

Untrendy ideas

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There are many untrendy ideas in sociolinguistics. Viable sociolinguistic concepts and theories have recurrently found themselves abandoned. Once fashionable agendas have been abruptly reworked or completely rejected. This is not surprising. Sociolinguistics' claims on conceptual novelty are often tied to denunciations of various epistemic fallacies, failed concepts and unfashionable theories purportedly upheld in the field. The progress of the discipline is to some extent reflected in the growth of its conceptual scrapheap. As historical epistemologists have long argued, however, denounced ideas tend to linger in the collective unconscious of a scholarly community. The progress of thought, as Canguilhem (2003[1965], 105–128) notes, maintains an intimate relation with the concepts it has rejected. It keeps turning toward and against that occasion of denunciation from which it once begun progressing. Unfashionable ideas are repeatedly invoked and actualised in the intellectual production that vowed to displace them. They keep haunting the scholarly consciousness, as Bachelard (1934) would say. This panel takes interest in this dialectic between the refutation and retention of various concepts and ideas in sociolinguistic thought and practice. On the one hand, it seeks to explore sociolinguistics' proclivity for theoretical revisionism. On the other, it attends to some largely rebuffed, currently untrendy sociolinguistic ideas. In this vein, the panel seeks to engage more deeply with sociolinguistics' intellectual history, adding a critical historical lens to its present cool and to the displaced, untrendy concepts that occasionally unsettle it.

Bachelard, G. 1934. *Le nouvel esprit scientifique*. Paris: PUF.

Canguilhem, G. 2003(1965). *La connaissance de la vie*. Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin.

Keywords: critique of theory; history of sociolinguistics; historical epistemology; re-reading yesterday's news

1. On the "origins" of "sociolinguistics"

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This paper re-visits the generally accepted story that the discipline of sociolinguistics was invented by a small group of US-based and mainly white male actors (Hymes, Labov, Gumperz, Ferguson, and perhaps Fishman, Bright and Ervin-Tripp) in the 1960s in reaction to a social Chomskyan generative grammar. It will argue that it can perhaps be better understood 1) in continuity with a longer genealogy of struggles over whether or not language can/should be extracted from cognition and social process as a separate object: 2) as a liberal project of "development" in the context of the Cold War (and in the US, McCarthyism) and post World War II "decolonization" (both external and internal: political independence of former colonies, the civil rights movement, minority language nationalisms); it will examine in particular the role of the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, and of the Social Science Research Council's Committee on Sociolinguistics. This project accepted the importance of standardized monolingual literacy as essential to modernist nation-building, and sought consensus-based modes of managing difference, at the expense of theorizing the role of language in the making of inequality. The paper will also discuss contemporaneous feminist and anti-racist critiques, most of which have been marginalized or are just recently re-emerging, as well as attempts in France and Catalunya to develop Marxist analyses of language as work and terrain for class struggle, or as a sociolinguistique du conflit which centred conflict over consensus. Finally, it will ask what the consequences of this genealogical perspective, highlighting the political economic conditions of knowledge production, might be for our own critical reflexive practice.

Keywords: *genealogies, political economy, academic discipline, Cold War, development*

2. Sociolinguistics and the Politics of Reification

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Sue Wright (2004) suggests a three-phase history of modern (macro) sociolinguistics. The first was invested in planning and social engineering in relation to macrosocial linguistic-politics problems, in particular in decolonizing jurisdictions. Turning away from this, the second embraced identity politics and 'the social, economic and political effects of language contact, concentrating particularly on issues of advantage/disadvantage, status and access'. The third phase was triggered by the end of the Cold War, and was concerned with issues of globalisation, the dominance of English, as well as a set of regional, particularist reactions. To this one might add a fourth phase, namely an engagement with Continental European theory in a broadly postmodern spirit, and a consequent rejection of the reification of identities and language varieties. An alternative way to understand the history of sociolinguistics is in terms of an oscillation between binaries, between pairs of antithetical concepts, frameworks and approaches. This paper argues that there exists in sociolinguistics a relatively stable set of assumptions, and that this reflects an underlying politics of reification. Frameworks and ideas that are politically and ideologically suspect are subject to attack under the label of 'essentialism', whereas reifications that serve progressive ends are justified – much in the spirit of Spivak's strategic essentialism, yet without recourse to explicit argumentation. This problem is reproduced in discussion of agency, and across many other contexts. The problem that this creates is an overall disciplinary incoherence, since theoretical discussion about, for example, the ontological status of languages, is carried in the abstract, i.e. detached from the political questions that surround according or denying the status of 'a language'.

References

Wright, Sue (2004) Language Policy and Language Planning. London: Palgrave.

