

Original Paper

Review of *The Sociolinguistics of Language*

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Abstract

This piece is an introduction and a review of one of Ralph Fasold's works, the Sociolinguistics of Language. From address forms to pragmatics, Prof. Fasold studied various language phenomena in social communications, including gender and language, discourse analysis, and creolistics. Pidgin and creole language phenomena should be examined in terms of processes instead of types of languages. To apply the theory into daily experiences, we should make efforts in language arts education.

Keywords

sociolinguistics, address form, ethnography, creolistics, pragmatics

The Sociolinguistics of Language was written by Ralph Fasold, a professor of linguistics at Georgetown University, Washington D.C. This book examines the influence of social interaction in language use and discusses a variety of facts about language from the commonplace to the exotic, it reflects that one of Ralph Fasold's major concerns is to improve our understanding of how language works, and to gain insights into the nature of human language faculty. The book stresses that such insights depend not only on the study of language as an autonomous system, but also on the study of its relationship with society. As a companion volume of "The Sociolinguistics of Society", this book completes the picture by concentrating on those aspects of sociolinguistics which are of more central concern to linguists, dealing as it does with the influence of social factors on language and with topics of concern to linguistic theory.

Each chapter of the book focuses on a topic concerning "the effect of relatively small-scale social influences on language". The subject of the first chapter is in the selection of address forms. In many languages, including the English language at an earlier time in its history, there are two or more words for "you". For example: *vous/tu* (French), *nin/ni* (Chinese). One of these is used for people you are less familiar with or who are socially superior, the other is used for people you are close to, or who have a lower social position than you do. Prof. Fasold finds that in English, the choice between first name and

title and last name is in many ways parallel to the *vous/tu* dichotomy. He concludes that in Western societies, forces that can loosely be called “power” and “solidarity” govern address forms, but the relative strength of each varies a great deal. Address forms make the fundamental point in sociolinguistics clear: social context is an important influence on language and language use.

Address from phenomena differ from one cultural setting to another, so this topic leads naturally to the ethnography of communication—the study of the organization of speaking as an activity in human society. Dell Hymes initiated the study of ethnography of communication in the early 1960s. A central concept is the speech community which, as most ethnographers agree, refers to a group of people who share the same rules and patterns for what to say, and when and how to say it. This definition was extended in 1982 by Saville-Troike who proposed that speech communities should be understood as overlapping, i.e., each individual speaker can belong simultaneously to several speech communities; some of the smaller ones included in larger ones, and some separate from the others. As Hymes proposed, the units of interaction include the situation event and act. When talking about the Whorf Hypothesis, the author describes a fine example of the ethnography of communication—the work of Elinor Ochs on a rural Malagasy village in Madagascar (Ochs, 1973), which was based on extended participant-observation in a small hamlet. The rules for behavior and value system of that community were substantially different from what a Westerner would expect and this has a great effect on the rules for communication. This example shows that methods in the spirit of participant-observation and the data it produces might have their limitations. Prof. Fasold seems more inclined to agree on the saying that people’s behavior tends to be guided by the linguistic categories of their languages under certain circumstances rather than the pure languages they speak. Research in the ethnography of speaking will continue until the correct methodology is obtained and a general theory constructed.

Chapter 3 deals with discourse analysis. The author sees discourse analysis as having two subdivisions: oral conversation and written structure of texts. A widely-studied topic in conversational interaction research is turn-taking. Research on text linguistics focuses on the proposal that lexical, morphological and syntactic aspects of languages have their origins and purpose in narrative, it was the relationship between grammar and discourse that accounts for text analysis.

The topic of chapter 4, language and sex, has been an important one for quite some time now, as sex differences are a fundamental fact of human life and it is not surprising to find them reflected in language. Prof. Fasold suggests the “gender pattern” as a phenomenon of sociolinguistic survey. The gender pattern involves the differential use of certain status-marking linguistic forms by sex. Recent research indicates that sex may be more fundamental as an influence on sociolinguistic variation that has been recognized so far. Certain linguistic features used by women in response to dominance by men are another emphasis in this part. Linguistic features were seen as reflecting “female register” in the mid 1970s. Recent research suggests certain linguistic devices be used to execute certain speech strategies. This leads to the study of cross-sex conversation in which men try to control the progress of

conversation while women tend to use devices to increase the probability that their contributions will be attended to and supported by their conversational partners.

