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The Early Days of Sociolinguistics

Memories and Reflections

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Sociolinguistics: Some Other Traditions

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Prague School Sociolinguistics. Although the word sociolinguistics was not used, many forms of sociolinguistic studies existed before mainstream sociolinguistics came into being in the 1960s. Various comments on “language and society” figured already in nineteenth and early twentieth century introductions to linguistics; there were the theories of J. R. Firth; the Japanese doctrines of variation (*isoo*), spoken and written language, and linguistic life; the “study of language and society” which developed in Soviet linguistics following Stalin’s intervention in 1950; the American predecessors of contemporary sociolinguistics (Boas, Sapir, Whorf, the ethnographers and others, Hymes 1964); and Prague School sociolinguistics, of which I shall say more later.

It is true that these varieties of sociolinguistics did not claim an identity separate from the rest of linguistics or (on the whole) create separate networks. Yet, the social system of science is only one of the components of a discipline: it is important and its absence weakens the case for the acceptance of the field of inquiry. However, I believe that if the word *sociolinguistics* is kept free to refer to a specific content (design) of academic pursuit as well as to its social system, many more sociolinguistic traditions will come to light and, perhaps, enrich our knowledge.

For those of us who went through the university in Prague in the 1950s the most important sociolinguistic tradition was that of the Prague School. Within the prewar and early postwar Prague School, we can identify a wealth of concepts, theories, and study areas which are undoubtedly sociolinguistic in their nature. This includes the theory of speech functions (Bühler, Mukařovský's poetic function), theories of variation (functional differentiation of the Standard Language, Vachek's theory of the written language, the Sprachbund theory, Skalička's typology), Mathesius' and Havránek's theory of language cultivation, an interest in the structure of (written) discourse, and others (Vachek 1966). Notice that most of these theories bear names other than those of Trubetzkoy and Jakobson, although Jakobson did take part in many of the projects. These theories were theoretically rigorous and connected with the overall framework of structuralism.

What most authors in this book will write about is the poststructural type of sociolinguistics (content design and social system) that developed mostly in the U.S.A. in the 1960s. It became the most vigorous poststructural variety of sociolinguistics and fully deserves the name of mainstream sociolinguistics. I believe that I am myself a peripheral member of this variety. However, I do not believe that this is sociolinguistics as such.

A portrait of the linguist as a young man. A few facts from the Prague police archives first—facts that I agree with. I was born in Prague in 1933 in a Czech family. My first degree, a sort of M.A. in Japanese Studies, was completed in 1957, after which I proceeded to postgraduate study to finalize my Ph.D. at the Oriental Institute in Prague in 1963. Two of my postgraduate years were spent in Japan. In 1966 I moved to Melbourne where I was teaching at Monash University until 1993, when I left Australia to take up my present position at the University of Osaka.

I was strongly interested in linguistics (not only in languages) since my high school years which brought me in touch with a considerable number of languages. However, it was not until just before I was to sit for the university entrance examination that my teacher of Hindi, Vincenc Pořízka, gave me a reference to the only Introduction to Linguistics produced by a member of the pre-war Prague school, Miloslav Kořínek (Kořínek 1948). Kořínek, who died at the age of 46, could not finish the text and the only well-developed part of it was phonology. I thought that this was a book of great beauty which provided answers to many problems on which my secondary school teachers had nothing to say.

When I came to the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University in Prague I entered the Department of the Languages and Cultures of the Far East to study Japanese. At the same time I enrolled, outside the prescribed course,

in General Linguistics, taught at the time single-handedly by Vladimír Skalička. In his seminar the word phonology hardly ever appeared. Instead, I remember his lectures on typology, style, grammatical case, vagueness in language, the structure of lexicon, the Sprachbund, social dialects and many other topics, as they came up in the contemporary linguistic discussions. A majority of these were sociolinguistic in their nature. Although a member of the prewar Prague Linguistic Circle, he laughed at the orthodox teaching about phonological oppositions and anything that smacked of definitions and hard-and-fast-line linguistics. Skalička was to become the most important influence on my linguistic life. I also attended lectures by Josef Vachek, who commuted to Prague from Brno as a visiting lecturer to teach about the theory of the written language. Since this was in the English department, he lectured in English, an extraordinary situation for Prague in the 1950s. The English department was three floors down from Skalička's office. Another floor down within the same building, Havránek held his weekly seminars many of which were sociolinguistically oriented. I did not attend these, although I did of course read all of what he wrote. It was under the influence of Skalička and (to a lesser extent) Vachek, that I changed from an incipient structuralist to a poststructural linguist. My graduation thesis and later my Ph.D. still dealt with phonology, but at least I selected the Japanese accent, rather than segmental phonology, and analyzed vagueness in the system.

