Shi-xu*

Sociolinguistics towards a culturalist turn: a sociolinguistic response to the challenges of mankind

Abstract: The 50 years of the devotion of sociolinguistics under the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* have brought us remarkable insights into language in relation to society. For the next half century, for the discipline to engage more effectively with the radically and fast changing human society, i. e. in answer to the provocative questions raised by Wolfgang Klein in *Schreiben oder Lesen, aber nicht beides, oder: Vorschlag zur Wiedereinführung der Keilschrift mittels Hammer und Meißel,* (1989. *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 74. 116–119 [repr. in this issue]) it may do well to take a culturalist turn, or its seminal sociocultural return, by studying language and society, or rather, language-in-society, as a system of culturally diversified and competing discourses with a view to neutralizing the human cultural chasm on the one hand and to enhancing human cultural har-mony and prosperity on the other hand.

Keywords: holistic; cultural; discourse; method

In the past fifty years, sociolinguistics, under the auspices of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, has made remarkable achievements that have deep-ened and enriched our understanding of language that defines humanity. It is high time that comrades of the Sociolinguistics Community began reflect on that history and to do so in light of the fast and radically changing world – if the journal wishes to continue to thrive and to impact on more and wider audiences and society at large. In this essay I argue that, rather than worrying about the discrepancy between over-production and underconsumption Wolfgang Klein (1989) brilliantly poses in his provocative and now famous article, sociolinguists today should concern themselves more about what needs to be researched and so produced and consumed (Shi-xu

*Corresponding author: Shi-xu, Centre for Contemporary Chinese Discourse Studies, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, China, E-mail: xshi@zju.edu.cn

2024). More specifically, what and how should sociolinguistics become for the future of mankind?

Sociolinguistics has long focused on language and approached it from various perspectives ranging from the geographical, historical, social to socio-functional (e. g. Labov 1973; Trudgill 2000; Wardhaugh and Fuller 2021). That is, language has occupied a privileged position while aspects of the context of language are taken as given 'reality' and used as explanatory resource. That means that language and context have been conceptualized in a binary, mechanical fashion with the latter treated as external, causal factor in relation to the former.

To date, sociolinguistics has drawn on various approaches in order to map out the ever-changing sociological landscape of language. Social network analysis, for instance, looks at how social networks, say, groups of friends or colleagues, influence language use. Language and digital analysis examines how language is affected by online environments such as social media featuring new slang, emojis and anonymity. Critical Discourse Analysis directs attention to the ways that language is guided by cognition, especially ideology.

For sociolinguistics to focus on language is one thing, but to bring into purview not just language but also what language is within and about would be quite another. For example, if the pressing societal issues like poverty, environmental disaster and nuclear weaponry which threaten our human existence are considered in conjunction with our language, greater expansion in theory, methodology and research agenda would be needed. Whether or not people talk about development deficits and security crises (and who and who not), how such problems are communicated and with what effects and consequences, or even reflexively, whether sociolinguists themselves are concerned with such societal phenomena, etc. will become new topics of enquiry. Indeed, without critically engaging with society with which language is inalienably intermeshed, sociolinguistics will be hard pressed for delivering true knowledge of the functioning of language in society, let alone help change society and so also catch the imagination of other disciplines.

Furthermore, sociolinguistics confined to language in a particular setting, locale, community or country, is one thing, but if it were to view language on an intercultural and multicultural, or global, scale, then it would be quite another. For, the crucial, but hitherto neglected, *cultural* dimension of language-in-society would perforce be recognized, hence greater sophistication in sociolinguistic theory: real human language is saturated with complex relations of not just difference, similarity, equivalence and commonality, but also connection, cooperation, penetration, unification, domination, confrontation, division and exclusion across the world's diverse speech communities. Then, manifold questions over the cultural nature and characteristics of language-in-society will arise: How are ways of thinking, worldviews, norms and values, strategies of meaning-making, perception and information,

etc. of particular communities embodied, reflected and constructed in and through language, how do different cultural forms of language interact with one another and with what result, how may language be reinvented or reorganized so as to prevent or reduce cultural disharmony and (re)create cultural harmony and prosperity instead? Indeed, without understanding human language as culturally heterogeneous and competitive, sociolinguistic science may hardly achieve the kind of knowledge and wisdom over language that will inspire equality, respect, collaboration and mutual learning amongst the diverse human communities.

If sociolinguistics is serious about society, including issues of power and identity, then its focus of attention might as well shift from universal language-only to culturally-defined language-in-society; and when such a holistic perspective is taken, i. e. when language is seen in terms of *human communication* (viz. social practice in which people use language and other media purposefully and consequentially in given historical and (inter)cultural milieu), then greater advancement may be expected in sociolinguistic theory, methodology and research agenda. That is, when human communication is reconsidered and understood as a global system composed of diverse and competing *cultural discourses,* then a host of new tasks will arise, which will be enough to occupy sociolinguistics for the next 50 years. Culturally diverse and competing discourses of domination and resistance, of peace and development, of freedom and democracy, of unity and cooperation, etc. call for not less, but more serious and more urgent attention, hence not less, but more research output and more consumption. Cultural coexistence, harmony and prosperity, could well be useful and possibly inevitable new goals to pursue.

In order to achieve these new goals, sociolinguistics may do well by adopting the following system of methodological approaches (Shi-xu 2024). (1) *Intracultural Analysis*: To search for identity, distinction, particularity, or peculiarity of a cultural discourse, i.e. that of a geopolitical/historical/ethnic community, through structural analysis of the relevant discursive components in the data at hand (e.g. self image, concepts, values, major themes, strategies of meaning-making). (2) *Transcultural Analysis*: To search for incursion by, influence from, or fusion with aspects of other cultural discourses by discovering relevant borrowings, transfusions or recreations of concepts and ideas, norms and values, topics and expressions or else responses and reactions of some sort. (3) *Crosscultural Analysis*: To search for differences, contrasts, variations as well as ambivalence between the cultural discourses in question through comparison of relevant discursive components or aspects (e. g. different representations of the "same" reality, variable attitudes towards the "same" issue, contrary actions taken). (4) *Intercultural Analysis*: To search for self and other representations by and interactions between different cultural discourses in question and so also resultant identities, penetrations, and relations of power (e. g. domination, exclusion, marginalization, resistance, cooperation, synergy). (5)

Pancultural Analysis: To search for commonalities, similarities, equivalences and interconnections between different cultural discourses in question through analysis of relevant discursive aspects (e. g. communicators, conceptions, objectives, shared experiences). (6) *Axiocultural Analysis*: To make evaluations over aspects or properties of cultural discourse(s) in question and propose new norms and ways of communication to enhance cultural development, unity and prosperity. In this regard, CDS adopts its own cultural-political standards, global and local. Whilst the global criterion, subject to continuing dialogue across our discipline, is whether and to what extent a discourse is in favour of cultural flourishing – cultural equality, freedom and prosperity, the local criteria are contingent upon the specific native values and concerns of the relevant cultural communities, whether or not they impinge upon sovereignty, security, or socioeconomic development, etc. Finally, it may be mentioned that, depending on the goals of research and the nature of data at hand, these methods can be employed selectively or else in combination.

Shi-xu is Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Multicultural Discourses.*

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