

A ROLE FOR LINGUISTICS IN ADDRESSING CONTEXTUAL ISSUES
RELEVANT TO SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Roulet (1972) concludes his review of attempts made in the 50's and 60's to apply linguistic descriptions and theories to second and foreign language teaching by acknowledging that linguistics does not offer panaceas for language teachers, but expressing regret that the majority of educationists and teachers "refuse to be squarely concerned with linguistic advice" (1972:65). Largely as a consequence of the broadening of the scope of the discipline there is today widespread recognition in most parts of the world that a knowledge of language structure and function, and of the processes involved in language acquisition constitutes an essential ingredient in the education of prospective language teachers. Nevertheless, in South Africa, the contribution of linguistics to language teaching is undervalued by both educational authorities and advocates for learners from oppressed communities. This is evident from the failure of the authorities to change national criteria for admission to professional training for language teachers in ways that will allow and encourage prospective language teachers to include linguistics courses in their undergraduate curricula. It is evident, also, in the widespread perception amongst advocates for learners from oppressed communities that linguists are incapable of addressing such contextual issues as the unequal distribution of power amongst peoples in South Africa, or of making their discipline relevant to the needs of the oppressed peoples and part of the process of democratic transformation. As evidence of this see French's article entitled "The baleful influence of 'linguistics' on adult literacy work" and Gough and Ries's (1990) claims about the contextual irrelevance of the 1990 conference of the Southern African Applied Linguistics Association.

There are no doubt many reasons for the undervaluing of the contribution of linguistics to language teaching in South Africa. Focusing on the perceptions of advocates for learners from oppressed communities, I suggest that an important contributory factor is that, until recently, there has been relatively little linguistic research which concerns itself directly with the role of language in the production, maintenance, contestation and change of social relations of power. In this paper I shall be exploring the potential contribution of research in this area to the credibility of the discipline. I will provide a brief overview of selected studies in the ethnography of speaking, interactional sociolinguistics and critical language study. I will conclude by suggesting how insights from these sources might contribute to second language teaching policy and practice that empowers second language learners from oppressed communities.

2.0 Ethnography of speaking and the relationship between language and social relations of power

As Fairclough (1989:8) observes, "sociolinguistics is strong on "what" questions (what are the facts of variation) but weak on "how" questions (why are the facts as they are?; how - in terms of the development of social relationships of power - was the existing sociolinguistic order brought into being?; how was it sustained?; and how might it be changed to the advantage of those who are dominated by it?).

Within the sub-field of sociolinguistics termed ethnography of speaking the tendency to ask what questions is evident, for example, in Wolfson's research on complimenting. In her earlier work (e.g. 1981, 1983) she reports on the forms, functions, and distribution of compliments within middle class American society and on how these differ from patterns in other societies.

In her later work (e.g. 1988, 1989), however, she has moved beyond the mere recording of these facts to attempting to find answers to questions about what the relationship is between these patterns of complimenting behaviour and the structures of society including social relations of power. She argues that compliments, by encouraging or re-inforcing desired behaviour, serve as a means of exercising power over others. This is because most compliments are social judgements of performance. She points out (see Wolfson 1989) that in middle class American society women are frequent recipients of such social control by men. She found that this was not at all affected by status. Whereas the deference accorded to high-status males places a strong constraint on "personal" comments by subordinates or strangers, there are no such constraints on speech to women of similar high status. As Wolfson (1989:172) puts it, "no matter what professional level a woman may attain, she is still treated as a woman". What this suggests is that compliments are often subtle and powerful mechanisms for exercising power and thereby establishing and maintaining asymmetrical power relations.

Other research in the field of ethnography of speaking which explores the relationships between complimenting behaviour and social relations of power is that of Herbert (see Herbert 1985, 1989 and Herbert and Straight 1989). Herbert compared the compliment giving and responding behaviour of white, middle-class Americans and South Africans on the Universities of New York and the Witwatersrand campuses. He found in his data that whereas Americans tend to give many compliments but accept few, South Africans tend to give few compliments but readily accept them. Herbert and Straight see the differences in these sociolinguistic conventions as reflecting or being the outcome of the very different relations of power which obtain and ideologies which pervade in the two societies.

