DIRECTIONS IN
SOCIOLINGUISTICS

The Ethnography of Communication

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Preface

The present work integrates in a single volume some major directions of research on the social basis of verbal communication, a subject which has become of considerable interest to social scientists working at both theoretical and applied levels. In recent years most linguists, in their concern with formal methods of description, have concentrated on the internal relations of linguistic signs, ruling out consideration of extra linguistic factors. Today, semantics is once more a legitimate subject, and syntax is seen to raise questions of the status of sentences as acts of speech and parts of discourse. Basic theoretical problems of the nature of grammar and its relation to speakers' verbal competence are therefore once more becoming relevant. Similarly, questions of the functions of language are again receiving serious attention.

The importance of language in social problems, especially education and national development, also is drawing linguistics into wider concerns. The last decade has seen an increasing number of conferences, interdisciplinary symposia, and monographs attempting to stimulate serious behaviorally oriented research on stylistics and expressive speech, intrasocietal diversity of language, attitudes to language, language politics and policy, and other similar peripheral subjects (Sebeok 1960; Bright 1966; Lieberson 1966b; Capell 1966; Haugen 1966; MacNamara 1967; Fishman *et al.* 1968).

Although sustained empirical work is only beginning, the response so far seems highly promising. Social scientists are showing interest in linguistic data as a means of studying behavior independently of overtly expressed attitudes, while linguists are beginning to see that many important questions of language change, education, and policy cannot be solved without information on the social factors affecting speech. Almost over-

night sociolinguistics has emerged as a distinct field, one of a series of border disciplines which promises to provide novel insights into the bases of human conduct.

The ready currency of the term *sociolinguistics*, however, does not reflect fundamental agreement on common problems, sources of data, or methods of analysis. On the contrary, the recent publications reveal almost as many methods of operation as there are workers in the field. Many scholars—probably a majority of those who identify themselves as sociolinguists—are interested in language data as they contribute to the solution of problems already posed by the academic dialogue in their own disciplines. Some simply measure attitudes to language or speakers' self-reports on their usage. Others analyze usage through counts of individual words, or syntactic constructions and the like, using such counts as indexes in somewhat the same way in which income, education, and attitudes are used by other social scientists. Others again, seeking to make better use of the full potential of linguistic description, tend to draw direct parallels between features of the linguistic structure of a particular dialect or speech style and independently measured social characteristics of its users. A fourth group, oriented toward policy issues, has begun to utilize descriptive and historical linguistics in the creation of new orthographies and scientific terminologies, and in other aspects of language development and planning.

The gradual accumulation over the years of ethnographic information and insight into verbal practices of human groups, however, has also raised some entirely new questions about the very place of speaking in human interaction. No one claims, that grammar, as the term is normally understood, covers everything that is rule governed in speech. Linguists and social scientists of many persuasions have long called attention to the importance of prestige, politeness, expressive, ritual, and religious values, and similar aspects of language. It has been argued that such nonreferential functions may be determinant in language behavior and language change. Language usage—i.e., what is said on a particular occasion, how it is phrased, and how it is coordinated with nonverbal signs—cannot simply be a matter of free individual choice. It must itself be affected by subconsciously internalized constraints similar to grammatical constraints. But although issues of language function have stimulated considerable discussion, they have, so far, not been integrated into any general theory of language and society and, as a result, are rarely taken account of in the research designs which underlie field procedures.

The special issue of the *American Anthropologist* published in 1964 under the title "The Ethnography of Communication" (Gumperz and Hymes 1964) was an attempt to stimulate empirically oriented work on such problems. In the years since the publication of that collection, con-

siderable progress has been made both in theory and in field techniques. The articles in the present volume, many of which are contributed by the same authors, attempt to capture these advances, while at the same time bringing in relevant lines of work not previously included.

