

Sociolinguistic Minorities, Research, and Social Relationships

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This paper suggests elements of an agenda for future sociolinguistics among minority groups, by seeing it as a mutual relationship that involves benefits to researcher and researched. We focus on two aspects of the relationship. One is the political, economic and social benefits that can accrue to a minority group as a result of the research. Research planned and conducted along with the minority group can result in knowledge and other outcomes that are of direct benefit to the group, and can help to ensure that short-term advantages are not gained at the cost of long-term problems. The other is the role of ethical commitment in the research itself. Universities and other bodies have designed ethical procedures that can be used as more than restrictions or an administrative hurdle. They can, in fact, operate as a blueprint for good-quality research. We argue that as sociolinguists we must engage, through commitment to the people we study, with the moral and ethical issues, which are inseparable from the study itself. Such engagement results in more profound scholarship, since as they are expressed by and within the community's discourse, the resulting descriptions will exemplify more closely the issues we are trying to describe.

Keywords: anthropology, empowerment, Fiske's four relational models, minority communities, research ethics, sociolinguistics

Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to outline a sociolinguistic research model that incorporates ethics as both an intrinsic and a functional component of its agenda.

'Who wins in sociolinguistic research in minority communities?' This rhetorical question is intended to remind us, amongst other things, that sociolinguistic research does not take place within an ethical void, and although (perhaps because) many issues are hard to resolve, they need to be aired publicly within the discipline. Researchers have a responsibility, as has been argued by a number of writers (e.g. Smith, 1999: 1), to resist the potential imperialism of social science research. Important though this is, it by no means exhausts the ethical aspects of sociolinguistic research.

Sociolinguistic research within minority communities is a form of social relationship. In our concern with behaving in a professional way towards academic colleagues and within the wider discipline, this basic

perspective is easily forgotten. It is important to be reminded that, as well as academic validity, our research practice must manifest ethical values and ways of behaving. We need to seek a research agenda that encodes 'a liberating perspective within which we see ourselves as clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe ... a quest for relevance' (Ngugi, 1986: 87). At the same time, we need to remind ourselves that interpersonal relations are changeable and multilayered, and will always ultimately elude any form of 'hegemonic ethics' (Davies, 1999: 23).

From the point of view of research as social relationship, methodological choices are determined by the nature of the relationship, and consequently methodological choice is in principle ethical. The researcher and the researched each influence the relationship, and the investigative method needs to reflect these influences. 'The belief in the ideal that benefiting mankind is ... a primary outcome of research is as much a reflection of ideology as it is of academic training' (Smith, 1999: 2).

The decision to take a social relations perspective on minority community research manifests humanistic assumptions, which we see as necessary if sociolinguistics is to contribute to increasing mutual understanding among members of society. It reflects the ideal of a vocation of intellectualism directed by an ongoing sense of liberation and illumination (Said, 1978). There is an irreducible gap between a desire to comprehend others for humanistic reasons, and the desire to use, control or colonise them.

Codes of research ethics have been long established, in the form of specific guidelines to be followed by practitioners and researchers, in fields such as medicine and law. It may be easier in such fields to develop clear codes of ethics as each has a relatively cohesive fundamental form of activity and a basic, professionally controlled qualification. (This can cause some problems for those attempting to work in interdisciplinary research within institutions.) Sociolinguistics, by contrast, draws on people, activities and qualifications from a range of backgrounds. Sociolinguists need to go beyond the statement of ethical guidelines to consider the various relationships between researcher and researched, which vary not only between contexts and cultures, but also over time. The perspective we present has methodological implications that affect the validity of the research.

We begin our discussion with a cursory survey of the development of ethical concerns within anthropology and sociology. We then consider their legacy in sociolinguistics. In the remainder of the paper we outline briefly one theoretical framework for the description of social relations perspective. We cannot provide a single answer to the question, 'who wins?', but we hope to provide a stimulus and one direction for further debate within our discipline in the attempt to articulate and evaluate some of the many answers that need to be offered.

Research Ethics in the Social Sciences

Ethical issues have been subjected to close examination and considerable debate for some time within anthropology (Wax, 2000). They arose initially from concern about the use of government-funded fieldwork for political ends. Later, growing unease within biomedical fields focused anthropologists' attention upon the treatment of human subjects in general, an issue that is arguably more complex in the social sciences than in medicine, and for which biomedical ethical guidelines are not an entirely appropriate model. Consideration of these issues led some researchers to regard the very epistemological bases of anthropology itself as an ethical question.

