

# SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND THE COUNSELLING PROCESS

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## Abstract

Sociolinguistics is the study of language as part of culture and society. Counselling, basically a linguistic-communicative process, has too often failed to consider systematic knowledge from related fields. This article discusses basic concepts of sociolinguistics and considers their relation to the counselling process.

## Résumé

La socio-linguistique étudie la langue dans le cadre de la culture et de la société. La consultation, qui a à sa base un processus linguistique et communicatif, a trop souvent ignoré les données systématiques de disciplines connexes. Cet article veut discuter les concepts de base de la socio-linguistique et indiquer leur lien au processus de la consultation.

Counselling is a communicative process. As most usually viewed, it occurs between two individuals, one of whom is termed the helper (or counsellor), the other the helpee (or client). It is assumed that the verbal and nonverbal communication process results in positive changes (developmental or remedial) in the helpee.

This view of helping has led counsellors and researchers to lay great stress on communication process. A massive amount of effort and time has been spent in analyzing dyadic (and now group) counselling interaction from this perspective. While this effort has resulted in increased definition and precision in determining what is and is not effective helping (c.f. Carkhuff and Berenson, 1967; Bergin and Garfield, 1971, and Ivey, 1971), the study of counselling has remained focused primarily on dyadic and small group interaction. This means that the larger social contexts of both helper and helpee are seldom given due consideration, either in the practice of counselling or in counselling research.

The field of sociolinguistics, however, provides a basis for reconceptualizing the counselling process (1) as interaction of individuals and society and (2) as interaction of language and thought. Sociolinguistics also provides for the reconceptualization of counsellor training in terms of communication competence. Sociolinguistics operates in the area between linguistics and sociology, and its body of knowledge is rich in information and concepts vital to a more thorough understanding of counselling communication. In its most simple definition, sociolinguistics is that area of study which focuses on the relationship of language use to the socio-cultural setting. Sociolinguists seek to determine who speaks what variety of language to whom, when, and concerning what (Fishman, 1970). Language is a part of culture, and the failure of the helping professions to consider the social implications of language use is a major short-coming of our field.

The purpose of this article is to introduce counsellors and other helpers to some basic concepts of sociolinguistics and to give special attention to the implications of this field for school counselling. Sociolinguistics provides some valuable perspectives from which to view the counselling process, particularly in a multi-cultural, bi-lingual society such as Canada.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A decision has been made in this article to give special attention to Canada as representative of a society which has made a clear commitment to bilingualism and pluralism. The United States in recent bilingual-bicultural legislation has made beginning steps away from the traditional "melting pot" philosophy, but still seems far away from a real willingness to cope with issues of differences among people. Despite its many problems in bilingualism, Canada may offer a model to U.S. education and psychology as to next steps in developing more effective communication among and between peoples.

*Sociolinguistics and Counselling*

Pride (1970) has defined sociolinguistics as "the study of language as part of culture and society." Counsellors do not usually think of language in terms of its relationship to a culture; rather, too often we consider language as merely the container of clients' feelings and ideas. However, the very words we choose, our manner of using them, and our variation of choice and manner from listener to listener carry important meanings.

The growing attention being devoted to non-verbal communication has had the ancillary effect of reminding scholars concerned with human communication that humans always communicate multiple messages. Seldom if ever is a person perceived as saying just one thing. counselling communication is no exception. The principle is well illustrated in Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson's (1967) second axiom of communication. Communications are realized on two levels, they present at least two messages:

The report aspect of a message conveys information and is, therefore, synonymous in human communication with the *content* of the message. It may be about anything that is communicable regardless of whether the particular information is true or false, valid, invalid, or undecidable. The command aspect, on the other hand, refers to what sort of a message it is to be taken as, and, therefore, ultimately to the *relationship* between the communicants (pp. 51-52).

The fact that language choice carries messages within itself is perhaps made most clear when one considers the hypothetical example of an English-speaking counsellor working with a bilingual French child. The counselling or helping session that proceeds in English may indeed be analyzed for words and specific types of counselling "leads," but an equally important message which may be received by the bilingual child is: "we are speaking English and not French". While this at first may seem unimportant, imagine further that the counsellor is also bilingual, and, noting some difficulty in the child understanding a point in English, s/he switches to French. While the basic counselling methodology may remain the same, the fact of language switching may be the most important indication of respect and empathy communicated to the child throughout the entire session. Similarly, the fact that a counsellor who is bilingual refuses to speak to a bilingual child except in the majority language may be a crucial indication of *lack* of

respect and empathy. Thus the language code selected by the counsellor may greatly influence his or her relationship to a client and consequently the outcome of the counselling process. Code selection and variation are as important—and in some cases, more important—than the ostensible content of speech acts in counselling.

