The Sociology of Language: A Return Visit

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When the sociology of language was first renewed after World War II, it had already experienced roughly half a century of growth, primarily under German (and ultimately: Nazi) auspices. Originally, after its revival in the United States under the auspices of a Research Committee of the American Social Science Research Council, the designations “sociology of language” and “sociolinguistics” were approximately equally common in the United States. The German designation had usually been Sprach Sociologie, and at that time it was commonly the province of sociologists, but the SSRC’s committee broke new ground by including both sociologists and linguists (Paulston and Tucker 1997). Since the latter had a far stronger link to and investment in language than did the former, their preferred designation, “sociolinguistics”, came to be the more common one and has even come to be preferred, at times, among some of those who basically view themselves as sociologists of language (although members of both groups have also collaborated and have shared some common interests, namely Shuy (1990) and Koerner (1991)). Nevertheless, to this very day, the two names have separate connotations. “Sociolinguistics” implies a type of linguistics (and, therefore, a concern with phonology, aspects of grammar, lexicon and discourse, etc.) whereas the “sociology of language” implies a type of sociology and, accordingly, a focus on social class, social processes and social problems, as related to and expressed via language. This presentation is subtitled “a return visit” to indicate an attempt to pick up on and further develop a perspective that has been relatively neglected in recent years.

Units and Topics of Analysis

Linguists conceive of their area of specialization in terms of a hierarchy of units of study ordered by their complexity (from elementary sounds through to sentences and full running-text or discourse). This sequence demonstrates the analytic maturity, power and conciseness that linguistics has achieved as a discipline, bordering even on those achieved by the natural sciences per se. Sociology has achieved neither the consensus nor the rigor of linguistics and its units and topics of analysis are less fully or consensually defined and less unequivocally ordered. Figure 1 represents one diagrammatic view of some of the units that may pertain to the entire sociology of language continuum, going from its border with “sociolinguistics” toward those of its interests that are more uniquely own.

Going from bottom to top, we find interaction type, role relationship and the person-place-topic-time considerations (which, taken together and concordantly, define, a “sociolinguistic situation”). A congregant/clergyperson, interacting in an acknowledged time and place of worship, on an acknowledged worship-related topic, would constitute such a fully concordant “sociolinguistic situation”. The above units are constructs that either have a common-sense or a sociological pedigree and, vis-a-vis language, they have largely remained empirically at the level of constructs that have yet to be precisely defined or validated. We do not know, for example, to what extent “time” is a crucial component of sociolinguistic situations in so far as influencing language behavior (e.g., which language is preferred among bilinguals who are equally at home in both of their languages). Are “time”, “place”, “person (role-relationship)” and “topic” of equal or of unequal importance in conjunction with determining language behaviors in all cultures, or does their relative importance vary from culture to culture or from one historical period to another within any given culture (Greenfield and Fishman 1971)? The latter state of affairs is almost certainly the case, given the contextual core of all social behavior, but further delimitation is acutely needed before empirical parameters can be established. The same is doubtlessly true for normatively “non-congruent” situations (e.g., were the above same individuals to meet after midnight in a secret place). In the New York City area it has been empirically demonstrated that incongruent situations result in a greater scatter (i.e., in less agreement) as to appropriate verbal behavior than do congruent situations (Greenfield and Fishman 1971). Much more work obviously needs to be done in order to obtain greater definitional precision, predictability and conceptual clarification in this connection (see Hymes 1962). Even prior to tackling “situation”, however, we must consider “speech community”, a notion which may well be foundational to all of the sociology of language (although it is not shown in Figure 1).
"Speech Community"

The community of speakers consists of all of those who are perceived as speaking the same language, either in actual or in virtual interaction. Thus like most other sociological entities, its reality depends on collective definition and acceptance at least on a small group level. Such a community not only shares ways of talking but of understanding or interpreting the matters that are spoken about. Such a community may be culturalological too (i.e., culturally different than its neighbors), but whether or not it is the latter, it has shared ways of behaving, of daily living, of valuing and of interacting both with and across its interaction networks (see below). Its boundaries may be natural (related to features of topography and climate) or related to perceived somatotypical similarities, but even when neither of the foregoing seem to be operative, they are reflective of frequency of verbal interaction via a "shared common language."