In summary, three main and overlapping areas of ethical concern can be identified within anthropology (Seymour-Smith, 1986), which also reflect historical developments within some other social sciences:

- the relationship between field research and official policy;
- the responsibility of the researcher towards peoples who are potentially threatened or marginalised by the research; and
- the extent to which the researcher allies him- or herself with the group under study.

In each of these areas, questions about ethics have significant implications in two ways. On the one hand, there are questions relating to the conduct of interactions between the researcher and the researched. Is it appropriate for a researcher to intervene on behalf of the people being studied and, if so, what should be the nature and extent of any intervention? It has long been recognised that the researcher comes to the encounter with the community he or she is researching with a range of goals, needs and interests, and that there is an ever-present danger that they will lead to activities that can, advertently or inadvertently, exploit, misrepresent or marginalise a community under study (e.g. Appell, 1978; Rynkiewich & Spradley, 1976). In general, contemporary anthropologists seek to separate the academic research endeavour from their own personal commitments with regard to the people they wish to study, but the complexities of the issues themselves, and the very various forms they can take in different situations, stimulate a lively and continuing literature on ethical topics. The American Anthropological Association's website invites comments on a range of papers that deal with ethical issues. Duranti (1997: 120–121) writes:

There is no way of escaping the responsibility we have as researchers to the people we study . . . We need to develop a theoretical understanding of our position and positioning in engaging in ethnographic methods.

Particularly within Marxist and Critical Anthropology, it has long been argued that there is no such thing as an ethically or ideologically neutral position within the social sciences. Any social science researcher, intentionally or otherwise, can be party to creating and disseminating an image of a social group that can be accepted as definitive and immutable by those who read the research, even though the image may not reflect the views or further the interests of that group. Reified in the literature, objectified images can lead to

perceptions that certain groups appear simplistic and static, rather than dynamic and multilayered.

Critical Anthropology attempts to describe the workings of cultural systems without supposing that they are 'homogenous, functional, a retention of the past, the result of marginality, or the creation of a dominant system' (Seymour-Smith, 1986: 58). Critical anthropologists accept diversity as basic to the human condition: the nature of, for example, social and cultural change is inevitably complex, and hence every description is partial, in both senses of the word. Furthermore, Critical Anthropology is less likely to impose a structure on a cultural system, seeking to establish a new type of ethnography that takes into account history, as well as the roles of local, areal and larger power structures and the ways in which they impinge on local communities. For these reasons, Critical Anthropology rejects the idea of the homogeneous speech community as being empirically valid or of having any substantive theoretical value.

In sociology, too, a primary ethical concern has been that of the researcher's responsibility to the subjects of research. A sensitive dimension of this is covert research (cf. Fulcher & Scott, 2003), especially as part of participant observation, when the researcher may intentionally withhold his or her identity and/or the purposes of the research, in order not to affect the behaviour of those being observed. The effects of such research have sometimes been justified on the grounds of the understanding gained from the unimpeded observation of subjects. It has also been argued that deception is a recurring part of social life, and there is no reason for sociological research to be any different (Goffman, 1959).

Whatever position an individual may take on covert research, the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2002) has established codes of practice for research, in which it is stated: 'Members have a responsibility both to safeguard the proper interests of those involved in or affected by their work, and to report their findings accurately and truthfully'.

The guidelines include extensive sections on 'Relations with and responsibilities towards research participants', 'Relationships with research participants', and 'Covert research'.

The Treatment of Ethical Issues in Sociolinguistics

Despite Shuy's (2003: 5) characterisation of sociolinguistics as 'a modern version of what used to be called anthropological linguistics', it has not yet followed the older discipline in developing a far-reaching interest in ethical issues. Remarkably little attention has been given to ethics within the literature of sociolinguistic research methodology. Introductory and survey texts in anthropology and social psychology and, to an extent, sociology commonly contain sections on ethical issues, whereas similar texts in sociolinguistics (e.g. Coulmas, 1997; Mesthrie, 2001; Paulston & Tucker, 2003) make no mention of the topic. Of the few publications that do focus on – rather than simply mention in passing – ethical questions, the majority (e.g. Goebel, 1988; Heller, 1999; Rickford, 1993, 1997; Wolfram, 1993, 1998) are concerned with very specific issues and/or specific personal experiences.

