NOTES AND DISCUSSION

LANGUAGE-LEARNING AND SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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Introduction

The differences between the use speakers make of a language in different areas of a country, or in one social class as opposed to another, are nowadays recognised as essential parts of a description of a language. There has been much work in sociolinguistics, and continuous cross-fertilisation between sociology, anthropology and linguistics to show this – Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Sebeok 1974; Trudgill 1974. But there is also a continuing awareness by teachers that progress beyond the elementary stage of language acquisition requires the development of sensitivity to the appropriateness of language use to communication situation – Jakobovits: 1970 and Campbell and Wales: 1970. Two particular reasons may have much to do with this changing level of interest – as Martinet put it (in Weinreich: 1953: vii):

> There was a time when the progress of research required that each community should be considered linguistically self-contained and homogeneous ... (this assumption) has enabled scholars ... to achieve ... some rigour in a research involving man's psychic activity.

For Chomsky also it was necessary to distinguish between the idealised speaker/hearer's intuitive knowledge of his language and the actual speaker or hearer's production of language in specified contexts; but we have now progressed beyond the particular needs of the early 60's. And a second reason may be the concentration of concern among teachers on the elementary stages of language acquisition, including foreign language acquisition; a normative approach, with simple and clear models is very necessary then; but a systematic approach to language-learning at advanced level – say the level at which a University student of foreign language of age 19/20 is operating – means that the real-life situation must also be considered and attention paid to language variation in real communication situations.

Unfortunately however the analysis and description of the situation in which language is used, and of the speaker/hearer relationship, are still often regarded as non-linguistic concerns and many linguists are at pains to eliminate group and individual differences in the data they describe. Traditional linguistics was of course normative and prescriptive by definition (rather surprisingly so if one recalls that its aims were often pedagogical); Le Bon Usage (Grévisse 1953), still a great achievement, is full of corrections of belgicismes and of the errors of great authors. It may well be that the social and political advantages of the cult of the norm outweigh the need to respect individual differences; and the preservation of a correct, prestige variety of a language, however idealised, may be an acceptable approach for teachers in such cases; these are not linguistic, but social arguments however. Structuralism does by contrast concern itself with 'value-free' analysis of realised utterances. Concentrating on data and on the description of data, one could have expected that structuralism would give us an account of realised usage and include analyses of the relevant situations; most schools however regard the communication situation as irrelevant and reject even semantics as being of no direct concern to the linguist, except insofar as semantics is conceived as the interrelationship of linguistic elements: