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Entrevista

Interview with Wolfgang Wölck (March 14th 2016)

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Information about the Interviewee: Wolfgang Wölck is an emeritus professor at the Department of Linguistics at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York and fellow of its Center for Cognitive Science. He has been a visiting profesor at various institutions including the United Kingdom, Belgium, Peru, Poland, and several US universities. His research has focused on diglossia, bilingualism, and sociolinguistic methodology. He has published a grammar of Quechua and directed a study on Quechua-Spanish bilingualism in Peru. He introduced, together with colleagues, the notions of "ethnolect" and "community profiling" in the field of sociolinguistics.

Information about the Interviewer: José Antonio Jódar-Sánchez recently started at the graduate program at University at Buffalo, State University of New York. Prior to that, he studied at the Universitat de Barcelona, and at San José State University as a Fulbright student. His interests lie in the intersection between semantics and syntax, with special emphasis in cognitive theories that touch upon metonymy, grammar, and linguistic typology.

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Information about the Interview: I was a member of a reading group, together with Wolfgang Wölck and Katharina Pabst, which revolved around issues of language variation over the lifespan. As part of this seminar, I wrote a linguistic biography. I came up with the idea of an interview with Prof. Wölck once I got more interested in issues of bilingualism, language contact, and macrolinguistics. It took place in a rainy afternoon in Buffalo while we chatted over a coffee. I am very grateful to him for his (otherwise scarce) time and for his patient and interesting answers.

J: Thanks for sharing this time with me. I must say I am a bit intimidated by the fact that I'm interviewing a professional (sociolinguistic) interviewer.

I'm going to ask you about the field of sociolinguistics in general first; then I'll move on to questions about basic concepts, then to your study of the Buffalo variety of English, and finally to your experience as a sociolinguist in Peru.

So do you think the field of sociolinguistics is an innovation that sprung up in a few years or it came about gradually?

W: It came about gradually, I'd say, 60 or 70 years ago. It grew out of dialectology, for linguists, and partly out of anthropology.

J: I have noticed that dialect studies including surveys and interviews were conducted in urban areas whereas studies of biligualism and situations of language contact were done in urban environments. Why is that?

W: Urban studies really became more sociolinguistic, that's true. I wrote an article about it, published in the 70s (Wölck, 1977) about the rise of sociolinguistics. When I first arrived in the United States in 1963, there was relatively little. And I taught the very first course at Indiana University in sociolinguistics. There were also some sociologists that were interested at that time. But unfortunately it did not last. So eventually the fields that fed sociolinguistics were linguistics, anthropology, and education.

J: Do you think all sociolinguists are by definition anti-Chomskyan?

W: No. That may be true of the leading sociolinguist, William Labov. He is not strictly anti-Chomskyan, he just wanted to get an entry into the more theoretical linguistics, by adding variable rules to the phonological grammar. And Chomsky did not accept that, primarily because Chomsky's view of language is a very deep-structure view of language, including Universal Grammar and the Language Acquisition Device. Chomsky's goals are very different from what matters to Labov, which are the social determiners of language use and change. Unfortunately, many sociolinguists don't know enough about theoretical and descriptive linguistics, especially the large-scale macro-sociolinguists, concerned with language policy and language education.

J: Isn't Chomsky's "fixed" view of language, his "competence", incompatible with a social view of language based on variation?

W: That's a misconception. Chomsky's view is simply not interested in variation. The whole idea of deep structure does not reach that level. Sociolinguists all analyze surface phenomena (not to be confused with superficial phenomena).

J: So it's simply two views that do not intersect at all.

W: Basically, they have very little to say to each other. Variationists criticize generativists for having too abstract and life-less a view of language, generativists rather ignore variationists.

J: Do you think there can be sociolinguistics without quantitative methods today?

W: There's got to be. The quantitative methods have to do with proving certain points of regularity. There is, in my opinion, now a lot of statistics in variationist sociolinguistics, which is only one part of American sociolinguistics. It's called micro-sociolinguistics. There's also macro-sociolinguistics, which has to do with language policy as well as national bilingualism and multilingualism. Macro-sociolinguistics is not so much part of American sociolinguistics. Most variationist is basically monolingual sociolinguistics. Macro-sociolinguistics deals with the division of countries according to social features. Variationism is only a small part of sociolinguistics which is, however, very representative in America.