However, already as a student I commenced my own work on clearly sociolinguistic topics, such as variation. Around 1955 I was stimulated by the Russian Japanologist N. I. Konrad's article on the national language in China and Japan (Konrad 1952), and wrote a set of theses on variation in language. Since there was no other way to publish them, I nailed the text to our departmental noticeboard and received comments from other students. Later, in 1956, these ideas were presented as a paper at the Students' Academic Conference. I remember that the concept of "language block" (we would now say a "variety system") was too much even for Skalička, who questioned my inclusion of Latin in the Czech system. The theoretical framework of this paper led directly to my first sociolinguistic publication on the concept of "Oriental Languages" (Neustupný 1965). This work was theoretical in its nature and I have remained strongly committed to theory ever since.

In the 1950s, Soviet sociolinguistics of the period was readily available in Prague and everyone in the field was reading it. However, most of the material was clearly two paradigmatic stages behind and we felt its prestructural character quite strongly. American work was not totally inaccessible, but it was difficult to find except for a couple of journals. I suspected from references elsewhere that people called Ferguson and Gumperz were developing a theory of variation close to mine, but did not get access to this work until after 1965.

After graduating from Charles University, I commenced my postgraduate work at the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and went to study in Japan for two years, from the Summer of 1960 to April 1962. My environment in Japan was grammatical and I was not subject to any influences from Japanese sociolinguistics, at that time already vigorous. However, the experience of a new culture resulted in my first attempts at what could be classified as an "ethnography of speaking." Some of the framework was included in an article on the theory of literary studies (Neustupný 1962) and in a draft which has never been published. This attempt grew out of Bühler's theory of functions, my university training (Skalička spoke about similar things in his seminars), and my continuing exposure to the Japanese communication system. Let me add that Shiro Hattori too had published a paper (in English!) in which he dealt with the different ways to get drunk (Hattori 1960). After I came back from Japan, probably in 1964 or 1965, Dell Hymes stopped over in Prague and later sent me much of his work on the "ethnography of speaking" published by then. This was fantastic and so much more systematic than my own fieldwork. I adopted Hymes' model and have used it ever since (e.g., Neustupný 1987). My encounter with Dell Hymes and our later contact was among the most positive influences of my sociolinguistic career.

In the 1960s the linguistic life in Prague was quite intensive and of considerable interest. Generative grammar started early and, thanks to local tradition, was not just a shadow of Chomsky. One of the most exciting developments was the theory of indeterminacy of language ("centre and periphery," Travaux 1966) in which I also actively participated. With regard to sociolinguistics, Skalička and Havránek retained their interests, and Daneš was also strongly interested. Others contributed a paper now and then, but on the whole, it would be incorrect to imagine that a specialized network of people who worked more or less in sociolinguistics alone developed. The social system of European linguistics did not encourage such specialization. It seems I was the only one for whom sociolinguistics was to become the main area of academic activity.

Becoming a sociolinguist. In the first half of the 1960s, the Oriental Institute in Prague was an extremely lively place. Ladislav Zgusta organized a group of linguists, all working together on a project describing the grammars of Asian and African languages. When I came back from Japan, I felt the need to supplement this by another project that would deal with sociolinguistic issues which were not central for Zgusta, Zvelebil, or other more senior linguists in the Institute. I think it was my stay in Japan that greatly contributed to my interest in the "socio" part of sociolinguistics. Apart from

language I have always been interested in social sciences. Although my training with Skalička was linguistic, in the department where I studied Japanese we were required to study history and other aspects of Japanese society and culture. Of course, much of this was without a proper theoretical training, but we did try to compensate for this by private study. So, I was not completely naive as a social scientist when entering my linguistic career. In Japan, I became social-problems conscious—not only with regard to Japan itself but in relation to other Asian and African societies as well.

Members of the Institute who joined me were Václav Cerný (Caucasian languages), Luděk Hřebíček (Turkish), Ivo Vasiljev (Korean and Vietnamese), and Petr Zima (African languages). Quite a bit of work was published by members of this group before it was virtually abandoned when I later left for Australia. Papers published by members of the group in English or French included Vasiljev's paper on international lexicon in Far Eastern languages, Zima's paper on linguistic variation in West Africa, and my own paper, already mentioned, on the concept of "Oriental Languages" and variation in such languages (1965). The network was not particularly firm, each of its members maintaining other interests and commitments unconnected with sociolinguistics. Only Petr Zima remained faithful to sociolinguistic studies. I was young and ambitious, perhaps pushing the sociolinguistic viewpoint too strongly and putting Ladislav Zgusta, who was the Deputy Director of the Institute, in a difficult position. I still owe him my apologies. However, I have no regrets concerning the formation of the group. This, for me, was the point of no return, a point at which I was confirmed as a sociolinguist.

