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CHAPTER ONE

Sociolinguists as sociologists

Over two decades ago, the Welsh sociologist Glyn Williams (1992) wrote a devastating review of the sociological underpinnings of the sociolinguistics of his day.¹ His findings were (not to put too fine a point on it) that sociolinguistics was often a combination of very good and even avant-garde linguistics with conventional sociology. So, while sociolinguists appeared as leaders and innovators in the field of advanced linguistic analysis, they would be mere followers in the field of sociological reflection, happy to adopt, often implicitly and without much questioning or motivation, mainstream forms of ‘sociological imagination’ (cf. Mills 1959). This led to images of society characterized by social integration, social consensus and cooperation, the relative stability of social relations and identities, and clearly delineated national units and group identities as circumscriptions for analysis – recipes from the kitchen of Talcott Parsons, according to Glyn Williams.

It is certainly true that sociolinguists have largely avoided discussing major theoretical issues in sociology and social science, and have been extremely prudent in explaining the big sociological issues that may emerge from their work.² This is a great pity, since contemporary sociolinguistic work *does* often yield insights that are challenging mainstream sociological assumptions, and do so at a fundamental level – the level at

which, to quote C. Wright Mills (1959: 5), ‘the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated’, the level, in short, at which we can form a ‘sociological re-imagination’, a re-imagination of our fundamental conceptions of humans and their social lives. In this text, I intend to undertake a modest attempt in that direction.

The main motive driving this attempt has already been given: contemporary sociolinguistics is sociologically relevant. And the reason behind this can be picked up quickly while reading sociological classics: they invariably refer to patterns of interaction as fundamental to whatever is understood by social relationships, social structure or social process – and usually also grant great importance to this. To quote just one of them, this is how Georg Simmel defined the task of sociology:

Sociology asks what happens to men and by what rules they behave, not insofar as they unfold their understandable individual existences in their totalities, but insofar as they form groups and *are determined by their group existence because of interaction*. (Simmel 1950: 11, emphasis added)

Yet, with a mere handful of exceptions, they pay hardly any attention to the actual nature and features of such patterns of interaction.³ Sociolinguists do just that, it is our profession. And systematic attention to communicative modes and processes, we shall see, has the potential to reveal the weakness of certain commonly adopted sociological assumptions and conclusions. It is my conviction that the ‘socio’ in ‘sociolinguistics’ involves the responsibility to work from language towards society. What eventually needs to be clarified and explained, through the analysis of sociolinguistic processes, is society and how humans operate in it and construct it. This becomes increasingly pressing as our field of study is changing from ‘offline’ communication in a precisely circumscribed social space to include rapidly evolving and changing delocalized ‘online’ communication in superdiverse environments, with well-recorded

challenges to established analytical frameworks. I want to encourage my fellow sociolinguists to take that responsibility seriously: we *do* have something to say that transcends the narrow confines of our own field of inquiry, and we should say it. Sociolinguists are, whether they like it or not, specialized sociologists.⁴

In my attempt, I will use Emile Durkheim's work as my point of departure. Why? Not just because of its pervasive influence on Parsons. From reading Durkheim's work, I found that his lasting influence across a broad swath of social and human sciences is often underestimated. It is in his work that the fundamental imagery of Man and society was constructed that became the perimeter, so to speak, within which twentieth-century social thought moved and developed. And even if later scholars dismissed his work or claimed to be free of his influence, they still adopted some of its fundamental principles. We're all, in many and often surprising ways, still Durkheimians.⁵ And after extracting some relevant points from Durkheim's work in Chapter 2, I intend to work with Durkheim in two different ways in Chapters 3 and 4.

One, in support of Durkheim, I wish to add to, and refine, a notion he saw as absolutely foundational for sociology as a science: *le fait social*, the social fact. This notion, when Durkheim first formulated it, was highly contested (to the extent that Durkheim spent most of the preface to the second edition of *Les Règles de la Méthode Sociologique* defending and clarifying it; Durkheim [1895] 2010). It was also rejected in what came to be known as Rational Choice Theory and, more generally, it clashed with the tradition of Methodological Individualism. The notion of social fact, of course, determines the possibility of a definition of 'the social' as a sphere of phenomena and processes that cannot be reduced to constituent parts without losing much of their essence. Thus, it also underlies the very possibility of a sociology and a sociolinguistics. A highly precise and analytically powerful view of the social fact is possible if we excerpt some advanced sociolinguistic work, which I shall argue in Chapter 3.

Two, we need also to step away from Durkheim and the world he tried to make sense of and consider our own. There are things now that Durkheim could not possibly have known or predicted, and contemporary sociolinguistic work on internet phenomena raises several entirely new fundamental questions about the nature of social groups, social relations and social processes and permits new hypotheses in these domains. By combining this second exercise with the first one, we arrive in Chapter 4 at a number of fundamental propositions – at theory, in other words – that may contribute to work in several other disciplines, and that have been generated inductively by detailed empirical attention to the facts of language, interaction, communication, of which we know that they are absolutely central to any social phenomenon. Or at least: let's try to establish that.⁶

Notes

- 1 In this text, I shall use the term 'sociolinguistics' as a broadly descriptive umbrella term including any approach in which the connections between language and society are systematically explored and in which communication is seen as an *activity* not reducible to the production of cognitive content. Work to be discussed in what follows might, consequently, more conventionally be labelled as linguistic anthropology, pragmatics, applied linguistics, discourse analysis and so forth – and disciplinary sociolinguistics.
- 2 There are some notable exceptions; see, for example, Fairclough 1992; Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Coupland 2016; Flores, Spotti and Garcia 2017; Perez-Milans 2017.
- 3 Some of the exceptions are reviewed in John B. Thompson's (1984) *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* – most prominently Bourdieu, Habermas and Giddens. Thompson himself, of course, also ranks among the exceptions (see especially Thompson 1984, 1990).
- 4 Some would say: microsociologists. But for reasons that have to do with the very nature of language, to be discussed at length in

what follows, I tend to have strong reservations regarding that facile micro/macro dichotomy. See Collins (1981) for a discussion and Collins and Blot (2003) for a very fine illustration of why sociolinguists are not necessarily just microsociologists.

- 5 I do not suggest here that we are *only* Durkheimians: we are also, equally unwittingly, Weberians, Marxians and Freudians for instance. I choose Durkheim as a point of reference because some of the fundamental concepts he designed are highly useful in the particular exercise I shall undertake here. And as a gesture to express that, sociolinguistics, as I see it, has some things to say on fundamental sociological and social-theoretical questions.
- 6 Throughout this attempt, I will follow Garfinkel's understanding of Durkheim (shared by several others) as concerned with empirical detail rather than conceptual generalization, and with what Durkheim called 'the objective reality of social facts' as something that can be demonstrated by attending to concrete, situated and embodied instances of social (inter-) action (see e.g. Garfinkel 2002). There are, therefore, aspects of Durkheim's work that I shall not mention and discussions on the interpretation of his work that I shall not involve myself in, for I do not need all of Durkheim's work nor any interpretation of it in order to make the points I intend to make.