CHAPTER 3

Sociology and the Power of (Ordinary) Language

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Introduction

The pragmatic dimensions of language (use) have been of particular importance in sociology since the publication of Durkheim's study of religious symbolism (Durkheim, 1976) and Mead's theory of significant symbols (Mead, 1934). Thereafter, Parsons made a fundamental contribution to this “symbolic turn” in sociology (Parsons, 1977). The development of the speech-act theory and the study of ordinary language use from the middle of the 20th century have had a decisive influence on subsequent sociology, as attested by many of the modern classics. Various aspects and functions of language have been of interest for sociologists: language as a means/medium for communication (Luhmann, 1988; Habermas, 1981); as the all-important means for social-interactional rituals and the definition of social situations (Goffman, 1967); and as means/media for the exercise of power and the construction of social hierarchies (Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron, 1991).

In this chapter, I will address certain issues concerning relationships between ordinary language and the scientific conceptions of social realities. Bourdieu’s critique of everyday language and common sense will be of particular importance. The chapter will suggest that although ordinary language and everyday conceptions are inadequate as a scientific vocabulary, they are part of the conditions for the existence of social reality. The “craft” of sociology must combine insights into the constructive importance of everyday language and the conceptions of various forms of scientific “breaks” with these conceptions.

Science and Ordinary Language

Sociologists must develop scientific concepts, theories and principles that are not found in ordinary language. But can they completely dissociate themselves from everyday concepts and linguistic practice? The logical empiricists developed the notion of a “universal” scientific language, cleansed of the imprecision, vagueness and obscurity of everyday language. At the most fundamental level, this language would constitute a common vocabulary and syntax for all sciences, thereby ensuring unambiguous linguistic meaning and verifiable propositions. Bourdieu also insisted on a necessary break with ordinary
language (Bourdieu et al., 1991: 13 ff), not (merely) because of its vagueness and obscurity but primarily because of how ordinary language and linguistic habits function as a medium for or as an expression of underlying social forces and dominance. For this reason, sociologists must “challenge ordinary language and everyday notions” and break with the accompanying “spontaneous sociology” to generate a scientific discourse that is fundamentally distinct from “everyday opinion” (Bourdieu et al., 1991: 13). If not, they will become unwitting victims of and contributors to the power relations that they as sociologists should seek to disclose.

Bourdieu’s arguments place him in an old tradition of suspicion regarding everyday language and beliefs – he mentions Durkheim’s critique of the psychological explanations of social facts and Marx’s theory of the social/material conditions of consciousness. The central point is that the notions of everyday language and actors’ ideas cannot be trusted to be correct descriptions of actions and social realities. Based on modern speech-act theory, it is possible to argue against a generalised dismissal of ordinary language as a source of sociological knowledge. The concepts of everyday communications are incorporated into social realities and institutions. These concepts participate in the constitution of reality and are therefore also relevant for sociological analysis. The everyday experience of social life is already “sociological” in a basic sense because “…sociology itself is a commonly held skill of untrained people and, thus, an important feature of social life itself” (Lemert, 2012: 6; Giddens, 1984). Conceptual, theoretical and methodological operations in sociology are, in various ways, dependent on pre-theoretical conceptions in everyday social life.

Ordinary Language and Symbolic Power

Various types of social, cultural, economic and political power are mediated through elements and forms of everyday communication, as Bourdieu has demonstrated. The idea of symbolic power is fertile. Even the more extreme concept of symbolic violence can be employed in certain situations – e.g., the derogatory characterisations of minorities or the ritual denigration of low-standing individuals in various groups. However, if this conception is generalised as the only sociological theory of language, this may result in the neglect of certain basic constitutional functions of language use – primarily those of speech acts in ordinary social situations and institutions. There is also a blending of principally different forms of “force” or “power”. The “deontic” force of various speech acts (their ability to create obligations among individuals and towards institutions) cannot (always) be explained as results of other types