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Sociolinguistic evaluations of inequality

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Abstract: In this new contribution, John Baugh provides an analytical overview of how the field has addressed issues of power and inequality. Baugh addresses how both social hierarchies and the legal system affect the standing of different languages and their users. He then especially focuses on language use in relation to racial and gender dynamics, highlighting influential work that revealed and analyzed how language is used to make and deepen inequality. He concludes with a call for the promotion of “linguistic human rights” that would protect minority language speakers.

Keywords: inequality, power, racism, gender discrimination, linguistic human rights

Linguists, regardless of their area of specialization, are mindful of a paradox regarding every human language; namely, from a purely academic perspective, all languages are equal, yet some languages and dialects are more highly valued than others. This discrepancy has been well known since the inception of the field. In 1921 Edward Sapir wrote, “When it comes to linguistic form, Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd, Confucius with the headhunting savage of Assam.”(p.219). This egalitarian philosophy is rarely realized in social terms. The field of sociolinguistics has tried to formulate interdisciplinary approaches that grapple with the complexities of language usage and inequality, and several noteworthy research milestones have helped to identify the linguistic dimensions of power, race, and gender. To better understand how these frameworks came about I trace the development of sociolinguistic research in its study of power, race, and gender, and then show how these issues may be framed within the notion of linguistic human rights.

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1 Perspectives on power

One of the very first scholarly attestations of the relationship between language and power can be found in Boas's (2014 [1911]) "Introduction" to the *Handbook of American Indian Languages*. He describes a combination of historical, social, cultural, linguistic, and political events that confirmed the need to document the decline of Native American languages. Sapir, A.L. Kroeber, and others spent countless hours with tribal elders who shared their linguistic knowledge. Their efforts helped to document many of the languages that would be lost as Native American populations decreased, which resulted from systematic efforts to displace or eliminate indigenous people.

Decades later, in 1960, Roger Brown and Albert Gilman described "the pronouns of power and solidarity," where social distance between interlocutors was revealed by their variable use of pronouns. Romance languages and Russian, for example, share lexical differences between familiar pronouns (e. g. *tu* [T]) and more formal pronouns (e. g. *vous* or *usted* [V]). They introduced a "solidarity semantic" noting that a "recipient of *V* may differ from the recipient of *T* in strength, age, wealth, birth, sex or profession;" that is, several of the multifarious dimensions of power between interlocutors during any given speech event. Since then the world has witnessed a plethora of episodes that have impacted the intersection of language usage and power.

For example, South Africa had two official languages during Apartheid – English and Afrikaans – both minority languages that were spoken by the dominant white populations. In the aftermath of Apartheid in South Africa, Neville Alexander, a former prisoner on Robben Island with Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, devised a new national language policy that reflected efforts to promote racial reconciliation. Rather than banish Afrikaans and English, Alexander opted to maintain those languages while adding another nine indigenous South African languages – Ndebele, Xhosa, Zulu, Swazi, Sotho, Sepedi, Tswana, Tsonga, and Venda – to create a new post-Apartheid national language policy that was designed to be more inclusive without alienating the white populations that had once been the dominant oppressive racial group.

Unlike South Africa, the United States does not have an official language; however, some, like the late California US Senator S.I. Hayakawa, started extensive efforts to change this. Hayakawa created an organization called *U.S. English* in 1983 that has the primary mission of passing legislation to make English the official language in the United States. U.S. English has helped to successfully pass "English-only" legislation in Colorado, Arizona, and other states through ballot initiatives. Native Americans living in Arizona objected to

these measures, noting that Navajo existed in the land that now occupies Arizona long before English was ever spoken in that state. Emboldened by these laws, some employers have insisted on English-only workplaces, thereby restricting language usage among their employees who may speak other languages.

Sociolinguists, like Ana Celia Zentella and Guadalupe Valdes, have produced scholarly publications decrying these linguistic constraints while exposing the legal flaws and restricted opportunities on jobs or in schools that negatively impact native speakers of Spanish and languages other than English who live in the United States. France has also experienced a wave of political nationalism that rejects immigrant languages as well as customs portrayed as antithetical to French culture and the well-being of the body politic. These xenophobic trends have only been exacerbated by acts of violence on language minorities intended to foment social strife.

