New Dimensions of Linguistic Inequality: An Overview

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Abstract

Relationships between language and inequality are a constitutive part of contemporary sociolinguistic theory which, despite certain specialized discussions and controversies, has developed a well-established set of theoretical assumptions. Our aim in this paper is to introduce an overview of these as well as to point out some emerging new perspectives on the issue of linguistic inequality.After a short introduction to critical sociolinguistics, I will analyze the shift from 'diversity discourse', which can be traced back to the mid-1980s in the USA, towards a new global focus on inequality, which emerged around the end of the 1990s. In the second place, we will describe some theoretical aspects of the concept of 'linguistic inequality' following current sociolinguistic bibliography on the matter, with special interest in globalization processes and the relationships of individuals with the state. In the third place, we review recent literature on new dimensions of linguistic inequality, with a special focus on (a) relationships between local and global language varieties; (b) multilingual practices and civil rights; and (c) multilingualism in educational settings.In the final section of this paper, we encourage the continuity of the research on new dimensions of linguistic inequality as a way of empowering linguistic minorities whose access to basic civil rights is impeded by asymmetrical language relationships.

Sociolinguistics: Developing New Theories for New Realities

Sociolinguistics has developed, after five decades of strong empirical evidence and several theoretical systematizations, a set of well-established claims: Language variation is correlated with sociological variables (Labov 1966). Language use indexes particular values of one or more contextual variables (Silverstein 1976). Membership of a speech community generates social norms of appropriateness of speech and social meaning (Hymes 1972, Gumperz 1972). These statements have become, at least theoretically, part of the (socio)linguistic common sense. As an emergent of a 'modern bureaucratic industrial society that increases the importance of communication processes' (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 1983: 2), this theoretical corpus is also embedded in specific historical conditions. Therefore, there is a serious risk, pointed out by Blommaert (2009), in the use of a modern repertoire of scientific knowledge to understand post-modern realities. In the case analyzed by Blommaert (2009), modern sociolinguistics seeks coherent language varieties tied to stable identities and territories. However, this approach is barely prepared to understand polyglot repertoires built by mobile subjects through a deterritorialized world of post-modern (or late-modern) communication (Jacquemet 2005: 261).

During the last decade, a new way of thinking about relationships between languages and societies – sometimes referred to as 'critical sociolinguistics'[1] (Blommaert 2010) – has questioned some of the assumptions of this *doxa*. This approach shares some assumptions with critical discourse analysis (CDA) such as the attention to discourse as a factor of production and reproduction of relationships of power, the need of dialogue between linguistic analysis and social sciences, and the interest in institutional settings (cf. Blommaert (2005: 33–34)). Nevertheless, critical sociolinguistics maintains a distant relationship with CDA based on

the following criticisms: (a) CDA has a linguistic-textual bias that restricts discourse to language, mainly written, and language analysis to systemic-functional linguistics; (b) it examines a very restricted empirical base – sampled in first-world, densely semiotized societies – which, nevertheless, sustains general theoretical concepts that claim to be applied at a global level; and (c) CDA privileges a synchronic point of view on discourse which is not rightfully integrated in historical processes (Blommaert 2005: 34–37).

Critical sociolinguistics sustains a multidimensional concept of language and discourse, combining linguistic analysis of written and oral texts with other phenomena such as gestures, sight, paratextual and paralinguistic features of speech, drawings, or page-design. Therefore, it advocates a conceptual blurring of the distinction between language and discourse, preferring instead the analysis of multilingual and heterogeneous resources employed by actual speakers in contexts of mobility and change. Special attention is given to the impact of *globalization* in communication and its role in the production and reproduction of global social relationships. Within this frame, language contact becomes a critical issue for sociolinguistics because it is an inherent dimension of globalization, where mobility and fragmentation of once stable groups is now very frequent.

One of the key interpretative features of this approach to language in society is a shift in the comprehension of linguistic difference, which is not described as mere diversity but, instead, evaluated in terms of inequality.

From Diversity to Inequality

The term 'diversity' has been traced back to the mid-1980s, when the *Workforce 2000* Report made a projection of a highly heterogeneous labor force in the USA, which would later overcome the traditionally higher percentage of White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant workers by the incorporation of more women, ethnic minorities, and immigrants (Zanoni et al. 2010: 12). Based on this report, organizations began to see difference as a rare and valuable asset which could provide a competitive advantage if well managed. This 'diversity paradigm' (Zanoni et al. 2010) became the business rationale for the management of difference, subsuming class struggle, racism, or gender discrimination to a general, neutral term. Within the field of social sciences, diversity studies allowed for the expansion of 'legitimate' research objects, celebrating multiplicity and multiculturalism as a way of introducing 'the other' into academic discourse.