J: So you would include yourself within macrosociolinguistics right?

W: Yes, I'm a methodologist and contact linguist. Contact linguistics deals with multilingualism. I am somewhat interested in intra-linguistic variation but I am definitely more interested in an extra-linguistic characterization of sociolinguistic phenomena. In a country like the United States, you can hardly explain the changes in American English without referring to the languages brought here by immigrants.

J: Speaking of, could you give us a brief overview of the most typical features of Buffalo English?

W: It's hard to summarize that in a few lines. Everyone in Buffalo is familiar with the two major phonological features. And that's another thing. I'm very much an ethnographer. What I'm interested in linguistics is what matters to people. And what matters to people is what they use to categorize their environment. And I'm not sure much of what variationists do is used by people to categorize their environment. Not that variation has no interest, of course.

The very well-known two features of Buffalo English are the "hard a" and the "flat a". What Buffalonians use much more to distinguish among themselves and divide the society is prosodics. And this has been very understudied (Jódar-Sánchez, 2016). It's difficult to analyse prosodics. We have a conference coming up in May here at our department on tonality and tone languages (Fifth International Symposium on Tonal Aspects of Languages). That goes into that direction. Prosodics is located at a deeper level, it is what you first learn as a baby and you never lose. The foreign accent that I still have is mostly due to my German prosodics.

J: And it's hard to conciously modify it.

W: Yes, more than that, people are not aware of it. It is not conciously done. Those Buffalo features that I mentioned earlier are becoming less and less noticeable because the different parts of the city and society in Buffalo are merging more and more. The only one that is very different is African-American English, the major dialect of American English.

J: That was precisely my next question, whether there are any traces left of the languages (mainly Italian, Polish, and German) that immigrants brought with them from Europe.

W: Still the most obvious trace is that there is "a flattening" in all variaties of Buffalo. Everybody says cash [keəʃ] and fast [feəst] instead of [kæʃ] and [fæst], and also yes [jʌs], with "e lowering". Very many people do a certain amount of devoicing of final stops or fricatives. Everybody says his ['hɪs] instead of ['hɪz]. All these features come from the immigrant languages. And of course, the rising intonation in declaratives in Buffalo English, that's very German. The one thing that also comes from English is the gradual devoicing of final consonants, English being the only West-Germanic language that has not yet completed it.

J: You coined the term and the concept "ethnolect" (Carlock & Wölck, 1981). Throughout the years, what uses and misuses of the term have you seen?

W: We gave the variety the name, that's true. Very few misuses actually. There are people who are trying to use it for any kind of foreign accent. That's not an ethnolect. Ethnolect is a native, not a foreign, accent. Ethnolect speakers are not bilinguals. They are speakers of a language X with an accent. It's been used in Canada by a colleague of mine to refer to some Italian Canadian bilinguals in Toronto (Danesi, 1985). I said that what he's referring to is a bilingual dialect, not an ethnolect. Everybody who's bilingual has a particular accent or variety in the other language, if you like. Your English (José Antonio's), for example, is a bilingual dialect of English used by a Spaniard. Your bilingual English dialect shares many features with other Hispanic dialects. Your Spanish is not a bilingual dialect, it may become. There's plenty of those in the United States, where they start using a variety of Spanish highly influenced by English. For instance, Pachuco in California. But those are not ethnolects. Ethnolect speakers are monolinguals, at least in use, though they have a history of bilingualism at least three generations back.

J: In the linguistic biography I'm writing for the seminar, I was questioning myself about whether the distinction between the varieties of Spanish spoken by *euskaldunberris* "New Basque people" and by euskaldunzaharras "Old Basque people" would be ethnolects.

W: I don't think so, unless their variety of Basque is highly influenced by Spanish.

J: With regards to community profiles, how did the concept come about?

W: That's another concept that we introduced. It's a methodological tool, unlike ethnolect, which is just a label, for varieties that we found to be very important in US cities, and finally also, European cities. Lots of people, especially in the Netherlands, are using it now, around the area where I used to work.

