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On the relation between the sociology of language and sociolinguistics: Fishman's legacy in Brazil

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Abstract: Taking Fishman's concepts of macro- and micro-sociolinguistics, this article explores the relation between the sociology of language and sociolinguistics in the Brazilian context. We analyze the relation between both fields in American and Brazilian academic contexts and problematize Brazilian sociolinguistics' bias towards the use of quantitative approaches. Sociological interpretation to Brazilian sociolinguistic analysis on race, class and nation is given in light of Fishman's concerns on the sociology of language. We argue that sociolinguistic data production in Brazil, aiming at quantifying linguistic variation by using simplified social categories, ends up producing robust knowledge that is used politically to legitimate, in a post-colonial context, Brazilian Portuguese as being different from European Portuguese.

Keywords: sociology of language, sociolinguistics, Brazil, nationality, power

1 Introduction

This article follows Fishman's (1970, 1972, 1974, 1985, 1991, 2010) discussion on the terminological and conceptual differences between the sociology of language and sociolinguistics. From this perspective, we analyze Brazilian sociolinguists' preference for a quantitative sociolinguistics centered on Labov's (1972, 1994, 2001) concepts of language and the relation between language and society. Huge databases have been constructed to describe the processes of variation inscribed in the so-called Brazilian Portuguese. This

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article problematizes Brazilian linguists' quantitative approach to language in light of a complex sociological reality that still resonates colonial inequalities. Despite the "mid-life crises in the sociolinguistic enterprise" (Fishman 1991: 127) we argue that sociology of language can profit from quantitative sociolinguistics by geopolitically contextualizing the sociolinguistic process of knowledge production. This means to "make the best use of bad data" (Labov 1994: 11) by providing a sociological interpretation of quantitative studies. In this article, we explore how Brazilian sociolinguists' ideas of class, race and nationalism construct some representation of what counts as language.

We organize the article into three sections. First, we explore Fishman's terminologies and concepts of sociolinguistics and the sociology of language and the way American sociolinguistics has appropriated Fishman's ideas. The second section aims at presenting and problematizing Brazilian sociolinguists' preference for the empirical construction and description of huge databases over a broader, interpretative perspective. Finally, we propose a sociological interpretation of Brazilian sociolinguistics, in search of a dialogue between sociolinguistics and sociology in line with Fishman's early works (1970, 1972, 1974).

2 Sociology of language and sociolinguistics

This section focuses on Fishman's main works that explored the differences between the sociology of language and sociolinguistics (1970, 1972, 1974, 1985, 1991, 2010). The term *sociolinguistics* was broadly used in the beginning of Fishman's works, as the publication of *Sociolinguistics: a brief introduction* (1970) indicates. From the early discussion on the connection between society and language, Fishman has defended an interwoven perspective. In this book (1970), Fishman describes sociolinguistics in a broader sense, including several topics: "small-group interaction and large-group membership, language use and language attitudes, language-and-behavior norms as well as change in these norms" (Fishman 1970: 21); he also methodologically distinguishes micro-level analysis, which is more linguistically oriented (as ethnomethodological sociolinguistics), from macro-level analysis, which is more societally oriented. Fishman (1970) also proposes the methodological macro-level concept of *domain* to refer to an assembly of social situations where common behavioral rules are shared, such as school, church and neighborhood. An educational class, for example, would not be considered a kind of domain, but a *social situation* defined in relation to the relationship between interlocutors in a specific speech

network. These two theoretical and methodological categories, domain and social situation, “[...] reveal the links that exist between micro- and macro-sociolinguistics” (Fishman 1970: 53). In this book, Fishman does not mention the terminology “sociology of language”.

According to García and Schiffman (2006), not until the Bloomington Seminar in 1964 did Fishman start to differentiate sociolinguistics and sociology of language more explicitly; and between 1968 and 1972, Fishman would have preferred the use of the term sociolinguistics. In 1972, Fishman was already oscillating in the use of both terms, in favor of the term sociology of language. An expanded version of Joshua Fishman's work *The sociology of language*¹ was published in Brazil in 1974, only two years after its publication in the United States. In this paper, two of Fishman's approaches to language study are presented: descriptive sociology of language and dynamic sociology of language. Descriptive sociology of language (or descriptive sociolinguistics) is concerned with describing the social patterns of language use and of behavior towards language within a speech community. A dynamic sociology of language attempts to explain why and how (i) the social organization of language is used and (ii) attitudes toward the language may shift in different situational contexts (Fishman 1972). Fishman was profoundly interested in the linguistic and discursive dynamics of languages in contact. Understanding the dynamics of such contact could work in the favor, at least theoretically, of intercultural dialogue and the maintenance of language diversity, which would approximate sociology of language to language policy.

