THE SOCIOLOGY OF LANGUAGE IN QUEENSLAND ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

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1.1   The aim of this paper is to outline the social and educational problems arising from the phenomena of diglossia and bilingualism in Queensland Aboriginal communities.

1.2   It is not intended to overestimate the importance of these problems. They must be viewed as part of the problems of multilingualism in Australia, which are of course much wider. The Aboriginal population of Australia at the 1966 census (relevant figures for the latest census being as yet not available) totalled 80,207, which represented .69% of the total Australian population then (Archer, 1969: 7). This figure is undoubtedly conservative, as it includes only those persons "who described themselves ... as being 50 per cent or more Aboriginal, or simply as 'Aboriginal.' ... Investigations ... suggest that considerable doubt attaches to the validity of replies given to the question on race at the 1966 and previous censuses" (ibid., 3).

Even so, the proportion of people of Aboriginal descent to the total population cannot be high, even allowing for natural increase since then. The Aboriginal population (by the 1966 census figures) was predominatly rural (72.70%, as against 27.30% urban dwellers). Recently however an economic recession in rural areas has induced many Aboriginals to settle in the cities.

Language problems in Australia are not confined to Aboriginals. The multilingualism of migrants from Europe has already created an educational problem. A total of 19,954 children are receiving special English language instruction from 503 teachers in Government and Independent schools, the largest proportion of these being in New South Wales and Victoria (Department of Education, Queensland, Child Migrant Education, 1972). The figures are conservative: they are based on the number of children who have been found to need special instruction, hardly yet on the total number who may need it. The adult parents of many of the children are not without language difficulties.

2.1   The importance of Aboriginal sociolinguistic problems should not however be under-estimated. Human values are not measured merely in numbers. Moreover the problems have attracted much national and international attention. They have social, educational, linguistic, and psycholinguistic aspects which are generalizable beyond Aboriginal

communities and beyond Australia. Shuy and Fasold (1971: 185-186) give, as reasons for the growing current interest in sociolinguistics in the United States, "the conviction that social factors influencing language are a legitimate topic for linguistic investigation," the conviction that "such sociolinguistic knowledge should be applied, if possible, to urgent educational problems," and "the desire to find a sounder empirical base for linguistic theory." Of these, the second is regarded as the strongest motivation for current interest in socio - linguistics. The work of Bernstein (e.g. 1971) in a somewhat different setting in England shows a similar interest in the application of sociolinguistic knowledge to educational problems.

2.2   Soci !i,guistic problems of diglossia and bilingualism are naturally more acute in the United States than in Australia, because of the greater range of bilingual communities and the larger population. 76 bilingual education projects are already supported by grants under a Bilingual Education Act. This Act permits "the use of two languages, one of which is English, as mediums of instruction ... for the same student population, in a well-organized program which encompasses part or all of the curriculum, plus study of the history and culture associated with a student's mother tongue" (Gaarder, 1970: 163-164). $7,500,000 have already been expended over a one-year period on this work, but, even so, Fishman (1970: 47-49) complains that this sum is too small, and recommends urgent action to secure an increase in appropriations.

2.3   Similar efforts, proportionate to the nation's resources, are hardly as yet paralleled in Australia. Yet a start has been made in this direction. Thus the Queensland State Department of Education is conducting the Van Leer Foundation Language Development Programme (financed from Holland), which is especially applicable to the education of Aboriginal children (Department of Education, Queensland, Van Leer Foundation Project, 1970, 1971). This project began with the collection and description of a corpus of Aboriginal English data. Its instruction in standard English is, in the first instance, orally based, but proceeds to integrate listening experience and oral expression with written expression and reading. In New South Wales another project with similar aims is being conducted at the Bourke Public School. The Department of Education in South Australia has started to use the Pitjantjatjara Aboriginal vernacular in the early stages of education at five Special Aboriginal Schools among tribal populations (Office of Aboriginal Affairs, 1972; Education Department, South Australia, 1972). A three-week course in Pitjantjatjara is part of the "Aboriginal Studies" course at Western Teachers' College. Teachers appointed to Special Aboriginal Schools are encouraged to undertake, in two successive years, the Elementary and the Intermediate three-week course in Pitjantjatjara

organized each January by the Adult Education Department at the University of Adelaide. Immediate steps are being taken to correlate training in relevant aspects of linguistics and second language teaching methodology with training in the use of Pitjantjatjara. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra has organized and financed the description of Aboriginal languages, as well as socio-cultural studies, over many years, in co-operation with scholars in the various Australian universities.

