

Language and Changing Contexts: Sociolinguistic Perspectives

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The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) said '[t]ime changes all things, there is no reason why language should escape this universal law' (cited in Aitchison 1983:1). If language change is as natural as the rising or setting of the sun, it may be said that a sociolinguist will never find him/herself idle given that any communicative context is a context for analysis either from a synchronic (at a given point in time) or a diachronic (across time) perspective. In this special sociolinguistics issue, our primary aim is to present the naturalness of linguistic change and variation sociolinguistically.

In the *Concise Encyclopedia of Sociolinguistics*, Mesthrie (2001:1) traces the term, Sociolinguistics to Haver Currie in 1952 who 'noted the general absence of any consideration of the social in the linguistic research of his day'. He defines Sociolinguistics as 'the study of language in relation to society' and, together with other researchers (e.g. Hymes 1971; Fishman 1971; Labov 1972; Hudson 1980), compares this to the sociology of language, the focus of which is 'the study of society in relation to language'.

For many researchers (e.g. Hudson 1980), the distinction is irrelevant. However, there are others (e.g. Labov 1972; Trudgill 1978) who categorize Sociolinguistics as a domain with clear linguistic objectives, 'aimed ultimately at improving linguistic theory and at developing our understanding of the nature of language' (Trudgill 1978:11). In view of the above definitions, this issue brings together a range of articles, of which some may be regarded as fundamentally more sociolinguistic than others.

With regard to a few articles that deal more with the sociology of language, our decision to include them is based on our intention to raise an awareness of critical issues and areas that need to be addressed further in linguistic and inter-disciplinary research.

In this special sociolinguistics issue, we recognize the need to contribute to a database of sociolinguistic research occurring locally, regionally and internationally. We aim to provide a resource for new scholarship in Sociolinguistics; to strengthen an existing body of knowledge in this discipline by reporting on current and critical language/language-related matters, to identify areas needing research and to contribute to establishing and reflecting inter-disciplinary scholarship by bringing together researchers from various academic backgrounds.

This issue allows experienced researchers to extend the boundaries of their research theoretically, methodologically and analytically. It has also created room for younger researchers wanting to enter the field of scholarship and publishing. The contributors allow the readers to make the connection between theory and practice. In this regard, we have tried to adopt a writing style that is both academically sound and accessible.

The issue covers various sub-areas of Sociolinguistics and the articles are thematically arranged. Studies on language policy, planning and rights constitute the first category in the issue. On writing about a linguistic renaissance for an African renaissance, Kamwangamalu (2001:134) contends that there is a serious anomaly in this debate as 'African languages have as yet to play a role in the African Renaissance'. He states that if the goal is to transform people's lives, 'then language and the indigenous languages in particular must become one of the foci of the African Renaissance debate'. The articles in this category respond to this call by critically evaluating language policy and planning in the South African context.

In the opening article on South Africa's national language policy, Russel Kaschula reflects the critical tone of the articles that follow. Lawrie Barnes considers the socio-historical development of South Africa's language-in-education policy with the intention of seeking a strategy to overcome the negative perceptions many South African parents have adopted towards mother tongue education. Rama Pillay's article presents an empirical study of the perceptions of learners and explores reasons for their

negative attitudes towards isiZulu. While Stephanie Rudwick's study does not directly address language policy and planning, she critically explores the theoretical concept of ethnolinguistic vitality (Giles *et al.* 1977) in relation to the sociolinguistic situation in KwaZulu-Natal, with the focus on the numerically most dominant group in the province, namely, isiZulu mother-tongue (L1) speakers. Her findings indicate that despite the prevailing hegemony of the English language and a rather diglossic relationship between English as high (H) and isiZulu as low (L) variety, the ethnolinguistic vitality of isiZulu appears strong and robust. In their articles, Mbulungeni Madiba and Nobuhle Ndimande review the language planning situation in higher education and make recommendations for how policy can become practice. Johan Lubbe's article on linguistic rights litigation follows logically from these articles, raising awareness of one's language rights as a basic human right and explores the role of litigation as an instrument of language rights activism.

Code-switching research is another growing area in sociolinguistic research. In their critique of current trends in code-switching research, Meeuwis and Blommaert (1994:417) state

analyses of code-switching should start, not from an (often misguided) assumption of commonness or universality (based on the observation that code-switching appears in many communities in similar ways), but on an assumption of *variability* (e.i.o).

This category comprises studies by Malini Ramsay-Brijball and Ondene van Dulm that challenge the theoretical landscape of code-switching research. While Ramsay-Brijball focuses on theorizing identity construction as a function of code-switching using a poststructuralist framework, van Dulm explores the applicability of the minimalist framework in the analysis of the form of code-switching. The other two articles in this category, by Eda Üstünel and by Vis Moodley and Nkonko Kamwangamalu, consider the pedagogical implications of code-switching in an English second language (ESL) classroom. Moodley and Kamwangamalu locate their research in the South African context by focusing on Zulu first language (L1) speakers while Üstünel considers Turkish learners in an ESL classroom. Both articles highlight code-switching as an effective communicative resource that aids the teaching and learning processes.

As South Africa grapples with a language policy that is at the cutting edge of multilingual development, the development of the indigenous African languages rightfully takes centre-stage. Studies by Marianne Visser and Edith Venter on the one hand and Somikazi Mlonyeni and Jacobus Naude, on the other hand, focus on the development of isiXhosa, the second most widely spoken indigenous language in South Africa (Statistics South Africa 2001). Visser and Venter focus on the development of isiXhosa for specific purposes in local government. They explain how current theoretical research on communicative language teaching and focus-on-form research can inform and determine the features of course design in terms of pedagogic norms (Valdman 1989). In their study of *The Prisoner of Zenda* as the source text, Mlonyeni and Naude raise an awareness of the complexity involved in translations, explaining and elaborating on the reasons for social and material transfer of cultural aspects from the English source text to the target text in isiXhosa.

