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Ethno-Sociolinguistics And Interdisciplinary Research

Nadjouia Raoud^{1*}

¹ University of Algiers 2, Algeria

Introduction

This paper proposes a brief overview of interdisciplinary research in “ethno-sociolinguistics”, from an epistemological, theoretical and methodological point of view, as suggested by Blanchet (2000, 2007).

From an epistemological viewpoint, the radical divergence between what he terms “structuro-linguistics” and socio-linguistics resulted in the hegemony of “hard core” linguistics, relegating sociolinguistics to a marginal position while another crisis seemed to have shaken ethnolinguistics, sociolinguistics, and the sociology of language.

The theoretical and methodological approaches suggested by Blanchet propose an empirico-inductive qualitative method, known as a “linguistics of complexity”. This “comprehensive paradigm” (“paradigme compréhensif”), emerging in the sciences of Man, constitutes a dialogic, interpretative approach as an alternative to the naturo-positivist rationalism of Western philosophy.

Structuro-Linguistics as a Historical Product of Ideological and Intellectual Context

For Blanchet, the existential crisis of language sciences can be best analyzed from an epistemological viewpoint. Despite their chronological parallel emergence, both structuro-linguistics and sociolinguistics constructed radically different “objects”, and structuro-linguistics was the historical product of its ideological and intellectual context. Blanchet gives two reasons for this difference: The first reason is the ideological foundation of an arborescent, monogenetic classification, a model which also invented and classified human “races”, and, therefore, racialism, thus fostering racism. Continuing monogenetic ideology, the 19th and 20th centuries witnessed the construction of state-nations, homogeneous and monolingual, amidst the awakening of nationalisms and racial theories.

The second reason relates to the posture of the dominated that many sociolinguists adopted. This attitude arose from a situation where many of them came from and, via ethnographic empathy, studied those minority linguistic groups considered by the hegemonic sociopolitical norms –academic and linguistic-, as “deviant”, local, exotic, etc. Linguists

therefore concentrated on a supposedly homogeneous language, abstracted from the diversity of usages, which allowed a recycling of the rules and examples in a literary written language. Thus, traditional grammars inherited from prestigious Greco-Latin models. Among the effects of the logician paradigm, Blanchet mentions the initial confusion between discourse and rationality introduced by Plato, and later by Aristotle, amplified in his rhetoric, and extended from discourse to language, on the basis of a supposed universality of the categories of Greek. For Plato, the term “logos” refers to discourse or reason, and is opposed to “pathos”, emotions (and the body). Hence, all discourse must be rational, all utterances must obey logical rules. The vision of the world that is given by this science must be that of a totally coherent world, reduced and cut in minimal units, according to binary, hyper-specialized thought that would unveil, from the outside and in all objectivity, explanatory causalities, establishing universal laws and allowing predictions.

It was that ideological context which generated the hypothetico-deductive method, which, while decontextualizing the observables, neutralized the complexity of variables on the basis of a hypothesis to validate or to refute. Hence, the development of the fascination for numbers and statistics, a belief in the objectivity of quantitative “data”, and the illusions of the researcher outside the world and isolated from any influences and *vice versa!*

The direct consequence of this was a hierarchy between fundamental research (the most detached, reputedly the most scientific) and applied research (the most connected to the world, and therefore, less scientific). For Blanchet, however, the former is more likely to be scientific, while the latter, being less close to reality, relates more to fiction.

Interdisciplinary Research in “Ethno-Sociolinguistics”

The metaphorical comparison that Blanchet uses with his students is that structuro-linguists “dissect” languages as others dissect fish “to see what is in there” (in which case fish are studied out of their living environment). Sociolinguists, on the other hand, observe the behaviour of living animate species to understand how they live together in their environment or elsewhere. To do so, it is necessary to be gradually integrated (through a process of familiarization), and if possible, to be oneself a living being used to that environment. Blanchet proposes the conceptualization of an interpretative paradigm in ethno-sociolinguistics, resulting from a number of scientific works and views on language practices in the fields of ethnolinguistics and sociolinguistics.

While diverse disciplines traditionally identified as “rather distinct” contribute directly, like ethnology/anthropology, sociology, others contribute in a more indirect way, like social psychology (for group dynamics and interactions), law and politology (for linguistic and educational policies), history (of groups, territories, institutions, etc.), science of education (for educational practices, didactics), individual psychology (learning, bilingualism-cognitive, affective...inhibitions, etc.), semiotics (diverse languages, namely kinesics, emblems); sometimes even geography (for language/dialect distribution; history for an understanding of ethnic, cultural, migratory, regional, dialectal differences, multilingualism, code-switching and mixing, diglossia); or social psychology (for language attitudes and representations).

