

SOCIOLINGVISTIKA/ SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Language and Knowledge in the Modern Society

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Abstract. Language is not only our most important means for presenting ideas, values, and norms. It also shapes the way individuals view the world. Knowledge as a concept is positively loaded. Politicians are talking of the importance of knowledge and an idea that knowledge puts things into motion. In the industrial society most people were occupied in manipulating things compared to in the post-industrial society where people instead are manipulating meanings. In the changing society of today scientists are describing a shift from redistribution to recognition. Mass media are then important in selecting, associating, manipulating, and diffusing symbols. Those with sound language capacity have an advantage in ‘world making’ and also in formulating clichés that might manipulate people’s mind and destroy what Habermas calls ‘emancipatory’ knowledge. Then it might be of importance to analyse linguistic clichés – also inside social science – and ask who are the persons having the language capacity to define the world we are living in?

Introduction

The classical theorists, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber analysed the changing society, they were living in following the principles they found in their contemporary society and made predictions about the future based on their findings. Today social theorists often refer to the *past* society in their analyses and as a consequence we have all these ‘*posts*’; post-modernity, post-industrialism, post-communism. There is an agreement about a transitional state at present but great uncertainty both about the process of transition and about what will happen. We know where we are coming from but not where we are going. The new tendencies that have been pointed out are often based on the sense of a new world disorder. For example, Barber, (1992, 1996) writes about a great conflict between ‘McWorld’, the global civilisation of Western commerce and consumerism, and ‘Jihad’, the opposing tendencies of revived religious, ethnic and national passions. Other scientists on the same line are Castells (1996-1998), Fukuyama (1999), and Huntington (1993, 1997).

Among the tendencies that are well established in the ongoing change is the one of the switch from the policy of class and inequality to the policy of identity and difference (Inglehart, 1997). This can be described as a switch from concern for ‘redistribution’ (of material wealth) to a demand for ‘recognition’ (of cultural expression) (Taylor, 1992, Fraser, 1995).

The aim of the article is to discuss the relationship between language and the theories of a post-modern knowledge society. **The objectives** of the article are as follows:

- to analyse the theories of Inglehart, Taylor and Fraser and determine if the role of language in the contemporary society

could be applied to some of the post-theories including the theories of transition and knowledge society;

- to find out if the theories of language use as formulated by Habermas can be of great importance for a fruitful discussion of the present social situation.

Theoretical Background

First description and definition of the concepts and then discussion of the relationship among them and analysis of their use in contemporary scientific contexts are presented.

Language is our most important set of symbols according to Chomsky (1965). Through it, the ideas, values, and norms of our culture find their most complete expression and the cultural self-reproduction depends on language. Languages of the world today are very diverse and vocabulary of a language reflects the culture and environment of its speakers. The very well known example of this is that presented by Whorf (1941) about Eskimos who have more than 20 different words related to “snow”. Some linguists and social scientists argue that the differences among languages do not just reflect the needs and environments of their speakers but that they actually shape the way the speakers view the world (Sapir, 1949). Sapir and Whorf argue that language and thought are so intimately interrelated that the speakers of one language may actually think about the world differently than the speakers of another language do.

Abstract words can be influential in shaping the character of a culture. They are much more numerous in modern languages of the West, especially English, than in many other languages. Due to the world-wide influence of Britain over the past 200 years, and more recently of the United States, the English language is now becoming a global tongue that is the second favoured language in many of the world nations. It is used as an

official or semi-official language in over 60 countries, and is the main language of the World Wide Web, air traffic control, business or scientific conferences and pop music. But in many countries there is a considerable concern about that issue.

The concept **Knowledge** has been used and analysed in many disciplines. Today in most part of the Western World this concept is positively loaded, has a positive value. Not so long ago in my country, Sweden, at least education was sceptically looked upon but today almost all young people know that they have to study at least for 12 years and many of them will continue to higher education. The politicians are talking of the importance of higher education. This demand for education or knowledge is a value shift. Behind that shift it is possible to find different arguments like, knowledge puts things into motion, knowledge is the capacity for action or without new technology no economic growth will be maintained. Drucker (1969), however, states that the increasing demand for knowledge has to do less with more difficult and complex job skills and more with the supply of highly skilled labour. This is, according to Drucker, what underlies the transformation of society into a knowledge society. Those people with higher education expect upgraded jobs. So, we can expect that the education demands for the same job will increase.

In this 'post'-society work, the main point is not the manipulation of things, but that of meanings (Gellner, 1983). Consequently we can see a growing sector of knowledge-based occupations. The fastest growing segment of the labour-market is now the so called service-sector and in this sector it is the people working as experts, counsellors, advisers who are the most common ones. We can expect more people working on what is defined as positions of experts and specialists. In a Swedish study the researchers analysed the change of these positions in 1980 and 1995 and found a significant difference (Sohlberg, Leiufrud, 2000). Rueschemeyer (1986) describes how the experts have considerable impact on the lives of many people. The experts define the situation, define what is happening, they shape the meaning of people life. We can find them in many different areas, such as health and illness, fashion, order and justice. In my country, for example, we have experts calling themselves trend analysts. However, does it mean that people will have a higher level of knowledge? Will we have what can be called fragmented knowledge?

