

Introduction

KEY TOPICS

- What makes a system of communication a language
- What it means to 'know' a language
- How language varies across language users and within the language use of one person
- The social construction of identities
- The relationship between language and culture
- How to define and delineate the study of sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is the study of our everyday lives – how we use language in, for example, our conversations or social media interactions, and how this language use is influenced by the presence of societal norms, policies, and laws which address language. Since you are reading this book, you may already have some idea what the study of sociolinguistics entails; you may already have an interest in, and knowledge about, regional dialects, multilingualism, language policy, or non-sexist language. And we will cover all of these topics, along with many others – for example, what social class and ethnicity might have to do with language use, why we do not always ‘say what we mean,’ and the role of language in education.

But we would like to encourage readers to approach the study of sociolinguistics not only as an empirical approach to studying language and society, but as a way of viewing the world around you. In sociolinguistics, we seek to analyze data so that we can make generalizations about language in society, but also to question both our findings and the very process of doing research. Take, for instance, the topic of nicknames. There is a stereotype that men use nicknames and women do not, exemplified in the following joke:

If Diana, Natalie, Naomi, and Maria meet for lunch, they will call each other Diana, Natalie, Naomi, and Maria. But if Matt, Peter, Kirk, and Scott go out for a brewsky, they will call each other Dutch, Dude, Doofus, and Pencil.

We could investigate this sociolinguistic phenomenon by surveying people about their nicknames and also observing or recording interactions in which they are addressed by close friends and family members. We might find, indeed, that the men in our study are often called nicknames, while the women rarely are. But we would like to go deeper than

this generalization; why do we ask this question in the first place? Why do we assume that the categories of ‘men’ and ‘women’ are socially relevant? What is it about nicknames that makes using them, or not using them, significant social behavior? And even if most men are called by a nickname and most women are not, how do we explain the existence of individual men who do not have nicknames, and the individual women who do?

Thus, while in sociolinguistics we analyze linguistic interactions with the goal of making generalizations, we also question these generalizations and examine how they, in turn, influence how we use language. In short, the goal of sociolinguistics is not to make simple observations (e.g., men call each other nicknames, women do not) but to study the complex ways in which societal norms are intertwined with our language use (e.g., what it means to be a male or female member of a particular society may influence the terms we use to address each other).

We will come back to these points repeatedly: language, society, and sociolinguistic research findings must all be viewed in their social contexts, interpreted, and redefined. To begin, however, we will offer a starting point for discussing language in society. By society, we mean a group of people who are drawn together for a certain purpose or purposes; this is a rather vague and broad term, and throughout this book we will be engaged in discussing how to draw meaningful boundaries around a group of language users for the purposes of studying their language (see in particular chapter 3). We use the term language to mean a system of linguistic communication; this includes spoken, written, and signed modes of communication. A note here about terminology: although the majority of the research we will refer to is on spoken language, there is an increasing number of studies looking at written discourse (especially from social media) and we also do not wish to exclude those who communicate through signed languages. Thus, we will use the term ‘language user’ instead of the more commonly used term ‘speaker’ as a general term.

The main idea we would like to convey here is that language is inherently social. A society must have a language or languages in which to carry out its purposes, and we label groups of people with reference to how they communicate – e.g., *Spanish speakers*, *bilinguals*, *American Sign Language users*. This connection is inevitable and complex; our purpose here is to study the relationship between language and society in more specific ways which help us more clearly define and understand both the social groups and the ways they speak.

In this introductory chapter, we will present some of the basic concepts in the field of sociolinguistics: what defines a language, what it means to ‘know’ a language, the nature of differences across and within languages, the importance of social group membership in language use, and different ideas about the relationship between the worldviews of these groups and the languages they use. Further, we will provide a brief discussion of how sociolinguistics draws on ideas from a variety of disciplines for key concepts and approaches to the study of language.

The Nature of Language

A mainstay of introduction to linguistics textbooks (see for example Yule 2017) is a discussion of the nature of language and, often, how it differs from animal communication. Although the human ability to learn language is innate, a person learns a language through

contact with others and thus language is **culturally transmitted** – an idea which is at the heart of sociolinguistics. Other features include **discreteness**, **productivity**, and **displacement**, which can be used to distinguish between non-linguistic means of communication such as gestures and language. Another important feature is that the relationship between the form and meaning of a linguistic sign is **arbitrary**; aside from a few onomatopoeic words, such as words for animal sounds (e.g., *meow*, *moo*), the form (including both the sound and the way it might be written) of a morpheme is not derived from its meaning, or vice versa. We see evidence for the arbitrariness of the form–meaning relationship in the presence of synonyms within languages (e.g., *sofa*, *couch*) as well as the fact that words from different languages may have drastically different forms but still have the same meaning (e.g., English *love*, Swahili *kupenda*).

