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Studying language in social life: a personal narrative

Estudando a linguagem na vida social: uma narrativa pessoal

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Abstract: This essay, an “interview alternative”, aims to present an overview of Sally McConnell-Ginet´s perspectives on sociolinguistic research since she entered linguistics via the study of mathematical logic and analytic Anglo-American philosophy of language. The author tells us about her perception of linguistic diversity since she was a child, her research on language and gender issues, her work with Penelope Eckert, among others. She also highlights her resistance to the temptation to seek a ‘total’ theory of language in social and political life and, instead, her attention to the valuable insights made not only by a wide range of voices and research programs with different theoretical orientations and from different disciplines, but also by those of non-specialists whose informal observations and reactions can sometimes be important in suggesting new and fruitful paths of inquiry.

Keywords: Linguistic diversity; Linguistic practices and society; Linguistic politics

Resumo: Este ensaio, uma “alternativa de entrevista”, tem como objetivo apresentar uma visão geral das perspectivas de Sally McConnell-Ginet sobre a pesquisa sociolinguística desde o seu ingresso na linguística por meio do estudo da lógica matemática e da filosofia analítica anglo-americana da linguagem. A autora conta-nos sobre sua percepção da diversidade linguística desde criança, suas pesquisas sobre as questões de linguagem e gênero, seu trabalho com Penelope Eckert, entre outros. Ela também destaca sua resistência à tentação de buscar uma teoria "total" da linguagem na vida social e política e, em vez disso, sua atenção aos valiosos insights feitos não só por uma ampla gama de vozes e programas de pesquisa com diferentes orientações teóricas e de diferentes disciplinas, mas também por aqueles de não especialistas cujas observações e reações informais podem às vezes ser importantes para sugerir novos e frutíferos caminhos de investigação.

Palavras-chave: Diversidade linguística; Práticas Linguísticas e Sociedade; Políticas Linguísticas

Interview alternative

My comments are inspired by (though not directly responsive to) questions submitted to me by Professors *Marcia dos Santos Machado Vieira, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Marcos Luiz Wiedemer, State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.* I thank them both for their interest in my perspectives on sociolinguistic research and for being willing to let me offer this somewhat idiosyncratic and self-indulgent contribution to this special *REVISTA ANPOLL – 35 years of the Brazilian WG of Sociolinguistics at ANPOLL.*

I entered linguistics via the study of mathematical logic and analytic Anglo-American philosophy of language. As a child I noticed linguistic diversity early, 'translating' for my cousins from New York City and my white rural North Carolina playmates, who claimed to be unable to understand one another though I could readily understand them both. And my family moved a number of times as I was growing up, transferring from eastern to western North Carolina (with very different local varieties of English dominating) and then to suburban New Jersey, where I spent three teen years trying to sound less 'Southern'. Though of quite modest means, my parents (one a New York City native and the other born and bred in Asheville, North Carolina with time in both Florida and New York) were well-educated, and they certainly accepted and inculcated in me ideologies of linguistic 'correctness'. They were social progressives, deploring and trying to fight the overt racism of mid-20th century North Carolina, but at the same time, they did not see diversity as such as valuable. Like many, they saw social progress as making 'standard' language (and a certain normative life-style) accessible to all.

Although I greatly enjoyed language and literature, I fell in love as an undergraduate at Oberlin College, Ohio, with formal mathematics. I enjoyed proving theorems, and I admired rigor and precision. It was not numbers so much as logic and abstract algebra that lit my intellectual fires. But it was in a philosophy department introduction to formal logic that I began thinking about the complexities of language use. That course included not just formal logic but also philosophical exploration of the ways in which actual linguistic practices in which logically important English words like *and* or *not* occurred did and did not fit the formal models logicians were developing. And I

was hooked. I read Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and early work by Paul Grice, J.L. Austin, and many others and then had a year as a Fulbright Scholar studying philosophy at the University of Cambridge, England.

There was a short hiatus. I returned to the US to marry a young philosophy professor then teaching at Ohio State University. Nepotism rules of that era meant I could not hold a fellowship in the OSU philosophy department so I returned to mathematics briefly, earning a master's degree at OSU and embarking on a mathematics PhD at the University of Michigan, to which my husband moved. Young children and a growing realization that mathematics was not my deepest intellectual passion resulted in a few years of trying out alternatives. I did some editing part-time (all that prescriptivism learned in childhood was finally useful!) and I even programmed computers as a part-time job, teaching myself machine language from manuals, in the mid-1960. Finally, however, I discovered linguistics, a field I had not even heard of as an undergraduate in the late 1950s. I entered the PhD linguistics program at the University of Rochester, NY, and finally got my PhD in 1973 with a dissertation titled *The Syntax and Semantics of English Comparative Constructions*, which combined some formal syntax and rudimentary formal semantics. (At the same time, the dissertation was where I first began thinking about semantic indeterminacy, a feature of language of great importance for what I now think of as sociosemantics).

