

1 Introduction

Any discussion of the relationship between language and society, or of the various functions of language in society, should begin with some attempt to define each of these terms. Let us say that a *society* is any group of people who are drawn together for a certain purpose or purposes. ‘Society’ is therefore a very comprehensive concept, but we will soon see how useful such a comprehensive view is because we must consider many very different kinds of societies in the course of the discussions that follow. We may attempt an equally comprehensive definition of language: a *language* is what the members of a particular society speak. However, as we will see, speech in almost any society may take many very different forms, and just what forms we should choose to discuss when we attempt to describe the language of a society may prove to be a contentious issue. Sometimes, too, a society may be plurilingual: that is, many speakers may use more than one language, however we define language. We should also note that our definitions of language and society are not independent: the definition of language includes in it a reference to society. I will return to this matter from time to time.

Knowledge of Language

When two or more people communicate with each other in speech, we can call the system they use a *code*. We should also note that two speakers who are bilingual, that is, who have access to two codes, and who for one reason or another shift back and forth between the two languages as they converse by code-switching (see chapter 4) are actually using a third code, one which draws on those two languages. The system itself (or the *grammar*, to use a well-known technical term) is something that each speaker ‘knows,’ but two very important issues for linguists are just what that knowledge comprises and 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. It is certainly something different from, and is much more considerable

than, the kinds of knowledge we see described in the grammars we find on library shelves, no matter how good those grammars may be. Anyone who knows a language knows much more about that language than is contained in any grammar book that attempts to describe the language. What is also interesting is that this knowledge is both something which every individual who speaks the language possesses (since we must assume that each individual knows the grammar of his or her language by the simple reason that he or she readily uses that language) and also some kind of shared knowledge, that is, knowledge possessed by all those who speak the language. It is also possible to talk about ‘dead’ languages, e.g., Latin or Sanskrit. However, in such cases we must note that it is the speakers who are dead, not the languages themselves, which still exist, at least in part. We may even be tempted to claim an existence for English, French, or any other language independent of the existence of those who speak these languages.

Today, most linguists agree that the knowledge speakers have of the language or languages they speak is knowledge of something quite abstract. It is a knowledge of rules and principles and of the ways of saying and doing things with sounds, words, and sentences, rather than just knowledge of specific sounds, words, and sentences. It is knowing what is *in* the language and what is not; it is knowing both what it is possible to say and what it is not possible to say. This knowledge explains how it is we can understand sentences we have not heard before and reject others as being *ungrammatical*. Communication among people who speak the same language is possible because they share such knowledge, although how it is shared and, even more so, how it is acquired are not well understood. Certainly, psychological, social, and genetic factors are important. Language is a communal possession, but at the same time an abstract entity. Individuals have access to it and constantly show that they do so by using it properly. As we will see, a wide range of skills and activities is subsumed under this concept of ‘proper use.’

Confronted with the task of trying to describe the grammar of a language like English, many linguists follow the approach associated with Chomsky, undoubtedly the most influential figure in linguistics for the last half century. Chomsky has argued on many occasions that, in order to make meaningful discoveries about language, linguists must try to distinguish between what is important and what is unimportant about language and linguistic behavior. The important matters have to do with the learnability of all languages, the characteristics they all share, and the rules and principles that speakers apparently follow in constructing and interpreting sentences; the much less important matters have to do with how individual speakers use specific utterances in a variety of ways as they find themselves in this situation or that. Lightfoot (2006) rephrases this last distinction as being one between what he calls ‘I-language’ and ‘E-language.’ It is the linguist’s duty to focus on I-language since it is ‘a mental system that characterizes a person’s linguistic range and is represented somehow in the individual’s brain’ (p. 7), whereas E-language is ‘part of the outside world . . . amorphous . . . not a system . . . fluid, in constant flux . . . not

systematic' (pp. 12–13). Therefore, we must assume that it should be of much lesser importance to scientific investigation.

Chomsky distinguishes between what he has called *competence* and *performance*. He claims that it is the linguist's task to characterize what speakers know about their language, i.e., their competence, not what they do with their language, i.e., their performance. The best-known characterization of this distinction comes from Chomsky himself (1965, pp. 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.