Others touch upon ethical issues, but in the form of general statements and exhortations: practical guidelines rather than substantive discussion. For example, Saville-Troike (1989: 111), who points out that ‘most research on minority communities has traditionally been conducted by members of the majority group or by foreigners’ (reflecting the past associations with anthropological research), defends the value of minority community research in bringing tangible benefits to those communities, such as the production of material in an otherwise evanescent language. She proscribes exploitation of researched groups and withholding information that breaches confidentiality or that may damage members of a community. There is no discussion, however, of what constitutes exploitation.

To give another example, Davies (1999: 24) cites Koehn to the effect that ‘the profession’s moral authority is established by its unconditional concern for the client’s good’. Whilst this is a commendable recognition, it fails to address certain critical questions, such as who the client is: is it the university, a funding body, informants, the academic community, even perhaps the researcher him- or herself? Each of these parties has some legitimate claim on the research outcomes, but the claims may conflict (as reflected in the question in the title: who wins?). In the case of conflicting claims, by what criteria can the priority of one over another be established?

Illuminating though they can be in relation to specific details, in the absence of a sustained and systematic dialogue about ethical issues, these instances, individually and collectively, do not add up to an adequate treatment of ethical issues that are inextricably intertwined with the field of sociolinguistics. An important aspect of sociolinguistics, as of all social science research, includes wrestling, in each specific situation, with questions such as: who undertakes the research; to whom does it belong; in whose interests is it undertaken; who benefits; in whose name is it written up and published; how are the findings disseminated; and, once disseminated, what is their status?

Such questions highlight the tension between public ethics concerning major social issues, such as the legal rights of minorities, and individual ethics, which relate to issues of professional responsibility and personal conscience (cf. Davies, 1999). For, in fact, research is not merely a relationship between the researcher and the researched, as illustrated in the diagram below (Figure 1). There are inter-relationships between researcher (R), researched (P), the funding body(ies) (F) and the peer (academic) community (S). The researcher is the central and common element, and has responsibilities to the other parties. There is a pressing need for a careful examination of how such

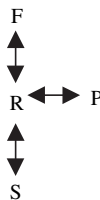


Figure 1 The interrelationships between researcher, researched, funding body(ies) and peer community

tensions can, and should, be resolved without damaging the interests of the parties involved, or the validity of the research.

Two notable exceptions to the paucity of wide-ranging discussion in the sociolinguistic literature are Labov (1982) and, particularly, Cameron *et al.* (1992), both of which treat ethics as central to the sociolinguistic enterprise. Labov (1982) puts responsibility firmly on the researcher to dispel erroneous ideas and practices (where unearthed) and to use research, where salient, for the benefit of the researched.

Cameron *et al.* (1992: 5) consider two general theoretical issues: 'the status of academic knowledge itself' and the 'relation between researcher and researched in the making of academic knowledge'. They reject the so-called scientific method based on the positivist assumption that 'observations procured in a scientific manner have the status of value-free facts' as both epistemologically suspect and likely to lead to unethical practices. They also criticise the relativist reaction to positivism, which has become widely established in the social sciences, as inappropriate. It has the merit of recognising that observed 'facts' derive from perceptions that are crucially affected by the values of the observer, but it lacks a reference point from which variant social constructions of reality can be evaluated. The informing subject's account of reality is an important element of the researcher's description but, they ask, 'Do we want to give [the subject] the last word in every case?' (Cameron *et al.*, 1992: 10). Relativism is unable to take account of the fact that, although social reality is a human construction, humans are not free to make any construction that they choose. Cameron *et al.*'s (1992: 10) preferred position is that of 'realism': 'Realism posits a reality existing outside and independent of the observer, but also stresses that this reality may be impossible to observe or describe definitively'.

The study of language in use, they argue, can ignore neither the participants' own concepts of reality nor the social and political contexts in which they use language. This epistemology has ethical implications which strongly influence their standpoint in relation to the second issue: that of the relations between researcher and researched. Accepting Foucault's (1980: 2) premise that social science is 'strongly implicated in the project of social control', they equate knowledge with power, and they approach interpersonal ethics in terms of power relations.

They categorise the positions adopted by researchers into three broad types of power relations: research on, for and with the subjects involved. The first two they reject, on the grounds that they fail to take cognisance of the fundamental inequality of power between researcher and researched. Research on subjects, whilst it may be conducted according to professional ethical guidelines, involves an inherently exploitative use of power. Research (on and) for involves the researcher's acting as an advocate for the researched. Here, although the goals of the advocacy may be laudable, the power relations remain unchallenged, and may actually become more unequal as the subjects become more dependent and hence more marginalised.

The position the authors adopt is what they call 'empowering' research, or research on, for and with the research subjects. The ethical and methodological consequences of this position are summed up in three statements.

