

THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIOLOGY OF LANGUAGE: BEYOND SOCIOLINGUISTICS; TOWARDS DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Frédéric MOULENE

Sociologist, Associate Researcher

Laboratoire Dynamiques Européennes (UMR 7367 – CNRS), Université de Strasbourg

E-mail: frederic.moulene@misha.fr

Abstract

Nowadays, the sociology of language is explicitly identified among I.S.A. research committees, although we do not find a national equivalent in many other sociological associations all over the world. Alongside, this domain of sociology has an uncertain situation within the majority of the university systems (and notably in the English, American and French cases on which we focus): few scholar jobs and chairs, research programmes, articles and books are clearly dedicated to the sociology of language. The cause is probably that it is difficult for sociologists to work on language per se whilst there is already linguistics as specific disciplinary field aimed at investigating language. Moreover, linguists have developed their general framework from the canonical principles of Saussure for whom language has to be studied beyond the social context; it is significant that a scholar as influential as Chomsky still follows the saussurean dichotomy and considers speakers as basically identical and interchangeable. For their part, sociologists usually keep language questions out of from their study domain. Thus, they forget that society is spoken by individuals and with all the words they have learnt by living and doing. Moreover, since Austin, we have known that it is often as long as certain things are told that they can perform, change the reality. So, knowing that each science tends to consider its object of study as its exclusive preserve, the sociology of language is an academic challenge. However, it is worth the effort because social reality is always something we reach with language (that is socially constructed) – how could we do things to each other without words? Indeed do we need an autonomous sociology of language indeed? Or should we try to persuade the sociologists that all sociology is inevitably a sociology of language (the same way that, for Labov all linguistics is necessarily social)?

Keywords: Sociology of Language - Sociolinguistics – Interdisciplinarity – Epistemology – Discourse Analysis.

Introduction

It is never harmless to consider how scientific knowledge is divided into different fields even if several disciplines may share some objects of study and “a common epistemic space” (Berthelot, 2001: 204; author’s translation). To what extent, sociologists use to distinguish for several decades some domains as traditional as the sociology of work, the sociology of education, the political sociology among others: this “social division of scientific labour” which lies at the origin of an artificial fragmentation of knowledge (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; author’s translation) seems obvious and dominant at each step of the research process. Therefore, some other potential subfields have strong difficulties to be admitted as ones in their own right. The Sociology of language is a remarkable example. On the basis of five years of research that would need to develop further, we suggest that this domain has an uncertain status in the academic systems all over the world : few positions in the university are clearly dedicated to the sociology of language and this is true for research and as well as for editorial projects as well. It is also significant that this domain is hardly ever explicitly identified in the research groups of sociological associations (as set out further the brief review of the situation in different countries). In such a context, we must pay tribute to the original initiative of the International Sociological Association which introduced a special Research Committee devoted to the Sociology and Language in 1968. However, this endeavour has yet not been sufficient to ensure the recognition of a new subfield and give it a decisive impetus all over the world. The main cause is certainly that it is difficult and maybe illegitimate too for sociologists to work on language even though by definition, as linguistics is the official disciplinary field aimed at investigating language. Indeed, language is by no means a peripheral problem (as is the case with knowledge, culture and other great issues of concern to humankind): on the contrary, it is so involved in whatever area of human activity that no social science can avoid it and this is particularly true for sociology: beyond usual conversation, the most of social interactions would not be conceivable without speech. John L. Austin underlined that speaking is doing: asking and answering somebody, establishing and enforcing a rule or a law, spreading a piece of information, etc (Austin, 1962). Therefore a remarkable paradox still remains: if language is pervasive and consubstantial with any social phenomena, why is it not at the heart of the sociological focus? This is the point that we want to investigate with a particular focus on the scientific literature from the English-speaking world and France. We will first review the epistemological issues between sociology, linguistics and language, and then we will show the obstacles of a genuine sociology of language, and its deep opportunities.

The scientific specialization process and its consequences on the sociological approaches of language

Sociology and linguistics became autonomous from philosophy for both philology and anthropology (as regards linguistics) after a long process in the second part of the nineteenth century. Sociology appeared in the French university curriculum in 1877 within Law colleges and the *Revue Internationale de Sociologie* was launched in 1893; the first chair of sociology was created in Chicago in 1895 and held by Albion W. Small, eighteen years before Emile Durkheim in La Sorbonne. In these times, modern linguistics owed much to the key role of Ferdinand de Saussure, who got a chair in Geneva in 1891, when the first journals of the discipline had first been published two decades earlier (*Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* in 1852; *Bulletin de la société de linguistique de Paris* in 1869).

