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Sociolinguistics: 50+ years (in under ten minutes)

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I was very pleased and honoured when Luisa invited me to say a bit about changes – past, present and future – in the study of language in society at this event, and to do so, I'd like to focus on three big fields that you can find in most countries:

- the state, which involves government, laws, public services like education
- the economy – manufacturing, business, internal and external trade, and
- security – policing, the military and intelligence services.

Of course these overlap a great deal, and there also lots of other fields I'm leaving out (the media, organised religion, communities, homes etc etc). But if we're looking at changes for sociolinguistics over the last 50 years, I think these three – the state, the economy and security – provide a useful reference point.

So let's jump back to the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s when contemporary sociolinguistics really took off, starting in the US but spreading to other countries fairly rapidly. At this point, the central issue for sociolinguists – the central creed and cause – was linguistic diversity, and domestically in places like the US and the UK, the main backdrop to this – indeed, the main antagonist – was the nation-state. It was nation-states that promoted monolingual standard languages, mainly through education, and for sociolinguists at the time, this emphasis on monolingual standards did two bad things: (a) it denigrated non-standard dialects, neglecting their systematicity and eloquence,¹ and (b) it squeezed out indigenous and migrant minority languages.² Admittedly, when sociolinguists went abroad to advise on the selection and development of local languages in post-colonial countries, they generally supported standardisation.³ But obviously here too, the nation-state was central (this was nation-building). This doesn't mean to say that security and the economy were completely ignored in sociolinguistics: there was a little bit of forensic linguistics,⁴ and there were studies of job interviews⁵ as well as a huge commercial language teaching industry. Even so in this period, the nation-state was the central 'chronotope' for sociolinguistics.

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NOTES & REFERENCES

e.g. Pride, J. & J. Holmes (eds) 1972. *Sociolinguistics* Harmondsworth: Penguin; Labov, W. 1972. *Sociolinguistics Patterns*. Oxford: Blackwell; Trudgill, P. (ed) 1978. *Sociolinguistic Patterns in British English*. London: Edward Arnold.

² Fishman, J. 1972. *Language in Sociocultural Change*. Stanford: Stanford University Press; Linguistic Minorities Project (1984) *The Other Languages of English*. London: RKP.

³ cf. Cooper, Robert (1989). *Language planning and social change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

⁴ The International Association of Forensic Linguistics was established only in 1994.

⁵ Gumperz, J., T. Jupp and C. Roberts. (1979) *Crosstalk*. Southall, Middx, UK: BBC/National Centre for Industrial Language Training.

The 1990s, of course, brought globalised neoliberal marketisation. States were redefined, a lot of their services were handed over to the private sector, and in public culture, the consumer and the entrepreneur took over from the ideal of the literate citizen.⁶ Walls, borders and boundaries gave way to flows of products, people and ideas,⁷ and to earn their keep, universities had to show that they were contributing to social and economic well-being.⁸ All this registered with sociolinguistics:⁹ interest shifted from standardisation to the commodification of language;¹⁰ concepts like ‘speech community’ were placed in scare quotes¹¹; and the idea that languages like English or Spanish were natural, unitary entities gave way to an understanding that named languages are products, fashioned out of lots of different resources, repackaged and branded for lots of different purposes, in lots of different ‘markets’.¹² Indeed, the very identity of sociolinguistics was itself heavily affected by these big changes. In universities, the new socio-economic mission undermined the old disciplinary boundaries,¹³ and in a growing climate of interdisciplinarity, sociolinguists started to engage seriously with other scholars in the humanities and social sciences, taking on board people like Bourdieu and Foucault,¹⁴ broadening their horizons far beyond just the grammaticality or appropriateness of non-standard speech. In the process, they generated a much richer account of the role that language and communication play in social and institutional relationships, in culture, ideology and consciousness.¹⁵ So even though sociolinguists are often very critical of neoliberal marketisation, of the remaking of the state and the repositioning of universities, they didn’t escape and in at least some respects, they made significant gains.

I’m not so sure, though, that we’ve paid enough attention to questions of security, where it’s more about enemies and traitors than citizens or consumers and it’s language as shibboleth & weapon, not just language for measurement or profit. Here, silencing joins standardisation and selling as a core mission, the message ‘stay alert’ takes priority over ‘conform’ or ‘shine’, and the management of life in Foucault’s ‘biopower’ needs to be supplemented by the administration of death in Mbembe’s necropolitics.¹⁶ Language research certainly hasn’t completely ignored fear, suspicion and violent conflict, and there’s important work in, for example, critical discourse analysis, in translation & interpreting studies and educational

⁶ Rose, N. (1999) *The Power of Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Fraser, N. (2003) From discipline to flexibilisation? Rereading Foucault in the shadow of globalisation. *Constellations* 10/2:160-171.