Herbert and Straight suggest that because social relations in the USA are relatively fluid, Americans have frequent resort to strategies such as complimenting in order to negotiate these relations. They suggest, further, that Americans frequently reject compliments in order to avoid the implication that they are superior to their interlocutors. This behaviour they see as consistent with the ideology of egalitarian democracy most Americans publicly espouse. By contrast, social relations in South Africa are, to a large extent, pre-determined. White, middle-class South Africans, accordingly, give few compliments because solidarity with one's peers can be assumed, and does not have to be negotiated. They very frequently accept compliments to keep non-equals at a distance by allowing the compliment to imply that they are superior to their interlocutors. This behaviour Herbert and Straight see as consistent with the ideology of "institutionalized social inequality publicly enunciated in South Africa"(1989:43).

The Wolfson and Herbert studies, then, highlight the role of language in the exercise of power and, thereby, the establishment and maintenance of conventional social relations of power. They do not, however, say anything about its role in changing those relations. This is a focus of my own most recent research (see Chick 1991 & in press). I have, amongst other things, tried to establish whether or not Herbert's findings are generalizable beyond the Witwatersrand campus, and whether the changed structural conditions associated with desegregation in South Africa has affected speech act performance. To facilitate comparison between Herbert's Witwatersrand corpus collected in 1981-2 and my own corpus collected on the University of Natal, Durban campus 1989-91, I replicated Herbert's methods of collection and analysis as far as possible. What my analysis revealed, amongst other things, is a pattern of compliment

responding behaviour amongst white middle-class English speakers on the Durban campus which is closer to that evident in Herbert's New York data, than his Witwatersrand data collected almost a decade earlier.

Since no data is available for the Durban campus in 1981-2, it is not possible to exclude the possibility that the difference between the compliment responding behaviour on the two campuses reflects regional variation. However, what suggests that it reflects, instead, change of norms over time, is Herbert's report (personal communication) that the pattern of responses in a corpus he collected on the Witwatersrand campus in 1990 resembles more closely the pattern evident in my Natal corpus than that in the Witwatersrand corpus collected earlier. However, if, indeed, as research has suggested, compliment giving and receiving are strategies for exercising power and thereby establishing social relations of power, then what may be evident in my Natal data is not merely the consequences of changes in social relations of power, but powerful mechanisms for accomplishing such change.

To sum up, Wolfson and Herbert's studies show that sociolinguistic conventions reflect existing social relations of power, and that conventional sociolinguistic behaviour is a means of maintaining such relations. What my study adds is that, not only may such conventions change over time in response to changing socio-political circumstances, but that unconventional sociolinguistic behaviour, such as unconventional responses to compliments, is one means (amongst many) for bringing about changes in social relations of power.

3.0. Interactional sociolinguistics and the relationship between language and social relations of power

The second sub-field of linguistics in which scholars have investigated the relationship between language and social relations of power is interactional sociolinguistics. Interactional sociolinguistics involves the fine-grained analyses not of de-contextualized speech act sequences but of video or sound recordings of entire speech events, or at least substantial episodes within them. By this means interactional sociolinguists have been able to demonstrate the role of language in establishing and maintaining social relations of power.

Interactional sociolinguists (See, for example, Gumperz 1982 a & b, Erickson and Schultz 1982) have focused, in particular, on speech events which tend to predominate in modern, urban settings. These speech events involve encounters between "gatekeepers" who control access to the opportunities and services supplied by a wide range of bureaucratic, technological, educational and legal institutions (e.g. job application or performance evaluation interviews, loan, bursary or licence application interviews, cross-examinations and so on). Gatekeeping encounters, then, are ones in which unequal power relations are well-defined, and in which resources and therefore power are distributed or withheld. Language plays a key role in such encounters since gatekeepers tend to be guided in exercising their judgement by the quality of communication that takes place in them.

Interactional sociolinguists have pointed out that gatekeepers in most urbanized, multi-ethnic societies tend to belong to dominant groups, more often than not, white, middle-class groups, and the supplicants to minority/oppressed groups. They have shown that social and often regional distancing usually ensures that gatekeepers and supplicants are ignorant of one another's cultural backgrounds and sociolinguistic conventions.