The theoretical goal of the type of sociolinguistic investigation represented here is best illustrated by the notion of communicative competence: What a speaker needs to know to communicate effectively in culturally significant settings. Like Chomsky's term on which it is patterned, communicative competence refers to the ability to perform. An attempt is made to distinguish between what the speaker knows—what his inherent capacities are—and how he behaves in particular instances. However, whereas students of linguistic competence seek to explain those aspects of grammar believed to be common to all humans independent of social determinants, students of communicative competence deal with speakers as members of communities, as incumbents of social roles, and seek to explain their use of language to achieve self-identification and to conduct their activities. While for linguistic theory in the former sense the ability to formalize sentences as grammatically acceptable is the central notion, for sociolinguistics as represented in the book, the central notion is the appropriateness of verbal messages in context or their acceptability in the broader sense.

The contributors and their contributions represent an unusually broad range of fields. Different readers will recognize concepts and techniques drawn from linguistics, ethnography, sociology, dialectology, psychology, componential analysis, ethnoscience, paralinguistics and kinesics, folklore, ethnomethodology, stylistics, and possibly other sources as well. While most chapters are empirically oriented, none are merely descriptive. Many new and general concepts, suitable for the analysis of verbal interaction processes everywhere, are proposed. Yet there is by no means complete agreement on theory. Sociolinguistics is still many steps removed from the formal rigor of an integrated grammatical theory. It seems clear, however, that progress is not a matter merely of refining analytical apparatus. Since many of the relevant questions have only recently begun to be asked, we lack the empirical information on which generalizations must be built. Our aim here is to present evidence documenting the existence of a level of rule-governed verbal behavior which goes beyond the linguists' grammar to relate social and linguistic constraints on speech, to illustrate the type of data that must be collected for its analysis and the elicitation methods by which it can be gathered.

We hope that this book will stimulate students and professionals in the linguistic and social sciences as well as educators concerned with language arts. Because of the newness of the subject, it was impossible to modify the content of the articles without seriously impairing their utility.

Additional explanatory material has, however, been provided in the Introduction, the Plan of the Book, and in notes preceding each chapter. The Introduction relates the interactional approach to language to past and present theory and fieldwork practice. The Plan of the Book outlines the scope of the volume and the rationale for its organization. Each chapter is introduced by an explanatory note pointing out its significance for our concerns and giving additional background readings. A general bibliography lists all references cited. A list of background readings brings together some basic background material relevant to modern sociolinguistics. Also included in the appendix is the "Outline Guide for the Ethnographic Study of Speech Use," by Joel Sherzer and Regna Darnell. We hope that the reader will enjoy direct contact with work that seeks to build something and will gain new perspectives from which to approach existing research on language and social interaction and its application to education and policy making.

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Introduction

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The interactional approach to language behavior, which is the unifying theme of this volume, exemplifies both new theoretical insights and changes in research orientation. Since such changes are best understood in historical perspective, we will begin this introduction by outlining the background of modern sociolinguistics: early speech community studies, descriptive linguistics, generative grammar, and correlational sociolinguistics. We will then proceed to treat some of the most important research paradigms and analytical concepts emerging from the work of the last decade, and conclude with a discussion of implications for future fieldwork.

Early Speech Community Studies

The systematic investigation of the speech of human groups dates to the beginning of the nineteenth century and is part of the general interest in organized knowledge concerning the variety of human customs and beliefs which arose in the Enlightenment. For example, in the 16th century, Montaigne collected oral literature from Brazilian Indians brought to France. A unique manual of ethnography including language appeared in the seventeenth century in France, and word lists were gathered extensively in the eighteenth century. But cultural description focused on speech behavior was almost nonexistent. Most scholarly work of the era was dominated either by a concern with evolution in which the institutions of Western industrial society were seen as the end product of a series of evolutionary stages of which the languages and customs of primitives represented the beginning and/or with legitimizing the cultural origins of nations [e.g., the Italians (Vico) and the Germans (Grimm)].

Linguists of all persuasions, like other scholars, were concerned with documenting historical processes, but the source material for their studies

differed. There were many linguists who, in the manner of the early classical philologists, worked primarily with manuscript remains of extinct languages or with literary texts, inscriptions, or documents exemplifying earlier stages of modern literary languages. Work with single or at most a few manuscripts of earlier epics, tales, chronicles, or Bible translations, each relatable to a particular modern vernacular, led them to visualize speech distribution as describable in terms of a limited number of discrete languages and dialects. Their goal was to document the development of these modern varieties from earlier prehistoric protolanguages in somewhat the same way that biological scientists studied the evolution of animal organisms.

