

## LANGUAGE AS A ZOMBIE CATEGORY OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

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The aim of this paper is to discuss how sociological theories have dealt with language.

Many theories in sociology regard language as the most fundamental institution in social life. These theories presuppose that the same language is intersubjectively shared among people and enables them to understand mutual subjective meanings. This idea has become a marked trend since the 1960s, especially among theories termed the “meaning school,” such as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s phenomenological sociology, and Harold Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology. Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action can be perhaps included in this trend as well.

However, Max Weber, the progenitor of the meaning school, consciously avoided the hypostatization of linguistic community linked to social organicism and collectivism. He embraced the universalism of Western civil society and shaped his theory around the principle of individualism. For him, a linguistic community prior to individuals was only superficial, although, or perhaps because, Weber himself was living during the formative period of the German nation-state. The method of understanding that he proposed was based on rational calculability.

The idea of an intersubjectively shared language cannot be axiomatic because intersubjectivity, as pointed out by Niklas Luhmann, is incompatible with subjectivity (Luhmann 1993, 492). Even if people share the same language, the language of the majority, which creates a macro-association amongst people, is based on its standardization by a nation-state. A “linguistic sociology” that presupposes the sharing of language is possible only under the assumption of a “national society” by methodological nationalism. Hence, it is debatable whether a nationally constructed language can be given the status of a natural language in the life-world. Historically, the theoretical idea of the sharing of language was prevalent during the Cold War period, during which nation-states were relatively stable. In this sense, language in sociological theories is a zombie category that carries the residue of the nation-state.

In this article, it is impossible to clarify the whole picture of the relationship between sociological theory and language. Therefore, I concentrate on an analysis of texts by Luckmann and Weber because their texts clearly show their theoretical differences and respective historical backgrounds.

### 1. The Rise of the Sociology of Language

First, I will briefly explain how the sociology of language has developed rapidly since the mid-1960s. Thomas Luckmann, a phenomenological sociologist, wrote in his book *The*

*Sociology of Language*, “[a]t that time [in the first half of the 1960s] the sociology of language did not yet exist” (Luckmann 1975: 5).

Though the sociology of language existed prior to the mid-1960s, under the influence of related disciplines such as psychology and anthropology, sociology experienced the “linguistic turn” during the second half of the 1960s.

This transformation can also be observed from the programs of the World Congress of the International Sociological Association (ISA) (cf. Fishman 1971, Spolsky [2011] 2013).

In the Sixth World Congress, which was held in France in 1966, the sociology of language was not assigned a specific section. However, following the Congress, over 20 participants held an informal meeting and submitted an application to the ISA to establish the Research Committee on Sociolinguistics. Their application was realized in 1968 and at the Seventh World Congress of the ISA in 1970, two sections on the sociology of language were held daily.

In my opinion, the sociology of language is characterized by a focus on linguistic heterogeneity and variability in society, as well as a focus on related social problems, such as discrimination and disparities. As the sociologist of language, Rolf Kjolseth stated:

Sociology departed from ‘common sense’ definitions of language, and regarded language as a generally homogeneous phenomenon inside social groups and categories, while the sociology of language [*Sprachsoziologie*] regards it as an important mechanism through which differences inside and among groups are articulated (Kjolseth 1971: 15).

As this quote from Kjolseth indicates, the traditional sociological view of language is based on a focus on homogeneity. In this regard, the following statement by Joshua A. Fishman, a driving force in the establishment of the sociology of language, is illuminating:

[T]he sociology of language was a special German preference during the first three decades of this [20th] century. It was, however, influenced and controlled very rapidly and very intensively, first through the ideology of Pan-Germanism, and then through the ideology and myth of the Nazis. It is therefore no wonder that this discipline, in the entire quarter century after the end of the war, had still not gained scientific acknowledgement in German-speaking spheres, even though acknowledgment had long since been accorded to this discipline in the USA, UK, France, the Soviet Union, and different parts of the Third World (Fishman 1971: 34–35).

In other words, in sociology, language was associated with ideas of nationalistic homogeneity as typified by the Third Reich. But, the sociology of language since the 1960s has been oriented toward heterogeneity and social problems. Fishman continues:

[The sociology of language is] also useful for the poor and the powerless, for the weak and disadvantaged, for the modest and those who are forced to be in uncertainty from all countries; because only the worry of such people can prevent the social sciences from belonging to the claqueurs once again and from contributing to the ruins that totalitarianism of each coloring has always provoked (Fishman 1971: 35).

