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Notes on the Sociological Study of Language

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Abstract: The SSRC's Committee on Sociolinguistics (1963–1979) was formed to explore how the nascent interdisciplinary field of sociolinguistics could deepen scholarly understanding of the intersection of language with social, cultural, and political questions. In this 1963 piece, John Useem, a committee member, explains how "developing the sociological study of language" would advance social science. He emphasizes the potential contribution to social knowledge through research on how language is used across cultural contexts and social divides of class, geography, race, and ethnicity.

Although several "first generation" American sociologists (e. g., Cooley, Mead, Thomas, Park) explored the role of language in social life, and although a sizable number of more recent investigators have taken into account the social patterns of language in the context of varied groups and interpersonal relations, sociolinguistics has yet to develop as a significant field of sociological research. The recent emergence of psycholinguistics and ethnolinguistics, and the impressive growth of linguistics as a scientific discipline together suggest possibilities for developing the sociological study of language and offer a basis for the useful exchange of ideas, among scientists concerned with behavior, about the further study of language as a social phenomenon.

A limited review of the American sociological literature of the last three decades reveals numerous theoretical essays on the function of language in the formation of the social self and the general process of human socialization. The formal theories rely primarily on anthropological and psychological data, sometimes without the support of critical appraisal of the original research, and often by inference from an investigation which was designed for an entirely different purpose.

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A substantial number of disparate observations on the character of language used within particular segments of American society are reported. A cross section of the sources includes studies of ethnic minorities and their acculturation, interaction of Negroes and whites with special reference to the symbolic forms of communication that stem from dominance and subordination, the distinctive modes of expression within occupational groups or shared by participants in work-related organizations, the vernacular of deviant groups, the styles of speech in adolescent cultures, contrasts between rural and urban language patterns, and differentiations by social classes. Some investigators describe the language of a group in order to identify its norms, predominant modes of behavior, and world views; others consider the social functions of language in setting the social boundaries between the in-group and outgroups. Many newer studies are focused on how the newcomer learns the rules and his social role in a group.

Concern with language variables pervades sociological research on communications. A complex of relationships (which ordinarily encompasses the media of mass culture, informal social networks, leaders in the formation of opinion, and the lineaments of person-to-person influence inside a community) is surveyed to trace the flow of selected information, attitudes, and imagery through a sample population. Field studies examine the ways in which verbal and visual language actually fit into local sets of values, customs, and traditions, the reasons for the 29 differential responses of individuals to the projected symbols, and their consequences—in the market place, the diffusion and adoption of technology, voting, and other situations.

Partially overlapping such field studies are the current social psychological studies in depth of facets of personality, language, and social structure. Research in one specialized field centers on small groups. Elaborate technical schemes have been imaginatively devised to record in laboratory situations the kinds, incidence, and degree of verbal interaction and to correlate these with roles, leadership, and decision making in the observed group. Other studies defy a simple classification, and can only be illustrated here by mention of a few subjects which are attracting considerable sociological interest: alienation and the problems of identity, Erving Goffman's delineation of "out front" and "backstage" behavior, perceptions of self vs. other, and role sets.

The sociological literature as a whole reveals but rudimentary concepts for the analysis of language as a social system, for comparative studies, and for study of the role of language in a total society. There seems to be fairly widespread recognition that language is important, but no one has been quite sure what to do about language as a general social pattern. Sociology contains a rich store of classifications, terminology, propositions, and concepts applicable to most dimensions of its universe of study, but it has only scanty and rudimentary ones for the study of sociolinguistics.

Two additional assays tend to reinforce these appraisals. First, in *Sociological Abstracts*, the most sophisticated theoretical statements on the nature and function of language in American society are listed, not in the usually meager section entitled "Sociology of Language and Literature," but rather (and consonant with what has been outlined above) in the more conventional areas of sociological inquiry such as "Interaction within Group Structure," "Interaction between Groups," "Social Stratification," "Bureaucratic Structures," "Social Change," etc. Second, examination of a cross section of introductory textbooks, to discern what an undergraduate student might learn about the sociological approach to language, strengthens the impressions already gained. Most of the books in current use stress, in the words of one, "the compelling nature of language" for personality organization and culture; few present a conceptual scheme to help students probe beneath the surfaces of everyday life in American society or to extend their understanding of language in different cultures.

What might constitute the reciprocal benefits of collaboration between sociologists and linguists? "Old hands" in the study of language could aid sociologists by evaluating some of our relevant studies to suggest how we could build on them.[1] Construction of a full-scale sociological model to delineate the scope and content of future research would be premature, but sociologists would gain a measure of sophistication from a critical appraisal of the generalizations in the sociological literature about structure and functions of language. We need help in regard to the selection of critical questions, initial hypotheses, and development of a sociologically meaningful set of terms and categories of data. In turn, sociologists might contribute methods now available for use in sample surveys and testing for the significance of differences between sample populations, and concepts for analyzing social structures and interpersonal behavior in conjunction with linguistic data.