2 Racial disparities

Such acts of violence often take place in nations where racial disparities are a fact of life. These racial disparities were once codified into law – for example, in the United States and South Africa – explicitly favoring white populations at the expense of nonwhite people. France, on the other hand, prohibits the collection of any official data based on racial differences because such efforts are inconsistent with a national ethos that advocates liberty, equality, and fraternity for all French citizens. But, this language of colorblindness overlooks the evidence that many nonwhite French citizens have experienced unequal access to employment, housing, and education.

In the United States, the birth of sociolinguistics coincided with the burgeoning civil rights movement and President Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty, resulting in federal legislation that promoted civil rights and voting rights.¹ Whereas much of the social science research that was based in the United States during the 1960s relegated the study of minorities to the marginal fringes of various disciplines, sociolinguistics was a noteworthy exception. Labov (1969, 1970), who promoted quantitative analyses of linguistic variation, published two

¹ Despite the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the US Constitution, which were intended to provide rights to former slaves and their descendants, the legacy of racial discrimination in the United States continued and continues as various racial and ethnic minorities are targeted in hate crimes that began with lynching and more recently has resulted in the killings of Blacks and Jews in their houses of worship.

landmark articles that placed African American linguistic analyses at the core, not the periphery, of this emerging research trend.² Labov's first formulation of variable rules was created in association with analyses of vernacular Black speech. Similarly, he challenged one of the prevailing, racist myths correlating IQ and race, which reasoned that the consistently low academic achievement of African American students was due to inferior and limited intellectual abilities, as reflected through comparisons of white and Black standardized test scores (Jensen 1969).

Labov assailed such opinions by exposing flaws in misguided educational psychological research that misunderstood and misrepresented the linguistic behavior of Black students. He did so by comparing and contrasting the logical discourse contained in the speech of urban adolescent gang members in New York City with that of middle-class, well-educated African American adults. Many of these older and better educated individuals spoke using Standard English; however, they often did so in contradictory and illogical ways. By carefully analyzing the content of gang member's speech, Labov was able to challenge assumptions about dialect differences between dominant Standard English norms and vernacular Black speech. The latter had been mischaracterized as ungrammatical gibberish, primarily by linguistically uninformed educational psychologists. Labov demonstrated that these misguided interpretations of Black speech were not only ill-conceived, they were simply wrongheaded.

In addition to Labov's contributions, sociolinguistic studies benefited tremendously from ethnographically informed analyses of discourse, as reflected in research produced by Gumperz (1962, 1982) in India and England, as well as Hymes' (1962) formulation of "the Ethnography of Speaking," in which universal properties of spoken language were established. Prior to any of these studies, Ferguson (1959) formulated the concept of "Diglossia," noting that languages such as Arabic, Greek, Swiss-German, and Haitian Creole all exhibited common sociolinguistic characteristics that yielded "high" and "low" varieties of the same language, along with somewhat similar developmental, educational, and political circumstances that codified these linguistic trends.

When viewed in its totality the development of the field of sociolinguistics provided a great deal of research that had either direct or indirect relevance to exposing combinations of racial and class disparities that continue to exist in many of the worlds urban communities, particularly if those communities

² More precisely, 1969 saw the publication of "The Logic of Nonstandard English," and "Contraction, Deletion, and Inherent Variability of the English Copula," in which Labov adapted to rule writing notation that Chomsky and Halle developed in 1968.

include extensive language contact among diverse people who have differential access to wealth and other economic and educational opportunities.

3 Gender inequalities

Language usage also reflects power inequalities between genders. Scholarly attention to this issue outlines a combination of embryonic and iconic linguistic studies that evaluate women's relationship with language while promoting feminist scholarship intended to overcome gender inequality. Beginning with the writings of Robin Lakoff – especially her seminal article “Language and Woman's Place” – we see the first attempts to increase awareness of power disparities between women and men, and how these inequities have been codified by various forms of linguistic behavior.