Keywords: *language planning; identity politics; globalisation; postmodernism; politics of reification*

3. Monolingualism

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A central contention in Billig's work is that thinking is a rhetorical activity: '[a]ny reasoned argument seeks to exclude, or persuade against, counter-arguments' which co-constitute the meaning of that argument; in this way, 'affirmation and negation are intertwined' (Billig 1996: 2). I draw on this rhetorical view of thinking to address ideas on linguistic fluidity and the untrendy notion of monolingualism or language separation upon which their cutting-edge attraction is based: I argue that these ideas are part of a reasonable argument against overly categorised views of language, but that they have all but represented monolingualism as irrational and improper; insofar as thinking depends on the availability of contrary views, it will be useful to contradict the near-consensus that monolingualism is *passé* or reactionary.

Thus, I will seek to persuade the audience that a radical rejection of linguistic fixity risks depicting fluidity and permeability as essential features of language, and frames linguistic boundary work as a repressive, non-natural intervention. I suggest that this ignores the argumentative context for imagining and valorising linguistic fluidity, that this may complicate an explanation of language use as orienting to the conflicting values of fixity and fluidity, and that it may downplay how our thinking about language is informed by this conflict.

I will explore how this conflict, and the resolutions it invites, is observable in socio- and applied linguistic thinking about fluidity. I will inquire if the monolingual form of these accounts illustrates scholars' support for that which they oppose, and to what extent scholars' accounts of fluidity project the existence of homogeneous speech communities. I will also draw attention to scholars' use of language separation to explain linguistic complexity in more understandable terms, and to their advice to acquire standard varieties in texts that contest their influence.

Keywords: *monolingualism, fixity, fluidity, contradiction, thinking*

4. Semilingualism

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The profoundly untrendy concept of semilingualism is routinely dismissed as an obsolete sociolinguistic idea. It is standardly treated as a theoretical misconception, produced by flawed linguistic reasoning. While such critiques are interested in correcting a purported historical misconception, their corrective ambition appears to have produced reductive or skewed accounts of the origins and historical existence of the concept of semilingualism. The present paper seeks to break with such accounts. To this end, it offers a critical analysis of the formation of the concept of semilingualism in the work of Nils-Erik Hansegård, the Swedish linguist to whom the concept has been attributed. Defying the impulse to explain semilingualism as a case of mere prejudice or non-science, the paper traces the conceptual goods by means of which Hansegård crafted his intellectual agenda. This genealogy unravels a variety of sources: 1) pre- and post-war German and Austrian linguistics and psycholinguistics, adopted from academics like Friedrich Kainz and Georg Schmidt-Rohr, 2) nominally North American bilingualism studies, as pioneered by linguists like Uriel Weinreich and Einar Haugen, 3) various incarnations of Saussurean structural linguistics, 4) input from Hansegård's fieldwork in Sápmi, 5) evidence from institutional settings, such as bilingual education in Switzerland, Wales and Ireland. The genealogy furthermore unravels important facets of Hansegård's own interpretative and theoretical practice. Likewise, the wealth of influences and layered standpoints stresses, recalling Koerner (1991, 64) that 'the sources of modern-day sociolinguistics are diverse and complex'. They included both acknowledged and ignored agents and relations between agents, all of which 'have a bearing on the development of the various research programs from the 1960s onward' (ibid.).

Keywords: *models of deficit, mother tongue, patholinguistics, Sápmi, theory formation*

5. Conflicts within the Global South and Southern Epistemologies in African sociolinguistics

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The term “Global South” is complex and contradictory as it has both geographical and geopolitical connotations (Santos 2012; 2015). When used with Southern Epistemologies, it captures the ‘ontological turn’ in Anthropology (de Castro, 201) and is further complicated by the conflation of the ‘ontological turn’ with the geographical (Pennycook & Makoni, 2019; Makoni 2019). Within this paper, we will explore “Global South” contradictions by drawing from our identities as researchers in Northern spaces who have connections with the “Global South.” We will analyze the research of Kaiper, a white female American who conducted research in South Africa, and compare this with Makoni’s lived experiences as a Zimbabwean- man who lived many years in South Africa, but whose work is created in both “northern” and “southern” spaces. Kaiper’s research on the language learning of domestic workers was a three-year project in which she explored the intersections of racial and linguistic histories with the history of South African domestic work and how these intersecting histories motivated the desire for female domestic workers to learn English. Conversely, Makoni’s work is built upon decades of critique of researchers like Kaiper who come into spaces uninvited and “conduct” research “on” populations different from themselves. And yet, although Makoni has lived for many years in South Africa, he had not thought about the role of domestic workers in the educational and linguistic history of this space. By modelling the ways in which research from both Southern and Northern spaces is rife with diverse and often contradictory practices and understandings, we exemplify how processes of the de-linkage of North/South, colonial/decolonial can exist not only outside of the boundaries of the ‘academy’, but within the walls and experiences of academics pushing for and simultaneously hindering notions of decoloniality.

