

Inaugural address

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Clarifications

- Focus on sociolinguistic's conceptualisation of diversity
- The **interdisciplinary nature of sociolinguistics** and perhaps of all social sciences and conceptualisation of social phenomena
- Nature of this presentation : questions unanswered

Starting point

- Everybody agrees that research in social sciences has made significant contributions to the welfare of mankind:
- -its contribution to knowledge in general and particularly its engagement with social issues which are of critical relevance to equity and social justice

Preconceived beliefs

Because social sciences' contribute to the advancement of knowledge, they determine the understanding that the ordinary citizen has of the world. That understanding has its source in academic knowledge.

What is less obvious is that some preconceived beliefs about people and cultural practices are rooted in certain trends in academic work.

Example

- We have all been made to understand that the term ***word*** is a fundamental component of languages. Let us question this belief.
- Oral languages are composed of sounds. **Words** exist only in written languages.
- There are many languages which exist as oral languages... some of them “have died”.
- If words are a fundamental component of languages, then we condemn oral languages as second class languages.
- Question: What is then the source of our understanding of the world?

Definition of a *word*

- When linguists started to reflect on the term and tried to define it, they came to the conclusion that one of the definitions that they can provide is that a word is a series of letters between two blank spaces.
- In fact, for technical purposes, linguists have other units of analysis which are more rigorous and systematic.
- Word out of the control of linguists

Implications for research

If social scientists provide the ordinary citizen with lenses through which she/he understands the world, then scientists have a moral and ethical responsibility towards wider society; this is why they should not only limit their preoccupations to the production of knowledge but reflect on:

What knowledge? For what purpose?

Diversity

- The understanding of diversity is influenced by the kind of knowledge that academic research has provided to wider society. The ordinary citizen's perception of herself/himself and of the other is influenced by this knowledge.
- Policies regarding equity, social justice..
- This is the reason why I want to reflect critically on the conceptualisation of diversity in sociolinguistics.

What is sociolinguistics ?

- Let us say that linguistics is the *scientific* study of languages: the description of the different components of a language with proven tools of description is one example. Or a classification of languages based on their *grammatical* characteristics is a linguistic study of languages.

Limitations of linguistics

- Sociolinguists claim that these studies are too abstract and are devoid of any interest. For a sociolinguist, no language can exist without any society and no society can exist without at least one language.
- The social architecture of a human community is strongly linked with its language practices, the beliefs concerning languages and language policies.

Basic assumption of sociolinguistics

- The basic assumption of sociolinguistics is that language use and language attitudes are socially patterned.
- Sociolinguistics is the study of language use, language attitudes and even language policy from a social perspective.

Example

- Study of youth language and urbanisation in France
- Prior to the study: negative attitude to youth language
- Sociolinguistic research: how to describe their language? What does it reveal?
- Their language symbolises their problems, their marginalisation, but also the sense of solidarity which exists among them: they have their own language, their vocabulary, their grammar...they are in a society of their own

Example 2

- White teacher: This is not a spoon
- Little Black girl: Dis not no poon
- White teacher: No, this is not a spoon
- Black girl: Dis not a poon
- White teacher : This is not a spoon
- Child exasperated: Well dass a cup

Sociolinguistics and diversity

Whatever the perspective that the sociolinguist chooses, he cannot avoid understanding the social architecture of the human community where she/he wants to conduct her/his sociolinguistic research.

In the Southern Hemisphere, one of the first objectives is to understand what is termed diversity.

Where does our conception of diversity come from?

- Term 'diversity': broad and different academic origins
- One understanding of diversity originates from the notion of plural society.
- Term used for the first time by the British Administrator John Furnivall in his book *Netherlands India: A study of plural economy*.