J: It basically consists of getting to know the community before undertaking your study so as to select participants.

W: It's a sampling method. For any survey you need a sample, and that's how you choose a sample.

J: We read an article in the seminar with you where they had a community of practice (Lawson, 2011). How different is it from the comunity profiles you pioneered?

W: The community of practice is a way of using a sample that has no origin, no local or residential definition, it only has a shared activity definition. Those are the people that go to the same school from very different communities. They have a reason to congregate for a certain time in a certain place, and only for that purpose. That's what they call community of practice, it's not a community profile. The latter is a contiguous living community, whose speech is defined by the very fact that they live in the same area and are part of the same community.

J: In sociolinguistic studies, aside from classical variables like age, sex, literacy and education level, social class, profession, etc. what are the variable missing out from current studies? Maybe variables like personality?

W: That's precisely the reason to have community profiles. To find the defining variables, dimensions, qualities of the community. And then those are the variables that you have to look at.

J: So it has to be done community by community.

W: Yes! To think that you can use community profiles as you ran down a list with a set of terms like sex, age, occupation, etc is a common mistake. Their level of importance depends on the context, it can't be pre-established. And maybe there's lots of others, like the political party you support, or the church you go to.

J: So the impression I get is that there has to be a level of adaption or tailoring of the tools used in the study according to the community.

W: It's more the integration of the researcher. The researcher has to learn about the community. It's a matter of knowledge, investigation, knowing the specifics of the community. And picking people that represent those particular sections of the community.

J: Fishman defines diglossia as any two languages of a speaker, unrelated either genetically or historically, which are associated with high and low prestige respectively (Fishman, 1967). What is your concept of diglossia?

W: I prefer and use the original concept of diglossia, the one by Ferguson (1959), that goes back to the 50s. Diglossia is the alternate use of two varieties, usually of the same language, with different social meaning or prestige. Often these are a dialect and the standard. Diglossia is not the contact of two different languages, that's bilingualism. Diglossia is a type of bilingualism but it's related, limited to varieties of the same language.

J: So, for the reader to be clear, your and Fishman's definition of diglossia differ in whether it is between two languages or two varieties of the same language.

W: Yes. In his view, all community bilingualism is diglossia. Because one of the major defining characteristics is the social difference between the two varieties. And that to him is the most important thing. And he considers only individual bilingualism as bilingualism. Never community bilingualism. But the fact is that there is *no* community bilingualism without a social difference between the two varieties. It is also true that there are plenty of individual bilinguals, like you or me, with no social differences between the languages that we use. You are a Spanish-Catalan-English trilingual and I'm a German-English bilingual. There are different uses of these languages in different contexts but no social difference.

J: You've also written about conflict linguistics. How did that come about and how does it relate to contact linguistics and situations of bilingualism?

W: I have a friend who coined the phrase "There's no language contact without conflict". That's true, especially in communities, not in individuals. We are individual bilinguals and there is not conflict whatsoever between my German and English, or Spanish and English for you. Take the Spanish-English bilingual community of the United States, there's conflict. Because in the US Hispanic communities, which are bilingual, Spanish usually still has lower status. So then there's conflict. Often also, some features lose out against other features.

J: You directed a survey in Spanish-Quechua bilingualism in Peru with the support and generous financing of the Peruvian government. Could you tell us a little bit about your experience?

W: It happened over 30 years ago. I organized it and directed it, though of course I participated as well. It was a fairly well-funded government study of Quechua-Spanish bilingualism. It started in 1968, and ended in 1996.

J: What are the difficulties of conducting such long-term studies?

W: There was a civil war in Peru that made it very difficult. People were killed by the hundreds. It had nothing to do with language. The Peruvians call it *La Violencia*. By arround 1980, a terrorist group called the *Sendero Luminoso* got organized in the Andes and led a bloody communist revolution against the government and its institutions. Many of the people in my survey died as a consequence of this.

J: So in a way it hindered your study, to say the least. I am sure many people were not predisposed or willing to participate in language surveys after the conflict. That climate of violence and

bloodshed must paralyze everyone's daily activities, let alone research.

