

SOCIAL USE OF LANGUAGE (SOCIOLINGUISTICS)

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Summary

Speech, the basic mode of language use, creates and derives meaning from integral relations between abstract patterns which comprise it on one hand, and social dynamics in which it figures on the other. Empirical approaches to the study of speech patterns in social contexts have been developed so as to foreground the multiple meanings of language structure in interpersonal experience. Such meanings emerge in different temporal dynamics, ranging from the “real-time” of situated talk in interactional relations to long-term, historical processes of sociolinguistic change. Research paradigms and findings summarized here contribute important empirical sociolinguistic correctives to received common sense ideologies of languages. Taken together they demonstrate that common conceptions of homogeneous, unitary languages can have important political effects, and make language variation play into and reproduce social difference and hierarchy.

1. Introduction

Empirical, descriptive approaches to language have traditionally centered on the patterns and structures, which make speech a distinctively human form of communication. Those patterns are discovered in partial, recurring sameness of sound and meaning which make it possible for transient physical events of behavior (talk) to embody and convey multiple symbolic significances (meanings). The earliest science of language developed along with heuristic strategies for generalizing about properties, which are common across languages, and diverse modes of human talk. These centered on and allowed recurring structures to be abstracted from heterogeneous masses of talk, and recognized as properties of “underlying” language codes or systems.

These language systems are understood to be composed of interlocking substructures of

sound, grammar, and lexicon. These structures count as an enduring form of practical knowledge shared among language users. As such all language of knowledge is social, because it is shared among those who are able to produce and perceive as meaningful instances of its use.

In the 1960's Noam Chomsky's generative paradigm for the study of language structure radically universalized questions about language. He proposed that linguistics' ultimate goal should be an account of the neurocognitive endowment which enables any genetically normal human to internalize knowledge of, or gain "competence" in, any language they are exposed to during the "critical developmental period" for language acquisition. This new paradigm involved new methods and goals but shared basic empirical concerns and heuristic assumptions with older "structural" paradigms in linguistics. In each object of description and analysis are recurring aspects of language structure, assumed to be invariant and shared by a homogeneous community of speakers. By assuming a state of perfect sharing of knowledge, linguists can abstract away from particular speakers and acts of speech, and so also an indefinite range of contextual factors. In this way they also abstract away facts of language use and meaning which are always necessarily grounded in the contingencies of transient events of talk.

Sociolinguistics, broadly understood, has developed out of different approaches to crucially situated and embodied meanings of talk. The broad challenge faced in this field has been to reject or qualify these simplifying assumptions of structure-centered approaches to language, while nonetheless keeping facts of language structure at the center of their investigations. Although the empirical foci and implications of different sociolinguistic paradigms vary in ways described in this chapter, all share a grounding in contextual relations of structure to us, reject the easy substitution of abstract models for interactional experience, and are concerned with dynamics of communicative process, change, and variation. In different ways, sociolinguists investigate complex relations between structures which talk embodies and interactional lives of which talk is part.

Different relations between talk and context create different types of multiple layered social "meanings." The word "meaning" as it figures in these paradigms counts as a phenomenon, which is emergent from interplay between speakers' shared knowledge of structures governing the production and recognition of well-formed combinations of words, and of the social and contextual surrounds in which those structures are realized as embodied conduct. Social meaning also derives from the fact that knowledge of language never perfectly coincides between speakers. Rather, it overlaps within and between groups of speakers, which can make language difference important within larger ideas or ideologies of social difference and inequality. It also bears importantly on approaches to language change which have largely superseded older, historical approaches to language structure which turn out to have been handicapped by ideas that languages constitute unitary objects, as noted above.

To move beyond descriptions of uniform, static structures requires several different strategies for situating structures in some time frame or temporal dynamic. Most immediate of these is what can be called the "realtime" of talk: the measurable events of

speech, occurring in and helping to maintain interactional dynamics in such events combine and alternate with each other as “turns at talk.” A second, broadly ontogenetic point of view, these events can be studied for their cumulative, long-term role in processes of language socialization, which culminate in acquisition not just of what Chomsky calls competence in a given language, but also in participation in ways of life governed by broader understandings of contexts, persons, and worlds. A third, still longer term dynamic of language focuses on variation and difference in language use, and patterns of language change they reveal. From this perspective, dynamics of language change turn out to be integrally related to broader social institutions and ideologies operative within and across communities.

The following review of sociolinguistics is organized around these sorts of temporal dynamics, each partially delimiting the scope and implications of different research paradigms discussed here and in other articles. In different ways, these paradigms have also developed, thanks to recording technologies which make possible the empirical study of speech independently of its symbolization in some form of writing (or orthography). As researchers have become increasingly able to study talk and its interactional surrounds “directly,” through traces speech and conduct can be made to leave on recording media, it has become increasingly apparent that technologies of writing have their own shaping effects on conceptions or ideas of language with important social implications.

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Biographical sketch

J. Joseph Errington teaches anthropological linguistics and Southeast Asian studies, and his research has centered on issues of language and social change in the south-central region of Java, Indonesia. He has focused on semiotic dimensions of verbal interaction, the politics of language and ethnicity in plural societies, and the role of language in formation of social identities. His books are *Language and social change in Java: linguistic reflexes of modernization in a traditional royal polity* (1985, Athens, OH, USA: Center for Southeast Asian Studies), *Structure and style in Javanese: a semiotic view of linguistic etiquette* (1988, Philadelphia PA, USA: U. of Pennsylvania Press) and *Shifting languages: interaction and identity in Javanese Indonesia*. (1998, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press). He is currently writing a critical review of linguistics during the colonial era.