3.1   Linguistic description of English-language data gathered by peer-group mono-stylistic elicitation and by other methods from 30 Queensland Aboriginal communities by a team of linguists between 1960 and 1968 reveals linguistic variation between the extremes of an L ('low') form (Ferguson, 1959: 327) and an H ('high') form approximating to the General Australian English of teachers and administrators (Flint, 1968: 15-16). The use of these is found to be socially determined, being appropriated to different societal domains and roles (Fishman, 1971a: 32-35, 73-89). Thus a diglossia situation exists in these communities. Between the H and L forms a continuum of "relatively uncodified, unstable, intermediate forms" is also observed (cf. Ferguson, 1959: 332; De Camp, 1961: 80-84; Douglas, 1968: 14-15). Aboriginals use the L form for intragroup communication in the home domain, and their best approximation to the H form for intergroup communication with non-Aboriginals, especially with administrators and teachers. The use of the intermediate forms is determined stylistically by the status of the person addressed and by other features of the language situation.

The mutual intelligibility rating between the L form of Aboriginal speakers and the H form of non-Aboriginals reaches to below 40%.

In some communities bilingualism as well as diglossia is found. Aboriginal speakers here still fully retain their original vernacular. Its use, as against that of one of more diglossic varieties of English, is also appropriated to specific societal domains and roles. The Aboriginal vernaculars are unintelligible to most non-Aboriginal Australians.

3.2   The medium of instruction in schools in Queensland (as also in other states) has hitherto officially been the H form of English; but the Aboriginal children who attend them are accustomed to the L form in the home domain. The lack of ready mutual intelligibility between teacher and pupils tends to retard educational progress and subsequently to restrict economic opportunity (cf. Hughes, 1970: 103-119, "The linguistic division of labour in industrial and urban societies"). Thus diglossia and bilingualism lead to role compartment-alization and so tend to produce social unrest. What begins as primarily a linguistic

problem ends as primarily a social one.

3.3   Even in the beginning, however, the problem is not purely linguistic. The lack of
ready mutual intelligibility between the H and L forms is certainly due partly to the
describable differences in phonology, grammar, and lexis (and in the phonology–grammar
correlations). It is also due to contextual (situational) and cultural differences. The L
form is culture-bound; the H form is, too, but to a different culture. Bernstein (1971: 199),
in his chapter "A critique of the concept of compensatory education," says pertinently:
"If the culture of the teacher is to become part of the consciousness of the child, then the
culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher. This may mean that
the teacher must be able to understand the child's dialect, rather than attempt deliberately
to change it." This principle is recognized in the Van Leer Foundation Project. The teachers
understand the Aboriginal English of the children, and take every opportunity through that to
lead them to understand standard English.

        Bernstein goes on to stress the importance of contexts of learning. "There is nothing in
the dialect as such, which prevents the child from internalizing and learning to use
universalistic meanings. But if the contexts of learning, the examples, the reading books,
are not contexts which are triggers for the children's imaginings, are not triggers on the
children's curiosity and explorations in his family and community, then the child is not at
home in the educational world." The contexts of learning and the symbolic system of the
school room do not provide him with any linkage with his life outside.

3.4   The importance of recognizing the close relationship between language and culture
is stressed by Labov (1964: 80–81). The teacher must be acquainted with the full range of
contextual styles of his pupils. For this purpose, he must use special elicitation techniques.

4.5   Gumperz (1970: 141–142) stresses the importance of context in the teaching of
reading to bilinguals. "Since bilinguals and bi-dialectals rely heavily on code-switching
as a verbal strategy, they are especially sensitive to the relationship between language and
context. It would seem that they learn best under conditions of maximal contextual
reinforcement. Sole concentration on the technical aspects of reading, grammar, and
spelling may so adversely affect the learning environment as to outweigh any advantages
to be gained."

        Thus the teacher of diglossic and bilingual pupils needs to combine a knowledge of
relevant related aspects of both sociology and linguistics – in other words, of sociolinguistics.

3.6   Philips (1970: 95) gives an example which shows why this is so: "If the Indian child

fails to follow an order or answer a question, it may not be because he does not understand the language structure of the imperative and the interrogative, but rather because he does not share the non-Indian's assumption in such contexts that the use of these syntactic forms by definition implies an automatic and immediate response from the person to whom they are addressed. For these assumptions are sociolinguistic assumptions which are not shared by the Indians."

