COMMENTS ON 'ETHICS, ADVOCACY AND EMPOWERMENT'

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The authors are to be commended for drawing our attention so forcefully to questions of methodology in sociolinguistics and related social sciences. The questions they raise are rarely addressed in the literature, but they frequently surface in the minds and consciences (both personal and sociopolitical) of those of us who do research on language in living speech communities. Hopefully, this stimulating article will help us to clarify the issues we worry about privately and lead us, through public discussion, to resolve and act on them more successfully.

CFHR&R's characterization and endorsement of the empowerment framework as research done '*on, for* and *with* social subjects' is something with which many if not all sociolinguists would agree. It has the structural ring of the climax to Lincoln's Gettysburg address ('*of* the people, *by* the people, and *for* the people'), and is similarly devoted to principles of freedom and enfranchisement. But while I hasten to align myself in general with the principles and methods they advocate, I do have some specific questions and reservations (and agreements) to express about their details.

Ethics

My first reservation has to do with the fact that their discussion of the 'Ethics' framework was not more searching and extensive. This brevity might have been because 'Ethics' was to be rejected in favor of 'Empowerment', and its 'do no harm' principles included in the latter framework, but the principles themselves are more complex and more in need of exploration than CFHR&R admit.

Everyone can agree, for instance (cf. Labov, 1984, p. 51; Milroy, 1987), that totally candid or surreptitious recordings—in which the speaker does not know that he is being recorded—are unethical. But what of partial deceptions, non-confessions and half-truths, like recording newcomers to an ongoing interaction and only informing or seeking permission from them afterward (ibid.)? What of concealing your real interest in people's language lest it 'affect their behaviour and so vitiate your results' (CFHR&R, p. 83)? What of recording speeches and arguments in public places without the speakers' permission? Labov (1984, p. 52) admits that this last issue meets with no consensus even within his research group; discussion among other sociolinguists—and community members—will yield further disagreements.

Some of the later 'empowerment' sections of the article in fact have definite implications for the earlier discussion of 'ethics', but the connections are not made. For instance, the practice of concealing one's interest in language is difficult if not impossible if one's results are to be shared with community members and one's agenda (partially) set by them. And

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what of the tendency of many sociolinguistic works to include samples of informant speech dealing with sex, violence, obscenity or intensely private matters, as a (usually unstated) way of demonstrating that we have overcome the Observer's Paradox? This is an ethical issue of representation (p. 90)—one of the issues on which community members are often mad, sad, bitter or disappointed once the articles, books, recordings and other public products of our research come out—but it is not discussed as such. Clearing examples with community members can help, but some people may object to elements which others do not, and many people may object to elements which the researcher feels are accurate, relevant and important to the analysis, things without which part of the 'truth' he or she has arrived at cannot be told.

Community power, service and advocacy

I agree wholeheartedly with CFHR&R's observation, in the section of the article dealing with power as a multiple phenomenon (p. 90), that the researched 'can exert power over researchers' in various ways. This much is evident to those of us who have heard or read fieldwork horror stories of informants who systematically misled their researchers. But the authors' notion of empowerment seems to carry with it something of the monistic sense against which they themselves argue, the assumption that it is the researchers who have the power, and will decide who and how to share it with (to 'empower'), and in what ways.

In an alternative, more complex view, we would have to grant that the community might not care a whit about the linguists' research concerns (as in the case of Rampton's informants, with respect to their retroflex consonants), but that THEY might be willing to empower or allow US to carry out our research in return for services which THEY need. This is essentially the model to which I was introduced in 1970 (through sociology Professor Herman Blake, then at the University of California, Santa Cruz) when I first set out to do combined community service and research on the South Carolina Sea Islands; we were hosted and allowed to do research by the community in return for a variety of services which included ditch-digging, fence building, classroom teaching and assistance in a range of dealings with government bureaucracies. Some people did turn out to be very interested in issues of language and culture, but if I had sought to 'empower' them only by sharing what I knew and found interesting, I might have missed the more comprehensive 'empowering' which doing their bidding afforded.

More generally, I do not want to downplay advocacy, or Labov's (1982, p. 173) 'principle of the debt incurred'. Most of us fall short of paying our debts to the communities whose data have helped to build and advance our careers. Our grants typically include more money for paying data processors than data providers, and our intentions to pay back the community in service often get lost in the less escapable commitments and busyness of teaching, committee service and more research. It is not a picture, when we step back and view it, with which we can be proud. And if a rationalized view of empowerment leads us to *less* advocacy and service, it is to be regretted.

Interaction and positivism

I am certainly no positivist, if by this is meant, as CFHR&R suggest, an approach in which 'interaction between researcher and researched appears as a source of interference or contamination'. As I noted in Rickford (1987, pp. 168–169):

sociolinguistics cannot make further progress on some of its key issues until we overcome ideological barriers against the use of intuitions and begin involving speakers as active partners and participants in our enterprise rather than as passive objects of observation and analysis.

The extreme positivist position against which CFHR&R are arguing can perhaps be illustrated by the following quote from Bickerton (1971, p. 467, fn 9), who, discussing the difficulties of knowing what counts as a speaker's 'real' informal or uninhibited style, expressed the view that:

> The sociolinguistics of the future will surely be based on *surreptitious recordings* by trained participant-observers or by *remote-control devices* at present available only to government and industrial spies and divorce peepers. (Emphasis added.)

Twenty years later, with the experience of Watergate behind us and the issues raised by CFHR&R before us, we would probably disagree. The interference-free data with such devices would yield would be unethical and unempowering, and also scientifically wanting— lacking in answers to questions about what our informants thought they were doing and what they might do on occasions which our devices had (inevitably) failed to record.

To agree with CFHR&R in rejecting non-interaction as an approach to sociolinguistic fieldwork is not to agree, however, that there is NO reality independent of the observer's perception, nor that the researcher should be satisfied with data resulting ONLY from interaction between the researcher and researched (p. 86). The authors' argument that such interaction is normal communication recalls Wolfson's (1976, p. 202) argument that 'there is no single, absolute entity answering to the notion of natural/casual speech', and that therefore its pursuit via 'spontaneous' interviews and group recordings is to be eschewed. But we need only appeal to sociolinguistic theory and experience to establish that informants regularly employ more or less of the standard or vernacular varieties in their community depending on their interlocutors. In Rickford (1983, p. 309), in Rickford and McNair-Knox (in press), and in several of the works cited in the latter, it is shown that researchers who are 'insiders' often (though admittedly not always) tap into more vernacular veins in their interviews than researchers who are 'outsiders', and that if we ONLY had one or the other picture, we would have a more limited view of the community's linguistic competence than if we did not. CFHR&R surely did not intend for us to be satisfied with samples of informants displaying parts of their linguistic repertoires 'as these had been developed in talking to parents, teachers, [and] employers' (p. 87). We do not perhaps want to reify the vernacular aspects of speakers' competence as the 'only' real thing, or deify them as the 'most' valid aspect of their repertoires, but we certainly want to seek them out as part of developing a full-fledged picture of their repertoire, something which is basic to much of sociolinguistic research.

Looking beyond this special issue, it would be good if *Language & Communication* and other journals which report sociolinguistics research would provide a section or some other means of regularly discussing the kinds of ethical/methodological issues which this excellent article raises.