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Linguistic Coding of Social Information and Mechanism by which Social Categories Affect the Communication Process

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ABSTRACT

In many communities, two or more varieties of the same language are used by some speakers in different conditions. Perhaps the most familiar example is the use of the standard language and regional dialect when many speakers speak their local dialect at home or among family or friend of the same dialect area but use the standard language in communicating with speakers of other dialects on public occasions. Charles A. Ferguson (1964) in his famous work on 'Diglossia' finds that in all the defining languages the speakers regard superposed variety as superior to regional dialects in number of respects. Sometimes the feeling is so strong that the superposed variety alone is regarded as real and the regional dialect is reported 'not to exist'. This attitude cannot be called deliberate attempt to deceive the questioner, but seems almost a self-deception. Even the feeling of the reality and superiority of the superposed variety is not so strong there is usually a belief that this variety is somehow more beautiful, more logical, better able to express important thoughts, and the like. And this belief is held also by speakers whose command of the said variety is quite limited.

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1. Introduction

The multiplicity of roles we have to play as members of race, nation, family, schools, club, as sons, lovers, fathers, workers, church-goers, golfers, newspaper readers, public speakers, involves a certain degree of linguistic specialization. In this sense, unity is the last concept that could be applied to language. As J.R.Firth (1964) puts it, "unity of language is the most fugitive of all unities, whether it be historical, geographical, national, or personal, there is no such thing as one language and there never has been". (p.67)

Recent empirical investigations in socio-linguistic have provide important evidence on the effect of extra linguistic influences on language behaviour and language acquisition. It has been shown that both the structure and the stylistic aspects of messages can be effected by a variety of environmental, social and psychological conditioning factors. Many sociolinguists have now addressed themselves to question like 'how is social information code linguistically and what are the mechanism by which social categories affect the communication process'?

2. Origin and Social Influence on Language

The basic position with respect to coding of social information was stated by Dell Hymes(1962)who asserts that both language and languages usage are structured and suggests that it is language usage rather than grammatical categories per se which most closely reflects social influences. This implies that from the sociolinguistic point of view every utterance has both social and referential meaning. Even a brief look at literature shows that features of any component or stream of language structure

may carry social meaning. Although social meanings may be coded almost anywhere within the linguistic system, they always require the existence of one or more referentially equivalent synonyms. It is the speaker's selection among these variables, as W. Labov (1964) has called them, which conveys social meaning.

There is further more an increasing amount of evidence for the assumption that social variation is not simply a matter of variation among isolated alternates, but that social markers occur in clusters such that selection of one of the particular set of alternates in one part of an utterance restricts the freedom of selection among subsequent sets. Social variation is thus governed by certain co-occurrence or co-variation constraints. Since, as M.Joos(1957) has pointed out ,these restrictions cut across the usual components of language, we have some justification for speaking of social variation as a selection among codes rather than a choice among individual variants. such distinctions among social codes are most clearly marked what we commonly recognise as bilingual societies; but in monolingual societies where codes are to a large extent isomorphic, co-occurrence constraints do operate and may be important.

Co-relation between speech and social categories has been well documented by many decades of research in dialectology ,bilingualism and language contact studies. In recent years, they have been validated by highly sophisticated statistical techniques. Basil Bernstein's (1972) sociological analysis demonstrates important differences in the norms or social rules underlying the informant's communicative behaviour, differences which affect their perceptions of social relationships. He argues that the genes of social class may well be carried not



through a genetic code but through a communication code that social class itself promotes, “If a social group ,by virtue of its class relation, i.e., as a result of its common occupational function and social status, has developed strong communal bonds, if the work relations of this group offer little variety; little exercise in decision making; if assertion, if it is to be successful must be collective rather than an individual act; if the work task requires physical manipulation and control rather than symbolic organisation and control; if the diminished authority the man at work is transformed into an authority of power home; if the home is overcrowded and limits the variety of situations it can offer ; if the children socialize each other in an environment offering little intellectual stimuli; if all these attributes are found in one setting ,then it is plausible to assume that such a social setting will generate a particular form of communication which will shape the intellectual , social, and affective orientation of the children”. (Bernstein, B. 1972, P. 472)

Thus the particular form of a social relation acts selectively upon what is said, when it is said and how it is said. The form of the social relation regulates the options that speakers take up at both syntactic and lexical levels. Different speech systems or codes create for their speakers different orders of relevance and relation. The experience of the speakers may then be transformed by what is made significant or relevant by different speech systems.

