

## AMERICAN SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND SOUTH ASIA\*

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

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)    θ+səməy  $\approx$  → θsəməy 'untimely'

\*θsəməy

- (c)      dɔktər + i    --- dɔktri 'medicine',  
 but        mət (ə) ləb + i    --- mətɫəbi 'selfish'

\*mətɫbi

- (6)  $\emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset / [\alpha \text{feature}_i] [\beta \text{feature}_{i+1}] \dots [\text{feature}_n]$

Ohala (1977) rightly argues that the canonization as primitives of exceptions to badly formulated rules effectively inhibits further investigations of the factors determining rule application. What is needed, she argues, is the more sophisticated rule (7):

- (7)  $\emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset / \text{VC} \_\_ \text{CV}$

Condition:    (a) There may be no + in the environment to the left.  
                   (b) The output may not violate the phonotactics of Hindi.

Since Ohala's paper is easily accessible, I shall not reproduce the various possible modifications of (4) rejected by her before making the proposal in (7). I would simply like to say that condition (a) in her formulation of (7) is redundant, given condition (b). Condition (a) is motivated by the fact that reduced forms such as those in (8) are impossible:

- (8) (a)        ʃətrənʃ + o    (b) \*ʃətrnʃo 'chess-games'  
                   pak<sup>h</sup>ənd + i        \*pak<sup>h</sup>əndi 'hypocrite'

It is redundant because clusters like -trnʃ- and -k<sup>h</sup>ənd- cannot be analyzed as concatenations of possible onsets and codas in Hindi (cf. Singh 1981).

As the other side of this coin is supposed to be social variables, perhaps we should look at them before we proceed to other things. Ohala herself provides an interesting starting point. After a penetrating critique of the Labovian attempt to promote methodology to metaphysics, she gives up on the other set and lists them as if they had nothing to do with anything. She cannot, however, be faulted too much for she does not claim to be doing sociolinguistics. Shapiro and Schiffman 1981, on the other hand, do. They explicitly take contemporary grammatical theory to task for not building into the structural descriptions of linguistic rules "social conditioning factors" and prefer the Labovian variable formulations in which variables such as age, education, ± high (prestige) and ± formal can be given their proper and rightful place (p. 54). At several places in their comprehensively programmatic

description of the Indian subcontinent, the variables  $\pm$  high and  $\pm$  formal co-occur, but that co-occurrence is of no interest in their model just as the co-occurrence of word-boundary and the feature syllabic has no particular significance in Labov's formulation above. The explanation for the latter is offered by the prosodic principle that mora-reduction is understandably more difficult if what is to the right is likely to create a complex onset (for details, see Singh 1987). The explanation for the former is available in a theory of society that predicts that the dominant will formalize their discourse habits and conventions.

It is also possible to find orders and relations that exist in "the plethora" of linguistic code-distribution in India and seek an explanation for what current research in sociolinguistics, particularly the research guided by the variationist paradigm, would like us to believe are irreducible primitives. Just as the "bewildering array" of phonological variables involved is grounded in some very general principles of prosody and rhythm, the social variables can and must be grounded in a theory of society.

My point de départ is not that variability, linguistically or socially conditioned, is not "systematic and rule governed" but that the so-called rules that claim to explain this variability don't even accurately describe it. Indian voices of dissent, such as Pandit (1972) and Pattanayak (1975), have focussed on the castist obsession of Western sociolinguistics. However, they do not point out the lack of explanatory potential of the exercise, irrespective of which variables are or are not considered. I would like to redress the balance and take a few steps towards a theory in which such linguistic and social variables can be shown to have an entirely derivative, secondary status. I also take the view that the relations and orders amongst these variables must be understood within the context of Indian society and that what needs to be undertaken is not, as Shapiro and Schiffman (1981:176) put it, detailed empirical investigations of "the kinds of phenomena now being done in the West" but a serious attempt to find reasons for which these variables pattern the way they do on the Indian subcontinent.