Keywords: *Global South, Southern Epistemologies, African sociolinguistics, decoloniality*

6. Universality

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The famous French philosopher of language Henri Meschonnic once wrote that language theory is always at the same time social theory. Whereas sociolinguistics intends to understand the impact of cultural norms and contexts on language praxis, it has rarely put into question its underlying general assumption, which is the understanding of language as an expression produced by a specific world perception of socio-historical collectives. This understanding was largely influenced by a – more or less adequate – lecture of relativistic concepts within the anthropology of language ranging from Wilhelm von Humboldt to Boas, Sapir/Whorf and Edward T. Hall up to William Labov and others. In *An Essay on Man*, Ernst Cassirer has suggested in a different understanding of language: Being a symbolic form (*Weltansicht*), language is an important step within the universal human attempt to grasp the world. With Humboldt, Cassirer puts forward the fact that all languages serve the same general aim of understanding and do all achieve, even if their way to do so varies. Similar concepts, stressing the universal human faculty, have been given by the Parisian structuralists from Claude Lévi-Strauss to Philippe Descola within a general understanding of cultures. Thus, whereas generally speaking, sociolinguistics has contributed to overemphasizing cultural relativism, which has become a hegemonic understanding of communities (and nations) our days, my paper argues for universality as underlying principal of communication. It is based on a reframing of Humboldt's so-called language relativism, and reaches out to a translationalist universality brought forth by thinkers of diversity and opacity such as Édouard Glissant, Barbara Cassin, or Souleymane Bachir Diagne.

Keywords: *language theory, world view, translation, relativism, universality*

7. Linguistic Knowledge, Contextual Language Use, and Theories of Competence in Sociolinguistics

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This paper conducts a historical investigation of the notion of competence in sociolinguistics. Chomsky's exclusive focus on competence (vs. performance) in linguistic study, Hymes' theorization of communicative competence, as well as recent usage-based accounts will be closely examined to reveal the conceptual difficulties of delineating a so-called object of study on the level of both communities and individuals. In particular, I will explain that, despite its call to move beyond a fixed view of language and speech community, a fixity-endorsing postulation which the latest theory claims to have displaced has to be in place: i.e. We store in our mind identical units as found in the languages that we were exposed to. It will be further discussed in light of sociolinguistics' history why this idea (or a system of interlocking ideas) keeps being invoked despite recent efforts of denouncement. Moreover, the essential question, how one actually 'chooses' from one's repertoire derived from numerous past instances of contextual communication and applies to a new situation, remains untouched in these theories. Building on insights from ethnomethodology and integrationism, I will underline that we, as social, culturally-embedded language users, instead of being at a position where we could assess the situations before matching them up with the inventories stored in our mind, remain part of the unfolding situation and irrevocably, inescapably make it what it becomes. To tackle this complexity, I argue, lies at the heart of the project of theorizing competence, which is beset by tensions between the actual and the potential, the observable and the underlying, the personal and the shared. Finally, drawing on Jaspers and Madsen (2019), I will point out that sociolinguistics may have more to gain in addressing wider political issues concerning the purpose of measuring language competence in particular socio-historical situations than superseding 'older' theories.

Keywords: *competence, repertoire, usage-based accounts, fixity, sociolinguistics*

8. “Ancestor hopping” and the proposal of neo-descriptivism in contemporary Chinese linguistics

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In recent years, the proposal of neo-descriptivism by Jianhua Hu (Institute of Linguistics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) has gained wide attention and support in the Chinese linguistic circle, with two national conferences (2017, 2018) having been held and a number of articles published to elaborate and propagate its ideas. According to Hu (2018), neo-descriptivism is a theory-neutral stance which highlights the importance of small but thorough descriptions of cross-linguistic, experimental or intuitional data, and strongly opposes unfalsifiable hypotheses and ungrounded generalizations. These guidelines have been variously interpreted by Hu’s supporters, and as yet, no consensus has been reached about the exact principles and aims of neo-descriptivism. This article argues, from a historical perspective, that the neo-descriptivist proposal, while characterized by its local academic background, signifies a new round of the theory-data alternations which Robins (1974) finds to be recurrent in linguistics, and which de Beaugrande (1991) calls “ancestor hopping”. At present, the proposal is predominantly concerned with sophisticated and in-depth elicitation and description of data made possible by technological innovations in and outside linguistics (as compared with the old “butterfly-collecting” description that became unfashionable), but as one can see in some of the neo-descriptivist works, a more radical shift is under way towards the application of sophisticated descriptive methods to observations of how language actually works in its sociocultural, psychological, and multimodal communicative contexts. With the proliferation of detailed data from these observations, it will not be surprising for some neo-descriptivists to develop a somewhat Wittgensteinian attitude towards language description (as a few of them already have), though for most linguists, it is more likely that the theoretical understanding of these data will one day become the next big issue, so that linguistics will move again from data to theory in the next round of “ancestor hopping”.

Keywords: *neo-descriptivism, ancestor hopping, data-orientation, Wittgensteinianism, empiricism*