However, in my opinion, this focus on the heterogeneity of language has not become influential in sociology as a whole; rather, this view of language appears to have been incorporated into linguistics as sociolinguistics. Sociological theory in general seems to have persisted in its concern with the homogeneity of language.

## 2. From Religion to Language

In contrast to the sociology of language, sociological theory since the 1960s has emphasized language as equally shared among people.

This tendency is particularly evident in the work of what may be termed the “meaning school,” which derives from the interpretative sociology of Max Weber and is typified in the work of Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger. Berger and Luckmann write:

Normally, of course, the decisive sign system is linguistic. Language objectivates the shared experiences and makes them available to all within the linguistic community, thus becoming both the basis and the instrument of the collective stock of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1989: 68).

[A]ll who employ this same language are [the same social] reality-maintaining others (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1989: 154).

I think that this approach to language differs from the approach taken by the sociology of language, which deals with linguistic problems in society. Using an analogy from the difference between the philosophy of language and linguistic philosophy, this approach can be rather termed “linguistic sociology,” as it bears a concern with understanding subjective meaning in intersubjective language (cf. Tada 2013: 74). That is, in linguistic sociology, language is thought of not as a problem but as a means of solving a problem: interpretative sociology can understand subjective meaning through shared linguistic meaning.

Linguistic sociology may be considered inclusive of ethnomethodologists such as Harold Garfinkel and Harvey Sacks and critical theorists such as Jürgen Habermas. In particular, Habermas’ theory of communicative action toward consensus explicitly privileges language:

[S]ocial theory [*Gesellschaftstheorie*] stands in front of a changed situation of argumentation. ... [T]he language’s suprasubjective status prior to subjects has been worked out... (Habermas 1985: 438).

For brevity, I will discuss Luckmann here as a clear exemplar of linguistic sociology. Linguistic sociology may be discerned in the relationship between religion and language in Luckmann’s sociology of knowledge [*Wissenssoziologie*].

It is well known that Talcott Parsons placed weight on the common value of religion and assumed that society is characterized by “congruence.” Luckmann critiqued this idea of Parsons and emphasized that contemporary society is functionally differentiated and exhibits “incongruence.”

Luckmann writes:

The notion of complete congruence between the ‘official’ model of religion and the subjective system of ‘ultimate’ significance implicitly rests on the assumption of ‘perfect’ socialization of an individual into the social order. This assumption is, of course, untenable (Luckmann 1967: 79).

Luckmann thought that religion had become a “private affair” (Luckmann 1967: 86) in complex, industrialized societies.

Nonetheless, he assumed the congruence of language. Luckmann argued that human organisms do not construct universes of meaning from scratch: rather, through the internalization of a historically given universe of meaning, they transcend their biological nature and become human beings (Luckmann 1967: 51).

Luckmann considered language necessary for this process. He states:

A language contains the most comprehensive and, at the same time, most highly differentiated system of interpretation. *This system can be internalized, in principle, by any member of society*, and all experiences of all members can be potentially located in that system (Luckmann 1967: 54, emphasis added).

[L]anguage is based on the sociality of human being. At the same time, the human kind of *community formation* [*Gemeinschaftsbildung*] without language is inconceivable. A person’s life and action in society are not simply determined through external compulsion. They are subjectively meaningful through the personal acquisition of culture that transcends individuals. Culture is a meaning construct that gives form to a person’s consciousness (Luckmann 1962: 514, emphasis added).

However, what constitutes widely shared language in an industrialized and functionally differentiated society must be interrogated. Languages are institutionalized by the state as national languages. Prior to the implementation of general primary education, spoken national languages could not exist (Hobsbawm 1992: 52). National languages are almost always semi-artificial constructs (Hobsbawm 1992: 54).

Germany is not the only nation-state whose formation has taken place through the promotion of language. The French Revolution insisted on linguistic uniformity as one of conditions for full French citizenship and nationality (Hobsbawm 1992: 21). In France at the Revolution, 50 percent of “Frenchmen” did not speak the “French language” at all, and those who spoke it “correctly” constituted only 12–13 percent of the population (Hobsbawm 1992: 60; see also Calvet [1974] 2002: Chap. 7). Thus, communicative action at the grassroots level, as conceived by Habermas, was actually only possible in a limited way.