*The Individual, Society, and Counselling*

The fact of systematic variation in language choice and manner of use is a key concept in sociolinguistics. An awareness of this fact by counsellors and researchers is the basis for reconceptualizing the counselling process as the interaction of individual and society.

Fishman (1968) has organized this fact of systematic variation along 3 dimensions: language domain, role-relations and code-switching. A *language domain* is a class of places, settings, or situations in which one language style, dialect, or variety is habitually used. Examples of language domains include the family, a neighborhood, the school, and institutions such as the church, business, or government. The counselling or therapy session itself may be considered a language domain with its own unique linguistic patterns which may be as important as the content of the verbal interaction.

*Role-Relations* affect interpersonal interaction in language domains. For example, the role of teacher and the role of student within the school domain lead to certain language patterns whereas the role of counsellor and the role of high school student-client lead to different language expectations. Bernstein (1972) has argued that role and language code are inseparable:

*A social role can then be considered as a complex coding activity controlling both the creation and organization of specific meanings and the conditions for their transmission and reception* (p. 474).

*Code-switching* is the result of movement from one language domain to another. The counsellor may start a conversation with the helpee in the formal code of the school ("What courses are you taking and how are you doing in them?"), switch to an informal code later ("Wow, the hockey game was a scene!"), and switch later to a basic helping code ("Right now, you seem to be feeling anxious about school"). Code-switching such as this typically occurs without any conscious awareness, although some helpers may have the reputation of being "phony" perhaps because their code-switching appears delib-

erate and calculated or is inappropriate to the role-relation, e.g., the "buddy-buddy" counsellor.

The task of the counsellor, then, is to switch to a suitable code with which to communicate with the helpee given the language domain in which they find themselves and the role relationship s/he wants to establish. The counsellor's work is complicated by the possible intrusion of other language domains: of the school or the client's family, or of the counsellor's profession or subculture. Bilingualism on the part of either helper or helpee complicates the counsellor's task even further.

Rethinking the counselling process in terms of language domains, role relationships and code switching can yield some useful observations. For example, consider the following:

Helpee: I am really tied up over my French.

Helper: As I hear you, right now you sound extremely anxious.

Helpee: Yeh, I am scared about not doing well.

Helper: I think you ought to study harder and attend classes more regularly. French is crucial.

Helpee: Classes ain't no good. They are dull.

In this case, the helper's first lead (a reflection of feeling relating to an immediate emotional state) came from the language domain of professional helping and presumably contributed to the development of a counsellor-client role relationship. The second lead, however, came from the language domain of the school or of the home and presumably contributed to the development of a teacher-student or parent-child role relationship.

The abrupt code switching disrupted the counselling process. No less than in the hypothetical example of the bilingual helper and helpee above, the helpee in this situation is also going to make some crucial inferences about the counsellor based on the counsellor's language—inferences that will directly affect the quality of helping the counsellor is able to provide. Blom and Gumperz (1972) have studied patterns of code switching and have found that mixing codes unexpectedly is disruptive to communication. Ideally, code transitions should be smooth and relate to the state of *both* participants.

Awkward code-switching, however, is not uncommon in counselling. It is particularly likely to occur when either the helper or the helpee is uncomfortable or when both are bilingual. Helper or helpee may feel uncomfortable

when, e.g., the helpee has expressed more of self than is really desired or when the beginning counsellor is afraid of certain topics. For example,

Helpee: Sex is a major "hang-up" of mine. I'm really "bummed-up."

Helper: Sexuality is a vital concern to many younger people.

The helper maintains the topic, but the code is from the school domain and moves counsellor and client toward a teacher-student role relationship. Had the counsellor previously been responding with a code in his or her own professional domain or with a code in the student domain, the sudden switch in codes, domain and role relationship would have been dramatic. We are suggesting that the student-client senses such things and that the quality of helping is detrimentally affected.

Awkward code-switching is also quite likely in bilingual counselling situations. The two individuals may find that one language is more suitable than the other for communicating on certain topics. For example, imagine a helping session where the helpee discussed in French, problems in a language immersion program, but in recounting difficulties in mathematics, s/he switched to English. The counsellor-client negotiation of who selects which code at what time for what topics may be a clumsy trial-and-error process. The outcome says much about the relationship between the individuals. For example, the higher status individual most often determines which language code prevails.

Viewed from this perspective, it is easy to see that students coming into a counselling office may often have difficulty in communicating. They are most likely to use the language code of the school domain whereas they may actually feel more comfortable with a more informal code. They are also vaguely aware that the language code of the effective helper may be different from the school code. The effective counsellor, however, is able to operate appropriately within several linguistic codes with smooth transitions. This is not easy and perhaps explains one reason that numbers of students do not return for second and third interviews. On the other hand, considering the vast complexity of language codes, perhaps it is remarkable that any return at all.

