

LINGUISTIC OR LINGUISTS' PREJUDICE?

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RESUMEN

El presente artículo trata de analizar algunas teorías en lingüística, además de ejemplos (frecuentemente citados en libros de lingüística), y que se basan en prejuicios, en vez de en verdades empíricas.

PALABRAS-CLAVE

Prejuicios; poder y solidaridad; sentimientos xenofobos.

ABSTRACT

This paper aims at ringing the alarm in respect to some linguistic theorizing, stereotypical rather than prototypical examples often repeated in books of linguistics and linguistic behaviours which scandalize healthy readers and sane language speakers as soon as they meet these hocus pocus «scholarly opinions» in books of linguistics and which are now taken as God's truth.

KEY WORDS

Prejudice; power and solidarity; xenophobic feelings.

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article traite quelques theories linguistiques, ainsi que des exemples (souvent cités dans les livres de linguistique) basés sur des préjugés, au lieu d'être basés sur des vérités empiriques.

MOTS CLÉ

Préjugés; pouvoir et solidarité; sentiments xénophobes.

1. LINGUISTS' PREJUDICE

No one questions –even laymen who are frequently treated by linguists as ignorants– the strong relationship between language and society on the one hand, and language and culture on the other. In fact, language has often been defined as the tool through which propositional content and practical knowledge are conveyed. In addition to this, language is a mediating vehicle for culture.

What is noteworthy, however, is that books on linguistics often make use of erroneous linguistic items, despite their merit of offering a «scientific analysis of language». Most linguistics books begin their introductory pages by emphasising the premise that there are no *primitive languages*, only to fall in the trap of implicitly asserting that there are *non-primitive languages* (European languages for instance!) J. Lyons (1981) for instance, has a whole section entitled: «*there are no primitive languages*» and I quote: «*It is still fairly common to hear laymen talking about primitive languages... The truth is that every language so far studied, no matter how primitive or uncivilized the society using it might appear to us in other respects, has proved upon investigation to be a complex and highly developed system of communication...*» (J. Lyons, 1981:27) David Crystal also mentions the same phenomenon when he says: «*...Just because a community happens to be, anthropologically speaking, primitive, (that is low on a scale of cultural development) is no reason for arguing that its language is primitive also*» (D. Crystal, 1971: 71).

Readers of linguistics should be weary of examples often quoted by linguists. These examples can be the source of stereotype generation that are totally disconnected from scientific theorizing. A simple example of this is repeated again and again in the literature of linguistics in general and Semantics/socollingistics in particular. Take the linguistic phenomenon of *codability*, Eskimos are said to have different lexemes for the word *snow*. This may be true. It is equally claimed that Arab beduins have several words for *camel*. In this case we have to be clear in our minds what the referent of Arab is on the one hand, and what is denoted by *beduin* on the other. We also need to find out which beduin is being talked about, and by extension which era is involved. Finally, we have to make sure of the meaning network which can be triggered once the word «beduin» is mentioned. These are questions which experts in language study have to look into before giving cheap examples which can only perpetuate stereotypes which are completely divorced from reality. In fact, nowadays' beduins –if we are actually doing a synchronic analysis of their language– would be hard pressed if they are asked to offer more than two lexemes for the word *camel*. Naïve examples like these either show ignorance of the author, or hidden motives –conscious or unconscious– which go beyond scientific theorizing.

What is ironical in the literature of linguistics is that linguists err in *layman's* terms –that's real language after all– however they resist layman reflection upon

language. Linguistic theory is full of controversies, at times unhealthy ones. Very often, unequal forces are confronted:

the expert vs the non-expert
the linguist vs the layman
primitive vs non-primitive!
the native speaker vs the second/foreign language speaker
man vs woman etc.

2. LINGUISTIC PREJUDICE: PRONOUNS OF ADDRESS IN SPANISH: «TU» AND «USTED»

John Lyons, in his book *Semantics* succinctly explains how extra linguistic variables determine the choice of one pronoun of addressee rather than another. The choice of pronouns of address is socially –and anarchically to some extent– conventionalised. Furthermore, beside the social function they fulfill, their use has a syntactic dimension in that *concord* and *government* are features of combining first personal pronoun (singular or plural) with the verb phrase that is at stake. In other words, the morphological change a verb undergoes (in case of highly inflected languages) is an indication of which personal pronoun is involved. In French for example, «regardez» implies «vous»; in Spanish, the morpheme *is* in verb forms collocates with plural personal pronouns.

Apart from the psycholinguistic computation personal pronouns require, they also have a sociolinguistic dimension, e.g:

knowing when to use «tú» and when to use «usted»
knowing who the addressee is
knowing why «usted» is required rather than «tú», etc.