The scientific revolution was in progress and moved our knowledge of society from a speculative approach to a methodological one. At the same time, it increased the specialization within the different social sciences (Gusdorf, 1974: 344). Thus, linguists and sociologists developed separately their own research programs. This situation of non-communication between them both is perceptible since the seminal works of each one.

Modern linguistics drew its canonical principles in Saussure's lectures (1916) which gave the scientific priority to the internal linguistics over an external one although the latter is relevant. By this way, linguistics is firstly internal: it refers to the language system in itself and excludes everything (the external one) that has to do with the individual variation in the use of language (speech). This perspective was very closely linked to the foundation of a new field which is not related to the influence of the other sciences, in particular anthropology that usually considers language as a social and cultural material (Zemmour, 2008: 18-19). Basically, this position has been dominant in linguistics from Louis Hjelmslev (1943) up to André Martinet and Noam Chomsky as they consider speakers as basically identical and interchangeable:

“To simplify our analysis, we shall assume that the language in process of evolution is that of a strictly monoglot community, perfectly homogeneous in the sense that observable differences represent successive stages of the same usage and not concurrent usages.” (Martinet, 1964: 164)

“Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected” (Chomsky, 1965: 3).

For its part, sociology is far from avoiding language: the real problem is rather that the focus of our discipline takes language issues into account but does so just “circuitously” (Leimdorfer, 2010: page; ; author’s translation). This has been a deeply-rooted trend since the foundation of sociology:

“The sociologists of the 19th and the early 20th centuries developed some theories in which ideology, class consciousness for Marx, beliefs, collective consciousness and morality for Durkheim form fundamental notions and both gave a prominent place to categories of thought. Language is certainly considered but even more circumvented in favour of philosophical, sociological and psychological categories.” (Leimdorfer, 2010: 35; author’s translation)

Thus, if Durkheim did not explicit the contribution of words and discourses to social life, he showed how collective representations regulating the norms could never come out without language (1991: 720). More precisely, as social facts are “manners of acting or thinking, distinguishable through their special characteristic of being capable of exercising a coercive influence on the consciousness of individuals” (1982: 43), it does not seem improper to include the forms of talk which lead someone to do something or change their attitude and their speech in a certain way. In a Marxist perspective, language is a part of superstructure – see N.Y. Marr & V.B. Aptekar (Alpatov, 2011), therefore speeches have to be seen as “reflections” of material reality (Achard, 1993 : 16-17; ; author’s translation), but the latter are effective, able to support, legitimate and intensify the strength of the established order (Marx & Engels, 1846). This is the domain of ideology and notably the dominant one that manifests itself through the parliamentary debate controlled by the upper-class, the conservative press, free trade advocacy among classical economists, the Old Hegelian's philosophy. Lastly, let’s point out the theoretical overview by following Max Weber and Georg Simmel who regarded language as a reciprocal action in which conversation (and communication by extension) fuels, strengthens and spreads out representations orienting human activity (Weber, 1992: 13). Thus, what is usually called society has to be seen as the product of this action (Simmel, 1971: 23-35). Thus, the high specialization of the disciplines, notwithstanding its remarkable contribution to the advancement of knowledge production, has caused significant harm to the interdisciplinary

dialogue. Linguistics was developed by focusing on the internal structures of language, and has sometimes been driven by the ambition of finding unity among diversity (e.g. Chomsky's Universal grammar). But it has been done at the price of renouncing many great issues: how language may change with societal evolutions? How to deal with the various forms of talk knowing that any population is more or less heterogeneous and potentially marked by inequalities? How do these diverse individuals and groups use language in the different social contexts and how does language contribute to their relations with each other? All these questions would be the cornerstone of the sociology of language, but have sociologists seized this opportunity?