#### *Language, Thought, and Counselling*

A second way in which sociolinguistics provides for a reconceptualization of the counselling

process is in the consideration of language and thought. A fundamental theoretical argument among sociolinguists revolves around the question: to what extent does the language of a culture shape the thought and experience of the inhabitants of that culture, and to what extent do inhabitants' experiences and thoughts shape the language of that culture? Here is no place to try to resolve the riddle except to say that the interaction of individual and culture clearly works both ways. Culture both shapes and is shaped by inhabitants' thought and experience. The wise counsellor is aware of both sides of this coin.

Long before the term sociolinguistics was coined Sapir and Whorf (Deese, 1970) took up one side of the argument:

*The basic premise of the linguistic relativity hypothesis is that our modes of thinking are all as the artifacts of our culture are at the mercy of the language we speak* (p. 128).

It is well known that the Eskimo language has over 30 separate words for types of snow. English, by contrast, does not provide for such fine distinctions regarding snow. Even if one is an experienced skier, the native speaker of English would be hard pressed to speak of 30 types of snow. Therefore, when presented with the "same" phenomenon, snow, the English speaker's experience of snow is constrained by the relatively limited number of categories provided by the language. Eskimos however are free to experience snow in a greater number of ways because of their language.

Thus the way we experience the world, our reality, is in part determined by our available repertoire of language frames or the richness of our lexicon. In a counselling session, the helper may perceive that the helpee is operating within a language frame which is severely limiting his/her view of self or the world. The counsellor may then view his/her task as broadening the helpee's linguistic repertoire for construing the world. Counselling theory offers new language frames for the helpee. Whether it be psychoanalysis, non-directivism, behavior therapy, reality therapy, or rationale-emotive counselling, each theoretical system provides new ways through which the world may be conceived and reordered.

Thus, there is the other side of the language-thought coin. The helpee's view of the world (culture) may be restructured by learning a new vocabulary for describing it. For example, a person introduced to transactional analysis for the first time will typically begin to "see" parents,

adults and children in their every encounter. A routine conversation with his or her domineering employer becomes a problem of how to respond as adult rather than child to someone who "comes on too parent." A routine family argument becomes a problem of how to respond as adult to a spouse who is "coming on too child." Transactional analysis (as does any counselling or personality theory) provides a naming system for the world. A person who internalizes that system internalizes a new world.

The counselling process may then be reconceptualized in terms of the sociolinguistic problem of language, thought, and reality. The helpee brings a certain world view/language system into a counselling session. Over a period of time the helpee may experience a change in his or her language system which will result in a change of his/her world view. A goal of counselling then becomes not only to change the helpee's ways of *thinking* about himself/herself and others but also to change his or her ways of *talking* about himself/herself and others.

At first glance it may seem that bilingualism is a basic constraining force in Canadian society. It certainly raises a host of problems that other societies do not have to face. On the other hand, a more optimistic view is that a bilingual society is ultimately the stronger society because *more* views of social reality are available. The bilingual society is not limited to a single or relatively few language frames, but has available more ways of coping with the world and thus more options for individual and group adaptation and growth and for solving social problems. However, the determination of whether Canadian society is constrained or liberated by language rests in the hands of Canadians and the way they view their world. The sociolinguistically aware counsellor, for her or his part, will view bilingualism as an opportunity for growth rather than as a problem to be solved.

Particularly pertinent is the work of Lambert (1972) in Montreal. His study clearly demonstrated that bilingualism is not the handicap counsellors and psychologists have long believed. Bilingual children consistently demonstrated higher intelligence test scores than a matched group of monolinguals. The bilingual child is in fact culturally and intellectually advanced over his or her monolingual peer. He also found that bilingual children had more favorable attitudes toward English and English people than monolinguals and that bilingual children valued their dual language facility and considered bilingualism

a useful part of life experience. This important point should not be lost on counsellors who may consciously or unconsciously support individual and community attitudes against bilingualism. These data may be compared to the existing expectations and attitudes toward bilingualism in the United States where bilinguals are expected to perform poorly at both intellectual and social levels. Sociolinguistic analysis reveals that cultural expectations and valuing of the bilingual child is the important determiner of social competence.

### *Competence and Counselling*

Sociolinguistics provides for the reconceptualization of the counselling process (1) as interaction of individuals and society and (2) as interaction of language and thought. The third basis for reconceptualizing the counselling process concerns counsellor training and the concept of communication competence.

