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Publication date
2006

Published in
Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Flores Farfán, J. A. (2006). Who studies whom and who benefits from sociolinguistic research? *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 27(1), 79-86.

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Discussion

Who Studies Whom and Who Benefits from Sociolinguistic Research?

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The papers from this welcome and long overdue colloquium touch upon a number of research issues and their social implications. In particular, the papers pay attention to ethical questions, which relate to the social sciences in general, but which have, and only recently, been discussed in the sociolinguistic literature.

Mark Garner, Christine Raschka and Peter Sercombe's contribution to this issue points a way through this *terra incognita*. Their paper, 'Sociolinguistic Minorities, Research, and Social Relationships', opened up a fruitful discussion at the colloquium on the role and impact of research in terms of its ethical implications, expressed by the 'who wins?' question in the session's title. It is to be hoped that this sort of discussion will be continued in the sociolinguistic literature in the future. As Garner *et al.* suggest, the commitment to bring 'tangible benefits to those [endangered] communities, such as the production of material in an otherwise evanescent language', is an enormous challenge, and one that is rarely articulated from the perspective of the researchers themselves (e.g. Flores Farfán, 2001). Their paper further noted that such a commitment raises a number of challenges related to several forms of empowerment via different means, including media and the arts (for a discussion on this point see Flores Farfán, 2003a). Moreover, it is a commitment which relates specifically to empowering endangered communities to reverse language shift – a situation which researchers as 'activists' (and vice versa) need to deal with, because of the ever-present risk of perpetuating, rather than interrupting and contesting, or even transforming, unequal power relationships, which are manifested, for instance, in the asymmetric organisation of using two or more languages.

This was an enlightening session in which the papers presented revealed the embryonic development of a number of specific approaches and programmes to support speakers of minority languages. Although Holly Cashman's paper, 'Who Wins in Research on Bilingualism in an Anti-bilingual State?' (in this issue), does not touch specifically on the issues confronting endangered languages, she alludes to the interventive efforts required, even in situations where a language is strong, such as is the case with Spanish in the USA, if a minority language is to receive any kind of institutional support. It is telling that Cashman writes her paper in the first person, highlighting her

personal dilemmas, a choice that goes against the presumed objectivity of received academic regimes. Possibly, she is reflecting the isolation of her social situation as a Caucasian defending Latino bilingual education in the face of a society perceived as being individualistic and racist. Indeed, her use of the first person implicitly acknowledges her commitment to the defence of bilingualism as a resource and not as a problem, following an influential tradition, which was established in Arizona (Ruiz, 1984), where she works. Unfortunately, it appears to be problematic to place research and intervention at the same level, even though Cashman outlines an inspiring approach for facing the challenge.

It is more common in practice to separate arbitrarily the two processes, of research and intervention, as if they are discrete processes, as suggested, for example, in Adrian Blackledge's paper 'The Magical Frontier between the Dominant and the Dominated: Sociolinguistics and Social Justice in a Multilingual World' (in this issue), while speaking of discrimination not as an issue of 'academic progress' in the linguistic proficiency of Asian minorities in the UK. In the same vein, Blackledge develops a revealing analysis of the political (public) discourse which leads to the implementation of laws that discriminate against immigrants in the UK on the basis of language difference and proficiency in English as a second language. Notwithstanding which, departing from Blackledge's premise that 'methodological approaches must be able to make visible those hegemonic discourses which construct discriminatory language ideologies', the task of deconstructing racist discourses and gaining visibility at the public level is a challenge that is still insufficiently met beyond academic realms, even if acknowledging the possibility of an 'ethnography of empowerment'. In connection with this, questions as how to oppose intolerance in the form of 'common sense' albeit erroneous arguments, where in an ideal world everyone would speak English, remain largely unaddressed in sociolinguistic (or, indeed, any social science) research.

