

Polemics with Polemic Views of Slovak Sociolinguistics

Slavomír Ondrejovič

The paper shows that the origins of sociolinguistics in Slovakia date back to the same period as those of sociolinguistics in the USA and Europe. The author discusses the ‘struggle’ between the sociolinguistic and non-sociolinguistic (normativist) approaches to language, and argues against the views of those Slovak linguists who take a negative attitude to sociolinguistic research in Slovakia from the position of either systemic linguistics (F. Kočiš, J. Kačala) or classical dialectology (I. Ripka).

Key words: sociolinguistics, sociolinguistic vs. non-sociolinguistic approach to language, dialectology, communication-pragmatic turn

Sociolinguistics is not only a relatively young scientific discipline, involving linguistics, sociology, ethnology, anthropology, social psychology, and possibly other human sciences dealing with the relation between language and society; it is also a ‘scientific world view,’ a morale, a world view, and conceivably also a lifestyle. A typical example supporting this assumption is the situation in the Slovak linguistic community. In spite of the usually proclaimed unity (“we are all pursuing the same objective”), we witness different (‘sociolinguistic’ and ‘nonsociolinguistic’) approaches to language in various groups. For obvious reasons, this cannot be perceived as negative; invention, so crucial to science, is not engendered from consensus, rather it results from the competition of views and from disputes. It goes without saying that unity as such is not the ultimate goal because the essence of the communication-based, never completely grasped knowledge is the plurality of views (Švehlová 1992: 62).

It is without doubt that the origins of sociolinguistics were fraught with trial and error aimed to interrelate linguistic behaviour and social conditions for such behaviour. The beginnings of the sociolinguistic effort in the USA and Europe date to the 1960s. But this decade also engendered Slovak sociolinguistics. This suggests that a number of processes and research programmes in Slovak linguistics started ‘at the appropriate time in the development of the discipline, and that Slovak linguistics has kept abreast with the times in many fields of linguistic thought. Unfortunately, the promising start was slowed down or even brought to a stop in many areas. While the project *A research into the colloquial form of literary Slovak*, dating from the 1960s, meant an excellent perspective and a chance for advancement in the field, today we may regretfully conclude that sociolinguistics in Slovakia has failed to keep pace with development elsewhere in the world. As a result, we lost precious time. The field of sociolinguistics in Slovakia revived this tradition as late as the late 1980s and the early 1990s, also reflected, to the limits of its abilities, international linguistic thought and social demand. But the most important source for the development of current sociolinguistic thought in Slovakia has been works of Ján Horecký dealing with literary and national language, as well as his sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic and pragmalinguistic studies, the first of which date to the 1960s. The final one was published in 2002 (Horecký 2002, cf. Ondrejovič, 2006).

As noted on a number of occasions (cf. Ondrejovič 1995: 9; for the discussion on this issue cf. Ripka 1998, 2004), Slovak linguistics echoed the paradigm turn elsewhere in the world,

which consisted of the change from an ‘isolated’ examination of language system towards the examination of the system in real life. It is doubtless that international structuralist and generativist thought in the field of science (of language) has been highly seminal. In the context of humanities, linguistics has become – as admitted by many prominent scientists – a pilot science, which methodologically inspires and assists numerous related and unrelated disciplines (cf. Ondrejovič 1988). The paradigmatic turn loomed in the mid-1970s. The focus of linguistics gradually shifted from the examination of immanent (purely semantic and syntactic) properties of the language system towards the functions of language in social interaction. In fact, it was a response to a sort of methodological reductionism of structuralism and generativism. It was found necessary to relativize the view that language is potentially a semiotic system and that communication is merely a specific use, an implementation, of these signs. This view namely gave rise to an illusion that language system (*langue*) is primary and its use (*parole*) is something secondary, something derived.