Fishman (1970) has suggested that a major goal of applied sociolinguistics is the definition of communication competence, the possession of an adequate repertoire of language varieties for maximum communication with a variety of groups. Connolly and Bruner (1974) are more specific:

Competence implies action, changing the environment. It seems in a sense to involve at least three things. First, being able to select features from the total environment that provide the relevant information for elaborating a course of action. This activity goes by several names; forming a schema, constructing a programme, etc. Secondly, having planned a course of action, the next task is to initiate the sequence of movements, or activities, in order to achieve the objective we have set for ourselves. And finally, we must utilize what we have learned from our successes and failures in the formulation of new plans (p. 3).

The concept of communication competence is a challenging one for the school counsellor. It raises such questions as: What language variety does the professional helper use with what individual under what conditions; Moreover, what are the "features from the total environment that provide the relevant information" to make this decision; Given that information, can the helper act on it; And given successes and failures of both perception and action, can the helper learn from them and continue to grow and develop?

The communication competence of many professional helpers can be brought into serious question and may partially explain the success and popularity of para-professional and peer counsellors (c.f. Delworth, 1974; Gluckstern, 1973, Carkhuff, 1969). Peer counsellors *start* with communication competence which may be more important for helping than the professional skills of diagnosis and treatment.

A host of basic sociolinguistic factors must be considered for communication between counsellor and helpee: language domains, code switching, role relationships and the relations among language, thought, and reality. The failure of professional counselling to consider these fundamental issues in training programs and in professional practice is disturbing. We have failed to take into account the importance of communication competence as a basic foundation of training programs.

It is true that counselling has begun to develop some rather specific and systematic programs which are aimed toward increasing the communication competence of professional helpers (Brammer, 1973; Carkhuff, 1969; Danish and Hauer, 1973; Kagan, 1967; Ivey, 1971; Ivey and Gluckstern, 1974). These programs all aim to teach professional helpers more effective communication skills and represent the profession's first significant effort to produce communication competence. Yet, they all fail the test of sociolinguistic relevance for they do not deal with basic sociocultural issues underlying their use. While the systematic counsellor trainers are to be commended for efforts to demystify and make clear what effective helping is, they have simultaneously failed to take into account the appropriateness of those helping skills to specific client populations.

For example, in the microcounselling (Ivey, 1971) system a paraphrase is treated as simply a paraphrase. And though it is made clear that in a given situation there is no one best counsellor response, some are clearly better than others. This has been particularly obvious in the use of Ivey and Gluckstern's (1974) *Basic Attending Skills* video tapes. With only a few hours exposure trainees are able to pick better and worse paraphrases and to supply examples of each themselves. The clear development of communication competence made possible by systematic programs such as microcounselling helps clarify important missing elements in helper training in both systematic and traditional training programs. In the case above, when trainees are

supplied data on such concepts as language domain, code switching, and role-relationships, they are able to observe how sociolinguistic concepts are functioning to control counselling process and outcome rather than the counsellor's personality theory or counselling technique.

Yet, the fact remains that no school of counselling and therapy, no method of systematic helper training has dealt substantially with the larger social context of counselling and sociolinguistic concepts. The systematic training methods do seem ideally fitted for development of true communication competence, yet as of now they have failed to consider these vital issues.

#### *Summary and Implications*

There are several useful courses of action which could do much to remedy the lack of emphasis on sociolinguistics foundations of the helping relationship. The first is reading and inclusion of sociolinguistics concepts in training programs. Helpful starting points are Fishman (1968, 1970) Gumperz and Hymes (1972), and Hymes (1974). Counselling is heavily a linguistic phenomenon and failure to seek information from closely related fields leaves the profession with the unproductive task of "rediscovering the wheel."

Secondly, training programs need to emphasize experiential training in sociolinguistic concepts. While systematic training programs offer one clear vehicle toward this objective, attention paid to language domains, role-relationships, and the naming power of language in counselling theory and personality courses plus consideration of these issues in didactic practicum training can do much to remedy the present situation.

Needless to say, counsellor-trainees representative of a wide variety of linguistic background and/or language domains will considerably enrich any training program. If such internal resources are unavailable, there is ample precedent for paying participants in experiments. If need be, training programs could pay other-culture-consultant-participants for their sociolinguistic input in training sessions.

Communication competence implies that the counsellor needs to have a wide repertoire of linguistic knowledge and skills. A counsellor operating in the formal language domain of the school too often represents linguistic incompetence. On the other hand, the counsellor awareness of the socioculture aspects of language and the problems of the role constrains of the role

"counsellor", plus awareness of the potential experiences of the helpee is at a good beginning point for flexible and positive human interaction.

Counselling has too long been presented as a "set" series of techniques and answers which apply equally well to all clients. The field of sociolinguistics helps explain some of our failures to work effectively with those whom we would help. Counsellors must strive to develop higher levels of communication competence and the ability to adapt their expertise so that they can communicate more widely and more naturally with larger client populations.

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