is part. In the second, the analyst keeps the text entirely on the mental level, and exemplifies the properties attributed to a well-formed discourse (cohesion, coherence, relevance, and so on) with little more than short sequences of two or three artificially constructed sentential sequences.[8]

Chapter 13 in this volume synthesizes the Anglo-Saxon tradition of analyzing 'discourses' outside of their social context of production and reception (though reference is made to van Dijk's rather different approach).

I see a much more fruitful approach to discourse analysis taking place outside the Anglo-Saxon tradition (for a good overview, focussing on French and Marxist approaches in particular, see Seidel 1985). This alternative tradition began more than fifty years ago with the work of Vološinov (1973) and Bakhtin (1981) (who in all probability were the same person), which has been described by Gill Seidel as having 'injected into pragmatics and linguistics a political awareness and a theory of social action, largely Marxist, that can be seen as part of the development of socially relevant and socially realistic linguistics' (1985: 44; see also Hymes 1977). It continues today in the work of the French discourse analyst Ducrot (1972, 1973, 1984) and in that of many others who see their work as part of the general study of communicative behavior and social action.

For this approach, which is the one that I advocate, the examination of

[8] Even such an exhaustive treatment of cohesion as that provided by Halliday and Hasan (1976) does not provide the elements with which to uncover the hierarchization of information within the text, which should certainly have priority over the issue of 'well-formedness.'

units like utterances, short exchanges, and speech acts and texts in isolation are but intermediate (though necessary) steps in the understanding of the social nature of speech. To obtain a full picture of language in context, we must study interdiscourse relations, in which several discourses are connected by their reference to the same topic with differences in their schematic organization; intertextual or sequential relations, i.e. where each discourse paves the way for the discourse that will follow it, produced by the same or by a different speaker; and how the social function of a discourse is altered by the ideology within which it is produced or received.[9]

[9] At the Instituto de Lingüística de la Universidad de Buenos Aires we are currently developing an approach to discourse such as I have just outlined. Our working paper series, *Análisis sociolingüístico del discurso político. Cuadernos del Instituto de Lingüística*, includes articles on internal hierarchization of information (Pardo 1986; Lavandera 1986b), interdiscourse relations (Lavandera *et al.* 1985), and intertextual relations (Raiter & Menéndez 1986; Lavandera 1985). An important research undertaking is an analysis of what is specific to discourse within the social functioning of language and an identification of the way in which discourse features respond to and, in turn, create functions of social scope, including the roles or symbolic loci of the participants in the *énonciation* (García Negroni & Raiter 1986). Others include the means of 'referred discourse' (Zoppi 1986) and mitigating resources (Lavandera 1986a).

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