By examining how language works in its social context, sociolinguistics has greatly advanced our understanding of the relationship between signs and their meanings. The philosopher Peirce (Hartshorne et al. 1931) suggested a three-way typology of signs. A **symbol** is a sign which has developed a conventional meaning; for example, a heart shape indicates love. There is nothing about this shape which inherently leads to this interpretation; it is simply a correspondence which has grown out of use. As noted above, linguistic signs are generally symbols, that is, we understand them because of conventionalized meanings, not because of any ‘natural’ connection between the sign and its meaning. An **icon** is a sign which in some way resembles the object it refers to, such as a map. Although linguistic signs are not generally held to be iconic, particular varieties may be seen as having an iconic relationship with the people who use them (see chapter 3 for a discussion of this in the section on language ideologies). An **index** is something which ‘points to’ something – such as literal pointing with your finger to indicate what you are referring to, or the commonly used example of smoke indexing fire. Smoke does not resemble fire, but since the two often co-occur, we associate them with each other (as shown in the idiom ‘when there’s smoke there’s fire’). The concept of indexicality is one which has drawn great interest in sociolinguistics. Put simply, certain varieties often come to index certain types of language users; thus indexicality is inherently a central aspect of the study of language in society. We will expand on the use of this concept in sociolinguistics in the next chapter.

Knowledge of Language

As mentioned in the last section, language is culturally transmitted, and while the ability to learn a language is innate, we are not born knowing a particular language, nor are we genetically pre-dispositioned to speak a certain variety, but we learn the language(s) we are exposed to. The system (or the grammar, to use a well-known technical term) is something that each language user ‘knows,’ but two very important issues for linguists are (1) just what that knowledge comprises and (2) how we may best characterize it.

In practice, linguists do not find it at all easy to write grammars because the knowledge that people have of the languages they speak is extremely hard to describe. Anyone who knows a language knows much more about that language than is contained in any grammar book that attempts to describe the language. One of the issues here is that grammar books tend to be written as **prescriptive** works; that is, they seek to outline the

standardized language and how it ‘should’ be spoken. What sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropologists do is provide **descriptive** grammars of languages, which describe, analyze, and explain how and why people actually speak their languages.

One example of this difference can be found in the *less/fewer* distinction. Prescriptively, *less* should be used with non-count nouns, such as water, rice, or money; *fewer* is used with count nouns (or noun phrases) such as drops of water, grains of rice, or pesos. So something may be worth *less money*, but it costs *fewer pesos*. Descriptively, however, this distinction does not hold; *less* is often used with count nouns. For example, it is common in the US to see signs in grocery stores indicating that certain cashier lines are for patrons with ‘ten items or less,’ although ‘item’ is clearly a count noun. Chances are you will also hear people saying things like *there were less students present today than yesterday*. While some speakers do still adhere to the *less/fewer* distinction, it is being lost in some varieties.

Linguistics are aware of prescriptive rules of language as dictated in reference grammars, and they are not irrelevant in sociolinguistics; as we will discuss below, language ideologies are also an important part of how language functions in society. However, in the study of language, linguists focus on descriptive grammar, that is, the rules inside the heads of language users which constitute their knowledge of how to use the language. This knowledge includes underlying rules and principles which allow us to produce new utterances, to know both what it is possible to say and what it is not possible to say. Most language users can’t articulate these rules, but know how to apply them. It is this shared knowledge that becomes the abstraction of a language, which is often seen as something which exists independent of language users. How this knowledge is used by language users is the core of sociolinguistics. In the following sections, we will explore the ways in which sociolinguists and linguist anthropologists have conceptualized language and its users.

Competence and performance

Confronted with the task of trying to describe the grammar of a language like English, many linguists follow the approach associated with Chomsky, who distinguishes between what he has called **competence** and **performance**. He claims that it is the linguist’s task to characterize what language users know about their language, that is, their competence, not what they do with their language, that is, their performance. The best-known characterization of this distinction comes from Chomsky himself (1965, 3–4) in words which have been extensively quoted:

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker–listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. This seems to me to have been the position of the founders of modern general linguistics, and no cogent reason for modifying it has been offered. To study actual linguistic performance, we must consider the interaction of a variety of factors, of which the underlying competence of the speaker–hearer is only one. In this respect, study of language is no different from empirical investigation of other complex phenomena.

However, it is exactly the interaction of social and linguistics factors that interests Labov, arguably the most influential figure in sociolinguistics in the last sixty or so years. He maintains (2006, 380) that ‘the linguistic behavior of individuals cannot be understood without knowledge of the communities that they belong to.’ This is the focus of sociolinguistics, and what makes it different from Chomskyan linguistics. We are primarily concerned with real language in use (what Chomsky calls performance), not the language of some ideal language user (i.e., an idealized competence). This distinction is reflected in methodological differences; syntacticians such as Chomsky will often use **grammatical judgments** to get at competence, while sociolinguists tend to use actual language production (see Part II for discussions of sociolinguistic methodologies).

Further, the knowledge which underlies language production, or performance, is more than just knowledge of grammar; language users must also know social norms for how to use a language – when it is appropriate to speak or to be silent, what topics are acceptable, what form of a question is appropriate to use with a friend versus your boss. There is thus another kind of competence, sometimes called **communicative competence**. This means knowing social rules for communication. These rules are often linked to language, but are also community-specific. Communicative competence can be independent of grammatical competence; that is, someone may understand the form of the questions ‘What’s up?’ but

Exploration 1.1 Grammatical Judgments

Here are a number of statements that can be ‘tagged’ to make them into questions. Add a tag question to each with the tag you would be most likely to use and also add any other tags you might also use or think others might use. If you wouldn’t use a tag question in this context, is there some other means for seeking confirmation, such as the use of *right?* or *okay?* which sounds more natural to you?

See (1) for an example of a potential answer. Indicate for each example which tag you believe to be the prescriptively ‘correct’ tag, or if you might associate certain tags only with certain types of speakers. Compare your results with those of others who do this task. If there are differences in your answers, how can you explain them? Do such differences challenge the idea of a shared communicative competence?