A second group of scholars preferred to concentrate on more recent, historically documented linguistic changes. Arguing that peasant communities and tribal societies furnished living proof of evolutionary processes, many of them turned away from written documents to the direct study of the oral practices of such communities. The first-hand empirical investigation of speech received particular impetus from the neo-grammarian doctrines of sound change. The Neo-grammarian thesis that language change is regular and that sound changes which relate contemporary vernaculars to earlier forms of speech are describable by means of laws which, like the laws of natural science, allow no exceptions, was the first statement of historical linguistic processes sufficiently explicit to suggest practical field tests. It could be argued that if local peasant dialects of a literary language represent divergent historical development of earlier stages of that language, and if sound correspondences are regular, then dialects should be separated by sharp boundaries reflecting the historical linguists' statement of these correspondences.

Motivated by these and similar questions, dialectologists launched into a series of field surveys in which peasant speech was studied either through mail questionnaires or directly through fieldwork by investigators, who often covered many miles on foot in order to collect dialect samples through direct methods. Other scholars, more skeptical of the Neo-grammarian hypothesis, sought to disprove the latter theory by studying the linguistic consequences of large-scale immigration or conquest or by investigating "language mixture" as revealed in pidgins and trade languages found in regions of interethnic contact.

Writings on these issues in the years 1875–1940 are often quite speculative and poorly documented when compared with studies based on textual materials dating from the same period. Nevertheless, they served to demonstrate that language is basically a social institution and to document the importance of social factors in language change, thus disproving earlier ideas of biological or geographical determinism. Although it is evident that new expressions are always created by individuals, the acceptance of such innovations by others, their spread, and their ultimate effect on the

linguistic system is in large part socially determined. Conquest, population migration, or other less dramatic forms of social change can lead to the disappearance of old languages and the spread of others. Similarly, new languages, pidgins, and creoles may be created as a result of forced population resettlement and intensive intergroup contact. Classification by language, therefore, need not be correlated with groupings of mankind on other bases.

Perhaps the most detailed and, for the modern social scientist, the most interesting evidence of the working of social factors in the spread of linguistic innovations comes from the dialect surveys conducted during the first decades of this century. The Swabian dialectologist Fischer (Bach 1960), e.g., found that the rural dialect boundaries of the area of southwestern Germany closely reflected the political borders of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. So close was the connection that subregional borders drawn on the basis of dialect isogloss bundles were almost as accurate as frontiers reconstructed on the basis of historical records alone. A comparative study of dialect boundaries in Germany, France, and Italy by Jaberg (1936) suggests that dialect diversity in these countries is a direct function of the degree of centralization of political power in a particular area. France, dominated for the last few centuries by a single center of political and economic power, shows few sharp dialect boundaries; transitions are gradual. Except in outlying areas, preexisting differences seem to have been largely obliterated. In Italy, with a few highly centralized city-states, dialect distribution follows the frontiers of these states and boundaries are sharp. Germany, where political fragmentation and small states were the rule, shows many small dialect areas, separated by relatively large transition zones, reflecting the lack of political stability and the many territorial changes of recent history.

Our understanding of the mechanisms by which social factors affect language change has been clarified by Leonard Bloomfield's (1933) discussion of speech communities, which argues that linguistic diversity in human societies is directly related to density of communication or to the amount of verbal interaction among speakers. Bloomfield writes:

Imagine a large chart with a dot for every speaker in the community and imagine that every time any speakers uttered a sentence an arrow were drawn into the chart printing from his dot to the dot representing each one of his hearers. At the end of a given period of time, say 70 years, that chart would show us the density of communication in the community. . . . Subgroups are separated by lines of weakness in this net of oral communication.

Whereas previous scholars had attempted to find direct correlations between language and various environmental factors, Bloomfield here postulates an intervening level of human communication which mediates

between linguistic and nonlinguistic phenomena. Political, economic, or even geographical factors are no longer seen as directly reflected in speech. They affect language only to the extent that they can be shown to channel verbal communication among speakers, causing certain individuals to have more verbal contact with some than with others and thereby influencing the rate at which innovations diffuse. Recent sociolinguistic research leads us to question the relation between diffusion and mere density of communication as too simplistic, but the basic point about the effect of interaction on language structure is nevertheless valid and has become a central issue in modern sociolinguistic research.

