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The (in)significance of facts in sociolinguistic engagement

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Critical reflexivity seems expedient in a robust, burgeoning field such as sociolinguistics. Assumptions, principles, and approaches nurture implicit and explicit disciplinary canonization based on our cognitive framing and background experience—and these tenets deserve to be scrutinized judiciously.¹ In fact, I have to admit that some of my own research unwittingly contributed to the construction of a set of 'sociolinguistic myths' about the development and status of African American Language (Wolfram 2007) as well as some questionable assumptions about the nature of social engagement (Wolfram 1998; Wolfram, Reaser, & Vaughn 2008). I therefore welcome this critique of the *principle of error correction* as a theory underlying social change. The study of language in its social context is historically embedded in an ideological struggle that pits 'popular beliefs' against 'expert authority', thus making it vulnerable to overstatement and overgeneralization—by the sociolinguistic intelligentsia as well as those speaking for popular culture.

At first glance, the oft-cited trifecta of principles guiding sociolinguistic engagement—(a) the *principle of error correction* (PEC), (b) the *principle of debt incurred*,

and (c) the *principle of linguistic gratuity*—seems to be a noncontroversial, appropriate activist call to the field of sociolinguistics (Labov 1982; Wolfram 1993; Rickford 1997). After all, who can be against correcting ‘errors’ in fact and giving back knowledge to the communities where we conduct our research and to the broader public? At the same time, however, we have to acknowledge that underlying ideologies and beliefs underlie ALL principles and practices—with material causes and consequences.

Perhaps the most noteworthy lesson from engagement efforts in sociolinguistics over the last half-century is how resistant and dismissive public agencies and institutions have been to ‘sociolinguistic facts’ about language diversity. One of the most prominent myths about social life is that giving people facts and analyses about their social situation motivates change (Cooper 2006). As Beck (2017) notes, ‘There are facts, and there are beliefs, and there are things you want so badly to believe that they become as facts to you’. We need to remember that beliefs and values about language derive from the same primitive system that governs religion, morality, and politics, and that simply ‘correcting facts’ is an insufficient motivation for social change.

To a large extent, the critical analysis offered in Lewis’ critique explicates the underlying reasons why the correction of erroneous facts is not enough to inspire social change related to language. These explanations range from ‘alternative facts’ that reinforce popular beliefs about language (e.g. the ‘deficit’ vs. ‘language difference’, ‘vocabulary gap’) to a critical race theory approach highlighting the systemic, material consequences of racism for those it targets and those it benefits. The bottom-line analysis points to the inseparability of language use, social groupings, and representations of language, which are ‘material, perceivable, and often embedded in institutionalized practices’ (Lewis, this issue, pp. 328–329). It is difficult to deny this conclusion given the steadfast, institutional resistance to a social gospel rooted in sociolinguistic fact. At the same time, I’m not sure that attributing the cause to an exclusive PEC focus on an IDEALISTIC approach vis-à-vis a MATERIALISTIC one is appropriate or explanatory. In actual sociolinguistic practice, there has often been an integration of these approaches. For example, relatively early in the application of sociolinguistics, it was pointed out that the reified, institutional construct of ‘correct language forms’ in language assessment was discriminatory and racist, embedded in a regime that involved material aspects of institutional consignment—and that the ‘physical circumstances’ are the most appropriate target from the abatement of racism (Lewis, this issue, p. 330). Indeed, some sociolinguists have been working diligently to address these issues by holding institutions accountable for discriminatory classification and assessment practices legally and institutionally (Ann Arbor Decision 1979; Baugh 2003; Rickford & King 2016), without explicitly stating that their underlying motives were framed in what we now refer to as critical race theory (Delgado & Stephancic 2001; Alim, Rickford, & Ball 2016) or ideological approaches (Woolard & Schieffelin 1994; Rosa 2016). On a number of occasions, sociolinguists certainly have demonstrated an

integrated idealistic and materialistic approach in practice, contrary to the author's claim that they have been exclusively idealistic.

To be honest, I have to admit that the original statement of the PEC principle now seems somewhat simplistic and ideologically naïve. Critical race theory and language ideology scholarship have certainly given deeper understanding of and the motivation for a materially based social activism to confront the systemic practice of linguistic subordination and racism, even as they have underscored the fact that correcting facts is insufficient in social activism. But I also think that it is a bit myopic to conclude that linguists who endorsed PEC were not aware of or dismissed the fundamental material aspects of racism, classism, and hegemony that drive language inequality. At the same time, this conclusion does not detract from the expediency for a critical reflexivity applied to the PEC principle—and many other principles of sociolinguistics. Indeed, this article is a welcome call for more critical reflexivity related to a broad set of fundamental principles and canons of sociolinguistic theory and practice.

NOTE

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Correcting whose errors? The principle of error correction from an ethnographic lens

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Labovian sociolinguistics constitutes an important paradigm that brings to the fore-front issues of social justice in linguistics and asks about the debt the scholar has towards the community once s/he gets information from it. Nevertheless, as many scholars have discussed, and even though this paradigm has focused on changing society for the better, it has serious limitations on how it conceptualizes the relationship between language and society. Based on critical race theory and language ideologies, Lewis powerfully contributes to this discussion by critiquing the *principle of error correction* (PEC) proposed by Labov as a particular way of conceptualizing social change. As Lewis points out at the end of the article, this principle reflects an ‘earlier era’ and needs to be reconsidered in light of the significant transformations not only in the study of language in society developed in recent decades but also in critical theory and humanities in general.

According to Lewis, the limits of the PEC originate in its premises about racism, social change, and representations of language. Moreover, the PEC is based on a positivist/modernist/structuralist approach to language itself. The use of terms such as ‘errors’, ‘correction’, ‘misconceptions’, ‘objectivity’, ‘language myths’, ‘mistaken beliefs’, and ‘scientific fallacy’, among others, reflects this. This