- 1) He’s ready, *isn’t he?*
Other possible tags: ‘innit,’ ‘ain’t he.’
Prescriptively ‘correct’ tag: ‘isn’t he.’
- 2) I might see you next week, ...?
- 3) No one goes there any more, ...?
- 4) Either John or Mary did it, ...?
- 5) Few people know that, ...?
- 6) You don’t want to come with us, ...?
- 7) I have a penny in my purse, ...?
- 8) I’m going right now, ...?
- 9) The baby cried, ...?
- 10) The girl saw no one, ...?

not understand that this is a greeting, showing grammatical competence but a gap in communicative competence. The reverse may also be true; for instance a second language learner might use a polite form as dictated by the norms of a community, but not use prescriptively correct word order.

Variation

The competence–performance distinction just mentioned is one that holds intriguing possibilities for work in linguistics, but it is one that has also proved to be quite troublesome, because the performance of different language users, and the same person in different contexts, can vary quite a lot. For instance speakers in some areas of the Midwestern United States might utter sentences such as ‘The car needs washed’ while others would say ‘The car needs to be washed’ or ‘The car needs washing.’ Further, an individual speaker might use all three of these constructions at different times. (These different structures for expressing the same meaning are called **variants**; we will explain this term and how it is used in more detail below.) For sociolinguists, this **linguistic variation** is a central topic, and a core belief is that variation in language is socially meaningful. There is variation across language users, that is, reflections of different ways that people use a language in different regions or social groups, but also variation within the language use of a single person. No one uses language the same way all the time, and people constantly exploit variation within the languages they know for a wide variety of purposes. The consequence is a kind of paradox: while many linguists would like to view any language as a homogeneous entity, so that they can make the strongest possible theoretical generalizations, in actual fact that language will exhibit considerable internal variation. One claim we will be making throughout this book is that variation is an inherent characteristic of all languages at all times, and the patterns exhibited in this variation carry social meanings. (See the link to a website which provides an overview of the field, the sociolinguistics page for the PBS series *Do You Speak American*, in the materials associated with chapter 1 in the web guide to this textbook.) Thus, sociolinguistics is concerned with language not as an abstraction, but in the forms in which it is used.

Variation can occur on all linguistic levels, including lexical, phonetic, or morphosyntactic features. Lexical variation is exemplified by different words for the same thing – for instance, while Canadians go to the *washroom*, their US neighbors often say they are headed for the *bathroom* or the *restroom*, while elsewhere in the English-speaking world, people use the *toilet* or the *loo*. Phonetic variation has to do with different pronunciations, for example, the pronunciation of words such as *playing* with a final *-in*’ (alveolar nasal) or *-ing* (velar nasal). *The car needs washed/washing* example above shows morphosyntactic variation; a further example of morphological variation is the use or non-use of verbal *-s* marking on third person singular verbs, e.g., *he plays* versus *he play*. These examples illustrate variation associated with different social meanings (a topic which will be taken up in the next chapter) – *washroom/bathroom/toilet/loo* and *needs washed/washing* are examples of regional variation, *-in*’/*-ing* variation has to do with the level of formality, and the use or non-use of verbal *-s* is part of standardized and non-standardized varieties of English. But of course, a single speaker might also use all of these variants, especially the phonetic and

morphological variants. Certainly every English speaker has said both *playin'* and *playing* in different contexts!

Further, while there is considerable variation in the speech of any one individual, there are also definite bounds to that variation: no individual is free to do just exactly as they please so far as language is concerned. You cannot pronounce words with random sounds, inflect or not inflect words such as nouns and verbs arbitrarily, or make drastic alterations in word order in sentences as the mood suits you. If you do any or all of these things, the results will be unacceptable, even gibberish. The variation you are permitted has limits (at least if you want to be understood!), and these limits can be described with considerable accuracy. For instance, although most of us would say 'the cow jumped over the fence,' we can say, 'It is the fence that the cow jumped over,' which is comprehensible if somewhat stilted; but most people would agree that 'the fence jumped the cow over' does not follow English word order rules and is largely incomprehensible. Most language users know what utterances are part of the language – or at least their variety of the language – although they do not usually know the linguistic rules; such explanations are the job of linguists!

Our task will be one of trying to specify the norms of linguistic behavior that exist in particular groups and then trying to account for individual behavior in terms of these norms. This task is particularly interesting because most people have no conscious awareness of how their linguistic behavior is conditioned by social norms. We will also see how the variation we find in language allows changes to occur over time and often points to the direction of change. A living language not only varies, it changes.

Exploration 1.2 Variation in Greetings

How do you greet your friends, your family, your colleagues, your professors and your acquaintances? Are there different verbal exchanges as well as different embodied practices (e.g., kissing, hugging, shaking hands, doing a fist bump)? Does the situation matter – that is, do you greet your family differently if you have not seen them for a long time, or friends in different ways depending on whether you run into each other by accident on campus or if you are meeting for dinner? Are there ways of greeting, either that you use or that you do not use, that index membership in particular groups? Are there ways of greeting that you find inappropriate – in general, or for particular addressees or in particular situations? Compare your own repertoires and practices with those of the other students in your class.

