



Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University (4/10/2019)

From Metalanguage to Metapragmatics

Exploring Non-Linguistic Language Reflection

1 Introduction

Central Questions

- Why is non linguistic language reflection an important topic for linguists to think about?
- Why do many linguists seem to have problems with the fact that non-linguists reflect on (make statements about) language?
- Which linguistic disciplines and concepts help to explore and explain non-linguistic language reflection?
- What does all this *meta-* mean?

2 The Qualms with Reflection

“look at language objectively”

“The chief difficulty facing the person who comes new to the study of linguistics is that of being prepared to look at language objectively. For language is something we tend to take for granted; something with which we are familiar from childhood in a practical, unreflecting way. And, as has often been observed, it requires a particularly strong effort to look at familiar things afresh. Nor is it merely our intuitive or practical familiarity with language that stands in the way of its objective examination. There are all sorts of social and nationalistic prejudices associated with language, and many popular misconceptions fostered by the distorted version of traditional grammar that is frequently taught in the schools. To free one’s mind of these prejudices and misconceptions is indeed difficult; but it is both a necessary and a rewarding first step.” (Lyons 1968: 2)

Linguistics as “descriptive science”

“To assert that any linguistic form is ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ *because* it is at variance with some other form taken (explicitly or implicitly) as the standard is [...] tautological. Each socially or regionally differentiated form of the language has its own standard of ‘purity’ and ‘correctness’ immanent in it. Once this is realized and accepted, the way is clear to a more satisfactory description of languages. Whether the speech of one region or of one social group should be taken as the standard for wider use (e. g. as the basis for a literary language), is a question of a different order. The linguist’s first task is to *describe* the way people actually speak (and write) their language, not to *prescribe* how they ought to speak and write. In other words linguistics (in the first instance at least) is *descriptive*, not *prescriptive* (or normative).” (Lyons 1968: 43)

Prescriptivism – Descriptivism

“Prescriptivism [...] is the disfavoured half of a binary opposition, ‘descriptive/prescriptive’; and this binarism sets the parameters of linguistics as a discipline. The very first thing any student of linguistics learns is that ‘linguistics is descriptive not prescriptive’ – concerned, in the way of all science, with objective facts and not subjective value judgements. Prescriptivism thus represents the threatening Other, the forbidden; it is a spectre that haunts linguistics and a difference that defines linguistics.” (Cameron 1995: 5)

The Fuzziness of Language

“[...] wie Wolken auf einem Berggipfel nur, von fern gesehen, eine bestimmte Gestalt haben, allein wie man hineintritt, sich in ein nebligtes Grau verlieren; so ist die Wirkung und der Charakter der Sprachen zwar im ganzen deutlich erkennbar, allein so wie man anfängt zu untersuchen, woran nun dieser Charakter im einzelnen hängt, entschlüpft einem der Gegenstand gleichsam unter den Händen.” (von Humboldt [1810–1811] 1981: 130–131)

(as clouds on a mountain peak have a circumscribed outline only when seen from a distance and dissolve in a foggy gray as soon as one enters, the functions and the character of languages seems clearly graspable only when we look at them in a general way. As soon as you start to ask what exactly determines this character and functions, the object slips, so to speak, under your hands.)

Linguistic Principle of Equality

“There is no such thing as good and bad (or correct and incorrect, grammatical and ungrammatical, right and wrong) in language.

[...]

All languages and dialects are of equal merit, each in its own way.” (Hall 1950: 6)

Linguistics as ‘objective inquiry unit’

“Is there any source for accurate and reliable information about language, which will be more dependable and less likely to throw us into an intellectual and emotional tailspin than the ‘authorities’ that try to correct us?

There is. For the last hundred and fifty years, a number of scholars have been working on the study of language from a scientific point of view. They are often called simply *linguists*; but, as many people use the word *linguist* to mean a polyglot – somebody who knows a lot of languages – the person who has made a scientific study of language often prefers the term *scientific linguist* or *linguistic scientist* or *linguistician*. The work they engage in is called *linguistics*. By now, linguistics has amassed a store of knowledge which is accurate and reliable enough to decide on such points as these we worry about.” (Hall 1950: 2)

“Leave your language alone!”

