

The Price of Communication – On Reading Bourdieu

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In a recent work by Bourdieu, *Language and symbolic power*, an interesting attempt has been made to explain some of the dynamics of language with a socio-economic theory. The findings identify one strong outer force for language change.

Introduction

We are used to the idea that words 'mean' something. Concurrently we accept that words do not mean anything: they are merely pointers to meaning. The meaning of an utterance is thus not in what we say, but in what we want to be understood or *not* understood: Language is often used with the purpose of not being understood. What we can objectively study is the properties of the signal only – its shape. The first part of this paper will discuss some aspects of a technical theory of communication systems, the second part will discuss the impact of socio-economic force on language formation and differentiation as proposed by Bourdieu 1991. Bourdieu suggests that linguistic behaviour is caused by socio-economic differences which define an outer force for adaptation and linguistic change.

Language as communication system

Viewing language as a system of communication gives insights into what would be needed to transmit a message. Language could be viewed as a communication system that operates through many different channels (verbal or non-verbal), where the receiver and the sender are evolving new representations and knowledge. This new knowledge makes it easier to transmit similar knowledge, whereas new ideas of comparatively low complexity would be hard to transmit due to a 'faulty' sender and/or receiver (due to the lack of correct prerequisites).

The linguistic signal can be viewed in a dualistic mode: it is both abstract and concrete. The concrete manifestation of the signal can, for example, be a complex speech signal that carries physical information about the source, determined by the relation between the amplified frequencies. For the case

of written text, the signal would be a string of perceived letters that could form meaningful entities to us. In analogy with viewing a piece of art, the physical attributes of the signal are not unimportant and can in fact reveal details to us about the characteristics of the transmitter. The intended meaning behind the signal has to be *recreated* in the receiver of the message. For this process to work correctly, the transmitter and receiver must be correctly tuned, which is attained by mutual similarity and mutual 'knowledge'.

The first level of communication

The technical problem is how accurately these 'symbols of communication' can be transmitted. The speech signal necessarily contains a certain amount of redundancy, due to the presence of noise in the physical signal. Noise here means anything added to the intended signal. It has been calculated that the redundancy in English text is about 50% (Shannon & Weaver 1963), which means that about half of all letters could be randomly removed. A receiver would still be able to significantly reconstruct the text.

In a given context, some continuations are more probable than others, although anything can theoretically occur. Information gives a measure of the freedom of choice in a situation. The more freedom of choice, the higher the amount of information. A convenient way to measure information is in the number of bits that we need to express the number of choices. If there are 8 choices, we need 3 binary digits to express the choices (since $2 \cdot 2 \cdot 2 = 8$). If the choices are equally probable, all choices will have the same number of information bits, otherwise we could have a continuous scale where the more probable choices have a fraction of a bit, and the least probable could be assigned high information content. It is important not to confuse the statistical notion of information, which is the basis of an engineering communication system, with meaning. As noted before, meaning is not, essentially, a characteristic of the signal.

An engineering communication theory is just like a very proper and discreet girl accepting your telegram. She pays no attention to the meaning, whether it be sad, or joyous, or embarrassing. But she must be prepared to deal with all that comes to her desk. (Shannon & Weaver 1963:27)

The second level of communication

Even if the signal is received, there is another problem. 'How precisely do the transmitted symbols convey the desired meaning?' (Shannon & Weaver 1963). This question states the essence of the field of semantics. The kernel

of the problem is that there is theoretically no way of knowing if a message has been understood or not. If we ask, there is no way to know if the question was understood. If the receiver *did* correctly acknowledge that the message has been understood, there is similarly no guarantee that we will understand the acknowledgement. We will have to trust that our shared experiences (and biological similarities) will allow us to understand each other.

The third level of communication

In the case that the meaning of a transmitted signal has been understood, one question remains: 'How effectively does the received meaning affect conduct in the desired way?' (Shannon & Weaver 1963).

Simply put, will communication be effective? Bourdieu touches on this important question when he examines the sociological factors that imply language accommodation and differentiation. One of his ideas is that language (contrary to what is believed by formalist linguists) is a scarce resource with its own price formation, and associated anticipation of profits. Effective communication, is in the service of the totality of the linguistic community, and the state – whose needs utterly shape the legitimate language. Bourdieu equals, in a way, linguistic competence with effective communication.

Language magic

Language has several features in common with magic. Language is a way in which we can affect the world without performing physical labour. We could order a chair to be moved, or ask for the salt. The success of the speech act is dependent on whether we use the correct spell, pronounced with the appropriate pronunciation and tone of voice, relative to the receiver. Language magic is sanctioned by the priests and judges of the legitimate language: the grammarians whose doctrines are forced upon the masses through various officials of the establishment, such as language teachers. Acquiring language in a social context involves learning the effects of language. The most powerful spells are those that are sanctioned by our social institutions and the state.