Cashman acknowledges this problematic status: all research implies effects of intervention, producing an 'impact' on its 'object', no matter how unconscious or apolitical the approach taken pretends to be. No neutral or natural approach to research exists, a matter that is often ignored in received approaches, and not only in the social sciences. With a view to developing specific proposals for action alongside research, Cashman programmatically resorts to the possibility of setting up a web site as an alternative space for the empowerment of Spanish speakers in the USA. She envisages using the Internet as a powerful outreach resource capable of providing a way to expose and oppose racism, to educate the public – an effort in public anthropology – and as a means to gain visibility, and thus respect, for Latinos and their language.

What became clear from the colloquium was that empowering minority groups and, in Cashman's words, 'extending the benefits of research to the researched' remain programmatic and emblematic goals, especially when the focus moves beyond the stage of goodwill towards bilingualism in an otherwise anti-bilingual state. The logic of research itself implies the risk of neutralising, naturalising and even perpetuating social inequalities that have

supposedly been criticised and deconstructed and, therefore, of only indirectly opposing discrimination, oppression and exploitation.

With this in mind, an approach permanently linking research and intervention is very much needed: such an approach might involve pursuing a change in paradigm that would allow programmatic statements to become forms of, for instance, political or educational action. Indeed, Cashman suggests looking at how to stimulate existing resources in order to construct innovative pedagogical models. She suggests recruiting Latino people in the sociolinguistic process or utilising Latino English varieties in formal education, as well as working on Latino interculturality in similar settings.

All the contributions to the colloquium reflected the ever present, albeit generally overlooked, question of the potential clash between the agendas of researched and researcher. Yet many instances can be found, in sociolinguistics and anthropology, of a confrontation between the perspectives of the observed and the observer. The question of who studies whom and who benefits from research is often contested, materialising as the confrontation of different interests and ideologies. As Garner *et al.* (2004) put it:

[T]he continuous emergence of different types of unfixed social relationships, established by the researcher and the researched, entails a permanent negotiation of the identities linked to different parties involved in emergent constructions of social relationships.

These emergent possibilities range from the appearance of conflict and cultural misunderstanding to the establishment of solidarity ties, as well as to much more horizontal, even intimate relationships, an aspect that has hardly been debated in the sociolinguistic literature, let alone explored for intervention purposes.

In so far as the sessions allowed for the identification of ethical and political issues that are overwhelmingly taken for granted (such as questioning the presumed neutrality of data gathering, which again reminds us of the inextricable link between research and intervention), they were extremely inspiring. However, one of the basic tenets of sociolinguistic research is that one should first identify the different biases and ethical dilemmas at work, in order to allow for the formulation of a general programme that will explore, and systematically face, similar questions. Indeed, if we are to develop an approach which is finer and more complete, more 'realist', that allows for the development of sociolinguistic theory and practice, then the complex social relationships, arising from the researcher's encounter with research subjects, should be explicitly placed in the foreground.

All researchers face ethical dilemmas that are not necessarily fully confessed. Such a situation was manifested in the set of complex illustrations provided by Garner *et al.* in the course of the research by one of the authors (Peter Sercombe). Some elders among the Penan of Borneo identified with the researcher as appealing to their rank in terms of authority, because he honoured their language and culture. This was a situation with interesting ethnolinguistic revitalising effects and an aspect that is still not fully valued, much less explored, by sociolinguists and educational practitioners. Other Penan, by contrast, perceived the researcher as a cash cow; and still others saw

him as a *port parole* of their demands towards the state. Similarly, in Mesoamerica, especially in the case of Nahuatl (e.g. Flores Farfán, 2003b; Hill & Hill, 1986), the complex dynamics of identity negotiations between the researcher and the researched may well include other power differentials in which speakers evoke the 'authenticity' or 'purity' of their language.

Several questions posed during the sessions triggered heartfelt debates around such issues as how, if at all, research can be systematically linked to intervention, or how detached the observer should be from the researched, and whether to consider the 'object' of our queries as an 'informant' or as a 'collaborator', or even as a 'co-author'. As Garner *et al.* suggested, 'no discrete parametric, categorical model resists the complex, dynamic, variable nature of language' and they illustrate from their own experience of sociolinguistic fieldwork how the relationship between researchers and researched might often entail multiple identities.