W: In two ways, actually. The most obvious way, they were dead, they'd been killed in the revolution. Second, they were no longer interested or willing to collaborate. Everything became very very insecure and sensitive. We were asking about things such as "why do you use the language?". The senderos, the revolutionaries originally tried to use Quechua in their favor because there were socialists, communists. They thought this was the way to gain indigenous support. And then they turned around and began to prosecute the poor people who mostly spoke Quechua. It was very conflictive, it lasted about 20 years.

J: I'm sure everything and everyone became suspicious. And if some strange, non-local people come to your house and ask you about your language use, then you panic.

W: Exactly. If you wanted to interview someone you were a suspect. It was dangerous, you could get shot at. We were in the middle of a civil war.

J: Did you feel safe at that time in Peru?

W: Obviously not, and not only for myself. I had people working for me, local people. I didn't want to expose them and put them in jeopardy.

J: You know some Quechua, what was your experience learning the language? What level did you achieve?

W: It was interesting, I enjoyed it very much. It was very hard. Until then I only knew some European languages, and they're all very alike, they're structurally very much the same (Standard German, Low German, Dutch, English). Quechua is a polysynthetic agglutinative language, very different from anything we use. In the Chomskyan framework we talk about left- and right-branching languages. Quechua is completely left-branching whereas English and all other languages we use are right-branching. It's cognitively very demanding.

J: Very challenging indeed. To say a noun and specially a verb, you have to think twice to put all the morphemes together.

W: When I was at the height of my Quechua knowledge, after 10 years of working there, I could produce strings of morphemes of about 4 or 5. The average for a 5 year old goes up to about 8 or 9. (laughter)

J: So I guess they always knew you were not a native speaker. Also because of the looks.

W: Yes, but they appreciated me. At the beginning, I knew more Quechua than Spanish. I'd never learnt Spanish formally. After living in Lima and teaching at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, my Spanish got much stronger than my Quechua. Also because Spanish is much more like the other languages I know. I still maintain some Quechua. The problem is that it's not written language, and thus, there's very little literature. And most of what we do as intellectuals with languages, we read. And occasionally write. So for this kind of language you have to use it by practicing speech. I practice it with people back in Peru. And the less time I spend in Peru, the less I know it.

J: Have you taught any course in Spanish at our department here at UB?

W: Not in here, in Lima. And they forgave me for my bad Spanish. The advantage is that I have no qualms, no inhibition, no complexes. After all, I have never taken a course in Spanish. I just used it. So I always say "Please forgive me if I don't use the subjunctive, I'm sorry". (laughter) My accent was never that bad because phonologically German and Spanish are not that different. I've written a lot of Spanish, but I've always had it translated, looked over, and

checked. I have a whole grammar on Quechua (Wölck, 1987). I only wrote two books in Spanish, that one and more recently, a volume on the rise of new varieties from situations of language contact (Escobar & Wölck, 2009), together with one of my daughters.

J: Is the book about linguistic contact back in Peru?

W: Everywhere, worldwide. It's mostly in Spanish contact situations. It's an edited book with contributions from other people. What Anna and I did is mostly on Peru. There's stuff on the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Sikuani, Wayú, Tikuna, Jopara. It's about the rise of new varieties through contact.

J: When you were in Peru you also participated in the process of officialization and standardization of Quechua.

W: I'm actually still officially on that committee. The reason is that without standardization you cannot develop a written variety of the language. Eventually, especially in order to get the language more accepted, more used, more developed, it has to get into the education system. You need to have written materials in the language.

J: Also for foreign learners to be able to learn the language. A whole infrastructure of teaching materials is needed which ultimately relies on the development of the standard variety first.

W: There's now something close to a standard variety which is close to the Ayacuchano variety. But there's still no official standard. In Ecuador there is one. Ecuadorian Quechua is more unified anyhow. Peru and Bolivia are the original areas of Quechua. Quechua was imported in the last stages of the Inca Empire to Ecuador. It's quite pidginized but more unified. And so, the Ecuadorian government, and especially at that time the Ministry of Education, which was almost entirely ran by indigenous people, declared the so-called *alfabeto único*. If you wanted to write you had to use that. It was somehow enforced.

