Sociolinguistics Thus Far, and Further

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As the title suggests, this paper is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the genesis of sociolinguistics as a serious research endeavor, and where could it be possibly placed in the study of language. The second part of the paper discusses the prospect of applied sociolinguistics, and tries to identify the ground on which it may stand.

I

When we talk about the prospect of sociolinguistics as a serious research endeavor, the first question will have to do with its locus. Where could we possibly place it? Although the initial provocation that caused its emergence had to do with a growing dissatisfaction with the Chomskyan universal grammar, these were the kinds of questions that were being raised by the anthropologists in the '20s and '30s (especially, Sapir 1912, 1916, 1924 & 1957; Whorf 1938, 1950 & 1956 or Sapir & Swadesh 1946) who were making pronouncements such as 'No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached'. In fact, in a recent book on sociolinguistics, dedicated to 'all those working for the liquidation of sociolinguistics as we know it', Rajendra Singh et al. (1995) stated that the emergence of sociolinguistics can be traced to somewhere in the beginning of this century when Saussure floated the concept of 'idiolect'. Between 1910 and 1960, there is obviously an enormous empty space which makes us define sociolinguistics open-endedly. In fact, the concepts 'dialect' and 'language' have always been difficult to define linguistically. This was so no matter whether one took the criterion of 'mutual intelligibility' into consideration, or 'autonomy' or 'heteronomy' into account. Further, it was realized that since there was nothing between the highly particularistic concept such as the sum-total of speech

habits of a single individual in a life-time (or idiolect) and the notion of universals of language, there must be a socio-linguistics in between.

Like any other social institution, language, too is an expression of both the 'free' self of man as well as that of man as a social animal. It is the responsibility of the theory of sociolinguistics to reconstruct the nature of and potential for this 'freedom' and 'bondage'. In such a theory, structuralism will have a place insofar as it enables us to write a grammar of language use, and communicative potentials of a discourse. But it cannot escape its general responsibility of interpretation and/or reinterpretation of the meaning of a given text, since all texts are products of society.

The question that could then be raised would be what would the agenda of contemporary sociolinguistics be at the turn of a new century? Should it be something different from what it had traditionally been is the question. If we wish to chalk out a programme *de nouveau*, there could be trouble with such speculations in augmenting novelty. No matter what theoretical position we may take, each one of them is constrained by the rudiment of its own logic and language—tinged in its own tint as it were, and delimited by the conceptualization of the discipline within which it is supposed to have grown. For instance, if we are to redefine the agenda of 'psycholinguistics', a related inter-disciplinary programme, we often tend to look into the void that exists between the hard facts about the speech acquisition or disorder experienced by the *real* speaker-listener and the undistorted or incorruptible competence of the *ideal* speaker-listener. We often forget that the distinction between the real and the ideal self is an abstraction that we have recently created to amuse ourselves and to strengthen our game of theory-building. It does not occur to us that we could as well do away with the ploys and playthings we had ourselves rused as stratagem.

Some sociolinguists of today believe (see Singh et al 1995) that self-reflexive and discipline-specific criticism within sociology or linguistics cannot wash out the sins of western theories of development that are 'essentially scientistic orientation to social reality' (Cf. Singh et al., 1995: 'Introduction', pp. vi). According to this position then, where the western tradition of scholarship in social sciences erred was that they treated language only as an object (cf. Sapir 1929) and what speakers thought was of no direct consequence to the science of their thinking and expressing.

They were useful only to the extent that they were the storehouse with the keys left inside, and science was only in the magic which will somehow get us the keys. But the scientist in us knows that in course of time many disciplines have been made and unmade. Even within the narrow universe of linguistics, many theories and techniques have been proposed and disposed. It would thus need a lot of gumption, courage and compassion to appreciate the extreme position taken by Rajendra Singh et al.

Notice that even those who would take a fairly liberal posture had fallen into the same trap of trying to find the place of 'socio-linguistics' within the boundaries demarcated by the Saussurian *idiolect* (= the particular) and Chomskyan conception of universal grammar (= the general). Many may not even agree that this indeed was the best way of defining the discipline 'open-endedly', although there may be a general agreement that it has to be defined in a meaningfully open-ended manner.