My papers published after 1965 still included quite a bit of phonology based on material researched at the beginning of the decade. However, gradually I turned completely to sociolinguistics both in my topics and in my participation in academic networks. I should mention that later on, in Melbourne, I added an active interest in language acquisition and teaching with a particular interest in teaching "sociolinguistic" and "sociocultural" competence (Neustupný 1987).

I moved from Prague to Melbourne in 1966. This was a legally approved move, not defection. In 1966 the process of liberalization, which later resulted in the Prague Spring, had gone so far that this was possible. After the defeat of the Prague Spring, the new Czech government proclaimed my stay in Australia illegal and I was unable to return to Prague for more than ten years; the next opportunity I had to speak to Czech linguists again was in 1990.

Within a month of arriving in Melbourne I was invited to attend the Airlie House Conference on language problems of developing nations and following

that conference was given the opportunity to meet a number of American colleagues for the first time. However, it was not this event that converted me to sociolinguistics; as explained above, I was made a sociolinguist in Prague and had already selected the discipline as my principal theme of study by 1962. However, this trip gave me an associate membership in the mainstream sociolinguist network, which was particularly useful for the development of my theory of language problems. Another beneficial development, arising from the conference was my meeting Björn Jernudd who, incidentally, had joined Monash, the university at which I had just been appointed, earlier that year. He remained not only a good friend but acted as the first reader of my papers and adviser in "speaking" to the networks of mainstream sociolinguistics. As far as the development of my theory of language problems is concerned, he always provided critical and constructive comments and was not afraid to use my work; later we started jointly developing the theory of language management (Jernudd and Neustupný 1987, Neustupný 1994).

I feel that Australia provided an extremely fruitful background to my sociolinguistics. It was a society turning postmodern and as such directly *required* a variety of poststructural sociolinguist studies. With Björn Jernudd, Michael Clyne, and later John Platt at my side I did not consider myself isolated. But, of course, isolated from mainstream sociolinguistics I was—a fact I realized whenever I visited the United States.

Problems of a marginal member. I have never been a full-fledged member of mainstream sociolinguistics. Apart from geographical distance, one of the reasons was my language; but it was not only the issue of English in the narrow sense of the word. Of course, my English was bumpy at that stage but, more than that, I was writing in what Galtung (1981) would have called a Teutonic idiom. I agree that my papers must have been difficult to read, with their abstractness, excessive density, and lexicon that was marginal to English. It was not until the middle of the 1970s that Björn Jernudd could say "now you can write for American audiences." In 1973 I was invited to contribute a volume to the Stanford series on sociolinguistics, edited by Anwar Dil, but it was beyond my ability to prepare the manuscript. All my papers were in English, but they had to be strongly edited, something I did later, with limited success, when publishing my "Poststructural Approaches to Language" at the University of Tokyo Press (1978).

However, my problems went beyond those of the idiom. It was also the ideas I wrote about that did not fit. For example, one of my leading themes has always been the issue of developmental types of communication. I could see that some of my colleagues within mainstream sociolinguistics (not John Gumperz, for that matter) expected that the issue of variation would be the

same in all societies. My experience, on the other hand, pointed to the need for different models in Early Modern, Modern, or Postmodern environments. I feel that today the idea is more readily acceptable, but this was not so in the 1960s or 1970s.

Academics have often assumed that the greatest obstacle to international communication is the language in which messages are transmitted. However, to write in English is not enough. The idiom and the content which is transmitted may significantly differ not only between paradigms but between varieties of academic disciplines within the same paradigm. Linguists, too, are often (or normally?) "monolingual" and "monocultural" in the variety in which they have been trained and require adaptation to their own idiom and content selection by others. Fortunately, I had friends who were prepared to mediate and others who could accept messages even if they were formulated within a different system.

My contribution. As I mentioned above, my own work in sociolinguistics started in the theory of variation and I did continue to work in that direction in the 1970s. However, I consider myself that my main contribution has been in the theory of language problems. I intentionally say "language problems" and not "language planning" because my interest has always been wider. One of my early successful papers in this area was "Basic Types of Treatment of Language Problems." This paper was written for the 6th International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, held in Kyoto in 1968. After circulation for some time in its manuscript form (as was usual at that time), it was preprinted in 1970 in *Linguistic Communications*, working papers which Björn Jernudd and I launched from Monash. At the same time it was offered for publication to *Anthropological Linguistics*, but turned down. Finally, Joshua Fishman reprinted the version from *Linguistic Communications* in his *Advances in Language Planning* (1974).

