

AMERICAN SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND SOUTH ASIA*

Rajendra Singh
Professor of Linguistics
Université de Montréal
Montréal, P.Q., H3C 3J7

Abstract

Since Shapiro and Schiffman's (1981) declaration that South-Asia was open again for investigation à la American mainstream sociolinguistics, the rush has been on to apply the mainstream American models to that territory. Shapiro and Schiffman's own book is largely a programmatic defense of the Labovian model, the superiority of which for the South-Asian context they take for granted. At a slightly more macro-level, Gumperz (1982 a and b) and Valentine (1985 and 1986) claim South-Asia for the discourse-strategy model of American interactional sociolinguistics. These analysts apply the currently fashionable American models to the South-Asian situation, and claim to find what their models predict.

The purpose of this paper is to argue that ironically the South-Asian situation clearly brings out the fundamental flaws of these models, flaws that should generate some reflection on the alleged relevance of these models even on native American grounds.

We shall show (i) that the variable-rule account short-changes both phonology (cf. Singh and Ford 1989) and society (cf. Singh and Lele 1989); and (ii) that the discourse-strategy account unwarrantedly 'culturalizes' dubious "linguistics" findings, particularly in the domain of cross-sex communication (cf. Singh and Lele 1990). The variable-rule account postulates "phonological variables" that are deducible from principles of prosodic organization (cf. Singh 1987) and "social variables" that are deducible from principles of social organization (cf. Singh and Lele 1989). The discourse-strategy account is, similarly, possible only if hierarchical power is systematically ignored. (cf. Singh et al 1988). Our examples will come from Hindi and Indian English.

I. Introduction

Given the fact that the relationship between language and society can be neither perfect nor completely absent, the specific socio-historical conditions in which a language-scholar finds himself and his own inclination may push him to either examine that relationship or leave it alone. Situated in a frontier province, severed from his history (cf. Deshpande 1983), and faced with a moment that must have seemed the last one in which sense could be made with native-speakers (cf. Lele and Singh 1987), Panini turned not to writing about the imminent death of his language but to capturing what Koster (1987:376) calls "the patterns we find on the wings of butterflies". The story of Kalidas, masquerading as a palanquin-bearer in order to embarrass Bhoj, however, only underlines the fact that by his time the description of the patterns on the wings of butterflies had already become a normative enterprise, and the grammarians, in trying to preserve Sanskrit, were merely helping bury it. A reaction, typified by Yaska, had already begun, and the Brahmanic hegemony had more immediate tasks to accomplish. What had to be preserved was not Sanskrit but the class its speakers came from. The first sociolinguist of classical India was, thus, at best an unwilling partner in the perpetuation of superiority myths that later forced a Marathi saint-poet to ask: "If Sanskrit is the language of gods, is Marathi the language of thieves?" Although Yaska, like all good sociolinguists, used only descriptive labels, the Orwellian enterprise of the hegemonic appropriation of his labels did not take long (cf. Mehrotra 1986), for some animals have always been more equal than others. Otherwise, the very enterprise of teaching the mother-tongue -- the sort that was inaugurated in Europe by Queen Isabella (cf. Illich 1983), and in India after Panini -- would raise some interesting questions, to say the least.

The problem is not that the scholar concerned with the relationship between language and society is fundamentally more predisposed to ideological appropriation, but that he is in the unfortunate position of having to preside over the elimination of his discipline (cf. Hymes 1973). It is perhaps this existential predicament that makes him particularly sensitive to the sense that is left out from the enterprise of discovering the beauty of the patterns on the wings of butterflies. He is however quite right in pointing out that there is more in the world

of language than butterflies. There is, in other words, not only grammar but also languages and, above all, people who speak them, people working hard for absentee landlords and invisible machines of various shapes and sizes.

What I want to do in this paper is to show that the sociolinguist, at least the North-American variety, does not seem to reflect on his own activity, particularly when it comes to applying his models. If he were to show the same reflective ability and sensitivity towards his own enterprise as he does towards the butterfly enterprise, he would perhaps do things differently. I wish, in other words, to pursue not his critique of the butterfly enterprise but the dimensions along which his own enterprise seems to falter. I shall do so by looking at two dominant American sociolinguistic paradigms: (i) the variable rule paradigm, inaugurated by William Labov; (ii) the interactionist paradigm, which now has a handbook, a sort of do-it-yourself guide, and more than a couple of "standard reference books". Since the latter extends into more social peripheries than I have the time to discuss, I shall concentrate on only a few and focus on its extensions to South Asia.

II. The Variable-Rule

I shall begin by considering the construct variable rule, the dominant American tool for making sense of sound-systems within the social matrix. That consideration will, I'm afraid, be rather technical, partly because it is a technical matter and partly because our age does not allow non-technical challenges to allegedly scientifically gained insights. Things will, however, get non-technical a little bit later. In phonology the device variable rule operates with two sets of variables, 'phonological' and 'social'. I shall begin with what American variationists call "phonological variables".

The paradigm case here is that of word-final consonant deletion. The phenomenon has been studied extensively by, amongst others, Guy (1974), Labov (1971), Terrell (1977) and Tranel (1976). Labov proposes the following universal constraint on word-final consonant deletion:

- (1) +cons \rightarrow $\langle \emptyset \rangle$ / [+cons] $\langle \emptyset \rangle$ -- ## \langle -syllabic \rangle

His interpretation of (1) is given in (2) below:

- (2) "The rule asserts that whenever a final consonant is variably deleted the rule will operate more often if another consonant precedes it, if it is an integral part of the word and not a separate

morpheme, and if it is not followed by a word beginning with a vowel" (pp. 272-73).

The right questions to ask regarding (1), it seems to me, are: why should the deletion depend on (a) a preceding consonant, (b) a following vowel, and (c) the lexical/grammatical status of the segment in question?; and (d) what is common between the phonological variables (a) and (b)? Suppose the rule is not what Labov, ironically following the theory he doesn't like, says it is and that what it really does is to reduce moras (defined tentatively as number of segments in the rime). Now a VVC rime (3 moras) can be reduced to a 2 mora rime either by deleting the final C or by syllabifying it with the vowel to its right if there is one. If what is to its right is a C, it would predictably be far more difficult to achieve this mora-reduction (the onset possibilities in the language will play a crucial role). Substantive constraints on possible onsets of the type discussed in Singh (1981) tell us that the putative target of deletion is more likely to form a possible complex onset with a liquid than with another obstruent.

Given "an external sandhi language" (in the intended sense), a mora reduction phenomenon, and substantive constraints on syllabification (defined in terms of (a) sonority hierarchy and (b) universal syllabic template, as in Kiparsky (1979)), almost all of what the variationist says in a rather complicated way follows.

Now, consider a South Asian extension of this strange creature, the variable rule. On the basis of alternations such as those in (3), Srivastava (1969) postulates a rule such as (4):

(3) tabla 'drum' tabelʈi 'drummer'

namkin 'salty' namək 'salt'

(4) $\emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset / VC \text{ ___ } CV$

Now, confronted with the situation described in (5), one may feel, as some have, forced to throw in the towel on (4) and enshrine the variability in a rule à la Labov (1969), something like (6).

(5) (a) be+pəra \approx → bepəra 'illiterate'

*bepra

(b) ɐ+səməy \approx → ɐsəməy 'untimely'

*ɐsməy