Language as social semiotic

The social interpretation of language and meaning

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The essays in this book, which were written between 1972 and 1976, are linked by a common theme; the title of the collection is an attempt to capture and make explicit what this theme is.

'Language is a social fact', in the frequently-quoted words of Saussure; and to recongize this is, in Saussure's view, a necessary step towards identifying 'language' as the true object of linguistics.Others before him had stressed the social character of language; for example Sweet, who wrote in 1888, 'Language originates spontaneously in the individual, for the imitative and symbolic instinct is inherent in all intelligent beings, whether men or animals; but, like that of poetry and the arts, its development is social'.

Observations such as these can be, and on occasion are, taken as the springboard for a display of exegetical acrobatics which leaves the original writer's intention far behind. In reality, such statements always have a context; they are part of a particular chain of reasoning or interpretative scheme. Saussure is concerned, at this point in his discussion, with the special character of linguistics in relation to other sciences; Sweet is explaining the origin and evolution of dialectal variation in language. It is only at the risk of distortion that we isolate such remarks from their context and fix them in a frame on the wall.

The formulation 'language as social semiotic' says very little by itself; it could mean almost anything, or nothing at all. It belongs to a particular conceptual framework, and is intended to suggest a particular interpretation of language within that framework. This certainly encompasses the view that language is a social fact, though probably not quite in the Saussurean sense, which Firth glossed as 'the language of the community, a function of *la masse parlante*, stored and residing in the *conscience collective*.'

Language arises in the life of the individual through an ongoing exchange of meanings with significant others. A child creates, first his child tongue, then his mother tongue, in interaction with that little coterie of people who constitute his meaning group. In this sense, language is a product of the social process.

A child learning language is at the same time learning other things through language – building up a picture of the reality that is around him and inside him. In this process, which is also a social process, the construal of reality is inseparable from the construal of the semantic system in which the reality is encoded. In this sense, language is a shared meaning potential, at once

both a part of experience and an intersubjective interpretation of experience.

There are two fundamental aspects to the social reality that is encoded in language: to paraphrase Lévi-Strauss, it is both 'good to think' and 'good to eat'. Language expresses and symbolizes this dual aspect in its semantic system, which is organized around the twin motifs of reflection and action – language as a means of reflecting on things, and language as a means of acting on things. The former is the 'ideational' component of meaning; the latter is the 'interpersonal' – one can act *symbolically* only on persons, not on objects.

A social reality (or a 'culture') is itself an edifice of meanings – a semiotic construct. In this perspective, language is one of the semiotic systems that constitute a culture; one that is distinctive in that it also serves as an encoding system for many (though not all) of the others.

This in summary terms is what is intended by the formulation 'language as social semiotic'. It means interpreting language within a sociocultural context, in which the culture itself is interpreted in semiotic terms – as an information system, if that terminology is preferred.

At the most concrete level, this means that we take account of the elementary fact that people talk to each other. Language does not consist of sentences; it consists of text, or discourse – the exchange of meanings in interpersonal contexts of one kind or another. The contexts in which meanings are exchanged are not devoid of social value; a context of speech is itself a semiotic construct, having a form (deriving from the culture) that enables the participants to predict features of the prevailing register – and hence to understand one another as they go along.

But they do more than understand each other, in the sense of exchanging information and goods-and-services through the dynamic interplay of speech roles. By their everyday acts of meaning, people act out the social structure, affirming their own statuses and roles, and establishing and transmitting the shared systems of value and of knowledge. In recent years our understanding of these processes has been advanced most of all by Bernstein and Labov, two original thinkers whose ideas, though often presented as conflicting, are in fact strikingly complementary, the one starting from social structure and the other from linguistic structure. Bernstein has shown how the semiotic systems of the culture become differentially accessible to different social groups; Labov has shown how variation in the linguistic system is functional in expressing variation in social status and roles.

Putting these two perspectives together, we begin to see a little way into the rather elusive relation between language and social structure. Variation in language is in a quite direct sense the expression of fundamental attributes of the social system; dialect variation expresses the diversity of social *structures* (social hierarchies of all kinds), while register variation expresses the diversity of social *processes*. And since the two are interconnected – what we do is affected by who we are: in other words, the division of labour is *social* –

dialects become entangled with registers. The registers a person has access to are a function of his place in the social structure; and a switch of register may entail a switch of dialect.

