

SOME SOCIOLINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF
SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF XHOSA

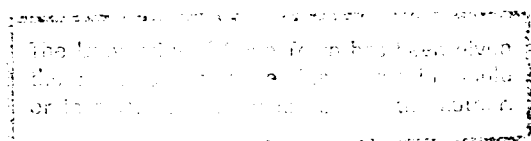
by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Winifred Nobantu and to the fond memory of my deceased father, Edward Bomvana, whose efforts and sacrifices are behind everything achieved.

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Needless to say, all the shortcomings in this thesis remain entirely mine alone.

INTRODUCTION

Motivation

During the period between March 1974 and June 1981, I was involved in the teaching of Xhosa to non-mother-tongue speakers at Rhodes University. This experience brought me face to face with problems for which my training as a teacher of Xhosa had not prepared me as my training had been in the first-language teaching and learning of Xhosa. It also sensitized me to some of the problems and contradictions that characterize the teaching of Xhosa to White learners. The sensitization itself came in the form of a frustration which was two-dimensional.

On the one hand I was frustrated by my inability to succeed fully in motivating the students. On the other, it was frustrating to witness the frustration of the learners with learning language, something which was expressed sometimes verbally and sometimes by dropping out of the course. The biggest disappointment of the learners with the course was that most of what they were taught and expected to know did not relate to what they considered to be their needs. They constantly complained that they were not getting out of their learning what they enrolled in the course for. Learners enrolled in the course because they wanted to acquire communicative competence in the language in order to

be able to interact easily with the speakers or to be able to get jobs where such competence is a prerequisite, e.g. journalism, translation, personnel management, etc. In addition to not being able to reconcile the academic components of the course (grammar, phonology, phonetics, comparative linguistics, etc.) with their needs, the learners had problems with reconciling the language variety taught with the varieties used outside the learning institution in real life communication situations. Those who came knowing some non-standard variety got discouraged when they discovered they had to unlearn almost everything they had known, because the institution expected them to acquire competence in the standard variety and did not recognize any other variety. Those who came not knowing anything found it discouraging to discover that the "pure language" they were taught did not do much to help them communicate easily with the mother-tongue speakers of the language because the speech communities into which they moved after the language classes used a different variety from that which they were taught. For example, it was not uncommon to hear a student complaining: "I was at the rugby match on Saturday and the Black guys next to me were often saying 'irabhi'. What was that word you gave us? They never used it once. And each time a player ran with the ball they shouted 'Pasa, pasa!'".

The other daunting problem for the learners was the lack of real life communication opportunities. This meant that for practising whatever they acquired from the classroom they relied on prefabricated communication situations in the language laboratory or role-playing exercises. Because of the artificiality of these situations, the learners' versatility in the language could not be satisfied. Through the working relations I had with the second language teachers of Xhosa at the local schools and with colleagues at other universities, I came to know that these were universal problems.

From my own point of view, I found it discouraging that successive attempts at devising workable strategies in motivating the learners did not yield the required results. The learners' expectations did not match their willingness to move into the community and interact with the mother-tongue speakers. The factors that militated against the development of this willingness were clearly tied up with the socio-political context within which their learning was taking place. I also found it discouraging that tertiary institutions seemed to be so chained to their language study tradition that they were not in a position to be responsive to the communicative needs of the communities they served. It became clear to me that institutions of learning, both schools and universities, treated language as an unchanging phenomenon which operated independently of

society. On the other hand, as Funso Akere (1978:409) puts it:

... several sociolinguistically oriented studies in language variation in recent years have shown that the picture of a language as a uniform, invariable and unchanging phenomenon has given way to one of considerable heterogeneity within the context of its use.

He goes on to explain why this is so when he quotes Bailey and Robinson as saying:

... because the forces of standardization have not yet completely levelled the individuality resulting from genetic make-up and rearing, removed the human impulse to gather in manageably small groups, or erased the cultural differences that distinguish group from group or nation from nation, language must be as various as the groups who use it and the activities they engage in.

As a result of these experiences the following observations were inevitable:

- (a) that, because language is a social phenomenon that is as dynamic as the society within which it operates, institutions of learning should keep up with the effects of social dynamics on language, so that their teaching should be able to meet the linguistic communication needs of the learners

- (b) that most of the problems that inhibit effective second language teaching and learning of Xhosa are rooted in the non-linguistic historical and socio-political factors that form the background against which these take place
- (c) that these factors, the personnel situation at the schools, as well as the syllabuses followed, represent a contradiction between the needs of the learners and the objectives of the second language teaching and learning of Xhosa, on the one hand, and, on the other, the means to satisfy these needs and achieve these objectives

The Scope

Apart from attempting to uncover some of the problems that the second-language teacher and learner of Xhosa have to contend with, the aim of this thesis is to draw the attention of the language practitioners and language education policy-makers to the following:

- Because of the non-linguistic historical and socio-political factors that inhibit access to the target language and its speakers and, therefore, the development of integrative motivation, any programme of second language teaching should include a programme of

reorientating attitudes and perspectives, whether overtly or covertly.