⁷ Deleuze, G. (1992). “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, *October*, 59: 3-7

⁸ Chatterton, M. and J. Goddard 2000 The Response of Higher Education Institutions to Regional Needs *European Journal of Education*, 35/4:475-95; Goddard, J. and J. Puukka (2008) The Engagement of Higher Education Institutions in Regional Development: An Overview of the Opportunities and Challenges *Higher Education Management and Policy*. 20/2:11-41.

⁹ Block, D., J. Gray & M. Holborrow 2012. *Neoliberalism and Applied Linguistics*. London: Routledge; Flubacher, M.-C., & A. Del Percio 2017 *Language, Education & Neoliberalism*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

¹⁰ Duchêne, A. & M. Heller (eds) 2012 *Language in Late Capitalism: Pride & Profit*. London: Routledge.

¹¹ e.g. Rampton, B. 1998 Speech community. In J. Verschueren, J. Östman, J. Blommaert & C. Bulcaen (eds) *Handbook of Pragmatics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

¹² Blommaert, J. 1999 *Language Ideological Debates*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter; Heller, M. 1999. *Linguistic Minorities and Modernity: A Sociolinguistic Ethnography*. London: Longman; Kroskrity, P. 2000. *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, & Identities*. Santa Fe: SAR Press.

¹³ Bernstein, B. (1996) Pedagogizing knowledge: Studies in recontextualising. In *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity*. London: Taylor and Francis. 54-81; Gibbons, Michael, Camille Limoges, Helga Nowotny, Simon Schwartzman, Peter Scott & Martin Trow. 1994. *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*. London: Sage.

¹⁴ Fairclough, N. 1989. *Language & Power*. London: Longman; Martin-Rojo, L. 2017. Language & Power. In O. García, N. Flores & M. Spotti (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Language & Society*. Oxford: OUP. 77-102.

¹⁵ cf. Coupland, N. & A. Jaworski 2009. Social worlds through language. In N. Coupland & A. Jaworski (eds) 2009 *The New Sociolinguistics Reader*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 1-22

¹⁶ Mbembe, A. 2003. Necropolitics. *Public Culture* 15(1): 11–40

linguistics, and well as linguistic anthropology.¹⁷ But how far is this work seen as mainstream sociolinguistics, and how much does it feature in introductory textbooks? At the start of the millenium, you could still maybe say that research on language in applications for asylum¹⁸ was just a specialist niche or a field of practical application, but nowadays as a matter of routine in England, lots of ordinary people – healthworkers, educators, landlords, employers – are forced to act as “untrained and unpaid border guards” checking up on their patients, students, tenants etc, “and more of us are falling under suspicion as illegitimate border crossers”.¹⁹ So even if we only want to stay relevant to the everyday worlds of the students in our classrooms, existing work on (in)securitisation now needs to be more prominent, and even then, there are big gaps and fast-growing challenges. Somewhat astonishingly, sociolinguists have had very little to say about surveillance,²⁰ where we also need to come to grips with digital algorithms;²¹ the pandemic we’re experiencing right now makes security a massive concern (even if its impact on global flows and neoliberalism²² remains to be seen); and of course we’ve also got the climate emergency.

So to talk about big shifts in sociolinguistics, past present and future, it’s helpful to look at how we’ve focused on the state, the economy and security. But of course ourselves, we’re not political scientists, economists, or security specialists, which means that we’re not restricted to these fields, and we’re also much more committed to studying everyday experience at ground-level, where the processes associated with security, the economy and the state interact together with a lot of other influences, producing unpredictable effects that it’s very hard to spot from a distance. For the most part, we’re also not politicians, bankers or generals, so it’s hard for us to intervene directly in the large-scale processes I’ve referred to. But over 50 years, we’ve kept on building our methodological tool-kit; our analyses now extend far beyond language and speech to embodied interaction, material artefacts and digital media; and there’s a good case for saying that our layered, multi-scalar and empirically grounded understanding of ideology is one of the most sophisticated in social