3. Social Setting and Context

To quote Bernstein (1964) again, “Individual come to learn their social roles through the process of communication. A social role from this point of view is a constellation of shared, learned meanings through which individuals are able to enter

stable, consistent, and publicly recognized forms of interaction with others”. (P. 252)

A social role can then be considered as a complex coding activity controlling both the creation and organisation of specific meanings and the conditions for their transmission and reception. Now, if the communication system which defines a given role is essentially that of speech, it should be possible to distinguish critical social roles terms of the speech forms they regulate.

Bernstein’s (1964) formulation of the distinction between two modes of speech-formal and public-continues to be based on social considerations. He asserts, “Although an individual will naturally shift from one type of utterance to another, depending upon the context of a social situation, there may well be series of diverse social contexts which are dominated by the use of one type rather than the other”. (P. 252)

In his view with a public language an individual interacts within a linguistic form which maximizes the means of producing social rather than individualised symbols while in the case of formal language the speaker is able to make a highly individual selection and permutation. Thus to him the public language is the major speech form of the lower working class whereas the formal language is considered the dominant and typical speech of the middle classes as different social structures emphasize or stress different aspects of language potential and this ,in turn, creates for the individual particular dimensions of relevance.

John L. Fisher (1964) on the other hand, in his attempt to answer such question as to how often members of a given subgroup use a sizeable sample of series of socially significant variants and how these frequencies of choice of variants change under different situations and in the presence



of conversant of different social status and personal relationships, presents an analysis of social factors influencing choice of linguistic variants. He asserts that even where the same factor determines the choice of alternates in several series of variants, the breaking point for each series probably be different, "...it is quite possible that one society would show a tendency, at least in some situations, to show a preference for adoption of formal forms of speech, and another in analogous situations show a preference for informal forms". (P.488)

Obviously the threshold for a given variant does not necessarily remain the same, generation after generation. If a particular variant for whatever reason gets greater prestige, it will gradually be adopted in more situations by more people; its threshold will be lowered. But as its threshold is lowed and approaches universality in the speech community, its socio-symbolic load is reduced and eventually vanishes.

An approach to social theory which is somewhat more in line with sociolinguistic finding is the integrationist approach as exhibited in the writings of E.Goffman(1963); H.Garfinkel (1956) and A.Cicoure (1968). They deny the parallelism between social and physical measurement. They point out that information on social categories is obtainable through the use of languages. Sociological measurement, in their view, always involves both the informant's and the investigator's perception of the categories that are being measured. Just as the meaning of words is always effected by context, social categories must be interpreted in terms of situational constraints.

4. How does Linguistic Coding meet its purpose?

Code-Switching, the juxtaposition of larger stretches of mother tongue and other tongue elements, is an interaction device in all multilingual speech communities. Studies on code switching have shown that bilingual speech communities employ this device as a communication strategy to convey significant social meanings such as winning arguments, expressing emotions, asserting expertise and knowledgeable, officiality, etc. Code switching in bilingual behaviour gains such deep significance with pronounced social connotations when one language is considered superior to the other in social status and becomes more prestigious. This happens due to the speaker's evolutionary reactions of the languages involved in the situation which, in turn, is conditioned by the socio-economic factors pertaining to the society which sustains the bilingual situation and the resultant social status of the respective groups associated with each of the language. In this sense, Code-Switching occurs because at least one speakers wishes to redefine the interaction by moving it in a different social arena. There is, therefore, a relationship between the linguistic code used and the social meaning of the interaction.