- The growing awareness on the part of White communities of the need to acquire communicative competence in African languages requires that the potential of the current language teaching and learning programmes to satisfy the needs of the people be seriously re-examined
- In the light of the inevitable effect of social dynamics on language, as well as in the light of the needs of the learners, the role of non-standard varieties of language in human interaction can be ignored only at the risk of not achieving the objectives of second language education.
- The South African government authorities need to rededicate themselves to the cause of second language teaching of African languages by taking and implementing decisions aimed at eliminating all those factors that inhibit effective teaching and learning, on both a short-term and long-term basis.

Summary

This thesis is divided into five chapters.

Chapter 1 deals with the theoretical issues involved in the study of language as a social phenomenon. It traces the development of the sub-discipline of sociolinguistics and the contribution of sociologists and anthropologists to the study of the relation between society and language. It is the aim of this chapter to emphasize the need for an empirical study of the effects of social dynamics on language, in order to appreciate the implication of non-linguistic social factors in language teaching and learning.

Chapter 2 outlines the importance of undertaking sociolinguistic surveys of languages before embarking on any second language teaching and learning programmes. This facilitates planning and ensures that the programmes do tie up with, and have the potential to meet, the needs of the learners.

Chapter 3 gives a historical perspective of the teaching and learning of Xhosa in White institutions in South Africa. ~~The aim of this chapter is to show how a country's language education is inextricably bound up with its socio-political history.~~ It is also intended to give a historical background against which the problem of social factors pervading the second language teaching and learning of Xhosa today should be understood.

Chapter 4 is divided into three main sections. The main section (paragraphs 4.2.1 to 4.2.4) gives a breakdown of some social factors that have a significant effect on second language learning in general. The ~~second~~ section (paragraphs 4.3 to 4.3.3) deals with how these factors are implicated in the second language teaching and learning of Xhosa in South Africa. The third section (paragraphs 4.4.1 to 4.4.3) highlights the practical effects of these social factors. This is done by relating the problems confronting those involved in the second language teaching and learning of Xhosa to the social context within which these take place. Information about the nature of these problems was obtained through the kind co-operation of the Cape Educational Department officers who made their records available and through questionnaires completed by teachers in service and by teacher trainees. Discussions with these proved very useful in giving more insight into the problems. Examination question papers (both external and internal) as well as some teaching material were also scrutinized. I also drew on personal experiences as a second language teacher of Xhosa.

Chapter 5 is the conclusion, in which the problems of social factors are summarized. This chapter ends with some suggestions as to what could be done to minimize the negative effects of the social factors on the second language teaching and learning of Xhosa.

General

Although the learning of African languages by non-mother tongue speakers is officially referred to as third language learning, "second language learning" has been preferred. One of the reasons for this preference is that, under normal circumstances, it is customary to have a first language, a second language, and then a foreign language. The other is that all the references used for the purposes of this thesis have either been on second or foreign language teaching and learning.

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CHAPTER ONE

LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

But I would like Tom to be a bit of a scholar, so as he might be up to the tricks o' these fellows as talk fine and write with a flourish. ... I want him to know figures, and write like print, and see into things quick, and know what folks mean, and how to wrap things up in words as aren't actionable.

George Eliot 1980 : 9

1.1 Introduction

I start this chapter by quoting two different utterances made by a character in George Eliot's Mill on the Floss. When Mr Tulliver uttered the above he was, unconsciously though it may have been, making a statement about how language operates in society. This, of course, is putting it in a nutshell. In fact, what Mr Tulliver was saying, was that:

- (i) language can serve as a mirror of social strata;
- (ii) language is of great importance in human relations;
- (iii) language has variations and that some variations enjoy higher status than others;

(iv) people can do many things with words.

Also reflected in the above utterances is one of the misconceptions about language which has, fortunately I think, been successfully disproved, namely, that those who are linguistically disadvantaged cannot "see into things quick". Because Mr Tulliver made the utterances in the context of justifying his wish to give his son, Tom, what he called "a good eddication; an eddication as'll be bread to him" (1980:8), it can be said that what he also was saying was that an educational institution should equip the language learner with linguistic skills for living. "Living" here is used not in the sense of being able to land a job which will enable one to make a decent living, but rather in the sense of being able comfortably to interact with the speakers of the language one has learnt irrespective of the variety of communication situations in which one may find oneself.