The sociolinguistics revolution and the debate about its sociological vocation

Sociolinguistics was born out of the increasing charges against the canonical principles of linguistics by many linguists themselves. Although we can trace their roots to pioneering scholars – from William D. Whitney (1867) to Uriel Weinreich, who was one of the very first to use the term “sociolinguistics” in 1953, just after Haver C. Currie (1952), as well as Antoine Meillet (1905) and Edward Sapir (1921) – sociolinguistics is considered as having been established from the late 1950s to the 1970s by a new generation of researchers: Charles Ferguson (1959), Joshua A. Fishman (1968), John J. Gumperz and D. Hymes (1972), W. Labov (1972). We focus here on Labov's position, which is symptomatic to the general state of mind of all these researchers. He consistently criticized what he called the classical linguists' disability to consider language as a social fact. He emphasised the paradox of linguistics: it would have failed to integrate the social dimension of language even though its underlying principles were very suitable for it (e.g. the external linguistics principle). According to Labov, linguistics is basically and inevitably sociolinguistics. The common point between all these researchers is the willingness to find “a comforting antidote to anti-sociolinguistics theory that Chomsky was establishing” (Spolsky, 2011: 12) and to take into account all the objects of study deliberately overlooked by standard linguistics: social determinants of linguistic variation (Labov, 1972), of conversation (Gumperz and Hymes, 1972), child language acquisition and impact on educational success (Erven-Tripp, 1973).

The expression “sociology of language” came firstly in the field of linguistics, even if “there is originally no preference regarding the choice of terms, between sociology of language or sociolinguistics” (Canut, 2000: 90). The same process occurred on the both sides of the Atlantic

and at the same time. In 1956 Fishman taught a course in sociology of language in the University of Pennsylvania and the French Marcel Cohen, linguist as well, published his remarkable *Matériaux pour une sociologie du langage*. But if these linguists agreed with each other to study language in the social context, the sociological dimension of the project was far from being unanimous and it is probably the reason why “both terms [sociolinguists and sociology of language] became rival afterwards” (Canut, id.), some scholars using them interchangeably (Paulston and Tucker, 1997), some other distinguishing them thoroughly (Gumperz 1971; Bright 1992). In this way, Ferguson, who created his review *Language in Society* in 1972 (its French equivalent), *Langage et société* was launched in 1977) did not support Fishman who wanted to go further into the sociological way by founding *The International Journal of the Sociology of Language* one year later and in accordance with his plea *The Sociology of Language: An Interdisciplinary Social Science Approach to Language in Society* (1972). Besides, a lot of linguists, even among the most involved in sociolinguistics, were at least “hesitant” to engage in such a project: Labov intended to reform linguistics, not to send back the social approach of language to a sociological subfield. After having stubbornly tried to impose his views in the 1970s and 1980s, Fishman regretted sociolinguistics’s failure in “progressing firmly on two legs [the linguistic one and also the sociological one]” by “trying to move ahead primarily on the linguistic front” instead of giving “social more prominence” (1991, 128).

The debate surrounding the potential sociological perspective of sociolinguistics is highly epistemological. Indeed, linguists are in a bad position: they are strongly interested in keeping the study language in the area of their discipline, which explains their reluctance to proclaim themselves “sociologists of language” (Varro, 1999) and their insistence on using rather the term “sociolinguistics” in the scientific literature. This fact goes so far that we can find some handbooks of sociolinguistics without finding the terms “sociology of language” in the subject index, nor some fundamental sociological concepts such as “social classes” or even “norms” (se Moreau (1997) for example). This means that sociolinguists are surely able to “socialize” language but it is not probably enough to establish a genuine sociology of language. Moreover, “even when sociology of language is mentioned, it is reduced to linguistics” (Varro, id.: 96; author’s translation). The distinction between sociolinguistics and the sociology of language offered by certain sociolinguists (Hudson, 1996: 4; Coulmas, 1997: 2) is symptomatic of what we could call a “disciplinary imperialism” because the sociology of language (“the study of

society in relation to language” according to R.A. Hudson, 1996) is seen as a “macro-sociolinguistics”, while the “pure” sociolinguistics would be “micro-sociolinguistics”.

The sociologists on the difficult and winding way to the sociology of language?

Faced with this willingness of sociolinguists to keep the social dimension of language in the parent discipline perimeter, the sociologists are poorly placed ??? as well:

“By excluding de facto the terms “sociology of language” from linguistics, the conditions for the emergence of this subfield are denied, as are also the legitimacy of its potential specialists. And if the latter do not or cannot want to be sociolinguists, they may risk to be isolated or lost in an unknown area without name nor object of study.” (Varro, *ibid.*: 97)

“Sociology, too (as linguistics), although far less messianic in its promise, is chained and waiting, somewhere in its own disciplinary provincialism, waiting to come to sociolinguistics, to broaden and deepen it somewhat and to enable it to live up to its name” (Fishman, 1991: 67)