As I point out elsewhere (see Chick 1985), this is particularly the case in South Africa where institutional segregation has been implemented on an unprecedented scale.

The consequence of mutual ignorance of socio-cultural backgrounds and sociolinguistic conventions is that gatekeepers and supplicants often find it difficult to synchronize their interactional behaviours in rhythmically co-ordinated ways. In the context of such asynchrony, interlocutors miss one another's signals, frequently interrupt one another, and find it difficult to develop coherent themes. Since gatekeepers are, generally, ignorant of sociolinguistic diversity, and take their own norms as a frame of reference, they tend to interpret supplicants' behaviours in asynchronous episodes not as a communication problem, but as evidence of wrong attitude or incompetence. As a consequence, they often deny members of subordinate ethnic groups access to services and opportunities and justice that they are entitled to, or deserve. Moreover, over time, miscommunication generates and reinforces negative cultural stereotypes that further reduce the effectiveness of communication. In this way, according to interactional sociolinguists, what takes place in such interactions serves to produce and re-inforce existing unequal social relations of power. What needs to be added is that racist attitudes contribute to interethnic miscommunication and discrimination, even where those involved are familiar with one another's sociolinguistic conventions and backgrounds.

Because interactional sociolinguists have tended to focus on miscommunication, they have contributed little to our understanding of the role of language in changing social relations of power where these are unequal. Important research sites for interactional sociolinguists, I suggest, are institutions or organizations within them which have been, or

are in the process of de-segregation. As I have observed elsewhere (see Chick in press), even in the heyday of the apartheid system other ideological traditions were influential. There were, as a consequence, alongside institutional supports for discrimination and segregation, institutional supports, albeit at times weak, for an alternative, non-racial, integrated, egalitarian society. Such supports created contexts within which the dominant discourse associated with apartheid ideology could be disputed, and long-standing, trusting relationships across ethnic lines developed. Where such relationships exist, asynchrony is less likely to lead to discrimination because participants in interactions, and particularly gatekeepers, are more likely to effect repairs by applying what Singh, Lele and Martohardjono (1988) term "Principles of Charity and Humanity". They are more likely to keep channels open long enough to learn about one another's discourse conventions and backgrounds. They are more likely to generate anew, through interacting, shared discourse conventions. Moreover the greater degree of interactional synchrony in gatekeeping encounters could lead to the fairer distribution of resources and opportunities and, therefore, in the long term, to more symmetrical relations of power throughout the society.

To sum up this section, because they focus on entire speech events, and not just on speech act sequences, interactional sociolinguists have been able to give flesh to the explanation provided by ethnographers of speaking that sociolinguistic behaviour is a means of establishing and maintaining social relations of power. They see the quality of communication as crucial in determining whether asymmetrical social relations of power are changed or not.

4.0 Critical language study and the relationship between language and social relations of power

The third sub-field which focuses on the relationship between language and social relations of power is what is referred to as critical language study (see Clarke et al 1987 & Fairclough 1989) or critical language awareness (see Janks 1988 & 1991). Critical language study provides a link between the analyses of the wider society by sociologists such as Foucault, Habermas and Bourdieu and the linguistic analyses of social interactions by critical linguists such as Fowler, Kress and Hodge. Scholars working in this field attempt to identify sociolinguistic conventions reflected in the formal properties of spoken and written discourse (or texts) and show how these conventions serve as resources in the production and interpretation of discourse. They seek to expose (hence the designation "critical") the generally hidden determinants of such conventions in social relations of power and struggles for power. They attempt to show how speaking and writing conventionally may contribute to the sustaining of relations of power in institutions and the wider society, and how doing so unconventionally may contribute to change in these relations.

