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LANGUAGE AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE
An approach to the sociology of language.

Premise

There is a general agreement among scholars who study human behaviour in believing the primary function of language to be that of vocally carrying out the "social tendency to see reality in a symbolic way" (Sapir, 1935, pg. 158). Experiments on the acquisition of concepts and categorization have proved that knowledge does not require verbal translation, since there is no 'a priori' reason to believe that man's knowledge of language is more intuitive than other types of knowledge such as, for example, knowledge of inter-personal transactions (Rommertveit, 1979, pg. 30) (1). Indeed natural languages are not the only system of signification in human societies, but they exist together with other non-verbal sign systems.

Since capacity of symbolization is basis for thought and behaviour, language becomes one of the many symbolic forms (2) through which thought manifests itself. It is, however, a form which, compared to other sign systems, is able to objectify human expressiveness and make it appear as an activity which needs the participation of the person who speaks as well as of those included in the situation. Thus language becomes a means for the understanding of reality, allowing one to classify experiences by fitting them into general categories. The meaning which, making experience anomimous, allows its transmissibility, stems precisely from such a generalization (3).

Language becomes a social process which implies communication and which, through the reciprocal adjusting of answers or actions on the part of individual bodies participating in the process" (Mead, 1967, pg. 99), creates the objects in terms of meanings within experience and behaviour.
The term 'natural languages' develops a concept which implies a relationship with society, insofar as it considers the usages, the rules, the variations within a language, etc. Moreover, according to Coseriu (1980, pg. 50), the fact that linguistic activity arises also on a cultural level is an essential aspect for defining language itself, even though one cannot forget that the biological aspect is indispensable for the carrying out of any such activity. Saussure himself claims that 'langue' is a social product and that, like any other type of communication, it regulates action or behaviour.

A sociological analysis of language will be developed in the present paper as analysis of verbal communication.

From a study of tongues to a study of language

The gradual removal of the structure of communication from the structure of action leads to a study of communication as a species of the genus 'action'; verbal communication is seen as a particular kind of communication (4).

To pass from a study of 'langue' seen as an "active system of language", i.e. as an abstraction of a series of essential conventions to actually obtain communication among members of the same linguistic community (Malmberg, 1972, pg. 63), to a study of the 'parole', seen as a concrete linguistic act, seems to be an inevitable step. Of course, the sociology of language has not yet found its final paradigm, even though it has made good progress, owing especially to the fact that many fields have become interested in the study of language. A common characteristic of such group efforts is the decision to choose as object of study not the 'langue' but the 'parole', i.e. linguistic behaviour in its social functions.

However, these points of view common to several fields should not overlook their specific original field of research, just as the sociologist should always refer to society in his study of language. For many years sociologists have disregarded the analysis of the relations between language and society because they have
considered language as an invariable characteristic which exists in every society, therefore overlooking its influence on social action (Giglioli, 1973, pg. 15).

The essential role which language plays in the differentiation of social behaviour was recently recognized when many scholars became involved in studying the social structure which determines linguistic behaviour. The sociality of language had already been proposed, at the end of the 19th Century, by some writers (among which Whitney) who saw language as a social institution serving the purpose of transmitting culture and having as its end communication among men. In the 20's, Sapir proposed a definition of language emphasizing its role as a socially and historically-conditioned activity, as well as its creative force and its being a system of voluntarily-produced symbols (Sapir, 1969, pg. 8). In 1929 the Prague school also claimed that language is a product of human activity and that the understanding of linguistic fact necessarily requires a knowledge of the social functions of language itself.

Among the ethnologists and cultural anthropologists who devoted themselves to the study of language we can mention Malinowsky, who, with his observations, influenced the English linguistic school from Firth to Halliday.

The results which originated from such interweaving of approaches led to the construction of terms which have enlarged the consideration for the social role of language. Bloomfield (a linguist) for instance created the concept of "linguistic community", Hymes (anthropologist and linguist) that of "communication event", and Malinowsky himself that of "situation context".

A relevant contribution was given by philosophy of language which considers the necessity of a reference to context in the interpretation of indexical expressions and in the solving of ambiguity in polysemic sentences. The philosophy of language considers, as basic unit of verbal communication, the linguistic act which is studied as performative, giving fundamental importance to the pragmatic aspect of language.