For Blanchet, interdisciplinarity constitutes a fundamental methodological, theoretical, and epistemological necessary “option”. It is not mere multidisciplinary, juxtaposition of points of view, but a synthesis of the contributions of complementary approaches considered as relating to the same subject/object, but working from different entries, thus shedding light on the complexity of the observed cases, with the aim of constructing open, partial, interpretative models, as an alternative to closed, total, explanatory theories. His project of an ethno-sociolinguistics asks three questions: The first one is well-known by sociolinguists: “Who speaks what, when, where, about what, how, why, for what symbolic purpose...?” (From Fishman’s well-known article: “Who speaks what language to whom and when?”). That is to say, an ethno-sociolinguist will try to describe and understand not only the usages of the linguistic varieties and variations in socio-cultural interactions but also their symbolic interpretations and meanings.

The second one is interventionist: it concerns intervention on the management of linguistic diversity, on the political, judicial, social, cultural, educational, didactic, pedagogical, etc. This may range from the promotion of minority (or, in some/many cases, majority!) linguistic groups to the intervention on linguistic and educational policies in multilingual or polyglossic situations.

The third one relates to the contribution of this “linguistics of complexity” to the gradual elaboration of a comprehensive holistic theory of the science of Man. The links between this type of description and the understanding of linguistic facts and sociology and ethnology, the two disciplines most directly crossed, may be made explicit in terms of priority.

For ethnology, the question does not arise as to whether ethnolinguistics is different from or the same as “ethnology of language”, or if ethnolinguistics is a distinct discipline, a branch of ethnology, or a branch of linguistics. The existence of terms such as ethnomusicology, ethnobotany, ethnolinguistics, etc., is good evidence that ethnologists are very open to interdisciplinarity and ready to share their field with any source that comes to shed light on one of the facets of their complex multiple object. The same question seems to concern the connection between sociology and linguistics, or even between sociology of language and sociolinguistics. In sociolinguistics, some essential principles are shared; for example, primacy is accorded to practices of direct observation on the field, contextualization, and the importance of variation while in sociology, models tend to work exclusively on macro-statistical data and directive questionnaires. Despite the fact that most of the present ethnosociolinguistic concepts and methods, and the name sociolinguistics itself, have recently arrived or come back to Europe and to France from the United States and the Anglo-Saxon world, via field linguists and anthropologists such as Boas, Malinowski, and others, linguistics has there remained very “internal” and generativist. For structuro-linguists, language is conceptualized as a device (a set of structures and rules), an abstract object deposited in each in an individual manner, which entitles the linguist to think of himself as a “representative and objective informant”, by considering actual variations as epiphenomenal and superficial, by placing monolingualism as central, when it is, in fact, in the minority, or even marginal.

For a sociologist, it seems to Blanchet that the study of the linguistic practices is a way to arrive at the knowledge of society. For an ethnologist, it is a means at the service of the knowledge of a cultural community. As for an ethno-sociolinguist, it is an end, and the study of the social and cultural context is a means of knowing the linguistic practices. What is rather comforting and positive is that researchers using different designations (sociology, ethnology, social psychology, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, etc.) find themselves working on the same points, in intermediary zones of a continuum without boundaries.

The Temptation to Distinguish Similar Projects in Autonomous Disciplines Is not Realistic

Blanchet stresses the integrating relations that ethno-sociolinguistics has with similar research projects such as sociolinguistics, ethnolinguistics, discourse analysis, pragmatics of “ordinary language”, with some variants of dialectology; therefore, the temptation to distinguish these projects in autonomous disciplines is little realistic, and neither are the clear-cut limits between the five polarities: social communities/social groups/networks; speakers/actors/language partners; language(s)/dialect(s); discourse/text(s), and communication practices, or even the three fields: language and society(sociolinguistics, sociology of language, ethnolinguistics), language and space (linguistic geography, dialectology), and language, space, and society (geolinguistics), since the term sociolinguistics already integrates these projects, a contradiction with the interdisciplinarity of these projects. It goes without saying that each of these projects privileges certain factors, for example, geographical or socio-urban variations receive more focus in studies dealing with language and space; however, an examination of other dimensions is not only relevant but also necessary. The label ethno-sociolinguistics has the major advantage of overtly signifying the double ethnologic and sociological aspect including, respectively, micro-interactions, identity, representations of the world by language as well as macro-variations of social stratifications, social conflicts, language and educational policies, thus covering the overall field of usages of human languages. There are so many common points between ethnolinguistics and sociolinguistics that many researchers in sociolinguistics include ethnolinguistics in their field and that ethnolinguists include sociolinguistics in their studies. The ideological distinction, coming from 19th century dominations, which was drawn between sociology(concerning “modern”, “developed”, that is to say, western, societies, and ethnology concerning “primitive”, “simple”, that is to say, “exotic”, societies, is today outdated and largely abandoned, and which the works of ethnologists themselves have proved untenable. Happily, we now do sociolinguistics on Chinese, Indian, or African fields and ethnolinguistics on European or North American fields (and vice versa!).

