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Crafting a more integrated, specific, and community-sensitive approach to applied sociolinguistics

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A sociolinguist's first reaction to Lewis' critique of Labov's thirty-five-year-old *principle of error correction* (PEC) would likely be defensive or dismissive. While never formulated as the full-fledged 'theory of social change' Lewis portrays it to be, the PEC has indeed offered a valuable 'theoretical starting place for diverse social-change efforts' (Lewis, this issue, p. 326) by (socio)linguists over the years, repeatedly allowing us to use our technical training to provide more accurate diagnoses of language-related social issues than nonlinguists could, and thereby paving the way for their successful (re)solution. An early example is the 1985 trial of Paul

Prinzivalli (see Labov 1988), who was rightfully found NOT guilty of making telephone bomb threats against Pan Am Airlines on the basis of Labov's careful phonetic evidence that his speech did not match the caller's recorded Boston accent. A more recent example is that of Voigt et al. (2017), whose computational analysis of police body-camera footage from 981 stops of Black and White drivers in Oakland, CA revealed that officers showed significantly more verbal respect to White than to Black drivers. This research is now being used to improve police training and police-community interactions in Oakland. In both cases, we could argue that, as in medicine, without an accurate diagnosis, a successful solution would elude us. And we might add that community beneficiaries of the (socio)linguist's on-the-ground 'error correction and knowledge dissemination' (Lewis, this issue, p. 339) might value this more than the critical race theorist's lofty theorizing.

But a hasty dismissal of Lewis' critique would be misguided, for several reasons. First, as the adage 'Where everyone thinks alike, no one thinks at all' reminds us, we should always be open to alternative perspectives. And since we know from Kuhn (1996) that scientific paradigms of one era are often replaced by rival paradigms, we should expect PEC to require revision or reconceptualization to continue to serve as the basis for sociolinguists' sociopolitical activism in the future.

Second, Lewis provides a rich and up-to-date set of references for sociolinguists to read (many from linguistic anthropology) to engage in the 'critical reflexivity' that a full refinement of the PEC might require. While I was familiar with some of them, others were new to me, and time did not allow me to read all. One that I DID read, and heartily recommend to colleagues working at the intersection of language and education, is Ladson-Billings' (2006) reconceptualization of the *achievement gap* 'between minority and disadvantaged students and their white counterparts' (2006:3) in terms of the *education debt* (with historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral components) that the US has 'amassed toward Black, Brown, Yellow and Red children' (2006:9).

Third, Lewis, drawing on *critical race theory* (CRT), repeatedly reminds us to consider the larger forces and ideologies of history, self interest, classism, and racism in which our language related problems are considered, and sociolinguists attempting to follow the PEC with respect to narrow linguistic details have also been led to these larger ideological and sociopolitical considerations. Lewis notes this with respect to Labov (1982) himself, who towards the end of OCLS, acknowledges the difficulties of trying to be objective 'with a racist society' (1982:195). This was also the experience of Rickford & King (2016), who, trying to understand why Rachel Jeantel's crucial testimony was not considered by the jury in the trial of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin, first demonstrated the systematicity of her African American vernacular (a classic PEC move), then the likelihood that it was unfamiliar to and not sufficiently understood by the mostly White jurors, and finally that racism and racial prejudice had played a key role. As we reiterate, in closing (Rickford & King 2016:982), 'Language lives IN society, and so must we'.

But wholesale acceptance of Lewis' critique would not be appropriate either, for it does have its weaknesses, starting with the fact that the author fails to apply to CRT the 'critical reflexivity' that he applies to the PEC, even as he acknowledges, in closing, Irvine & Gal's (2000:36) caution that 'it is always easier to detect positioning in the view of others... than in one's own'. The minuses of Lewis' critique, as I see them, are as follows.