J: Was it easier to get a standard in Ecuador simply because the language was more homogeneous?

W: Yes, absolutely, and there was more political power because the Quechua people ran the Ministry of Education.

J: Would it be feasible for Peru to adopt the standard in Ecuador? Would that be like almost a foreign language to them?

W: They would never do that. There are two reasons. Number one, they will not do anything outside Peru, no matter if it's their neighbor countries. Number two, it is a highly pidginized Quechua, which has lost many of the grammatical and even phonological distinctions that original Quechua has.

J: Are there any stereotypes about the variety of Ecuadorian Quechua being less pure due to the fact that it is more pidginized?

W: Of course. Ecuadorian Quechua has more mergers, it's kind of deteriorated. And people form opinions based on that.

J: Why did you oppose to the officialization of Quechua in Peru back in 1975?

W: I did. We did the survey, starting in 1968, as I said. In 1975 the Velasco military government proposed to officialize Quechua. Officialization meant putting it in the constitution as one of the official languages in Peru, side by side with Spanish. I didn't think it was a good idea because it was not standardized. So what kind of Quechua are you going to officialize? They did it anyway. And now I'm glad they did because it helped maintaining Quechua, giving it more

status. It didn't have any unification but it gained status.

J: What measures should be taken to standardize a language? The development of literature, for example? Or should that be a result of the process?

W: There's a difference between what are characteristics or dimensions of a standard language, and what should a standard language be. The degree of the status of a language depends on the existence of literature. The less literature there is, the less status there is. People are more aware of the existence of language if it's written, if they can see it. And what kind of literature is also important. All varieties, including the smallest dialect, have some amount of poetry. Eventually the highest level of use of a language is in technical literature. In fact, there are still not that many highly technical books, even in Spanish. Even though Spanish is a highly developed language. At the very highest level, let's say of quantum mechanics, it's all in English. And the same with German.

The other question is what the characteristics of a standard language are. And the most important one is writability. To develop a writing system that is user-friendly and represents some well-known variety of the language. What is not important is that it corresponds directly to one particular variety, even if that one is a high prestige variety.

J: Because then it favors a few standard speakers, which are usually a minority in the country in detriment of all dialectal speakers of the language.

W: Exactly. There in fact in the world no single established written language, Spanish, German, Russian, Chinese, that represents one particular dialect. The standard is usually a different, as some people call it, dialect. It doesn't correspond to any native dialect.

J: What about a standard oral variety, the one promoted in mass media, at schools, etc.?

W: There is a colloquial standard that has certain features that usually, in languages like Spanish, is a blend. There is no such thing as an overall Latin American oral standard. The Iberian oral standard, yes. There's one preferred American English oral standard, though. Which is more Northern than Southern. But it is not any particular Northern. It's not Eastern for sure, it's not an r-less dialect. It's not easy to locate it. Many say it's Mid-Western, partly true. There's a preferred oral variety that has to have a number of features but not necessarily all of them.

J: I'm thinking of Spain, where the oral standard variety may correspond to the variety of some people from the area of Castilla y León, places like Valladolid, Segovia, Burgos. And also in Catalonia, I'd say the standard oral variety of Catalan coincides with the variety of Barcelona or the one spoken around the Catalunya del Nord. Not so much with Basque because their standard is a creation from 1968, the Euskara Batua.

W: In the more centralized countries that's true. Spain is very centralized except for Catalonia and the Basque Country. It's also maybe true of French. The Parisian French, spoken above the Massif Central is generally the accepted one. But that's not true, for instance, of England. Not true of London English. Not true of German. There's not the Berlin variety or the Frankfurt variety that takes the role of the oral standard. What really counts as standardization is the written language. There was a tendency in the United States where language planning was happening for indigenous languages to have a phonemic writing system. That's nonsense. Kenneth Pike wrote a book on this, called Phonemics (Pike, 1947). Basically, how to convert languages to writing.

J: A phonetic writing system is that which faitfully reflects the pronunciation of the language in its writing system. What do you mean by a phonemic writing system?