Towards a “Linguistics of Complexity”

Edgar Morin introduces the third part (entitled *L'organisation des idées [the organization of ideas]* of the fourth volume of his *method* [Method] (entitled *Les idées [Ideas]* (Morin, 1991) by a reflection on language. He notes that, “*comme tout passe par le langage [as everything passes through language]*(ibid. : 161), the temptation has been to reduce it, by classical science, to a simple bio-logical device of transmission (structuralism, generativism), and for a “comprehensive science”, to make it the key human reality (pragmaticists , anthropologists):

situer le langage sans le dissoudre ou le réifier est donc complexissime [to situate language without dissolving or reifying it is thus highly complex] (ibid:162). For Morin, many domains, for examples, neuro-linguistics, neuro-psychology, sociolinguistics, reflect the complexity of the link between language, the neuro-cerebral apparatus, culture, society...He states that:

Le langage dépend des interactions entre individus, lesquels dépendent du langage. Il dépend des esprits humains, lesquels dépendent de lui pour émerger en tant qu'esprits humains et que chaque énoncé témoigne de spécificités propres à la cohérence linguistique de chaque langue, de spécificités subjectives, de spécificités culturelles, sociologiques et historiques (ibid.162-3)

[language depends on interactions between individuals, which depend on language. It depends on human minds, which depend on it to emerge as human minds] (ibid.162) and that each utterance reflects specificities intrinsic to the linguistic coherence of each language, subjective, cultural, sociological, and historical specificities. He concludes that [...] *nécessairement*[...] *le langage doit être conçu à la fois comme autonome et dépendant*(ibid.: 163)[necessarily, language must be conceived at the same time as autonomous and dependent]. Consequently, Blanchet considers that it is necessary to study jointly internal and external linguistics, and without dissociating them, examine the three intertwined levels constituted by:

- 1) The internal structures of the double articulation,
- 2) The relations between language, languages and neuro-psycho-logical functions of the human mind,
- 3) The mutual activation between language/languages and schemata proper to each culture. Hence, language science becomes enlightening in the loop relation of anthropology/culture/neurology (ibid:171). Instead of a classical disjunctive, explanatory paradigm, Morin proposes the adoption of an interpretative, understanding, qualitative paradigm, linked to the interdisciplinary concept of interaction, which places pragmatic communication at the centre of research on social phenomena. For Blanchet, without renouncing to modelization, argumentation, analysis, explanation, or description, sociolinguists should go beyond, integrating them into a more global project.

Methodological and Theoretical Framework

The other reason for an ethno-sociolinguistic study pertains to the methodological framework. Appeal to an interdisciplinary model implies that the complexity of the task requires methods of research whose aim is to examine the multi-faceted aspect of human linguistic interaction. Blanchet pleads for a qualitative empirico-inductive approach characterized by an alternation between empirico-inductive methods and hypothetico-deductive methods. Such a choice is justified by the fact that neither method alone is capable of capturing the complexity of (ethno-)(socio)linguistic work and is motivated by the fact that neither method alone is capable of capturing the complexity of human interaction. On the one

hand, variationist models, for example, following the techniques of sampling of modern sociology in using statistical analyses, have succeeded in showing how linguistic variables correlate with measurable social variables. This had a tremendously positive impact on the study of language, in general, and on the status of minority linguistic groups, in particular, stigmatized as sub-standard (Cf. Labov, 1978) . Quantitative analyses rely mainly on hypothetico-deductive methods and are not totally unquestionable, this being due to their inappropriately deductive methods based on pre-conceived hypotheses, thus sometimes seriously jeopardizing the analyses and often reducing human interaction to simple figures. Blanchet questions the efficiency of quantitative methods in analyzing actual processes of interpersonal communication for, as he explains, their exclusive reliance on quantitative results often reduces human interaction to simple figures. He criticizes their a-prioris, overgeneralization, reductionist and falsely deductive tendency since the hypothesis can be formulated only on the basis of pre-conceived questions that result from observed phenomena, neglecting the complexity of contextual variables. On the other hand, qualitative approaches have been criticized for the multiplicity of factors, and their inability to capture certain regularities.