Unfortunately, Bloomfield's suggestive remarks did not directly lead to empirical investigations, perhaps because at the time they implied an impossibly massive task. While there was widespread agreement about the importance of extralinguistic factors in language change, efforts to reconcile the linguistic findings of dialect surveys with the results of comparative reconstruction based on manuscript sources aroused considerable controversy. Although the issues are usually phrased in theoretical terms, failure to resolve them is at least partly attributable to the imperfections of field elicitation techniques and analytical tools. While scholars working with literary texts were limited to relatively few written manuscripts for each period, dialectologists sampled large numbers of speakers and were faced with the additional problem of reliability in transcription. For a time, accuracy in the recording of interspeaker differences became a major issue. One of the nineteenth-century pioneers of European dialectology, Gilliéron, fearing that scholars might permit their notions of language history to influence their field recordings (Pop 1950), sought out and trained as a fieldworker E. Edmond, a "naïve" speaker of the language whose main qualification was a good ear for sound and who, not being a philologist, was presumably unencumbered by preconceived notions about what he heard. Edmond received training only in phonetics, and traveled in person from locality to locality interviewing local residents and setting down on paper just what he heard without attempting to interpret it. Gilliéron's approach set the pattern for dialect elicitation procedures through the first third of the present century. Fieldwork was viewed as a process of behavioral observation aimed at the production of faithful records of natural speech. Interpretation and analysis were kept separate from this elicitation stage, being deferred until the data were in.

Geographical surveys, conducted on these principles, produced a wealth of new and startling information on intracommunity variation in pronounciation and word usage. Yet the larger the amount of data, the greater the number of problems in evaluating the significance of what was found. In spite of the basic insights gained into processes of change, the very question of dialect borders and their relation to sound laws, the

problem which initially had provided the impetus for these surveys, defied solution. Since in many instances there was no basis for deciding which of the many isoglosses that marked the transition from one region to another was the actual boundary, some scholars maintained that each word had its own history. Others attempted to group isoglosses into bundles of greater and lesser importance so as to distinguish major from minor boundaries, but there were no generally agreed upon criteria for such bundling (Bloomfield 1933; Bach 1960). It seemed impossible to reconcile the many interpersonal, interregional and social variations discovered in the course of direct field surveys with the prevailing view of languages and dialects as quasi-organic, internally uniform wholes. Clearly, objectivity and accuracy in the recording of speech was not enough, no matter how detailed and unbiased the data. What was needed was a theoretical basis for judging the relative importance of the many potential indexes of linguistic diversity

Descriptive Linguistics

Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916) distinction between speech (*parole*) and language (*langue*) can be seen as an attempt to resolve the dialectologists' dilemma. "Speech" refers to the actual sounds produced by speakers, while "language" represents shared pattern, which is distinct from what is actually said in somewhat the same way that Durkheim's social facts are separate from behavior. Language structure is defined in terms of the regularities derived from utterance sequences by a process of analysis in which utterances are segmented into minimal segments and these segments then classified by comparison with other similar elements. The goal is to arrive at the minimum number of symbols necessary to account for observed articulatory characteristics and thus to eliminate redundant features. The distinctive units derived in this way form a system which is defined by the relationship of contrast among units and which does not depend on the phonetic value of any one of them.

With the notion of structure established, the emphasis in fieldwork shifts from a search for greater accuracy to classification and contrastive analysis. While detailed phonetic records continue to be important, they are only the first step in linguistic research. Once recorded, the overtly distinct or *etic* units must be converted into structurally distinct or *emic* units (Pike 1964). The dialectologists' failure to agree on dialect and language boundaries could thus be attributed to a tendency to emphasize surface differences at the expense of structural relationship. Variations recorded in fieldwork are of equal significance only if they alter the structural relationships among elements. While speech may change from place

to place and person to person, grammatical systems tend to be more stable and less subject to change. With increased analytical refinement, the notion of languages and dialects as discrete wholes seemed saved, or at least salvageable. Henceforth it was argued that comparative statements, generalizations about verbal behavior and linguistic change must be based on emic analyses, not on raw field data. Homogeneity of languages and dialects was to be sought at the level of structural abstraction.