This 'management paradigm' (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998) of diversity entails an instrumental view of culture and difference, and objectifies 'the other' as an object of discourse (Thompson 1993: 13). Even 'discourse' becomes an umbrella term that hides the social actors that really stand for and by it: institutions – both public and private – and political agents who design policies and research agendas from an ethnocentric point of view which defines the 'normality' against which the 'others' (the diverse ones) are defined and managed. These kinds of questions address the problem of power relations and domination among 'different' cultures, which remains untouched by many diversity studies (cf. Hoobler (2005)).

Within the field of sociolinguistics and language planning, the study of language contact has become, in many cases, the privileged field for the development of diversity discourse and the management paradigm. The mere recognition of 6909 'living' human languages (i.e., languages which are actually spoken or written by a community or group; cf. Lewis (2009)) says little about the hegemony of five or six of them around the world; the 'endangered language' tag usually hides the fact that the speakers and their social identities are those who really are in danger, not (only) the languages. Nevertheless, it is auspicious to find high interest in documenting 'nearly extinct' languages (Krauss 2007, UNESCO

2009) and, eventually, to promote language 'revitalization', not only by providing the communities with technical support but also by intervening in the social, political, and economic conditions that endangered the speakers and their cultures (Krauss 2007: 13). As Krauss notes, it is a critical task: It not only involves the well-known mechanisms of linguistic description but also questions the cultural relativism that lies at the core of diversity discourse, which celebrates the differences of languages or cultures without wondering how power and economic and symbolic goods are distributed and appropriated by these diverse speakers.

The shift from the managerial paradigm of diversity to the political intervention on inequality raises a new set of questions for social sciences including sociolinguistics. In the next section, we will develop some of its theoretical consequences regarding the concept of *linguistic inequality*.

Defining Linguistic Inequality

We can define linguistic inequality as a specific form of language contact which is a consequence of the unequal social valuation of languages, varieties, or lects (by region, age, class, etc.) and communicative styles spoken or written in a given community. As such, due to the indexical character of language, linguistic inequality is a producer and reproducer of wider social, economic, and cultural inequalities. At the same time, it creates and strengthens intersubjective bonds, thus guaranteeing the concepts of identity and community for speakers (Dreidemie 2011, Malvestiti 2010). The challenge presented by this asymmetrical relationship among languages consists, on the one hand, of the creation of equal opportunities of access to language and communication–dependent rights. On the other hand, it faces the problem of recognizing and guaranteeing legitimate practices of voice production that become discriminated against, stigmatized, or undervalued by dominant varieties and discourse regimes.

This inextricable codependence between linguistic and wider social inequalities requires an interdisciplinary approach to a multidimensional phenomenon. The linguistic side involves a conception of 'multilingualism' that is different from the traditional notion of 'language', and a different method of analysis for language contact, displacing our vision from a 'distributional' conception towards a pragmatics of intercultural communication (Rampton 2000, Moyer 2011).

Especially in the context of global diasporas, where national minorities are also ethnic minorities and victims of social and economic inequality, it becomes increasingly important to analyze social and sociolinguistic repertoires (cf. Hymes (1996: 207), ff., Blommaert (2009), and Becker and Faulkner (2009)) as complexes of heterogeneous semiotic resources used by individuals to interact with other individuals. The role of the state becomes, in this regard, a key one, because it should guarantee access to basic civil rights, such as health care or education, contemplating and legitimizing the existence of these repertoires.

In fact, in many cases, nation–state institutions face linguistic inequality from a monoglossic point of view (Del Valle 2000, Silverstein 1998, 2003) that denies linguistic hybridity (Bauman and Briggs 2003) and 'impure' or 'mixed' forms of language (Dreidemie 2011), not only in the case of linguistic minorities but also within the subordinated varieties of hegemonic languages (Rampton 2006). This monoglossic and normative vision, which chooses between varieties with different degrees of legitimacy, has ruled even the formulation of linguistic policies of multilingual intercultural communication (Del Valle 2000, Moyer 2011, Huircan 2010, Fernández 2010, Pratt 1991, 2002).