Variants and the linguistic variable

We discussed variants above, saying that variants are different forms which largely mean the same thing; we could also say that they are different forms which can be used in the same environment. A **linguistic variable** is a linguistic item which has identifiable variants. For instance, the variation between *washroom*, *bathroom*, *toilet* and *loo* gives us four lexical variants. Another example which has been studied extensively is the vowel system of US English (e.g., Gordon 2002), including, for example, the production of words such as

cot and *caught* – some people pronounce these two words the same, while others use distinct vowels.

These examples show that there are at least two basically different kinds of variation. One is of the kind with distinct variants, such as different lexical items. The other kind of variation is a matter of degree; pronunciation of vowels is not binary but includes production on a continuum within the vowel space.

An important principle in the analysis of variants is the **principle of accountability**, which holds that if it is possible to define a variable as a closed set of variants, all of the variants (including non-occurrence if relevant) must be counted. That is, the analysis is done by identifying all of the environments where the variable could occur, and then seeing which variants are used. Take, for example, the study of third person singular -s marking. Some speakers of English have variation between this marker and a **null variant** (e.g., *she goes* and *she go* may both be used). To study this, you would look at all contexts with a third person singular subject. While this principle applies to grammatical variables in general, for pragmatically motivated variables such as discourse markers (e.g., *you know*, *well*) the principle of accountability cannot be applied, as there are no mandatory environments for such particles. As we will see in Part II, the features of language studied is an important consideration when choosing a research methodology.

Language Users and Their Groups: Identities

In order to talk about how people use language, we must talk about both individuals and groups, together with the relationships between people within and across groups. One of the current ways of thinking about this focuses on language user identities. The term **identity** has been used in a variety of ways in both the social sciences and lay speech. In current social theory, identities are not seen as fixed attributes of people or groups but are dynamically constructed aspects which emerge through social behavior, including but not limited to language use. Although we do look at identities of individuals, what we are primarily concerned with is *social* identity: 'Identity is defined as the linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories' (Kroskrity 2000, 111).

In such a view, identities are not preconceived categorical affiliations such as 'male' or 'female' but nuanced ways of being that we construct; while we may indeed reference such categories, our identities are not simply a matter of listing demographic identifiers (e.g., 'single white female, 45, architect, nature lover'). So while a speaker may introduce a comment by saying *As a mother . . .*, thus explicitly referencing this aspect of her identity, what will emerge is a more nuanced picture of what type of mother she is – for example, protective, feminist, one who encourages independence, one who is concerned with the upward mobility of her children. Named social categories such as 'single mother' or 'helicopter parent' are not our identities but concepts we use to construct our identities.

Further, our identities are fluid and we do not have a single identity but multiple levels of identity, and shifting and sometimes even conflicting identities which emerge in different contexts. To continue the example above, the speaker may reference her identity as a mother but then also focus on how she identifies strongly with her profession and struggles to balance this with the demands of parenthood; this may be intertwined with

her gender identity and her social class identity. In another conversation, this same person might use particular lexical items to focus on her regional affiliation to construct a different aspect of her identity, and to align herself with an interlocutor who shares this background. Thus, the identities we construct are constantly shifting, and also at different levels, from macro-categories such as ‘woman’ or ‘southerner’ to interactional positionings such as alignment.

Likewise, group identity categories are constantly being negotiated. What it means to be the member of a particular social category (e.g., ‘gay,’ ‘educated,’ ‘Latinx’) may vary over time, space, and situation, and how particular language users identify with or are assigned to these categories may also vary. We will revisit this concept of multiple identities throughout this text because it is highly relevant to our study of language in society.

So far, we have said that the term ‘society’ refers to a group of people unified through some purpose; other concepts such as ‘speech community,’ ‘social network,’ and ‘community of practice’ will be found in the pages that follow (see especially sections devoted to these concepts in chapter 3). We will see how these are useful if we wish to refer to groups of various kinds, since it is among groups that individuals form relationships or reject connections with others. The groups can be long-lasting or temporary, large or small, close-knit or casual, and formally or informally organized. This is, therefore, another level of complexity we must acknowledge in the pages that follow as we refer to ‘middle class,’ ‘women,’ ‘speakers of Haitian Creole,’ ‘teenagers,’ and so on. We must remember that these categorizations also have a process side to them: all must be enacted, performed, or reproduced in order to exist. Socioeconomic class, gender, language background, and age are only important aspects of our identities and groups if we choose to organize our lives in that way; in some contexts they may not be salient social categories and we may instead see ourselves as members of groups based on racial identification, sexual orientation, national belonging, or membership of a particular formal social group (e.g., a choir, a professional association, or a fox hunting club).

Bucholtz and Hall (2005) provide a framework for the analysis of the linguistic construction of social identities. Central to this framework are the ideas of identity as emergent in interaction and encompassing different aspects of identity, simultaneously but also varying across interactions. In chapters 7 and 8, in our discussions of interactional sociolinguistics and multilingual discourse, we will return to this framework to discuss the linguistic means through which identities are constructed. In this introduction to the study of identities, the main point we wish to stress is the concept of identities as relational, which is inherent in group membership. Bucholtz and Hall note that the construction of identities is not done in a vacuum, but has to do with the relationships between self and other. Similarity and difference are thus central to the process of identity construction. For example, two people may construct themselves as similar in their identities as cycling enthusiasts by using jargon specific to that group (see Exploration 1.3 below). However, another participant in the conversation may construct difference in identity by avoiding such jargon or using words such as ‘thingamajig’ or ‘whatchamacallit’ to refer to bike parts. Another aspect of identity which has been the focus of sociolinguistic studies is authenticity (e.g., Jones 2011; Mason Carris 2011; Shenk 2008; Westinen 2014). These studies show that language is used to construct authenticity not just in linguistic groups but also in ethnic categories, sexuality groups, or in groups related to expertise and activity, such as hip-hop artists. Thus, the

Exploration 1.3 Identities

Members of cycling communities have a lexicon to refer to their social activities which is not shared with outsiders. Below is a list of terminology. What observations about group norms can you make based on these terms? What aspects of identity are constructed through the use of these terms, beyond simply being an avid cyclist?