If I interpret the success of the paper correctly, it was due to bringing into focus two different patterns of what was called language planning. These patterns (Japan and Czechoslovakia) were of interest because they were either unfamiliar or familiar, depending on the reader's experience. I said that the "language policy" approach to language treatment was characteristic for Early Modern societies, while the weaker "cultivation" approach characterized Modern societies. The basic fact that there were differences in approach was probably accepted by most readers. However, some were uneasy about the developmental typology (Early Modern, Modern) especially when they took "policy" or "cultivation" as the only defining features of the two approaches. Of course, there are "policies" in Modern societies and "cultivation" in Early Modern ones. For me there has never been any doubt

about that, because language and reality in general were indeterminate and could not be explained by single features, each characterizing a single category.

The language treatment paper was also reprinted in my book entitled "Post-Structural Approaches to Language" (Neustupný 1978) which, apart from papers on vagueness, typology, and variation, also included another basic contribution, printed for the first time: "An Outline of a Theory of Language Problems." In this paper, written in 1973, I developed a theory of language correction and connected it with language planning. This theory has directly led to the language management framework which Björn Jernudd and I use today. Looking back at my "Post-Structural Approaches to Language," I feel that it is perhaps more timely now than it was when it was published. Unfortunately, it has been out of print for some time. However, the collection does not include any of my papers dealing with discourse; those started appearing just when the book was with the publishers.

Teaching sociolinguistics. I have not taught at all in Prague. After coming to Melbourne, I developed a course in Japanese sociolinguistics which I offered annually until the late 1980s. Apart from this I was invited by Professor Sibata to teach a general course in sociolinguistics at the University of Tokyo in 1970. This was probably the first real introduction to sociolinguistics ever taught in Japan and the course was attended, apart from a handful of undergraduates, by postgraduate students and teachers of the department.

Sociolinguistics as postmodern linguistics. Having mentioned the developmental typologies of language, I cannot but apply this theory to answer the question why mainstream sociolinguistics appeared in the 1960s and why it is still with us.

As I mentioned above, there were many sociolinguistics other than mainstream sociolinguistics, but with the possible exception of the work of some individuals, such as František Daneš, none of them was poststructural. Several reasons can be given to explain why mainstream sociolinguistics made it. Firstly, the existing tradition was by no means negligible. Just inspect again Hymes' "Language in Culture and Society" (Hymes 1964) with its detailed bibliographies. Although similar work may have existed elsewhere, the important point is that this work was available within a single national network and could be drawn on, particularly in the initial stages of the discipline. Second, the social system of American linguistics, with its financial backing, was extremely strong. There were extensive postgraduate schools, there were universities willing to employ staff, there was money to

run projects and conferences. Conditions such as this did not exist anywhere else. Networks could develop and could be maintained.

Yet, the third, and perhaps most important point, was that in North America mainstream sociolinguistics grew up in a society that was changing from a Modern to a Postmodern type. The idea of accepting variation within society, social conflict, the conviction that it was necessary to look at processes rather than at fixed categories (and other features of the Postmodern) characterized not only linguistics but society as a whole. Even had there been no tradition and only a weak social system supporting the developments, a new sociolinguistics would have emerged; perhaps not as strong as it is, but still a substantial contribution to the world sociolinguistic tradition.

Out of the other three societies with which I have been connected, sociolinguistics in Czechoslovakia remained at approximately the same level during the 1970s but started rising again towards the end of the 1980s. It is fully poststructural today, but still needs time to make peace with both mainstream sociolinguistics and the tradition of the Prague School. Sociolinguistics in Japan has also entered the poststructural stage and the same question applies: how to balance the impact of mainstream sociolinguistics with the strong local tradition (Tokushuu 1988). No doubt, sociolinguistics in Australia, also a poststructural system, is vigorous, even if it lacks a unified forum for its discussions.

Mainstream sociolinguistics has developed since the 1960s by repeatedly adding new emphases, while retaining the previous ones. Discourse sociolinguistics has been the last prominent addition and the time seems to be ripe for a new sociolinguist field of study. We know that it is coming, and it may be in full swing by the time this book is published. It will be relevant not only for mainstream sociolinguistics but also for all other varieties of sociolinguistics which still may be in existence. Why not a sociolinguistics of interaction, interaction in the sense of integration of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural competence within the same framework? Frankly speaking, I do not believe that we can create varieties of any form of linguistics at wish. History will act on our behalf.