To our point of view, the harsh criticism of Pierre Achard who wrote that “the most usual position of sociology in front of language is indifference” (1986: 6; author’s translation) is still relevant. Thus, we are not surprised to note that the sociology of language is not to be found in the lists of contents of the main handbooks of sociology at least in English (Giddens & Sutton, 2013; Haralambos & Holborn (eds), 2013; Bilton & al., 2002) nor in many dictionaries of the discipline (Scott, 2014; Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 2006 . The French case goes in the same way (Riutort, 2014; Durand-Weil, 2006; Boudon & Bourricaud, 2011) and even though we cannot generalize our findings to every country, it seems that the majority of them follow this trend. It might be objected that language is addressed through “mass and communication” but on this indirect way, the question of language has been very little dealt with: for an example, this literature provides very few details about the relations between the linguistic resources of an individual (or a group) and the way in which these details are being used in order to reach its purpose. The situation is similar on the academic scale. We find no trace of “sociology of language” in the sociological associations of USA (ASA), Canada (CSA), Europe (ESA), Great Britain (BSA), France (ASF), Italy (AIS), Scandinavia (NSF), Switzerland (SSS), and India (ISS). Only the German one (DGS) devotes a group to “Sprachsoziologie/Wissenssoziologie”

(“sociology of language/sociology of knowledge” while the Spanish one has a group called “Sociología de la Comunicación y del Lenguaje” (“sociology of communication and language”). At the global level, the case of the Research Committee 25 “sociology and language” within the International Sociological Association (ISA) is particularly praiseworthy and dynamic (almost 80 papers have been submitted to the 18th congress in 2014) although its name just points out the link between the field and the object of study instead of clearly identifying the scope: however the RC25 name is a remarkable demonstration of its ambitious project to unite the scholars from different disciplines around the problem of language. On the basis of our explorations, we would assert that the Working group 16 “sociology of language”, within the AISLF (International Association of French-speaking Sociologists, with a vast majority of scholars from Europe, Quebec, Northern and Western Africa) is a notable exception and goes further on this point of view. In general, we can see that the sociology of language has an uncertain position at the university all over the world: regarding other fields, few scholar jobs and chairs, research programmes, articles and books are clearly dedicated to the “sociology of language”. We can add that every sociolinguist is coming from linguistics while the subfield – socio(logy)+linguistics - firstly allowed an interdisciplinary domain.

We assert that one constant problem is that many sociologists are still too intimidated when they consider language in the sociological perspective. The first reason lies in the pervasive nature of language in society, that refers to the notion of “centrality of language in human existence” (Hertzler, 1965; Valverde Zabaleta, 1969; Achard, 1993; Leimdorfer, id.) and what it involves for sociology:

“Sociology of language is not a well-defined sociological subfield well defined and is not the subject of scientific works clearly identified. And it is probably not a coincidence because, as remarks Pierre Achard, every social relation, whatever, involves language.” (Lahire, 1994: 144; author’s translation)

“There is no social practice whose activity excludes language – language is always part of the action (...) Why? Because social action involves communication, hence language and other types of semiotic activity. (...) So, discourses are an inherent part of all social practices.” (Fairclough, 2000: 156)

“Out of many diverse sources and interests, sociology of language is emerging as a speciality with a high potential of generalizability. Because of its many angles and because it seems to be involved in all human actions, it promises to become a center

of fructifying observation and analysis. Its frontiers are uneven and wide and largely unexplored.” (Barnes, Becker and Becker, 1940: 895)

This huge challenge can explain why so few sociologists are engaged in research on language. When the pioneering linguists were founding sociolinguists, Basil Bernstein (1971) was probably one of the few sociologists to participate to this endeavour. Yet, he dealt with language as with any sociological object, potentially determined by social mechanisms (regarding the consequences of restricted/elaborated language codes on educational achievement) and we may wonder why few of his colleagues did not follow his strong example. The double difficulty in the relations between, firstly, language and society and, secondly, linguists and sociologists is at the origin of numerous obstacles. Today, only specialists know sociologists like Chester L. Hunt (1966) or Allen D. Grimshaw (1971). And Spolsky notes that “with rare exceptions, the topics that interested the linguists did not interest the sociologists, and vice versa” (ibid.: 16). Nevertheless, the rich interdisciplinary dialogue within the groups such as RC25 and the journals linking language and society is genuinely promising if we want to shift the lines.