- (1) Persons are not objects and should not be treated as objects.
- (2) Subjects have their own agendas and research should try to address them.
- (3) If knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing. (Cameron *et al.*, 1992: pp. 23–24)

Cameron *et al.*'s treatment is systematic and sophisticated, and goes well beyond the mere enunciation of rules of ethical behaviour. At the risk of oversimplifying their extensive and thoughtful discussion of these statements, the implications of their position can be summed up as follows. Sociolinguistic research, if it is to be empowering, must employ interactive methods that allow the subjects to voice their own agendas and allow the researcher to respond to them considerately but critically. They examine in detail four case studies from their own research in a variety of contexts, in which they illustrate the complexities and sometimes irreconcilable contradictions involved in conducting research which seeks to empower those whom it studies.

Two observations are in order here. First, there is the question of who is powerful and who is powerless. By whose standards is the question to be answered? Certainly, Cameron *et al.* recognise the dangers of a simplistic view of power. Nonetheless, the assumption needs to be critically examined that we researchers are the powerful, with our scientific knowledge and access to a world-wide network of academics who value that knowledge, and the communities in which we conduct our research are the powerless (or at least the less powerful). It can be argued that in some aspects of our relations with the community members, we are the powerless. Fieldworkers occasionally remark on the low value of their expertise in the eyes of the subjects of the research. Cyr (1999: 284), for instance, quotes a member of the community he was studying: 'I put all my data in a garbage bag in the attic of my garage, and they will stay there until I meet a linguist who is as intelligent as I am and can understand me'.

In the same vein is a comment made to Wolfram (1998: 273): 'How can you be a university professor and be so dumb?' A well informed ethical standpoint for sociolinguistic research will depend upon a careful consideration of the status of our knowledge–power in a wider context. The results may lead us to be genuinely humble rather than merely self-deprecating.

Our second observation is more fundamental, and it serves as an introduction to the model of research relations we outline in the following section. More important even than avoiding a simplistic understanding of power is avoiding the reductionism of defining all human relationships (including those between researcher and researched) in terms of power. Although the notion of empowerment gives welcome recognition to the fact, still too often overlooked, that social research can be an agent of social control, it is in danger of entrenching the very problem that it is trying to address. As Cameron *et al.* admit, the ontological status of power is sketchy at best (McIntosh, 1997) and, furthermore, after Foucault (1980) and Gramsci (1971), it is no longer necessary to assume that an individual or group 'has the power' as if it were a commodity that can be possessed or derived from a simple cause, such as a gun (or, indeed, knowledge). Nonetheless, power here

remains an essentially sociological construct, derived ultimately from Marxist doctrines of the unequal structure of society.

As a consequence, no matter how much an 'empowerment' model may be explained as more complex and variable than the mere balancing of power, the term inevitably carries some implication that those defined as the strong endow power on, or share power with, those defined as the weak. It is hard not to conceive, however subtly, of an empowering relationship as a paternalistic one. The insidious effects of the metaphor surface even in Cameron *et al.*'s generally open-minded discussion. They write, for example, of 'giving a voice' to their subjects. In the context of explaining a particular effort at 'empowering' the informants through sharing alternative constructions of knowledge, they comment: 'Obviously this did not guarantee that the informants *took up* the alternative understanding *offered to them*' (Cameron *et al.*, 1992: 25; italics added). Such inadvertent examples demonstrate the difficulty of divorcing empowerment from endowment.

This will remain the case as long as social relations are seen essentially as power relations. Interpersonal relationships can be understood not only sociologically, in other words, in terms of the interactions of groups and social types, with the inevitable focus on ideological and political conflict or accommodation. This understanding needs to be complemented by a social-psychological focus on, for example, the many ways in which people seek commonality and mutuality through their interactions.

A Social Relations Approach to Research Ethics

Research in minority communities is a form of social relationship. Although it has a number of distinctive features, its fundamental characteristics – and their ethical implications – are those of any such relationship. In the search for an ethical basis for minority community research, we are interested in processes of exploring commonality between researcher and researched. Communication, by which relations are formed and maintained, is predicated on establishing common ground (Clark & Brennan, 1993; Lévi-Strauss, 1978). This is a humanistic endeavour, to understand difference within equality that, crucially, does not tend to increase social differentiation (Mendus, 1992: 414). In the search for an epistemological and methodological perspective that conduces to the benefit of researcher and researched alike (e.g. Rawls, 1967), it is essential to go beyond an empowerment model.