I think sociological theory has idealized language as public property: it has conceived of language as connecting individuals as society undergoes changes that cause individuals to withdraw into private spheres.

However, it may be considered natural that this perspective on language arose in the 1960s because national boundaries were stable during the Cold War—that is, during the “Cold Peace” (Hobsbawm [1994] 1996: 228). Furthermore, with the “death of the peasantry” (Hobsbawm [1994] 1996: 289) in this period, the sharing of language became more indispensable. The division of labor in industrialized societies necessitates the standardization of literacy because in such societies, work centers on communication with

others (or the control of machines, which must be understood by explication) (Gellner [1983] 2008: 32). As Ernst Gellner wrote, “[w]ork, in the main, is no longer the manipulation of things, but of meanings” (Gellner [1983] 2008: 32).

Languages became shared through standardization and the spread of education system within the framework of the nation-state. Louis Althusser argued that the dominant “ideological state apparatus” in the mature capitalist formation was the school: “In fact, *the Church has been replaced by the School today*” (Althusser [1995] 2011: 180).

Thus, the sharing of language became commonplace in this period, as the following quote by Ernest Gellner suggests:

The establishment of pervasive high cultures (standardized, literacy- and education-based systems of communication), a process rapidly gathering pace throughout the world, has made it seem, to anyone too deeply immersed in our contemporary assumptions, that nationality may be definable in terms of shared culture. Nowadays people can live only in units defined by a shared culture, and internally mobile and fluid. *Genuine cultural pluralism ceases to be viable under current conditions* (Gellner [1983] 2008: 53–54, emphasis added).

In my opinion, theories of linguistic sociology that presuppose the sharing of language among people rely on a kind of methodological nationalism; the societies that they deal with are none other than national societies. However, with the current advance of globalization, the framework of the nation-state is weakening: today’s society is not national but global. We are living in the age of the world society in which the idea of the intersubjectively shared cannot be presupposed.

Thus the concept of the “shared language” may be, to borrow Ulrich Beck’s phrase, a kind of “zombie category” (Beck [2002] 2009: 8) that bears the mark of the nation-state.

### 3. Max Weber’s View of Language

Finally, I refer to Max Weber, from whom the “meaning school” originates. Weber recognized that the sharing of language in modern “national society” is artificial and political. Regarding the relationship between language and the nation-state, he wrote:

Today, in particular, the “linguistic community” [*Sprachgemeinschaft*] is valid as the normal basis [of national communality] in the age of language wars [*Sprachenkämpfe*]. ...In fact, today, the “nation-state” has become conceptually identical with the “state” on the basis of language unity (Weber [1921] 1980b: 242).

Weber consistently embraced subjectivism and individualism, insisting that understanding is based on universal rationality and calculability, which bear no relation to language. Weber thought that linguistic communities are subjectively constructed.

According to Weber, shared national characteristics are unnecessary for the establishment of a “linguistic community (*Sprachgemeinschaft*).” A linguistic community is established when a linguistic behavior is meaningfully oriented toward certain chances of making itself “understood”; thus, it is established when people “may” expect that a certain linguistic behavior, on average, exerts a meaningful effect (cf. Weber [1913] 1988: 455–456). In brief,

the establishment of a linguistic community is also dependent on actors' subjective and rational expectations regarding chances for communicating [*Verständigung*].

Therefore, linguistic communities do not exist as a collective hypostasis prior to individuals but may exhibit a semblance. Weber writes:

A *linguistic* community will be, in the ideal-typical and 'purposely rational' borderline case, expressed through numerous individual acts of social action oriented according to the expectation that the other person reaches an 'understanding' of a common meaning. ...[M]assively, among a lot of people, through the meaningfully similar use of certain externally similar symbols, this comes off somehow approximately 'as if the speakers orient their behavior toward purposefully agreed-upon grammar rules (Weber [1913] 1988: 453).

In other words, the establishment of a real linguistic community is not prior to, but follows, linguistic action. When language is enunciated and not understood, only then is a linguistic community proven to be absent.