It is also important to underscore here that the voice of dissent within sociolinguistics, may arise from within the socio-linguistic tradition in whether the dichotomy between macro-vs. micro-sociolinguistics must be unquestionably accepted as a prime or whether we should accept and adopt the trichotomy of subjectivity, objectivity and inter-subjectivity in demarcating the boundaries of sociolinguistics. Interestingly, even the critics of sociolinguistics are not able to spell out whether their concern for considering language as both unifying and dividing force would include answers to questions like the following: how are languages born (i.e. or, could we say, how do dialects get promoted to 'language' status), why and how do they split into different kinds of entities (if not into different 'varieties'), and under what condition(s) do they die. All these questions arise when we use the metaphor of living beings to look at natural languages.

There is no doubt that structuralism has set in motion a number of dominant world processes and intellectual move-ments during the last two centuries. But for the same reason, it deserves more than just an a historical appreciation. It has, how-ever, been challenged, both by the Marxists and others who see the reduction of any aspect of language to a set of structural princi-ples as incompatible with a materialist world view, and by the idealists who see such principles as a threat to their conception of language as first and foremost an instrument for expressing human individuality.

Before we could possibly resolve some of these tangles in order to chart out our future map of sociolinguistics, let us quickly look into the beliefs that underlie almost all the critical references to linguistics:

1. Grammars are nothing but convenient metaphors
2. Grammars are a stalic phenomenon whereas language is not
3. Sociolinguistic investigations must begin where facts of the matter end.
4. 'The disguised end culturalization of the political and the economic can only hinder our understanding of the relationship between language and society' (Singh et al, 1995: Introduction, pp. ii).

In order to cross the boundaries of post-structuralist discourse, and to know where structuralism had erred, we must be able to differentiate between two theoretical positions, best represented by the discourse emanating from the underprivileged speech communities as against the learned discourse on language in the centers of cultural power in the last two centuries. The sudden 'discovery' of Sanskrit in 1786, both as a tool and as a model of analysis for the West, or the sudden spurt in the anthropological interest in documenting the dying languages of the world for creating an archaeology of living tradition belongs to the history of the objectification which we could still call structuralism.

In either case, the structuralist had made judgments of error— first by trying to appropriate models and materials (=Sanskrit grammar, literature, logic, philosophy, astronomy, or even medicine) from their colonies, and secondly by trying to des- cribe the speech of the people out of power in the language and with the rigor that reflects the scienticism of his own com- munity that has already cornered all scarce resources of that region. Only once in a while do we find lamentations as we have seen in the statements of Malinowski (see Firth 1957), or John and Mary Haas (esp. 1944 and 1951) underscoring the danger in trying to translate the Trobrindian and such other tribal stories and legends in terms of the conventions of a typical western language.

There had been many wrong steps that were 'naturally' taken by the flag-bearers of structuralism in early linguistics and socio- linguistics; for instance, the decision to emphasize more on the

spoken language, the unassailable (and virtually unfalsifiable) position given to the slogan of synchrony (cf. Saussure 1916), and the initial over-emphasis on the notion of paradigm, and the later insistence on everything being rule-governed, plus the general emphasis on the universal grammar enterprise. The theoretical-technical linguistics at this point found it necessary to postulate abstract associations between elements, and the standard emphases on the minds of the native speakers of language followed—whether we talk of Chomsky's (1965) 'linguistic competence' or Dell Hymes' (1971a, 1971b) 'communicative competence'. In the initial phase of linguistics, we take the social existence of language into account and begin to take note of the 'speech community', and yet we hesitate to consider it seriously. This was a period of extending the classical results to new language families and new domains, and of extending structuralism to other areas that are conventionally not associated with it.

In trying to subsume all kinds of situations under either complementary distribution with nearly neat and not-so-neat fits in terms of rules, what was remaining was being pushed under the carpet as free variation, without admitting that free variation was never subjected to formally identifiable conditions. The structuralists had hoped that, in due course, they would be able to extend the lawfulness of the micro-domains to cover the patterns of 'freedom' or variation, but this hope turned out to be an illusion. As we could now recall, the problems of free expressions and free variability revealed the limits of the structuralist endeavor, and gave rise to the new programs of generative and sociolinguistic research.

Chomsky introduced a systematic mentalism that placed the mind of the native speaker at the center of the inquiry, treating the speaker's intuitions as the mental phenomena accessible to the linguist (cf. Chomsky 1986). On the other hand, there was a transition from the structuralist single system approach to sociolinguist's attempt to redefine notions such as 'language' or 'speech community'.