There are many models of social relations in the social-psychological literature (e.g. Argyle & Henderson, 1985). (We should note here that we use the term 'social relations' generically, and not in relation to the specific Social Relations Model for dyadic interactions (Kenny, 1994).) One that provides a potentially valuable framework for examining ethical issues in sociolinguistic research is given by Fiske (1992: 689), who postulates that:

people in all cultures use just four relational models to generate most kinds of social interaction, evaluation, and affect. People construct

complex and varied social forms using combinations of these models implemented according to diverse cultural rules.

Fiske's four models are identifiable by the aspects of interactions that people attend to and the attributes of persons that are meaningful. They vary according to two scales that Fiske treats as categorical dimensions, but which we believe are more appropriately treated as parameters (see the discussion below): equality–inequality and independence–interdependence (see Figure 2). The four models may be briefly summarised as follows.

An equality matching (EM) relationship is characterised by equality and independence. EM relationships are based on a conception of even balance, and one-for-one correspondence, in-kind reciprocity. Participants are entitled to the same amount of material goods or personal values, and there is a constant monitoring of the relationship to ensure that the balance is maintained. Focus groups used for collecting research data depend for their success on the successful maintenance of EM relationships between researcher and informants. Too great a degree of interdependence can undermine the necessary detachment of the researcher from the information being presented, and too great an inequality (in either direction) may threaten participants' desire to share information.

A market pricing (MP) relationship is characterised by inequality and independence. An MP relationship is based on proportionality: 'people attend to ratios and rates' (Fiske, 1992: 692), which are usually expressed in terms of some measure of value, of which the archetype is money. Research using paid participants, for example, experimental projects conducted by academics with university students, involves this type of relationship.

EM and MP relations are both transactional, predicated on independence of the participants. One or the other is often taken (by some social scientists as well as in the popular mind) as the only type of human relations. Most theorists would argue, however, that interpersonal relationships, even in cultures that value individualism, are more complex and varied (for a discussion, see Mills & Clark, 1994).

An authority ranking (AR) relationship is characterised by inequality and interdependence. These relationships are based on a conception of an asymmetrical ordering along hierarchical social dimensions. Here, social

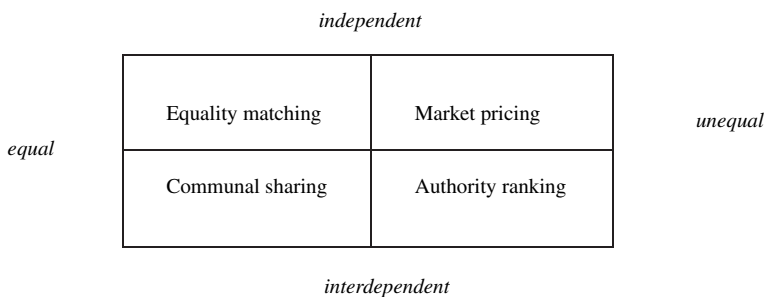


Figure 2 Fiske's four models of social interactions

relations are not simply a matter of unequal power, but of interdependence (i.e. mutual dependence), also involving obligations. The AR model most closely resembles the relationship between researcher and researched in much positivistic research.

A communal sharing (CS) relationship is characterised by equality and interdependence. Participants are not all the same, but they have equal value, equal rights and mutual obligations. The attempt to build a CS relationship is a presupposition of many ethnographic approaches to research and, in particular, ethnomethodology (e.g. Agar, 1980; Malinowski, 1935). The researcher may be treated as an honoured guest or even a friend within the community. This bestows certain rights of access to information that may be of incalculable value to the research. It also bestows obligations of reciprocity, which are essential to maintaining the research relationship.

The names of Fiske's models are less than ideal: for example, 'market pricing' carries strong economic associations that are irrelevant to many instances of this sort of relationship, but more important are some conceptual problems with the way in which the framework is articulated. Despite the empirical evidence he adduces, his claim that these four models represent all relationship types in all cultures tends to reductionism. There is also some ambiguity about what the types represent: at times they are presented as models which guide participants' perceptions of their relationship; at other times they appear to be used as descriptions of the relationships themselves.