Still following my husband as his career finally landed him a professorship at Cornell University, I had spent the two years writing my dissertation in Ithaca, NY, quite unsure whether I would ever be employed as a linguist. I was considering joining the staff of the Cornell Alumni News, for which I had done some freelance writing and editing when one of my husband's philosophy colleagues called. "There's a joint position that philosophy could share with the new women's studies program," he (all the Cornell philosophy faculty then were men) said. "You're a woman and you have some philosophical training. Why don't you apply?" Well, that may not be quite how he put it, but that was essentially the message. After thinking it over and extracting a promise from my husband that he would absent himself from all discussions of this possible hire, I decided that I would apply. I knew that feminist activists had started raising questions about such matters as whether the pronoun *he* really was able unproblematically to function as a generic, and I had even read Robin Lakoff's "Language and Woman's

Place" (first published as Lakoff 1973 and then, in expanded form, as Lakoff 1975). I gave myself a crash course in what was readily available then on the interaction of language and gender, reading work on language by not only linguists but also anthropologists and psychologists as well as philosophers, and gave a quite general talk to a women's studies-philosophy audience. There were wonderful feminist philosophers who applied for the one-year position but the philosophy department found them somewhat discomfiting and unconventional, and there were some relatively non-feminist philosophers that women's studies found of little interest. I think I was the one candidate acceptable to all even if no one's first choice.

I developed a course that I first called "Language and the Sexes," which was crosslisted with women's studies and philosophy and, within a year, linguistics (where I eventually ended up with a tenure-track and then tenured position). Sitting in on the first instantiation of that course was a fresh PhD in linguistics from Penn who introduced me to Bill Labov's work. Grad students from philosophy and linguistics reminded me of the potential relevance of speech act theory to the questions we were exploring. A very savvy graduate student enrolled introduced me to work in feminist anthropology and anthropological linguistics. The students generally helped me begin to appreciate that linguistic practices contributed to the subordination of women and yet new linguistic practices, sometimes directly competing with those more familiar, played a role in the growing resistance to that subordination.

So, with the help of students and also colleagues in women's studies from other disciplines, I was off. Not only did it become clear that the course was really about language and gender (so the course was rechristened after a few years), but it also became clear that studying language and gender required a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches. I quickly began to read and teach work from social psychology of language, communication studies, Labovian sociolinguistics, ethnography of language, experimental psycholinguistics, discourse studies, and feminist philosophy of language. I was able to do this not on my own but as part of an increasing network of feminist students and colleagues from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds in the humanities and the social and biological sciences. In 1980, Ruth Borker (anthropologist), Nelly Furman (literary theorist), and I published an edited volume (McConnell-Ginet, Borker, and Furman 1980, to which we three contributed introductory essays), *Women*

and Language in Literature and Society, that included contributions of superb young feminist scholars from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives.

In first teaching my language and gender course I divided it into two sections: The Sexes Speaking and Speaking of the Sexes. In the first section I looked, for example, at ethnographic cases where women and men reportedly used different linguistic systems and in the second at such topics as the widespread tendency of terms referring to women to undergo semantic pejoration. But this division became problematic as it became clearer and clearer to me not only that women and men were far from monolithic categories but also that linguistic systems and the uses to which they were put were intertwined.

One of my first published papers was "Intonation a Man's World" (McConnell-Ginet 1978), which argued that to the extent that intonational choices might 'index' gendered identities, that indexing was indirect (Elinor Ochs' terminology, which came much later and which I did not use)—i.e., that links to gender were mediated by more direct links to the social meanings of different choices. And in "The Origins of Sexist Language in Discourse" (McConnell-Ginet 1984) and its offspring, "The Sexual Reproduction of Meaning: A Discourse-Based Theory" (McConnell-Ginet 1989), I argued that matters like semantic pejoration were linked to power relations that affected what people could manage to do in speaking with one another. Patriarchal social arrangements and widespread misogyny resulted in semantic change.