W: There's a difference in some varieties of American English between the vowels in *cot* and

caught. And in other varieties they sound the same. The writing system captures that contrast. Pike suggests that for non-written languages, do a phonemic analysis and then make sure that for each of the units in this inventory, have a different symbol.

J: Speaking of oral standard varieties again, could there be one spoken by the media, for example, that is not spoken by anyone? An artificial oral standard?

W: It sometimes happens. Now that they have certain writing systems in Quechua, used in Andean schools for bilingual education, those children are now beginning to have two different varieties of Quechua that they use, the native variety and the one that corresponds to the writing system. This latter being a new creation through the writing system.

J: This situation is analogous to what is happening in the Basque Country. Some people have their Basque dialects, learnt at home, especially in the province of Guipuzkoa. And then those people also speak the standard variety, the Euskara Batua, taught at schools. And depending on the context, they will use one or another.

W: But it only happens in these new standardized languages, where there is a writing system that is now being used in education that doesn't correspond to any real dialect.

J: One of my last questions is about attitudinal studies. My impression from the studies I have read, including yours (Wölck, 1986a, 1986b), on the topic is that majority languages are associated with success, richness, smartness, and minority languages with affection, closeness, familiarity, subjective attributes overall. With the Basque case in mind, a sector of the Basque population, especially those that are *euskaldunberris* 'New Basques' feel more attached to the majority language. Would this contradict your statement? Could this be a product, almost an artifact of the recent standardization of Basque and its spread through the schooling system?

W: It could be that, the recent standardization of Basque, or it could be reference group membership, the fact that the person considers the association with Spanish, rather than with Basque, a sign of social advantage and improvement. Most likely, however, it has to do with the relationship of Basque to Spanish, which is quite different from that of the other minority languages, like Quechua, or the minority dialects, like Low German or Black English, on which my claims are based; or even US Spanish, to the dominant majority languages. Basque has associations of nationalism and political separatism, those I mentioned do not.

J: Probably it's not representative, but my experience tells me that a considerable number of people feel like that.

W: It could be. There was a time when there was a lot of defensiveness on the Basque side because of the oppression during the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent dictatorship. That time is over now. They're doing very well economically. Therefore, they no longer have this kind of defensive reason to be pro-Basque. They're free to choose. Of course, Spanish is a larger language. If you want to go anywhere in the world, Spanish is a great ally.

J: My informant for the linguistic biography actually thought the opposite. She thinks that at least for the more *euskaldun* "Basque" sector of the population, the association with Euskera is a harbinger of race, purity, Basqueness. Maybe both approaches are compatible. The issue is complex but fascinating. Anyway, one of my current interests.

As a wrap up to our pleasant conversation, I'll ask you a difficult question. What awaits the future of sociolinguistics and linguistics in general?

W: First of all, there's now very good training available everywhere in the United Stated and in Europe. So you can learn linguistics from a lot of experts. Secondly, there's more of a tendency to do empirical studies rather than develop some fancy theories supported by strange data or

sometimes even no data. That time is over, we have enough theories around. Moreover, we have more skills in linguistic description than we did even 30 years ago. More people know how to do it.

The future of sociolinguistics, in my opinion, is rather dim. Largely, because few people are interested in it. Linguistic theories have become much more fascinating. And there's more interesting work in psycholinguistics than in sociolinguistics. We should bear in mind as well that sociolinguistics is a little delicate sometimes because of political implications, as we said before with the civil war in Peru. That's why people don't do macrosociolinguistics that much, it's politically too dangerous. There should be some more work on language contact. Not in the United States because here the majority of American linguists are monolingual. The few that are not are beginning to be interested in other subfields, like psycholinguistics. There is now more sociolinguistics in Europe of the interesting kind and not just variationist. I have great respect for it but it has not shown any recent interesting results.

J: Plus macrosociolinguistics benefits society. It's an applied science, part of applied linguistics. So you see how you are contributing to something with your own work.

W: Very true. I got into sociolinguistics to hopefully bring about some relevance to social change, not just linguistic change. You feel you are doing something more goal-directed, useful if you like.

J: Thank you so much. Vielen Dank! I appreciate your time and your interesting thoughts.

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