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**POLARIZATION
In SOCIOLINGUISTICS**

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POLARIZATION IN SOCIOLOGICAL LINGUISTICS

Perhaps in terms of a polemic, Pride claimed that the field of sociolinguistics could be simplified into two focal areas. According to Pride,

“There are just two focal points in the whole field. One has been termed ‘communicative competence’, a possession of the individual language user; the other is the ‘speech community’, comprising those larger groupings of language users who share ‘rules’, or norms, for their use of a language or languages.”
(Pride:,1979)

This statement could be interpreted as being correct when observed from a surface level: it seems possible to slide the major divisions into one of these two areas. The first approach, broadly connected with psychology and cognitive linguistics, takes as its starting point the ‘individual’ from which linguistic elements are examined in the context of that individual’s social life. The second approach is more ‘sociological’, but can be broadly associated with many different fields in addition to simply sociology: history, economics, anthropology and politics to name a few. According to Bell (1976) the division between these two areas is “far from clear cut” although it does have advantages in that it is “convenient to adopt and adapt.” Bell goes on to label these two contrasting perspectives as *Micro-* and *Macro-* linguistics. From the point of view of simply laying theoretical guidelines or ‘focal points’ Pride’s statement is given a degree of plausibility, although it could be said that this generalisation does not take into account the areas within the field that are positioned on a bridge between the two extremes. In this paper we will be examining the significance of this statement and the major theoretical areas held within it: *communicative competence* for the individual, and the way language is experienced by the *speech community*. We will be observing which divisions within the field can adequately fit into the two areas suggested by the statement above as well as those which are more ambiguous. It will soon be revealed that the complex and multi-disciplined nature of the field of sociolinguistics makes it less easy to consider purely in terms of Pride’s broad generalization.

How can we begin to define the division of sociolinguistics which involves the individual’s *communicative competence*? Bell’s definition of ‘micro-linguistics’ where he mentions that the “emphasis is on the individual in small informal intra-group interactions” is on its own clearly insufficient because it does not take account of the theoretical background which led up to the creation of this area of sociolinguistics. As a reaction to the existing ‘structuralist’ theories of language evolving from the Saussurian school in which language *ideals* were considered far more important than social realities, Dell Hymes published his important article On Communicative Competence (1972) in which he attempted to demonstrate that the purity of Chomsky’s ‘Transformational Grammar’ was only a small part of the ‘linguistic’ truth. According to Hymes, “a major characteristic of modern linguistics has been that it takes structure as a primary end in

itself, and tends to depreciate use.” Relating his new theoretical ideas to the work of the primary protagonist within the field of linguistics at that time, Hymes develops his argument further: “Chomsky’s theoretical standpoint . . . carries to perfection the desire to deal in practice only with what is internal to language.” For Hymes, this was far from enough and demanded improvement, and he brought to linguistics a theoretical ‘breath of fresh air’ because of its multi-disciplinary influences, including contemporary semiotics, speech-act theory and cultural anthropology: he believed that a true study of language ‘competence’ should include being aware of the ‘appropriateness’ of certain linguistic utterances in certain social circumstances. This was to be one of the most important developments for the creation of the field of sociolinguistics, and in fact linguistics in general, and is the primary area defining the boundaries of what we have already introduced as *micro-linguistics*.

Hymes’ work is interesting in its multi-disciplinary nature and has opened up many possibilities to the field of linguistics. In setting up a dynamic between Chomsky’s concept of the essential ‘internality’ of grammatical structures representing basic cognitive structures within the brain and those in which ‘sociolinguistic’ rules are learnt, an interesting perspective was presented which acted to connect the cognitive sciences with sociolinguistics. Hymes demonstrates this relationship by showing that “data from the first years of acquisition of English grammar show children how to develop rules for the use of different forms in different situations and an awareness of different acts of speech”, saying that “competency *for use* is part of the same developmental matrix as competence for grammar.” (Hymes, 1972 [italics Z. Laskewicz]). Hymes did not totally reject the work of Chomsky, he wanted to build upon it, so the term ‘sociolinguistic communicative competence’ is in essence a complex concept that has brought about considerable controversy in many diverse fields, especially that of language education.