“[...] the message that linguistics has for our society at present is primarily the one that we have used as the title of this book: *LEAVE YOUR LANGUAGE ALONE!* We put it this way on purpose, to emphasize that any meddling with our language, by ourselves or others in the name of ‘correctness’, of spelling, or of nationalism, is harmful. [...] this message is both negative and positive. It is

negative, in that it warns us to give up, to abandon entirely the old dogmatic, normative, theological approach of traditional grammar and of social snobbery; and to substitute the relativistic, objective approach of scientific study and analysis. It is positive, in that it tells us, once we've cleared the ground in this way, to go ahead and to find out for ourselves what the facts really are, to analyze and describe them as accurately as we can, and then to apply the knowledge we have obtained in that way. In both these respects, the contribution of linguistics is simply a part of the effort of all science in modern democratic society, to find out the truth and to act upon it; in this sense, the linguist, like other scientists, may take as his motto the noblest of all slogans: 'Ya shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.'" (Hall 1950: 248–249)

Taking Non-Linguistic Language Evaluation Seriously

- Why do people feel the need to evaluate language?
- How does non-linguistic knowledge about language look like?
- Which functions do such evaluations have?
- Which specific interests are connected to these evaluations?

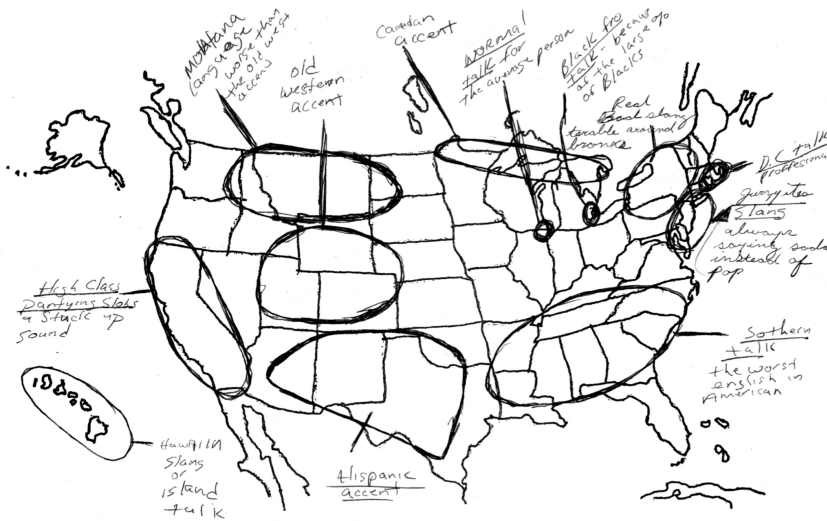
3 Going Meta

Linguistic Exploration of Non-Linguistic Language Reflection

Most Important Disciplines

- *Language Attitudes Research* Deals with the question which affects, emotions and dispositions people have vis-a-vis languages (cf. Garrett 2010)
 - ⇒ Background: Social Psychology
 - ⇒ See also Linguistic Profiling: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAZMIC_OwTw
- *Folk Linguistics*: Deals with the question how non-linguistic knowledge about language, in particular about dialects and local varieties, looks like (vgl. Niedzielski/Preston 2000)
 - ⇒ Background: Dialectology
- *Language Ideology Research*: Deals with the question which values and beliefs concerning language people articulate in discourses (vgl. Kroskrity/Schieffelin/Woolard 1998)
 - ⇒ Background: Linguistic Anthropology

Mental Maps (Folk Linguistics)



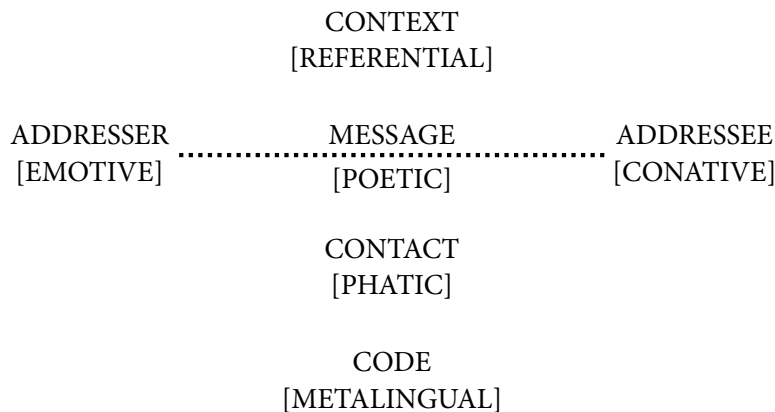
(Aus: Preston 1996: 307)

The Liar Paradox

“Epimenides the Cretan said that all Cretans were liars.” (Russell 1908: 222)

“[...] a man says: ‘I am lying [just now]’” (Russell 1908: 224)

Jakobson’s Model of Communication



(Jakobson 1960: 353, 357)

The Importance of Metalanguage

“Far from being confined to the sphere of science, metalingual operations prove to be an integral part of our verbal activities. Whenever the addresser and/or the addressee need to check up whether they use the same code, speech is focused upon the CODE and thus performs a METALINGUAL (or glossing) function. ‘I don’t follow you-what do you mean?’ asks the addressee, or in Shakespearean diction, ‘What is’t thou say’st?’ And the addresser in anticipation of such recapturing questions inquires: ‘Do you know what I mean?’” (Jakobson [1956] 1985: 117)