First, Lewis' description of the alternative CRT/critical reflexivity approach that he favors is strikingly *SHORT ON DETAILS*, especially at the level of concrete steps that sociolinguists might take 'to improve social conditions' (Lewis, this issue, p. 325). Lewis offers several examples of ways in which historically inspired reconceptualizations of problems might be possible, but there is little indication of what the researcher might do to solve or alleviate the problems beyond this point. He admits as much at one point, saying (Lewis, this issue, p. 342) that 'Critical reflexivity serves to check assumptions of what a social problem entails and what social change requires, but it cannot by itself supply the diverse political strategies beyond error correction that remain to be refined or more widely adopted'. By contrast, some of the rare specifics that he offers as material manifestations of the language ideologies approach—'language practices in schools, curricula or teacher training materials' (Lewis, this issue, p. 329)—are better exemplified in work by PEC advocates, for instance, in Labov's online *Reading Road* manual, and *Portals* readers, used by thousands of teachers and tutors to improve the teaching of reading (see Rickford 2016:571–72), or in the strategy-specific work of Charity Hudley & Mallinson (2011). The three closing questions (Lewis, this issue, p. 342) that Lewis suggests sociolinguists ask to avoid the limitations of the PEC are helpful, but not enough, nor detailed enough.

Second, Lewis repeatedly insists that PEC and CRT perspectives are *INCOMPATIBLE*, but I *DISAGREE*. The fact that he cites several instances, in the writing of Labov, Wolfram, and myself, in which specific PEC linguistic approaches are accompanied by references to racism and larger sociohistorical factors, shows that they *CAN* be combined, even if the latter factors need further elaboration and integration than they have received.

Third, Lewis' portrayal of two groups of intellectuals—PEC advocates and CRT/language ideology advocates—divided over appropriate analyses of and solutions to social problems, crucially omits the perspectives of a third social group: the members of the communities most affected by those problems. The need to consider and be guided by *community perspectives* is a principle that was repeatedly emphasized by UC Santa Cruz sociology professor J. Herman Blake in formulating the Cowell Extra-Mural Program through which he sent several dozens of students in the 1960s and 70s to do quarter-long stints of community service and scholarship in communities across the country.¹ For instance, when Frank Smith and I went to Daufuskie Island in 1970, we began by asking community members what they wanted help with, and it was only after several weeks of mending fences, planting crops, and rendering other mundane services they asked for that we got the chance

to help teach in the island's two-room schoolhouse. For an example of how a community perspective might influence some of the issues Lewis discusses, note Hoover's (1978) study of community attitudes among African American parents of elementary school students in East Palo Alto and Oakland, California. She found that there was strong community support for 'Vernacular Black English' but also for 'Standard Black English' with eloquent elaboration (1978:80, table 8) of the advantages of knowing both varieties. Lewis' positive endorsement of several language ideologists' proposals that students NOT have to learn Standard English in addition to their native vernacular would NOT accord with the Black community perspective Hoover reported.

Fourth, Lewis does not sufficiently emphasize that some of the 'failures' of PEC practitioners are due to the fact that we do not often enough step outside of linguistics to reach influential movers and shakers in law, education, government, and so on. But his commendation of John Baugh for reaching out to fair housing agencies and advocacy groups (Lewis, this issue, p. 339) is well deserved.

In addition, Lewis overemphasizes 'individual' actors in characterizing PEC. To the extent that PEC writers mention individuals (and that is itself rare), it is invariably as representatives of a larger class, for example, of teachers.

Finally, the critical race theory approach that Lewis valorizes strips linguists of any technical role for our expertise as linguists in fighting classism, sexism, or racism. We should not simply join the ranks of sociologists, political scientists, and so on in fighting these 'isms'.

Overall, Lewis' critique represents a good opening salvo. Now we need to sit and work together to refine an integrated, specific, and community-sensitive approach to combining our knowledge of sociolinguistics and sociohistorical theory to address problems and challenges in society more generally.

NOTE

¹For further information on the Cowell Extra-Mural community service program, see <https://cloud-front.escholarship.org/dist/prd/content/qt4m01p3bz/qt4m01p3bz.pdf>, and Jackson, Slaughter, & Blake (1974; see especially p. 38). Herman Blake has told me that his concept of the primacy of community perspectives in community study and service was significantly influenced by Howard University sociologist Hylan Garnet Lewis and his (1955) book, *Blackways of Kent*.

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Critical reflections on the role of the sociolinguist in UK language debates

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Mark Lewis invites us to reconsider the theory of social change that underpins Labov’s *principle of error correction* (PEC), which assumes that change will occur when researchers share their (privileged) linguistic knowledge with the wider public. This is a welcome invitation, for it opens up space for critical reflection on the role sociolinguists can play in public debates about language. As my use of the term *critical* suggests, I align with Lewis’ position that we must relinquish Labov’s (1982) quest for ‘objectivity’ in favour of critical reflexivity. This involves