Sociolinguists began their programme by pushing the co-occurrence approach of the structuralists – the idea that most of what was free variation could be explained by tabulating co-occurrences of high forms with high forms and of low forms with low forms – to the problem of sub-codes into a new logic, and by challenging the belief that free variants could be

unconditioned. It naturally meant adding crucial extra-linguistic variables like class and other social factors to the tabulation. The sociolinguist thus broadened the inquiry to the limits of a new frame – the verbal repertoire of a speech community. This approach matured when the notion of styles of speech was set up by considering the covariation of forms and functions, and when social domains like friendship, religion, work and solidarity (all horizontal) and class, caste, and power (all vertical notions) were formally introduced. As in the generative grammar tradition, there was a concern with form mapping onto meaning, which immediately showed the interplay of various extra-linguistic forces.

However, the sociolinguists who tried to bridge the gap that separated linguistics from sociology, were quick to denounce the Chomskyan enterprise because of its autonomy thesis. Although sociolinguistics initially showed promises to collect all such things that escapes the standard Chomskyan net, it does no more than giving what is known as the variation theory (cf. Labov 1970). It was hypothesized in the early '60s that the social and natural dimensions of the multiplicity of cultures and ethnicities and their interactions, found in most nation-states, could be captured in terms of language contact. It could give us a privileged access to elements of a potential general theory of society and language. Unfortunately the 'field' in question did exactly the opposite. Those studying language-contact either ignored all disconcerting facts, or defined them as exceptions. A quest for 'correcting' generative linguistics by bringing in analyses, as can be seen in the contemporary western sociolinguistic tradition, make one feel they have been making their theories not with but from their scientism.

II

The way to correct these aberrations would be to view the role of the scholar working on language and society interface as a catalyst of these discourses which may contribute to convergence between theories of language and society. What must be listened to, in other words, is not only what the linguist or the language philosopher calls ordinary language but the meanings the unprivileged generate. An attempt to do so will ensure that all texts that are mere reshaping and scripting of the stories that are written by the masses of people by their lives will now be

possible to disentangle and disambiguate. If this plea to base sociolinguistics of the next millennium on the ground provided by the 'discourse of the underprivileged'¹ is accepted, we could possibly think of an applied sociolinguistics which, to start with, could be possibly bifurcated into:

    A. Sociolinguistics of Development, and

    B. Sociolinguistics of Institutions.

In what follows, I shall first discuss and outline some concerns of a possible applied sociolinguistics under the broad headings as above:

Sociolinguistics of Development

I shall concentrate here only on one aspect of sociolinguistics of development because the idea is not to exhaust all possible topics in this area. I had pointed out elsewhere (Singh 1994) that for languages which are undergoing or are yet to go through the secondary language development processes, 'translativity' offers the best developmental model. This is because nowadays as anxious native speakers striving to develop our language, we cannot afford to wait for natural historical forces to operate on our speech and for it to then undergo the twin processes of language development—standardization and modernization. But since most languages are now developed through some sort of planned intervention, it is often difficult to demarcate periods of development that could be divided so neatly as between standardization and modernization. The primarily developed languages had no model before them to imbibe. In comparison, languages of today have a number of models of primarily developed languages, and they have the option to follow any one of these models with suitable modifications, wherever necessary, or chart a completely new course by avoiding all known courses of action followed so far. One assumption is that the language planning policies that have worked elsewhere can give us models that are possible to translate. The choice is then between being innovative and being translative.

Although this could be debated for long, between the above options, translativity is a better, surer and faster way to develop as a strategy of language development. Innovation (howsoever ideal it may be theoretically), like any act of creativity, runs the risk of being a failure, and being counter-productive. If nothing, it is surely more time-consuming than any translative strategy. It is

not surprising, therefore, that many underdeveloped and developing languages today start from a point where they attempt at translating tools, ideas, terms, sciences, technologies, certain amount of cultural traits—especially, music, dance, dress and some performing arts—and even language structures. There is obviously a hidden danger here that the donor speech community may pass on its stereotypes, belief systems, world view as well as politics and governance, too, if not all art forms as well as metaphors, proverbs, and myths—thus creating a colonization of the mind. While the applied sociolinguists will plan out options and execute policies of development, the core sociolinguists will ring alarm bells when the recipient speech community is made a subject of sociocultural invasion.

Such influence and disaster studies would have their morals from which the language developers in the future could carefully draw their strategies. It is in this context that language maintenance and shift studies or investigations into codeswitching and code-mixing will find their utility.