¹⁷ eg Hodges, Adam (ed) 2013. *Discourses of War and Peace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; MacDonald, Malcolm & Duncan Hunter 2013. Security, population and governmentality: UK counter-terrorism discourse (2007-2011). *Critical Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*. 6/2:123-40; Khan, Kamran 2017. Citizenship, securitisation and suspicion in UK ESOL policy. In K. Arnaut, M. Karrebæk, M. Spotti & J. Blommaert (eds) *Engaging Superdiversity*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. 303-21; Busch, Brigitta. 2016b. Heteroglossia of survival: To have one’s voice heard, to develop a voice worth hearing. *Working Papers in Urban Language and Literacies* 188. <https://www.academia.edu/20304151/>; Footitt, H., and Kelly, M. (Eds.). (2012). *Languages at war: Policies and practices of language contacts in conflict*. Basingstoke: Palgrave; Valdés, G. 2017. Entry visa denied: The construction of symbolic language borders in educational settings. In . In O. García, N. Flores & M. Spotti (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Language & Society*. Oxford: OUP.322-348; Zakharia, Z. (2020) Language and (in)securitisation: Observations from educational research and practice in conflict-affected contexts. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 24:103-110; Briggs, C. (1997) Notes on a ‘confession’: On the construction of gender, sexuality, and violence in an infanticide case. *Pragmatics* 7: 519-546; Silva, D. & J. Lee 2020. ‘Marielle, presente’: Metaleptic temporality and the enregisterment of hope in Rio de Janeiro. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* DOI: 10.1111/josl.12450. For a review, see Charalambous, Panayiota. 2017. *Sociolinguistics and security: A bibliography*. *Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies* 213. At <https://www.academia.edu/33687581/> and www.kcl.ac.uk/liep

¹⁸ Blommaert, J. 2009. Language, asylum and the national order. *Current Anthropology*. 50/4:415-25; Maryns, K. (2006). *The asylum speaker: Language in the Belgian asylum procedure*. Manchester, UK: St. Jerome Press; Jacquemet, M. 2011. Cross-talk 2.0: Asylum and communicative breakdowns. *Text & Talk* 31/4:475-98.

¹⁹ Yuval-Davies, N., G. Wemyss, K. Cassidy (2019) *Bordering*. Cambridge: Polity

²⁰ See however: Jones, Rodney 2015. Surveillance. In A. Georgakopoulou & T. Spilioti (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Language & Digital Communication*. London: Routledge. 408-11; Jones, Rodney 2017. Surveillant landscapes. *Linguistic Landscapes* 3/2:150-87; Eley, L. & B. Rampton 2020 Everyday surveillance, Goffmann & unfocussed interaction. *Surveillance & Society*. 18/2:199-215.

²¹ Georgakopoulou, A., C. Stage & S. Iversen 2021, *Quantified Storytelling: A Narrative Analysis of Metrics on Social Media*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Rampton, B. 2016. Foucault, Gumperz and governmentality: Interaction, power and subjectivity in the 21st century. In N. Coupland (ed) 2015 *Sociolinguistics: Theoretical Debates*. Cambridge University Press. 303-30

²² <https://novaramedia.com/2021/10/05/if-neoliberalism-is-over-what-next-downstream/>

science.²³ Maybe most crucially, we've also learnt the importance of talking to different kinds of people, inside the academy in different disciplines and outside in professions and communities,²⁴ and this generates lots of scope for distinctive sociolinguistic contributions to broader collective endeavour. As Hymes said roughly 50 years ago, sociolinguistics is a primarily analytical rather than political undertaking, but it serves the higher ethical objectives of *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* because it "prepares us to speak concretely to actual inequalities" (Hymes (1972) 1977:204-6).²⁵ I think that still holds true, and it's obviously not just inequality that our analyses illuminate. And most relevant right now, I think that all this fits with MIRCo's account of its mission, and that's why I'm very happy indeed, and very excited, about participating.

Thank you.

²³ Blommaert, J. & B. Rampton 2011. Language & superdiversity. *Diversities* 13/2:1-21

²⁴ Blommaert, J. 2020a. Looking back: What was important? *Ctrl+Alt+Dem*. At <https://alternative-democracy-research.org/>; Blommaert, J. & J.-L. Van der Aa 2020. Jan Blommaert on education: Teaching, research and activism. *Working Papers in Urban Language and Literacies* # 278. At <https://www.academia.edu/44725342>; Martín-Rojo, L. Taking over the square: The role of linguistic practices in contesting urban spaces. *Journal of Language and Politics* 13 (4), 623-652; Rampton, B. 1995. Politics and change in research in Applied Linguistics *Applied Linguistics* 16/2: 233-56

²⁵ Hymes, D. (1977) *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach*. London: Tavistock.