Central to their explanation of the relationship between discourse conventions and the social relations of power, is the exercise of ideological power. Fairclough (1989) explains that in modern societies power is exercised increasingly through consent rather than through coercion, and that ideology is the primary means through which consent is manufactured. Ideologies or "common sense assumptions" about relationships of power in different societal institutions are implicit in the discourse conventions associated with them, such as who has the rights and obligations to initiate the interaction, regulate turn-taking and so on. The discourse conventions associated with, for

example, a medical consultation, reflect the dominant ideologies of medicine as a social institution i.e. they reflect the answers that power holders give to questions about the nature of the roles of doctor and patient, about what constitutes professional behaviour and so on. Moreover, these conventions serve to establish social roles (positions) for doctors and patients. It is only by behaving conventionally that they take on their respective roles. Power holders are able to exercise ideological power because they are usually well placed to project their own discourse conventions as the 'right', 'natural' or "universal" way of doing things i.e. to make their conventions "stick". Conventions tend to be "policed" by power holders. Medical staff enforce patients' compliance in consultations, while those higher in the institutional hierarchy enforce the compliance of medical staff through disciplinary procedures such as malpractice procedures, through promotions and so forth. To the extent that the participants uncritically accept the conventions of the power holders as "right" or "natural" or "common sense" ways of interacting, and behave accordingly, they sustain and legitimize the relations of power which underlie them.

Fairclough illustrates the exercise of ideological power by pointing to the role of power holders in the process of elevating a social dialect into what is often called a standard or possibly national language. He points out that standardization in Britain was a long process of colonization of the discourse of major social institutions (literature, law, government, religion) by the East Midland dialect of the merchant class in London at the end of the medieval period. It was, moreover, closely associated with the transition from feudalism to capitalism and the growing power of the middle class. Re-standardization was, therefore, both the consequence of the emergence of a dominant ideology, and a means of

achieving this dominance. Gradually more and more people accepted the use of this dialect as correct. Power holders accomplished this compliance partly by means of codification (the reduction of variation within this dialect through dictionaries, grammars and so forth). This was accompanied by prescription and stigmatization of other social dialects, not only in terms of correctness of form, but in terms of their manners, morality, life style and so on. The colonization of the discourses of an ever wider range of social institutions entrenched the dominance of the middle class in Britain by making competency in Standard English a pre-requisite for elevation to positions of power and influence.

Linguists working in this sub-field go beyond explaining how existing social relations of power are maintained or reinforced. They also explain how these may be changed. An essential element in their explanation is the notion of ideological struggle. While power holders always try to impose an ideological common sense which holds for everyone, ideological homogeneity is never achieved. Ideological diversity in institutions and the wider society is particularly evident where social relations of power are fluid. For example, different class, gender, ethnic or other groups, as a consequence of different interests and experiences, may develop different ideologies of medicine, and engage in an ideological struggle for power in the medical institution. Since, as had been noted already, discourse conventions reflect ideological assumptions, the struggle for power takes place both through language and about language. This is very evident in feminist advocacy of discourse conventions such as gender-neutral terms of address. The group which is able to make its conventions "stick" is able to establish and legitimize the social relations of power which underlie them. Significantly, the growing influence of the working class in recent years has been

accompanied by a weakening of the process of standardization, and to concessions being made to non-standard dialects in broadcasting and some of the professions

The explanation offered by critical language study provides a basis for understanding the ambivalent attitude of advocates for learners from oppressed groups in South Africa to English. It is widely recognized that because English is the predominant language of international communication and, internally, of trade, industry, commerce, education and interethnic communication, English is a key to the empowerment of oppressed communities. At the same time there is recognition by some (see Ndebele 1987) that English currently serves the interests of the power holders i.e. the dominant classes.

The concern that English should serve the interests of all South Africans in post-apartheid South Africa, and not just an educated elite, has led to calls for the re-standardization of English in the direction of an indigenous African variety of English. For example one of the recommendations which emerged from the 1990 Harare Workshop hosted by the ANC was that, if English is to be the lingua franca, it has to be made more accessible and that documents, forms and public proceedings should be written or conducted in a language understandable to ordinary people (Desai 1990:27). Along similar lines, Heugh (1990) claims that liberation movements are going to insist on a 'democratised variety' of English as the spoken standard.