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1 For instance, Leonard Schatzman and Anselm Strauss, "Social Class and Modes of Communication," *American Journal of Sociology*, January 1955, 329–338; Melvin Seeman, "The Intellectual and the Language of Minorities," *American Journal of Sociology*, July 1958, 25–35; Julian Samora et al., "Medical Vocabulary Knowledge among Hospital Patients," *Journal of Health and Human Behavior*, Summer 1961, 83–92; Albert K. Cohen and Harold M. Hodges, "Characteristics of the Lower-Blue-Collar Class," *Social Problems*, Spring 1963, 303–334; Tamotsu Shibutani, *Society and Personality* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961); Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1955); Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963); James H. S. Bossard, "Family Modes of Expression," *American Sociological Review*, April 1945, 226–236.

Cross-cultural research

Cross-cultural sociological research with respect to the non-Western world can be said to be of three kinds: the study of patterns of social structure and behavior generic to the intersections of societies; the comparative study of delimited patterns in a number of different societies; and the study by a foreigner of interrelated patterns within another society. A modest start on each has been made by a very few American sociologists; the increase of professional interest and new programs that support research overseas together assure expansion of all three kinds of sociological work.

The growing interdependence of American and non-Western societies, with its concomitant movement of persons across cultural boundaries, creates a need for fundamental knowledge about the nature of the interaction in nascent binational and multinational communities and other forms of group association.[2] On the role of language in cross-cultural relations, more folklore and mythology prevail than solid information and conceptual frameworks. The sociology of education might be advanced by a study of the present fashions in foreign language instruction, specifically, the assumptions about human learning, beliefs about the manner in which language knowledge serves to increase intercultural understanding, the emphasis on the oral versus the written tradition with resulting differences in the content of what is communicated, and social factors which impede or facilitate the use of acquired foreign languages. Similarly, current practices in non-Western societies with regard to the learning and use of English (e. g., the outright rejection of English by some factions because it has become the mark of the colonial legacy, and insistence by others on the preservation of English in order to maintain effective communication in an interdependent world) invite study. The language patterns generated by continuing association between Americans and other nationals, as between technical assistants and their counterparts, in an American-managed firm in an alien country, and in the mixed groupings formed around a compound, have scarcely been touched by sociologists. In general, far more is known about the language experience of foreign students in the United States (some of the studies initiated by the Council's former Committee on Cross-Cultural Education are relevant) than of Americans in foreign countries. For sociology, the evolving commonalities and conflicts involved in such experiences open a new field for research.[3]

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2 For a more detailed statement, see John Useem, John D. Donoghue, and Ruth Hill Useem, "Men in the Middle of the Third Culture," *Human Organization*, Fall, 1963, 169–179.

3 A partial inventory of recent studies and an outline of some needed studies appear in Ithiel de Sola Pool, *Communication and Values in Relation to War and Peace* (New York: Institute for

Because American sociologists concentrated on American society during the years of the discipline's rapid development from the 1930s through the 1950s, no methodology was designed for comparative studies and little attempt was made to verify cross-culturally the propositions derived from American life. Some pilot inquiries have been made, and some are now under way.[4] Nonetheless, almost every aspect of language patterns that sociologists have investigated in American society awaits comparative study in the high civilizations of the non-Western world.

In the aftermath of colonialism and the early stage of modernization, the societies of Asia and Africa have made language a symbol of their unification and of their inner divisions. Under colonial regimes different native societies were formed into single nations whose populations became divided into foreign-oriented and tradition-bound strata; the former typically preferred to speak European languages, while the latter kept their traditional modes of speech. The legacy of this colonial heritage intrudes into present-day issues over languages. Sociologists accustomed to a society that coincides with a nation-state would find in many non-Western societies unique opportunities to explore the issues originally posed by Park on the role of language in a society. Much has been written on the impact of language on the outlook and perception of life situations by the members of a society. The ongoing introduction of modern science and technology into age-old societies gives the sociologist a natural laboratory for the study of massive changes in what Thomas called "the definition of the situation."

Items Editor's note: The author is Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at Michigan State University. He prepared these "Notes" for the Council's Committee on Sociolinguistics, which was appointed last June to foster collaboration of linguists and sociologists in a significant field of research in which the latter thus far have done relatively little systematic work. Members of the committee

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International Order [1961]). Representative of a number of conferences on the study of groups of Americans in cross-cultural situations is *Peace Corps and Behavioral Sciences: Papers of a Meeting Held at the Department of State, March 4–5, 1963*, sponsored by the Peace Corps and the National Institute of Mental Health.

4 Thus, Hideya Kumata completed a semantic-oriented study of Japan, Korea, and America. See his "Cross-cultural Study of Meaning" in *The Measurement of Meaning*, eds. Charles E. Osgood et al. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1957); also, Bartlett H. Stoodley, "Normative Attitudes of Filipino Youth Compared with German and American Youth," *American Sociological Review*, October 1957, 553–561. American sociologists have yet to attempt a comparative study equal to Hajime Nakamura's brilliant *The Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples* (1960), sponsored by UNESCO.

are Charles A. Ferguson, Director, Center for Applied Linguistics (chairman); Joseph H. Greenberg, Professor of Anthropology, Stanford University; Thomas A. Sebeok, Professor of Linguistics, Indiana University—all sometime members of the Council's former Committee on Linguistics and Psychology; Everett C. Hughes, Professor of Sociology, Brandeis University; and Mr. Useem; *staff*, Elbridge Sibley. The new committee has drafted plans for a research seminar, which may be held in the summer of 1964. The "Notes" are published in the hope that sociologists and other social scientists interested in the committee's endeavor will communicate with committee members or with the Council staff.

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