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THE SOCIOLOGY OF SECOND
LANGUAGE ACQUISITION*

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While success in first language acquisition is inevitable in all normal individuals, success in second language acquisition is highly variable. The effects of aptitude and motivation on proficiency in second language learning have been examined, but relatively little has been said about what social factors might also influence the degree to which a second language is learned. Within the construct of social distance, this paper explores societal factors that either promote or inhibit social solidarity between two groups and thus affect the extent to which a second language learning group (2LL group) acquires the language of a particular target language group (TL group). Social distance pertains to the individual as a member of a social group which is in contact with another social group whose members speak a different language. The assumption is that the greater the social distance between the two groups the more difficult it is for the members of the 2LL group to acquire the language of the TL group. The following issues are involved in social distance: In relation to the TL group is the 2LL group politically, culturally, technically or economically dominant, non-dominant, or subordinate? Is the integration pattern of the 2LL group assimilation, adaptation, or preservation? What is the 2LL group's degree of enclosure? Is the 2LL group cohesive? What is the size of the 2LL group? Are the cultures of the two groups congruent? What are the attitudes of the two groups toward each other? What is the 2LL group's intended length of residence in the target language area?

In terms of political, cultural, technical or economic status, in a language contact situation, one group may be either dominant, non-dominant, or subordinate (see Dennis & Scott 1975). If the 2LL group is dominant in relation to the TL group such that its modal status (standard of living, level of education, degree of technical development, political power) is higher than that of TL group, then social distance will prevail between the two groups. In such a situation the 2LL group will tend to learn little of the target language and a class of interpreters will usually evolve to mediate communication between the two. If the 2LL group's modal status is lower than that of the TL group, then the 2LL group will be subordinate in the relationship, and once again social distance will prevail. This situation will limit contact between the two groups such that the 2LL group may have little

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opportunity, need or desire to learn the target language. If, however, the modal status of the 2LL group is roughly equal to that of the TL group, then the former is considered non-dominant in relation to the latter and social distance becomes minimal. Such a situation should facilitate intergroup contact and thus promote the acquisition of the target language by the 2LL group. Of course there may be differences of opinion between the TL group and 2LL group as to the relative modal status of the latter; therefore, the dominant, non-dominant, subordinate dimension has to be assessed by viewing it both through the eyes of the TL group and the eyes of the 2LL group.

In terms of cultural patterns involving life-style and values, there are three general integration strategies which the 2LL group might adopt: assimilation, adaptation or preservation. If the 2LL group decides to assimilate, then it gives up its own life-style and values and adopts those of the TL group. If it chooses to acculturate, then its members adapt to the life-style and values of the TL group, but at the same time maintain their own cultural patterns for use in intragroup relations. Preservation, as defined here, is a strategy in which the 2LL group completely rejects the life-style and values of the TL group and attempts to maintain its own cultural pattern as much as possible. Assimilation foster's minimal social distance and preservation causes it to be maximal. Hence, second language learning is enhanced by assimilation and hindered by preservation. Adaptation falls in the middle. Again, the TL group and the 2LL group may have conflicting goals with regard to assimilation, adaptation and preservation, therefore, these strategies must be examined from both the point of view of the TL group and that of the 2LL group. It should be noted that conflicting goals are likely to generate hostility between the two groups. Such hostility would perhaps foster even greater social distance than would be caused by both parties being comfortable with the 2LL group choosing preservation as its integration strategy.

Shermerhorn (1970, see also Paulston 1975) uses the term "enclosure" to refer to structural aspects of integration as opposed to cultural aspects (life-style and values). Enclosure involves factors such as endogamny, institutional separation, and associational clustering. If the two groups have separate schools, churches, clubs, recreational facilities, if they have restrictions on marrying outside their specific group enforced by either custom or law, if they tend to have separate professions, crafts or trades, then the degree of enclosure is considered high. On the other hand, if the two groups share the same social institutions, are free to marry outside their group and engage in the same professions, crafts and trades, then the degree of enclosure is low. High enclosure maintains social distance, limits contact between the two groups and thus hinders acquisition of the target language. Low enclosure has the opposite effect.

Cohesiveness is another factor affecting social distance. If the 2LL group is cohesive, then its members will tend to remain separate from the TL group, thus producing social distance. A factor closely related to cohesiveness is size. If the 2LL group is large, then intra-group

contact is likely to be far more frequent than inter-group contact and in certain cases may even exclude the latter.

Congruence or similarity between the culture of the TL group and that of the 2LL group also affects social distance. If the two cultures are similar, then integration is facilitated and social distance is reduced. Congruence, of course, is a relative term and therefore we speak of cultures A and B as being more congruent than cultures A and C.