The relation between quantitative sociolinguistics (Labov) and the sociology of language (Fishman) oscillates. While Fishman (1972), for example, makes six references to Labov's works, we may say that Labov's early mentions of Fishman's studies occur several times. For example, in *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (1972), Labov quotes Fishman's *Readings in the sociology of language* (1968), stating his own theoretical position in relation to the sociology of language: “I will not attempt to deal with these questions and this research here” (Labov 1972: 183). On the other hand, Labov recognizes Fishman's contribution in *Bilingualism in the barrio* (1968), affirming that it was a “source for the study of language in its social context” (Labov 1972: 205). Even though it may seem that Labov assumes an ambivalent attitude towards Fishman's ideas, later works show that he tends to have a peripheral attitude in relation to Fishman's sociological worries. We may problematize Labov's lack of sociological concern by

¹ Lecture prepared for the Voice of America Forum Lecture Series, George A. Miller, Rockefeller University, Coordinator. A revised and enlarged version of this work was published in 1972.

the fact that his book *Principles of linguistic changes* (2001) – focused on social factors – does not make any reference to the sociology of language.

The *Handbook of sociolinguistics* (Coulmas 1997), on the other hand, brings several references to Fishman's works. Beyond Fishman's paper on "Language and ethnicity: The view from within", almost half of the book makes clear reference to some of Fishman's concepts, as the ideas of demography of language (Verdoodt), domain (Leiner), extended diglossia (Schiffman), language contact, language degeneration and language revitalization (Craig and Brenzinger), language conflict (Nelde), multilingualism (Clyne), global scale sociolinguistics (McConnell), bilingual education (García) and language planning and language reform (Daoust). The *Handbook of language variation and change* (Chambers et al. 2003), in turn, makes few references to Fishman's ideas. On the whole, only three chapters of this handbook mention Fishman's studies on the relation between language and attitudes (Preston), on language and ethnic identity (Milroy) and on the relation between sociolinguistics and the sociology of language (Patrick). This brief comparison may reveal how sociolinguistics has used different terminology to deal with the complicated relation between micro- and macro-sociolinguistics: while the former has been identified as language variation and change, the latter is better absorbed by sociolinguistics. According to Fishman (1985: 125), the bridges between these two levels of analysis can be compared to similar ones in the field of sociology: "[...] conceptual bridges exist between macro-sociology of language and micro-sociolinguistics about to the same extent, probably, as they do between micro-sociology and macrosociology more generally". In this sense, we have a lot to learn from advanced research in sociology.

The above examples help us to locate Fishman's ideas within this "regime of knowledge" (Foucault 2013), where the author works as a function of discourse that marks a specific way "to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others" (Foucault 2013: 285). This way, we take into account that the proper name *Fishman* – from the perspective of author-function – is deeply connected to a group of discourses that invoke a broader, critical and interdisciplinary attitude towards the relation between language and society, from a macro-sociolinguistic perspective.

Fishman (1991) diagnoses a mid-life crisis in sociolinguistics related to the mismatch between social and linguistic aspects in which language (language variation description), rather than sociological and political concerns, has turned into the cornerstone of sociolinguistic studies. In spite of the strong presence of sociologists in the birth of the field in the 1960s, the linguistic turn in sociolinguistics suppressed those sociological seminal voices and

interests. Fishman's interpretation to such imbalance seems quite simple: "Linguists, in general, and perhaps anthropological linguists, in particular, often enjoy looking down on sociology" (1992: 128). Despite this academic hierarchy of knowledges, anthropological linguistics has become a reference for sociolinguistics, shifting the macrosocial concerns towards micro and ethnographic interests.

Fishman's (1992) diagnostic of American universities' mutual disinterest of sociology and sociolinguistics can be applied to the Brazilian academic context. And the outcome of this lack of interdisciplinarity was the intuitive invention of limited political and sociological explanation to linguistic phenomena by sociolinguists.

3 Sociolinguistics in Brazil and its (lack of) sociological language

Brazilian sociolinguistics can be useful to understand the reasons why Fishman's ideas on the sociology of language and on the defense of a dialogue between linguistics and sociology did not flourish in Brazil in comparison to the micro-sociolinguistics associated with Labov's works. One symptom of such imbalance between both fields in Brazil can be noticed, for example, by the lack of publication of Brazilian articles in the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, founded by Fishman. A different situation happens in relation to the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, where, at least, two or three examples can be found. This relative absence of Brazil in international sociolinguistic scenarios can, however, be partially explained by the linguistic barrier Brazilian scholars face in relation to publishing in English. In other respects, Brazilian sociolinguists have become quite focused on local issues, mainly on the analysis of linguistic stratification of Portuguese.