Put differently, what Mr Tulliver was saying was that he, as a member of society, had observed an inalienable relation between language, society and education. Therefore he was making an utterance which had sociolinguistic undertones.

In the following paragraphs I shall attempt to explore what sociolinguistics is and what relation there is between sociolinguistics and the teaching and learning of language.

The ultimate aim is to give a theoretical background which will help in the understanding and analysis of the practical problems that will be dealt with later.

1.2 On Defining Sociolinguistics

According to Downes (1984 : 15) sociolinguistics

is that branch of linguistics which studies just those properties of language and languages which require reference to social, including contextual factors in their explanation.

Experience with learning has, however, taught learners in all spheres of life that definitions like the one given by Downes are seldom, if ever, enough to give clarity on any particular subject. Comprehension usually emerges much more easily from more illustrative perspectives than from mere definitions. This is particularly the case in sociolinguistics because it is relatively a new discipline.

There may be a number of ways in which one can gain the perspective which may enable one to understand what sociolinguistics is. One could start off by tracing the various paradigms within which language has been studied and taught over the years, or simply consider the functional value of language in human life, one could choose to trace the emergence of sociolinguistics as a component of linguistics. I have chosen the latter approach, not because

it is the best, but because, for the purposes of this thesis, it appears to be more appropriate. (However, it would seem that whichever approach one chose to make one's point of departure towards a definition of sociolinguistics, one would come to the same conclusion, namely, that the field of linguistics could never be complete without a component that treats language as a social phenomenon.) It appears appropriate for the following reasons:

- (a) It has the potential to enable one to understand why sociolinguistics made such a late entry into the linguistic scene.
- (b) It confirms the relevance of language for other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology.
- (c) It contextualizes the perception of the legitimacy of the claims made earlier in the introduction as well as the issues to be raised later which form the main premise of this thesis.

1.3 The Emergence of Sociolinguistics as a Discipline

1.3.1 The Neglected Question

When it is said that sociolinguistics is a new discipline - and this is said quite frequently in sociolinguistic

literature - it is easy to get the impression that earlier linguistic studies or scholars of linguistics did not consider language a social phenomenon. On the contrary, there is enough evidence to show that linguists have always been aware of this since the Greek period of linguistic studies. However, as will be shown later, linguists never considered this worthy of any serious investigation. Although one cannot say with certainty why this very important aspect of language study was neglected in earlier linguistic studies, one can speculate. In Downes' definition of sociolinguistics given above, the keyword is "variation". If variation in language is the trigger that activates the interest of linguists in sociolinguistics, then one may speculate that variation in the earlier period of language study could not have been a significant issue. Man had not yet brought in as many changes to his physical and psychological environment as he did after the Industrial Revolution. The mobility of speakers was not as it is today. Communities were far more homogeneous than they are today. Language homogeneity was therefore still a reality. Early linguists were aware of dialectal differences in language as well as of the fact that speakers could, and did, use their language variably. However, the linguistic issues that they addressed were thought to be more deserving of their attention than the sociolinguistic ones. Dialects were seen as a potential threat to the preservation of language purity. Those philosophers who took an interest in

language and who were therefore pioneers of linguistic studies, were preoccupied with finding answers to such "serious questions" as the origin of language and the relation between sound and meaning. Those that continued the language study tradition were preoccupied with the notion of the preservation of language purity. This knowledge of the "pure" language, according to Thrax, facilitated:

the appreciation of literary compositions, which is the noblest part of grammar.

This view of language comes out even more clearly in his definition of grammar as quoted in Robins (1979 : 31):

Grammar is the practical knowledge of the general usages of poets and prose writers.

Even the language description revolution ushered in by the publication of Ferdinand de Saussure's lectures by his former students did not do enough to activate the interest of linguists in the factors that come into play when speakers of a language use their language. Their concern was solely with the structure of the langue and not with parole. The difference between them and their post-de Saussurean counterparts was simply that of method rather than that of subject, which in both cases was the description of the structure of language as a system. The

distinction between language and speech was merely acknowledged, but speech was not considered to have any place in linguistics. In the introduction to his Sociolinguistic Patterns (1972 : xv), Labov attempts to account for linguists' neglect of variation in language by citing some of the views expressed by structuralists in order to justify this neglect:

The second ideological barrier explicitly asserted that sound change could not in principle be directly observed. Bloomfield defended the regularity of sound change against the irregular evidence of the present by declaring (1933 : 364) that any fluctuations we might observe would only be cases of dialect borrowing. Next Hockett observed that while sound change was too slow to be observed, structural change was too fast (1958 : 457). The empirical study of linguistic change was thus removed from the programme of twentieth century linguistics. A third restriction was perhaps the most important: free variation could not in principle be constrained. The basic postulate of linguistics (Bloomfield 1933 : 76) declared that some utterances were the same. Conversely, these were in free variation, and whether or not the other occurred at a particular time was taken to be linguistically insignificant ... The internal structure of variation was therefore removed from linguistic studies and, with it, the study of change in progress.

