

Redesigning a Course in Socio-Linguistics for an African Context

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Introduction

In general, the scientific field is unbalanced, in the sense that Western countries, or scholars based in these countries, hold a hegemonic position in the production and dissemination of what is perceived as scientific knowledge. Scholars in peripheral countries, such as those found in Africa, who wish to participate in the scientific field and make contributions to the production of scientific knowledge, face enormous challenges for a variety of reasons. For instance, entering the field of dissemination of scientific knowledge, via publications, is not easy for those with perspectives different from the dominant ones. This situation may explain the fact that 'post-colonial theory has been produced in all societies into which imperial forces of Europe intrude, though not always in the formal guise of theoretical texts. But this might not be so clear today given the privileging of theory produced in metropolitan centres and the publishing networks, which perpetuate this process' (Ashcroft et al., 1995: 2–3).

On the other hand, we should not overlook the fact that most scholars in these peripheral countries were trained within a Western tradition (in Western contexts), and are therefore conditioned to reproduce (uncritically) Western paradigms. An obvious consequence of this (uncritical) reproduction of Western paradigms is that African thinking has been both a mirror and a consequence of the experience of the West, which can be illustrated by the way most universities in Africa organise their curricula, course outlines, textbooks, and the like.

This situation requires some reform if we are to make the university more relevant to the African context. One way of achieving this objective may be through adding new and marginalised perspectives into scientific debate and university classrooms, a process which could start with redesigning course outlines and changing textbooks used in different university programmes. In other words, the curriculum should integrate new perspectives, which consider scholarship done outside Western contexts, such as that undertaken in Africa, on Africa, and by Africans or scholars concerned with Africa. In this way, we would be empowering a new breed of graduates with other perspectives and analytical tools.

This is the spirit guiding the project entitled ‘Redesigning a Course in Socio-Linguistics for the Mozambican Context’, which I will be discussing in the rest of this chapter. I will first outline the objectives and motivation, which will be followed by a discussion of how the project has progressed. Finally, the chapter considers the impact of the progress of the project on the assumptions motivating the project.

Objectives of the Project

Bearing in mind the intention of changing the content and analytical tools common to African universities, let’s take the situation of a one-year Socio-Linguistics course taught in the Faculty of Arts, Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo (Mozambique), and its attempt to effect changes not only to its content but, more importantly, to the approach used to address the content. The Faculty of Arts intends to achieve this goal by getting acquainted with socio-linguistic scholarship undertaken in Africa and/or on Africa, and by incorporating components of this scholarship in the design of a course outline and in the compilation of a reader. The final objective is to sketch a Socio-Linguistics course that is relevant to Mozambique, without losing the universal aspects relevant to the field of Socio-Linguistics.

Motivation for the Project

While keeping the general objective in mind, we may ask what kind of rationale can support the quest for relevance? In what ways is it justifiable to talk about redesigning a Socio-Linguistics programme? I want to argue along these lines by analysing the development of the field of Socio-Linguistics, emphasising issues that render it a legitimate scientific endeavour. I argue that there are objective and subjective conditions related to the field of production, reproduction and

circulation of scientific knowledge that lead to specifying certain issues as scientifically relevant in a given time and space. This means that science is to some extent contingent upon the conditions in which it is produced and made known.

In this regard, recent developments in the field of Socio-Linguistics have been directed towards issues that do not relate to the major concerns of most African countries. But no one wants to be left out of the 'mainstream'; we rely on textbooks written in Western contexts for Western consumption, and course outlines designed for other social contexts. The challenge that the project poses is whether the Faculty of Arts can introduce a balance into this situation.

The scientific field that has come to be known as socio-linguistics is relatively new. It started to blossom in the late 1950s. It gained recognition as a discipline within linguistics in the 1960s and early 1970s, as students of language questioned basic assumptions that the structuralist schools of linguistics, such as Chomsky's generative linguistics, were taking for granted. One of these assumptions is the notion that language could be viewed as dissociated from its social context.

In reaction to such views, some scholars established a new paradigm in the study of language by positing that a wider perspective should be taken – one that considers language not only in terms of structure but also in light of usage; that takes into account social actors behaving socially. As one of these scholars put it, 'a thoroughgoing linguistics must move in another direction as well, from what is potential in human nature, and elementary in a grammar, to what is realisable and realised; and conceive of social factors entering into realisation as constitutive and rule-governed' (Hymes, 1974: 93).

The main developments leading to the establishment of socio-linguistics took place in the US, and, as the field grew, different trends emerged. For this reason, by the beginning of the 1970s, Gumperz and Hymes (1972: vi) would point out that 'the ready currency of the term socio-linguistics ... does not reflect fundamental agreement on common problems, sources of data, or methods of analysis.' A variety of issues were tackled within Socio-Linguistics, ranging from theoretical Socio-Linguistics to what has been known as applied Socio-Linguistics. Defining itself as partly empirical and partly theoretical, a number of questions were addressed and a whole array of situations considered, including language problems of the so-called developing countries.¹

In fact, Africa was one of the major concerns of Socio-Linguistics, not only as an object of inquiry, but also because of the involvement of African scholars. An example of such a case is the Ford Foundation funded projects in the 1960s that led

to language descriptions of Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia, in which well-known African scholars fully participated (eg. Kashoki and Walusumbi). The common feature of these projects is the inclusion of articles dealing with practical issues arising in connection with situations found in African countries.

