

On social pragmatics: its origin and early development

Jacob L. Mey, The University of Southern Denmark

As to the origin of *social pragmatics*, it can be partly found in the study of human behavior in general (by sociologists, psychologists, economists, rhetoricians, and so on), partly in the interest that linguists developed in the various forms of socially oriented and colored language use (such as dialects). With regard to the former, its scientific interest remained purely static-descriptive (as in the disciplines, now mostly obsolete, of sociometrics and sociography). In particular, the study of variation in language was either perceived against a historical background, or studied in the context of modern society; these interests crystallized respectively around the kernel disciplines of historical dialectology (with its emphasis on "Wörter und Sachen", in the tradition of the Swiss dialectologist Jakob Jud; 1882-1952), and around the burgeoning discipline of sociolinguistics in its extended form, where the object of study included not only the regional dialects of a language, but also other, socially stratified and gender-determined varieties of speaking, later augmented by an interest in professional speech, religious discourse, baby, children's and adolescents' talk, speech characteristic of certain current genres (such as rapping), and so on.

It is customary to partition this union set of social, behavioral, psychological, economic and linguistic interests in language according to whether they consider themselves either as *linguistic* theories informed by a social, psychological, economical etc. point of view, or as theories of the phenomena in question as subsumed under a *social* perspective. In the first case, we usually refer to these theories as belonging to *sociolinguistics*, while in the second case, we talk about the *sociology of language*. Unfortunately, I think that this distinction, while practically motivated as a division of labor, does not make much sense in a wider, theoretical perspective. First off, the social linguistic phenomena can be theoretically distinguished, but not be separated in the real world. And then, the other way around, since all language presupposes a social formation, both for its origin and for its use, human social formations cannot historically be imagined without the use of language.

The early sociologists of language concentrated on description. According to the Nestor of North American researchers in the field, Joshua Fishman (1926-), what is needed is "a reliable and insightful description of any *existing* patterns of social organization in language use and behavior toward language" (Fishman 1972: 47; emphasis original). Such patterns are drawn upon in attitudes and policies towards phenomena such as bilingualism (Fishman 1972: 52-53), in debates as to whether or not to influence language use and development through various policies, in particular when it comes to interfering with language attrition or language shift, and engaging in efforts to bring back languages from the brink of extinction (compare the current discussions on 'endangered languages'). By contrast, in an early article the British linguist John R. Firth (1890-1960) stressed the need to study what he termed the "context of situation" (Firth 1964: 66—a term that originally goes back to the Polish-British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), and was to echo in the work of sociologists, sociolinguists and pragmaticists throughout the decades to come; the social semiotics of Michael Halliday (1928-) comes to mind as a prime instance. Firth's own notion of 'serial contextualization' precludes on what Fishman came to call 'the dynamic sociology' of language (1972: 51), a notion which comes pretty close to what we consider to be a 'social pragmatics'. And finally, among the US sociolinguists who made their mark during the past century, one should not omit to mention the late John J. Gumperz (1928-2012), whose pioneering work started as 'advanced dialectology' (in his early work on local Norwegian ways of speaking), but

eventually matured in his studies of 'contextualization' that have built bridges across territories where few had wanted to go, in the intersection of linguistics and anthropology.

One other researcher who devoted his entire life to creating a synthesis of the two aspects mentioned here, was the Frenchman Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). Starting out from his personal experiences in Algeria during the independence wars, he gradually embraced a comprehensive view of human activity; rather than considering it a deterministic reaction of individuals to pre-established conditions and emerging stimuli, he argues that "it is necessary to abandon all theories which explicitly or implicitly treat practice as a mechanical reaction, directly determined by the antecedent conditions and entirely reducible to the mechanical functioning of pre-established assemblies [or] models." (1979: 73)

Individual activity does not, by itself, lead to societal organization; the fact that people *act* in some kind of collectivity does not automatically index the presence of *interaction*. But in order to coordinate the activities involved in social practice, humans have to communicate; the development of language is related to this practice, in particular the tool-making and tool-using processes that are specific for human activity and depend on *communicative* interaction: individuals acting with (or against) one another and communicating against the backdrop, both of Nature and of what the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (1940-) has characterized as the "equalities and inequalities" that are the primordial parameters of any society, but in particular of our own, late-capitalist social formation (Rancière 1995:19; see Mey 1985: ch. 3.3).

A purely descriptivist model of studying human activity does not explain this societally oriented interaction; but, as Bourdieu also remarks, "the truth of the interaction is never entirely contained in the interaction" (Bourdieu 1979: 81); it is the conditions of society that vouchsafe and sanction the ongoing action, which always occurs in a climate of 'equalities and inequalities'. Only if these oppositions are resolved in common human interaction, a common-sense world with a 'common-sensical' system of values may be established. This value system is "taken for granted" by all, "endowed with the objectivity secured by consensus on the meaning of practices and the world" (Bourdieu 1979: 80; in Bourdieu's elegant, but unfortunately un-translatable French, the system "va sans dire parce qu'il vient sans dire"; *ibid.*).

Even so, the objectivity that Bourdieu talks about is not the kind of objectivity that we attribute to a scientific experiment; rather, it is located in the "objective intentions" of the interactive process, and should not be confused with the subjective intentions of the interactants. For Bourdieu, the principle governing societal interaction is the human *habitus*, conceived of as the "internalization of [society's] objective structures as dispositions" (*ibid.*) – which, because they are not bound to a particular place or time or individual, are called "transposable" ('portable', as we would say to-day, in our computer-inspired terminology). The habitus is dialectically placed between the objective conditions, encountered as 'nature' or 'world', and the subjective categories through which we interpret them. The human activity aims at overcoming contrasting societal tendencies such as: equality vs. inequality, fact vs. 'view', personal preference vs. the common good, immigrants as threatening aliens vs. immigrants as indispensable work force, and so on and so forth. These oppositions are neither purely objective (in the sense that one can 'prove' them experimentally) nor are they created solely in the mind of the beholder, as it is often argued in today's public debates, when it comes to discussing problems of integration and assimilation with reference to the immigrant population.

By stressing the role of activity and interaction in the production and reproduction of society, Bourdieu has laid the groundwork for an objective evaluation of the societal formation, whose "sexual division of labour, domestic morality, cares, strife, tastes, etc. produces the structures of the habitus which become in turn the basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences" (1979: 78). Consequently, the habitus is needed to guarantee an effective practice of communication through language, using the linguistic structures and constructions that are anchored

in our nature and culture. In Bourdieu's pithy formulation, "[habitus is] structured structures turning into structuring structures" (1979: 73), "history turned into nature" (ibid.: 78), our *natura secunda*, to borrow a term originally due to Aristotle, but famously adopted by St. Augustine.

References

- Bourdieu, Pierre (1979). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. R. Nice (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [Orig. French: *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*. Paris: Droz. 1972].
- Firth, John R (1964). 'On sociological linguistics'. In Dell Hymes (ed.), *Language in culture and society: A reader in linguistics and anthropology*. New York: Harper & Row. 66-70.
- Fishman, Joshua A. (1972). 'The sociology of language'. In P.P. Giglioli (ed.), *Language and social Context*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 45-58.
- Mey, Jacob L. (1985). *Whose Language? A Study in Linguistic Pragmatics*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: Benjamins.
- Mey, Jacob L. (2001). *Pragmatics: An Introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Rancière, Jacques (1995). *La mésentente: politique et philosophie*. Paris: Galilée. [English trans. Julie Rose. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999].