Studies on language change and variation also contribute to this special sociolinguistics issue. According to Labov (1994:9):

the fact of language change is a given; it is too obvious to be recorded or even listed among the assumptions of our research. Yet, this fact alone – the existence of language change – is among the most stubborn and difficult to assimilate when we try to come to grips with the nature of language in general as it is reflected in the history of a language.

In this category, Usha Desai and Malini Ramsay-Brijball focus on the philological and sociolinguistic development of the Indo-Aryan language, Gujarati. They trace the history of the development of this language from the root language, Sanskrit to its present dialects as spoken here in South Africa and in India. In his study on the lexicalization of Sheng, a non-standard, mixed variety used mostly by the youth in Kenya, Nathan Ogechi's analysis shows that although the Sheng speakers coin, manipulate and use Sheng lexemes in ways that are often unintentional, there is a high degree of logic involved in the process of lexicalization. Studies by Vivian de Klerk and Richard Antrobus as well as Luanga Kasanga offer new avenues to study emerging speech patterns among Black South African English speakers and

young White South African English speakers respectively. Kasanga, in particular, challenges traditional linguistic theory by analyzing these new patterns not as error but as creativity.

Language ideologies are addressed in a range of ways in the research presented by Mompoloki Bagwasi, Felicity Horne, Rita Ribbens, Thabisile Buthelezi, Aquilina Mawadza, Shakila Reddy, and Priya Narismulu. These papers examine the practices and texts in which different languages are represented and many attend to how understandings of language may be challenged, while some also consider how alternatives are being created (Cameron 2003:448). Gender studies is one of fastest growing areas in postgraduate research and this may be attributed to the interdisciplinary nature of the subject and the deep crises that are experienced in the areas of masculinity, HIV/AIDS, and interpersonal violence.

Studies on language and gender by Buthelezi and Mawadza draw on a wealth of knowledge of the Zulu and Shona languages respectively to map sexist and stereotypical discourses of gender (Pauwels 2003), at the same time embodying and recording the challenge of the other of patriarchy that has been silenced for so long (Davies 1995). Other studies refer to stereotyping, that is, overgeneralizations that are factually inaccurate but nevertheless persistent (Apte 2001). Mawadza examines Shona language usage and the gendered manner in which this language is used to stigmatize HIV/AIDS sufferers. Reddy and Narismulu consider questions of gender in the discourses of different youth subcultures in the Durban area. Felicity Horne examines more public statements about HIV/AIDS in post-apartheid South Africa. There is much in this paper that is valuable for understanding the impact of gender, such as the exposition of the military linguistic model that underpins many descriptions of HIV/AIDS.

Frantz Fanon argued that '[t]o speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language but it means above all to assume a culture' (1968:13). While the psychiatrist could not have anticipated the pathological silence that accompanied the devastation of HIV/AIDS, his analysis sums up the direction of the research done in the papers by Mawadza, Horne, Reddy and Narismulu. HIV/AIDS exemplifies the importance of the connection between knowledge and power, not just in the service of social goals but also in the achievement of disciplinary value as the President of the World Federation of Modern

Language Associations argued at the twenty-first World Congress (Cunningham 2003).

Areas for Further Research

This issue addresses emerging challenges in sociolinguistic research. Language and gender is one area that needs to be developed much further, given the interdisciplinary nature of the subject and the dearth of information in society. There has been a focus on language and gender in the *Journal of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 20,3 (2002). More research is unquestionably needed to understand how and why women and men speak the way they do. Exploring such patterns of gendered language usage will also enable us to understand how they perpetuate stereotypical notions of gender associated with the HIV/Aids pandemic.

More attention needs to be paid to race, mapping and analyzing the language used in the discourses of race, which is not going to go away and which sociolinguists need to address substantively, especially from the vantage point of postcolonial states that are dealing with neoliberal globalisation. As with gender, writing about race is not to be confused with hegemonic and reactionary positions on the subject. Talking about race is as important as talking about gender if the oppressive discourses of racism and sexism are to be exposed and challenged. This will not happen through silence. Such a project may well begin with race as an analytical category as indicated in the groundbreaking and paradigm-expanding work of the population geneticists (Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi & Piazza 1994).

Research addressing the indigenous African languages and how these operate in relation to the established languages of instruction in any educational institution is urgently needed. The substantial number of contributions that address the disparities between language policy and practice bears testimony to the importance of this subject area. Of importance are the recommendations offered by the contributors. It is now time to test the ways in which these may be best implemented and to report on the findings. Linguistic redress is long overdue, as language planning workshops in KwaZulu-Natal have indicated (Geyser, Narismulu & Ramsay-Brijball 2000; Ndimande, Desai & Ramsay-Brijball 2002).

Identifying and researching variation within the newly emerging speech varieties is another area for further research. As the linguistic mosaic

of countries evolves, the emergence of new varieties and linguistic strategies become a reality. The urgency to understand how people construct identity in multilingual contexts through the deliberate or unintentional use of these varieties is becoming increasingly necessary. According to the Pan South African Language Board, Tsotsitaal, for instance, was listed by an unexpected large number of speakers in the 2001 census, indicating the widespread use of emerging non-standard, mixed varieties. In order to address the linguistic renaissance mentioned earlier with any sense of responsibility, sociolinguists are urged to probe further into the rapid growth of these varieties by documenting their pragmatic as well as the structural features.

As the National Research Foundation focuses on how the boundaries of research may be extended, sociolinguists and other researchers need to strengthen existing work and open up new directions.

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