The sheer complexity of the ethical issues involved were raised in Garner *et al.*'s review of Fiske's model. These include: equality matching (perhaps the ideal social relation as it presupposes equality and independence between researched and researcher), market pricing (the most common type of relationship between observed and observer), authority ranking (in which the possibility of reversing the power roles of observer and observed arise) and communal sharing (another rare specimen in the social sciences). Again, the authors remind us that such models are subject to flux and that one-sided relationships are unlikely. Creole linguistics, advancing an understanding of complex bilingual variability, is particularly suggestive in this regard, specifically regarding ideas such as continua and the covert prestige of varieties otherwise considered 'low', stigmatised versions of a language.

A suggestive critique of the notion of empowerment is developed by John Edwards in 'Players and Power in Minority-group Settings' (in this issue). It avoids the paternalistic overtones of apparently democratic notions such as 'sharing power' or 'giving voice'. In an attempt to propose an alternative kind of sociolinguistics – also termed 'responsible' (Hale, 1992), or more recently ('sustainable') 'peace' linguistics (Crystal, 2004) – both Edwards and Garner *et al.* draw attention to a tendency towards paternalism in sociolinguistics as opposed to the idea of 'exploring commonality'. Of the contributors, Edwards' consideration of the future of endangered languages is the most pessimistic – or perhaps the most 'realistic'.

The fatalistic view implied in conceiving of language shift as the norm belongs to a meta-discursive academic regime in which fallacious distinctions between linguistic documentation and revitalisation emerge. Even if articulated as a realistic approach, Edwards' critique clarifies the currently inevitable subjectivity in carrying out research. He takes a more 'detached' position than, for instance, Cashman or Garner *et al.*, all of whom, at least, presume a potential link between research and intervention. Paradoxically, in the same vein, Edwards seems to assume that the researcher does not always have power, as expressed by instances of diglossic reversals, which do not resist dichotomous analyses. This paradox alludes to one of the dilemmas posed by the need to develop sustainable ethical sociolinguistic research,

namely, the need to disenfranchise and articulate alternative methodologies to assess the divergent perceptions at work in the research process.

Arguably, meeting this need could have potentially therapeutic effects for both sides of the relationship. If, as Garner *et al.* argue, social relationships are not fixed but negotiated, then emergent methodologies would necessarily involve different ethical dilemmas, such as bridging the gap between researchers' interpretations and interests and those of 'active interpretative subjects', no longer considered 'objects' or 'informants' of an 'objective' study. However, the quest for methodologies that are conceived of as collaborative endeavours, rather than one-sided, top-down theoretical and ideological approaches, is still poorly developed (e.g. Hornberger, 2004).

Another issue seldom acknowledged, let alone investigated, arises when the desire to understand the 'object' of our study calls into question our own political and ideological stances with regard to research practices. For example, linguists tend to apply certain instruments, such as questionnaires, for so-called 'elicitation'. However, as sociolinguists have shown, these instruments create a series of effects on the data itself, highly telling of a type of asymmetrical power interaction established in such (mis)encounters. These power relationships are associated with an interrogative conversational genre, superimposed by such instruments and its systematic constraints. This is a topic worthy of study in its own right (e.g. Briggs, 1986; Flores Farfán, 2003b; Milroy, 1987). Interrogative effects include sophisticated purist accounts of the language under scrutiny, manifested in the production of a corpus replete with (for instance) neologisms, out-of-context utterances and hyper-correction. In general, such accounts avoid bilingual material, perhaps seen as 'contaminating', and thus may destabilise the expectations of the linguist with regard to the presumed 'purity' of the language being investigated. All these processes produce a specific variety that in turn is presented as representing the language, without any further qualification.