This is how we try to account for the emergence of standard dialects, the correlation of dialects and registers, and the whole complex ideology of language attitudes and value judgements. But these imply more than the simple notion that language 'expresses' social structure and the social system. It would be nearer the point to say that language *actively symbolizes* the social system, representing metaphorically in its patterns of variation the variation that characterizes human cultures. This is what enables people to play with variation in language, using it to create meanings of a social kind: to participate in all forms of verbal contest and verbal display, and in the elaborate rhetoric of ordinary daily conversation. It is this same twofold function of the linguistic system, its function both as expression of and as metaphor for social processes, that lies behind the dynamics of the inter-relation of language and social context; which ensures that, in the micro-encounters of everyday life where meanings are exchanged, language not only serves to facilitate and support other modes of social action that constitute its environment, but also actively creates an environment of its own, so making possible all the imaginative modes of meaning, from back-yard gossip to narrative fiction and epic poetry. The context plays a part in determining what we say; and what we say plays a part in determining the context. As we learn how to mean, we learn to predict each from the other.

The significance of all this for linguistics is that these considerations help to explain the nature of the linguistic system. We shall not come to under-stand the nature of language if we pursue only the kinds of question about language that are formulated by linguists. For linguists, language is object – linguistics is defined, as Saussure and his contemporaries so often felt the need to affirm, by the fact that it has language as its object of study; whereas for others, language is an instrument, a means of illuminating questions about something else. This is a valid and important distinction. But it is a distinction of goals, not one of scope. In the walled gardens in which the disciplines have been sheltered since the early years of this century, each has claimed the right to determine not only what questions it is asking but also what it will take into account in answering them; and in linguistics, this leads to the construction of elegant self-contained systems that are of only limited application to any real issues – since the objects themselves have no such boundary walls. We have to take account of the questions that are raised by others; not simply out of a sense of the social accountability of the discipline (though that would be reason enough), but also out of sheer self-interest – we shall better understand language as an object if we interpret it in the light of the findings and seekings of those for whom language is an instrument, a means towards inquiries of a quite different kind.

In these essays, the attempt is made to look into language from the outside; and specifically, to interpret linguistic processes from the standpoint of the social order. This is in some contrast to the recently

prevailing mode, in which the angle of reasoning has been from the language outwards, and the main concern was with the individual mind. For much of the past twenty years linguistics has been dominated by an individualist ideology, having as one of its articles of faith the astonishing dictum, first enunciated by Katz and Fodor in a treatise on semantics which explicitly banished all reference to the social context of language, that 'nearly every sentence uttered is uttered for the first time.' Only in a very special kind of social context could such a claim be taken seriously – that of a highly intellectual and individual conception of language in which the object of study was the idealized sentence of an equally idealized speaker. Even with the breakthrough to a 'sociolinguistic' perspective, it has proved difficult to break away from the ideal individual in whose mind all social knowledge is stored.

The 'grammar' of this kind of linguistics is a set of rules; and the conceptual framework is drawn from logic, whence is derived a model of language in which the organizing concept is that of structure. Since the structural functions are defined by logical relations (e.g. subject and predicate), the linguistic relations are seen as formal relations between classes (e.g. noun and verb). It was Chomsky's immense achievement to show how natural language can be reduced to a formal system; and as long as the twofold idealization of speaker and sentence is maintained intact, language can be represented not only as rules but even as ordered rules. But when social man comes into the picture, the ordering disappears and even the concept of rules is seen to be threatened.

In real life, most sentences that are uttered are not uttered for the first time. A great deal of discourse is more or less routinized; we tell the same stories and express the same opinions over and over again. We do, of course, create new sentences; we also create new clauses, and phrases, and words – the image of language as 'old words in new sentences' is a very superficial and simplistic one. But it really does not matter whether we do this or not; what matters is that we all the time exchange meanings, and the exchange of meanings is a creative process in which language is one symbolic resource – perhaps the principal one we have, but still one among others. When we come to interpret language in this perspective, the conceptual framework is likely to be drawn from rhetoric rather than from logic, and the grammar is likely to be a grammar of choices rather than of rules. The structure of sentences and other units is explained by derivation from their functions – which is doubtless how the structures evolved in the first place. Language is as it is because of the functions it has evolved to serve in people's lives; it is to be expected that linguistic structures could be understood in functional terms. But in order to understand them in this way we have to proceed from the outside inwards, interpreting language by reference to its place in the social process. This is not the same thing as taking an isolated sentence and planting it out in some hothouse that we call a social context. It involves the difficult task of focusing attention simultaneously on the actual and the potential, interpreting both discourse and the linguistic system that lies

behind it in terms of the infinitely complex network of meaning potential that is what we call the culture.