Ethnomethodologists have been particularly interested
in the decodification of everyday language expressions, for which the members of a community must share not only grammatical rules but also communication competence. We could remember the attempts to discover the qualities making up the basis for the activity of an actor. Such qualities were listed by Cicourel (1973), who believes them to be essential for the reaching of an understanding between speakers; among them he mentions the reciprocity of perspectives, the similarity of repertoires and the sharing of experiences.

The importance of verbal language and its central position within the communication system make it a capital tool for the co-ordination of subjective 'vital spaces', with a more or less direct reference to the objective social field. Anthropologists-linguists Sapir and Whorf based themselves on such an observation to formulate the hypothesis of linguistic relativism: language constrains the ways of thinking and the cultural models of people and it influences the social structures themselves (5).

Bernstein (1971) has furnished a new and interesting approach to this controversial problem. He observes that there can be two different types of personal language systems; the first consists of reference systems denoting common experiences, the second is made up of a mainly connotative reference system (6).

Lastly, political scientists have also become interested in the relations between social communication and development which is seen as a relation between linguistic modernization and planning or as a cause of political or social conflicts generated by linguistic diversity itself.

The Sociology of language
Joshua Fishman was one of the first sociologists to take interest in the relations between language and society, in a more systematic way and using sociological methodologies: according to Fishman, the sociology of language studies the interaction between the use of language and the social organization of behaviour. He
sees the sociology of language (7) as a descriptive sociology, which searches for the generally-accepted models of use of language, as well as models of behaviour and attitudes toward language on the part of social networks and communities (Fishman, 1972, pg. 17). Sociology of language also seems to analyze the dynamics of language, trying to study why and how the social organization of language and social behavior towards language can be different, at different times, within the same community. A third area of study, according to Fishman, concerns the teaching of languages and political and social modernization. An interesting concept is that of social field, which Fishman means as a class of situations requiring linguistic variety and allowing connections between linguistic variations and the institutions within a society, thus furnishing a key for the integration of microsociology and macrosociology of language.

In fact, Fishman considers the sociology of language as "a study of language varieties, of their functions and of those of their speakers and of the way in which these three elements constantly interact and modify one another, both within a given linguistic community and among different communities" (Fishman, 1972, pg. 71).

Another sociologist who has analyzed language is Giorgio Braga. According to Braga, language is an action with a great use of form and with an inter-personal orientation, therefore being a type of communication with many functions. The main function is that of mediating action, consisting in the capacity of transmitting knowledge and establishing alternative values, forming decision schemata, giving instructions, verifying things and deciding on change and innovation. Other functions are that of symbolic use, when the message is used for its own sake (poetry) and the operative function which is used to establish logical connections and quantitative determinations (Braga, 1977).

In his analysis of language from a sociological point of view, Braga introduces in the study of linguistic behaviour the theory of field, especially suited for
microsociological studies, and the theory of role. The theory of field is applied to speakers (actors) who can modify their vital spaces, by communicating verbally without crossing the social field. The theory of role on the other hand considers the social system and allows one to shift to a macro-sociological level, creating a dialectic between expectations and fulfilments of the linguistic role (8) which connects all subjective vital spaces. Within a linguistic community, speakers play different roles, depending on their status, on relationship types, on environment and situation; their verbal behaviour changes along with these variables. This behaviour can be compared to social role, and can thus be considered expectation and fulfilment at the same time, norm and behaviour (Marcato, 1983, pg. 97). Braga therefore proposes a substitution of the relation 'langue-parole' with the relation 'expectation-fulfilment', to avoid considering words as a personal choice and language as a social fact. Fulfilment and expectation are parts of the same process, which one can observe in verbal activity insofar as "reciprocal expectation between persons communicating implies that the former and sender of the message postulates a given capacity of reception and interpretation on the part of the other person, who in turn expects the former to respect certain rules in forming and sending such message" (Braga, 1972, pg. 10).

**Linguistic Custom**

The reference system is the main instrument of thought, and G.H. Mead has rightly indicated it as fundamental for the construction of the self and of society. Only the uniformity of behaviour sequences tends to reduce the innovative aspect to a dialectic between expectations and fulfilments. When speaking of linguistic role, we should bear in mind that verbal communication as means for mediation is auxiliary to other roles, since verbal and non-verbal situations are always alternating. When speaking of roles, moreover, one should not forget that they represent institutional order. Berger and
Luckmann (1969, pg. 109) remind us that the importance of roles is made concrete by the assuming of a role in which the individual does not act of his own accord, but within the schemata of the assumed role (9). Every role can also represent a whole institutional connection because it has a relation with the other roles, and it makes sense only within a common knowledge which, originating through social interaction, becomes institutionalized.

