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The past is a future priority

Abstract: A sensitisation to the disciplinary past offers a way forward for socio-linguistic inquiry. Historicisation may add reflexive distance to our current concerns and debates. It may serve to detect, put into perspective and ease epistemological and ideational tensions. It is equally useful for determining the extent to which past ideas and practices linger among us, and for clarifying the effects of such forms of retention. Historicisation may be brought to bear on the ways in which we engage with our objects of study, and on the ways in which we understand our acts of engagement. A critical interest in the disciplinary past could provide a shared historical ground for all strands of sociolinguistic inquiry. It could help us to counteract disciplinary fragmentation, while at the same time stimulate disciplinary renewal and constructive exchange. For these reasons – I argue – a sensitisation to the history of sociolinguistics is of immediate relevance to the readership of the IJSL.

In the inaugural issue of this journal, J. A. Fishman declared that "the sociology of language must demonstrate expertise and conceptually integrative inventiveness in the interaction of sociology and linguistics with each other" (Fishman 1974: 7). The sociology of language would, in this view, function as a dual corrective, aimed at facilitating "the simultaneous *broadening* of linguistics and the *precisioning* of sociology" (Fishman 1974). Fishman alluded to a desired interdisciplinary future. His references to "inventiveness" and "conceptual integration" gestured at the presumably better days lying ahead. Like other socially interested language scholars of the day, Fishman envisioned the emergence of a new and autonomous framework for studying language and society – a new academic discipline equipped with new questions, new tools and new answers.

Contemporary sociolinguistics is beginning to arrive at this goal. Its work of conceptual renewal has been substantial. Sociolinguists have borrowed liberally from a host of social and cultural theories, constructing new inroads to their

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principal objects of study. This is important work, which has incited serious reflection on what the study of language is, or ought to be. Yet, the interest in the distant goal of disciplinary becoming seems at times to have bracketed out the disciplinary past as a possible object of analysis. The sociological "broadening" of linguistics has often been achieved at a cost of dehistoricisation. Those who strive, as Ernst Bloch (1974: 2) argues, "live in the future", in anticipation of the accomplishment: "the past only comes later". The dialectic between ambition and attention may well explain socio-linguistics' epistemological and disciplinary priorities, especially during the first decades of its existence.

Has the sociology of language cultivated a historical understanding of its origins, priorities and achievements? Has it considered intellectual history a prioritised site of scholarly engagement? Has it engaged in depth with its past? It is more or less uncontroversial to give a negative answer to questions like these. Some 30 years ago, E. F. K. Koerner noted that "next to nothing" had been written on the history of sociolinguistics (Koerner 1991: 57). This perceptive remark should not be read as an assessment of the current state of sociolinguistic research. Things are no longer as squalid as they once appeared to Koerner (1991). A number of studies have delved into the institutionalisation of sociolinguistics that gained momentum in the 1960s (e.g. Heller and McElhinny 2017; Murray 1998; Salö and Karlander forthcoming). Others have explored the precursors and sources of contemporary sociolinguistic inquiry (e.g. Falk 1995; Hutton forthcoming; Jaworski 2020; Joseph 1992). Yet, intellectual historical analysis appears to be a relatively recent addition to socio-linguistics' epistemological repertoire. It has not yet enjoyed a wide uptake in the field. We have for the most part taken relatively little interest in our own history.

A mature science must be able to grasp itself. It must work toward an understanding of *why* its intellectual enterprise has come to adopt a certain epistemological posture, *why* it sustains a certain structure of interest, and *why* it has become invested in a certain set of foundational concepts, questions and aims. These ambitions should entail a relatively specific engagement with history. Approached in this way, the term "history" does not primarily connote historical analysis in a broad sense, nor diachronic linguistic analysis of any sort. Rather, it stresses the necessity of a general sensitisation to the history of knowing. It emphasises the importance of interrogating the origins and permu-tations of our pursuit of understanding, and of the forces that have shaped this development. We should aim to grasp why we have come to think the way we do, and what has been won and lost in the process. We should strive for hindsight, for retrospection. We should strive to historicise our thinking.

Why?