Taking a pull: riding in the front of the line of cyclists and breaking the wind resistance

Wheel sucker: someone who drafts and never takes a pull

To hammer: pedaling hard

Hammerhead (pejorative): someone who likes to hammer a lot

Crit (abbreviation for criterium): a competition on a short distance course where cyclists do laps

Prime: prizes in a crit

Sandbagging: racing a category beneath one's abilities to get a prime

Granny gear: lowest gear

Off the back: getting left behind by the group

On your wheel: riding close to the cyclist in front of you (often used to describe someone's strategy in competition)

Clydesdale: a male cyclist over 220 pounds or a female cyclist over 160 pounds

Do you have any social groups which have specific lexicons and, if so, what are the consequences of using or not using these terms in ingroup or outgroup interactions?

construction of the social identities is inherently also about the construction of social groups in terms of boundaries and membership.

Language and Culture

There is a tradition of study in linguistic anthropology which addresses the relationship between language and **culture**. By 'culture' in this context we do not mean 'high culture,' that is, the appreciation of music, literature, the arts, and so on. Rather, we adopt Goodenough's well-known definition (1957, 167): 'a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves.' Such knowledge is socially acquired: the necessary behaviors are learned and do not come from any kind of genetic endowment. Culture, therefore, is the 'knowhow' that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living; for language use, this is similar to the concept of communicative competence we introduced above. The key issue addressed here is the nature of the relationship between a specific language and the culture in which it is used. Of course, we must recognize that cultural norms are not static; they change over time and what is 'normal' is constantly negotiated by members of a society. Thus they do not just vary over space, but also over time.

Directions of influence

There are several possible relationships between language and culture. One is that social structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure and/or behavior. Certain evidence may be adduced to support this view. For instance, given the evidence of the **age-grading** phenomenon (i.e., young children speak differently from older children, and, in turn, children speak differently from mature adults), we could argue that the social organization of age groups influences the language used in these groups. Another possible piece of evidence for this direction of influence is studies which show that the varieties of language that people use reflect such matters as their regional, social, or ethnic origin and possibly even their gender. In both cases it might be that social structures account for – possibly even determine – linguistic differences.

A second possibility is directly opposed to the first: linguistic structure and/or behavior may either influence or determine social structure or **worldview**. This is the view that is behind the **Whorfian hypothesis**, which we will discuss in more detail in the next section. Such a view is behind certain proposed language reforms: if we change the language we can change social behavior, for example, a deliberate reduction in sexist language not only reflects a desire to combat sexism, but is also aimed at raising consciousness about the prevalence of sexist attitudes.

A third possible relationship is that the influence is bi-directional: language and society may influence each other. Certain language reforms can also be seen as relying on this perspective; the reforms are made because of changes in societal norms, for example, awareness that generic ‘he’ is not inclusive may increase the power of women and girls, enabling them to claim inclusion. Consequently, language change and a greater awareness of gender equality co-occur, hand in glove as it were.

A fourth possibility is to assume that there is no relationship at all between linguistic structure and social structure and that each is independent of the other. A variant of this possibility would be to say that, although there might be some such relationship, present attempts to characterize it are essentially premature or unprovable, given what we know about both language and society.

The Whorfian hypothesis

The claim that the structure of a language influences how its users view the world is today most usually associated with the linguist Sapir and his student Whorf, a chemical engineer by training, a fire prevention engineer by vocation, and a linguist by avocation. However, it can be traced back to others, particularly to Humboldt in the nineteenth century. Today, the claim is usually referred to as ‘Linguistic Determinism,’ the ‘Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis,’ the ‘Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis,’ or the ‘Whorfian Hypothesis.’ We will use the last term since the claim seems to owe much more to Whorf than to anyone else.

Sapir acknowledged the close relationship between language and culture, maintaining that they were inextricably related so that you could not understand or appreciate the one without a knowledge of the other. Whorf took up Sapir’s ideas but went much further than saying that there was merely a ‘predisposition’; in Whorf’s view the relationship between language and culture was a deterministic one; the social categories we create and how we

perceive events and actions are constrained by the language we speak. Different language users will therefore experience the world differently insofar as the languages they speak differ structurally.

One claim is that if users of one language have certain words to describe things and users of another language lack similar words, then users of the first language will find it easier to talk about those things. We can see how this might be the case if we consider the technical vocabulary of any trade, calling, or profession; for example, physicians talk more easily about medical phenomena than those without medical training because they have the vocabulary to do so. A stronger claim is that, if one language makes distinctions that another does not make, then those who use the first language will more readily perceive the relevant differences in their environment. If you must classify camels, boats, and automobiles in certain ways, you will perceive camels, boats, and automobiles differently from someone who is not required to make these differentiations. If your language classifies certain material objects as long and thin and others as roundish, you will perceive material objects that way; they will fall quite ‘naturally’ into those classes for you.