According to Bell, the linguistic feature ‘most central’ to this division is the *speech act*, taken from the influential ‘speech-act theory’ which is attributed to Austin and later Searle. Speech-act theory, like the sociolinguistic *communicative competence* of Hymes, can be seen as forming one element within a larger theoretical reaction against the purity of the structuralist model epitomised by Saussurian linguistics. In the case of speech act theory, language is viewed not in terms of what is *said* but what the ‘speech-act’ itself actually *does* in its utterance (*see* Austin, 1962). Austin and later Searle were to present the primary pioneering work on this subject, which is involved largely with a study of the ritualization of language events and their repetitive use within culture as determined by social circumstances. The important factor here is that in studying speech-acts there is an implicit realisation of a connection between social context and meaning rather than linguistic form and meaning; in studying speech acts we are acutely aware of the context of any given utterance. Speech-act theory, therefore, plays a very important role in understanding the social contextualization of language utterances. According to Bell, the *speech act* has opened up the field of sociolinguistics considerably:

“In attempting to deal with the complex phenomena of the speech act in such a way as to create viable models of the micro-processes in which it functions as a unit, the linguist is forced more and more into the consideration of data previously excluded from linguistic investigation: the ‘extra-linguistic’ communication channels

which make use of gestures, eye contact, spatial proximity and the like which, for some considerable time, have been the particular province of psychology and psychiatry."
(Bell, 1976).

Micro-linguistics, then, is involved with a study of an individual in relation to his/her social group, concentrating on the significance of individual 'linguistic' elements and their relationship with the circumstances that brought about their utterance. It is already clear that the subject of 'micro-linguistics' implicit in Pride's *communicative competence* generalisation is a complex area of discussion covering an important range of theoretical standpoints. We move now to the second area in this discussion involved with the broader context of observing languages within larger societal groups. Referring again to Bell, *macro-linguistics* is where "the locus on investigation is interaction at the large inter-group level: to the extent of studying nations and states in contact." He goes on to define the 'macro-linguist' as the one who "will be typically found studying inter-group communication, perhaps within the context of a single society, for example the use of the mother tongue and the local language by minority linguistic groups, working together with sociologists and educationists or he might well be concerned with questions of a larger scale, such as decisions on the choice of the official language for a new political federation, the defence of linguistic minority rights or working in concert with political scientists and planners." (Bell, 1976). *Macro-linguistics* contains clearly a very wide range of elements broadly connected with Pride's notion of *Speech-Community*. The problem begins when we attempt to define what a 'Speech-Community' actually is.

We have difficulty in defining such a term because it is dependent on so many different factors. According to Wardhaugh (1992, Ch. 5) a 'speech community' is a very abstract concept, and "one likely to create not a few problems, because the particular norms that a community uses may or may not be exclusively linguistic in nature, and even the linguistic norms themselves may vary considerably among small sub-groups." This discussion brings an important element with it, in that the whole notion of the definition of 'language' is brought into question. How far does a variation of a language differ from another before it can be classified as a separate language, and which factors play a role in deciding what distinguishes a 'language' from a 'dialect'. Is the 'multilingualism' of a given society brought about by social distinctions, bringing about a process known theoretically as *diglossia* in which one language is considered socially superior to another in that it plays different roles in society? (Platt & Platt, 1975). Or is the multilingualism, in contrast, brought about by the application of language policy on education so that at home a different language is spoken than at school? Or is it, in fact, brought about by geographical positioning? With these difficulties in mind, it could be said that the primary concern of this division of sociolinguistics is with the understanding of language variation and multilingualism within contemporary society and its repercussions for these societies and their members. This statement itself presents many different possibilities, bringing in sociopolitical/historical, educational, functional, regional and social factors.