Fiske describes his models as discrete: any given relationship is either one or another type. For the purposes of attempting to establish an ethical basis for sociolinguistics, however, it is more helpful to treat the models as ideal types, marking the extremes, as it were, against which social relations may be plotted. This allows us to describe any given relationship as more like one of Fiske's models or types than another, insofar as it is marked by more of the features of one than of the other. This requires also that we regard what Fiske calls categorial dimensions as parameters. This provides a frame for characterising the complexities of research relationships by placing them at various points along the two parametric axes, and enables us to account, in our conceptions of the forms of research relationship, for various features that fieldwork experience bears witness to. They include the fact that the social relationship between researcher and researched is not fixed, but is in one way or another being negotiated as the work progresses, and that the perceptions of relationship by the researcher and by community members may conflict. Fiske (1992: 690) writes:

Certain relation features are meaningful (and others are irrelevant) for the participants' conception of any interaction, for their intentions, plans, and expectations about it, for their social motivations and emotions, and for their evaluative judgements about it.

As the relationship develops during the research, so do the ethical requirements. What is expected by each party, and what are the ethically appropriate responses to those expectations, may be different at different stages. Furthermore, it is very possible, perhaps probable, that the relationship is likely to be defined differently by those involved, and disparate views of

what is taking place in the research process may lead to misapprehensions that can impede the conduct of the research. It is important, therefore, for the researcher to be aware of his or her own notion of the relationship as well as being sensitive to community members' perceptions of the relationship. Research experiences of each of the authors can help illustrate the point.

Peter Sercombe's experience among Penan communities in Borneo (see Sercombe, 1996a, 1996b, 2003) exemplifies the inherent complexity and variability of the relationship between researcher and various members of a community. Poor Penans needed money, and perceived the researcher as a cash cow, and the relationship in terms of MP. Others were surprised and flattered that a member of another ethnic group would be interested in their language – a form of AR relationship. Some saw him as an intermediary who would communicate their welfare concerns to the state (a relationship approaching EM). Some Penans became friends with the researcher and were coincidental informants as part of a more or less CS relationship. In the same vein, children sometimes regarded him as a playmate. Interestingly, community elders occasionally treated him as someone to whom they could display their knowledge, a relationship that could be characterised as AR, yet in the inverse mode from its more common versions in the field.

Finally, the researcher was sometimes also linked to the colonial past, which was viewed as a period of benevolent AR relationships. As Cashman (2004: 4) notes in her paper for this colloquium:

The sociohistorical context of the research on language minority communities is crucial . . . at least to the resolution of the question of how to extend the benefits of sociolinguistic research on minority groups to the subjects of said research and, more generally, the members of said groups.

While studying the Russian immigrant community in Melbourne, Australia, Mark Garner (1988a, 1988b, 1989) developed friendly relationships with many community members. Their acceptance of him and his interests initially facilitated his role as a participant observer. He was invited into their homes, occasionally to meals, and found them willing to respond to his questions at great length and in considerable detail. His own construction of the relationship was as independent and equal, characterised by reciprocity (EM). The community members provided him with information and insights that were essential to the research, and in turn he brought the perspective of an informed outsider to a relatively small and close-knit community, giving them an opportunity to share and reflect on their experiences in a way that was not easy from within the group. As a representative of the university, he also provided a direct link for the community with one of the prestigious institutions of the host community. The fact that the university was interested in their community seemed to contribute importantly to members' sense of acceptance by the society in which they had settled, mostly as refugees, a generation earlier.

It gradually became clear, however, that the community was defining the relationship rather differently. The researcher was increasingly expected to attend community social functions, to meet even members of extended

families who lived in distant places, and to give advice on a range of communal and personal issues. In other words, the relationship was being defined by the subjects of the research in terms of CS, rather than EM: the perspectives differed on the parameter of interdependence–independence. What the researcher perceived as give-and-take equality, the community defined as mutual rights and obligations. In many respects, of course, the attitude of the community considerably enhanced the quality of the information and insights that the researcher gained, but in other ways the misalignment of perceptions had potential to subvert the research process entirely. It became increasingly difficult for the researcher, who had his own family and community responsibilities, to avoid giving offence by not accepting the many invitations to participate in Russian communal and family life. On occasions, though fortunately very few, tensions developed that were not easily resolved.

