The Sociolinguistics of Literacy

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1. Background

It may be possible for human beings to have abstract or analytical modes of thinking that do not rely on concrete contexts after their acquiring literacy skills. This is a premise under the so-called "Great Divide" theory, first postulated by Goody and Watt (1963). Luria (1976), owing much of his ideas to Vygotzky, also attempted to find direct proof of the theory by conducting various kinds of psychological experiments under the auspices of the field of cognitive psychology. Following Luria and Vygotzky, Scribner and Cole (1981) also sought answers to the same question. Based on more sophisticated psychological experiments than those done by Luria, which were conducted in Vai communities in Liberia in the 1970's, they constituted an attempt to find direct relationships between the acquisition of literacy and an abstract mode of thinking. However, none of the data they obtained, based on laborious experiments, ethnographic observations and interviews, produced any meaningful clues with enough significance to prove their hypothesis. Since Scribner and Cole's study, no other scholastic research has been conducted in an attempt to test the hypothesis.

One of the reasons why it might be impossible to find direct relationships between literacy skills and cognitive skills such as analytical/abstract modes of thinking is that literacy practice is not a purely cognitive one. We need, of course, to accept the fact that some literacy practices have cognition-oriented aspects. Consider the case of a Japanese first-grader who is taught to read and write each hiragana. He is encouraged to discover character/sound combinations, a primarily cognitive task.

However, even though such a practice tends to be regarded as a "purely" cognitive one by some educators, in some cases we need to regard most of the learning experiences like simple character/sound combinations to be also social practices, particularly if they occur in educational settings. Generally, in any educational setting, there must be at least two participants--the teacher and the taught. If the teacher has a dominant cultural background and if the taught is in the role of the dominated, then the taught might have difficulty pronouncing the "proper" sounds for certain letters.

It can be said that aspects of power/knowledge (if we borrow from Foucault) have been neglected in current Labovian sociolinguistics. Although sociolinguistics has been regarded as a discipline involving the study of the relationships between language and society, the

aspects of power/knowledge, which necessarily accompany language practices, have almost been forgotten in the actual endeavors of sociolinguists. This is so not because sociolinguists are trying to avoid any research which is in any sense "political," but because current sociolinguistics as a discipline as such has a tendency to neglect such attempts. This situation urges us to reconceptualize what sociolinguistic research should be.

2. Literacy Studies

2.1. Literacy: Skills to Be Measured

Literacy has been discussed in various disciplines from education to legal studies. Literacy has not been regarded as a topic that must be extensively examined in linguistics. Rather literacy, in the field of linguistics, has been a minor concern, particularly because it, in most cases, has been conceptualized as universal reading and writing skills. This conceptualization inevitably has led researchers into a trap in which they take literacy practice as cognitive practice. Researchers have been encouraged to study cognitve aspects of reading and writing skills, which will help children learn how to read and write.

It was Freire (1970) who showed that literacy acquisition is greatly influenced by the social and cultural environments in which learners are put. His understanding of literacy was based on his literacy education in Brazil, where even today some "slavery" is observed (Schemo, 1995:A1,A6) and the literacy rate is low. Freire's understanding of literacy has developed mostly in the field of literacy education, and some North American researchers in education have shown great interest in it. However, sociolinguists have not incorporated his understandings on literacy in their pursuit of the relationships between language and society. Even though they accept the notion that language reflects society or vice versa, literacy from Freire's point of view is not a major concern in their discipline.

Within Freire's framework of literacy education, it is impossibe to take reading/writing skills as universal/context-free skills which can be applicable in any situation where literacy is involved. One of the reasons why it is so is that literacy education is impossible when the taught are considered to be ready to absorb knowledge given by the teacher. For the participants in any Freirean literacy education, literacy is not the universal skills of reading/writing, rather it is a means by which they can "read the world." Reading the world means that a person who acquires literacy can obtain the means to free himself from any oppressive predicament he is forced to accept in the society.

Freire's reinterpretation of literacy is very radical in the sense that literacy practice (part of language use) cannot be studied without reconsidering how literacy is viewed in a given society and why greater values are placed on certain types of literacy, particularly literacy

shared by the mainstream groups in a society. However, literacy, if it is practiced in that way, becomes violence (Stuckey, 1991).

It is interesting to see that Freire's idea is well incorporated into the literacy campaigns promoted by UNESCO. One of the chief purposes of those campaigns is to facilitate literacy education for those who have no "functional literacy." The idea of functional literacy was most vocalized in 1965 in Teheran (UNESCO, 1965), and it has been accepted in the field of literacy education. Functional literacy, in other words, is defined as reading/writing skills that function well enough for a person to live in a given society. Even from this simple definition it is clear that the concept of functional literacy involves political decisions when it is actually carried out in a given literacy education program. Freire showed in his studies this unarticulated fact that literacy education (or any other kind of educational activity) always has "political" aspects.