Take, for example, the puzzle raised by Nadkarni (1975). As the apparently motiveless (structurally, that is) reborrowing or reactivation of the temporarily suspended inherited pattern of relativization is discussed in Singh (1986), I shall

concentrate here only on the "social" puzzle it raises. Nadkarni rests his 'motivelessness' argument on linguistic grounds (i.e., that Konkani has a fully developed Indo-Aryan system of forming relative clauses) - a claim that Singh (1986) has already disputed on linguistic grounds. He then goes on to discuss some 'sociological' factors such as code-switching which are generally associated with prestige. He concludes that Kannada has no prestige in the region and hence the borrowings are based on the "functional dominance" of Kannada. In spite of the sophistication of such sociolinguistic analyses, some basic sociological questions remain unexamined. Take, for example, the following (cf. Singh and Lele 1990):

1. What is the relationship between "functional dominance" and "social prestige"?
2. Why and when does "functional dominance" necessitate modifications to the prestige variable?
3. How do different classes among the Kannadigas perceive the claims of Saraswat Brahmins about higher social status?
4. What is the "material" basis of functional dominance and the "ideological" basis for prestige claims?

Another example is furnished by the sociolinguist's analysis of aspects of Hindi. In the case of Hindi the variability in the use of Perso-Arabic phonological units such as /f/ or /z/ and in the use of "pleonastic" relative-clause, seen as arguments by Shapiro and Schiffman (1981:53ff) for the variability model, in fact raises questions of the following sort:

(i) What, if any, is the difference between standard North American variable realizations of Bach [ba:k] and [ba:x] and Hindustani variable realizations of /bāzār] and [bājār]?

(ii) Is it enough to say that the variables that "regulate" the distribution of the invitational-tag are "socio-economic background" and "formality of the context" (Shapiro and Schiffman 1981:54)?

(iii) Why does the description of the notorious schwa-deletion problem in Hindi invoke features such as [± Native], [± Perso-Arabic] and [± Formal] at the same time?

### III. Beyond the sentence

Dissatisfied with the grammarian's focus on the sentence, the contemporary American sociolinguist

suggests that we should study real discourses of language in action. Our interactionists examine stretches of discourse between bi- or multi-lingual speakers in an attempt to isolate those features of conversational inference which, according to them, make for, as Gumperz puts it, "cultural, subcultural and situational specificity of interpretation". Insight into such culturally specific inferences should, they suggest, help us understand the nature of misunderstanding in human society, particularly in advanced industrialized societies. The issue being investigated by them is how ethnicity and different cultural background determine speakers' linguistic and discourse strategies and how these differences account for communicational asynchrony.

Given its premises, it is not surprising to find, for example, that Gumperz' answers to the well-known problem of inter-racial urban living avoid such fundamental questions as institutional racism and the effect it has on individual behavior and perception. Consider, for example, his treatment of the case dealing with the "problem" of a group of Indian and Pakistani cafeteria workers in Britain (discussed in Gumperz 1982a). Although it is immediately clear to the reader that the problem at hand is not one of communication on the part of workers but rather one of perception on the part of the supervisors and clients, Gumperz sidesteps the question of prejudice. He suggests that the victims of misperception should, as he has taught the cafeteria workers to do, acquire "a strategy for self-diagnosis of communication difficulties". This "strategy", besides bestowing upon those who master it the "confidence" in their own "innate abilities to learn" seems to have the advantage of saving the energies of those whose tacit task it is to assimilate.

Contradictions abound in contemporary American interethnic interactional sociolinguistics. Consider, for example, what Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (in Gumperz 1982b) refer to as the "linguistic analysis" of a West Indian social worker's request for increased funding. Had it not been for the intervention of the other committee members, the Gumperzes suggest, the West Indian social-worker would have failed for not using standard English discourse strategies. They submit the conversational data to two sets of judges, of West Indian and British background respectively, and conclude that the different interpretations hinge upon ethnic style. On the other hand, they point to the speech of two other committee members, also typically

West Indian, but easily "interpretable for the funding officer". The "explanation", they are forced to admit, "must be a more complicated one than the clash of two different styles in rhetoric" (149). This, however, does not stop them from implying that the fault lies with the social worker himself, who, unlike his more agile compatriots, does not master the efficient rhetoric of "committee talk", of primordial importance to anyone who wants to be understood in committee meetings.

