

How folk linguistic methods can support critical sociolinguistics

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Abstract

This paper argues that folk linguistic research methods have much to offer critical sociolinguists concerned with linguistic inequalities and power structures. In as much as critical theory considers knowledge as inherently woven into power relations, the folk linguistics research tradition shows that knowledge about language and the sociolinguistic world is not only the domain of academics but also resides, and is actioned, in the community. This paper specifically explores the contribution folk linguistic research methods can make to critical sociolinguistics. The paper argues that folk linguistic methods are not only well-placed to identify and trace community-based claims of knowledge that create and sustain inequalities between languages and speakers, but also allow us to localise sociolinguistic knowledge by understanding local phenomena through local world-views. Ultimately, this helps to decolonise sociolinguistics by voicing, legitimising and indeed applying more ontologies and epistemologies of language than those from the West that generally still dominate sociolinguistic scholarship.

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1. Introduction

Language is as much a social phenomenon as it is a cognitive one, meaning it attracts human interest, inquiry, metacommentary and, therefore, knowledge claims. The social experience of language is central to critical sociolinguistics dating back to the pioneering works of Hymes (1962, 1972) and Gumperz (1964). It asks us to interrogate how human engagement in and about language structures inequalities and power relations between languages and speakers akin to the broader interests of critical theory (Horkheimer, 1982). Central to these inequalities and power relations is the role and influence of knowledge (Foucault, 1980; Habermas, 1978). Knowledge, whether its genesis is in an ontological world-view or is idiosyncratic such as hear-say, is laden with claims of what is true and what is not true at any one point in time. Each instantiation or expression knowledge – whether about language or other social phenomena – pedestals one epistemic view over other possible views. Critical sociolinguistic research, where knowledge has been identified and seen operationalised, tends to have been undertaken through methods most traditionally affiliated with critical theory. These include, for example, critical analyses of political discourses (Johnson, 2011; Wodak and Meyer, 2009) and ethnographies (Duchêne and Heller, 2012; Hornberger, 2002; Hymes, 1962) that identify, for example, normative claims about language that ultimately value certain languages and speakers over others, and epistemological

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conflicts where languages and cultures come into contact. However, in as far as people in the community claim to know about linguistic phenomena, and indeed discuss and action that knowledge, then folk linguistic methods can also help to identify and analyse truths and logics that create and sustain grassroots inequalities and power structures that concern critical sociolinguists.

Following a discussion about the power-laden nature of knowledge and its relevance to critical sociolinguists, this paper specifically analyses how the core research techniques in folk linguistics, as presented by Preston (2011), can support critical sociolinguistics. On the one hand, folk linguistic research methods can equip critical sociolinguists with more methodological tools for elucidating linguistic inequalities and power structures as they manifest in the community and are realised through knowledge claims (Mesthrie, 2000). On the other hand, they can simultaneously address epistemic inequalities within sociolinguistic scholarship itself about the nature of language. The paper therefore also argues that folk linguistic research techniques can respond to the increasing call to localise knowledge in sociolinguistic research so that language phenomena can be understood through local perspectives rather than through external theory (Canagarajah, 2005). Academia itself is an agent of power in that it can value, devalue, include and exclude particular world-views when authenticating knowledge. In as far as critical theory asks us to acknowledge diversity in world-views about the nature of language and to be aware of implicitly pedestalising western knowledge (Widdowson, 2001) then “injustice is almost by necessity its result” (Blommaert, 2009: 18) and will plague our scholarship if we do not. This means folk linguistic research methods can contribute to the decolonisation of sociolinguistic theory and method by understanding, voicing, legitimising, and indeed ultimately applying more ontologies and epistemologies of language than those that generally premise current scholarship (Smakman and Heinrich, 2015).

2. Critical sociolinguistics and knowledge

This paper sees critical sociolinguistics as residing at the intersection of language in society and critical theory more broadly with its concern for linguistic inequalities and power (Mesthrie, 2000). That is to say, in the case of this paper, critical sociolinguistics concerns “processes by which systems of social inequality are created and sustained” (Tollefson, 2006: 43) specifically in respect to languages and their speakers (rather than, for example, language use as accommodating and expressing other social inequalities) and upholds a scepticism of any normative claims about how language in society operates (Dean, 1994). Epistemologically, its genesis therefore lies in the established field of critical theory, as it relates to society in general, especially the Marxist tradition that brings attention to the plight of the marginalised and seeks to “liberate them from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer, 1982: 244). In doing so, it advances scholarship that “rejects epistemological assumptions” and “obscures all versions of truths” (Alvesson, 2002: 1) as they may pertain to how language as a social phenomenon can be understood ontologically and epistemologically.

A critical view on language in society has existed since pioneering sociolinguistic work, especially from Hymes (1962, 1972, 1996) and more recently by Silverstein (1996), that argued that language is not only a cognitive property akin to Chomskyan linguistics, but also a social phenomenon subject to social influences and regulation. The proof, it is argued, is in the speech community, whereby unique linguistic resources and strategies are socialised in order to achieve communicative goals, without necessarily adhering to the prescriptions of a defined language. The socially embedded nature of language from this perspective means language is also subject human evaluation whereby communities can hold normative claims about how language in society operates. This in turn creates and sustains power structures and inequalities between speakers of different language varieties when certain claims or conventions are pedestalised over others. Hymes (1996) reminds us that while there is no empirical reason to believe that individual languages can in themselves be unequal, “linguistic resources do, in fact, come organized in the world” (p. 25). To this end, matters such as linguistic diversity, the medium in which language is expressed, the structure of language and the function of language become subject to different vantage points and therefore problematisation, debate and critique. The notion, then, is that certain beliefs become socially conventionalised, even hegemonic. Critical implications arise when such socially-constructed conventions about language encounter complex linguistic repertoires and alternate linguistic practices whereby non-conforming language and speakers are marginalised. Hymes’ (1962, 1977) ethnographic work brought our attention to diversity in how the sociolinguistic world can be organised and understood.

For critical sociolinguistics, this has brought us to research, question and challenge social conventions about language in the interest of diversity and giving voice to the marginalised. For example, a linguistic epistemology that directly ties language to nationhood and pedestalises a specific variety as the standard to the exclusion of other varieties, or sees societal monolingualism as normal and necessary (Wright, 2003, 2007), is well-traversed in critical scholarship. This inspires critical ethnographic work such as Hornberger’s (2003) that investigates how the assumed normativity of English monolingualism in the United States is operationalised in classrooms and disadvantages diverse literacy repertoires. However, critical sociolinguistics can also be pursued through methods beyond ethnography. Critical discourse analysis (CDA), for example, takes an interdisciplinary approach to analyse spoken and written texts as social

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