Today there are hardly any active projects of this nature, even though the field has grown and the issues addressed in the field have broadened. What is perceived as mainstream Socio-Linguistics today, can be seen by browsing through major journals in the field, such as *Language in Society* and the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*. For the most part Socio-Linguistics has become a theory-driven enterprise, shying away from the practical concerns, typical of Third World countries, that drew the attention of scholars in the 1960s. Issues considered relevant to Socio-Linguistics are defined in connection with networks and interests established in major academic and scientific centres in (certain) Western countries (e.g. the US, UK and France). Unless one is part of the network and abides by the rules, access is denied or obstructed, which means, in general, that the work of scholars in non-Western contexts with different interests remain sidelined. This may be the reason why we find the work of African scholars in major journals only when they are still in training, or if they are established in Western universities.²

It follows from the previous statements that there is work that is undertaken by scholars in Africa that remains unknown and does not have a wider impact in contexts where it could be useful. Without committing myself to the idea that all sidelined work has quality, I am arguing that there is scientific work out there (of quality) that does not get disseminated as a consequence of the way the field of production and reproduction of scientific knowledge is organised. Hence, little of this work finds its way into our classrooms.

The project focuses on this aspect in particular. In redesigning a Socio-Linguistics course outline, it attempts to bring into the classroom the products of scientific work that are not normally made available. As a result, the Faculty of Arts expects to have a course programme that addresses issues relevant to the socio-linguistic landscape of Africa, and, in particular, of Mozambique. This requires the development of a far more empirical and applied Socio-Linguistics, which is not to say that theory is not important to Africa, or that there should be a division of scientific work, whereby theory belongs to Westerners (and Africans cannot or should not produce theory). Rather, we are arguing that socio-linguistic theory should be directed towards issues that are relevant to Africa, and, in particular, to Mozambique.

The Progress of the Project

The project has pursued its objectives by trying to gain knowledge of socio-linguistic scholarship undertaken in Africa and/or on Africa through a review of course outlines and syllabi used in different universities, as well as socio-linguistic literature produced in Africa or addressing issues related to Africa. The Arts Faculty naively thought that it could reach its objectives by using the following strategies:

- ▶ contacts with scholars in different universities;
- ▶ visits to universities;
- ▶ participation in conferences; and
- ▶ examination of bibliographies.

Collecting material for the project has proven troublesome. First, exchanges with African scholars are not easy. This is for a variety of reasons, such as lack of addresses, failure to respond, and scarcity of means for sending material. Secondly, some of the interesting work is in the form of projects whose reports are not available. Actually, some of the material can only be found in the libraries of major universities in Western countries, meaning that even if one wants to 'reform' a course outline one has to rely on the West. Given these difficulties, we have redefined our methodology and we are relying more on sources and material located in American and European universities to redesign a course outline in Africa. This constitutes a contradiction in itself.

In terms of content, the project has shown so far that the issue is not whether theory-driven Socio-Linguistics is useful or not, but instead how to frame socio-linguistic issues that are relevant to local contexts in a solid theoretical approach with a universal application. It is most likely that the change will not be in the content per se, but mainly in the way the content is addressed – that is, by bringing to the attention of students situations similar to those they face daily (the empirical side), or by training them to apply their knowledge to local contexts (the applied side).

Conclusion

Given the way scientific practice is undertaken, Western academics hold a hegemonic position. This state of affairs has an impact on access to scientific knowledge in non-Western contexts, such as Mozambique. While a case can be made for common ground in terms of the epistemological base for the scientific endeavour, objective and subjective conditions leading to the practice of science

divide Western and non-Western science practitioners. What is perceived as scientifically relevant therefore depends on these conditions, and, moreover, there is an ordering of scientific knowledge, that gives predominance to scientific knowledge emanating from the West.

In this connection, Africa, in general, is negatively affected, and scientific work done in Africa is frequently overlooked, even in African universities. I have argued for the possibility of changing this situation, taking the case of a Socio-Linguistics course, which could be redesigned so that it could incorporate contributions from socio-linguistic scholarship undertaken in Africa and/or on Africa (of particular relevance to Mozambique). This has proved a very difficult enterprise due to the fact that even access to African scholarship is mediated by centres in the West.

The outcome for the Faculty of Arts at Eduardo Mondlane University, therefore, is quite disappointing and illustrates the real stumbling blocks in the way towards developing a vibrant African scholarship with at least some independent character. It would be interesting to explore whether this is a feature of most attempts to activate indigenous knowledge forms.

Endnotes

- 1 Recall the famous masterpiece *Language Problems of Developing Countries* edited by Fishman and colleagues (Fishman et al., 1969), which collected articles by major socio-linguists of the time addressing issues related to Third World countries.
- 2 Once they return to their countries, their names fade away. Part of the reason may be the fact that the conditions leading to major scientific achievement are difficult to find in most African countries. However, even the work that some manage to undertake, faces a variety of difficulties.

References

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