Historical epistemology provides two interdependent answers. Most fundamentally, historicisation is capable of critically grasping claims on

universality. In the language sciences, such claims tend to appear in articulations of what language is and does. As such, they are symbolically commanding. They aspire at absolute judgement, and thereby divest themselves of the capacity to grasp their own relativity. Unless we historicise them, we are left with two analogous choices: accepting some proposed universalism or setting up a rival one, equally orthodox in its articulation of reality. This dialectic is not epistemologically sound. It is prone to produce a potentially infinite regress of irreconcilable views on some object or phenomenon. The multiplication of theories of language attests to this dynamic.

The history of linguistic thought, as John Joseph (2017) elucidates, can be regarded as a series of interconnected struggles in which competing and often antagonistic viewpoints on the essence of language have been played out against each other. All strands of linguistics uphold a tacit consensus that language can and probably should be studied. However, there exists no universally accepted delineation of the object of study, nor of the modus sciendi by which we ought to approach it. The stormy histories of universalising notions like "language", "competence", "meaning", "creativity" and other key concepts of contemporary linguistic thought offer excellent illustrations of this point. "If there is a truth", as Bourdieu (1987: 206) argues, "it is that the truth is a stake in the struggle".

Historicisation can serve to create distance to any such struggle, past or present. It allows us to map the social and conceptual relationships that embed the ideas, facts and arguments over which and through which battle is waged. It opens up a possibility for understanding such battles, and challenges us to grasp the logic according to which their stakes, modes of engagement and outcomes are determined. Historicisation may not only highlight the multiplicity of linguistic thought, but also the historical conditions under which each specific form of linguistic thought has taken shape. It invites us to grapple with the forces underlying the formation linguistic thinking, to abandon or reconfigure engrained positions, and to correct our views. Historicisation is a prerequisite for a truly sociological linguistics. Any sociology of language worth pursuing should take it seriously.

Historicisation is thus an encompassing analytic and must be applied as such. It demands that venerated *and* denigrated modes of thinking are subjected to equally critical scrutiny. It is worth querying to what extent we have taken aboard this aim. It is true that some sociolinguists have stressed the importance of using "historical" tools, that is to say "concepts that open a window from the present onto the past" (Blommaert 2010: 138). But have such concepts been picked up using historical tweezers? Have we considered it necessary to historicise their circulation and use? I am not sure that we have, at least not as a general rule.

The historical consciousness of sociolinguistics is grounded in a critical appraisal of the epistemic legacy of mainstream linguistics and its supposed

effects on the social study of language (e.g. Williams 1992). Sociolinguistics has arguably taken greater interest in the historical inflections of "formal–functional analysis" (Silverstein 1979: fn. 2) than in the genesis of the anti-structuralist, neo-Peircean or neo-Jakobsonian theories that currently hold sway in the field. This outlook is underpinned by a commitment to some doctrine of transcendental linguistic facts, and to some extent manifested in empiricism. It is prone to reduce intellectual history to a question of conceptual disuse – to a question of what has been left behind or overcome. But history is not confined to the past. Any historical epistemology must, as Bachelard (2002: 27) insists, "treat facts as ideas and place them within a system of thought". No vision of linguistic facts – whether total or partial – should be exempt from this mode of historicisation.

Where does this leave the sociology of language? In what ways does historicisation matter to the mission of the IJSL? Minimally, historicisation should bring to bear on the ways in which we engage with our objects of study and on the ways in which we understand our acts of engagement. It may expose and help to relieve epistemological and ideational tensions ingrained in the field. It may also serve to create distance and perspective. Attending to the disciplinary past of the sociology of language does not only mean attending to the practices of those who came before us, but also to the traces of past practices that linger among and within us. This shift of attention may take on a number of guises. It may entail an engagement with the roots of sociolinguistic inquiry and with the historical transmission of sociolinguistic concepts and concerns. It may produce a sensitisation to the forms of sociolinguistic thought that have taken shape beyond the confines of the academic field. It may direct our gaze toward the global proliferation of sociolinguistics, and to the local modes of reception and adaptation bound up with it, not least beyond Anglophone academe (e.g. Nikol'skij 1974; Pandit 1979).

Historicisation can, in this vein, lay bare unexpected relationships and call forth forgotten voices. Its results, as Chris Hutton (forthcoming) has shown, may not always meet our expectations, and not always validate received disciplinary genealogies. Yet, historicisation presents us with a possibility to expand, adjust and critically reflect on the scope and principles of any strand of socially interested linguistics. Not least for this reason, it ought to be a future priority for the IJSL, and for all sociolinguistics.

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