The understanding of language as a semiotic system is, certainly, correct. What must be, however, avoided is its absolutization. The semiotic system has always been an important aspect of research into language communication, but it does not cover all of its essential characteristics. In this context, let us refer to Chomsky’s dispute with sociolinguistics in his interview *Linguistics and social sciences* (1995). Linguistics is, in Chomsky’s view, a branch of psycholinguistics. As such, it cannot ignore the principle of idealization. Such a step would be totally irrational, because, in Chomsky’s view, rejection of idealization is childish, although – as he admits - sociolinguistics is *in toto* a ‘part’ of linguistics and brings the idealization closer to the complex reality (1995: 21). We believe this fact to be also important in terms of an adequate explanatory process. Linguistic research must (also) deal with socially determined communication. This assumption naturally follows from the undisputed fact that a semiotic system does not exist for and by itself; it serves human communication about man and the world in which he lives and which he experiences (cf. Helbig 1986). This implies the necessary co-operation between linguistics and other fields of science investigating the intellectual activity of man and human communication. It is this factor that engendered sociolinguistic research

Even if we claim that Slovak linguistics echoed the above-mentioned paradigmatic turn, a systematic reflection of the international development in Slovakia was delayed in comparison to most other European countries. Importantly, however, this shift in Slovak linguistics did not mean – unlike in some other countries – any *volte-face*. Since Slovak linguistics drew not only on domestic sources but also on the theories of the Linguistic Circle of Prague in many fields, it featured the social dimension for a long time. On the other hand, sociolinguistics in Slovakia has not been fully institutionalized yet. It still lacks certain features which would enable it to be labelled as an independent discipline: no sociolinguistic handbook has yet been published, sociolinguistics is not studied at Slovak universities, etc. is the fact that the 11th International Congress of Slavic Linguists which was held in Bratislava in 1993, did not have a sociolinguistic section is a reflection of the issue.

In other words, international, not to speak of Slovak, sociolinguistics has not yet been constituted. As in other countries, sociolinguists in Slovakia have been searching for its place in discussions and disputes with authors who assume different positions.

Slovak sociolinguistics has been blamed, for example, for restricting its scope to sheer statistical methods and descriptions without any effort to evaluate and explain data (Kočiš 1995: 71), for its excessive liberalism in questions of language culture, for not taking unambiguous standpoints with regard to correctness or incorrectness of linguistic means in specific cases, etc. It is true that the sociolinguistic position regarding language culture issues is more tolerant, but at the same time, it is more differentiated, as it never focusses on a single representative, i.e., on a literary language. While sociolinguists are aware (also on the basis of their own research) of the most prestigious position of the literary language in Slovakia (cf. Slančová and Sokolová 1995) they are not willing to equate ‘correct’ with ‘literary’. It is assumed, to the contrary, that the most ‘correct’ word or expression for a given situation is sometimes selected from other (‘non-literary’) layers of national language. In fact, these disputes link to a long struggle between analogists and anomalists which ‘officially’ started as a clash between the Alexandrian and the Pergamonian schools as represented by Aristarchos and Julius Caesar. In principle, anomalists could be considered forerunners of the above-mentioned ‘non-sociolinguists’ and ‘normativists’, while sociolinguists represent the thinking of anomalists. To use a metaphor, sociolinguists do not try to trim a language according to a French park style with its precise geometric shapes and schemes (this being a characteristic ambition of ‘non-sociolinguists’); instead their pattern is an English park whose architecture is based on a natural beauty of original countryside with minimum intervention. Such a park (and such a language) may not be very symmetrical, but it is more ecological, and thanks to a limited number of restrictions, it is characterized by a higher degree of liberty. This position was developed in a brilliant way by Melcer in his defence of Slovak (written in Hungarian) *Response in the interests of Slavonic language* published in 1842 (!) (cf. Ondrejovič 2000b).

Let us discuss two of the non-sociolinguistic views – those expressed by Kačala and Ripka. Our standpoint to these and other similar views is presented in (Ondrejovič 2006).