Legitimate language has its origin in the functions that are necessary for the formation of the state. The linguistic form of these functions are ritualised, and the success of speech acts is not necessarily dependent on being objectively grammatically correct. A better determinant for success is

that the speech act must be pronounced in the correct manner, by a person in whom authority is vested.

The economy of language symbols

We are used to the fact that concrete objects and services are assigned a price in our everyday experience. Bourdieu says that symbols also come with a price. This price is noticed when we try to acquire new symbols, and in the use of the symbols.

The symbols of language can be useful by their ability to carry symbolic information which is 'to be understood and deciphered'. But in reality, little language usage has this purpose. The symbols of language can also be understood as signs of wealth that are 'to be evaluated and appreciated', or as signs of authority 'to be believed and obeyed'.

Price formation

Utterances receive their value (and their sense) only in relation to a market, characterised by a particular law of price formation. (Bourdieu 1991)

An illustration of the power of price formation is choosing a mate. How often are we not prompted to think that someone is especially attractive because there is competition for that person? This is actually a sound foundation of social decision making – fundamental for making good decisions in a complex world (see Cialdini 1988). The more people that think that something is true, the likelier we think that it *is* true (social proof), and the harder it is to disprove.

Another example of the effects of price formation is when we buy something expensive (e.g. a watch). We are aware of the cost and its value but, with time, the watch is merged with our persona and its price is not consciously contemplated, until we sell it. This process makes us more comfortable with acquired goods.

Language works in a similar fashion. When we acquire a new construction, or symbol, it is at first uncomfortable, but the expected rewards for acquiring this symbol may outweigh our resistance. With time the symbol, and the habitat in which it is used, are integrated into our persona. The value of the symbol is no longer a conscious one. When we are born into a language habitat, the acquisition of symbols is done at the same time as our persona is built up. The symbols that we find in our habitat, or inherit from our parents like a family treasure, are closest to our persona

and therefore comfortable. The cost associated with the symbols is noticed when we try to trade these linguistic symbols on a linguistic market.

Language communism

Bourdieu is critical towards the 'language communism' that he feels is inherent in all current linguistic theory. Language communism expresses itself in classical linguistic theory in the common myth that language is a common treasure in which we all have an *equal* share. Language is often seen as a cornucopia – an infinite source – from which we are free to draw without paying a price. This 'communist' metaphor for language use is utterly misleading, according to Bourdieu. It fails to solve or explain the economic and social factors that are the conditions of the habitat in which we acquire language.

There is incidentally a paradox inherent in focussing language study on syntax. If language is a rule based behaviour, where the construction of correct sentences is the objective, then producing correct sentences is less complex than recognising a sentence. A rule based production system will always produce correct sentences, but (due to noise and variety) recognition must involve a choice from possible alternatives. This contradicts our everyday experience: recognition is usually effortless while production involves effort (at least when we try to use the official language).

Bourdieu believes that the *recognition* of the official language is reasonably universal within a language community. However, the language competence (especially in the language that Bourdieu calls the legitimate, or official, language) is not distributed equally among the inhabitants of the language community. The legitimate language is connected to social status, and differentiation of the language is accomplished because of the different social values that are associated with pronunciation, syntactic structures, etc. Social status is in turn connected with attractiveness. Bourdieu suggests that it will be utterly impossible to separate these dependent variables. He tells a story to illuminate the meta-qualities of language that is a product of the whole system.

Thus a French-language newspaper published in Béarn (a province of south-west France) wrote of the mayor of Pau who, in the course of a ceremony in honour of a Béarnais poet, had addressed the assembled company in Béarnais: 'The audience was greatly moved by this thoughtful gesture'. In order for an audience of people whose mother tongue is Béarnaise to perceive as a 'thoughtful gesture' the fact that a Béarnaise mayor would speak to them in Béarnais, they must tacitly recognize the unwritten law which prescribes French as the only acceptable language for formal speeches in formal situations. The strategy of condescension consists in deriving *profit* from the objective relation of power between the languages [...] symbolically

negating [...] the hierarchy of the language and of those that speak them. [...] In reality, the Béarnais mayor can create this condescension effect only because, as mayor of a large town, attesting to his urbanity, he also possesses all the titles (he is a qualified professor) which guarantee his rightful participation in the 'superiority' of the 'superior' language [...]. What is praised as 'good quality Béarnais', coming from the mouth of the legitimate speaker of the legitimate language, would be totally devoid of value [...] coming from the mouth of a peasant, such as the man who, in order to explain why he did not dream of becoming mayor of his village even though he had obtained the biggest share of the votes, said (in French) that he 'didn't know how to speak' (meaning French), implying a definition of linguistic competence that is entirely sociological. (Bourdieu 1991:68-69)

The linguistic market

In opposition to the 'communist' metaphor, competence in a language can be thought of as a scarce resource with an unequal distribution. As with all attractive scarce resources the price is high, and people are willing to go to great lengths to obtain higher competence.