In Brazil, quantitative sociolinguistics has reduced the social dimension to questionable stratified categories, without references to any sociological theories or methodologies. Similar to this situation, Fishman's (1991) analysis of sociolinguistic references in American sociological journals showed a small number of sociolinguistic works. The same happens in Brazil: the *Brazilian Journal of Social Science*, for example, between 1997 and 2015, published 87 issues and none of them mention any aspect related to language issues or to the field of sociolinguistics. Also, one of the main Brazilian journals of linguistics – *DELTA* – has published around 70 issues, among which only two deserve to be mentioned: Severo (2009) proposes a theoretical approximation between

William Labov and Mikhail Bakhtin; Mollica and Roncarati (2001) revise the basic assumptions of Brazilian sociolinguistics and propose an agenda of research that investigates a broader connection between micro-sociolinguistics and macro-sociolinguistics.

One seminal paper that revises Brazilian sociolinguistics outlines three interconnected objectives (Vandresen 1973): (i) analysis of languages in contact; (ii) sociolinguistic description of Brazilian Portuguese; (iii) revision of theoretical and methodological problems. Regarding (i), Vandresen emphasizes the influence of Indigenous, African and European immigrants' languages in Brazilian Portuguese. The second item emphasizes the systematic co-variation between linguistic structure and social structure, considering a diachronic, geographical and social perspective aligned with a micro-sociolinguistic perspective. The latter item proposes the construction of a uniform methodology of research. It dates back to the beginning of Brazilian sociolinguistics, which shows how early works were concerned with an interconnection between micro and macro-sociolinguistics in line with Fishman's works placed within "the sociolinguistics enterprise", understood as an "embrace of both sociology of language and sociolinguistics" (Fishman 1999: 152).

We can trace back the relation between the sociology of language and sociolinguistics in Brazil by contextualizing the history of sociolinguistics in this country. In 1974, Brazil was under a dictatorship that lasted until 1985. Curiously, this was the period when most linguists were interested in collecting data to produce a large and detailed description of Brazilian Portuguese. This construction of a huge database in several public universities ran parallel with the strength of linguistics as an autonomous area of knowledge during the 1970s. An example of such a database, which is currently academically active, is a project called NURC (Norma Linguística Urbana Culta [Urban educated linguistic norm]), which is aimed at describing the so-called "educated" spoken Portuguese. Yet, such a project was not ideologically neutral, since it but carried out the following national purposes (Castilho 2002; Faraco 2008; Silva 1996): the strengthening of Brazilian Portuguese in the educational field by academically legitimating a Brazilian linguistic norm as well as the production of pedagogical material focused on the sociolinguistic ideas of linguistic variation.

Language diversity in Brazil has been studied from the framework of a mix of Labov's variationist theory and Fishman's approach to language contact. While the former has offered a quantitative model to map and describe high level of linguistic variation of Portuguese, the latter has provided theoretical support to explain languages in contact, mainly European languages in the south of Brazil. Several sociolinguistic databases have been developed,

systematizing Brazilian Portuguese diversity from both a variationist and dialectological perspective.²

On the one hand, such variationist databases share similar methodologies of data collection and analysis, which provide some general comparative conclusion about the idea of Brazilian Portuguese, as well as about the economic and social motivation to the stratification of Brazilian Portuguese (Lucchesi 2002). On the other hand, some databases' methodologies have been revised towards a more qualitative framework, where languages are not taken only from a descriptive and quantitative perspective, but considered as social practice, towards a macrosociolinguistic perspective (Fishman 1972). Such quantitative perspective considers methodologies based on networks and communities of practices rather than speech communities. This epistemological revision has been influenced by several factors: (i) the influence of Brazilian applied linguistics in the academic and public debate of mother-tongue teaching; (ii) the role played by the Brazilian language policy debate in Angola and Mozambique where Portuguese is official; (iii) the strong influence of American qualitative sociolinguistics on Brazilian Sociolinguistics; and (iv) the strength of two explanatory models to Portuguese linguistic diversity – one centered on a regionalist view and another focused on a sociological view.