This extension into the area of grammar could be argued to be a further strengthening of Whorf’s claim, since classification systems pertaining to shape, substance, gender, number, time, and so on are both more subtle and more pervasive. Their effect is much stronger on language users than vocabulary differences alone. The strongest claim of all is that the grammatical categories available in a particular language not only help the users of that language to perceive the world in a certain way but also at the same time limit such perception. They act as blinkers: you perceive only what your language allows you, or predisposes you, to perceive. Your language controls your worldview. Users of different languages will, therefore, have different worldviews. (This idea also appears in popular culture; for instance, we can see it in a strong form in the science fiction movie *Arrival*, in which those who learn the aliens’ language also acquire the ability to see the future and past.)

Whorf’s work on Native American languages led him to make his strongest claims. He contrasted the linguistic structure of Hopi with the kinds of linguistic structure he associated with languages such as English, French, German, and so on, that is, familiar European languages. He saw these languages as sharing so many structural features that he named this whole group of languages Standard Average European (SAE). According to Whorf, Hopi and SAE differ widely in their structural characteristics. For example, Hopi grammatical categories provide a ‘process’ orientation toward the world, whereas the categories in SAE give SAE users a fixed orientation toward time and space. In SAE, events occur, have occurred, or will occur, in a definite time, that is, present, past, or future; to users of Hopi, what is important is whether an event can be warranted to have occurred, or to be occurring, or to be expected to occur. Whorf believed that these differences lead users of Hopi and SAE to view the world differently. The Hopi see the world as essentially an ongoing set of processes; time is not apportioned into fixed segments so that certain things recur, for example, minutes, mornings, and days. In contrast, users of SAE regard nearly everything in their world as discrete, measurable, countable, and recurrent; time and space do not flow into each other; mornings recur in twenty-four-hour cycles; and past, present, and future are factual ways of viewing events. (We should note that Malotki (1983) has pointed out that some of Whorf’s claims about the grammatical structure of Hopi are either dubious or incorrect, for example, Hopi, like SAE, does have verbs that are inflected for tense.)

Deutscher (2010a, 2010b) has revisited the Whorf hypothesis, noting some of the obvious problems with this hypothesis: ‘If the inventory of readymade words in your language determined which concepts you were able to understand, how would you ever learn anything new?’ However, he further discusses some recent research which provides evidence for the connection between language and worldview. One example is that users of a remote Australian aboriginal tongue, Guugu Yimithirr, from north Queensland, do not make use of any egocentric coordinates (i.e., deictic words such as ‘left,’ ‘right,’ ‘behind,’ ‘in front of’) but instead rely solely on the cardinal directions of east, west, north, and south. Research on this language prompted recognition of the same phenomenon in languages of other far-flung places such as Bali, Namibia, and Mexico. Deutscher uses this research not to make strong claims about linguistic determinism, but to urge readers to recognize linguistic relativity, advising us that ‘as a first step toward understanding one another, we can do better than pretending we all think the same.’

More recently, McWhorter (2014) argued against the Whorf hypothesis, with a book written for a popular audience titled *The Language Hoax: Why the World Looks the Same in Any Language*. His main point seems to be that the differences between groups are cultural, and not determined by language. This book has not been well received by linguistic anthropologists, as can be seen in Webster’s (2015) review. Nonetheless, a shared perspective seems to be a rejection of the neo-Whorfian interest of experimentally testing differences of perception across users of different languages. McWhorter’s point is that if there is an effect of language on thought, it is minor; Webster’s is that different languages have different poetic potentials and this, and not some abstract idea about ‘thought,’ is what is interesting about the influence of language on our worldview. In the next section, we will move on from the question of the direction of influence to the discussion of the nature of connections between linguistic features and social variables in sociolinguistic research.

Exploration 1.4 Translatability

If you speak more than one language or dialect, are there certain words or phrases which you feel you cannot translate into Standard English? What are these words or phrases – are they simply words for things which are not part of the cultures of the English-speaking world, or concepts or idioms not found in English? What does the view of particular words as ‘untranslatable’ indicate about the connection between language and worldview?

Correlations

It is possible to claim a relationship between the use of certain features of language and social structure, and such correlational studies have long formed a significant part of sociolinguistic work. Gumperz (1971, 223) has observed that sociolinguistics is an attempt to find correlations between social structure and linguistic structure and to observe any changes that occur. The approach to sociolinguistics which focuses on such correlations and the quantitative analysis of them is often called **variationist sociolinguistics**, and the theory and methodology of this will be discussed in chapter 5.

It is important to note that correlation only shows a relationship between two variables; it does not show causation. To find that X and Y are related is not necessarily to discover that X causes Y (or Y causes X). For example, to find that female language users use more standard features than male language users in a given community does not prove that being female causes someone to speak in a more standard manner (see chapter 5 for a discussion of how such findings have been interpreted, and chapter 11 for a broader discussion of language and gender). We must always exercise caution when we attempt to draw conclusions from such relationships.

As noted by Eckert (2012), although first and second wave variationist sociolinguistic studies focused on such correlations of specific variables and static social categories, third wave variation study embraces the ideas about language as a means for constructing social identities, not reflecting them (see chapter 5 for a deeper discussion of the three waves of research). These different ideas about the role of language in society, and society in language, reflect the multiple influences from different academic fields of study on contemporary sociolinguistics; this is the topic of the next section.