It was also held that feelings about language were inaccessible and outside of the linguist's scope (Bloch and Trager, 1942). The social evaluation of linguistic variants was therefore excluded from consideration. This is merely one aspect of the more general claim that the linguist should not use non-linguistic data to explain linguistic change.

What is said by Labov here implies that the post-de Saussurean linguists did not only ignore social evaluation

of language change, but also did so consciously. Other sociolinguists such as Fishman and Kroeber have echoed almost the same sentiments expressed by Labov in attempting to explain the neglect of sociolinguistics in earlier linguistic studies.

However, in all fairness to the earlier language scholars, whatever can be said against their neglect of social considerations in the field, it should also be borne in mind that these did not have much relevance to their language study objectives. Moreover, sociolinguistic surveys and theories can only flourish against the background of what one can call a solid edifice of descriptive linguistic theory. Such theories themselves evolve over a period of time. Sociolinguists, who today seem to relish criticizing the structuralist, the comparativist and the transformationalist, owe much more than they are prepared to admit to these early language scholars who evolved the theoretical foundations on which sociolinguists have built. Even more is owed by sociolinguists to those scholars of other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, who, for practical reasons related to their disciplines, were the first to recognize the usefulness of language in the study of social sciences.

1.3.2 Social Sciences and Language

A study of the historical development of linguistic studies shows that descriptive linguistics has its roots in philosophy because it was the questions raised by philosophers that launched an avalanche of theories about language. On the other hand, the component of language that deals with language as a social phenomenon has evolved from the interest which anthropologists and sociologists had in language.

Since the main reason for the inclusion of this section here is to show that it took scholars from other fields to interest linguists in the study of language in society, I shall do no more than just list some of the European and American anthropologists and sociologists whose contributions in the field of linguistic anthropology and sociology of language had a significant impact of the development of sociolinguistics as a component of general linguistics. Their respective biases will not be dealt with, although their motivation generally should emerge from the remarks made. It should also be mentioned here that this is not to imply that scholars from other disciplines did not perceive language as relevant to their respective disciplines. On the contrary, politicians such as Marx and Lenin had very clearly defined views about the significance

of language in the shaping of national policies at governmental level.

Dell Hymes, one of the great figures in linguistic anthropology, traces the involvement of the British anthropologists in language from as far back as the last quarter of the nineteenth century with the appearance of Sir Edward Taylor's Primitive Culture and Anthropology in 1871 and 1881 respectively, in which he included some chapters on language (1964 : 4). But Dell Hymes himself is prepared to concede that Bronislaw Malinowski, the celebrated anthropologist, is the father of linguistic anthropology in the British Isles. Other notable scholars in the British Isles were Gardiner, Firth, Hocart and Haddon.

In France the study of the relationship between language and society was pioneered by anthropologists and sociologists as well as by linguists. The names of the linguists, de Saussure and Meillet, the sociologist, Durkheim and the anthropologist, Maus, are notable. A number of French scholars, amongst whom was Claude Levi-Strauss, continued this tradition.

In America, anthropological work among the Indian tribes motivated scholars' interest in linguistic anthropology. Among these many scholars were Franz Boas, his students, Edward Sapir and A.L. Kroeber and Leonard Bloomfield, who

also regarded himself as Boas' student. Although these scholars had their respective biases, some of which shifted from one emphasis to the other, as their involvement intensified and as a result of the influence of further research findings and ideas from other scholars, the premise of their work was undoubtedly uniform. First, they saw language as a tool that could lead to conclusive findings. Then, because their main concern was the culture of the so-called primitive communities or tribes, they came to recognize language as a culture semiotic. Hence the earlier term: ethno-linguistics. It was through observing language that they could make statements about customs, beliefs, social strata, behaviour patterns, etc. of the "primitive" communities.

However, what is more relevant for the purposes of this section of the work, is that what they all had to say about linguistics betrays their thorough awareness of the linguistic trends of their time. It is perhaps to these allusions to linguistics that sociolinguistics owes its existence. Boas, for instance, stated that:

... it was indispensable for each language to be described in terms of its own configuration, instead of on a preconceived abstract scheme, which, in practice, often came to little more than a modification of Latin grammar.