Secondly, there is no doubt that much of what we call linguistic convergence emerges from translative actions which members of converging speech communities (and it could be either donor or recipient or both) use as gap-filling devices. We will, therefore, have to think of newer kind of convergence studies which will catalogue such trends and traits. Notice that while some such traits could be attributed to a real pressure— thanks to a shared history of co-existence, extensive travels, intermarriages, withstanding foreign onslaughts and conspiracies together (both against themselves and against the other), a number of others could be traced only to translative actions. Beginning from 1803, as we all know, there was a spurt in both horizontal[2] (among modern Indian languages) and vertical[3] (from languages of power and prestige to developing modern Indian languages) translations, and as a consequence almost all modern Indian languages now have a number of word formation techniques and morphonological devices as well as syntactic operations which did not exist in the early stages of their prose literature—but which eventually appeared as the prose genres developed.

Term planning is yet another area in the interface of translation and traditional sociolinguistics which would require the attention of those engaged in language development. All critics of technical glossary would usually lay blame on the term

translators who had to be ready to listen to a lot of criticism and unkind remarks. However, what is usually expressed as a dissatisfaction against a term often grows out of refusal to appreciate another kind of knowledge and belief. Most of the time we forget that when one translates economics, politics, science or culture of another community, the terms and expressions one opts for are aimed at being a match for the objects or ideas they stand for. It is not fair to blame the translator, who is a harbinger of new knowledge, for introducing something that is 'foreign', because the ultimate aim of such scholars is to use their discretion of coining a term as an instrument of growth. In all fairness, one has to give these naming words time and currency to see if they are accepted, and sooner they are naturalized and assimilated, the faster will the language grow.

Sociolinguistics of Institutions

It is not my endeavor to be exhaustive here either in discussing precisely what kinds of institutions an applied sociolinguist could study. It is not difficult to think of a *sociolinguistics of schools* (which must not be confused with what is called 'educational socio-linguistics') which has received some attention in the recent times as a part of 'interactional sociolinguistics'. Charles Osgood, the semanticist, had started in the late fiftees interesting studies on memoranda of understanding (MoUs), trade agreements, patenting documents, evaluations and laws, war speeches, threat perceptions and copyright documents, etc., for which a speciali-zed kind of *sociolinguistics* (*of international relations*) could be devoted. It is needless to say that *sociolinguistics of trade and commerce* will subsume under it Pidgin and Creole Studies, too. *Sociolinguistics of propaganda and polemics* has its own charm in that it opens up a large tract of space between election speeches and a product launching advertisement campaigns.

There are thus many kinds of *sociolinguistics of institutions* which would probably set our agenda for the future research in this field. However, now that we have learnt to lay equal emphases on speech and writing, the institutions of literary as well as non-verbal communication offer very exciting prospects for the future of applied sociolinguistics. Let us try and elaborate on these two areas.

Sociolinguistics of literature will devote its primary attention to literary institutions, in particular to the system of literary net-

works in a given society. In a multilingual and polyliterary country like India, the nature of relationship that obtains between the major literatures and the minor ones (cf. Majority-minority configuration studies of Schermerhorn 1970 and Paulston 1978), or the internal relationship among the minor literatures (cf. Studies on Sunflower Syndrome by Singh 1987) provide interesting topics for those who want to take he 'Two Types of Linguistic Relativity' studies of Dell Hymes to its logical conclusion (where surveys could be organized to find out self- and peer-evaluation of a given literature). The by-product of these studies will be works on literary prejudices - something on the line of linguistic prejudice studies of the type Aditi Mukherji (1981) had done. Secondly, various aspects of text production, especially social conditions that prompt an author or make somebody an author, including the cost-effectiveness or market or commercial aspects of a literature could be studied here. Thirdly, recurrent themes and characters as well as inured thematic treatments are surely correlatable with the sociolinguistic situations obtaining in the speech community, and particularly with the linguistic structures used or with the lexical coinage. Peter Hook's (1981) proposal on 'South Asia as a Semantic Area' which was not elaborated beyond that one paper would reveal startlingly new facts that bind multilingual cultures and polities. And in this respect, this becomes an important topic. Fourthly, potentially all speech varieties could vie with one another in being promoted in the literary arena. The growing trend in world literature today is that more and more speech varieties (dialects, sociolects, caste dialects or registers) are being placed in the developmental maps and that the progression path of a given linguistic community in a scenario like the above will depend on the inter-action with numerous socio-economic factors. These four broad topics could possibly give us an idea as to how to go about using language as an instrument of development within the context of sociolinguistics of institutions.