Similar concern has been shown, also, in attacks upon normative models of communicative competence established for second language learners. Pierce (1990:5), for example, challenges the apparent reasonableness of identifying communicative competence as the goal in DET English second language syllabuses. She points out that identification begs the question of who is to

determine what kind of communicative competence is appropriate for learners, or, in Fairclough's words, whose conventions are to be made to stick? Such reasoning led the People's English Commission of the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) to identify as the goal of second language teaching a wider definition of language competence than merely a knowledge of the rules of correct and appropriate use of English within South African society. It includes, according to NECC (1987), "the ability to say and write what one means; to hear what is said and what is hidden; to defend one's point of view; to argue, to persuade, to negotiate; to create, to reflect, to invent; to explore relationships, personal, structural, political; to speak, read, and write with confidence; to make one's voice heard; to read print and resist it where necessary" .

To sum up this section, those involved in critical language study, like the ethnographers of speech and interactional sociolinguists whose research has been reviewed above, show how sociolinguistic behaviour contributes to the establishment, maintenance and change of social relations of power. Their unique contribution is to expose the crucial role of the hidden dimension of ideology in the exercise of power, the privileged position of power holders in being able to cling to power by projecting their convention as natural, and the role of ideological struggle in change in social relations of power.

5.0 WHAT THIS RESEARCH MIGHT CONTRIBUTE TO SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING POLICY AND PRACTICE

Finally I turn my attention to what insights from the research reviewed might contribute to second language teaching policy and practice that could empower learners from oppressed communities in South Africa.

The insight that the circumstances of the wider society, including social relations of power, are reflected in and constrain interactional behaviour, suggests that the diminishing influence of apartheid ideologies, and the demise of structures congruent with them will, themselves, produce conditions more conducive to effective interethnic communication. The scrapping of legislation relating to job reservation, group areas and segregation of public amenities, for example, means that there are now more opportunities for the development of trusting long-term relationships across ethnic lines which facilitates the learning of the sociolinguistic conventions of other groups and, therefore, more synchronous interethnic communication in gatekeeping encounters.

However, insights from these studies suggest that one would be naive to expect such structural change, on its own, to lead to more symmetrical social relations of power. Changes in social relations of power are not the outcome of legislative decree. Rather they emerge as a response to ideological struggle and change, and need to be interactionally negotiated or constituted. There are still relatively few opportunities for people in South Africa to form long-lasting relationships across ethnic lines, or even to interact in relaxed circumstances where miscommunication does not have severe consequences for one of the parties (usually those in subordinate positions). Racial prejudice and negative stereotypes are still pervasive, and continue to be sources of discrimination in gatekeeping encounters. Moreover, as Gumperz (1982 b:3) points out, increased interethnic communication between groups does not necessarily lead to more effective communication. If interethnic miscommunication occurs frequently in the early years of the post-apartheid era, it may re-inforce or generate anew structures inimical to an egalitarian democracy. Then, too, one can anticipate that power holders will try as vigorously as ever

to project their conventions as the right ones in a wide range of institutional domains as a means of holding on to interactional power.

If, as has been suggested in the above review, trends in language use are more the aggregate results of countless interactions than the consequences of legislative decree, the promotion of effective intercultural communication may be a more empowering second language teaching policy than, for example, the adoption of a standardized indigenous variety of English as the target of language teaching. What this means is that communicative competence will need to be an important goal of second language teaching. Concerns about normative models of communicative competence expressed by, for example, Pierce 1990, though valuable in encouraging critical awareness, should not, in my view, be allowed to obscure the advantages to learners of having communicative rather than merely grammatical competence as the goal of language instruction. Policies which merely promote greater proficiency in a language in the sense of the grammatical code will not ensure effective interethnic communication. Indeed, in some circumstances, grammatical competence on its own may be a disadvantage. As Wolfson (1989:49) explains, advanced learners who are proficient in the target language in the sense of code are often held accountable for sociolinguistic violations in ways that less competent speakers are not, because they are "unconsciously assumed to be equally knowledgeable about the sociolinguistic rules of that community".

