A Meta-Analysis of Recent Research on the Social Psychology of Language

Ivan B. BROWN*

ABSTRACT

The social psychology of language is a complex, multi-layered and obviously multi-disciplinary field of enquiry. This paper outlines the territory of this sub-discipline of applied linguistics, and gives an overview of the current theories, constructs, models and tools current in the field. It also provides a broad picture of recent approaches to empirical research in the field. This range of theoretical perspectives, research methods and interdisciplinary applications was found during a meta-analysis of 169 abstracts that were published between 2001 and 2003. Analysis of these abstracts suggested an increasing range of socio-psychological constructs incorporated into studies of applied linguistics, especially in relation to second language acquisition and use. There also appeared to be a growing trend among social psychologists to involve linguistics more systematically in their research.

What is the *social psychology of language*? The weighted significance of the three words "social", "psychology" and "language" immediately warn us that this sub-discipline of applied linguistics is a complex multi-layered and obviously multi-disciplinary field of enquiry. It is clearly a point of interface between linguistics and a branch of psychology. This kind of hybrid discipline is not uncommon, but social psychology is itself clearly an interdisciplinary field and an unambiguous definition of it is hard to find. Bainbridge (1994), in *The Encyclopaedia of Language and Linguistics*, defines social psychology as "lying between psychology and sociology, with less substantial connections to economics and literature" (1994:576), and makes a distinction between *sociological* social psychology and *psychological* social psychology. It seems that there have been differing perspectives and priorities in social psychology, depending on which parent discipline academics have been rooted in. It would not be appropriate in this kind of survey to analyse these traditional interdisciplinary relationships in great depth, but it is necessary to look briefly at the generally understood definitions, firstly in order not to confuse social psychology of language with sociolinguistics or psycholinguistics, and secondly in order to start mapping out the territory of this field from a solid basis.

Hogg (2001:310) defines social psychology as "the scientific investigation of how the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of individuals are influenced, by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others," and later describes "the mapping of utterances to social actions" (2001:312), that this field aims to explain. This would appear to start to show the differences between social psychology of language and sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics. *The Encyclopaedia of Language and Linguistics* states that sociolinguistics "encompasses the study of multilingualism, social dialects, conversational interaction, attitudes to language and language change" (1994:585). This seems to place more emphasis on the interaction between sociology and the dynamics of whole living languages and dialects than on interaction between linguistic utterances and psychological states. The expression *language and social psychology*, which implies a looser frame of reference, appears in the titles of several publications, including the *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*. Of all the journals covered in this survey, the abstracts of articles in this journal concur most closely and consistently with the apparent

* Division of Languages: Department of Foreign Languages

remit of the field under investigation. As of August 2007, the journal describes its remit as the following: "[It] records contributions exploring the social dimensions of language and the linguistic implications of social life. Articles are drawn from a wide range of disciplines, including linguistics, cognitive science, sociology, communication, psychology, education, and anthropology."

The social psychology of language, like most academic fields, would be expected to have its own range of commonly employed theoretical constructs, models and perspectives, as well as possible applications, implications and insights for and from other areas of linguistics and human sciences where language is involved. Any of these elements could potentially be involved with a number of other of the above elements in empirical research at a given point in time. The nature of the relationships between these various elements is likely to be a dynamic and constantly moving one, as trends in the relevant areas of empirical research change over time. This paper will give an overview of the theoretical perspectives; that is, the current theories, constructs, models and tools current in the field. It also provides a broad picture of recent empirical research that involves practical applications of the social psychology of language, particularly in second language acquisition. This range of theoretical perspectives, research methods and interdisciplinary applications was found during a meta-analysis of 169 abstracts that were published between 2001 and 2003.