The field of sociolinguistics, broadly defined, has been enriched by an exceptional cohort of women linguists who have raised awareness regarding gender disparities in language and life. Their research has both elevated the depth and quality of sociolinguistic research pertaining to women and women's language, and helped – either directly or indirectly – to advance women's equality. Although many countries continue to confine opportunities for women, feminist linguistic analyses have shown that language usage by women, as well as many of the cultural customs that have historically suppressed women, are antithetical to linguistic human rights; that is, regardless of a speaker's gender.

Women linguists of color have also made several remarkable contributions, often reflecting upon their own experiences, exemplified in studies by Lanehart (2002), Britt and Weldon (2015), and Troutman (2010) who each describe language usage among African American women. Mendoza-Denton (2008) has depicted the language of Latina gang members, and the complexities of their lives in relation to language usage and their involvement in activities that frequently spawn unwelcome encounters with police. These women, without diminishing their own identities and dignity, seek to be supportive of their male counterparts.

Smitherman (1999) and Zentella (1997) are illustrative of scholar activists who have contributed to greater linguistic awareness of African American and Latinx populations, respectively. While simultaneously combating social injustice and inequality in education and employment, both challenge through their research ill-conceived policies based on linguistic myths regarding false pathological diagnoses of Black children, or restrictive English-only policies that

unfairly impact native Spanish speakers in the workplace. Their efforts have helped to expose and rectify prejudicial treatment born from a combination of unequal access to power, unequal treatment based on race, and unequal opportunities that have historically confronted women in the United States and elsewhere.

Women worldwide continue to suffer the consequences of long-standing power disparities that are frequently reflected in language usage. The works previously mentioned are part of a larger scholarly enterprise within the social sciences, now reaching into various policy areas, which intends to reduce and eliminate the historical disparities women have experienced globally. The efforts of preeminent sociolinguists, such as Deborah Tannen,³ whose work centers of gender differences in language and social opportunities in the United States, have made essential contributions in this area. Viewing similar matters from the perspective of other languages in other countries, Ruth Wodak,⁴ whose studies in critical discourse analyses address challenges of social hierarchies that disfavor women, has also researched intimate family discourse among mothers and daughters (as has Deborah Tannen). As a result of these collective efforts, many of the barriers to equal opportunity for women have been exposed, challenged, and in some instances, resulted in new laws and policies intended to advance equal opportunities regardless of gender.

4 Promoting the quest for linguistic human rights

All of the previous attempts to conduct linguistic research intended to further advance equality can be considered part of a larger enterprise to promote linguistic human rights in one form or another. Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2016) enlisted support from several language scholars who unearthed diverse examples of violations of linguistic human rights throughout the world, particularly in circumstances where people are sanctioned by statutes that inhibit or restrict their native language usage.

³ Deborah Tannen has published several books devoted to women's language in one form or another, including her best-selling book titled, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (2007). She has also written, *Talking from 9-to-5: Men and Women at Work* (2001), which explores some of the special circumstances impacting women's language usage in the workplace.

⁴ Ruth Wodak is perhaps best known for her extensive studies related to "critical discourse analysis." Some of that research is devoted to women, including her book titled, *Hilflose Nähe? Mütter und Töchter Erzählen (Helplessly Close Together? Mothers and Daughters Speak)* (1984).

Frequently these violations of linguistic sovereignty are promoted in the name of national unity, where alleged threats to the body politic result in laws to control language usage by promoting one or more national languages at the expense of minority speakers, who occasionally represent indigenous populations displaced through colonialism. In the United States, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, and Russia, for example, language policies have been developed to engineer outcomes that favor some languages or dialects over others. In nearly every instance, these policies to promote one or more national languages intersects with access to power, which may be exacerbated by racial disparities or the unequal treatment of women.

Sociolinguists have consistently attempted to provide a combination of studies that directly or indirectly expose linguistic bias. Moreover, when linguistic bias is reinforced by legal statutes or language policies that favor some groups over others, inequalities persist, further dividing populations living in the same society and maintaining inequalities. These scholarly efforts, while not unique to the field of sociolinguistics, are beneficial to a longstanding legacy among many social scientists devoted to doing all that is possible to overcome historical discrimination.

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