Kačala’s article *Sociolinguistics versus language culture?* (1996) poses a question: Which of the scientific disciplines – sociolinguistics or language culture – has a more promising perspective and is better prepared for “the codification of linguistic phenomena resulting from language development?” (1996: 71). In his view, the history of literary languages indicates that the task of codification has been mastered by linguists working in the field of language culture. In this connection, he also refers to “reservations of sociolinguistics-oriented linguists addressed to linguists who concentrate on language culture.” They are summarized as follows: 1. language culture emphasizes a system-focused approach to the detriment of a communicative and pragmatic approaches; 2. the normative and codification approach to language culture relies too heavily on the static aspect of linguistic construction and linguistic units, and suppresses their dynamic nature; 3. sociolinguistic examinations support their conclusions on practical language use with data which, in some points, call into question the position of codifiers and codification manuals. Unfortunately, this summary is not followed by relevant arguments which rebut or at least cast doubts upon these reservations. Instead, Kačala concludes surprisingly: “This attitude is fraught with certain professional superiority of the adherents of sociolinguistics and with underestimation of the working methods, results and even the overall language culture objectives” (1996: 72). He adds, “The impression is as if there were a competition between sociolinguistics and language culture, as if one linguistic discipline offered better, seemingly

‘more scientific’ solutions than the other” (ibid.). Kačala asks whether “this situation is justified, what the reason for this feeling of superiority is, and whether the relation between sociolinguistics and language culture is aptly labeled as a relationship of competition” (ibid.). He answers this question by claiming that language culture and sociolinguistics should not be in a competitive relationship; rather they are complementary, a view which must be appreciated. However, Kačala also assumes that “numerical data of the occurrence of certain variant phenomena or linguistic phenomena negatively assessed from the perspective of language culture do not bring any new knowledge for language culture (at most, its numerical expression), because a high or medium frequency of certain proscribed linguistic phenomena does not depend on statistics and mere frequency in speech; instead, it depends on inherent linguistic features of particular linguistic units and on the principles of language and on improvements of linguistic practice reflecting the requirements of language culture” (Kačala 1996: 73). This stance is inconsistent with his appeal for complementariness. It is exactly this point at which sociolinguistics and the outlined concept of language culture contradict each other. Frequency of phenomena is an indispensable variable for sociolinguistics, carefully evaluated and interpreted in the context of sociolinguistic variables.

Another critic of (Slovak) sociolinguistics, its orientation and development is Ripka. In one of his recent articles he poses the rhetorical question of why Slovak sociolinguistics pretends to be a Columbus (Ripka 2004). He maintains, *inter alia*, that sociolinguistics usurps “an absolute methodological superiority in research into spoken (oral) communication,” which, in his view, follows from “ignoring the fact that the spoken form of language as a way of linguistic expression is potentially property of all forms (variants) of a national language this also includes local dialects (traditional territorial dialects) which have long been studied systematically by dialectology. According to this account, dialectologists and sociolinguists prefer empirical research of language in various social (sic!) situations (and also in regions with different dialects). By implication, it is necessary “to take into consideration several similar (analogical, parallel) methodological factors and parameters.” In reference to Slovak linguistics, Ripka maintains that “researchers should not be illuminated or blinded only by glare emanated by international ‘stars on [the] sociolinguistic sky’” because “these stars do not know the historical development of particular languages and dialects, and diachronic research has been concealed from them. They are only familiar with the current dynamics which cannot be identified with solid rules of development as a phenomenon in process.” We could argue about whether those ‘stars’ know or do not know the historical development of particular languages and dialects (but, actually, which languages – ‘Western’ or ours?) but one can hardly accept the more general claim that diachronic research had been concealed from them (cf. mainly Romainenová 1985).

Ripka’s considerations derive from his strong feeling of, in his words, ‘sidetracking’ the dialectology or its ‘peripheral position’ and ‘marginalization’ by sociolinguistics (he also uses the term ‘dominating sociolinguistics’), and he blames Slovak sociolinguists for this situation because they disregard the methodology developed by dialectology. In his view, this methodology lends itself to their research. However, they turn improperly to renowned Americans who have not got the faintest idea about the development of particular languages and dialects (once again, it is not clear whether ‘ours’ or ‘theirs’) because they do not deal with diachronic research.