Thus the fulfilment-expectation dynamic relation becomes the dynamic relation between linguistic behaviour and linguistic norms which tend to become consolidated and eventually instituzionalized, so as to assure communication between greater social groups and between generations. Linguistic norms can be considered not so much a sum of expectations, but as an actual "field effect", a global sociological phenomenon which, although stemming from single expectations, eventually modifies them in a radical way (10).

However, "the distribution of personal expectations is important quite apart from the awareness of expectations as communitarian phenomena" (Braga, 1977, pg. 151). The concept of linguistic matrix, which stems from such distribution, is similar to Schütz's "common sense knowledge" (1962) and to Cicourel's "interpretation procedures" (1968). The latter writer uses the term to indicate a series of characteristics which are necessary for reaching an understanding between subjects. These characteristics are universal rules, including the reciprocity of perspectives, identity of repertoires and of secondary communication between interlocutors, bearing in mind that experience can never be completely verbalized (11). Other more recent studies point to the fact that this type of universal knowledge or experience is socially distributed (Giglioli, 1973, pg. 23).

The evolution from linguistic matrix to linguistic custom takes place through the awareness, though on an intuitive level, of the systematic quality of language. Only the awareness of the rules underlying language can determine expectations which are then transformed into linguistic norms from which arise the linguistic custom
which entails the sense of belonging to a community.

Linguistic custom is reinforced by social sanctions, that is by approval or disapproval of linguistic behaviour, by the prestige of "speaking well" and by the appropriateness or efficiency of communication. The concept of repertoire, considered within linguistic custom, can be seen as the ability to fulfill expectations, even though expectations and fulfilments never coincide. Linguistic behaviours or fulfilments suffer various kinds of dispersion: on a microsociological level, we can envisage situations which lead to different styles or registers (Labov, 1971), while on a macro-sociological level there may be diversifications in linguistic fulfilments concerning social structures and processes such as social aggregates, social functions and canalization. A diversification based on social aggregates determines the type of language (Italian, German, etc.): geographical aggregates are of great importance and their deracination can lead to a decadence of old speeches or dialects and to the creation of new idioms. The differences in social classes within social aggregates can also create more prestigious or less prestigious speeches, and there can be a diversification based on age groups which can lead to the forming of juvenile jargons. On the other hand, canalization entails differences between the oral mode and the written mode: the former including inter-personal language and its submodes (television, telephone, radio and cinema), the latter including chirographic texts and printed textbooks and various types of journalistic texts. Although this paper does not intend to treat each of these modes in detail, it should be noted how all types of mass communication are necessarily simplified and tend to bring linguistic homogenization to a medium-low level as compared to the school-teaching level.

Moreover, the registers used by groups which include a greater number of linguistic trend-setters obviously take on greater prestige (12).

The advent of writing has increased further the prestige of those who speak a language and the importance
of written language (which grows considerably with the advent of printing) and of literacy caused custom to change into code, the institutionalization of linguistic socialization mechanisms and of sanctions towards the use of linguistic norms.

Technological innovations such as writing and printing entailed the definitive transition to the systematization of the written form and therefore to its institutionalization, a very important transition for the reinforcing of the feeling of belonging to a community, insofar as language is an index of collective cohesion (13). A proof of how important a common written form is for a group is represented by the minimization of differences in custom which are considered as differences in dialect (14).

**Institutionalization and development of culture**

The interactionist current proposes a model of society based on dialectic interaction; the two levels are represented by action and by communication. As already said, through linguistic education the linguistic customs and codes of the community are learned, and linguistic norms operate as a constraint as much as any other norm. The linguistic role obliges communicants to accept the linguistic custom of their community under penalty of sanctions among which the loss of identification with the community itself. By observing larger communities, one can notice how the linguistic code becomes more formalized and to adapted to the reference system as well as to the social field: it is this mechanism which triggers the institutionalization of the language.

