

Linguist's multi-layer data and linguistic community's polyphony

Maurizo Guerre

University of Naples L'Orientale

Linguists often use in their works sets of data (usually sentences) laconically identified as numbered specimens labelled with the language or linguistic community name. Such a state of affairs is, as obvious, a reflex of the ghost of the "ideal speaker-hearer". When inspected from close, however, data labelled as specimens from the same language often show a multi-layer internal structure. Each layer carries in it some specific feature that identifies in one way or another its origin in terms of different conditions of linguistic production and recording. Not only different speakers, but also discourse circumstances, the use of both spoken and, at least in some cases, written records, as well the relationship of the researcher with the her/his collaborators, and several other dimensions (for instance, the level of speakers' meta-linguistic awareness) are all very relevant to provide a specific value and "flavour" to each set of data. Such a multi-layer structure of the data could reflect either a linguistic community's alive social polyphony, or, more rarely, a fading away use of an obsolescent language code. Each researcher knows very well the conditions under which the specific data s/he uses were collected, but usually s/he does not provide this information in the linguistic papers or books s/he writes. Unless specific anthropological linguistic or socio-linguistic points are focussed upon, all the data are quoted as specimens of a specific language or linguistic community.

In the presentation a deconstruction of two linguistic papers of mine (Gnerre 1986 and Cuturi and Gnerre 2005) will be provided under the above perspective, showing some aspects of the multi-layer origin of the data presented and analysed in each one. Both papers depict linguistic communities in dramatic cultural-linguistic transition. While the first (on the Shuar of the Upper Amazon) focuses on cultural and linguistic changes affecting ways of speaking and discourse genres, carrying with them a reduced (at least up to present) impact on the linguistic code as such, the second paper (on the Huave of Southern Mexico) focuses on the complex strategies implemented by the Huave to express concomitance relations. Comments on the first paper will focus on the range of first-hand and second-hand sources of the relevant data (spread on a time span of fifty years). As for the second paper, although data come from a much shorter time span, the emphasis will be put on both authors' relations with Huave speakers as well as on the latter' linguistic awareness, as an important aspects shaping the linguistic data. In both cases, it will be shown how linguistic communities' intrinsic polyphonies reflect on linguistic data.

Papers discussed:

Gnerre, M., 1986, "The Decline of Dialogue: Ceremonial and Mythological Discourse among the Shuar and Achuar of Eastern Ecuador", in *Native south American Discourse*. Edited by Joel Sherzer and Greg Urban, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 307-341.

Cuturi, F. And Gnerre, M., 2005, "Concomitance in Huave", in *Conference on Otomanguean and Oaxacan Languages (COOL)*, Edited by Rosemary Beam de Azcona and Mary Paster, Berkeley: Department of Linguistics. Survey of California and Other Indian Languages. Report 13: pp. 51-86.