Pinker (2007, p. 74) points out the consequences of such a view: 'Though linguists often theorize about a language as if it were the fixed protocol of a homogeneous community of idealized speakers, like the physicist's frictionless plane and ideal gas, they also know that a real language is constantly being pushed and pulled at the margins by different speakers in different ways.' It is just such 'pushing and pulling' that interests Labov, the most influential figure in sociolinguistics in the last forty or so years. He maintains (2006, p. 380) that 'the linguistic behavior of individuals cannot be understood without knowledge of the communities that they belong to.' We will return to such issues from time to time.

The knowledge that we will seek to explain involves more than knowledge of the grammar of the language for it will become apparent that speakers know, or are in agreement about, more than that. Moreover, in their performance they behave systematically: their actions are not random; there is order. Knowing a language also means knowing how to use that language since speakers know not only how to form sentences but also how to use them appropriately. There is therefore another kind of competence, sometimes called *communicative competence*, and the social aspects of that competence will be our concern here.

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

Exploration 1.1: Idiolects

An idiolect is an individual's way of speaking, including sounds, words, grammar, and style. My own speech is regarded as North American almost everywhere I go but in certain aspects shows my origins in the north of England. I pronounce *grass* and *bath* with the vowel of *cat*, do not pronounce the *r*'s in *car* and *cart*, and distinguish the vowels in *cot* and *caught* (and pronounce the latter word exactly like *court*). I also distinguish the vowels in *Mary*, *merry*, and *marry*. Occasionally, I catch myself pronouncing *book* to rhyme with *Luke*, and I always have to watch my pronunciation of *work* because I have a 'relic' Geordie pronunciation homophonous to *walk*. I remember my first contact with the Northern Cities Chain Shift (see pp. 198–9) since I heard *hot* as *hat* (but, of course, context removed any possible ambiguity). I now say words like *tune*, *duke*, and *news* like *toon*, *dook*, and *nooz* (but when, as a young man, I served in the Duke of Wellington's Regiment, I used to say *Jook*). In vocabulary I know Geordie dialect words like *bumler* 'bumble bee,' *canny* 'nice,' *clarty* 'muddy,' *gob* 'mouth,' *hinny* 'honey,' *hoy* 'throw,' *lug* 'ear,' *plodge* 'wade,' *spelk* 'splinter,' *spuggy* 'sparrow,' and *tettie* 'potato' but no longer use them. My grammar, both written and spoken, is that of Standard English. However, I would never think of saying *It is I* or *He is faster than I*, and *between you and I* is absolutely a no-no but for a different reason. I prefer short direct utterances to pompous, convoluted ones and use words like *start/begin*, *buy*, and *use* rather than *commence*, *purchase*, and *utilize*. People also *die*; they do not *pass away* or *pass on*. (However, you must be the judge of my success in this as you read the pages that follow.)

Try to characterize your own speech in a similar way, and compare what you say about your speech with what others say about their speech and also about yours.

to be quite troublesome, particularly when much of the variety we experience within language is labeled 'performance' and then put to one side by those who consider 'competence' to be the only valid concern of linguists. The language we use in everyday living is remarkably varied. Some investigators believe that this variety throws up serious obstacles to all attempts to demonstrate that each language is truly a homogeneous entity, and that it is possible to write a complete grammar for a language which makes use of *categorical rules*, i.e., rules which specify exactly what is – and therefore what is not – possible in the language. Everywhere we turn we seem to find at least a new wrinkle or a small

inconsistency with regard to any rule we might propose. When we look closely at any language, we discover time and time again that there is considerable internal variation and that speakers make constant use of the many different possibilities offered to them. No one speaks the same way all the time and people constantly exploit the nuances of the languages they speak 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 and each speaker of that language as controlling only a single style, so that they can make the strongest possible theoretical generalizations, in actual fact that language will exhibit considerable internal variation, and single-style speakers will not be found (or, if found, will appear to be quite 'abnormal' in that respect, if in no other!). One claim I will be making throughout is that variation is an inherent characteristic of all languages at all times. Even 'dead' languages, e.g., Sanskrit, Classical Greek, and Latin, are replete with variation as anyone who has ever studied one or more of these languages closely can attest.