However, many opportunities have been missed for fifty years: in 1965, nine years after the linguist Cohen, Joyce O. Hertzler proposed his own handbook entitled *A sociology of Language* but few colleagues from his own branch did work on this basis. Nevertheless, the paradox is that the innovative sociologists in matter of language helped the linguistic work. Labov ever acknowledged that sociology was way ahead of linguistics in taking into account the social essence of language. For him and many of its colleagues, the progress of sociolinguistics would have not been possible without sociologists like Harvey Sacks (1972) and Emanuel A. Schegloff (1968), two of Erving Goffman's students who exported Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology (1967) in the domain of conversational analysis:

“It is a matter of some interest that the most significant advances in this field have not been made by linguists, but by sociologists (...) Linguists have been handicapped in their approach to this field by their inability to utilize essential social constructs involving the roles of speaker and listener, obligations, power relationships, memberships categories and the like.” (Labov, 1972: 257).

It is obviously the case of interactional sociolinguistics too. Gumperz (2001) also payed tribute to Goffman (1959, 1981) as “sociological predecessor” because the author of *Forms of Talk*

highlighted not only face-to-face interactions but also the central dimension of language in these one: social facts are seen as the result of practical actions in which verbal communication has an utmost importance. Today, sociolinguists are unanimous to acknowledge their debt of gratitude to these sociological frameworks (see Matthiessen & Slade, 2011: 380).

The contribution of P. Bourdieu to the reflection in *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991) does not propose a way to sociology of language but emphasizes the limits of (socio)linguistics to understand how society determines language and how the individuals use their language resources in their daily discourse knowing these resources are more or less legitimate. Bourdieu's charge against Labov is really relevant: for the first, the American sociolinguist does not see the importance of distinction effect through language and its consequence on power relation:

“Though superfluous in terms of a strict economy of communication, they (the verbosity and verbal inflation of bourgeois speech) fulfill an important function in determining the value of a way of communicating.” (Bourdieu, 1991: 85)

Thus, we have to consider the added value of a sociological approach of language. It is not related to the distinction micro-sociolinguistics/macro-sociolinguistics (Coulmas, 1997): a sociology of language (which would have a “macro” and “quantitative” perspective) investigates in the same time the impact of social structure on our speech (as Bernstein did) and as well, as sociolinguistics (“micro” and “qualitative”) how the language resource are mobilized by the individuals in front with each other (as Goffman did). Therefore, sociology of language proceeds by a feedback movement: from society to language and from language to society because language contributes and strengthens to the social determination. The distinction language/society does not make sense in sociology because “language is the key social link” (Leimdorfer, *ibid.*: 252; author’s translation): it is absolutely not conceivable to separate language from society (language is everywhere in society), “even though language has its own principle, different from social relationships” (*ibid.*). This is even more true that social reality would not appears out from language (Berger-Luckmann, 1966).

Conclusion

Our purpose was to underline the conditions of emergence and stabilisation of sociology of language. Two obstacles have been identified. Firstly, linguistics offers a dynamic branch especially devoted to the study of language in the social context (sociolinguistics) but the majority of its specialists have been reluctant to go further towards sociology (a remarkable exception is given by Fishman). Secondly, knowing that language is pervasive in any social activity, sociologists may feel overwhelmed by the extent of this challenge: some of them have let the study of language to linguists, some other has dealt with it on an indirect way, circuitously (language as a verbal form of social representation and social interaction). We perfectly understand these attitudes but we do really not consider them as sufficient. Indeed, a large part of sociolinguistics achievements would have not been possible without sociological innovations. Moreover, the criticism endeavour of linguistics (even in its socio- version) by P. Bourdieu is still relevant: sociology is potentially able to provide us a highlight on language that (socio)linguistics cannot. The consequence is that sociology is basically legitimate to approach language. However, too many sociologists continue, from their part, to work on language data as some external, peripheral, by-product elements, which form may be neutralized by a simple content analysis. The Discourse Analysis (D.A.), based on the opposed principle (the signifier as never separable from the signified) brings us the opportunity to unite sociologists, linguists and the specialists of other social sciences around the question of language, its social determination and its potential power on society. But hitherto, linguists are at the lead of DA - the most of its concepts are coming from linguistics, see P. Charaudeau & D. Maingueneau (2002) - and sociologists have an opportunity to seize in this new domain.

We must be ambitious for the future of sociology of language in social context. Rather than to let sociolinguistics alone in the area (scenario 1: withdrawal), to work separately from the linguists (scenario 2: isolation) or to maintain the utopic project of a definitive merge between the two discipline (scenario 3: reunion), we think more relevant to consider that every sociology is inevitably a sociology of language. It would be the equivalent process of the "labovian revolution" (every linguistics necessarily is sociolinguistics).

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