In addition to the Journal of Language and Social Psychology, a number of other sources were surveyed. These include a number of journals rooted in the parent disciplines, such as the British Journal of Social Psychology, the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, Language and Communication, the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, and Applied Linguistics; other journals such as Language and Communication, Human Communication Research and Human Relations; and other journals covering related interdisciplinary applications, such as the Journal of Management Studies, Studies in Second Language Acquisition, Language Learning and The Counselling Psychologist. Abstracts were also collected from the website of the 8th International Conference of Language and Social Psychology, held in Hong Kong in 2002, organised under the auspices of the International Association of Language and Social Psychology. Some articles from these conferences often appear in subsequent issues of the corresponding journal mentioned above. The following theoretical terms and constructs were found under investigation as variables in a significant number of abstracts: communication accommodation theory (CAT), accommodation, linguistic intergroup bias, discursive (social) psychology, storytelling, narrative, attitudes, social identity, social identity theory, attribution, attribution theory, motivation, evaluation, vitality, ethnolinguistic vitality and dyadic discourse. Each of these occurred in at least five abstracts out of the accumulated body collected from the Journal of Language and Social Psychology (48 abstracts) and the 8th International Conference of Language and Social Psychology (121 abstracts), not counting abstracts found in both. Inter- and intra-cultural factors were also often significant variables in this particular sample of abstracts. Although only explicit in four of the abstracts from the journal, they were explicit in almost half of the abstracts from the conference. Other theoretical constructs and perspectives that occurred were: expectancy, self-categorization, reference group, willingness to communicate (WTC), analytic philosophical perspective, semantic differential, Communicative Predicative of Aging Model, Elaboration Likelihood Model, Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory, Hall's Communication Context, the Social Context Model, Intercultural Communicative Competence and Social Cognitive and Discourse Processing. Other notable technical terms found in this survey will henceforth be marked by*.

Within this survey, the earliest occurrences of communication accommodation theory* and dyadic* discourse were found in a study by Li (2001, "Cooperative and intrusive interruptions in inter- and intra-cultural dyadic discourse") of the University of Northern British Columbia. This experimental study, involving 4 Canadians and 40 Chinese simulating doctor-patient conversations in various dyads, claims that its results provide "unequivocal support for communication accommodation theory," (2001:259). This theory still had currency in 2003. James Green (2003) investigated toilet graffiti, aiming to enrich public discourse of this topic and address its hitherto "methodological failings" by integrating the research into the social identity and de-individuation model* and communication accommodation theory. There were also many instances of this theory in the context of gender, generation and age relations, although no significant instance was found in the

context of second language acquisition or use in the whole of the survey. Accommodation of speech was noted as one of the results of a study on L2 simplification strategies (Lin, 2003). However, the title of the article mentions "Sociolinguistic Factors" rather than factors of social psychology of language. Here we have an example of a potential boundary problem between these two interdisciplinary fields. This may be resolved by the fact that the abstract only mentions speech accommodation with respect to males and females, with no mention of the social context or actions of the individuals involved, such as convergence or divergence. Therefore this particular situation is more likely to fall within the domain of sociolinguistics than social psychology of language.

Semin, Sherman and Doest (2002) at Free University Amsterdam and Indiana University respectively, base an experimental study on the linguistic category model*, and conclude by arguing that the "methodological and substantive implications of linguistic context deserve greater attention in social psychological research," (2002:195). This would seem to be yet another instance of pushing for greater systematic linguistic involvement in social psychology, thereby promoting the field of social psychology of language. While not necessarily being a direct response to this, Douglas and Sutton (2003), publishing in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, may be cooperating with this trend. Their abstract does not explicitly mention the linguistic category model, or methodological or substantive implications of linguistic context, but they do mention language abstraction, a construct frequently coinciding with the above in many abstracts, including that by Semin et al. (2002). This arguably constitutes heuristic evidence of the growing trend by social psychologists to involve linguistics more systematically in their research.

The above constructs also appear to be clearly related to linguistic intergroup bias* (LIB). De Montes, Semin and Valencia (2003) produced results which they claim have implications for LIB. Their study involves abstractness of descriptions of positive and negative target behaviours (as a dependent variable). While de Montes and Valencia write from the University of the Basque Country, one of the supervisors, Semin, is the same researcher as cited above, based at Free University, Amsterdam. Discursive approaches appear to have consistently appeared in the field since before the temporal remit of this survey, with some evidence of varying emphasis and perspective. Wiggins (2001), at Loughborough University in the UK, engaged in "discursive work", arguing that this type of research had hitherto neglected everyday interaction. She therefore incorporated other constructs and tools into her study, including conversation analysis, evaluative practices and attitudes. Since the aim of the study was to investigate the verbal evaluation of food, direct evaluative expressions were examined in terms of their construction and placement in the talk, and discursive activities such as accounts, compliments and offers of food were discussed "in relation to the interactional construction of evaluations [*]," (2001:445). She also addressed one potential interdisciplinary application of social psychology of language in this case, namely food preferences and health promotion.