Chapters 5 and 6 are about pragmatics. This part can be considered as a “continental” approach as suggested by Levinson (1983), because the main ideas in pragmatics—conversational implicature, speech acts, presupposition, indexicals and politeness—have overlapped some aspects of sociolinguistics. As far as semantic meaning and pragmatic meaning are concerned, many scholars are in favor of the partial separation of the two. Prof. Fasold introduces to us Sperber and Wilson who attempt to build a pragmatic theory on the concept of relevance. Ralph insists that notions like implicatures and indirect speech acts be interpreted in relation to the cultural values of communities of speakers. Pragmatics can be seen as the study of the entire phenomenon of human communication.

The subject of chapter 7 is pidgins and creoles. Research on pidgins and creoles has inspired many of the insights in sociolinguistic variation studies. According to Prof. Fasold, creoles are structurally enriched compared to pidgins. Pidgin and creole language phenomena should be examined in terms of processes instead of types of languages. The widely-accepted definitions of *pidginization* and *creolization* were suggested by Dell Hymes:

Pidginization is that complex process of sociolinguistic change comprising reduction in inner form, with convergence, in the context of restriction in use.

Creolization is that complex process of sociolinguistic change comprising expansion in inner form, with convergence, in the context of extension in use.

Pidginization is usually associated with simplification in outer form, *creolization* with complication in outer form.

A major contribution from creolistics to the sociolinguistic study of language variation has come from the creole continuum model, which is the one used in the analysis of various subsystems found in creole-speaking communities. Another contribution from creolistics to variation analysis is the study of the “grammaticalization” of certain linguistic elements as creoles develop. In the end of this chapter, Prof. Fasold brings about the history and future of U.S. Vernacular Black English, he says that the disputation on the origins of VBE in the 1960s and 1970s was pacified by the early 1980s. At that time the divergence hypothesis was proposed on the basis of research by William Labov and associates, and independently by Guy Bailey and Natalie Maynor. While admitting the true existence of the creole origin hypothesis and the divergence hypothesis, Prof. Fasold thinks that VBE is no more an unworthy approximation of English than English-lexified creoles are. The verb systems of VBE seems to be noticeably richer than the verb systems of socially favored English lects.

Chapter 8 is about linguistic variation which is considered by Ralph as the centerpiece of sociolinguistics. While the patterns of stratification by class and style are prominent in Labov’s work, some other influences including that of the sex of the speaker (and addressee) on sociolinguistic variables are equally important. A range of research results indicates that the higher social strata are

typically not the site where linguistic change begins. Instead, the lower to lower-middle strata are almost always the location for linguistic innovations. The “linguistic market” concept which has been used in sociolinguistic research is another way of language from economic reasons. Developmental linguistics, an approach led by Charles-James Bailey, may be the most comprehensive attempt to develop a complete linguistic theory that includes variation and change, it is concerned with explaining the nature of language by explaining how it came to be as it is. Time is seen as a basic factor in linguistic variation. Both socio-communicative and neurobiological influences on language are taken into account, the former is unnatural yet not undesirable, while the latter is connatural, a balance between the two is essential to the health of a language.

In the last chapter of the book, Ralph describes the application of sociolinguistic theory to the problems of everyday experience. The first and possibly most extensive efforts have been in language arts education such as reading and writing, language testing and educational problems. Ralph advocates tolerating disfavored sociolinguistic variants in early writing efforts, he thinks that teaching spoken standard English in classrooms is doomed to failure. Another application of sociolinguistic theory is the investigation of language contact and bilingualism. Sociolinguistics also plays an important role in the study of “world Englishes”. In addition to ethnography of education and bilingualism, sociolinguistics is being applied to the legal and medical professions.

As a cross-disciplinary subject, sociolinguistics displays its multiple characteristics in its theoretical mode and research method. It observes and studies utterances and languages of human beings, reveals the interrelationships among such factors as language, society and culture in human society, its purpose is to establish a new theory that can best describe the internal system of language and external factors that influence language and causes variations. Ralph’s book undoubtedly helps to establish such a theory by showing us a consistent and complete view of sociolinguistics. The publication of the book in China will surely promote a world-wide study in this field.

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