A recognition of variation implies that we must recognize that a language is not just some kind of abstract object of study. It is also something that people use. Can we really set aside, at any point in our study of language, this fact of use? It is not surprising therefore that a recurring issue in linguistics in recent years has been the possible value of a linguistics that deliberately separates itself from any concern with the use, and the users, of language. Following Chomsky's example, many linguists have argued that we should not study a language in use, or even how the language is learned, without first acquiring an adequate knowledge of what language itself is. In this view, linguistic investigations should focus on developing this latter knowledge. The linguist's task should be to write grammars that will help us develop our understanding of language: what it is, how it is learnable, and what it tells us about the human mind. This kind of linguistics is sometimes referred to as 'theoretical linguistics' and it has claimed a privileged position for itself within the overall discipline of linguistics. In such a view investigations of language use have little to offer us. Many sociolinguists have disagreed, arguing that an *asocial* linguistics is scarcely worthwhile and that meaningful insights into language can be gained only if such matters as use and variation are included as part of the data which must be explained in a comprehensive theory of language; such a theory of language must have something to say about the uses of language. This is the view I will adopt here.

We will see that 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 what he or she pleases so far as language is concerned. You cannot pronounce words any way you please, 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 and these limits can be described with considerable accuracy. Individuals know

the various limits (or norms), and that knowledge is both very precise and at the same time almost entirely unconscious. At the same time, it is also difficult to explain how individual speakers acquire knowledge of these norms of linguistic behavior, because they appear to be much more subtle than the norms that apply to such matters as social behavior, dress, and table manners. This is another issue to which we will return from time to time. 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 that we can account for much of their linguistic behavior in this way. 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.

People have also learned to vary the language (or languages) they use and no two persons use a language they share exactly alike. Why does speaker X behave this way but speaker Y behave that way in using language Z? To answer that question we must look at such issues as identity, group membership, power, and solidarity.

Each of us has an identity or, perhaps more accurately, a set of identities since it is very unlikely that each of us has underlyingly a fixed, unchangeable identity that is constantly striving to emerge or one that others have somehow

Exploration 1.2: Identities

Try to describe your 'identity' in a 50-word paragraph that portrays the 'essential you.' Ask others you know to do the same, i.e., portray their 'essence.' Take these descriptions and see what characteristics people mention in doing this task. Look at what is mentioned and the ordering of characteristics. See what, if any, patterns emerge. See, too, if you collect these descriptions anonymously how successful you are at deciding which characterization goes with which person.

Alternatively – or as a complementary task – look at some source or sources where people offer an 'identity' sketch of themselves for public consumption, e.g., in various print media or over the internet, and subject these descriptions to a similar analysis.

Finally, how trustworthy are any and all of these 'snap' presentations of self, your own included? After all, these are 'performances' or 'public faces' presented for an occasion!

ascribed to us. Am I, for example, merely a retiree, a professor, a Canadian, a client, a tourist, a neighbor, a patient, a father, an immigrant, a passenger, a male, a pedestrian, a consultant, etc? At any one time I am one of these since that is how another or others may regard me. However, at all times I am potentially all of these (and more) and must choose to enact – perform if you will – an identity appropriate to the situation in which I find myself. One's identity is neither some essential quality one has been born with or acquired nor a stereotype that one appears to fit (although one can put on such an act: 'the absent-minded professor' or 'the blushing bride'). Identity is 'something that is formed and shaped through action' (Richards, 2006, p. 3) and demonstrated through performance and action.

Identity is constructed from interaction with others and is the result of our socialization, i.e., our experiences with the outside world as we have dealt with that world in all its complexity. Consequently, many factors affect it: race, ethnicity, gender, religion, occupation, physical location, social class, kinship, leisure activities, etc. Identity is created in dealing with such factors and in dealing with members of groups for whom these factors are among their identifying characteristics. An identity may also change because identities can sometimes be quite malleable as the circumstances of our lives change.

