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**Sociolinguistics:
50+ years in under 10 minutes**

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Abstract

This short talk sketches some major shifts - past, recent and emergent - in sociolinguistics, focusing on its engagement with the state, the economy and security, concluding with some comments on its continuing relevance.

I was very pleased and honoured when Luisa Martín Rojo invited me to say something today about changes – past, present and future – in the study of language in society. Admittedly, my vision is very much restricted to work in English, but within that limitation, I'll try to pick up Luisa's challenging invitation by referring to three big fields that you can find in most countries:

- the state, which involves government, laws, public services like education
- the economy – industry, business, internal and external trade, and
- security – policing, the military and intelligence services.

Of course these overlap, and there also lots of other fields I'm leaving out (the media, organised religion, communities, homes etc etc). But if we're looking at changes in Anglophone sociolinguistics over the last 50 years, I think these three – the state, the economy and security – provide a useful reference point.

So let's jump back to the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s when contemporary Anglophone sociolinguistics really took off, starting in the US but spreading to other countries fairly rapidly. At this point, the central issue for sociolinguists – the central creed and cause – was linguistic diversity, and domestically in places like the US and the UK, the main backdrop to this – indeed, the main antagonist – was the nation-state. It was nation-states that promoted monolingual standard languages, mainly through education, and for sociolinguists at the time, this emphasis on monolingual standards did two bad things: (a) it denigrated non-standard dialects, neglecting their systematicity and eloquence,[1] and (b) it squeezed out indigenous and migrant minority languages.[2] Admittedly, when sociolinguists went abroad to advise on the selection and development of local languages in post-colonial countries, they generally supported standardisation.[3] But obviously here too, the nation-state was central (this was nation-building). This doesn't mean to say that security and the economy were completely ignored in sociolinguistics: there was a little bit of forensic linguistics,[4] and there were studies of job interviews[5] as well as a huge commercial language teaching industry. Even so in this period, the nation-state was the central 'chronotope' for sociolinguistics.

The 1990s, of course, brought globalised neoliberal marketisation. States were redefined, a lot of their services were handed over to the private sector, and in public culture, the consumer and the entrepreneur took over from the ideal of the literate citizen.[6] Walls, borders and boundaries gave way to flows of products, people and ideas,[7] and to earn their keep, universities had to show that they were contributing to social and economic well-being.[8] All this registered with sociolinguistics:[9] interest shifted from standardisation to the commodification of language;[10] concepts like 'speech community' were placed in scare quotes[11]; and the idea that languages like English or Spanish were natural, unitary entities gave way to an understanding that named languages are products, fashioned out of lots of different resources, repackaged and branded for lots of different purposes, in lots of different 'markets'.[12] Indeed, the very identity of sociolinguistics was itself heavily affected by these big changes. In universities, the new socio-economic mission undermined the old disciplinary boundaries,[13] and in a growing climate of interdisciplinarity, sociolinguists started to engage seriously with other scholars in the humanities and social sciences, taking on board people like Bourdieu and Foucault,[14] broadening their horizons far beyond just the grammaticality and appropriateness of non-standard speech. In the process, they generated a much richer account of

the role that language and communication play in social and institutional relationships, in culture, ideology and consciousness.[15] So even though sociolinguists are often very critical of neoliberal marketisation, of the remaking of the state and the repositioning of universities, they didn't escape and in at least some respects, they made significant gains.

I'm not so sure, though, that we've paid enough attention to questions of security, where it's more about enemies and traitors than citizens or consumers and it's language as shibboleth & weapon, not just language for measurement or profit. Here, silencing joins standardisation and selling as a core mission, the message 'stay alert' takes priority over 'conform' or 'shine', and the management of life in Foucault's 'biopower' needs to be supplemented by the administration of death in Mbembe's necropolitics.[16] Language research certainly hasn't completely ignored fear, suspicion and violent conflict, and there's important work in, for example, critical discourse analysis, in translation & interpreting studies and educational linguistics, and well as linguistic anthropology.[17] But how far is this work seen as mainstream sociolinguistics, and how much does it feature in introductory textbooks? At the start of the millenium, you could still maybe say that research on language in applications for asylum[18] was just a specialist niche or a field of practical application, but nowadays as a matter of routine in England, lots of ordinary people – healthworkers, educators, landlords, employers – are forced to act as "untrained and unpaid border guards" checking up on their patients, students, tenants etc, "and more of us are falling under suspicion as illegitimate border crossers".[19] So even if we only want to stay relevant to the everyday worlds of the students in our classrooms, existing work on (in)securitisation now needs to be more prominent, and even then, there are big gaps and fast-growing challenges. Somewhat astonishingly, sociolinguists have had very little to say about surveillance,[20] where we also need to come to grips with digital algorithms.[21] The pandemic we're experiencing right now makes security a massive concern (even if we're not sure about its impact on global flows and neoliberalism[22]). And of course we've also got the climate emergency.

So to talk about big shifts in Anglophone sociolinguistics, past and future, it's helpful to look at how we've focused on the state, the economy and security. But of course ourselves, we're not political scientists, economists, or security specialists, which means that we're not restricted to these fields, and we're also much more committed to studying everyday experience at ground-level, where the processes associated with security, the economy and the state actually interact with a lot of other influences, producing unpredictable effects that it's very hard to spot from a distance. For the most part, we're also not politicians, bankers or generals, so it's hard for us to intervene directly in the large-scale processes I've referred to. But over 50 years, we've kept on building our methodological tool-kit; our analyses now extend far beyond language and speech to embodied interaction, material artefacts and digital media; and there's a good case for saying that our layered, multi-scalar and empirically grounded understanding of ideology is one of the most sophisticated in social science.[23] Maybe most crucially, we've also learnt the importance of talking to different kinds of people, inside the academy in different disciplines and outside in professions and communities,[24] and this generates lots of scope for distinctive sociolinguistic contributions to different kinds of broader collective endeavour. As Hymes said roughly 50 years ago, sociolinguistics is a primarily analytical rather than political undertaking, but it serves the higher ethical objectives of *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* because it "prepares us to speak concretely to actual inequalities" (Hymes (1972) 1977:204-6).[25] I think that still holds true, and it's obviously not just inequality that our analyses illuminate. Most relevant right now, I think that all this fits with MIRCo's account of its mission, and that's why I'm very happy indeed, and very excited, about participating.

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