It is a matter of some controversy whether sociolinguistic or pragmatic components of communicative competence can be taught. For those who believe that description should precede the design of materials there is the problem that, even in the case of English, which has been the focus of considerable

sociolinguistic investigation (see for example Wolfson 1981, 1983, 1988, Holmes and Brown 1987 and others studies of complimenting; Takahashi and Beebe 1987 study of refusals; Sacks et al 1974, Bennett 1981, Edelsky 1981 on turn-taking conventions), sociolinguists have not been able to provide a comprehensive description of the discourse conventions of even a single speech community. Then, too, as some of the studies reviewed above show, these conventions change, sometimes rapidly.

Fortunately instruction does not need to wait for description to be complete. As Wolfson (1989:15) points out, what is at the root of most interethnic miscommunication is not so much ignorance of sociolinguistic rules as ignorance of the very existence of sociolinguistic diversity. People ignorant of sociolinguistic diversity tend to judge speech behaviour of people with differing rules of speaking, usually negatively, in terms of their own standards. To counter this tendency, what is required is less direct instruction in how to compliment, refuse, or take turns appropriately in the target language community, but the development of learners' sociolinguistic or pragmatic awareness and of their lay abilities for pragmatic analysis. Bardovi-Harlig et al (1991) provide suggestions as to how this might be accomplished. They suggest the use of natural models where a guest is invited to interrupt the class, and engage in some brief and believable exchange. This is followed by a re-enactment by volunteers from the class. Both exchanges are taped and the differences between real and role-play exchanges discussed. Inauthentic exchanges, found in many texts, could form the basis of discussion about what constitute appropriate ways of, for example, closing conversations, and about differences in how this is accomplished in different language or cultural groups. As a further development of this, learners could be asked to role play a closing where the one

participant has another appointment and needs to end the appointment politely, and the other wants to continue. Of course, given that interethnic miscommunication is usually mutually accomplished by all participants rather than unilaterally by learners, pragmatic awareness needs to be fostered amongst the native English-speaking elite as well.

However, for language policy and practice for oppressed communities to be really empowering, it has to go beyond the promotion of sociolinguistic awareness. Students need not merely to become aware of the conventions of the dominant discourses in a wide range of institutions. They will need, also, to become aware that many of these conventions reflect asymmetrical social relations of power, and that their compliance in interacting consistent with them serves to legitimate such conventions and maintain the power structures in these institutions. Such critical awareness would empower them to be assertive, to contest and to disagree in situations where formerly their ignorance of the relationship between language and power and their low status as determined by the dominant discourse, would have encouraged them to be compliant.

The Critical Language Awareness materials which Janks (1990) has been developing together with teachers and learners suggest what sort of practice would be appropriate. Included in these materials, for example, is a module which is designed to help learners become aware of the ways in which writers use language to position their readers i.e. constrain them to operate within the social role or position set up by the discourse conventions used. The abstract notion of social role or position is introduced gradually, firstly by an activity designed to demonstrate that "where we stand", literally, "affects what we see"; in other words, where we are physically affects our understanding of what we perceive. To demonstrate how critical

study can be used to "denaturalize" conventions, learners are asked to analyse maps used in Japan and Australia which challenge conventional ways of representing the world in maps. These alternative maps show these two countries in the centre of the world. This is used in conjunction with an examination of the positive connotations in dominant discourse of "up" words such as "top", "high" and "boost" and negative connotations of "down" such as "dropped" and "low". This is followed by exercises in which learners are asked to consider how age, gender, race and so forth might affect a person's position on political, intellectual and emotional issues. They are invited to role play competing siblings using language to win their mother over to their position. The learners are, then, given the opportunity to discover how writers use language to position their readers by being provided with a number of texts to "deconstruct", such as two accounts of the same battle, one from the point of view of the conqueror and one from the point of view of the conquered or underclass. Finally they are asked to consider the naming of streets and public holidays from history, and the struggles which occur over whose history the names should be drawn from.

6.0 CONCLUSION

In this paper I have highlighted research in three sub-fields of sociolinguistics that can demonstrate to sceptics that linguistics is able to address such urgent contextual issues of our day as the need to empower oppressed people in South Africa. This research reveals that sociolinguistic behaviour not only reflects social relations of power, but is a means through which such relations are established, maintained and changed. Armed with such insights linguists are well equipped to co-operate with language teachers in designing second language policies and

practices which will empower learners from oppressed communities in South Africa.

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