The Interdisciplinary Legacy of Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics has grown out of ideas presented by scholars from different traditions, most notably linguistics, sociology, and anthropology, although some key figures in its development also came from the field of education (see Wodak et al. 2011 for a more detailed overview of this). There is a general distinction between **micro-sociolinguistics** and **macro-sociolinguistics** (which has also been called the sociology of language). In this distinction, macro-sociolinguistics includes such topics as language policy and planning, societal patterns of language use (especially in multilingual contexts) and intercultural communication, while micro-sociolinguistics looks, as the name implies, at the smaller details of interactions – the structure of conversation, the use of specific linguistic variables and their variants, and the variation of these aspects of language across different social contexts.

A further distinction which is sometimes made is that between sociolinguistics and **linguistic anthropology**. A number of scholars (Duranti 2003; Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 2008; Bucholtz and Hall 2008) have noted the fuzziness of the distinction between these two fields, arguing that there is considerable overlap in theory, themes, methodologies, and history. Ethnography of communication (which will be discussed in detail in chapter 6) has long been an area of overlap between these two fields (and others); this approach examines languages as a system of cultural behavior. Current approaches to the study of identities and language ideologies also blur the distinction between sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. In chapter 6, we will discuss several ethnographic approaches which focus on language in society, including ethnography of communication. This is qualitative research and thus methodologically very different from quantitative variationist work; it also tends to address the question of the social meaning of language use less in terms of correlation with the social categories associated with the language user, and more in terms of how people use language to carry out their social lives (including but

not limited to positioning themselves as members of particular social categories). Further, other approaches to discourse analysis (the broad term used to discuss methods that look at language use at a level beyond the utterance) which have similar aims will be introduced in chapter 7.

There is also a growing amount of work originally called **critical sociolinguistics** (Singh 1996; Kress 2001) but now often termed **critical discourse studies** (Wodak and Meyer 2015; van Dijk 2009). This approach takes what can be called an ‘interventionist’ approach to matters that interest us; we will discuss its findings in more detail in the section on Critical Discourse Analysis in chapter 7, and in Part IV of the book on Sociolinguistics and Social Justice. Rooted in critical theory, research in this vein is concerned with looking at power structures and the reproduction of inequalities. This work focuses on how language is used to exercise and preserve power and privilege in society, how it buttresses social institutions, and how even those who suffer as a consequence fail to realize that many of the things that appear to be ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ are culturally constructed and not inevitable; it is power relations in society that determine what is defined as ‘normal.’ Critical discourse studies thus seek to bring such power relations to light, with the aim of bringing more social equity.

This is very much an ideological view, and its proponents maintain that all language use is ideological as are all investigations, that is, that there is no hope of an ‘objective’ or ‘neutral’ sociolinguistics. Indeed, neutrality is not sought within critical discourse studies. As noted by Blommaert: ‘it is not enough to uncover the social dimensions of language use. These dimensions are the object of moral and political evaluation, and analysing them should have effects in society: empowering the powerless, giving voices to the voiceless, exposing power abuse, and mobilising people to remedy social wrongs’ (2005, 25). It is important to note that this perspective of the societal utility of sociolinguistics is not new or solely in the area of critical discourse studies. Linguists have long seen the importance of weighing in on social issues connected to their research; a well-known example is the testimony of linguists about the status of so-called Black English and the educational rights of its users in 1979 (Labov 1982). Recent discussions of engagement in sociolinguistics are a call to go beyond mere consciousness raising (see Lewis 2018; Labov 2018; Rickford 2018; and Rickford and King 2016 for a deeper discussion of this).

The intellectual history of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology also reflects broader ideas and movements of its time. Heller and McElhinny (2017) address how political and economic ideologies and events, such as colonialism and capitalism, have influenced how language is studied and what conclusions are drawn from sociolinguistic studies. Block (2018, ix) notes that sociolinguistics increasingly includes social theory more broadly. His text on political economy in sociolinguistics addresses the study of topics such as English world-wide (which we will pick up in chapter 13), the language of tourism, language in the workplace, and the importance of social class in not just how we speak but also discourses about social groups and their inherent social value. Further, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have often been involved in language revitalization movements and language policy and planning, topics which will be addressed in chapter 13.

As can be seen by this brief introduction, the study of sociolinguistics has grown out of an interest in the role of society in how we use language to encompass a concern for how

language is part of the construction of social realities. This volume seeks to present contemporary research but acknowledge the history of the field, presenting theories and findings which contribute to our understanding of language in society in different ways.

Overview of the Book

As should now be apparent, the study of sociolinguistics is deeply concerned with aspects of scholarship which are sometimes labeled theoretical and others which are said to be **applied**. At the very least, sociolinguistics is a socially relevant variety of linguistics, but it is probably much more.

These chapters are organized within four general topics. However, there will be considerable moving back and forth with cross-referencing within topics and among topics. Interrelationships are everywhere, and our themes will recur across the discussions of dialects, multilingualism, discourse, and social justice.

Part I, Languages, Communities, and Contexts, deals with some traditional language issues: trying to separate languages from dialects and looking at types of regional and social variation within languages (chapter 2); trying to figure out what kinds of ‘groups’ are relevant when we study language use (chapter 3); and looking at the role of context in language use and interpretation (chapter 4).