From the 1970s on, language contact also became a theoretical object parallel to the description of Brazilian Portuguese. Examples are the description of spoken German in the state of Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul, as well as the description of spoken Italian in Southern Brazil and in São Paulo. In terms of current language policy, several municipalities have co-officialized European languages, as in the following examples of languages: (i) *Talian*, an Italian variant, officially recognized in Serafim Correa, located in the state of Rio Grande do Sul; (ii) *Pommersch*, a German variant officially recognized in several cities of the state of Espírito Santo as well as in Pomerode, a city located in Santa Catarina; (iii) *Hunsrückish*, a German variant officially recognized in the cities of Antonio Carlos (located in Santa Catarina) and Santa Maria do Herval (Rio Grande do Sul). Other examples include the formal recognition of European

² Examples of database can be found in the following websites: PEUL – *Program of Language Use Studies*, Rio de Janeiro (<http://www.letras.ufrj.br/peul/>); VARSUL – *The Project on Urban Linguistic Variation in the South of Brazil* (http://www.ufrgs.br/letras/projetos_varsul.html); *Comparative Studies of Brazilian, African and European Portuguese* (<http://www.concordancia.letras.ufrj.br/>); *Project on Popular Brazilian Portuguese of Bahia* (<http://www.vertentes.ufba.br/home>); *Portuguese spoken in Semi-Arid region of Bahia* (<http://www2.uefs.br/nelp/projetos.htm>); ALIB – *Linguistic Atlas of Brazil* (<http://twiki.ufba.br/twiki/bin/view/Alib/WebHome>) (Coelho et al. 2015).

languages as a means of educational instruction in several cities in Brazil. We understand that the connection between language and culture is not inherited, but historically constructed: “although language rightfully claims a special relationship with culture, the relationship is far more detachable and more widely sharable than elitist or proto-elitist consciousness raisers are likely to admit or recognize” (Fishman 1985: 121). In this sense, the examples above reveal how identity politics (Hale 1997) may also reinforce traditional discourses that tie together language, culture and ethnicity towards the recognition of rights in contexts of diaspora.

Together with this growing interest in European languages, the Brazilian government and some scholars have also focused on so-called Brazilian indigenous languages. Examples are the official recognition of three indigenous languages (*Nheengatu*, *Tukano* and *Baniwa*) in the city of São Gabriel da Cachoeira, located in the state of Amazonas in northern Brazil, as well as the recognition of *Guarani* in the cities of Tacuru and Paranhos (state of Mato Grosso do Sul), and the *Akwê Xerente* language in the city of Tocantínia (state of Tocantins). To sum up, politics of plurilingualism in Brazil has been geographically distributed as the following: while European languages are mainly located in the south and in the southeast, indigenous languages are particularly located in the north, northeast and in the central-west. It is no historical coincidence that the richest part of Brazil is located in the south and in the southeast. See Figure 1.



Figure 1: Brazilian map (<http://br.transparencia.gov.br/tem/?estado=TO>).

Politics of minority languages in Brazil have to consider such economic issues, since European and indigenous languages do not share the same ideological and political representation. In this sense, we agree with Fishman (1994: 92) that “language planning is frequently a hegemonic pursuit” that reinforces certain concepts of language in detriment of local ones.

4 On the sociological aspect of Brazilian sociolinguistics: back to the sociology of language

We may consider that Brazilian sociolinguistics from its early days has been concerned with the construction of knowledge that could consolidate and legitimate a national language that were structurally different from the ex-colonizer's language. Portuguese is the official language of both Portugal and Brazil. Although Brazilian independence occurred in 1822, we may consider that ostensive research on the relation between language and society did not start until the 1970s, with a strong resonance in education. Also, the political construction of nationalism in Brazil powerfully articulated language and identity, creating and reinforcing the myth of monolingualism in Brazil (Oliveira 2000), where the languages of immigrants and indigenous people did not integrate a national linguistic scenario.

Although several discussions on how bilingualism and multilingualism in Brazil was politically appropriated may refer to Fishman's works (Vandresen 2006), in this article we opt for focusing on the political role of sociolinguistics, helping to create the idea of Brazilian Portuguese aligned with Fishman's (1968) analysis of language and nationalism. However, rather than reinforcing tricky categories such as “developing nations” (Fishman 1968), we politically prefer to use the term “post-colonial context” to refer to Brazil as an idea, although we agree with Fishman (1968) that nation may signify different things for Americans, Latin Americans, Africans, Europeans and so on.

