

Monica Heller\*

## Preface

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This collection of essays emerged out of an unexpected process, and so it takes perhaps a somewhat unusual form. In researching a book manuscript, I approached Ron Kassimir, of the New York-based Social Science Research Council, for help in locating the archives of the SSRC-sponsored Committee on Sociolinguistics, which was active in the 1960s and 1970s. I was interested in the deliberations of the Committee, which included in its membership most of the names an Introduction to Sociolinguistics course would include (Ferguson, Hymes, Gumperz, Fishman, Labov; as I mention in the first essay, the Committee also included some people, such as Grimshaw, Keyfitz, Lieberman, examples of the sociologists and political scientists with whom the Committee tried to establish an interdisciplinary dialogue, whose names would not now figure on such a course syllabus). I wanted to understand the formation and institutionalization of “sociolinguistics” – a field usually presented as having newly emerged in the 1960s, principally in opposition to Chomskyan generative grammar and its marginalization of questions related to the social. I wanted to know what “social” meant to them, and in particular how it might have connected to two major phenomena of the time: decolonization and development in the context of the Cold War. What were their understandings of how language figured in to the discourses of modernization and progress, of emancipation and equality, that were central to the political and economic questions of that time?

A few years later, mission accomplished, I thanked Ron for his help. Not unreasonably, he wanted to know what I had found, and what I had to say about it; on the basis of my reply, he asked if I would care to contribute a brief text to *Items*, an on-line SSRC publication which seeks to communicate to a broad interested readership what kinds of knowledge the SSRC has been helping create. This was a one-off, and appealing to me because I like writing short texts that I can try to render accessible; in this case, I was even offered help in the form of magistral editing from Ron and from Rodrigo Ugarte. It is the first piece you will find in this collection. It sets up the lines of enquiry related to my original questions regarding the political economic conditions of knowledge production, and in particular regarding the extent to which (and the ways in

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which) the field introduced and took up particular political problems of the time, specifically those related to social difference and social inequality. There is a blurry line around how much of this is or is not connected particularly to the United States.

Once this essay was out (in September 2018), and I had moved on to other things, Ron and Rodrigo came back to me to ask if perhaps I might agree to co-curate a small series of these essays, under the title *Sociolinguistic Frontiers*. The idea was to start from what “sociolinguistics” as a supposedly emergent field was trying to do (or did inadvertently) in the 1960s and 1970s, and where we find ourselves now on some key issues. On that basis, we sought out some colleagues who might have something to say connected to the lines of enquiry my essay suggested, and had a track record of accessible writing. We had no narrative arc in mind; we were interested in a variety of viewpoints on whichever elements our contributors might wish to address. Bear that in mind as you read; we have presented the texts in the chronological order of their appearance, but you certainly don’t have to read them that way. Ron and Rodrigo also had the brilliant idea of adding, as counterpoint to the essays, some texts from the archives of the Committee on Sociolinguistics (the thing that got this whole episode started in the first place). Again, there is no particular order, so you can read contrapuntally in any way that works for you.

Ron and Rodrigo kept extending the life of the series, and people kept agreeing to contribute, although perhaps we ended up being a little more US-focused than we might originally have intended. Sadly, some potential contributors were unable in the end to be part of the series; their voices are missed. As 2019 was drawing to a close, we thought perhaps we had had a good enough run, and chose to end the series; I got the last word.

I did think that it would be nice to have the essays accessible as a whole in some form. The *Items* archive groups them in reverse chronological order, which at one level is fine, but erased the remaining effect of the opening and closing essays. In a great moment of serendipity, Alexandre Duchêne, General Editor of this journal, and a contributor towards the end of the series, proposed what you have before you: a republication of the whole set. Alexandre, Ron and Rodrigo accomplished the necessary collaborative work to make it happen, and my thanks go to all three.

As you can see in the closing essay, some things surprised me. One is the persistent strength of the politics of recognition within the field, that is, the reproduction of identity-related social categories as the focus of much of our work. The cultural categories which have long been used to organize social difference and social inequality, drawn both from the concept of the nation and from its gendered, sexualized and racialized hierarchization, largely remain the

grounds for the analysis of both oppression and resistance. Language, named language(s), remain a key terrain for those struggles. Class, a key term for many strands of sociolinguistics in the 1960s and 1970s, has largely escaped contemporary theorization in the field, although a (re)new(ed) interest in work provides a productive angle, albeit not one discussed in this series.

The second is the difficulty in gaining critical distance from the political economic conditions of our own knowledge production, as an element of the reflexivity we otherwise honour through such concepts as positionality and stance, and despite sea changes in those conditions (audit culture, precaritization, market versus open access models of publication). Obviously, it is easier to get a grasp on how such processes operate from afar: it is some ways easy for me to say all kinds of things about the Committee on Sociolinguistics, that was 40 years ago. Nonetheless, it may be worth trying to figure out how to do the same for ourselves in the here and now.

Perhaps this collection of essays will provide some kind of takeoff point, some springboard, for a reflection on what we are doing with this field, why, and with what consequences. They provide many points of entry to what remains a rich and productive conversation.