Part II, Theory and Methods, looks at three broad approaches to research in sociolinguistics and how they are carried out. Chapter 5 deals with variationist sociolinguistics, chapter 6 ethnographic approaches, and chapter 7 discourse analytic research.

Part III, Multilingual Matters, addresses both macro- and micro-sociolinguistic topics in the study of multilingualism. These topics include interactional as well as societal patterns of multilingualism (chapter 8), structural consequences of language contact (chapter 9), and language in national, transnational, global, and digital contexts (chapter 10).

Part IV, Sociolinguistics and Social Justice, looks into three areas of life in which sociolinguistics offers us some hope of understanding pressing problems (and which some sociolinguists argue require our deliberate intervention). Language, gender, and sexuality, one of the great ‘growth areas’ in language study, is the first of these (chapter 11). Sociolinguistics and education is the second (chapter 12). Language planning and policy issues, including the spread of English world-wide and the ‘death’ of many languages, is the third (chapter 13).

Chapter Summary

This chapter provides an introduction to the field of sociolinguistics as well as to some of the major themes that will recur throughout this textbook. We propose broad definitions for the terms ‘language’ and ‘society,’ and introduce the concept of ‘identities,’ which is central to the study of contemporary sociolinguistics. We also explore the possible relationships between language and culture, most notably the Whorfian hypothesis. Finally, we note the interdisciplinary nature of the field of sociolinguistics, as well as the breadth of topics, both macro and micro, that we will deal with in the coming chapters.

Exercises

- 1 Look at the list of grammar rules below. Write an essay defending the use of one of these 'incorrect' grammatical constructions. Why do you think using these constructions is justifiable? Explain how the difference between these rules and natural speech demonstrates the difference between descriptive and prescriptive grammars. Prescriptive rules and examples:
 - Never end a sentence with a preposition; use 'whom' instead of 'who' in object position. Example of a violation: Who did you give it to? ('Correct' speech: 'To whom did you give it?')
 - Adverbs (words which modify a verb or adjective) should end in -ly (unless they are irregular, e.g., *fast-fast* or *good-well*). Examples of violations: Come quick! The house is on fire! ('Correct' speech: 'come quickly') That's a real nice dress you're wearing. ('Correct' speech: 'really nice') You read so slow! ('Correct' speech: 'you read so slowly')
 - The verb 'lie' (past tense 'lay') means that something is in a prone position; the verb 'lay' (past tense 'laid') means that something is being put into a prone position. Examples of violations: It's laying on the table. Just lie it down there.

- 2 Politically correct (PC) language. Below are some examples of so-called PC language. Think about why these terms have been suggested, which ones have been widely adopted, and what attitudes exist toward some of these linguistic terms. What beliefs about the relationship between language and culture are reflected in the suggestion and adoption of or resistance to PC language?

Firefighter (formerly 'fireman')

Police officer (formerly 'policeman')

People of color (formerly 'non-white')

Differently abled (formerly 'disabled')

Homemaker (formerly 'housewife')

Native Americans (formerly '[American] Indian' or 'Red Indians')

Happy Holidays (instead of 'Merry Christmas')

- 3 Language and culture: Covid terms. Below is a list of expressions used during the time of Covid-19. Discuss how these words construct cultural norms of the time as well as illustrate linguistic creativity.

'Quarantini': it's a regular martini but you drink it alone at home

'Zoomtail': similar to quarantini, except that you do it on Zoom

'Covidiot': someone who blatantly violates social distances/hygiene protocol

'The Rona': short version of Coronavirus

'Zoom-ba': same as Zumba, but on Zoom

'Zate': Zoom + date (a date or meetup on Zoom)

'Quaran-tan': tanning while quarantined

'Quaranteens': babies conceived during a quarantine, who will be teens by 2033

'Quarantime': the era of the Covid-19 restrictions

‘Coviduation’: you may graduate but won’t participate in a graduation ceremony
 ‘Zumping’: getting dumped on Zoom

- 4 Communicative competence. Look at the following joke about British sayings and what they really mean. Discuss how this depiction of cross-cultural miscommunication illustrates the concept of communicative competence.

WHAT THE BRITISH SAY	WHAT THE BRITISH MEAN	WHAT FOREIGNERS UNDERSTAND
I hear what you say	I disagree and do not want to discuss it further	He accepts my point of view
With the greatest respect	You are an idiot	He is listening to me
That’s not bad	That’s good	That’s poor
That is a very brave proposal	You are insane	He thinks I have courage
Quite good	A bit disappointing	Quite good
I would suggest	Do it or be prepared to justify yourself	Think about the idea, but do what you like
Oh, incidentally/by the way	The primary purpose of our discussion is	That is not very important
I was a bit disappointed that	I am annoyed that	It doesn’t really matter
Very interesting	That is clearly nonsense	They are impressed
I’ll bear it in mind	I’ve forgotten it already	They will probably do it
I’m sure it’s my fault	It’s your fault	Why do they think it was their fault?
You must come for dinner	It’s not an invitation, I’m just being polite	I will get an invitation soon
I almost agree	I don’t agree at all	He’s not far from agreement
I only have a few minor comments	Please rewrite completely	He has found a few typos
Could we consider some other options	I don’t like your idea	They have not yet decided

Source: Translation table explaining the truth behind British politeness becomes internet hit, by Alice Philipson, *The Telegraph*, September 1, 2013. © 2013, Telegraph Media Group Limited.

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