- In his writings Furnivall defines a plural society as a society different in **kind from that of Europe**
- He goes on to say that **'The plural society has come into existence because the only factor common to all groups and members has been the economic factor'** (Furnivall 1945, p. 171).
- The role of the market place

The label plural misleading

- It concentrates attention upon differences in race and custom and upon group conflict while at the same time directing attention away from the processes making for unity and integration in the society” (R. T. Smith 1958).
- Plurality may also encourage people to look on societies as if they did not have coherent social systems that are strictly comparable with other societies (Morris 1957: 125 in B. Burton, 1962, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com>).

Charles A. Coppel, 1997, “Revisiting Furnivall's plural society”

- Charles A. Coppel (1997) Revisiting Furnivall's ‘plural society’: Colonial Java as a mestizo society?, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 20:3, 562-579.
- In the light of Furnivall's insistence that in colonial Burma, Europeans and natives met only in the market place, it is surprising to learn that his wife (Margaret Ma Nyun Toungoo), who died in 1940, was Burmese.
- Worst form of deafness/blindness characterise people who refuse to listen/to see

Academic myopia

- Carl A. Trocki, 1993, in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia Volume 2: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, CUP, p. 79-130.
- The only scholars to question Furnivall's characterisation of Netherlands India as a 'plural society' have been the Dutch, and their criticism (even when readily available in English) has received scant attention from mainstream research

‘Description’ of the social architecture of Mauritius from a linguistic perspective

- Mauritius often ‘described’ : complex postcolonial, multiracial/multi-ethnic and multilingual country. Each of these labels are viewpoints but are perceived as objective academic knowledge.
- Strong link established between complex racial/ethnic fabric of the island and sociolinguistic setting.
- Multilingual nature of the community perceived as an indicator of both the social and cultural complexity of the country and its ethnically diverse population.

all languages have an ethnic index: they are all associated with an ethnic group

Hindi and Mauritian Bhojpuri	Hindus from Bihar
Tamil	Hindus from Tamil Nadu
Telegu	Hindus from Andhra Pradesh
Marathi	Hindus from Maharashtra
Gujrathi	Hindus from Gujrath
Arabic and Urdu	Muslims
Cantonese and Hakka	Chinese
French	White and coloured
Creole	??
English	??

Reflecting critically on language and ethno-cultural identity

- In the 1990s, during a period characterized by revitalized ethnic politics, some intellectuals in the Creole or “Afro-Mauritian” ‘community’ took two decisions:
- 1) they wanted to be recognised as a separate ethnic group: in the official ethnic classification of the population in Mauritius, the general population comprises the wealthy “White French-speaking elite” and the “poor dark-skinned African illiterates”; in between the lower middle class “coloured population”;
- 2) they decided that the Creole language, once perceived as a symbol of national unity, should be the language which defines the identity of this new ethnic group.

Madagascar

- Dearth of research in social sciences
- Two important contributions which ‘have stood the test of time’ are Dez’s and Vérin’s studies on language and social diversity.
- Leoni Bouwer (2005) :
“Dez's work is of tremendous foundational value for any subsequent dialectological study in Madagascar. Much of Dez's view on the Malagasy language has been echoed in other publications.”

- Dez (1978, 331-332) states that the number of Malagasy dialects has been arbitrarily fixed at 17, based on the traditional division of Madagascar into 18 tribes, with the Merina dialect of the eighteenth group regarded as the national language.

These descriptions are based on a series of assumptions

- Mauritius and Madagascar are ethnically/racially diverse/plural;
- Ethnic/racial groups are linguistically and culturally bounded and homogenous.
- In Mauritius, diversity is indexed in multilingualism, whereas in Madagascar, it is indexed in the variation of Malagasy language to fit the ethnic and racial diversity of the human community.

Ethnicity: a construct

- Ethnicity is linked with essentialism, which is characterised by the belief that identity and cultural practices, including language practices, are grounded in a 'boundaried' world which defines groups and differentiates them from one another.

An alternative approach

- Hannerz: But anthropology has also developed other understandings of the frontier. In his work on the highlands of Burma, Edmund Leach (1960), problematizing the conventional notion of political frontiers, described a zone in which cultures interpenetrated dynamically, through varied political, ecological, economic and kinship frameworks.