The received writing of grammars of oral languages (as exemplified by many cases in Mesoamerica) neatly illustrates the clash of speakers' and investigators' perspectives, which may begin with what is basically the researcher's need to get the language written down. This may be followed by the construction of a prescriptive grammar representing categories superimposed by the linguistic theories at hand, which are in line with researchers' own theoretical motivation, but which may be in contrast to the manner in which a language is used by the speakers themselves in a wide range of situations. What can result is often a contradiction between the performative attitude of the speaker against the ostensibly descriptive, albeit always interpretative, attitude of the observer, with its fully fledged range of political, ideological and, of course, ethical biases and implications. Such contradictions and contrasts are manifested in, for instance, the terms researchers use to capture complex social realities such as language use. The manifestation of different ideologies in positioning the 'object' of our studies is always at stake, in that we are dealing with active subjects and not objects. A case in point is the use of the term 'informant' in linguistics or anthropology, as opposed to the much more politically correct connotations inherent in terms such as 'collaborators' or even 'co-authors'. Of course, it is not just a matter of selecting

the 'right' terminology, as a way of redressing unequal power relations. An anthropologist may be highly committed to and feel responsible for the communities (s)he studies. As Edwards points out, researchers may use the requisite buzzwords to persuade colleges or funding bodies of the benefits of their study, but still overexploit the community by conceiving of the issue of 'empowering' the community in a top-down way.

Developing an ethically committed, sustainable approach to issues related to minority languages that constitute research topics is not a straightforward endeavour; rather, it is a complex one. It is from the sort of reflections presented in this colloquium that new paradigms are envisioned and finally advanced. Indeed, the final discussion posed by Edwards brought to the forefront perhaps the most outstanding issue in the social sciences, namely, the question of separating 'basic' from 'applied' research. In Edwards' view, limiting research results to a closed academic circle and not allowing those studied to participate in the resulting discussion is indirectly disempowering minority languages and ultimately perpetuating the process of language extinction. Indeed, the question to be asked is not only 'research on, for or with?', or even 'who wins?', but 'how we can arrive at a win-win situation?' How do we arrive at a situation of sociolinguistic sustainability and peace? How can we go beyond academic tourism and discussions to a situation in which research and intervention are conceived of as one?

Some possible approaches were proposed in this colloquium: developing and socialising the autobiographies of researchers and researched alike, as they reciprocally develop the research process, was one suggestion. Another was the idea of introducing self-critique practices in order to allow for the emergence of co-methodologies. Indeed, were such a suggestion to be developed in the form of a more co-operative and participative methodology, such as when the researched become co-authors with the researchers, then a positive, shared view of the 'other' may well emerge. This colloquium made it clear that, together with research, intervention practices that are ethically grounded, not taken for granted, left unanalysed, should be explicitly articulated when considering, planning and instigating sociolinguistic research.

Indeed, if the types of ideals discussed are at all possible, then that of not only celebrating linguistic diversity, but of sustaining it, could become a 'realistic utopia', a point made by the Catalan sociolinguist Isidor Marí during his closing remarks at the 'Linguistic Diversity, Sustainability and Peace' 2004 Congress. This resonates fully with the conclusions advanced in the landmark colloquium that I have attempted to review critically in this paper.

'Sociolinguistic Research: Who Wins? Research on, with or for Speakers of Minority Languages' (in this issue) raises vital questions for the advancement of sociolinguistics, including language planning. These multiple questions range from the investigation of the most effective means to develop successful methods to stabilise indigenous languages (e.g. Crystal, 2004; Hornberger, 2004), the quest for coherence between divergent yet complementary perspectives between researched and researcher (e.g. Briggs, 1986; Marí, 2004; Milroy, 1987), the presumed political neutrality entailed in separating documentation and revitalisation of endangered languages

(Romaine, 2004), the search for a commitment to bilingualism not necessarily conceived as entailing language shift or opposing forces (Bastardas, 2004). These are all questions which further exploration would help to advance a fruitful and authentic dialogue for the construction of research as a humanistic rather than functional endeavour, as the organisers of this ground-breaking session not only explicitly espouse but, it was inspiring to note, also try and put into practice.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge my debt to Mark Garner for his encouraging comments and invitation to write this review, as well as to Lucy Crystal for correcting my English.

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