It might be interesting to examine each of these factors and see which primary sociolinguistic study areas they can be connected with. We will soon discover that these boundaries, also, are far from easy to define strictly. According to Gumperz (1982, quoted

in Wardhaugh, 1992, Ch. 2) “socio-historical factors play a crucial role in determining boundaries.” The classic example is demonstrated by comparing Hindi, a language spoken in India, with Urdu, a language which is spoken in Pakistan: these languages are considered by their speakers to be entirely different. Gumperz (1971, quoted in Wardhaugh, 1992, pg. 26) considers that these two languages are, in actual fact, almost the same, but that certain differences are becoming more and more magnified for political and religious reasons.” Wardhaugh contrasts this example with that of China in which “mutually unintelligible Chinese languages (called ‘dialects’ by the Chinese themselves) are united through a common writing system and tradition.” (Wardhaugh, 1992, pg. 26). This aspect seems primarily to be a product of sociopolitical developments, connected also with large-scale religious and historical change. It also demonstrates that how one determines the difference between forms of language is not, in fact, based on universal models which can determine distinctions such as ‘language’ and ‘dialect’, ‘pidgin’ or ‘creole’ from one another, but that the distinctions are formed within social contexts, be that determined by a new national policy or a thousand years of folk tradition.

Sociopolitical variation within and between nations as discussed above has a direct connection with factors affecting the ‘education’ of language within a given society. Variation brought about by education can be related to that division within sociolinguistics known as ‘language planning’. According to Weinstein (1980, quoted in Wardhaugh, 1992, Ch. 15) “language planning is a government authorized, long term, sustained, and conscious effort to alter a language’s function in a society for the purpose of solving communication problems”: the theory is that by adjusting the language the populace is taught, you can also adjust the general attitudes to language. This can have both positive and negative aspects dependent on your perspective. If language planning results in your language being elevated to a higher social status, you would see the policy as being positive, whereas if your language is ignored by the policy or even lowered in social status you would see the planning as being relatively negative. This is indeed a complex discussion and many different social and political factors need to be taken into consideration.

When examining the division of macro-linguistics involved with the functional variation factor mentioned above, we move to an interesting topic involved with the study of languages developed for particular functional use: *pidgin languages* which are developed when contrasting social groups have to encounter for trade or other purposes and therefore are required to develop a system of communication. In itself, this is an incredibly detailed and complex language function that has thrown light on other fields of language research: the speed that these languages develop is of particular interest, and the way they develop and are used for certain social purposes is even more interesting. From a social perspective, this area is extended when sociolinguistic research is required to examine *pidgin* languages which have become ‘creolised’ because they are the only language form available to the following generation. The study of creoles is outside of the functional division and moves into other areas such as social variation: the attitudes to creoles as opposed to the standard form are quite negative, and these attitudes inevitably affect the way the creole develops. In contemporary society one can also discuss the language variations that have developed to cope with changes in modern technology, for

example, computer 'jargons' which develop for a particular social purpose. (Fromkin, Rodman, Collins, Blair, 1990, pg. 267).

Our discussion of the factors that bring about language variation ends with a discussion of regional and social variation. These two areas are themselves highly contrasting. Whereas regional dialects are geographically based, social dialects originate among social groups and depend on a variety of factors, the principal ones being social class, religion, and ethnicity. The primary unit used within the study of regional variation is known as the *linguistic marker*. This is a particular linguistic utterance, usually a phoneme, which recurs along geographical space allowing sociolinguists to notate their findings on maps and to create *dialect atlases*. (Wardhaugh, Ch. 6.). Research attempts to demonstrate which linguistic markers appear in which geographical areas, why they are positioned there and what geographical factors have resulted in those particular linguistic markers ending up in that position. When the study of these linguistic 'markers' moves to observing social development which has brought about changes, we move to the second topic, social variation. Societal variation can be related linguistically to the following factors: social class, age and sex. (Wardhaugh, 1992, Ch. 7). Societal variation, according to Labov (1972) uses a minimal unit known as the 'linguistic variable' to determine social contrast. According to Labov, these variables can be used to demonstrate the relationship between social divisions and linguistic utterance.