3.7 P. S. Rosenbaum (1969: 114-115), speaking of language teaching generally, criticizes the inadequacy of the teacher-orientated class-room. All activity is structured around the teacher's needs rather than around the student's, and language practice is not related to the context of actual modern language situations.

4.1 Gumperz (1970: 129), Bernstein (1971: 199) and Shuy and Fasold (1971: 186) disagree strongly with the earlier view that the form of speech used for intragroup communication by bilingual or diglossic children (their L form in Ferguson's terms) is culturally or verbally deprived. Gumperz finds such speech linguistically complex, and expressive in the contexts in which it is used. He further shows that bilinguals can use code-switching as an expressive device, empolying each code in the context for which it is specially suited, and thus achieving greater expressive competence than if they had exploited only one code.

4.2 Both the suitability of the L form to express the child's needs in appropriate cultural contexts and the expressive potentialities of code-switching cannot be realized if elicitation methods do not reveal the full range of data. Douglas (1968: 15) says that the habit of Aboriginal speakers of making speech adjustments according to the type of person addressed is one of the main barriers to research in his area. In the Queensland project this barrier was circumvented by using varied techniques of elicitation. All recorded material includes both interview-type material - the linguist eliciting data from the informant - and monostylistic peer-group elicitation. The procedure adopted in the latter was to record the speech of selected groups of varied composition (Aboriginal males, Aboriginal females, mixed groups of males and females, Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, in various age groups), and to leave them to converse freely among themselves on any topics interesting to them, the linguist being absent. A key point is that the purpose of the project was explained and the informants' willing co-operation was obtained. Guarantees of anonymity and confidence were given.

If this method had not been used, the full complexity of the diglossic and bilingual situation in Aboriginal English would hardly have been suspected.

4.3   One point where a knowledge of sociolinguistics can help the teacher of diglossic and bilingual children is that the teacher must not express or show contempt for the L form, or, in the extreme, attempt forcibly to suppress it. He will of course teach the children to substitute the appropriate expression of the H form when the child uses the L form in the class-room context. This implies that the teacher must understand the L form, in order to effect this substitution. An attempt to suppress the L form may not only adversely affect the child psychologically, but may even cause unrest in the community, as it did on Norfolk Island between 1912 and 1929 (Flint, 1964: 190). With the best of intentions of helping the children's educational progress, the educational authorities there attempted to suppress the L form. This caused great unrest in the community and the attempt was abandoned. The sociolinguistic reason for this is simple: the L form is culture-bound and associated with the child's intimate emotional family and home relationships.

5.1   So far, the importance to the linguist and the language teacher of realizing the relationship between language and culture has been stressed. It is now pertinent to show that sociolinguists, teachers, and educationists stress the importance of realizing the relationship between culture and language, in the reverse direction. Robinett (1969: 121), discussing the similarities and differences between teacher training for English as a second dialect and English as a second language, stresses the need for teachers and educationists to have at their disposal complete and exact linguistic descriptions. "We know too little about the many second dialects of English; for just as contrastive analyses of English and other languages have made ESL teacher training easier, systematic analyses of these second dialects of English is a prerequisite for enlightened ESD teacher training." (Cf. also Allen, 1969: 189-202).

5.2   Recognition of the reciprocal relationship between language and culture has important implications for linguistic and sociolinguistic theory. Neustupny (1972: 1,3,5) stresses that the language problems of bilinguals in Australia cannot be solved by insistence in teaching on grammatical competence alone. Communicative competence includes, not only grammatical competence, but also the ability to "decide when, to whom, what, and how to communicate." Clearly, teaching which aims at communicative competence must be preceded by a total description of language based upon a comprehensive linguistic theory

which relates linguistic structure to the relevant features of the context of language situations, and through these to the culture.

Such a theory is that of Halliday. In its earlier versons (1961: 241-246, cf. 1964: 18), it formally states the relationship of language to context of situation, which had long been a feature of British linguistic theory. Its subsequent amplifications (e.g. 1967a, 1968, 1970), including studies of the relationship of intonation to grammar, made it especially suitable for the comparative study of spoken language in its social context. It was this theory which provided the broad theoretical framework for linguistic description in the Queensland project. The theory was elaborated along lines, most of which (e.g. the recognition of a specific level of semantics, and of units above sentence in discourse structure) had been indicated by Halliday himself (Flint, 1970a: 161-167), with suggestions from Katz and Postal (1964), Pickett (1960: 11-17), and later Longacre (1968: 1-192; 1970: 150-163).