To begin with, Weber defined ethnicity as the "artificial" based on "subjective belief" (Weber [1921] 1980b: 237; see also Isajiw 1974: 116). In this regard, Weber differs from scholars such as Edward Shils and Clifford Geertz, who have attempted to objectively define ethnic groups by categories such as race, common ancestral belief, religion, and language. Rather, Weber may be considered a pioneer in the vein of Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, and Eric Hobsbawm, who have defined ethnic groups based on notions of subjectivity and artificiality (cf. Yamazaki 1999: 11–13, 18). Weber believed that both ethnicity and linguistic communities were subjectively and variably constituted. Weber writes:

The communality of *language*, which is created through the same kind of traditions from the family and neighboring environment, makes easier in the highest degree mutual behavior, that is, the foundation of all social relations. However, it itself does not yet mean the community formation [*Vergemeinschaftung*], but only makes easier the interaction [*Verkehr*] inside the group in question, that is, to make easier the genesis of *gesellschaft* formations [*Vergesellschaftungen*]. Firstly among *individuals*, not in their property as linguistic comrades [*Sprachgenossen*], but as other kind of interested people, orientation toward the rules of common language is primary, therefore, only a means of communicating [*Verständigung*], not the semantic content of social relations (Weber [1921] 1980a: 22–23).

Weber believed that the formation of linguistic communities and the nation-state necessitated the sharing of political remembrances and destinies. Weber lived in the German Empire, which was a multinational state with a significant number of ethnic Poles, while a significant number of "German" people lived outside the bounds of putatively "German" areas. Weber himself gives some examples of this (Weber [1921] 1980b: 242–243). For instance, despite speaking the German language, German-Alsatians had a sense of belonging not to Germany but to France because they shared in the political remembrance and destiny of the French Revolution. Baltic Germans also felt no national sentiment for the German Empire. By contrast, Poles in Oberschlesien conceived of themselves as Prussian, if not German.

#### 4. Conclusion: Sharing of Sharing of Nothing

Sociological theory came to be concerned with the sharing of language in the 1960s, against the particular historical background of the stabilization of the international order—and of national societies within that order—during the Cold War. The German Empire in which Weber lived contrasted sharply with conditions during the Cold War, and the current, transnational society that has emerged since the Cold War bears a greater similarity to Weber's context than to the context of the "Cold Peace." Thus, it can be said that *people today share a situation in which they share nothing* in line with Niklas Luhmann's concept of double contingency illustrates how communication can occur when nothing is shared. According to Luhmann, intersubjective sharing is not a condition for communication. Conversely, communication is a condition for intersubjectivity (cf. Luhmann 1990: 19).

In any case, sociological theories in the period defined by the existence of national societies, aside from a few exceptions, seem to have consistently emphasized "linguistic sociology," obviating a discussion of issues surrounding language. However, sociological theory in the era of globalization necessitates an interrogation of social problems pertaining to language, such as language wars and linguistic imperialism in the world society.

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# **INTERNATIONAL HISTORIES OF SOCIOLOGY**

**Conference Proceedings of the Research Committee on History of Sociology  
from the XIV ISA World Congress of Sociology in Yokohama, 13-19 July 2014**

*Edited by*

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## INTRODUCTION

As its contribution to the XIV ISA World Congress of Sociology in Yokohama, 13-19 July 2014, the Research Committee on History of Sociology (RC08) organised nineteen sessions. These included fourteen paper presentation sessions, one author meets critics session, one integrative session, one joint session, one roundtable session with five roundtables, and a business meeting. Altogether the RC08 program comprised 100 accepted papers.

In preparation for the RC08 program, the Program Coordinating Committee decided to put together an electronic volume in order, first, to document the event; second, to offer an opportunity for all RC08 members -- both those who were able to come to Yokohama and those who were not -- to be apprised of papers that they were not able to attend in person; third, to provide some advance publicity for the papers in the form of a pre-publication. Announcing the call for papers to all authors of accepted papers, we stressed that the post-conference submission of papers was an option not a requirement. Still, we received as many as 34 contributions.

Since this is a pre-publication effort only -- and to avoid a conflict for those who plan to revise their papers into articles for publication -- the distribution of this volume is restricted exclusively to RC08 members. It will not be published on any public website. For the same reason we ask you not to circulate or quote any of the texts without the express permission of the author concerned. Email addresses of the authors are provided with their papers below.

For similar (pre-publication) reasons we have restricted our role as editors and offered only very light editing of the papers, avoiding a uniform style of referencing etc. Nor have we tried to structure the volume thematically. The papers are instead ordered alphabetically after the family name of each author. To get a sense of the thematic contexts of the papers, the full RC08 program is enclosed as an appendix.

We hope you will enjoy reading the papers!

Umeå, Hong Kong and Kobe in January 2015,

*Per Wisselgren, Peter Baehr & Kiyomitsu Yui*