But any concept such as Freire's understanding of literacy can be read only "technically." In other words, his conception of literacy is applied to any literacy education program under the auspices of technical education in which learners are just expected to acquire universal reading/writing skills. One of the reasons is that for those who take literacy as the skills of reading/writing, literacy is recognized as skills which can be measured with certain standards that have been set by a given mainstream norm in a given society. Then literacy skills acquired by participants in literacy programs are measured even though it is impossible if they accept Freire's view in their educational practices.

Literacy skills are easily seen as skills which can be measured by certain standards. This view is quite effective when those skills are measured for the purpose of dividing individuals in order to allot them certain places in a society. This is why literacy tests are used on any occasion when individuals are must be allocated places on the social ladder. Most of the literacy research conducted so far has been accorded this "political" understanding. Scribner & Cole (1981) also share the same view on literacy. Their purpose of conceptualizing literacy was to produce empirical evidence to prove that modes of human thinking are developed and categorized by literacy. Their premise hold that literacy is preconditioned to be measured by statistics or means such as psychological tests.

Functional literacy has also been taken as a set of skills to be measured by tests. It has been taken as a basic concept for building a civil society. Failure to acquire literacy condemns citizens to an "uncivilized" life. Therefore, literacy is to be taught to every citizen, and consequently education becomes involved.

Schools as educational institutions are expected to play an important role in achieving the objective. Schools are believed to have been set up for teaching reading/writing skills. Students in such institutions

are then taught, tested, and then taught again to determine if they have mastered a given level of literacy. In this pattern of education, nobody doubts the possibility that literacy can be measured.

2.2. Historical Perspectives on Literacy Education

The standard of literacy skills to be expected for every citizen to possess has also changed. Historically viewed, the meaning of literacy has also changed. Literacy has been considered a minimum requirement for the development of a civil society. This "literacy myth," however, has led us to think that literacy is a sign of modern citizenship. Thus literacy and a particular mode of thinking has been combined in our understanding of literacy. Literacy and analytical/abstract modes of thinking are considered to exist in parrallel. However, as Graff (1979) showed, it is a modern myth. The standard of literacy has changed because it is under the influence of the political/cultural climates of a given age and society. This inevitably leads us to think that literacy cannot be studied without taking into account the cultural (that is, political) background in which literacy is embedded. Therefore, researchers' attitudes toward the researched must be critically examined.

3. The Sociolinguistics of Literacy

3.1. Empowering Research

One area in which reasearchers' attitudes is clear is the concept of the "observer's paradox." For positivist/objectivist sociolinguists, the subjectivity of the observer (that is the researcher) is an element to be avoided in the pursuit of scientific objectivity in linguistic reasearch. But as they themselves admit, it is very hard to do so, hence, the reason for labeling the phenomenon a paradox. In their understanding the relationship between the researcher and the researched, therefore, the final goal of their studies is to find some "regularities" in various linguistic usages in a certain society. In doing so they try to emphasize that their observations are "valuefree," which is one of the desirable conditions for positivist researchers. However, if we take "empowering research" as the goal of sociolinguistic studies, such a positivistic approach threatens the position of sociolinguists who try to show their advocacy in their research.

No sociolinguists, I believe, would deny the advocacy position that their researche helps the researched. For example, Labov started a line in his paper: "Much of the research that I have done on language change and variation has been motivated by the thought that the results may help to understand the failure of the school system to teach reading and writing to inner city youth"(1987:128). This is a clear articulation of his advocacy position in relation to his academic pursuit. As is clear to most of the sociolinguists who know Labov's research, he has been

trying to find some regularities to explain linguistic change. But this approach is not in harmony with his advocacy position because, as Cameron et al.(1992:17) states, "advocates pay their debt to the community by countering error and bias with the objective factual truth to which their expert status gives them privileged access." She also states, "there are regularities to be discovered in the social world, but they are there because of people's bias, intentions, understandings and learning. Social scientists have to be concerned with what produces regularities as well as with the regularities themselves"(p.12).

In order for sociolinguists to do this, Cameron explains, "empowering reasearch" should be introduced in sociolinguistics. It is a "research on, for and with," while advocacy research is a "research on and for," according to their terminology. One of the most basic elements of empowering research can be explained by how the researcher takes the relationship between the researcher and the researched. The researcher who is positivistic and takes an advocacy position regards himself as an expert who can try to avoid subjective bias in his study. On the other hand, the researcher who tries to conduct empowering research thinks of himself as a researcher not only with expert knowlege but also with the idea that the researcher's knowledge is or must be constructed out of the knowkedge of the researched.

Such a difference between empowering research and advocacy research based on the positivistic view is well explained by Freire's understanding of the relationship between the teacher and the taught. He does not see the teacher as an expert who gives certain knowledge to the taught who does not know it. In his understanding, (literacy) education succeeds if the teacher takes his position as a participant who creates, with the taught's cooperation, a new understanding of the world where the teacher and the taught live.

But how can it be possible in our sociolinguistic research? The positivist would reply that such empowering research is biased, and it is too valueladen to be social science research. Nonetheless, we cannot pay less attention to the possibility of sociolinguistic empowering research. It is because the limitations of the positivistic approach are clear. It is impossible for positivistic advocacy research to explain what produces regularities, which tend to be regarded as a norm in their framework.