The need for a comprehensive linguistic theory in sociolinguistic studies is stressed by De Camp (1969: 157-173), who stresses among other things the relationship between language and context, non-verbal as well as verbal. Discussion on his paper (e.g. Cromack, 1970) indicated the need for a consideration of discourse structure.

5.3   The following salient characteristics of Queensland Aboriginal English have sociolinguistic relevance.

Aboriginal English, as shown by the data gathered from the 30 Queensland communities, is not homogeneous. Five different types of communities, of which the English speech exhibits both similarities and differences, are distinguished (Flint, 1968: 6):

(a)   Those in which the Aboriginal vernaculars have fallen into general di suse. Diglossia is manifested here in the different social uses of an English H and L form.   AbAE (a).

(b)   Those in which Aboriginal vernaculars are in general use, and where a form of English is also used for communicating with non-Aboriginals. Both bilingualism and diglossia are manifest here.   AbAE (b).

(c)   Torres Strait Island communities, where a widely varying form of English, differing (though with some similarities) from those of AbAE (a) and (b), is found (Dutton, 1970: 137-160, especially 144-152).

(d)   The special community of Bamaga (Cape York Peninsula), where the English of Aboriginals shows the influence of Torres Strait Islanders living with them (Dutton, 1970: 153-154).

(e)   The fifth type is represented by one far north-western community
        in which the L form (henceforward referred to as NWL) differs in
        certain specific characteristics from that of AbAE (a) and (b).

The speakers of NWL were all elderly original immigrants from the Northern Territory,
and were fully bilingual in an Aboriginal vernacular (Karawa or Janjula) and diglossic
English. They used an approximation to the English H form for intergroup communication
with non-Aboriginals in the school, administrative, or commercial domains. Among
themselves, in the home domain, they used NWL for intergroup communication (between
speakers of Karawa or Janjula) and one or other of the vernaculars for intragroup
communication. This community is thus both diglossic and bilingual.

NWL differs from AbAE chiefly in grammatical and least in phonological characteristics.
The chief lexical differences are environmental. The most notable grammatical difference
is in the personal pronominal system. NWL has a set of dual plurals (with dual exclusive
in the first person), which is not found in the AbAE data. The pronominal system of AbAE
otherwise tends to be simpler.

NWL and AbAE of course both differ from the H form (General Australian English). The
lack of mutual intelligibility between the L forms and the H form is due most to a different
prosodic pattern, and to the relationship of this to grammatical structure (Flint, 1970b).

6.1   A comparison of the distinctive grammatical characteristics of NWL with features of
New Guinea Pidgin (NGP) described by Laycock (1970: 102-122), and of New Guinea
Highlands Pidgin (NGHP) described by Wurm (1965: 4, 39, 47) reveals certain similarities
between NWL, NGHP, and NGP, especially in the forms of the personal pronominal system
where NWL differs from AbAE; in the use of the verbal suffix /-im/ marking active/
transitive/causative verbs (Laycock: 116); and in general characteristics of sentence
structure. However, let it be emphasized that differences between NWL and NGP are also
notable.

6.2   The reasons for the similarities between NWL and NGP raise a complex interrelated
linguistic, sociolinguistic, and historical problem of the origin and development of pidgins
generally, and of New Guinea Pidgin in particular; and of the relationship of NGP to the
widespread Pacific trade language. It is not proposed to enter into this question here. The
origin of pidgins has been treated by Wurm (1971: 999-1021); De Camp (1971: 3-39); and
Laycock (1970: 102-107). De Camp discusses the monogenetic and polygenetic theories of
origin for Eurpoean-based pidgins and creoles: do all pidgins and creoles have a common

'genetic' ancestor or is each different pidgin and creole the result of a separate process of development? Do the similarities between NWL and NGP arise from parallel independent developments in similar language contact conditions between English and different native vernaculars, or do they stem from contact between Northern Territory Aboriginals and Pacific Island labourers introduced into Queensland from 1863, and especially 1880 onwards, some of these going later to New Guinea rather than returning to their original home? Is NWL related through NGP to the trade language of the Far East used "by traders of all nationalities from India to Indonesia and as far north as Japan" (De Camp: 1971 : 22)? Present historical evidence (e.g Sheppard 1966) does not suggest a relationship between NWL and the pidgin developed by the Pacific Island labourers on the Queensland canefields: social contact between Aboriginals and Pacific Islanders there and anywhere, was minimal.