In fact, the process of institutionalization is nothing else but the codification and the acceptance, within a community of users, of a formal series of norms which define correct usage. The guardians of language are in charge of this codification, adds Fishman; such guardians are the story-tellers, grammarians, teachers, writers, etc. who use language professionally and consciously.

Nowadays, the institutionalization of custom takes place through three main instruments: socialization at
school constraints towards usage and discrimination based on knowledge of the language (Braga, 1977, pg. 161). Linguistic socialization transforms school into the custodian of the good forming and understanding of language, in relation to popular custom as well as to the deviant behaviour of the juvenile classes. The necessity of a linguistic education at school is felt by all states which tend to integrate the groups stemming from different ethnic roots; but this is a choice which implies serious problems of social justice, insofar as those whose mother tongue is the same as the national tongue, owing to their community of origin or to their social extraction, will have an advantage over those whose situation is a different one (this holds true for dialects but also for languages). Linguistic socialization conditions scholastic socialization and the sanctions are inevitable, since certain positions can only be reached at levels of instruction implying the passing of linguistic tests. Scholastic socialization, by justifying constraints in usage, prepares the way to discrimination, starting a chain of complex processes which makes the action of institutionalization more and more efficient, since social discrimination can be reduced only by increasing scholastic socialization (Braga, 1977, pg. 162).

The institutionalization of language depends on social structure and the latter finally conditions the diversification of behaviour. The converging of expectations within the community is based on certain systematic characters of linguistic paradigms by developing similar expectations and an awareness and solidarity which entails the sanctions. In any case, a tension exists between linguistic behaviour and linguistic custom, a tension which makes concrete the dialectic between expectations and fulfilments, that is between shared and socially-controlled stances (linguistic norms) and categories of actual behaviour.

Linguistic education can be seen as the encounter between a primary education which comes from the family, from playmates, from the neighborhood, etc. and a
secondary education, offered mainly by the school. In fact the school must guarantee a broader communication and it must transmit the accumulated culture of previous generations. In this agency of socialization one learns the fulfilsments of linguistic roles corresponding to the generalized expectations of the entire linguistic community, often corresponding to a political community.

Education entails literacy but it is also the main way to the acquisition of common knowledge and ideas which allow an individual to be integrated in the context of the society he lives in and which allow also the cohesion and the awareness necessary to participate in communitarian and political life. Inside society, the most important education is that of young people, where linguistic learning is dominated by the finalizing of the linguistic roles intended by the socializing groups and institutions.

*Autonomous (super-national) languages and culture*

The arising of reciprocal competitions is inevitable in a population where several linguistic systems coexist; even though there is a formal richness in the language, this does not eliminate from the repertoire of the linguistic community the non-institutionalized varieties whose functions will be separate from, but complementary to, those of the institutionalized variety (15).

At the language level unification and diversification go hand in hand. This is a proof that traditional and modern ways are often combined in new constellations and are not substituted one by the other. Unification in the varieties within one linguistic community is attempted through interaction networks existing in the community, which are associated with school, government, industry, etc. and whose linguistic variety tends to be used in a non-differentiated way.

Several states accept two or more language variants for communication and within these societies the various codes are distinguished by the use which is made of them. Gumperz (1966) has extended the term 'diglossia' proposed by Ferguson. The former noted that this situation is
typical not so much of those societies officially recognizing different languages, nor of those which use popular and classical varieties, but also of societies which use many dialects or registers or linguistic varieties which are functionally differentiated. One can speak of various types of bilingualism among which the one called "proper" which appears when the cultural spaces of two linguistic communities, having reached the same level of linguistic codification and specialization, remain separate. This type of bilingualism is a factor of isolation between groups. "Improper" bilingualism, which excluded from secondary instruction, is limited to inter-personal canalization and is often lacking transcription. This type of bilingualism denot an imbalance between reference systems so that the cultural spaces of the two groups are reciprocally integrated while the communicants use the two systems for different functions. Language-dialect situations are typical instances of this case.

The language-dialect differentiation is being replaced by the differentiation between national language and autonomous language, which entails on one hand the reduction of cultural pluralism and on the other hand a position of greater prestige for the autonomous language. Supernational languages are becoming more and more important because they are the languages of culturally and economically important communities, and they give access to a highly specialized printed production and therefore to important social memories.