Edward Sapir's article on the psychological reality of phonemes dramatically demonstrated the importance of the notion of linguistic structure for our understanding of human cognition. Using evidence from his own efforts to train naïve natives to transcribe the sounds of their language, Sapir shows that his subjects' phonetic accuracy is significantly affected by the phonological system of their own native language. He explained what at first hand seemed to be errors in transcription by demonstrating that these errors occur where structural and phonetic reality conflict, and that the former takes precedence over the latter. Gilliéron's quest for unbiased native transcribers is thus demonstrably futile. All human beings, informants and linguists alike, tend to prejudge or edit the sounds they hear. Linguistic structure is more than a mere scholarly construct. Structure constrains and potentially predicts the speaker's perception of verbal stimuli.

Furthermore, since linguistic constraints operate largely below the level of consciousness, speakers themselves cannot be expected to provide adequate explanations for their own verbal behavior. Information on language structure must be discovered indirectly by trained investigators. Emphasis on phonetic accuracy gave way to a search for techniques which would enable the linguist to overcome his own perceptual limitations so as to discover the system of a second language.

The demand for better and more systematic analytical tools was especially strong among the growing numbers of American anthropologists and linguists who, following the pioneering work of Gatchett, Boas, and others, had set out to record and preserve the many languages spoken by American Indians. Information on these languages at first derived in large part from word lists or text translations collected by missionaries or government officials. As scholarly interest in tribal cultures deepened and linguistic skills increased, anthropologists began to record indigenous tales and myths as part of their regular ethnographic descriptions. A native speaker, usually someone well versed in tribal traditions, would dictate texts which the investigator would then record phonetically as best he could. Even the most careful investigators, however, frequently failed to note important aspects of these tales and tended to misinterpret the

speaker's utterances. It became evident that the systematic analysis of linguistic form and of phonological and grammatical structures had to take precedence over evaluation of content. Anthropological linguistic analysis at the level of sound had to precede that at the higher levels of syntax, semantics, and culture.

Among the most valuable accomplishments of this period is the development of techniques which go beyond the mere recording of data to enlist the native speaker's assistance in improving the validity of the linguist's perception of sound. In order to determine if what was recorded as different was actually different, or whether what was transcribed as similar was actually similar, the method of variation within a frame was employed. This method consists of contrasting like items varying only in one feature. Thus, if an investigator wanted to test his transcription of the English 'i' in 'bid,' he would search for other items in the speaker's vocabulary, such as 'bed' and 'bead,' which shared the initial 'b' and the final 'd' and differed only in the vowel. In this way, by keeping the elicitation frame constant, he could concentrate all of his attention on one feature. The method served both to discover new distinctions and as a way of ear training or drill, helping the linguist to overcome the limitations imposed by his own phonological system. Linguistic analysis became an integral part of the fieldwork process. Moreover, since all speakers of a language are equally affected by the subconscious perceptual constraints of the system, structural linguists came to prefer intensive work with a single informant to the dialectologist's language surveys.

As anyone who has tried it can attest, the linguist-informant elicitation procedure just described is not at all simple. Most naïve speakers are unaware of the formal features to which the linguist wishes them to attend and think of language only in terms of meaning. The process thus involves learning for both the linguist and the informant. Not any native can serve as an informant. Linguists working in this tradition tend to search out "good" speakers of the language, people with both the time and leisure to work over a long period of time who had sufficient intelligence and verbal ability to learn the required task (Samarin 1967). Statistically, their sample is thus always biased.

The interview setting, furthermore, is often formal and contrived and almost always quite different from the settings within which people usually interact. Some of the best-known work of the Sapir era was, in fact, based on the speech of native speakers who had long been isolated from other native speakers of the language. Sapir's informant on Nootka was a student in a Pennyslvania college. Benjamin A. Whorf derived his basic data on Hopi from an Indian resident of New York City (Hoijer 1954). Even those linguists who worked in or near actual communities

often found it necessary to do most of their elicitation in their own quarters, away from the distracting noise of the native community.

