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# Review of Hasan, Ruqaiya [J. Webster, Ed.], Semantic Variation: Meaning in Society and Sociolinguistics (The Collected Works of Ruqaiya Hasan, Vol. 2)

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**Book Review Submission:**

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Reviewer bio:

Claire Scott completed her doctoral thesis in 2009 under the supervision of A/Prof David Butt and Dr Annabelle Lukin at the Centre for Language in Social Life at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. Her doctoral research, entitled 'Reporting Armistice: A diachronic, functional perspective' investigates diachronic consistency and variation in the register of newspaper reports from 1902-2003, focussing on the relationship between the changing context of the newspaper and the linguistic choices made in the reports. She currently lectures in English Language and Linguistics at the University of Wollongong.

**HASAN, RUQAIYA [J. WEBSTER, Ed.]. *Semantic Variation: Meaning in Society and Sociolinguistics* (The Collected Works of Ruqaiya Hasan, Vol. 2). London: Equinox. 2009. xiii + 484pp. [hbk £75.00/\$95.00; pbk £35.00/\$50.00].**

### **Introduction**

The prolific and influential writings of Emeritus Professor Ruqaiya Hasan over more than three decades have been very significant in the field of systemic functional linguistics and beyond, particularly in the areas of research concerned with child language development, cohesion and stylistics, semantics, and context. Her papers are now being collected together in a series of volumes commendably edited by Jonathan Webster (who also edited the recent ten volume series of the Collected Works of M. A. K. Halliday published by Continuum). *Semantic Variation: Meaning in Society and in Sociolinguistics* is the second volume in this seven volume series (volumes 3-7 are to appear gradually throughout 2011, according to the publisher Equinox's website<sup>1</sup>).

The book's twelve chapters, which comprise eight papers originally published elsewhere and four previously unpublished papers, are arranged in such a way as to highlight the gaps in semantic theory for sociolinguistics and to advocate ways of addressing these theoretical and methodological blind spots and deficiencies. A number of the previously published papers are already well known in the SFL literature, e.g. Chapter 3, *A sociolinguistic interpretation of everyday talk between mothers and children* [1990] (co-authored with Carmel Cloran), which reported on the findings of an extensive study of mother-child conversation conducted in Sydney in the 1980s. A CD-ROM accompanies the book and provides relevant appendices and extras, including a summary of the semantic variation research carried out by Hasan and Cloran, a guide to the transcription conventions used, samples of mother-child dialogues and analyses, and two extra papers (Cloran's *Identifying patterns in linguistic behaviour* and Hasan, Cloran, Williams & Lukin's (2007) *Semantic networks: the description of linguistic meaning in SFL*).

One of the strengths of the book is the way Hasan consistently goes back to the foundations of linguistic thought - especially those thinkers whose ideas have so influenced many sociolinguists, e.g. Saussure, Malinowski, Whorf, Wittgenstein, and later Firth, Bourdieu, Bernstein, Luria, and Vygotsky - and revisits those ideas in light of the more recent developments in the field. This is combined with the solid empirical evidence of the mother-child data and Hasan's highly sophisticated rhetorical style to deliver a firm argument for the reconceptualisation of semantics in sociolinguistic research. In many of the chapters (particularly those in Part II), as in much of Hasan's other work, Bernstein's theories of code and socialisation (e.g. Bernstein, 1975, 1990) occupy a prominent position. Bernstein's concern with the differential use of 'coding' across the social landscape is firmly in line with the concerns of 'semantic variation in sociolinguistics' as Hasan conceives of it. This section of the book also provides much needed explanations and demonstrations of the modelling and use of semantic system networks in the analysis of text (in this case, spoken discourse between mothers and their children).

Hasan's characteristically probing evaluations open up a space for problematising the analysis of semantics in sociolinguistics, and for re-evaluating why linguists treat language and society, and the relation between the two, in the variety of ways they currently do. The argument that persists throughout the book is that an 'integrated sociolinguistics' is needed, in which the concerns of the various strands of sociolinguistic research, which have hitherto been carried out largely in parallel with each other, may be included under one banner based on an organising principle that explicitly indicates the relationship between them (p.32). The organising principle Hasan proposes here, as in much of her other work, is based on the

vectors of context - field, tenor and mode (cf. Halliday, 1985). Hasan has been a major contributor to the theorisation of context as an analytical construct in linguistics (e.g. Hasan, 1995, 1996, 1999; Hasan, 2009a). Her work is pervaded by the assumption that “to describe the nature of human language we need to place it in its social environment”... which “must be taken as an integral part of linguistic theory” (Hasan, 1999: 224). Sociolinguistics, if it is concerned at all with the description of language, therefore needs to make context an integral part of its frameworks and methodologies.

The current state of ‘multi-stranded’ sociolinguistic research (e.g. following the likes of Hymes, Labov, Gumperz) is given a rigorous critique, which highlights the real need for explicit theorisation and clarification of many of the taken-for-granted ‘facts’ upon which sociolinguistics seems to be based (e.g. the ‘socio-’ and the ‘linguistic’ in the very name of the discipline). Hasan proposes that a realisational model of the relationship between language and society (see also Halliday, 1975/2007; Hasan, 1999) be used in an integrated sociolinguistics to effect “a deeper understanding of the relationship between language and society” (Hasan, 2009b: 14).

Hasan’s suggestion for studying language and society in this integrated way is constructive and progressive in that it preserves the scope for studying all the topics or discourses that have become popular in sociolinguistics, e.g. ideology, politeness, or social class, while setting them in a principled, explicit research agenda in which each topic would “find its true location *vis-a-vis* the other relevant areas of enquiry into the working of language and society” (p.34). And while Hasan puts forward two theories that are well suited to the concerns of an integrated sociolinguistics – Bernsteinian theory and SFL – she stops short of advocating any particular methodology, proposing instead the principle that “the adoption of a linguistics that in its design does not militate against the aims of integrated sociolinguistics will make the task easier, and free of contradictions” (p.38).

Hasan’s familiar zeal for the application of linguistic findings to the rectification of social inequalities, particularly in the education system, is also demonstrated clearly in this volume. She emphasises the hostile reception that evidence of sociosemantic variation normally attracts, and laments the fact that while this is the case and such research is virtually ‘written off’, there can be little done to rectify the social inequalities that are perpetuated through different ‘ways of meaning’ (see e.g. pp.227-228). The chapters of this book combined present a very compelling argument and evidence for the existence of sociosemantic variation: that across the social spectrum there are different habituations of meaning and as a result certain groups may be effectively excluded from particular kinds of social processes because of their different ways of meaning.

The importance of this book lies in the concentrated treatment of a crucial but neglected topic in SFL and sociolinguistics, that of semantics and the theoretical place of semantics in sociolinguistic study. The inclusion in one volume of Hasan’s in-depth investigation and discussion of semantic variation, along with semantic system networks, is of immense value to the linguistic community. This book is a very worthwhile and important read for all linguists whose research involves consideration of the semantic stratum and how language users ‘mean’ in their social context. It has important implications for pedagogical applications of linguistics, particularly in the early stages of formal schooling. In addition, if the book moves more linguists to continue systematic research into semantic variation in an ‘integrated sociolinguistics’, perhaps there can arise a stronger force to respond to the unwarranted hostility that has thus far prevented the necessary social change from occurring.

Bernstein, B. (1975). *Class, Codes and Control: Towards a theory of educational transmission* (Vol. 3). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

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<sup>i</sup>The details of this series are available at <http://www.equinoxpub.com/books/browse.asp?serid=12>.