3.2. The Linguistics of Social Contradictions

The positivist would argue that social class stratification would explain part of such regularities. However, we need to note that those regularities are regarded as part of a "speech community." In this community are found sociolinguistic regularities. This understanding of what constitutes a speech community is based on a Labovian sociolinguistic premise that language reflects society. But what is a

speech community? What kind of language is referred to here? What kind of society is talked about?

One of the most important critiques is given by Williams (1992). The speech community in which Labov and his followers are trying to study language is the one where the speakers have in common certain linguistic features and the subjective values which are dominant in the community. He states, "The shared norms in this respect are speech norms allowing him (Labov) to discuss his very specific conception of social class by reference to his concept of speech community. The consequence of this is that any findings that derive from his study are limited to the speech community from which those findings derive, thus making any generalisation to the wider society difficult to say the least"(p.81). This means that a speech community is not an objective entity but a subjective one. This reinterpretation of the concept of a speech community is a fatal blow to the positivistic approach to language. Here we are required to redefine the notion that language reflects society.

One attempt to define speech community is given by Collins (1993). He focuses on a sense of contradiction in sociolinguistic research. A contradiction, according to him, can be explained as follows: "the students are simultaneously (self-)disabled and achieve collective insight, in advance of their conforming peers or the liberal staff who would 'reach' them"(p.127). He calls this situation a dilemma, in his own words, "they [educational systems] must profess egalitarian ideals while rationing class privilege"(p.128). Based on Bourdieu's "linguistic habitus," Collins is trying to construct a "linguistics of social contradictions." Educational systems play an important role in establishing linguistic norms, which can be found in the concept of a speech community as defined by positivistic sociolinguistics. Citing Gee (1989), Collins states, "the development of mind and social persona through discourse is always a contradiction-ridden experience for dominated groups"(p.132). Discourse, in other words, is "cultural creation of a certain kind"(p.127).

3.3. Literacy and Discourse

Gee (1990) redefined the notion of discourse along with "empowering research." But he uses the capitalized "Discourse," which is different from lower case "discourse" in "discourse analysis," one of the sociolinguistic enterprises. He states:

> A Discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network," or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful "role" (p.143).

He also urges us to recognize two kinds of Discourses--primary and secondary. He states, "All humans, barring serious disorder, become members of one Discourse free, so to speak. This is our socioculturally determined ways of thinking, feeling, valuing, and using our native language in face-to-face communication with intimates which we achieve in our initial socialization within the "family" as this is defined within a given culture"(p.150). The primary Discourse, according to Gee, can be acquired relatively easily; however, the secondary Discourse, which is learned in such public institutions as "schools, work places, stores, government offices, businesses, churches, etc"(p.151) is more problematic. The most important point is that secondary Discourses cannot be obtained through acquisition, but only through learning. This is why he defined literacy as "mastery of, or fluent control over, a secondary Discourse"(p.153).

Here we can recognize that literacy should not be taken as a social norm in a given speech community. Rather we must view literacy as a cultural creation, which reflects social contradictions in Collins' sense.

3.4. Non-Written Ordnung: A Case of Old Order Amish

One of the examples of such a view can be found in the literacy practices of Old Order Amish communities in North America. The Amish are often described from a nostalgic point of view: a religious sect adhering to a "holy" way of living without violence or any other societal negatives. Such a view constitutes an oversimplified understanding of the Amish. They are not "people of the past." However, the purpose of this essay is not to criticize such a view. I will point out here only one aspect of their literacy practices.

Amish people in each community (in the ordinary sense) have a set of shared rules, which are called Ordnung. If a certain member cannot follow the rules, he can be socially "shunned" or avoided. However, even though Ordnung is a norm in their community, those rules have not been written down since their history began nearly 300 years ago.

They know howimportant reading/writing skills are in daily communication, although education of their children does not surpass the eighth grade. They also insist that all the members of their community must share the normative Ordnung.

But why are the rules not written down? One reason is that those rules always change. But this explanation is not sifficient because rules can be rewritten when they change. I think one of the chief reasons for the unwritten rules is the recognition that the power of written language is different. Viewing it from Gee's perspective, it may be said that they know that Ordnung might become a secondary Discourse once the rules are written down. But a secondary Discourse, following Gee, cannot be "acquired." It is only "learned." They try to avoid raising children who boast of learned knowledge.

Here we can observe an alternative view on literacy, which is

radically different from ours. It might be argued that such a view of literacy cannot be throughly explained if we define "speech community" with positivistic notions.

4. Summary

I have tried tp show that literacy should not be taken as universal reading/writing skills applicable in any literacy event. To avoid such an objectivist view of literacy, sociolinguists need to redefine the notion that language reflects society. They also have to reconceptualize the meaning of speech community. Such attempts have been seen the births of concepts of "empowering research" and the "linguistics of social contradictions." Finally, I argued that the "sociolinguistics of literacy" can incorporate such endeavors to contribute to a reconceptualization of how future sociolinguistics should be.

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