If I mention the names of those whose ideas I have borrowed, it is not to claim their authority, but to express indebtedness and to give the reader some hint of what to expect. The present perspective is one which derives from the ethnographic-descriptive tradition in linguistics: from Saussure and Hjelmslev, from Mathesius and the Prague school, from Malinowski and Firth, from Boas, Sapir and Whorf. Among contemporaries, everyone concerned with 'sociolinguistics' is indebted to William Labov; whether or not we accept all of his views, he has uncovered new facts about language (a rare accomplishment) and led the subject along new and rewarding paths. Among all those I have read and, whenever possible, listened to, my personal debt is owed especially to Basil Bernstein and Mary Douglas, to Sydney Lamb and Adam Makkai, to Jeffrey Ellis and Jean Ure, to Trevor Hill, John Sinclair, John Regan, Paddy O'Toole and Robin Fawcett, to my wife Ruqaiya Hasan, and to my former colleagues in Edinburgh and London. Such ideas as I have brought together here are the outcome of the ongoing exchange of meanings that somehow add up to a coherent 'context of situation', that in which language is used reflexively to explore itself.

Beyond these considerations lies an outer context, that of language and the human condition. Put in more prosaic terms, this means that my interest in linguistic questions is ultimately an 'applied' one, a concern with language in relation to the process and experience of education. From working over a number of years with teachers at all levels, primary, secondary and tertiary, in various aspects of language learning and language teaching, including learning to read and write, developing the mother tongue, studying foreign languages and exploring the nature of language, I have become convinced of the importance of the sociolinguistic background to everything that goes on in the classroom. The sociolinguistic patterns of the community, the language of family, neighbourhood and school, and the personal experience of language from earliest infancy are among the most fundamental elements in a child's environment for learning. This emphasis is directly reflected in some of the papers in this volume, for example in the final discussion of topics for further exploration, with the suggestion of the classroom as a centre of sociolinguistic research. But indirectly it is present throughout the book. If some of the argument seems remote from everyday problems of living and learning, this is because these problems are not simple, and no simple account of what happens at the surface of things is likely to be of much help in solving them.

I
The sociolinguistic perspective

1

Language and social man
(Part 1)

1 Language and the environment

If we ever come to look back on the ideology of the 1970s, as suggested by
the writer of an imaginary 'retrospect from 1980' published in *The Observer*
in the first issue of the decade, we are likely to see one theme clearly standing
out, the theme of 'social man'. Not social man in opposition to individual
man, but rather the individual in his social environment. What the writer was
forecasting – and he seems likely to be proved accurate – was, in effect, that
while we should continue to be preoccupied with man in relation to his
surroundings, as we were in the 1960s, the 1970s would show a change of
emphasis from the purely physical environment to the social environment.
This is not a new concern, but it has tended up to now to take second place;
we have been more involved over the past twenty years with town planning
and urban renewal, with the flow of traffic around us and above our heads,
and most recently with the pollution and destruction of our material
resources. This inevitably has distracted us from thinking about the other
part of our environment, that which consists of people – not people as mere
quanta of humanity, so many to the square mile, but other individuals with
whom we have dealings of a more or less personal kind.

The 'environment' is social as well as physical, and a state of wellbeing,
which depends on harmony with the environment, demands harmony of
both kinds. The nature of this state of wellbeing is what environmental
studies are about. Ten years ago we first came to hear of 'ergonomics', the
study and control of the environment in which people work; many will
remember London Transport's advertising slogan 'How big is a bus driver?',
announcing the design of new buses 'on ergonomic principles'. This was
characteristic of the conception of the environment at that time. Today we
would find more emphasis laid on the social aspects of wellbeing. No one
would assert that the shape of the bus driver's seat is unimportant; but it no
longer seems to be the whole story. There are other aspects of environ-
mental design which seem at least as significant, and which are considerably
more difficult to adjust.

Consider for example the problem of pollution, the defensive aspect of
environmental design. The rubbish creep, the contamination of air and
water, even the most lethal processes of physical pollution appear to be more
tractable than the pollution in the social environment that is caused by

prejudice and animosity of race, culture and class. These cannot be engineered away. One of the more dangerous of the terms that have been coined in this area is 'social engineering'; dangerous not so much because it suggests manipulating people for evil ends – most people are alert to that danger – but because it implies that the social environment can be fashioned like the physical one, by methods of demolition and construction, if only the plans and the machines are big enough and complicated enough. Some of the unfortunate effects of this kind of thinking have been seen from time to time in the field of language and education. But social wellbeing is not definable, or attainable, in these terms.