Therefore, communicative obstacles in access to civil rights derive in many cases from the contraposition of, on the one hand, an impersonal, monoglossic, normative, and monologic

discourse and, on the other hand, social actors that show a repertoire of varieties, discourses, and resources based on strong interpersonal bonds and mobile social networks. Among many others, we can quote the work by Dreidemie (2011), who shows the strategies of Bolivian migrants facing capitalistic rules of commerce in Argentina. Carranza (2008, 2010) analyzes the interplay between socially indexed marginal identities and institutional literacy in the penal system. Vasilachis de Gialdino (2003) explores homeless discourse by examining social discriminatory representations of the homeless by the mass media. As for migrants in Spain, Corona, Nussbaum, and Unamuno (2013) and Nussbaum and Unamuno (2006) analyze the constitution of young speakers' repertoires against school discourse, and Moyer (2011, Moyer and Ruiz 2007) shows the interaction of Asian and east European migrants with institutional discourse in a hospital in Barcelona.

However useful this opposition might be, between modern monoglossic institutions and post-modern heteroglossic social actors, it is schematic and grants little justice to the individual agency in the production of voice (Hymes 1996, Blommaert 2008). The conceptualization of these realities in terms of inequality – as systems that prevent the generation of equal opportunities and reproduce unequal ones – does not relegate subjects to a passive role of 'inadequacy' or 'deficit' (which has been questioned in previous theories, such as Bernstein's opposition between elaborated and restricted code; cf. Bernstein (1971)). On the contrary, the production of voice – that is, 'the capacity to make oneself understood' (Blommaert 2005: 255), '[the] freedom to have one's voice heard, freedom to develop a voice worth hearing' (Hymes 1996: 64) – can be observed, although it requires attention to different communicative materials and procedures (Blommaert 2008, Bonnin 2011a, 2011b). The results of this kind of analysis allow for the proposition of alternative forms of communication based on the dialogue between discourse theory and the social actors' own knowledge and needs (Moyer 2011, Fernández, Gandulfo and Unamuno 2012).

In sum, linguistic inequality deals with the lack of adequacy between a national monoglossic state, which manages and distributes the access to civil rights based on a traditionally homogeneous conception of language, and mobile subjects whose communicative repertoires are built on everyday evidence of alternative, non-hegemonic ways of communication. In this sense, the problem of linguistic inequality develops from both the field of discourse analysis and sociolinguistics, and it truly belongs to a 'sociolinguistics of discourse' (Blommaert 2009: 425).

Dimensions of Linguistic Inequality

As we have outlined at the beginning of this paper, many of the empirical and theoretical issues we describe here already have an established tradition. The concept of 'lectal power', provided by Chew (1995), the 'narrative inequality' pointed out by Hymes (1996), or even the classic 'restricted'/'elaborated' code by Bernstein (or 'code orientations', as rephrased by Hymes 1996: 51) have all contributed to our current understanding of the topic. Nevertheless, the realities and processes studied have changed, and new challenges to old concepts have surfaced, requiring new perspectives. Hymes (1996), for instance, shows a strong sensitivity to 'world-system' problems, understood as macroscale processes attached to a new interregional and transnational division of labor (Wallerstein 1974). In this regard, he integrates this concept to communicative repertoires in speakers' daily lives. However, the examples he brings and the cases he analyzes are strongly anchored in the classical scope of linguistic anthropology, even when he had an anticipatory insight on how 'the great process affecting languages has not been one of separation and diversification, but rather one of contact and reintegration' (Hymes 1996: 211).

The emergence of new global forces and actors since the late twentieth century has been accompanied by new dimensions of linguistic inequality. As before, sociolinguistics develops new theories to face new realities. Many of the works that we will review in what follows are, at the same time, a continuation and a questioning of this tradition although we do not intend to make an exhaustive review but a series of highlights of contemporary reflections on language and inequality.