Penelope Eckert, a sociolinguist who was Labov's first PhD advisee, and I happened to meet one another during the 1980s and by the beginning of the 1990s we had begun what became a fruitful collaboration on the study of language and gender, with my bringing a background in theoretical semantics and pragmatics and Penny in the systematic study of linguistic variation, both at the level of phonological variables and at the level of competing language varieties within communities. We began collaborating in 1990 and our first publication (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992) introduced the construct of 'communities of practice' into sociolinguistic discourse. What we realized through talking with one another (and with some other colleagues) was that linguistic practices and their social meanings emerge especially clearly in the context of groups of people regularly engaging with one another around certain mutually recognized concerns. Families, workplaces, sports teams, playground friendship groups, church choirs—these

and many more offer especially fruitful sites for sociolinguistic inquiry. Ana Cristina Osterman's work in police stations, e.g., is an excellent example of investigations centered on communities of practice.

What Penny and I were NOT proposing was that sociolinguistics should be confined to ethnolinguistic studies set in such groups. We tried to make this clear in "New generalizations and explanations in language and gender research" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999), but many people have seemed to think we were urging abandonment of sociolinguistic surveys or of large data studies or other kinds of approaches. What we were doing was urging researchers to remember that language has many of the properties it does, including its critically important variability and malleability, because it is a major medium of social practice and bearer of social meaning. And, although we were not as explicit about this as we might have been, neither one of us thought that one could really understand language and gender issues without also thinking about matters of sexuality as well as all sorts of other dimensions of identity such as nationality, religion, class, and, of special importance in the US, the black vs white construction of race.

Penny Eckert and I eventually coauthored a textbook, *Language and Gender* (1st ed, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003, 2nd rev ed, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013). And both of us, though now retired, continue professionally active with each of us exploring a variety of linguistic issues. My most recent major publication is aimed at a non-specialist audience, *Words Matter: Meaning and Power* (McConnell-Ginet 2020). In that book, I discuss both very current politically charged situations in which language plays a central role and also look back at historically distant but illuminating cases. I decided to write this book not long after Donald Trump was inaugurated as president of the US in January 2017. What I wanted to do was help non-academics understand better at least some aspects of why and how the words we use matter for social life and political relations. The book focuses on a small sampling of what has happened and is happening in the US but there is occasional discussion of situations elsewhere, and I hope my general approach may be usefully applied in other contexts.

So, what is that approach? For starters, it is mostly limited to matters in the general domain of semantics and pragmatics. This is not because I think that the kinds of questions raised in more traditional sociolinguistic research are any less important for

understanding the complex connections of language to our social practices and institutions and their political implications. It is because I can offer more insight on these dimensions of meaning-making than on (equally important) issues like indigenous language (re)vitalization, devaluation of varieties whose speakers are systematically disadvantaged by structural racism, subtle matters of sociophonetics, code-shifting, language contact, morphosyntactic change and the like. Fortunately, research is social. No one investigator or even large research group can deal with everything of potential significance. But this is not a problem: we benefit from having not only different investigators but a diversity of approaches.

Although I do not actually draw on any mathematical modeling of meaning-making in this book, I do mention recent game-theoretic work like Heather Burnett's ideas about social meaning games (e.g., Burnett 2020). And I do think there are other ways in which formal modeling can help us understand better the structure of what is happening in, e.g., semantic controversy and change. Formalizations (and other 'idealizations') always leave out something, but they can nonetheless be useful for focusing attention on certain important features of what is happening in the messy actual business of real lives. At the same time, formally inclined researchers should resist the temptation to think that the only important phenomena are those that they see ways to model mathematically. I do include in my book discussion of a study that used computational methods on a very large data set, and such work can be useful in some cases (but, importantly, not all).

I have also resisted the temptation to seek a 'total' theory of language in social and political life, one that will 'explain' all that we and others observe. We will, I believe, get valuable insights by encouraging a wide range of research programs—and welcoming voices not only of diverse researchers with different theoretical orientations and from different disciplines but also those of non-specialists whose informal observations and reactions can sometimes be important in suggesting new and fruitful paths of inquiry. In my book, for example, I often draw on material from social and political activists and do not depend only on academically approved contributions to understanding language.

The main problem with resisting 'totalizing' theories as I do is that what can successfully be presented even to colleagues let alone to wider publics will often be quite complex but also incomplete. There are no beautiful graphic or simple verbal bullet

points to sum up and convey most sociolinguistic issues. Some oversimplification is essential among ourselves as well as for the general public, but it helps if a large number of us offer some more nuanced accounts to reporters and resist what we judge, especially problematic distortions. Not every scholar has to (or is able to) speak to those outside the academy but I think that some of us must try to do so. It is much more difficult for young scholars than for someone like me, with no further need to please professional peers, to engage in such work. I admire enormously the courage of the many students and fresh PhDs who have in fact been doing important public-oriented work. Those of us who are well-established professionally need to support their efforts as well as we can.

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