Through such "analysis" the authors end up qualifying the West Indian speaker's style of self-correction as "odd and rude" sounding. The officer's speech, on the other hand, shows, according to them, how in the "English system" "self-corrections carry a fall rise and... are ...lower in pitch and less loud". In fact, the fallacy here is twofold: (1) in informal English speech (which is after all, the most common) self-correction can feature rise as well as high pitch (consider, for example the emphatic highlighting in a sentence such as I had only 3, I'mean 2 drinks) and (2) the rather contrived style of the funding officer can hardly be said to be representative of the "English system", unless we are to believe that all or most native speakers of English sound like members of a committee perennally in full session.

Finally, the fact that another speaker of English on the committee had no trouble interpreting the intentions of the West Indian speaker, and even states that "he had made (himself) very clear" leads one to conclude that either a) the funding officer lacks, either as an individual or as a member of a power structure, cognitive faculties available to other native speakers of English, or b) the analysis of the interaction based exclusively on linguistic factors is wrong and other factors caused the officer to doubt the urgency of the social worker's request.

It is quite easy to see that these differences in verbal strategies provide convenient pegs on which to hang prejudicial hats. Such misinterpretations can themselves be institutionalized and, I submit, that any unidirectional study is a step in the direction of the legitimization of such an institutionalization.

If contemporary American interethnic interactionists want to be taken as interactional sociolinguists and not as apologists for the system, they must look, as was pointed out in Singh et al 1988, at power-structure as an independent variable. They cannot, in other words, legitimately ignore the ways in which their immediate contexts are embedded in

more inclusive social and institutional contexts. The fact that the construals of the dominated minority are almost entirely left out of their account suggests quite strongly that they are not only tolerant of the expectations of the powerful, but also willing to oblige them by justifying it with what they call "linguistic evidence".

#### IV. On Extending Interactionism

The model furnished by our interactionist has been extended to another periphery, Indian women. I shall, as my example, take Valentine's (1986) analysis of cross-sex communication in India. It is a careful attempt to infuse the theories of contemporary interactional sociolinguistics such as Gumperz (1982a) and Maltz and Borker (in Gumperz 1982b) with Indian 'empirical content' and deserves a close reading. She applies the currently fashionable model of discourse to the Indian scene and claims to find what the model predicts.

The model in question sees power, as was pointed out in Singh and Lele (1990), in structural-functional rather than hierarchical terms. In other words, it seems power as "energy" in successful communication acts. It ignores the uneven distribution of hierarchical power within a society and the contradictions that follow from it and assumes, as Maltz and Borker put it, that problems are not "the result of bad faith" (201), but of differences in the manipulation of discourse strategies. For cross-sex communication, the reasoning of its adherents goes something like this. There are differences in the speaking patterns of American men and women in cross-sex communication. In very general terms, women are "complying and attentive" to their partner's speech, whereas men tend to interrupt the speech of women, challenge their statements, and control the conversation. This necessarily leads to difficulties, which are further exacerbated by stereotypical attitudes.

These researchers believe that such difficulties can be traced back to differences in linguistic socialization and to miscommunication (à la Gumperz for interethnic problems). Hierarchical power differentials, the researchers in this paradigm grant, may make some contribution, but overall it is more fruitful to look into the different sociolinguistic subcultures of men and women. They then proceed to describe the "world of boys" and the "world of girls", suggesting that whatever differences there may be in adult speech are merely extensions of what has been

learned in childhood. Ostensibly, they stop short of questioning the reason behind such differentiation and leave the distinct impression that one simply cannot fight nature and that in any case it is more interesting to occupy oneself with symptom-analyzing activities (cf. Singh 1984). For further research they generally suggest the investigation of, for example, the speech of tomboys, lesbians and gay men, or the elderly, where, they tell us, power differences have become insignificant.

The second most important characteristic of this model is its almost unqualified acceptance of the transfer of rhetoric hypothesis (see Kaplan 1966 and others). According to this hypothesis, the discourse of nonnative speakers is shaped by the discourse conventions and strategies of their native language, usually to their detriment in the native context. It is this unmistakable nonnative color of their discourses and their  $L_1$ -conditioned mind that make it difficult or impossible for them to master the strategies of the native speaker that cause problems. Not much else is involved, not even principles of communicative cooperation (cf. Varonis & Gass 1985).