SCALE JUMPING AND GLOBALIZATION

The concept of 'sociolinguistic scale' was coined by J. Blommaert (2006, 2010) in order to articulate different levels of context, from the microlevel of the actual interaction to the macrolevel of globalization and world system. It is a 'vertical' metaphor of social order which helps to understand every utterance as indexicalizing different levels of the scale, from the local and momentary interaction to the translocal, widespread, and long-term processes. In this sense, speakers can make scale jumps (i.e., pointing to different scale levels) to accomplish different kinds of purposes, being adequate in one local sociolinguistic level but ineffective or even clumsy in a different, higher one. Blommaert (2005) lists some examples taken from advertising in Dar es Salaam (Tanzania):

- *Disabled Kiosk* (the name of a 'kiosk' – a converted container that serves as a small shop – operated by a disabled man)
- *Whole sallers of hardwere* (sign at a hardware shop)
- *Shekilango Nescafé* (the name of a café on Shekilango road in suburban Dar es Salaam)
- *new Sikinde tea* (*room*) (the name of a café, note the brackets)
- *Sliming food* (in an advertisement for a health shop) (Blommaert 2005: 403)

In these examples, Blommaert observes the orientation towards a highly valued language (English) that indexes a set of transnational capitalistic values (success, entrepreneurship, mobility, and luxury). However, speakers do not follow the higher-level norms of standard written English but the local values in current Dar es Salaam. English, in these examples, is not a simple up-to-down imposition but, rather, a construction built on heterogeneous linguistic resources whose values have been relocated from a transnational to a local-scale level. As a result, the scale jumping made by the disabled man in the first example is more complex than it is traditionally understood. He does not see himself as an international businessman but as a businessman in Dar es Salaam who can add to his local identity a set of international indexicalities. At the same time, he is not addressing the higher-level scale of speakers of standard English but his fellow neighbors, at the lower, local scalar level, who will perceive the value of the English displayed but not (at least, not necessarily) its normative (in)correctness. Therefore, scale jumping brings on different scales of inequality and adequacy: The same utterance works locally as a distinction mark, although it can be a global stigma.[2]

Here lies the originality of this proposal: It does not rely on a (more or less) mechanical up-to-down interpretation of macroglobal processes (late capitalism, globalization, etc.) projected over microtext production or interactions (cf. Wodak (2002) and Fairclough (2002)). The dynamics of scale jumping – both as a resource and as a limitation – is widely explored in current research on multilingualism, migration, and education (Rampton 2006, Collins and Slembrouck 2007, 2008, Saeed 2008, Nussbaum and Unamuno 2006, among many others). These new research lines, founded on the concept of scale jumping and transnational mobility, investigate the phenomenon of *superdiversity* (Vertovec 2007, 2010, Blommaert and Rampton 2011, Sharma and Rampton 2011), understood as a new

level and kind of demographic and cultural complexity based on the changing patterns and itineraries of migration and the massive access to new information and communication technologies (Vertovec 2007).

MULTILINGUAL PRACTICES AND HUMAN/CIVIL RIGHTS

Within the complex linguistic situation in Spain, where the political divisions in terms of autonomous communities have involved different linguistic policies in order to invigorate local languages (galego, euskera, català, etc.), initial research in linguistic inequality referred to the status of the nation–state language (Spanish) and the local (also national) ones. An important advance was made in this field, analyzing language policies, and judiciary and legal corpora referring to bilingual contact, as well as ideological discourse analysis on linguistic nationalism (Miley 2006, Del Valle 2005, Bossong and Báez de Aguilar González 2000, Mar-Molinero 2000, Siguan 1992, Turell 2001).

Therefore, the typically modern view on bilingualism – as a struggle between dominant and subordinated languages within the territory of the nation–state – is now challenged by new migrant populations that have pluralized the linguistic environment of public services. The original work by M. Moyer (2011) on multilingualism in a Barcelona health clinic shows that new multilingualism is being faced by state institutions with the old bilingual paradigm and a set of prejudices about relationships between language, ethnicity, national identity, and social class. One of the most interesting findings of her research is the ideological association of foreign languages with foreign nation-states, as is the case of written applications in standard Arabic that are not understood by many of the patients who 'speak Arabic'. As a result, many policies designed to overcome linguistic inequality reproduce, paradoxically, the prejudices and asymmetries which they intend to fight against. One of Moyer's main concerns is, precisely, the design of communicative strategies from a collaborative point of view, allowing the others to maintain and express their own voice.