Another significant contribution

- *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Barth 1969). Barth establishes an analytical distinction between the social and the cultural and adds that ethnicity is best seen as a matter of social organization: he then concludes that there is no simple relationship **between ethnic group membership** and the distribution of cultural items among populations.
- (=perceived group membership)

Vaughan

- The 'evasion' of Jouan is a minor and incomplete footnote to the history of the Indian Ocean in the eighteenth century. But in some ways it seems a good place to start a discussion of colonial identities.
- Eighteenth-century Isle de France, and particularly its capital, Port Louis, was a fluid and complex place: one in which, despite the rigidities of colonial life with the binary divisions between slave and free, black and white, it was not always easy to know just who everyone was.

Boswell: contemporary Mauritius

- For many “ordinary” Mauritian Creoles, hybridity is a permanent feature of Creole identity and experience
- Creoles rarely publicly or formally invoke hybridity
- Why? = conceptualisations of hybridity in Mauritian society are still affected by essentialist discourses and dominant groups see and treat hybridity as “a threat to the fullness of selfhood [and] as the moral marker of contamination, failure or regression” (Papastergiadis 1997: 257).

Raison-Jourde

- Interesting critical deconstruction of ethnic and racial terminology used in social sciences to account for the social architecture of the Malagasy society:
- -terms used: ethnic groups, races, tribes, kingdom
- Le terme de race n'est pas moins péjoratif que le terme de tribu= "the term 'race' is not less derogatory than the term tribe"

Beyond the Indian Ocean: The African Frontier (1987)

- The editor I. Kopytoff has delineated a Subsaharan landscape where innumerable microfrontiers keep developing, not just at the outskirts of established societies but precisely in the interstices between them; where small groups of people meet to form the beginnings of a new society, having left their respective earlier homes for example after succession disputes or witchcraft accusations.

Discussion

- Sociolinguistics has adopted the perspective of the dominant trend in anthropology and has approached language related issues as if they are grounded in a 'boundaried' world which defines groups and differentiates them from one another. Sociolinguistics has also highlighted social divisions along the lines of race and ethnicity

Why that dominant conceptualisation of diversity?

- Sociolinguistics has not been able to make a distinction between perceived group membership and the distribution of cultural items in societies
- Faire une distinction entre le sentiment d'appartenance à un groupe et la distribution du matériau culturel d'une communauté humaine

N.J. Gibson (2009) “Making Art, Making Identity: Moving beyond Racialised Perceptions of Identity through Collaborative Exhibition in the New South Africa”

- Post-1994 public discourses on reconciliation, integration and national unity still used terminologies of division and difference.
- Given that there are many points of cultural similarity, ancestries, interaction and understanding that exist or could occur between South Africans....

Sociolinguistics and interdisciplinarity

- “the sociology of language in its almost all-inclusive sense is a good example of the manifold epistemological problems that characterise interdisciplinary work” (Fishman: 1983: 33).
- 3 paths towards interdisciplinarity:
 - A) borrowing the interpretation of social phenomena
 - B) borrowing conceptual tools/methods of data collection
 - C) problematising interdisciplinarity: understanding the trends of theorisation within a discipline and making conscious and deliberate choices of a particular trend

Can sociolinguistics contribute to social welfare?

- “Every self-respecting nation has to have a language. Not just a medium of communication, a ‘vernacular’ or a ‘dialect’ but a fully developed language. Anything less marks it as underdeveloped.” (Haugen : 1972 : 103)

- Tombiah:« the myth of a monolingual nation-state (“one country, one language, one people”) is clearly inappropriate for the Philippines.” p. 525
- It is fallacious « to impose a historical construction such as a nation-state, achieved on a distinctive soil, on a dependent world, as if its realisation is a necessary stage in universal history” (p.525)

- *Thank you for your patience !*