Valentine is not happy with the explanation that cross-sex discourse only reflects "the male control of macro-institutions in society" (Zimmerman & West 1975:125). Power in language, she believes, is not a measure of dominance, control, and influence but a measure of "the ability to effectively communicate and to accomplish successful discourse" (Valentine 1986:75). She sees power as "effective communication, an accomplishment understood to be satisfying in itself" (1985:196) and as "a strategy that affirms the patterns found in females' and males' speech" (1986:75). Accordingly, she proceeds to examine the strategies of "discourse topic initiation and the success rate in gaining an appropriate response and in establishing a common theme, how this discourse topic is maintained or shifted, and the organizational devices used to regulate verbal contact and conversation" (1986:75). The discourses examined come mostly from Hindi and Indo-Anglian novels and plays.

The most important empirical findings of Valentine (1986) are: (a) "the male speaker initiates conversational topics more often than the female speaker of either Hindi or Indian English" (77); (b) whereas the male speaker's questions generally (62 percent) demand a response, the female speaker's questions are almost always (78 percent) used as conversation maintenance device (77-78); (c) the

Table I. Analysis of female-male topic initiation and appropriate response success rate

	Indian English		Hindi	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Topics raised	60	87	54	64
% raised	60/147 (41%)	87/147 (59%)	54/118 (46%)	64/118 (54%)
% with question	17/60 (28%)	36/87 (41%)	26/54 (48%)	23/64 (36%)
% with statement	43/60 (72%)	51/87 (59%)	28/54 (52%)	41/64 (64%)
Successful				
% with question	11/17 (65%)	29/36 (81%)	17/26 (65%)	20/23 (87%)
% with statement	25/43 (58%)	39/51 (76%)	15/28 (54%)	33/41 (80%)
Total	36/60 (60%)	68/87 (78%)	32/54 (59%)	53/64 (83%)

Source: Valentine (1986:77).

female speaker's "utterances do not demand a response nor ensure the success of her topic and turn" (78); (d) the male speaker "rarely" makes verbal acknowledgments in response to his partner's remarks and shifts topics abruptly (80); and (e) a comparison of Hindi and Indian English cross-sex conversations intimates that the underlying sociolinguistic conventions are being transferred from first language and first culture to English (85).

The finer empirical details of her findings can be gathered from Table I.

Valentine suggests that the first four findings are to be "understood in terms of contributions to the conversation for better communication" (80). "For the female speaker the power of effective communication lies in her strategies of tying together and linking utterances to establish support and create continuity in conversation" (79). For the male speaker, on the other hand, the power lies in having "his discourse topic acknowledged, secured, adopted and developed" (79). According to Valentine, there is no question of male speakers claiming "conversational control over female speakers" here. What is involved is, quite simply, "the mutual attainment of effective communication" (79) through the use of different strategies or differential use of the same strategy (as in the case of the question form).

The situation of communicative harmony requires what McCarthy (1978:325) calls an "effective equality of chances to assume dialogue roles." Valentine's findings underline the absence of that equality (see her findings (a) and (b) in particular). The interpretive devices required to defuse the inequality she does find boggle the mind of at least this

speaker of (Indian?) English. They also cast doubt on not only uncritical extensions of contemporary American interactionist sociolinguistics but also on that way of doing sociolinguistics even back home in North America (cf. Singh et al., 1988). It could hardly be otherwise. I hope its nonrelevance abroad will generate some reflection on its alleged relevance back home, the territory Hymes (1983) so tellingly refers to as "an under-developed country."

#### V. In Conclusion

The burden of social responsibility and of the social embeddedness of language that licenses the contemporary sociolinguist's not entirely unjustified critique should not, to conclude, be allowed either to put matters of grammar -- the patterns on the wings of butterflies -- out of court or to let him live in a room without mirrors. As for the former, it will perhaps suffice to quote Engels, who, with disarming simplicity, observed: "It will hardly be possible for anybody, without being ridiculous ... to explain the economic origin of High German vocalic changes, which divide Germany into two halves" and Marx himself in his "Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy" refers to "laws and categories" that all languages have "in common", thus endorsing the butterflies. As far as the latter is concerned, let me quote from an Indian philosopher who said that the sensitive brahmin reflections must be like mirrors with eyes. I shall conclude by begging your permission not to unpack that metaphor.

#### Note

\*This paper is based on several reviews and papers on contemporary American sociolinguistics I have authored or co-authored during the last few years. I am grateful to Jayant Lele, who co-authored many of them with me, for many discussions regarding sociolinguistics and for letting me appropriate some of what might originally have been his.

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