The same problem has been pointed out in the case of African asylum seekers in Belgium and the UK by K. Maryns (2005, 2006, 2011) and Blommaert (2009), among others, as a special feature of inequality reproduction in which a set of (socio)linguistic ideologies, bonded to the modern identification of one language, one nation, one territory, is no longer useful to understand a globalized context of mobility of speakers, a redefinition of territorial borders, and multilingual repertoires. In a sense which involves research on language policies, this perspective questions models like Phillipson's (1992) 'linguistic imperialism', understood as an international process of language (English) domination sustained by language promotion, cultural propaganda, and business expansion. Indeed, the traditional view of linguistic inequality research on English as an imperialist language killer is challenged by these phenomena of multilingualism which are closely related to those of scale jumping and superdiverse communicative repertoires, which we reviewed in the previous section.

MULTILINGUALISM IN EDUACTIONAL SETTINGS

Educational contexts are one of the most attractive settings in linguistic inequality research as a place where 'normative monolingualism' (Fuller 2009: 346) reproduces the hegemonic status of national languages, devaluing non-standard ways of speaking (for an extensive review, see Fuller (2009, 2012)). It has been observed that the privileged position of these languages persists among young students, even despite the existence of formal instruction in the minority language within the school (Fuller et al. 2007, Potowski 2004). In the same direction, Fuller (2009: 347–349) also notes that, although code switching is observed, it can

serve to relegate a minority language to a peripheral status, that is, using English for serious academic work and Spanish for off-task discussion (Pease-Alvarez and Winsler 1994, Palmer 2007). Even in the case of intercultural bilingual education, a segregationist and/or separatist view on language contact persists which hinders a more egalitarian relationship between languages, varieties, and, of course, speakers (Fernández, Gandulfo and Unamuno 2012, Kanno 2008).

Despite this well-established research field, and the relevant corpus of data and results accomplished, new issues have emerged related to multilingual and multiethnic educational settings. We could even speak of a 'bilingual bias' that omits the presence of the increasing contact amongst many languages and varieties in the same school context. Martín Rojo (2010) analyzes the changes in process that derive from migration in contemporary Europe with specific questions on discrimination, social integration, and the consequences of educational failure. Rampton (2006) shows the relevance of contact between multiple languages and varieties in an English school as part of a complex repertoire displayed by immigrant adolescents (or immigrants' children) in order to create new possibilities of voice and new social identities, for instance, pronouncing Bengali words with a Cockney accent, or reading technical scientific terms using a Cockney or Caribbean dialect (Rampton 2006: 370; see also Jaspers 2005). As a matter of fact, regardless of the great deal of research on stylized heteroglossic speech practices of young people with migrant backgrounds over the last 15 years (cf. Rampton and Charalambous (2011)), there has been a series of changes involving the stabilization of these 'mixed speeches'. Rampton (2011) shows the relevance of multiethnic adolescent heteroglossia in the constitution of actual urban vernaculars (in his empirical research in London). Thus, some of the traditional assumptions regarding intragroup identities, heteroglossic practices of resistance, or even code switching must be revised, because these 'spontaneous' and 'unstable' varieties show on the contrary an identification with distinctive ethnically mixed urban neighborhoods shaped by immigration and class stratification; a relationship, but also a distance, with the local migrant languages; and a wide recognition by media and popular culture beyond its local origins (Rampton 2011: 291).

Conclusion: Towards the Recognition of Language-based Rights

In this paper, we have reviewed recent research on language and production/reproduction of inequality. Besides different goals and, overall, different empirical research fields, these works share a common interest in solving problems derived from unequal contact among speakers – prior to contact among languages. We observe in these works a set of progressively eroded boundaries: between discourse analysis and sociolinguistics, language and repertoire, written and spoken discourse, and among 'national languages'. In sum, the new focus on speakers and the practical problems derived from unequal access to language-based rights enhances a theoretical and methodological series of innovations that mark new trends in sociolinguistics and empower new global, multilingual citizens.

Short Biography

Juan Eduardo Bonnin is a researcher at the CEIL/CONICET, Argentina, and a professor at the University of Buenos Aires. He has studied the relationships between religious and

political discourse in Latin America and published several articles, book chapters, and books on the subject. His current research interest involves the articulation of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis in the understanding of linguistic inequality in Argentina. His last book is *Génesis política del discurso religioso. Iglesia y comunidad nacional* (1981) *entre la dictadura y la democracia en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2012).

Notes

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[1] Not to confuse with Hodge and Kress' (1979) 'critical linguistics' or, more recently, Kress' (2001) 'critical sociolinguistics'.
[2] I would like to thank an anonymous reader for this observation, which was pointed out to me during the editorial process.

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