

The Discipline of Sociology of Language Is it One or Is It Not?

Review of Joshua A. Fishman (ed.), *Advances in the Sociology of Language, volume II: Selected Studies and Applications*. The Hague: Mouton, 1972.

Fishman's book is a collection of articles designed to reflect what he sees as certain tendencies in the sociology of language (and/or sociolinguistics) over the last decade, tendencies towards more integration around systematic questions, more data orientation, greater use of quantitative techniques, and an increased interdisciplinary approach. The strong implication is that the sociology of language has come into its own as a substantial sub-discipline. Presumably, this collection constitutes implicit evidence for this. It is divided into five sections: 'Small Group Interaction,' 'Large-Scale Socio-Cultural Processes,' 'Bilingualism and Diglossia,' 'Language Maintenance and Language Shift,' and 'Applied Sociology of Language: Policy, Planning and Practice.' As can be seen from these titles the bulk of the book is concerned with relatively macroscopic issues.

It is precisely because of the stated purpose of this reader that it is a disappointment to this reviewer. Linguistics proper has developed an elaborate array of concepts for the study of the abstract system—language. Social science has been handed the job of putting language back into the world, of studying natural language use and acquisition directly. How to accomplish this has become a focal point of several very basic theoretical and methodological controversies. Thus, to the reviewer, the sociology of language is not currently characterised by homogeneity and consensus, but by

polarisation around some very interesting issues. The trouble with this volume is that it, for the most part, does not address these issues. In particular, the core of the book takes one side of two such important issues, without directly addressing the issues themselves.

The concepts that sociolinguistics use to characterise the sort of thing language is might be called, after Kuhn, the linguistic paradigm. There are a hose of studies that have discovered things humans are doing when they use natural language which seem difficult or impossible to deal with using the linguistic paradigm. Other theories and studies argue that the whole conception of natural language use as some kind of 'performance' of an abstract language 'system' is fundamentally wrong. The articles of Fishman's volume mostly make heavy use of linguists' versions of what language is to define problems and data sets, without addressing the issue of the appropriateness of the concepts involved in these versions.

Secondly, the book does indeed contain a large selection of studies using quantitative approaches, but this is another major issue in the sociology of language. That is, virtually 90% of the currently popular quantitative techniques revolve around one idea: conceptualise your phenomenon as a collection of variables and computer their statistical interrelations. There are huge questions about whether many topics in the sociology of language can be, or should be, studied in this way.

One of these questions is that of measurement. Even in the case of categorical variables this question can be treated as the problem of assigning numbers to a set of qualitative observations. For such assignments to be valid, one's qualitative observations have to satisfy certain mathematical axioms, axioms that are not overly familiar to most social scientists who are familiar with the customary questions of reliability and validity. In experimental psychology, especially in language-related research, great attention is often paid to this problem. It appears in many instances that there are aspects of language use that do not satisfy the axioms necessary for them to be treated as collections of variables.

Another problem concerns the units of analysis. In most experiments and surveys individual persons are measured on a variety of variables. In many problems involving language there are reasons to take sets of individuals as the units with values on certain variables, or to sample sociolinguistic situations rather than persons. The issue often becomes a complicated one. In any case, the articles of this reader simply press customary techniques into service in studying their problems, often in arbitrary ways, without justifying the use of these techniques or even mentioning the issues that might be involved here.

It might seem that I am criticising a book for doing something that it did not set out to do. There is some truth to that, but there is also some truth to the claim that the book gives the impression of a consensus and a homogeneity in a field where there are large controversies. Perhaps because of this emphasis, there do not seem to be any major findings and/or research procedures presented in the book. But,

again, the book was not designed to present breakthroughs.

On the positive side, the field of the sociology of language is virtually pregnant with fascinating questions and phenomena. Fishman's work is sprinkled with such questions and such phenomena in the various articles. For example, much macroscopic work with language can almost use an epidemiological metaphor of language as a sort of 'virus' in a host of population. One can then ask how it interacts with other languages, how it changes over time, how it moves geographically, etc. the book contains a lot of this kind of material which presents many interesting things to think about. Secondly, social scientists have been using their own natural language abilities, and those of their subjects, as tacit resources for a long time without giving serious thought to the issues of doing social science with a natural language. Some of these articles suggest general things for social scientists to think about in this regard. For instance, one article suggests that different languages may have their own independent effects on the scores individuals get on social and psychological interviews (or questionnaires) conducted in one language or another.

In summary, the book does not, in general, bear on the currently major issues in the sociology of language. For practitioners in this field it will be mostly a book of 'some more studies.' For the general social scientific reader, the book will provide many issues that he has not thought about, as well as indicating how social scientific techniques are being used to study language and how the study of language is being integrated into traditional social scientific concerns.