Bilingualism is generally characterized by the presence of alternative codes as well as of alternative messages; these entail the forming of a finalizing relation between communicating population and alternative message. This is not so when bilingualism is the result of education, when a second language is learned academically without its being present in the social context of the student. Anticipatory bilingualism, which exists when one studies the language of politically and economically dominant countries, belongs to this category; the learning of these languages is made easier if the codes
and the cultural spaces are similar.

The necessity to learn a super-national language and therefore the need to create bilingualism through early education produces a socio-linguistic problem, if one considers that the greater part of any population is still at a level of communication bound to personal interaction, with the addition of the atypical function of mass communication which creates imbalance. Reception of television messages and suchlike by this stratum of population is in fact minimal, owing to the fact that the basic reference systems are different and are assimilated to those of television using false analogies. Moreover, even though the second language may be taught in school with a global system, the child does not find the language in his family and in his everyday environment. The problem thus shifts to direct communication between cultures, requiring a cultural circulation, not simply as school education, but also on an inter-personal level, which can be accomplished with trips to foreign countries and by exposure to mass communication in languages that are not the national one.

The learning of languages other than one's own is a problem which involves encounters with culturally different systems. Cultural distortion is in fact inevitable and implicit in the use of a language learned by education, that is scholastically; this will be minimal in the operative function of languages, average in everyday life language and maximum in poetic language, which can never be completely translated, as it is removed from the expectations implicit in linguistic form. This difference can be verified only within accurate cultural reference schemata, because "something which is original in one language may be trivial in another" (Marcato, 1982, pg. 231).

The effects of the technological revolution in communication systems have gone beyond the linguistic fact and one can talk of cultural imbalance due to the levels' difference in permeability to the various kinds of language. On the one hand, mass communication has emphasized expressive idioms too much, while on the other
hand, organized culture has become more and more specialist. From a linguistic point of view we can see a growing need for autonomous languages, as well as some interesting phenomena such as the rapid developing of spoken language and the surge of new modes, such as radio, television and cinema.

The learning of a language, usually the national language, has up to now been essential for the integration in some social positions; nowadays the knowledge of other languages is also required, for cultural richness and the widening of the personal horizon. Using one or more languages as communication tools is a solution to be advocated, as long as this does not stifle the expressive possibilities of the minority languages (meant as less prestigious national languages) through the constraints of consumerism (Heilmann, 1982, pg. 200).

Thus, the definition of language as a means for communication and culture implies two complex sets of problems, connected one set with the need to communicated outside the boundaries of one's own language, the other set with the necessity to respect specific single cultures.
NOTES

1) See Ervin Goffman's studies.

2) Many scholars agreed on this line of thought, among them Cassirer (1923), Langer (1951) and Paulus (1969).

3) According to Berger and Luckmann, we have a language when the vocal sign removes itself from the 'hic et nunc' of subjective states; q.v. pg. 60-62.

4) This theoretical model, referred to in this paper, was proposed by Braga (1977).

5) One must consider however that every language can fulfill new requirements, insofar as words can have several meanings and can be used in several ways; moreover, each language evolves, since the perceptions which stimulate the production of words, words being symbols for human experience, change with time (Mac Bride Report, 1982, p. 25).

6) Instead of 'reference system', Bernstein uses the terms "restricted code" and "elaborated code", which however are rather tricky terms and can create misunderstandings.

7) Sociologists include in the category 'sociology of language' all the studies which stress the importance of linguistic facts for a better understanding of social facts. The same term is used by linguists to describe that part of general linguistics which studies the influence of given social factors on the structures and on the historical evolution of a language.

8) The term "expectation" is used to mean all stances, values and behaviours which a given society believes persons occupying a certain social status to have, while fulfilment is the behaviour actually exhibited by a person in a given situation, in relation with the expected behaviour.

9) We could say it with G. H. Mead's words "generalized other".

10) Expectations have a centripetal character, for they tend to keep language the way it is, while fulfil-
ments have a centrifugal character because they tend
to variability in the use of language.

11) Human experiences can be lived as "internal" or
"external" but to be communicated they have to be
common to both persons or subjects involved.

12) Groups including influencers are usually those which
hold political power and economic power and are
usually identified with the educated classes.

13) However, language is not the only solidarity bond.
There are other factors such as ethnic, religious and
political differences working that way.

14) This has emerged also from a research on the image of
language in which dialect is considered to be
unimportant and scarcely prestigious.

15) Institutionalization is the main instrument for the
autonomy of language.
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