Given the complexity of human interaction, of which language is undeniably an important part, the researcher adopts an interpretative posture that does not pretend to the exhaustiveness that characterizes quantitative hypothetico-deductive approaches whereby universal laws of causality are established and on the basis of which the phenomena under study are explained. It is very tempting, within a hypothetico-deductive approach, to orient the observer's view towards data that confirm the hypotheses and discard those that pose problems.

Methodology of Research

Blanchet suggests three types of investigation: participant observation, indirect and direct interviews. The limitations of participant observation, such as the difficulty of recording observed facts and the complexity and multiplicity of the parameters observed in detail, may hinder representativeness of the general sociolinguistic context and the organization of a corpus into analyzable data. For this reason, semi directive and directive surveys allow for more "framed" quantitative treatment of the data. This alternation between the two methods (qualitative and quantitative) is the dialogic paradigm that Blanchet calls " internal/external posture," whereby the sociolinguist appeals to procedures of distanciation, comparison, and counter-verification of participant observation by two other types of surveys: indirect and direct interviews.

Comparison of the same observed phenomena should be carried out on different fields, for example, a different region, a different neighbourhood, etc., to confront the results, or at least the tendencies that may show up. For keeping a balance between the (linguistic) variables and the invariants contributes in ensuring the procedures of distanciation, comparison, and counter-verification. In other words, the investigator beforehand collects information on the ethno-sociolinguistic characteristics of the informants (age, origin, profession, common languages, etc.).

The respective advantages and weaknesses of the semi directive and directive methods are balanced since, while the former allow the collection of freer, more natural discourse, but with the disadvantage of too complex a corpus, the latter –despite their tendentious/reductionist quality- offer more “framed” answers. For this reason, and in order to reduce bias (and therefore erroneous “conclusions”) that might “result” from pre-established.

Questions of a quantitative type, Blanchet suggests that participant observation should precede (directive and semi-directive) interviews, assigning the latter type a minor (checking) role, however. Thus, from a methodological point of view, one can use the three different types of investigation in this order: participant observation, semi-directive, and directive questions. From a theoretical viewpoint, directive and semi-directive surveys stem from a hypothetico-deductive method contradictory with an approach whereby the researcher tries to understand, and not explain the phenomena under study, although it is hoped that there result some tendencies.

Participant observation requires that the observer should either belong to or have some (social, ethnic, or cultural) tie with the group in question in order to be sufficiently integrated and reduce the “observer’s paradox”(Cf. Labov 1976). It is not surprising that the majority of sociolinguists work on situations they themselves live or personally witness and the majority of specialists of linguistic minorities come from them. Within an interpretative approach, empirico-deductively led, the privileged data are, before all, those that are collected by participant observation of micro-interactions; secondarily, those collected by semi directive interviews; and finally directive interviews which are used as mere additional verification or confirmation. For a directive investigation leaves a huge place to the investigator, reducing to a minimum the role of the informants, when, in fact, they are the main actors of concrete micro-sociolinguistic realities.

Conclusion: Criteria for Scientific Validation

There are, in Blanchet’s view, two criteria of scientific validation. The first one involves the non-exhaustive answer to a question well-known to sociolinguists: “Who speaks, what, when, where, about what, with whom, how, why, for what purpose ...? (a question put forward by Fishman, and later taken up by Dell Hymes in his *communicative competence*), knowing that one could start with any of the terms, for example, “what (linguistic variety to describe) is used by whom, when...?”.

The second criterion is feasibility- the possibility of implementation, both in terms of work produced and submitted to other researchers, but also in terms of its ethical and interventionist action.

For a methodology to be convincing by the completeness of its surveys, as well as by that of its analytic, comparative, and synthetic procedures, both criteria of external confirmation/acceptation by other researchers (and by the informants themselves) and criteria of internal coherence between the data, the argumentation and the interpretation, are necessary, thus drawing concrete implications in terms of action on the field, and of linguistic, educational, cultural policy, such as the promotion of minority languages or

stigmatized varieties. But with this difference that it will have only partial predictivity, unlike laboratory science, which tries to reproduce empirically the same effects from the same causes artificially isolated. For the complexity of living parameters leads to non-mechanical and non-systematic behaviours even if some regular tendencies are observable.

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