In my view, any accusations in the field of sociolinguistics made about the “residues of peripheral perception” (Ripka) in assessing and using theoretical and material assets of dialectology are not justified. Slovak sociolinguists realize the importance of the contribution of Slovak dialectology, and make no secret of drawing on its achievements. Therefore, there is no reason to speak about “playing down the linguistic production in these fields”, or about “ignoring the progressive heuristics developed by (Slovak) dialectology during many years of field research.” Rather, Slovak sociolinguistics has very naturally absorbed everything from Slovak dialectology and its methods which should flow in its blood (and what can be more!), that is to say, anything that was achieved by Slovak dialectology during the 20th century. But Slovak sociolinguistics cannot content itself with this single source because it simply differs from the (classical) Slovak dialectology in its postulates, imperatives and objectives. For obvious reasons, the objectives of sociolinguistics cannot be restricted by the scope of dialectology. To the contrary, due to its delayed start, it must get acquainted with the development of linguistics elsewhere in the world, including in the Americas. It should be appreciated that Slovak sociolinguists are aware of these circumstances. Moreover, an unbiased approach can show us that Slovak sociolinguistics has yet not discovered that it is a part of international sociolinguistics – not only American but also European, including Czech sociolinguistics which Slovak sociolinguistics falls behind – in the required range and scope, with its rich inspirations and impulses. Fortunately, Slovak sociolinguistics has realized that it cannot remain isolated by relying exclusively on its own tradition. This does not mean any “negation of national traditions,” or “playing down the national and admiring uncritically the international” as perceived by Ripka (1998, and a number of subsequent papers, the last being 2004).

Let us point out some differences between our classical dialectology and sociolinguistics. Ripka (e.g. 2004) assumes that dialectologists frequently provide relevant answers to the fundamental questions of sociolinguistic field research. In Ripka’s view, differences, if any, between sociolinguistics and dialectology are simply a matter of terms. Let us emphasize once again that dialectological research is important for sociolinguistics. But it also should be stressed that it is not sufficient for sociolinguistics. To illustrate the point, let us cite from *Dialects of Liptov* by Stanislav. Stanislav is also referred to by Ripka in an effort to support his assumption that both dialectology and sociolinguistics make use of the data of age, gender, and social status of language speakers. When describing his dialectological research Stanislav (1932: 8) maintains:

In my behaviour I pursued the objective to get as near to the nature of my object as possible in a most clever way. Following this introduction – sometimes, depending on the specific circumstances, without it – I inquired his/her personal data, the place of birth, parents, their origins, family background, the length of school attendance; with male speakers I also asked whether they traveled abroad and whether they were on active service, whether and where they were in service (e.g., coachman). With the tone and sequence of my questions I tried to avoid any suspicion of spying for the administration.

No doubt, the data were only collected by the researcher to verify the appropriateness of the informant for his research objectives. These parameters, as it follows from the *Dialects of Liptov* itself, were not further evaluated. The so-called classical dialects, it should be noted, are

examined as ‘languages’ of a homogeneous community. Researchers try to identify objects who are believed to speak the dialect in the ‘purest’ form, that is to say, the most suitable objects are usually searched for among the oldest group of population.

