

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY
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In responding to the honor that you have paid me today, I would like to explain why I am especially grateful to receive a degree honoris causa from Pompeu Fabra University. I think I can speak for all linguists in recognizing the great achievement that has been accomplished here in less than four decades in restoring the Catalan language to its rightful place as the public medium of expression in Catalonia. When I entered the field of linguistics in 1961, Catalan was an underprivileged language and Catalan speakers did not have a public voice. Though that situation has long since been rectified, the impact of the re-establishment of Catalan still resonates among linguists throughout the world.

Linguists are also aware that one among the great universities of the world is named after a member of our discipline. I like to believe that Pompeu Fabra would have approved of this award. Certainly he would have been interested to learn that my work in linguistics was preceded by a number of years as an industrial chemist, a striking parallel with his own career. Perhaps his answer to the question, "What has one got to do with the other?" was not so different from what I had to say myself. In an article on "How I got into linguistics and what I got out of it," I reported that one benefit that I had derived from my industrial

work is a firm belief in the existence of the real world. I would think that Pompeu Fabra's early efforts to reform Catalan orthography were also informed by that belief.

My own work has been focused on linguistic developments in North America. Though these sites are geographically remote from Catalonia, the techniques I initiated have been helpful to linguists everywhere who want to build their science upon the observation of language in use in daily life. When they do so, entering the homes of the speakers of the language, engaging in interaction with them, recording their voices, they find that they have profited, professionally and personally, from the data they have gathered. And in so doing they have incurred a potential obligation to pay back some of that profit to that community. In the course of my own work with the African American community, I've had occasion to formulate this as one of the "principles of objectivity and commitment in linguistic science."

Principle of the debt incurred: An investigator who has obtained linguistic data from members of a speech community has an obligation to make knowledge of that data available to the community, when it has need of it.

The particular case that led to this formulation was the Black English trial in Ann Arbor, Michigan. A group of mothers of African American children had sued the school board and the state of Michigan for their failure to teach their children to read, as a result of the failure to take into account the linguistic differences between the children's home language and the English of the school room. I testified at that trial, drawing upon my work among African American youth in Harlem of New York City as well as later research in Philadelphia. In my paper, "The logic of nonstandard English", I presented evidence for the legitimacy of African American English, and in this and many subsequent articles I have been able to get a hearing for the voices of underprivileged people whose language had been considered inferior.

The linguists' general goal is always the same: to give a public voice to the speakers of the language they study so that their point of view will be heard by the broader society. This extends to the study of endangered languages and the programs to support bilingual education. In research with Spanish/English bilingual children in several cities in the U.S., we have demonstrated that children who learned to read in Spanish first were better able to use of alphabetic principles in learning to read in English later on. This research provides additional support to the evidence from many countries around the world: bilingual education provides language enrichment for students without detracting from their learning of other academic subjects.

More generally, the methods that I initiated for the study of everyday speech have been widely recognized as a "variationist" approach to linguistics. When we record and carefully examine our own speech, or that of others, we find a rich array of "linguistic variables" defined as alternate ways of saying "the same thing" in terms of truth-conditional semantics. The study of the conditioning factors – factors that determine which variants are used when and where – has led to a greater recognition of the social motivation of variation and linguistic diversity. In that way, they serve to defend all of us from the claim of prescriptive grammarians that there is only one right way to speak. The natural variation found in colloquial speech was traditionally attributed to laziness and ignorance, and the continuing process of language change which we find in every community was condemned as a moral offense against the proper use of language. Linguists now recognize that variation exhibits "orderly heterogeneity" in the speech community as a whole. The mathematical analysis of this varying behavior has shown us how speakers establish local or national identity, and how they define and re-define the social distance between them and their listeners. This close study of everyday speech reveals a rich stream of social information superimposed on that other stream of information, one dealing with times, places and states of affairs.

The study of everyday speech competes to some extent with the study of our intuitions about language. The most rapid and efficient way to learn about language is to ask ourselves questions about it: Can I say this? Can I say that? But when we record what people actually do say, we find some striking differences. These differences are neither overwhelming nor omnipresent, but each time they occur, we face the central question: why do we behave in a manner different from the way in which we *think* we should behave? This question comes to the fore whenever language changes: our intuitions will reflect the past, while the reality of the present escapes us.

The study of variation then tells us more about ourselves. It gives us a more accurate view of what we are like as human beings, as well as speakers of the language. This is the enterprise that I have been engaged in for some five decades, and I thank you for your recognition of its interest and its value.