In the mid-1990s, Christine Raschka carried out extensive fieldwork in the Chinese and Punjabi L1-speaking communities in Newcastle upon Tyne (see Milroy & Raschka, 1996; Raschka, 1996; Raschka & Milroy, 1996). She was interested in documenting, descriptively, the grammatical development of spoken English language abilities of women of the 'parent generation' (Li, 1994) in their social contexts. Although extensive links into both communities already existed, as an outsider to both communities, negotiation of access was difficult. Most informants were contacted through official or semi-official channels, like the local council's free ethnic minority language service, their children's local primary schools, the local college or the Asian women's centre. In all settings English language support of some kind was offered, and this enabled her to gain access as an English language teacher volunteer. In the case of the Muslim women, final approval of their participation had to be negotiated with the women's husbands. In effect the relationship that was being established was MP. The researcher was allowed to record conversational English language data, observe and ask questions in return for English language teaching. This in itself was not particularly remarkable, and may be quite common in sociolinguistic fieldwork. What was interesting, however, was that the relationship appeared to be non-negotiable. After some considerable amount of time teaching the women, Raschka attempted to shift the relationship more towards EM or perhaps CS in order to facilitate ethnographic data collection to establish nonlinguistic bias factors. This, however, seemed to be interpreted by the informants as breaching the initial contract. Consequently, the data collected through observation and semi-structured questionnaires are not as rich as the linguistic data set.

As these instances from our own experience show, research relationships are more complex than is often assumed in the criticisms that have been levelled at traditional ways of carrying out community research. Certainly, there are relationships marked by inequality of power: the researcher, as privileged outsider, defines how the community acts, thinks and feels, and represents the community to the wider world. This is a form of AR relationship, defined by inequality and interdependence. It is rightly warned against in the anthropological literature (as well, as we have seen, by Cameron *et al.*, 1992) on both epistemological and ethical grounds. The interdependence of the relationship means that it is easy to reinforce the marginal position of

the community, with the effect of reinforcing their own poor self-image and dependency. Even relationships that begin like this, however, may become more independent (moving towards MP), or less unequal (EM), or both (CS).

Furthermore, many – perhaps most – research relationships do not begin with an outsider simply arriving in the community, notebook and video recorder in hand. The researcher is typically introduced through some channel, the nature of which will help to determine the nature of the relationship from the start. Depending on whether it is effected through earlier social contact prior to the research, such as a friend (of a friend), or a leader or governing body of the community, the relationship will be different in important ways from one that is marked by simply inequality of power. Even the stereotypical cases of powerful–powerless relations vary along the dependency parameter.

Relationship Types and Ethics in Sociolinguistic Research

The ethically aware researcher in the field has to make decisions, including methodological ones, about specific actions in his or her dealings with real people in every-day situations. Professional ethical codes of practice give dos and don'ts, but despite the daunting and quasi-legal detail in which they are articulated, are able to address the fundamental issues only in wide, impersonal generalisations, for example:

6.2 Obtaining informed consent. Relationships with informants should be founded on trust and openness. They should be informed about all aspects of research that might reasonably be expected to affect their willingness to participate. The information given to efforts at the outset of a project should cover the objectives of the research, its possible consequences, and issues of confidentiality and data security. (BAAL, 1994)

It is hard to imagine that any practising researcher would take exception to such statements. The problem remains, however, that their application to a given problem has to be left to those on the ground, who need to translate disembodied principles into action.

Conceiving of research in social relations terms (whether according to Fiske's model or some other) does not automatically solve ethical issues, but it can help in three important ways. First, it places emphasis on the research as a human context, and not primarily a professional one, which is the reverse of the approach taken by most professional codes of conduct (e.g. BAAL, 1994, in which it is not until Section 5 that relationships with informants are brought into focus). Without wishing to imply that ethical behaviour in one's relations to the profession is not important, we believe it is essential for sociolinguists engaged in community research to be aware of the immediate and intensely interpersonal nature of their responsibilities – and that this aspect of the discipline's ethical basis has been given insufficient scholarly attention to date. Second, a social relations approach to research draws attention to the complexity of the issues involved, and may help to pre-empt the temptation to adopt simplistic or unconsidered views of the researcher's responsibility.

Third, the approach can help to clarify certain critical issues and, to an extent, indicate in advance of the research encounter what some of those issues may be. It is important to note that, although certain types of social relation may be preferred for methodological or personal reasons, the researcher has only a limited control over what form the relationship actually takes in practice. There is value in having a framework for reflecting on and analysing the relationships as they develop, and in being prepared in advance for potential benefits and difficulties, whatever form they take.

Some of the issues we have encountered were touched upon in the examples drawn from our own fieldwork. Other possibilities can be postulated within the framework. Relations along the AR end of the equality axis are characterised by imbalance of power as well as a mutual dependency. By contrast, where the relationship is unequal but less interdependent (i.e. more towards EM), the ethical issues are less about power than about fairness. The researcher has to strive to reciprocate the community's efforts in providing knowledge – for example, by making its benefits fully available to them. This is what Wolfram (1998) calls the 'linguistic gratuity' principle. In this connection, Smith (1999: 16) advocates the sharing of knowledge (rather than simply sharing information), because the researcher's obligation includes sharing both data and the underlying ideas and methods of analysis that inform the manner by which knowledge is created and disseminated. Moreover, the apparent reality of ideas within a knowledge system is a cultural product dependent on the relations within which it is created.