'Education' may sound less exciting than social engineering, but it is an older concept and one that is more relevant to our needs. If the engineers and the town planners can mould the physical environment, it is the teachers who exert the most influence on the social environment. They do so not by manipulating the social structure (which would be the engineering approach) but by playing a major part in the process whereby a human being becomes social man. The school is the main line of defence against pollution in the human environment; and we should not perhaps dismiss the notion of 'defence' too lightly, because defensive action is often precisely what is needed. Preventive medicine, after all, is defensive medicine; and what the school has failed to prevent is left to society to cure.

In the development of the child as a social being, language has the central role. Language is the main channel through which the patterns of living are transmitted to him, through which he learns to act as a member of a 'society' – in and through the various social groups, the family, the neighbourhood, and so on – and to adopt its 'culture', its modes of thought and action, its beliefs and its values. This does not happen by instruction, at least not in the pre-school years; nobody teaches him the principles on which social groups are organized, or their systems of beliefs, nor would he understand it if they tried. It happens indirectly, through the accumulated experience of numerous small events, insignificant in themselves, in which his behaviour is guided and controlled, and in the course of which he contracts and develops personal relationships of all kinds. All this takes place through the medium of language. And it is not from the language of the classroom, still less that of courts of law, of moral tracts or of textbooks of sociology, that the child learns about the culture he was born into. The striking fact is that it is the most ordinary everyday uses of language, with parents, brothers and sisters, neighbourhood children, in the home, in the street and the park, in the shops and the trains and the buses, that serve to transmit, to the child, the essential qualities of society and the nature of social being.

This, in brief, is what this chapter is about. It is a general discussion of the relation of language to social man, and in particular language as it impinges on the role of the teacher as a creator of social man – or at least as a midwife in the creation process. That this does not mean simply language in school is already clear. It means, rather, language in the total context of the interaction between an individual and his human environment: between one indi-

vidual and others, in fact. But the point of view to be adopted will be an educational one, emphasizing those aspects of language and social man that are most relevant to the teacher in the classroom.

It might seem that one could hardly begin to consider language at all without taking account of social man, since language is the means whereby people interact. How else can one look at language *except* in a social context? In the last resort, it is true that the existence of language implies the existence of social man; but this does not by itself determine the point of vantage from which language is being approached. Let us think for a moment of an individual human being, considered as a single organism. Being human, it is also articulate: it can speak and understand language, and perhaps read and write as well. Now the ability to speak and understand arises, and makes sense, only because there are other such organisms around, and it is natural to think of it as an inter-organism phenomenon to be studied from an inter-organism point of view. But it is also possible to investigate language from the standpoint of the internal make-up of that organism: the brain structure, and the cerebral processes that are involved in its speaking and understanding, and also in its learning to speak and to understand. So there is an intra-organism perspective on language as well as an inter-organism one. The two standpoints are complementary; but there tend to be shifts of emphasis between them, trends and fashions in scholarship which lead to concentration on one, for a time, at the expense of the other. In the 1960s the major emphasis was on what we are calling intra-organism studies, on the investigation of language as knowledge, of 'what the speaker knows', running parallel to, and probably occasioned by, the relative neglect of man's social environment. There has now been a move back towards a greater concern with the social aspects of language, a restoring of the balance in linguistic studies, with account once more being taken of the inter-organism factor – that of language as social behaviour, or language in relation to social man.

A diagrammatic representation of the nature of linguistic studies and their relation to other fields of scholarship will serve as a point of reference for the subsequent discussion (figure 1). The diagram shows the domain of language study – of linguistics, to give it its subject title – by a broken line; everything within that line is an aspect or a branch of linguistic studies.