Jakobson's Concept of *Metalanguage*

- The possibility to refer to itself (a message referring to another message or referring to the code used) is a crucial feature of Human language
- Not only can concrete messages refer to language (as a code system), but language itself has means to refer to concrete message contexts

(See Jakobson [1955] 1971)

Metapragmatics

“Signs functioning metapragmatically have pragmatic phenomena [...] as their semiotic objects [...]” (Silverstein 1993: 33)

4 How is Language Evaluated?

Essentialization of Language(s)

- Construction of fixed language borders (homogenism)
 - ⇒ language purity/purism, aversion against so called *language mixing*
- Variation in language is often perceived as a problem
 - ⇒ reduction of language to referential function
- Standard language is often over-generalized
- Language evaluations tend to be conservative and ego-centric

Metapragmatic Metaphors

- Language
 - as an organism (lives and can die, is under threat from external dangers and must be protected)
 - as a delimited territory (must be protected from external intruders)
 - as an essence (can decay, be contaminated by foreign essences, etc.)
- Unwanted factors of language change as
 - viruses and illnesses which threaten language (as an *organism*)
 - floods and other natural disasters which threaten language (as a *territory*)
 - foreign chunks which contaminate language (as an *essence*)

(Cf. Spitzmüller 2007)

5 Why is Language Evaluated?

Social Functions of Language Evaluation

- If people evaluate language, they evaluate associated contexts and users
- By such evaluations, people can take a social stance
 - Positive language evaluation is thus a means to express solidarity
 - Negative language evaluation is a means to express distance
- ⇒ Both are means to construct and maintain social identities

6 Conclusions

- The critical accounts of (some) linguists towards non-linguistic language reflection need to be criticized themselves:
 - The ranking of languages helps people to position themselves in the social world
 - In ordinary life, language is highly subjective in a positive sense: It is considered part of the self
 - Imperatives such as *Leave Your Language Alone!* are misconceiving the social function of language evaluation
 - As long as linguistic knowledge is limited to structural issues of language and language change, it does not give answers to the actual questions people have
- If linguistics attempts to understand language in all its complexity, language reflection needs to be taken seriously – not as a problem, but as a feature of language in society.

References

- Cameron, Deborah (1995): *Verbal Hygiene*. London: Routledge (Language and Politics).
- Garrett, Peter (2010): *Attitudes to Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Key Topics in Sociolinguistics).
- Hall, Robert A. (1950): *Leave Your Language Alone!* Ithaca, NY: Linguistica.
- von Humboldt, Wilhelm (1981): Einleitung in das gesammte Sprachstudium. In: Wilhelm von Humboldt: *Werke in fünf Bänden*. Vol. 5: *Kleine Schriften, Autobiographisches, Dichtungen, Briefe. Kommentare und Anmerkungen zu Band I–V, Anhang*. Ed. by Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel. Stuttgart: Cotta, pp. 100–112 [orig. 1810–1811].
- Jakobson, Roman (1960): Closing Statement. Linguistics and Poetics. In: Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.): *Style in Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 350–377.
- (1971): Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the Russian Verb. In: *Selected Writings*. Vol. 2: *Word and Language*. Berlin: de Gruyter, pp. 130–147 [orig. Harvard: Harvard University 1955].
- (1985): Metalanguage as a Linguistic Problem. In: Roman Jakobson: *Selected Writings*. Vol. 7: *Contributions to Comparative Mythology*. Ed. by Stephen Rudy. Berlin: de Gruyter, pp. 113–121 [orig. Presidential Address to the Linguistic Society of America 1956].
- Kroskrity, Paul V./Schieffelin, Bambi B./Woolard, Kathryn A. (Eds.) (1998): *Language Ideologies. Practice and Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press (Oxford Studies in Anthropological Linguistics 16).
- Lyons, John (1968): *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Niedzielski, Nancy A./Preston, Dennis R. (2000): *Folk Linguistics*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter (Trends in Linguistics: Studies and Monographs 122).
- Preston, Dennis R. (1996): Where the Worst English Is Spoken. In: Edgar W. Schneider (ed.): *Focus on the USA*. Amsterdam: Benjamins (Varieties of English Around the World G 16), pp. 297–360.

- Russell, Bertrand (1908): Mathematical Logic as Based on the Theory of Types. In: *American Journal of Mathematics* 30/3, pp. 222–262.
- Silverstein, Michael (1993): Metapragmatic Discourse and Metapragmatic Function. In: John A. Lucy (ed.): *Reflexive Language. Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 33–58.
- Spitzmüller, Jürgen (2007): Staking the Claims of Identity. Purism, Linguistics and the Media in post-1990 Germany. In: *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 11/2, pp. 261–285.