UNIVERSITY SIDI MOHAMED BEN ABDELLAH, FEZ
FACULTY OF LETTERS AND HUMAN SCIENCES, DHAR LMEHRAZ
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES

READINGS IN CULTURE

Semester 2; Groups: 5 Pr. T. GHOURDOU

Culture and Language

Language usually refers to the human system of units of sound (phonemes) compounded into words, in turn combined through grammatical rules (syntactically) to form a mode of communication that may be realized in both speech and writing. Saussure suggested that linguistics, the study of language in this narrow sense, was part of a wider field of investigation of signs and signification in general which he called 'semiology'. A notable instance of the application of a semiological perspective is Lévi-Strauss's analysis of mythology, though terms such as 'grammar' of myth, or of clothing, should be understood as analogies with language in the narrow sense, and do not mean that all human sign systems necessarily share common principles of organization.

Many anthropologists have adopted this broad view, studying all the channels and modes of communication that humans use to organize and convey meaning, including paralinguistic features such as gesture, facial expression, tone of voice and so on.

Anthropologists versus linguists

Linguists sometimes complain that other academics treat their subject as if it were a social rather than a cognitive science. Like most disciplines linguistics is very diverse, but the transformational revolution associated with Chomsky led to acceptance of a view of language as an abstract system, which for theoretical and practical reasons may be studied in isolation from its social and cultural context. For Chomsky, the core subject matter is grammar, and the universal human ability to generate and understand grammatical utterances: linguistic competence. Chomsky has remarked that other disciplines are presumably concerned not with grammars…but rather with concepts of a different sort, among them, perhaps, 'language', if such a notion can become an object of serious study'.

This conception of an 'autonomous linguistics', as it is sometimes called, poses fundamental problems for anthropologists, and indeed some linguists, who believe that the cognitivist emphasis marginalizes language's role in human communication. A similar point had been made much earlier against Saussure, when, in the 1930s, Malinowski, like the Soviet linguist Voloshinov, expressed serious reservations about the distinction between langue (the abstract linguistic system) and parol (actual speech). Since the 1960s, one of Chomsky's most vociferous opponents has been the linguistic anthropologist Hymes .

There are four main points on which Hymes diverges from Chomsky: speech (or parole) is accorded priority over grammar (or langue); competence is redefined to mean communicative competence in general, and treated as a behavioural rather than a cognitive phenomenon; universal forms of speech and language must be discovered by research in specific cultures and in cross-cultural comparison, not assumed in advance; and, crucially, language must be investigated in its social and cultural context. There is a very substantial body of work in anthropology and other disciplines which explicitly or implicitly shares these and similar assumptions. It includes, for example, research on class, both historically and in contemporary, especially urban, society; on education, ethnicity, gender relations, law, literacy, politics; and on the language of and in literature, both written literature and oral literature.

Language in context

Social linguistics, as it may be called, is by no means a uniform field, theoretically or methodologically: functionalism, structuralism, Marxism (structural and other), feminism and not least post-modernism have all shaped how social scientists and others have conceptualized the relationship between culture, society and language. American linguistic anthropology illustrates one influential approach.

In the 1940s, the dominant issue was the relationship between language and world view. The abandonment of the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, that the structure of a language determined our conceptualization of the world, led to a period in which folk categories and taxonomies and their organization became a distinct specialism. In the early 1960s, seeking to go beyond uncovering indigenous systems of classification and develop a more dynamic approach to language as social process, Hymes suggested that attention should be focused on 'ways of speaking'. This idea generated a great deal of research under the broad heading of the 'ethnography of speaking' or 'communication'. In this approach, speech is treated as the property of persons and social groups. People who share ways of speaking (i.e. who have a common set of linguistic practices) are said to be members of the same speech community. This is not the same as a society within which there are likely to be numerous speech communities. The ethnography of speaking is important because it emphasizes language in use, and locates that use within a social and cultural context. Its approach also forces attention on higher order linguistic practices (i.e. above the level of the phrase). In linguistics, these are what constitute discourse though that term has a number of other meanings. Discourse includes conversation, and for anthropologists, it is axiomatic that all conversation is culturally embedded, and only understandable through what Moerman calls 'culturally contexted' investigation. Many linguists say they accept this, but in practice ignore its implications. What those implications are becomes apparent if we consider what participants in a verbal exchange require to know in order to understand the meaning of references to persons.

Language and social differentiation

Contextualization, then, is crucial. So is linguistic heterogeneity. In most societies there co-exist different languages and dialects, and different modes of speaking which linguists call 'registers', 'styles', or 'codes'. These languages and modes of speaking are often hierarchically ordered and their speakers of unequal status, power and authority. This is common in modern nation-states with their 'standard' languages, but also occurs in traditional societies. Contextualizing language means understanding heterogeneity in terms of social differentiation at large.

The 'sociology of language', pioneered by Fishman, Haugen and Ferguson, has specialized in analysing linguistic differentiation within the nation-state. Ferguson (1959) devised the term 'diglossia' for situations where two varieties of a language (e.g. a standard language and a dialect) are spoken by members of the same community, with each variety having its own function and situationally defined range of usage. One variety he termed 'H(igh)', the other 'L(ow)' by reference to the generally perceived status of the variety's functions. For example the H language might be used for education, the L for family conversation. Diglossia is therefore associated with a division of social life into sets of institutions or activities (domains) in which, generally, one language (say the H variety) is expected or appropriate or obligatory. Mapping the domains of language use is, of course, important, but analysis must do more than summarize the results of statistical investigations showing that the H language tends to be spoken in this context, the L language in another.

Subordination through language

The study of linguistic heterogeneity therefore rapidly leads to questions of disadvantage, and thus to politics. There is, however, another, some would argue more profound, way in which language and power are related. Drawing on theories of ideology and discourse, it is suggested that language, rather than simply reflecting or reinforcing nonlinguistic structures of domination, itself fashions subordination. Something comparable may characterize the situation of women in many societies. The ways in which women are excluded from linguistic exchanges, or allowed to intervene in a restricted way, are well documented. Ardener (1975) proposed the concept of 'mutedness' (not to be confused with silence) to refer to situations in which a group (in this case women, though the concept may also be applied to subordinate ethnic groups or classes) can only articulate what it wishes to say through the dominant (male) voice. Mutedness is an instrument of exclusion from power and authority, 'It is not formalism in language which represses people and their thoughts, but the degree to which speakers impose such discourse on others'.