The history of the settlement of the Northern Territory, however, shows very extensive commercial contact between the Northern Territory and Singapore, Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies, and also Asian immigration from 1874 onwards: The development of the goldfields brought an influx of Chinese labourers starting in 1874 (Lockwood 1968: 78-87). This, according to one estimate, reached 6,000 by 1888. A flourishing cattle trade with those countries, connected with the great cattle properties of the Barkly Tableland, developed between 1880 and 1890 (Duncan, 1967 : 42-43). A subject worth investigating, and involving extensive historical as well as linguistic research, is whether the resemblances between NWL and NGP are to be explained by contact with the widespread Pacific trade language, through commercial intercourse with Asia and immigration, and through contact of the latter with NGP (c.f Salisbury, 1967), rather than through contact with the canefields Pacific Islander pidgin, and thereby with NGP.

6 3   De Camp further says that no theory yet proposed can fully account for the special similarities between some creoles. Laycock (1970 : 103) says: "The general agreements in structure between pidgin languages from quite diverse areas and times have led linguists to believe that either the mental processes leading to the forging of a pidgin are the same in all cases, or pidgin languages grow to resemble each other by a process of 'convergent development'."
Many instances of this general agreement in structure between historically and geographically unrelated pidgins were noted in the Queensland project and on Norfolk Island   Thus (to take simple examples) the Norfolk Island adult, the Edward River Australian Aboriginal boy, and the adult Italian immigrant do not 'go fishing ' They all /go fa fi /. The Norfolk Island adult and the recent immigrant to Queensland from Hungary both say Thank you very much for me.

Are these similarities the result of parallel independent developments in similar language contact conditions? An intensive comparative study of the structure of the respective languages with which English has had contact when these similarities occur could perhaps help to provide an answer to this fascinating linguistic and psycholinguistic theoretical question.

6.4   The broad sociolinguistic features of the complex diglossia and bilingual situation which examination of the Queensland data reveals are not dissimilar from those described by Jernudd (1971) for the Northern Territory, and Douglas (1968: 2-15), for South-West Australia. The linguistic varieties are not, of course, the same, since the social, historical, and linguistic circumstances of those areas are not identical. Douglas distinguishes Nyungar (denoting collectively the original related Aboriginal vernacular dialects of the area); Neo-Nyungar (the present everyday speech of Aboriginal people, which has been influenced by contact with English); Wetjala (the normal Australian English of the area, with dialect varieties recognized by the Aboriginal people); a form of 'trade' English; 'simulated Wetjala,' (an impressionistic caricature in appropriate situations of normal Australian English); and Yeraka (a play language of women and girls).

7.1   The solution of problems arising from diglossia and bilingualism must surely be a truly sociolinguistic one. The key to the educational progress of Aboriginals and the improvement thereby of their economic status in the community is the attainment of perfect mutual intelligibility between teachers and pupils in schools. For this the teachers need to understand the children's L form, and something of their vernacular (if the children are bilingual); and they also need to realize the close relationship between these and the children's culture. The difficulty in developing the use of the Aboriginal vernacular as the medium of instruction lies in the multiplicity of Aboriginal languages and dialects, many of which are still in process of being described, and the consequent difficulty of training teachers for different areas. The difficulty about the extensive use of the Aboriginal English L form as a medium of instruction would be that it would reduce the amount of practice received by the children in understanding and using English in its H form, which they need to master for their educational progress and advancement in economic status. The use of the English H form as the medium of instruction need occasion little difficulty, provided the teacher understands the L form and something of the vernacular, and is able to enter into the child's cultural world.

7.2   The ultimate solution of Aboriginal sociolinguistic problems however lies beyond the educational field, though it begins in it. The solution is of the kind suggested by Ferguson (1959: 338). Diglossia will tend to disappear when a trend towards social integration appears in the community, with broader communication between different regional and social segments. The close mutual interrelationship between language use and social organization here suggested emphasizes the nature of sociolinguistics as an 'interdisciplinary social science' (Fishman, 1971b: 217).

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