In a book by Stehr (1994, viii), with the title *Knowledge Society* the first sentence in the preface is 'There should be a new agenda for social science today because the age of labour and property is at the end'. Stehr argues that labour and property will disappear and we will get knowledge instead. As a consequence of this change the world will face another and very different moral, political and economical debates and conflicts. According to Stehr, the contemporary society could be described as a society where scientific knowledge influences all spheres of life. After all is this the real fact?

Habermas (1984) sees three forms of knowledge at work in society. First is instrumental knowledge, which is technical and scientific knowledge. Much of this has worked against human progress and has impoverished human lives. Second is hermeneutic knowledge with focus on understanding. But Habermas looks for the third form of knowledge, which could be 'emancipatory' knowledge. Believing in progress and modernity, Habermas thinks that societies can move forward

only if people can peel away all the irrationalities partially bestowed on them by media messages and arrive at a 'pure speech' situation in which they can understand clearly the ideas expressed by each other.

Gellner (1983), as mentioned earlier, writes about a shift in the labour force showing that nowadays not so many people work in producing things but in producing meanings instead. To produce meaning you need language and if language is so important it is a short step to recognise the strategic place of mass communications in modern society. Media selects, associates, manipulates and diffuses symbols (Bourdieu, 1998). In Western World those earning a lot of money are the ones in the media sector and, most important, recognised by people in general. Mills already in 1956 called for the world of celebrities. "The celebrities are The Names that need no further identification." (Mills, 1956/1969:71-72). Mills stresses that they are "the material for the media of communication" (p 72). As an example he mentions "It is carried to the point where a chattering radio and television entertainer becomes the hunting chum of leading industrial executives, cabinet members". Nowadays it is not uncommon that soap opera stars are asked about their opinion on world events. Bourdieu (1988) has written about the important "self-interested search for the extraordinary" (p 20) among journalists and how the images created by the journalists have a possibility to produce a 'reality effect'.

The role of media in creating opinions is looked upon as extremely important one. We can wonder what is happening in Italy with Berlusconi and the interest of mass media in the leaders in Russia, the Ukraine and Byelorussia, and the influence of CNN just to mention, about having control over media.

What Relation has Language to Knowledge?

If the most important things for individuals of today is to be well known and recognised and not the content of what you know, we must observe the following relations between language capacity and knowledge.

		Knowledge	
		High	Low
Language capacity	High	1	2
	Low	3	4

Figure 1. Possible relationships between language capacity and knowledge.

In position 1 we find persons who have high level of knowledge and at the same time the language capacity to formulate their knowledge. In position 2 we find persons who have low level of knowledge and at the same time they have a language capacity, which means that they have a possibility to manipulate people with their words without knowledge. In position 3 we find those persons who have high level of knowledge but low capacity of mediating this knowledge to other people. Finally, in position 4 we have persons with low level of knowledge and low language capacity.

The problem here is the positions 2 and 3. In position 2 the language capacity can be used to formulate, for example, hitting headlines without much content. This is popular in mass media and can make you a celebrity. It is often good for a scientist to be interviewed in mass media, no matter about what, just to be seen or heard is enough. It must be

asked if some scientific terms, like knowledge society, transition and globalisation belong to position 2. In position 3 we find another problem – those highly serious and knowledgeable researchers who have no capacity for language or are not interested in telling about their research findings.

Since the world takes English for granted this is also the language capacity you need. Those with sound English language capacity have an advantage in formulating slogans or clichés even in social science. These clichés will manipulate people minds and destroy, what Habermas calls, ‘emancipatory’ knowledge.

While writing this article I read an advertisement in the largest newspaper in Sweden. The advertisement presents the expert who will talk about the subject of Rhetoric – to convince. The expert, David Loid, is presented as a person with charisma and the art of convincing in a way that inspires confidence. Rhetoric can be used for good but the speaker must belong to position 1.

Conclusions

My reasoning contains many questions that are important to discuss both in society and among those who are doing research on social development. Let me sum up my earlier questions by a new one that seems to me particularly important to consider in social analysis:

Who are the persons having the language capacity to define the world we are living in?

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Kalba ir žinios šiuolaikinėje visuomenėje

Santrauka

Kalba - tai ne tik svarbi idėjų, vertybių ir normų išraiška, bet ir individų pasaulio supratimo formavimo priemonė. Žinios kaip koncepcija turi teigiamą prasmę. Politikai kalba apie žinių svarbą ir apie tai, kad žinios išjudina įvairius procesus. Industrinėje visuomenėje dauguma žmonių manipuliuoja daiktais, o poindustrinėje visuomenėje – prasmėmis. Besikeičiančioje šiandieninėje visuomenėje mokslininkai kalba apie perėjimą nuo persikirstymo prie pažinimo. Masinės informacijos priemonės vaidina svarbų vaidmenį atrenkant, susiejant, manipuliuojant ir išskaidant simbolius. Sugebantys gerai vartoti kalbą turi pranašumų “kuriant pasaulį”, ir formuluojant klisės, kurios padeda manipuluoti žmonių protais ir griauti tai, ką Habermas vadina “emancipuojančiomis” žiniomis. Tada iškyla lingvistinių klisėjų analizės svarba ir socialiniuose moksluose. Kyla klausimas, kas yra tie asmenys, sugebantys kalba apibūdinti pasaulį, kuriame gyvename.

Straipsnis įteiktas 2002 05
Parengtas spaudai 2002 11

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