In spite of these limitations, however, the success of the new elicitation procedures and the analytical techniques built upon them is well known. As compared to earlier grammarians, descriptive linguists achieved a unique degree of explicitness and replicability. Armed with the new methodological tools, any two investigators making independent study of similar data could expect, with fair certainty, to arrive at similar or at least comparable results.

The new techniques of structural analysis earned for linguistics the reputation of the most scientific of the social-science disciplines. But these techniques proved to be quite limited in their application. Single isolated utterances, rather than entire texts, became the chief units of study, with meaning—and to some extent even syntax—frequently deferred for later attention. Minor dialect variations, loan words, and other diffusionary phenomena were also frequently dismissed as either marginal or not relevant for formalization.

The result was that much potentially important information on speech behavior was lost in the process of converting etic into emic categories. The notion of grammars as internally consistent systems, which must be explained in their own terms without reference to outside information, furthermore led to a reaction against earlier, premature, cross-language generalizations. It became fashionable to emphasize the infinite variability of phonemic and grammatical structures (Joos 1962).

Generative Grammar

Fortunately, many of these limitations in scope proved to be short-lived. During the 1950s, when some of the basic problems of phonology and word morphology seemed settled, interest turned once more to syntax and semantics. Concern with meaning in the makeup of sentences led to some fundamental changes in notions of grammatical structure, changes which were in some ways every bit as basic as those associated with the shift to descriptive linguistics. The key factor in these theoretical developments was Chomsky's demonstration that mere taxonomic analysis and classification of phonological and morphological units fails to explain some very basic grammatical relationships. Sentence pairs like the by now well known "he is eager to please" and "He is easy to please" are, Chomsky argues, overtly similar, yet native speakers of English have no difficulty in recognizing that in the first item "he" refers to the subject of "please," i.e., the one who does the pleasing, while in the

second item "he" refers to the object, i.e., the one who is being pleased. In order to account for such underlying grammatical differences it is necessary to recognize two distinct levels of syntactic structuring, a level of "deep structure" dealing, among other things, with grammatical relationships (subject-object-verb, modifier-noun, etc.) and a level of surface structure representing the overt arrangement of phonological forms in actual sentences.

The relationship of sound to meaning thus proves to be much more complex than the earlier descriptivists had imagined. Segmentation and analysis of utterance elements does not automatically lead to an understanding of the basic mechanism of language. The goal of linguistic description therefore shifts from taxonomy of texts to grammar as a theory of the speaker's "linguistic competence," i.e., a set of abstract rules which account for his ability to generate and understand sentences.

This change in research paradigm has some important consequences for linguistic elicitation procedures. While much of the basic data for grammatical analysis continues to be collected in linguist-informant interview sessions of the type just described, the investigator, in order to prove the speaker's ability, takes an increasingly active role in the elicitation process. Rather than simply collecting speech forms and classifying them, he seeks ways of challenging his informant by asking him to perform grammatical operations on sentences, i.e., changing sentences from active to passive, positive to negative, singular to plural. He may himself test his own understanding of grammatical rules by creating new sentences and ask the informant to judge their grammaticality. The linguist thus ceases to be an impartial observer and increasingly takes on the role of an active experimenter.

Whereas descriptive linguists had seen their work as being closely related to the ethnographers' descriptions of foreign cultures, the generative grammarians' interest in grammar as a model of speakers' knowledge or ability takes them into the realm of the human. Chomsky explicitly characterizes linguistics as a branch of cognitive psychology. Generative grammar has a profound effect on psychological theory. The notion of linguistic competence clears the way for radically new approaches to cognition (Miller, Galanter, and Pribham 1960) and has made significant contributions to our understanding of human learning (Smith and Miller 1966).

It must be emphasized, however, that generative grammar studies speakers as individuals, not as members of specific groups. Speakers' abilities are dealt with at a very abstract level, with emphasis on those abilities that are shared by all humans. Recent linguistic research has in fact provided increasing evidence for the universality of basic grammatical processes, and much attention has been devoted to the formalization of