The Language of Describing People

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Recent trends in linguistics have shown a tendency to look at language from 'outside in.' This has come out of a feeling that although the subject matter of linguistics is primarily the linguistic code, the nature and attributes of the code are inextricably tied in with its social context and communicative function. Hence, a study of language in isolation from its sociocultural and communicative context and situation, though intellectually rewarding, is incomplete. Sociolinguistics in its macro-version is gaining ground as *the* linguistics subsuming other branches of linguistics, and considerably overlapping with anthropology and ethnology. At least three factors lend credibility to this view. Firstly, human communication and its negotiation of rules for social interaction in culturally meaningful contexts relate to sociology, anthropology, and linguistics alike. Secondly, there is some evidence to believe that social factors can predominate over biological factors in matters of 'acquired competence' for language learning.[1] Thirdly, language similarities in terms of linguistic universals, and language differences may be best accounted for through extralinguistic factors.

This paper[2] concerns itself with one aspect of ethnolinguistics – namely, the language used by different language communities to describe people. In every community, situations abound where people have to describe people in various degrees of detail and complexity. Some of the questions that will be raised here are:

What, if any, are the semantic primes and notions involved in the description of people? Are there any universal parameters to the physical, featural, and other attributes involved in the description of people? How are these attributes, if any, structured and built into the particular semantic systems? To revive Whorf, does a particular language have compulsory or specially efficient ways of coding certain variables which other languages don't? And finally, what are some of the dimensions of the nature, scope, and details of the language of description?

Every culture seems to have its own notions of describable attributes, some of which are universal and some culture specific. The strategies of description, the relative priority of what are considered describable features/attributes, and the prominence given to them in different cultures appear to be reflected in the language used in describing. It is, however, not so easy to say if the converse is true ... that is, does availability of language devices for description control or condition descriptive abstractions? It may well be true that the conditioning by the descriptive apparatus prevalent in a culture and reflected through language affects one's powers of abstraction of the various parameters of description.

The data used here is very limited and tentative. Native speakers of four different languages were brainstormed to come up with the various terms in their languages most commonly used in describing people in their respective language and ethnic communities. The languages used are: English, Malayalam, Amharic, and Chinese. These languages were chosen mainly for three reasons. First, they are from four genetically unrelated families: Indo-European, Dravidian, Semitic, and Sino-Tibetan. Secondly, they represent four widely different racial and ethnic groups. Thirdly, only in Chinese did the author need to depend totally on the informant.

All informants knew the purpose of elicitation, and no effort was made to structure the situation, level, or purpose of the hypothetical descriptions. The informants were mainly told to think of any situations needing both casual and detailed descriptions of people, like, for instance, meeting an unknown person at the airport, or giving a report at the missing person's bureau, etc., mutatis mutandis, their propriety and relevance to the particular culture.

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[1] Mary R. Miller, Competence in English Language Learning by American Indian Monolinguals and Bilinguals. In: William C. McCormack and Stephen A. Wurm (eds.), Language and Man: Anthropological Issues; pp. 165–176. The Hague: Mouton, 1976.

[2] A version of this paper was presented at South Eastern Conference on Linguistics (SECOL XXX) at Duke University, Durham, N.C., March 1984.