As Garner's experience demonstrated, while a relationship based on CS bestows certain rights of access, for example, to some of the more intimate thoughts and practices of the community, which are often of incalculable value to the research, it also bestows obligations of reciprocity. These are essential to maintaining the relationship, and failure to respond in accordance with these obligations may cause offence and damage the relationship and hence the research itself. For Sercombe, it occasionally meant he was seen to be a representative of an era and a cluster of concomitant values that no longer exist.

With regard to MP, a (what should be) obvious consideration is the need not to undervalue the research relationship perhaps, where payment is concerned, by undercutting the current market rate. An advantage of formalising the research relationship is that all parties can know where they stand, but this can also lead to the fossilisation of obligations and may militate against the growth of the relationship towards greater independence. Neither does MP necessarily resolve the issue of ownership of knowledge and its future potential change of value (whether in economic terms or, more commonly, in less tangible ways). Furthermore, rights and obligations are defined and limited by the 'contract' negotiated by researched and researcher, as exemplified in Raschka's case. In Sercombe's case, it also meant he was sometimes perceived as a source who could be called on to solve financial difficulties outside of what he perceived as his obligations to the researched.

The EM research relationship assumes equality, which allows for a balanced reciprocity among the parties involved. Greater egalitarianism can help to

engender a greater sense of self-worth among the researched, as Sercombe found. Equally, however, it has the potential, as experienced by Sercombe – a friend of many members of a Penan community – to be seen as a conduit through which the community might be taken out of its financial straits via the research process.

It is up to the researcher to ensure that the relationship with the minority community being researched is cast in neither a socially inferior mould nor a manner that abrogates their position in the research process. While it may not necessarily enhance the social status of the community, it at least should not further weaken their place in society.

Conclusion

Ethical issues have not received the same level of attention and informed debate within sociolinguistic minority research as they have in certain other disciplines. Our paper is an attempt both to raise awareness of these issues and to provide a framework for examining them. From a social relations perspective, all social science research (including sociolinguistic research) is primarily a relationship between two parties: the researcher and the researched. This relationship is the context and realisation of ethical decisions to be made by the researcher, and both parties have an active role in creating and sustaining and modifying it. Other relationships, such as those with the academic community and funding bodies, may also be significant in any given situation, and can complicate the decisions, as the researcher is the common element in all of the relations.

Social scientists, particularly those writing out of a sociological tradition – including the relatively few sociolinguists who have addressed ethical problems – have tended to assume that power is the motivating factor in relationships, and that inequalities of power, and access to resources that bestow power, constitute the major ethical challenge for researchers. Interpersonal relations, however, are at least as much affected by the human need for commonality and solidarity as for power. They are, in fact, infinitely complex and changeable, and if ethical issues are to be examined in a comprehensive manner within sociolinguistics, a flexible framework is required within which to describe the various types of research relationships that arise. As our own experiences have shown, the relationships can be interpreted differently by the parties involved, and they also may change as the research progresses.

We proposed a modified version of Fiske's 'four elementary models' as the basis for such a framework. Despite some shortcomings, the models have the advantage for our purposes of being both simple enough to be accessible to nonspecialist psychologists, and comprehensive enough to cater for a range of ethical eventualities.

One implication of the social relations view is that ethical issues need to be considered not only on the ground, in the course of fieldwork activities, but also prior to its beginning, for example, in the development of the research design. Because, as we have emphasised, relationships frequently change during the research, they cannot be completely predicted in advance. If the

researcher, however, is aware at the outset of how he or she construes the relationship with the researched (and also with the other parties mentioned above), there is at least an awareness that can provide the initial basis for evaluating both the fluid relationship itself and the ethical decision making that arises from it. It is important to note, however, that, although certain types of social relation may be preferred for methodological or personal reasons, the researcher has only limited control over what form the relationship actually takes in practice. There is value in having a framework for reflecting on and analysing the relationships as they develop, and in being prepared in advance for potential benefits and difficulties, whatever form they take.

The development of a social relations framework for sociolinguistic ethics is in its infancy. We hope that our proposals, brief and impressionistic though they be, may help to foreground the issues and how they are fundamental to the whole sociolinguistic research endeavour. We hope also that they may stimulate the sort of continuing, lively and informed debate that the discipline has lacked to date.

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