Review of Glyn Williams, Sociolinguistics: A Sociological Critique

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Williams’s aim in this volume is to show that sociolinguistics is based on outmoded and ideologically questionable social theory. He begins with a sketch of the social-philosophical antecedents of nineteenth- and twentieth-century linguistics, suggesting that ideas such as the inevitability of progress and the equation of social order with social homogeneity have colored linguistic as well as social thought. A more detailed exposition of the social theory of the American sociologist Talcott Parsons provides the basis for Williams’s critiques, in the remainder of the volume, of variationist sociolinguistics, work on language contact and language planning, conversation analysis, the ethnography of communication, and speech accommodation theory.

Parsonian social theory, according to Williams (I am not competent enough in sociology to evaluate his summary), explains human action as the interaction of individual personalities, social institutions, and cultural values and norms. As societies evolve, they seek equilibrium, a state in which values are shared by all and conflict is absent. Social stratification is explained in terms of consensus rather than conflict (as it would be in the Marxist view), the different groups in a society all sharing a common system of values. Williams claims that Parsonian sociology “is little more than a portrayal of American society informed by the dominant American value system” (62), with no mechanism for predicting or understanding conflict or radical change.

Williams’s critiques of sociolinguistics vary in effectiveness. His discussion of variation theory displays many of the weaknesses to which the critiques are prone. Williams seems not fully aware that the goal of Labovian sociolinguistics is the modeling of processes of linguistic change, not the demonstration that “some features of language mirror some features of society” (84). Some of his specific criticisms of the way social facts are handled by Labov are well taken (e.g., the idea of speech community is problematic, and it is misleading to identify social class with income), but they are hardly new. The most recent research to which Williams refers is from the early 1980s, and his choices of work to treat as representative can be mystifying. His discussion of register is based entirely on one 1982 article by J. Ure, for example. The names of key figures such as John Gumperz and, in another chapter, Dell Hymes are misspelled. The Parsonian nature of many aspects of variationist sociolinguistic theory does become evident in this chapter, though as much in spite of Williams’s argumentation as because of it.

Williams’s real interest and expertise are in the more sociological areas of language policy and planning. He argues that the notions of diglossia, bilingualism, and language shift are based “in a conception of society as an open system where individuals have equal access to all social roles” (100), social roles being defined emically in terms of shared cultural values rather than economically in terms of competition for resources. Language planning, Williams suggests, is generally conceptualized from the perspective of the dominant social groups; even the encouragement of “minority”-language education is a form of oppression, as it institutionalizes the languages of the nondominant, making them unavailable as arenas of class struggle. Evolutionism is another flaw of the sociology of language, according to Williams: language shift and the decline of bilingualism are seen as inevitable corollaries of progress toward social equilibrium rather than as results of the domination of minority groups by the institutionally powerful.

Williams’s other critiques, like the two I have summarized, are both compelling—Williams is right that much sociolinguistics is based on unexamined and questionable models of society—and irritating—one wishes again and again that Williams had done a better job of describing the discipline in a complete, fair, up-to-date way; that he had adopted a less petulant, combative tone; and that he had proposed some alternatives to the work he criticizes or, even better, showed by means of actual research (e.g., Kroskrity, Schieffelin, and Woolard 1992; Gal 1993) how an alternative sociolinguistics would explain linguistic and social facts more realistically. Williams’s suggestions for improvements in the field consist of a seven-page summary of Marxist thought and a ten-page overview of Foucauldian discourse analysis. Many sociolinguists will want more.

References