5. Mechanism

The sociolinguistic mechanics of language choice which make code-switching possible and even probable are the basis for the classification of switch. Jan-Petter Blom and John J Gumperz(1972), in their joint paper on 'Social Meaning in Linguistic structure: Code switching in Norway' find that each culture classifies its surroundings into a finite set of discrete categories-home, church, public square classroom etc. such settings like colour categories ,are determined both by universal and culturally specific criteria and thus vary from group to group. The speaker must scan his



environment to decide which of this classification applies, “Social meanings differ from referential meanings in the way in which they are coded. Whereas reference is coded largely through words, social meanings can attach not only acoustic signs but also to setting, to item of background knowledge, as well as to particular word sequence”. (P.285)

Simultaneously, the speaker utilises his knowledge of his audiences and their possible social identities to determine what identity relationship to assume, i.e. whether he can treat them as colleagues, close friends, equals, inferiors, superiors, casual acquaintances etc.

In their attempt to treat Code-switching systematically, Blom and Gumperz provide a classification of switches into two types-situational including shift for topic ,and metaphorical including shift for emphasis. Situational switching depends on the societal consensus that a particular linguistic variety is allocated to a particular cluster of topics, places, persons or purposes. A code switch symbolises a switch in cluster. Metaphorical switching also depends on social agreement as to the allocation of codes. However, metaphorical switching depends for its effects on a departure from the societal consensus on code allocation. As such, it is used to draw attention or to emphasize.

While illustrating some aspects of community multilingualism as it occurs among speakers of Hindi and Punjabi in Delhi, Gumperz (1964)found the social condition prevailing in multilingual societies creating a number of often conflicting tendencies. The need for frequent code-switching on the part of a large number of individual tends to reduce the language distance between codes. Linguistic overlap is the greatest in those situations which

favour inter-group contact. But ,on the other hand, the need for maintenance of at least some symbols of role specificity acts as a deterrent to excessive borrowings and thus prevents complete merger of codes. Interference will be considerably less in those situations which are specific to a single group. The linguistic picture thus shows a range of situationally determined styles of what is popularly considered the same language,

“The number and kind of Linguistic codes employed in a community and their genetic origin matters of historical accident; once a code is established it tends to become associated with the behaviour characteristic of the group that most frequently employs it. The group’s language becomes the symbol of group identity. But this does not necessarily mean that it is monolithic, far from it. Special , formal styles of the group language may be used for religious and or professional activities peculiar to the group. Other styles influenced by surrounding codes are used by those members of the group whose activities bring them into daily contact with members of surrounding groups. These conditions insure that to the extent that an individual participates in different aspects of community life, he must control the codes associated with those aspects of community life.”(Gumperz, J., 1964, P.206)

6. Function of Code-Switching

Carol Myers Scotton and William Ury(1977) in their joint work on “Bilingual Strategies: The Social Function of Code-Switching” attempt to explain ‘why’ of code switching in terms of an extension of the speaker. To them, it means to explain the relationships between the subject of discourse and the participants of an interaction and the societal norms which give a language choice its meaning. A



speaker switches codes for the two following reasons: to redefine the interaction as appropriate to a different social arena, or to avoid, through continual code switching, defining the interaction in terms of any specific arena. Code-Switching back and forth reflects the speakers' uncertainty concerning with social arena is the best ground on which to carry out the interaction with a view to the speaker's long term and short-term goals. Each social arena corresponds to a different set of norms. Each set of norms and, therefore, each social arena represent cognition about what behaviour is expected for interaction along with the limits for tolerable behaviour deviating from this expectation. Scotton and Ury (1977), however, do not expect a one-to-one link between status relationships among participants and language choice. Instead, they argue that while status is linked to language choice, the link is through role-taking and never one-to-one. A situation constraints participants in terms of which status is salient from among the several or more statuses which each person has. Moreover, a range of alternative roles is possible within the confines of that status. One the basis of societal norms and his long and short term goals, a participant decides what role to assume in a given interaction:

“Making a language choice is part of role taking. When a person chose to code switch, he is changing roles. The societal norms which apply within the context of a specific interaction give a meaning to the taking of a certain role. In this way, a language choice gets its meanings.”
(Scotton and Ury, 1977, P.10)

The initial roles taken, the language choice, at the beginning of an interaction indicates the intended social arena. Societal norms make the same interpretation possible for all involved. At any point in the interaction, a

participant has a choice to code-switch to a linguistic variety which is identified in the society with another arena. If he chooses to switch, he redefines the interaction as taking place in a new arena, and the social distance within the interaction changes. A switch may be very brief and, accordingly, the length of time an interaction is in a new arena may be very brief.

However, no linguistic variety has any single or fixed meaning for all interactions in a society. Each society has a limited set of socially meaningful attributes, one or more of which may become salient in a given interaction. Societal norms provide information about which attributes are salient in which interactions. Neither is one linguistic variety the property of any one arena.

The situation is more difficult in the case of bilinguals and multilingual who select different varieties of two or more languages to meet the requirements of different situations. Their assessment of the socio-cultural setting prompts them to use a registro-stylistic variety of a language in a particular situation and on a specific topic and then shift to a registro-stylistic variety of another language in another situation and on a different topic. They tend to switch from one code to another and then to third and so on. This means that they produce a chain of codes. Each point on this chain is a code and within each code they have a variety of networks of registro-stylistic choices. The chain may, therefore, be described as realization of underlying choices available within different codes. Code-switching may, therefore, be said to be patterned both syntagmatically and paradigmatically. Syntagmatic patterning refers to the sequential organisation of codes, to their meaningful ordering in situations; paradigmatic patterning refers to



the speaker's selection of a range of intra-code registral and stylistic possibilities.

It is clear then that code-switching cannot simply be a matter of free individual choice. As Verma, S. (1976) puts it, it is a verbal strategy used by speakers in much the same way creative artists switch styles and levels- from the sublime to the mundane or the serious to the comic and vice versa- or the way in which monolinguals make selections from among vocabulary items. Each type of coding or code-switching is appropriate to the topical and situational features that give rise to it. Certain topics are handled better or more appropriately in one language than in another in particular bilingual contexts.

Thus, in analysing the factors entering into the selection of communicative signals, it is important to distinguish between the perceptual clues and background information that serve as the input to the selection process and the actual stages that the analyst must postulate as part of his explanatory theory. The former are like the acoustic signals through which speech is identified as speech, whereas the latter are equivalent to the linguist's abstract grammatical categories. We assume that a speaker begins with a certain communicative intent, conscious or subconscious. He may want to ask for something specific: a favour, some information, or he may want to change the others' opinion or simply talk to be sociable. One of his first steps is to determine what, if any, limitations the environment imposes on his choice of interactional strategies. The three factors- knowledge of communicative intent, setting, and possible identity relationship, in turn, enter into the choice of speech events to be enacted. The speech event is probably the most general and most abstract category of verbal interaction. Speech events are bounded by certain

opening and closing routines and are associated with rules allocating speaking roles and construing choice of overt topic, message from code or speech variety to be used and, ultimately, the grammatical and lexical variables that can be used.

7. Conclusion

It must be clear that selection never completely determines the actual form of a message. It merely restricts the speaker's choice among possible alternative modes of expressions. Further selection among socially permitted alternates may then serve as a vehicle of the expression of individual meaning. The significance of the social relationships and social categorization of environment as the major social determinants of verbal behaviour is thus apparent. Outside actors such as ecology, rank and educational background significantly affect verbal behaviour to influence speaker's perceptions of their social relationships. The study of the rules governing these relationships in social organisation becomes an important part of the sociolinguist's task.

About the Author

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