In sum, it is clear that the study of *macro-linguistics*' is a very large topic involving, similarly, many contrasting theoretical approaches. This broad observation of the field of sociolinguistics has presented two main 'focal points' that on closer examination have revealed themselves to be areas of intense theoretical and practical complexity. Now we look further at areas within the field that act to 'bridge the gap' between the these two contrasting perspectives. To begin we can return directly to Labov. Although the intention of the 'linguistic variable' is to demonstrate large-scale social variation, a direct connection can be made between his essentially 'sociological' approach and the approach implicit in the work of Dell Hymes. The concept of the *variable rule* comes from Labov, which is an attempt to show that all 'socially-significant' linguistic variation in a community is, in actual fact, 'rule-governed'. This would surely have to be related back to Hymes' notion of 'sociolinguistic communicative competence' in which a relationship is set up between the psycholinguistic acquisition of language and the fact that this process is related to the acquisition of the social rules learnt simultaneously which help to dictate the context in which certain *speech-acts* occur. Labov's research may have broader sociological implications, as do his statistical methods for surveying the data, but still one can not ignore the clear theoretical connection with 'micro-linguistics'. One's attention is also drawn to the fact that the type of linguistic survey originated by Labov and his followers are always begun with the individual and groups of individuals and then fitted onto the general society. According to Wardhaugh, they have "little hesitation in generalizing their statements about [an individual] speaker's linguistic behaviour to all speakers of the language." (Wardhaugh, 1992, Ch. 6). From this perspective, it is interesting to note that Dell Hymes discusses the work of Labov in his influential paper On Communicative Competence: "Such work as Labov's in New York City . . . point to the necessity of a social approach even if the goal of description is a single homogeneous

code.” (Hymes, 1972).

An alternative approach within sociolinguistics, that taken by ethnomethodology and other influenced ideas, demonstrates alternative influences from fields as diverse as ethnography and cultural anthropology. It could be suggested that these approaches cannot be slid easily into either the *communicative competence* or the *speech community* facets of sociolinguistics suggested by Pride, even though they are interesting and ultimately essential tools for the understanding of language within society.

Ethnomethodology is involved with the logical systems that exist in human culture that help us to encompass reality, involving inevitably the role language plays in this process. In this sense language is used as a form of unconscious control over thought processes: “An important function of communication is social maintenance. Language is used to sustain reality.” (Wardhaugh, 1992, Ch. 10). Ethnomethodologists are interested in the processes and techniques that people use to interpret the world around them to make sense of the world. It has been argued within phenomenology, a division within philosophy, that human beings allows themselves to experience certain aspects of reality in a certain way as determined partly by their senses and partly within the context of cultural education. Benjamin Whorf’s theories relate these ideas directly to language, demonstrating that the primary medium for this ‘understanding’ is expressed in language structures, and that the language structures offered to us in the context of cultural existence restrict the way we experience reality. According to Wardhaugh, the now infamous ‘Whorfian hypothesis’ states that “Language Provides a screen or filter to reality; it determines how speakers perceive and organize the world around them, both the natural world and the social world.” (Wardhaugh, 1992, Ch. 9). This alternative approach interprets language as an expression of a cultural ‘entity’; on the one hand ‘socially’ acquired and ‘culturally’ bound, and on the other demonstrating the existence of thought processes available to every individual. This contrasts greatly to the traditional divisions within sociolinguistics, but still plays a potentially important role in understanding human language behaviour.

To conclude this paper, we can begin by saying that the field of sociolinguistics is very broad and involves influences from many different disciplines, including the cognitive sciences, anthropology, sociology, history, psychology, and of course linguistics. Pride’s statement which opened this paper seems now a little simplistic in the light of what we have observed, suggesting that a definition of the field of sociolinguistics should be considerably more open to the multi-disciplinary nature of its divisions. Bell has already anticipated this approach, and it may be useful to end this paper by drawing from his list of principles defining sociolinguistics:

“The more that we know about language, the more we can find out about it, and we should not be surprised if our search for new knowledge takes us into new areas of study and into areas in which scholars from other disciplines are already working.” (Bell, 1976).

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