Another factor that affects social distance is the attitude of the two groups toward each other. Attitudinal orientation refers to the cultural expectations maintained by the 2LL group towards the TL group and vice versa. Such expectations involve ethnic stereotypes by which one community either positively or negatively values the other, these favorable views will be communicated to the learner and will enhance his acquisition of the target language. This is especially true if both groups hold the belief that the acquisition of the target language by the 2LL group is both possible and desirable. On the other hand, if both communities hold negative stereotypes about each other and/or feel that the acquisition of the target language by the 2LL group is either unnecessary or undesirable, then social distance will prevail and acquisition of the target language will be inhibited. Of course, it is possible that the two groups evaluate each other differently. For example, the TL group could have positive attitudes towards the 2LL group while the 2LL group holds considerably less positive or even negative views towards the TL group. Attitudes usually cannot be accurately assessed by observation but must be measured using social-psychological instruments such as semantic differential scales, matched guise procedures, and cultural preference scales (see Gardner and Lambert 1972; Gardner et al. 1974).

The final factor involved in social distance is the 2LL group's intended length of residence in the target language area. If the 2LL group intends to remain permanently (or at least for a long time) in the target language area, then it is likely to develop more extensive contacts with the TL group than if it were just passing through or remaining for only a short time. Therefore, an intended lengthy residence in the target language area would tend to reduce social distance.

There are two important points that must be made regarding the social factors described above. The first is that these factors are not independent; they often interact such that one will affect another. For example, a group's desire for preservation is likely to make it cohesive and also produce high enclosure. The second point is that the social factors within each grouping are treated as though they were discrete categories, but in reality each grouping is a continuum. In other words, the categories dominant, non-dominant and subordinate represent the terminal and middle points on a continuum rather than discrete designations into which all groups can be neatly classified.

Using these social factors we can describe good and bad second language

TABLE 1

Analysis of social distance characteristics for good and bad language learning situations

| | Political, economic, technical, cultural | | | | | | Culture | | | | | | Structure | | | | | |
| | TLgp views 2LLgp | | | 2LLgp views itself | | | TLgp desires of 2LLgp | | | 2LLgp desires for itself | | | TLgp desires for 2LLgp | | | 2LLgp desires for itself | | |
	dominant	dominant	subordinate	dominant	dominant	subordinate	assimilation	adaptation	preservation	assimilation	adaptation	preservation	high enclosure	moderate enclosure	low enclosure	high enclosure	moderate enclosure	low enclosure
A. Bad language learning Situation I	*			*					*			*	*			*		
B. Bad language learning Situation II		✓			✓				✓			✓	✓			✓		
C. Good language learning Situation	X			X			X			X				X				X
D. American living in Saudi Arabia	*			*					*			*	*			*		
E. American Jewish immigrants to Israel	X			X			X			X				X				X

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learning situations based on the extent to which social distance is promoted. This is illustrated in Table 1 where rows A and B indicate the characteristics of bad language learning situations and row C those of a good language learning situation. Row D illustrates the social distance profile of Americans living in Saudi Arabia and row E that of American Jewish immigrants to Israel. The matching *'s in rows A and D and the matching X's in rows C and E are used to show the similarity of the social distance profiles in both columns.

One of the bad situations (row A, Table 1) would be where the TL group views the 2LL group as dominant and the 2LL group views itself in the same way, where both groups desire preservation and high enclosure for the 2LL group, where the 2LL group is both cohesive and large, where the two cultures are not congruent, where the two groups hold negative attitudes toward each other, and where the 2LL group intends to remain in the TL area only for a short time. This type of situation is likely to develop for Americans living in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia(row D, Table 1). The population of Riyadh is about 300,000(Paxton 1973). There are currently 8,000 Americans in that city and within a few years the number is expected to reach thirty thousand. The Americans will most probably be viewed as technically, economically and perhaps even culturally dominant, and they will most probably have the same view of themselves. Because the two cultures are so different (congruent) in terms of religion and social customs, both parties will probably desire high enclosure. Thus the Americans will live in certain parts of the city, have their own medical facilities, schools, and recreational activities. In addition, most of the Americans will probably be on two or three year contracts such that their intended length of residence in Saudi Arabia will be short. The attitudes of the two groups towards each other cannot be judged a priori and would require careful assessment.