Ripka himself admits that obtaining relevant information in dialectological investigation faces problems. He refers to factors which can affect the quality of the acquired data and information. They “must be expected, realized and eliminated” by an “empirical dialectologist” in his dialectological research. One and the same research cannot be repeated, and therefore, it is necessary to employ advanced heuristics enabling a researcher to obtain highly reliable and representative information. One must agree with this claim. But instead of specifying the procedures of advanced heuristics, Ripka takes a wrong turn to a rather aggressive attack on sociolinguistics: “Various sociolinguistic (sometimes inadequately prepared and consequently improvisatory) examinations should not take the form of a targeted campaign aimed at obtaining, for example, the material for the justification of certain desired changes in the codification of a literary norm.” In no way does this view (or stance) reflect an unbiased and objective position as a condition for a productive dialogue. It goes without saying that the term ‘targeted campaign’ does not apply to a sociolinguist’s work investigating the state of the arts in language use, the actual speech habits, even in the case when considerable discrepancies between the codification and usual norms are revealed,

Let us return to heuristic and methodological principles of classical dialectology. As it follows from the above-mentioned assumption of an ‘empirical dialectologist’ Ripka finds it difficult to cope with the so-called observer’s paradox. On the other hand, brilliant and important progress has been made in American sociolinguistics in this respect. A case in point is Labov’s phonetic investigations at department stores in New York which enabled him to obtain scaled results without any forced or far-fetched methods. Isn’t it wise to draw inspiration in these cases from the USA? This is of utmost importance for sociolinguistics. Another source of inspiration are the so-called ethnomethodology and conversational analyses, also engendered in the USA. Slovak dialectological heuristics does not appear to rest on any elaborate heuristic methodology; rather one’s impression is that it intuitively relies exclusively on research experiences.

Another assumption presented in Ripka’s disputes (cf. mainly 1998) is that dialectology has developed extensive material evidence and theoretical accounts of various phenomena pertaining to a common spoken communication in both rural and urban environments. But is it really true? Classical Slovak dialectology and research into the language used in towns and are, as it were, incompatible variables. Which of the Slovak dialectologists dealt with urban language? Towns as an object of linguistic research either did not exist for Slovak dialectology or were attributed a homogeneous nature mapping the situation in the neighbouring villages. I discussed the research into urban language use in Slovakia in my monographs *Between the language of the town and the language of the country* (1999) and *Research into urban language – traditions, situation, perspectives* (2000a). Therefore, let us only note that Štolc, one of the former leaders of Slovak dialectology, maintains that towns do not offer anything interesting for linguistic research; there are no urban dialects; what can be only found in towns is the “exacerbated reality” (*sic!*). The truth is that dialectologists preferred to avoid towns as if they were havens of leprosy. One last assumption of Slovak dialectology will be adduced without comment. When commenting on research results in towns in the Orava region within the well-

known project of *Research into the spoken form of literary Slovak*, Ripka maintains: “The language in the neighborhood of Dolný Kubín was and is better than the language of this town. It is fortunate for Slovak literature that our greatest novel writer Martin Kukučín was not born in Dolný Kubín but seven kilometers from this town” (Habovštiak 1972: 318).

Slovak dialectologists know very well that their field is not based on *terra incognita*. They needn't be reminded of it. In no way does it sidetrack dialectology nor does it pretend to be a proper Columbus. The branch of science differs, as noted above, from the classical Slovak dialectology, and has the indisputable rights to go its own way and also to look for inspiration beyond the classical dialectological research limits. This is even truer if the domestic methodological resources appear to be exhausted. The question whether Slovak sociolinguistics should ‘discover America’ cannot but be answered by ‘Yes’ in both a metaphorical and a literal sense. With few exceptions discussed in detail in the chapter on the history of sociolinguistics in Slovakia (Ondrejovič 2006) Slovak sociolinguistics has not made the most of the opportunity to acquaint itself systematically with sociolinguistic methodological impulses elsewhere (including America), which may improve its blood circulation. This is also the message from prof. Ján Horecký. No doubt, Slovak sociolinguists can benefit from international contacts.

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Doc. PhDr. Slavomír Ondrejovič, DrSc.
Slovenská akadémia vied
Panská 26
813 64 Bratislava
Slovak Republic
slavoo @ juls.savba.sk

In *SKASE Journal of Theoretical Linguistics* [online]. 2007, vol. 4, no. 1 [cit. 2007-04-03]. Available on web page <http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JTL08/pdf_doc/17.pdf>. ISSN 1336-782X.