The process of Brazilian independence (1822) fostered several initiatives around the creation of national unity. The choice of Portuguese as the official language was not enough to create a symbolic emancipation in relation to Portugal, which motivated several Brazilian writers to use and legitimate the so-called Brazilian Portuguese. In the nineteenth century political debate, however, this idea of a Brazilian language would be justified by the influence of Indigenous or African lexicon, with little recognition of the influences of

grammatical and prosodic aspects of these languages in the constitution of Portuguese (Severo and Makoni 2015). It was only in the twentieth century that the literary claim for a Brazilian Portuguese became a political and governmental issue (Velloso 1987). Such political use of Portuguese to create a Brazilian national identity can be related to two historical moments: during the Vargas Era (1930–1945) and the military government (1964–1985). Both periods adopted strong nationalist guidelines and attitudes as, for example, forbidding or controlling the use of foreign languages in public spaces. The price paid for such nationalistic campaigns was a silencing process that affected languages and ethnicities in Brazil towards the creation of a “unifying and ideologized nationality” in terms of “sociocultural integration” (Fishman 1968: 41, 44). After 2000, however, Brazil started going through a political phase in defense of cultural, linguistic diversity, towards the creation of a more “tolerant” national context, where “differences do not need to be divisive” (Fishman 1968: 45). We will not analyze current Brazilian language politics involving diversity, although we argue diversity must be seen as an invented category for political purpose (Severo and Makoni 2015).

Brazilian sociolinguistics reproduces classical sociolinguistic categories such as social class, education, age and gender. Among these, *social class* has been a strong sociological category used by Brazilian sociolinguistics. This allows, for example, for the emergence of some linguistic interpretation as the following: Brazilian Portuguese is socially and economically bipolarized (Lucchesi 2015), producing both an Educated Brazilian Portuguese and a Popular Brazilian Portuguese. Historical social and economic gaps in Brazil, since its Independence in 1822, have been taken as a model to explain the linguistic gap between different social classes. Such a gap would be strongly influenced by the distribution of educational privileges and the split between private and public schooling. We may problematize sociolinguists’ lack of knowledge about the tensions involving class identity in Brazil by promoting a simplistic correlation between social class, level of education, profession and place of residence. We believe Brazilian sociolinguistics can profit from sociological discussion related to the complexities of socio-economic classification in Brazil. Santos (2005), for example, mentions the use of 13 categories that try to cover a complex set of economic and social arrangements, including unsalaried, rural and illiterate workers. We suggest that sociolinguistics must learn with advanced sociological discussion, deconstructing a polarized linguistic interpretation towards a more complex interpretation of social linguistic use in relation to class struggles.

Such strong focus given to social class, as a key sociological category to define linguistic differences in relation to spoken Brazilian Portuguese, may also

be problematized if we consider ethical and racial issues. Brazil was the destination of the largest African Diaspora movement during the colonial era. More than four million Africans were brought to Brazil under slavery from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. This produced a strong racial division in Brazil, which was politically overshadowed during the twentieth century by the myth of Brazil being a “racial democracy”. Miscegenation ideology was used as a political argument (Nascimento 1980). Such sociological interpretation of the Brazilian racial issue produced some effects on how African languages were considered from a linguistic perspective. For instance, race has rarely been used as a “category” to describe language diversity in Brazil, as we can see from the databases mentioned in Note 2. In a general way, race was absorbed into the social class category.

This overlapping of categories, however, did not make Brazilian racism invisible – the last census reveals that the second poorest population in Brazil, after the indigenous populations, is the Afro-Brazilian population. In the last 20 years, such racial issues have come to be strongly considered in public policies in Brazil. In addition, only recently have Brazilian linguists started to use the category “Afro-Brazilian Portuguese” to describe the language spoken by Brazilian *quilombolas*, who are descendants of Afro Brazilian slaves living in *quilombos*, understood as “a form of social organization and ethnic category, and a legal category found in public policy” (Leite 2015: 1226). Just as miscegenation is a political discourse used to blur power relations and ethical issues concerning Afro-Brazilians, the idea of Brazilian Portuguese may also reinforce the myth of a plural Portuguese that originated from the political “harmonization” (Makoni 2015) of Portuguese with a mixture of African and indigenous languages, masking the underpinning struggles involving peoples and languages in Brazil.

5 Final remarks

In this article, we made an effort towards making “good use of bad data” by problematizing and analyzing sociolinguistic data in light of sociological interpretation. This way, even though Brazilian micro-sociolinguistics tends to be strong and productive, we believe that a timid dialogue between sociolinguistics and sociology has been pursued by local scholars who have been in touch with minority groups and peripheral contexts. This reinforces the idea that political and epistemological changes may come from below, especially in postcolonial contexts. Numerous examples include Zilles and

Faraco's (2006) claim for sociological understanding of Brazilian society; Severo's (2012) theoretical approximation between Labov's structuralism and Anthony Giddens's structuration theory; and Freitag and Severo's (2015) sociolinguistic proposal on the relation between gender and language from a framework that brings micro and macro perspectives closer together.

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