Let me give here an outline of the programme on *socio-inguistics of non-verbal communication:* The first problem must be faced by all communicators. How does one fix a code and/or its new forms in a non-verbal communication? There could be many norms indeed: local vs. global norms, open-ended vs standardized, natural vs planned and related or unrelated to verbal action. The second problem is obviously faced by an artist holding a view that communicability of a creation can be studied

much in the same way the traditional sociolinguistics was
working on ethno-linguistic aspects. Add to that the interesting
possibilities of linguistic and literary intervention in an artist's
use of his/her medium. Similarly, evaluation and interpretation
of a non-verbal text are very important aspects of this kind of
study. The third problem could be to find out how insular is a
given form of communication, and what are the chances of
mixing of other codes. Does or doesn't the variation bug catch up
with these non-linguistic forms of language, too? Further, some-
one will have to devote attention to the commercial aspect of non-
verbal text production, and on what makes a communication
salable?

Lastly, there are many social institutions which provide us
with a wide scope. They may otherwise appear as dead-end, but
when considered seriously and imaginatively, these seem to be
quite productive. Take, for instance, the reasonably old institution
of 'marriage'. There can also be a *sociolinguistics of marital
institution*. It goes without saying that it will consider things that
are otherwise in the realm of interactional sociolinguistics; take
the case of patterns of man-woman relationship and its growing
effect on both linguistic and nonlinguistic communication. The
levels of intimacy as reflected in verbal and pronominal selec-
tions or other lexical cues, and the nature of the dominant
(which will obviously have its linguistic repercussion) are other
applied areas. And so are possible studies on miscommunication
between man and woman. Secondly, consider the premarital
scenario, which allows the researcher to study language of flirt-
ing, of courtship and even language of written communication.
Language of failed relationships (data for which may come from
plays, films, biographical sketches, and autobiographies) as well
as post-marital harmony and the role of language as a synthe-
sizing agent can also make interesting areas of investigation.

III

To conclude, in the present paper, I have tried identifying new
and emerging areas in applied sociolinguistics, in which lies
the key to success of sociolinguistics of the future. The detailed
discussion on where we had gone wrong revealed many
interesting points on the failure of the discipline of socio-
linguistics as we knew it. We are not told when, how and why
linguistics in general, and sociolinguistics in particular, had

become from a 'listening' science to a 'speaking' science—a speech that is entirely based on what one claims to be one's 'intuitions'—a speech that is better termed a monologue which de-humanizes human script. Obviously, the listening science had no faith on writing—which we now find absolutely essential. It is, therefore, natural that our speaking science had got considerably de-humanized and its speakers (both native and non-native, ideal and real) have been pushed to the background. It is this aberration and anomaly that we seek to correct here by trying to set the agenda of contemporary sociolinguistics in the next century.

NOTES

1. This gives us a defective paradigm of language, which Dasgupta (1987/1993) calls the patrimonial paradigm, of which structuralism is a special case. This paradigm says that a language is basically a heritage, a social power resource which keeps going the cultural hegemony of some groups over others in the community. As a heritage, it is primarily a standard and only incidentally occurs as spoken and spontaneous dialects. As a heritage, it is primarily handed down by the parent generation and only secondarily received by the young, who are thus reduced to a passive role. As a heritage, it is primarily embodied in the corpus of valuable and reproducible texts which make it a site of social power, and only incidentally representable in terms of a codification of forms, principles, or rules of grammar, a convenient way to make its teaching possible. As a heritage, it is primarily a past, and only secondarily a potential for the future.

2. Consider the fact that the trend started way back in 1802, Bengali *Krittivaasa Raamaayana* had been translated into Manipuri as *Langoi Shagd Thaba* or Bengali *Raajaa Prataapaadityera Carita* (1901) was rendered into Marathi as *Raajaa Prataapaadityaace Carita* (1816); See Sisir Kumar Das (1991:75-77).

3. Persian *Aaraaish-e-Mahfil* was rendered into Urdu in 1801 and *Tutinaameh* into Bengali (*Totaa itihaasa*) in 1805. Or, Take the case of *The Oriental Fabulist* being made available in Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali in 1803 and in Marathi by 1806 (cf. Das 1991).

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