Competence in the legitimate language can be crucial for social rewards, since the legitimate language is in liaison with the state. Those that are mostly responsible for the language changes towards the legitimate language are the upwardly mobile 'petit bourgeois', and foremost the attractive and well educated young women that are most likely to associate with, and/or marry the wealthy men of the legitimate classes.

The value of social position is best noted in comparison with others. A need to differentiate oneself from those who have lower social status than oneself, and at the same time adapting to those who have a higher social status is the engine of linguistic, as well as social change. Bourdieu notes that the price the 'petit bourgeois' pay for climbing the social ladder is constant insecurity. The ambition to always be 'correct' leads to hyper-correction, and an abnormal control of bodily expression.

It is certainly true that, as one rises in the social order, the degree of censorship and correlative prominence given to the imposition of form and euphemization increase steadily, not only on public or official occasions [...], but also in the routines of everyday life. [...] Linked to this degree of censorship, which demands a consistently higher degree of euphemization and a more systematic effort to *observe formalities*, is the fact that the practical mastery of the instruments of euphemization which are objectively demanded on the markets with the greatest tension, [...], increases as one rises in social order [...]. Thus bourgeois usage is characterized, according to Lakoff, by the use of what he calls *hedges*, e.g. 'sort of', 'pretty much', [...], and, according to Labov, by intensive use of what he calls *filler phrases*, [...].

Though superfluous in terms of strict economy of communication, they fulfil an important function in determining the value of a way of communicating. (Bourdieu 1991:84-85)

Conclusion

A driving force for linguistic change is the law of price formation on a linguistic market. A condition for such a market to form is the unequal distribution of the language competence, especially in the legitimate language. Within a language community, several different ways of expressing similar thoughts exist. Each of these ways reflects a different social and linguistic competence. When there is an imbalance between social status and linguistic competence a personal conflict arises that can manifest itself in hyper-correction and tension. This indicates that language acquisition is a search for balance between internal conservative forces, and external forces of adaptation. The conflict manifests itself in a need to consciously control even behaviour that ought to be automatic to be comfortable (e.g. pronunciation).

Bourdieu addresses the problems that arise if we want to study language in full, including at least the third level in the technical communication system of Shannon & Weaver, dealing with the effectiveness of language. Bourdieu assumes that there are several levels of linguistic competence, which might be interpreted as several related languages. The understanding of language involves finding out how to interpret an utterance dependent on a speaker, a social context and a linguistic context. Bourdieu wants to stress social context, ignoring that there might be other levels of analysis. Whereas Saussure stresses the *internal* characteristics of language, Bourdieu finds that there exist forces outside of language that affect the development of language.

In contrast to Labovian sociolinguistics (according to Widell 1990), Bourdieu wants to see a *causative* relation between social stratification and linguistic expression. That is, social stratification (and associated stratification of the linguistic competence in the legitimate language) causes linguistic change through the 'anticipation of profits'.

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Kabardian Non-finite Forms with Arbitrary Subject Reference

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This paper focuses on a certain kind of non-finite form that occurs in complement clauses of commentative predicates such as *heləmer-s* 'interesting', *ʔeχʔəšχʔe-s* 'important', *tənš-s* 'easy' and modal predicates *xʔən* 'allowed, possible' and *xʔənqʔən* 'not allowed, not possible'. The characteristic feature of these forms is that the complement subject is arbitrary, i.e. lacking specific reference. It is the second person singular prefix *wə-* (*w-*, *p-*, *pʼ-*, *b-*) that is used to mark the arbitrary subject reference. Even if these forms have high frequency in Kabardian, they have not been noticed before in the literature on Caucasian languages (cf. standard Kabardian grammars *GK48*, *GK57*, *GK70*).

Preliminaries

Kabardian (or East Circassian) is a West Caucasian language, spoken by approximately 400,000 in the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic in the Northern Caucasus. Outside of the Caucasus there are large groups of speakers in Turkey, Syria, and Jordan.

A striking feature of the language is the highly synthetic structure of verbal forms, including cross-reference markers of the subject, as well as several objects and various inflectional and derivational affixes.

Kabardian is an ergative language, marking the subject of intransitive and direct object of transitive verbs with the absolutive case (*-r*) and the subject of transitive verbs with the ergative case (*-m*). The other cases are the instrumental (*-čʼe*) and adverbial (*-u*) cases.

An even more distinctive aspect of intransitive and transitive verbs is that they show different alignment of cross-reference markers – the verbal structure is always present in the clause, whereas case marking does not show up on all nouns and potentially case marked personal pronouns are frequently dropped. In intransitive verbs the initial position is occupied by the subject and in transitive verbs one finds the direct object in the initial position. The subject marker of a transitive verb is the cross-reference marker that is closest to the root.