Conversation analysis, mentioned briefly above as a tool of social psychology of language, was recognised as having another possible application. The abstract of an article in The Counselling Psychologist (Madill, Widdicombe and Barkham, 2001) offers an illustrative analysis demonstrating the potential of conversational analysis for psychotherapy research. In what might be called a case study of an "unsuccessful eight-session psychodynamic-interpersonal therapy" (Madill et al., 2001:413), the authors promise to demonstrate how the client and therapist pursued differing attributional projects*, another construct of social psychology of language. However, that was in 2001, and no related article was found in subsequent issues of the same journal. Nevertheless, while not explicitly related, other applications of the field to counselling have also been noted. One example is Sarangi (2002), of Cardiff University, who examined negotiations between counsellors and clients of possible scenarios involving probability statements.

Attribution theory, often together with attitudes, motivation and the willingness to communicate model (WTC), are theoretical models and constructs that have been frequently involved in research on second language use and acquisition. In the Journal of Language and Social Psychology, Clément, Baker and MacIntyre (2003) conducted a study focussed on WTC combined with the social context model* to "consider both contextual and individual difference variables in L2 use," (Clément et al, 2003:190). In their findings, path analyses* supported a model in which context, individual, and social factors were all important determinants of

L2 use, although patterns of relations differed depending on the ethnolinguistic vitality* of the group. This research was conducted on majority Anglophone and minority Francophone students attending a bilingual university in Canada.

A number of studies presented at the 8th ICLASP (Hong Kong, 2002) examined the roles of attitude, motivation and anxiety, in varying combinations in second language use and acquisition. Nakata and Sachdev (2002) presented a paper focussing on the role of anxiety in the learning of English in Japan. The relationship between anxiety, attitudes and motivation amongst learners was explored, particularly concerning difficulties in oral competence despite good performance in written aspects of proficiency. In exploring the reasons underlying oral performance, Nakata asked 120 junior high school students to complete a modified form of Gardner's Attitude Motivation Test Battery* and Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Test. As noted earlier, studies acknowledging the roles of cultural factors were prevalent at this conference, and this one was no exception.

The general topic of attitudes and motivation in second language learning was, in fact, adopted as the theme for the whole spring issue (53:1) of the journal Language Learning (2003). This consisted of six articles by: (1) Dörnyei (University of Nottingham); (2) Noels (University of Saskatchewan), Pelletier and Clément (University of Ottawa) and Vallerand (University of Québec at Montréal); (3) Baker and MacIntyre (University College of Cape Breton); (4) Noels (this time at the University of Alberta); (5) Masgoret (Victoria University of Wellington) and Gardner (University of Western Ontario); and (6) MacIntyre, Baker, Clément and Dunovan (University College of Cape Breton). Dörnyei opened by reviewing recent advances in theory and applications. Masgoret and Gardner used Gardner's Attitude Motivation Test Battery* for gathering* and analysing data. Noels and her collaborators examined the role of self-determination theory* in the overall scheme. Baker and MacIntyre examined the roles of the willingness to communicate (WTC) model and anxiety. Immersion programmes were also a prevalent theme, and the survey noted that practically all the articles involved studies in Canada. This could be explained by the fact that Canada is supposedly a bilingual country (with many other minority languages), with large remote areas where only one language is used on a daily basis. It is likely that this amount of research in this area is an effort at improving and promoting genuine bilingualism, and in some cases, multilingualism.

This survey has highlighted some of the commonly occurring theoretical constructs and perspectives, methodologies, and practical applications and implications for other fields of investigation found in the abstracts from the two years between 2001 and 2003. More systematic use of theoretical constructs with respect to linguistic, psychological and social contexts seems to have been encouraged by suggestions and recommendations in abstracts. Several applications have been identified, such as food evaluation, counselling and psychotherapy, and second language use and learning. Most studies have been shown to use experimental rather than ethnographic approaches, although there have been instances of case studies. Tools of data analysis have included conversation analysis, path analysis, test batteries and significant use of statistical methods such as analysis of variance (ANOVA). The studies noted in this report have taken place in a variety of countries and regions, notably Canada, East Asia (perhaps boosted by the presence of the conference in Hong Kong), Spain, Holland and the UK. Interestingly, social psychology is widely considered to have been initiated in the U.S.A. It would seem that bridges are steadily being built between the relevant disciplines in a growing number of universities around the world, fostering the growth of social psychology of language.

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