The second bad situation (row B, Table 1) has all the characteristics of the first except that in this case, the 2LL group would consider itself subordinate and would also be considered subordinate by the TL group. This has been the traditional situation of Navajo Indians living in the Southwest (and of American Indians in general). For years, by their own view and that of the Anglos, they have been politically, economically, technically and culturally subordinate to the dominant English-speaking majority. The fact that they have been forced to live on reservations and at the same time desired to preserve their own culture, which is quite different from that of the Anglo majority, has produced high enclosure and cohesiveness. In this contact situation it is probably safe to assume that attitudes of the two groups towards each other have been more negative than positive. All these factors have placed the Navajos at considerable social distance from English-speaking Americans and have made their acquisition of English difficult. Similar political, economic, technical and cultural subordination has existed for first generation immigrants to the United States from all over the world. The concomitant social distance was often only overcome by the second generation, who learned English while their parents did not.

A good language learning situation (row C, Table 1) would be one where the 2LL group is non-dominant in relation to the TL group, where both groups desire assimilation (or at least acculturation) for the 2LL group, where low enclosure is the goal of both groups, where the 2LL group is small and non-cohesive, where both groups have positive attitudes towards each other, and where the 2LL group intends to remain in the target language area for a long time. Under such conditions social distance would be minimal and acquisition of the target language would be enhanced. An example of such a situation would be American Jewish immigrants to Israel (row E, Table 1). They consider themselves politically, economically, technically and culturally equal to the Israelis, and this view is reciprocated by the Israelis themselves. Since low enclosure is desired for the Americans both by themselves and by the Israelis, Americans do not remain cohesive. Since both cultures have similar religious beliefs, the other cultural differences which may exist are minimized and the two cultures can be said to be reasonably congruent. In this case we can generally assume that the two groups have positive attitudes towards each other. Finally, since the Americans are immigrants seeking Israeli citizenship, they obviously intend to remain in Israel for a long time. All these factors facilitate the acquisition of Hebrew by the Americans.

Certain 2LL groups lack a modal tendency and therefore are difficult to classify in this system. As is noted in Shermerhorn (1970), there are at least four ways subordinate minority groups can react to their subordinate status. They can assimilate and abandon their life-style and values for those of the TL group. They can seek a pluralistic situation in which they make certain adaptations to the target language culture, but essentially choose to maintain their own life-style and values. They can attempt to secede and separate themselves politically from the dominant group or they can become militant and attempt to seize political power from the dominant group. Thus in cases where a 2LL group has several subgroups with different modal tendencies, each subgroup would have to be catagorized separately in assessing its social distance from the TL group.

The social distance classificaton system presented above can sometimes produce contradictions, but at the same time it can provide a basis for explaining these contradictions. For example, we have noted that if the 2LL group is dominant its acquisition of the target language will be hindered. However, Jill de Villiers (personal communication) has pointed out that there are white farmers in Africa who are certainly dominant but who nevertheless speak the local language fluently. This can be explained by the fact that the farmers must know the local language to maintain their dominance. In this case, the apparent contradiction of a dominant 2LL group acquiring the language of a subordinate group could be the result of the dominant group's lack of cohesiveness.

In order to experimentally test these ideas about social distance one might choose a population such as Americans in Saudi Arabia and compare its success in the acquisition of Arabic to the success in the acquisition of Hebrew experience by American immigrants to Israel. This research strategy would require finding comparable samples of subjects

from both populations and finding comparable measures of language proficiency. To examine social distance phenomena a questionnaire might be developed which would be filled out by experimenters doing research in second language acquisition. In it they might attempt to classify the subjects with whom they were working (either groups of individuals) on social distance dimensions. The questionnaire would be designed to permit the researcher to rate a particular 2LL group's dominance, cohesiveness, enclosure, etc., on a numerical scale, to compute a social distance score for the group and then to relate that score to the extent of development found in his subject(s)' speech.

However, there are several problems associated with a numerical quantification of a group's social distance. For example, we cannot assume that each characteristic (cohesiveness, attitude, subordination, etc.) is equally powerful in promoting social distance nor, as mentioned earlier, can we view these categories as necessarily being independent of each other.

As the classification of 2LL groups in either the bad or good language learning situations becomes less determinant (i.e., if a group stands somewhere between the bad and good situations), then success in acquiring the target language becomes more a matter of the individual as an individual rather than of the individual as a member of a particular social group. In addition, in either a good or bad language learning situation, an individual can violate the modal tendency of his group. Thus an individual might learn the target language where he is expected not to, and not learn the language where successful acquisition is expected. In these cases it is psychological distance (or proximity) between the learner and the TL group that accounts for successful versus unsuccessful second language acquisition. Schumann (1975a and b) has delineated the factors which create psychological distance between the learner and the speakers of the target language. These factors are affective in nature and involve such issues as the resolution of language shock, culture shock and culture stress, integrative versus instrumental motivation and ego-permeability.

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