The use of «usted» is restricted to some speech events, e.g: formal situations, lack of familiarity between speakers, power relationships, age difference. Thus, a young child (or even a father and his adult son) is expected to address his/her elders using «usted» in order to avoid being stigmatised as rude; strangers make use of «usted» up to the time when an agreement is reached for its substitution for «tú». The transition can be gentle as in: «¿Porqué no me hablas de tú?». Or it can be harsh as when one participant suddenly interrupts the other saying: «No me hable de usted, no soy tan viejo!»

Understandably, in some cases the transition can be achieved through *the loss of face* since one asks the interlocutor for his/her opinion to drop «usted». Brown and Fodor (1961) point out that it is always the superior who ultimately decides when solidarity is sufficient for the «high solidarity» to be used». (R.A. Hudson, 1980:124)

What is peculiar is when the use of «usted» is not *reciprocal*, i.e: employer and employee, that is when the former requires «usted» and allows himself/herself to address the latter using «tú».

So far, I have been dealing with *socially loaded pronouns of address* between members of the same speech community, that is to say, native speakers of the same language. Their use or non-use can be motivated by respect, solidarity, power, etc. The problem is that *power* can easily be defined, *solidarity* however, is rather vague. «*it concerns the social distance between people - how much experience they have shared, how many social characteristics they share (religion, sex, age, region of origin, race, occupation, interests, ...)*» (R.A. Hudson, 1980:122). When language is used as a means of communication between native speakers and speakers of other languages, then pronouns of address may go beyond what is socially regularised within the target speech community, and therefore be exploited to undermine the addressee, i.e: second or foreign language speaker, and emphasise *ethnic superiority* and by extension *xenophobic feelings* vis à vis other ethnic groups. Notice that the same phenomenon will be discussed in the section devoted to the strong version of «Sapir-Whorf» hypothesis.

Up to now, I have been talking about behaviours that are linguistically encoded. The picture becomes more bleak when messages are kinetically encoded. Then, instead of talking of the two-way division in pronouns of address: «tu» and «usted», the scale should really be from «usted» in the top of the scale to non-verbal messages in the bottom. I have in mind *paralinguistic* means which indicate *linguistic prejudice* and which can be graded into various types:

eye contact
eye brows raising
head movement, etc.

These signals are used in order to deepen social distance between interactants and they are used for this purpose. «*if nobody paid attention to the social signals that speakers send out there would be no point in sending them, but people do pay a great deal of attention to such signals ...*» (R. A. Hudson, 1980:195).

3. LINGUISTS' PREJUDICE REVISITED: THE WHORFIAN HYPOTHESIS

The Whorfian hypothesis is another piece of «*scholarly opinion*» which, in its strong version, tried to justify ethnic superiority through language analysis. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf claim that language determines the categories and patterns of thought of its speakers. They suggest that the structural complexity of a given language goes hand in hand with the world-view of its speakers.

«*We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised by our minds, and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up and organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to organize it this way - an agreement that holds*

throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language» (quoted in R.A. Hudson, 1980:103).

In other words, according to Sapir and Whorf, language functions as *blinkers* which guide our understanding of the world. Their investigation of Amer-Indian languages led them to conclude that because some of these languages (Hopi is their favourite example) lack the grammatical category *tense*, as a result, Hopi speakers will conceive *time* in a different way. Of course, the point of reference of Sapir and Whorf is based on the grammatical structure of English and by extension European languages. Hence, languages which do not follow the European mould must be defectuous, somehow! Yet, to turn the same argument upside-down, we can easily assert that the English language lacks a *future tense*, at least it is not morphologically encoded in the verb form of the English language. Can we conclude that English native speakers divide the philosophical concept time into past and present only, or past and non-past as some grammarians suggest, and therefore do not think in terms of the future? Would we say that the English language is less polite than other languages merely because it fails to provide its speakers with two alternative forms in respect to pronouns of address, although for the English speaker, the clearest linguistic markers of social relations are personal names, e.g: Peter, Mr Smith,... These examples only justify how *unscientific*, and at times erroneous some linguistic theories can be.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper is to underline some aspects of linguistic theorizing which either stresses false terminologies or forget to mention linguistic/non-linguistic facts (manipulation of linguistic items to strengthen linguistic prejudice) that should be captured in books that make the study of language their subject matter. The paper equally deals indirectly with issues which are taken as «settled», i.e. the native speaker represents the unquestionable model for language learners (section dealing with «tú» and «usted»). It is by no means easy to defend this premise knowing that language learners are constantly *pushed* to *excessively monitor* their verbal behaviour in order not to *offend* the native speaker. Paradoxically, the same requirement is frequently brushed aside when the very native speaker willingly breaks the rules he/she is master of - an evidence of the *language deficit* he/she still has to cope with.

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