In the centre is a triangle, shown by a solid line, which marks off what is the central area of language study, that of language as a system. One way of saying what is meant by 'central' here is that if a student is taking linguistics as a university subject he will have to cover this area as a compulsory part of his course, whatever other aspects he may choose to take up. There are then certain projections from the triangle, representing special sub-disciplines within this central area: phonetics, historical linguistics and dialectology – the last of these best thought of in broader terms, as the study of language varieties. These sometimes get excluded from the central region, but probably most linguists would agree in placing them within it; if one could give a three-dimensional representation they would not look like excrescences.
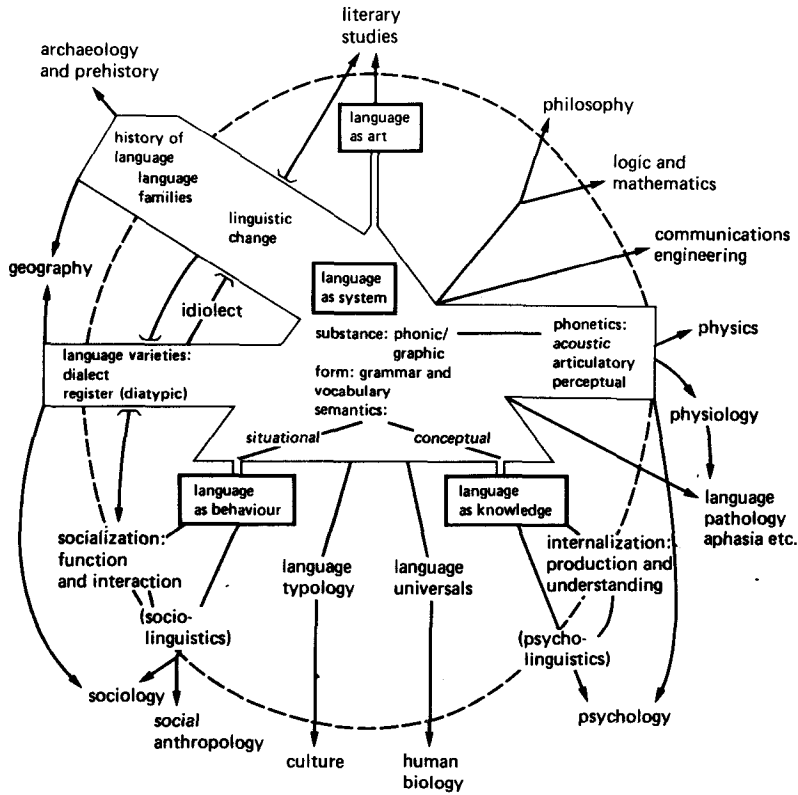
Fig. 1

Then, outside this triangle, are the principal perspectives on language that take us beyond a consideration solely of language as a system, and, in so doing, impinge on other disciplines. Any study of language involves some attention to other disciplines; one cannot draw a boundary round the subject and insulate it from others. The question is whether the aims go beyond the elucidation of language itself; and once one goes outside the central area, one is inquiring not only into language but into language in relation to something else. The diagram summarizes these wider fields under the three headings, 'language as knowledge', 'language as behaviour', 'language as art'.

The last of these takes us into the realm of literature, which is all too often treated as if it was something insulated from and even opposed to language: 'we concentrate mainly on literature here – we don't do much on language', as if 'concentrating on literature' made it possible to ignore the fact that literature is made of language. Similarly the undergraduate is invited to 'choose between lang. and lit.'. In fact the distinction that is being implied is a perfectly meaningful one between two different emphases or orientations,

one in which the centre of attention is the linguistic system and the other having a focus elsewhere; but it is wrongly named, and therefore, perhaps, liable to be misinterpreted. One can hardly take literature seriously without taking language seriously; but language here is being looked at from a special point of view.

The other two headings derive from the distinction we have just been drawing between the intra-organism perspective, language as knowledge, and the inter-organism perspective, language as behaviour. These both lead us outward from language as a system, the former into the region of psychological studies, the latter into sociology and related fields. So in putting language into the context of 'language and social man', we are taking up one of the options that are open for the relating of language study to other fields of inquiry. This, broadly, is the sociolinguistic option; and the new subject of sociolinguistics that has come into prominence lately is a recognition of the fact that language and society – or, as we prefer to think of it, language and social man – is a unified conception, and needs to be understood and investigated as a whole. Neither of these exists without the other: there can be no social man without language, and no language without social man. To recognize this is no mere academic exercise; the whole theory and practice of education depends on it, and it is no exaggeration to suggest that much of our failure in recent years – the failure of the schools to come to grips with social pollution – can be traced to a lack of insight into the nature of the relationships between language and society: specifically of the processes, which are very largely linguistic processes, whereby a human organism turns into a social being.

2 Inter-organism and intra-organism perspectives

The diagram in section 1 suggests a context for language study, placing it in the environment of other fields of investigation. It also suggests where 'language and social man' fits into the total picture of language study. The discussion of the diagram will perhaps have made it clear (and this harks back to what was said at the beginning) that when we talk of 'social man' the contrast we are making is not that of social versus individual. The contrast is rather that of social versus psychophysiological, the distinction which we have attempted to draw in terms of inter-organism and intra-organism perspectives.

When we refer to social man, we mean the individual considered as a single entity, rather than as an assemblage of parts. The distinction we are drawing here is that between the behaviour of that individual, his actions and interactions with his environment (especially that part of his environment which consists of other individuals), on the one hand, and on the other hand his biological nature, and in particular the internal structure of his brain. In the first of these perspectives we are regarding the individual as an integral whole, and looking at him from the outside; in the second we are focusing our attention on the parts, and looking on the inside, into the works.