Identity is very important: individual identity and group identity. It will be a recurrent theme in the pages that follow. Much of what we find in linguistic behavior will be explicable in terms of people seeking to perform, negotiate, realize, or even reject identities through the use of language. In fact, as we will see, language is a profound indicator of identity, more potent by far than cultural artifacts such as dress, food choices, and table manners.

Groups, too, have identities so we will be interested in the linguistic characteristics of both individuals and groups. Concepts such as 'community' (see chapter 5), 'social network' (see pp. 129–31), and 'community of practice' (see pp. 218–19) will be found in the pages that follow. These are useful in referring to groups of various kinds, for it is among groups that individuals form relationships or reject such a possibility. Just like individual identities, group identities are 'formed and shaped through action' (Richards, 2006, p. 3). The groups can be long-lasting or temporary, large or small, close-knit or casual. So here is another level of complexity we must keep in mind in the pages that follow as I refer to 'middle class,' 'women,' 'speakers of Haitian Creole,' 'teenagers,' etc. We must remember that these categorizations also have a 'process' side to them: all must be enacted, performed, or reproduced in order to exist.

In all of the above we must recognize that 'power' has a significant role to play. Power is 'the ability to control events in order to achieve one's aims' (Tollefson, 2006, p. 46) and is also 'the control someone has over the outcomes of others' (Myers-Scotton, 2006, p. 199). It is pervasive in society and exercised on a continuum from extremely brutal to most subtle but is never completely absent. It may be exercised and resisted through words as well as deeds.

Bourdieu (1991) conceives of languages as symbolic marketplaces in which some people have more control of the goods than others because certain languages or varieties have been endowed with more symbolic power than others and have therefore been given a greater value, e.g., standard languages, certain accents, a particular gendered manner of speaking, a specific type of discourse, etc. We cannot escape such issues of power in considering language and social relationships. However, it would also be unwise always to regard either the powerful or the powerless as being automatically in the right on any issue. Such ideological positioning is no less dangerous than the kind of postmodern relativism which suggests that it is impossible to make any valid judgments at all on issues.

‘Solidarity’ refers to the motivations which cause individuals to act together. We know that people can unite for all kinds of reasons some of which they may not even be able to articulate, and the consequences may be great or small. In the pages that follow we will look at some of the consequences for language behavior.

Finally, I will be making reference to *unmarked* and *marked* choices in language and living. The normal and expected, i.e., ‘default,’ mode in language and life is the unmarked; anything that stands out is marked. Suddenly switching to French in a conversation with anglophones would be marked just as would telling a racy story at a Baptist prayer meeting, addressing the Queen as ‘Liz,’ or pronouncing *nuclear* as *nucular* at a presidential news conference. In social life wearing a suit and tie on a Caribbean beach would be highly marked as would be queue-jumping in England, or as was Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau’s behavior of dancing a little jig behind the Queen’s back. If, as Bucholtz and Hall (2005, p. 372) say: ‘In many contexts in the United States . . . unmarked categories may include whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, middle-class status, and Christianity, but in local settings other arrangements are also possible,’ then that certainly leaves poor, black transvestites highly marked.

Markedness is a very useful concept in that once we have identified a marked characteristic we are better able to describe the expected norm. This is not to suggest that such norms are fixed for all time. Markedness can change. Twenty to thirty years ago if, as you followed someone along a city street, you heard him or her conducting one side of a vigorous conversation such behavior would have been marked as ‘bizarre,’ ‘crazy,’ ‘psychotic,’ etc. Now with the advent of new wireless technologies it is completely unmarked. Time changes the values we give to both words and deeds.

Language and Society

In the following chapters we will look at many ways in which language and society are related. The possible relationships have long intrigued investigators.

Indeed, if we look back at the history of linguistics it is rare to find investigations of any language which are entirely cut off from concurrent investigations of the history of that language, or of its regional and/or social distributions, or of its relationship to objects, ideas, events, and actual speakers and listeners in the 'real' world. That is one of the reasons why a number of linguists have found Chomsky's asocial view of linguistic theorizing to be a rather sterile type of activity, since it explicitly rejects any concern for the relationship between a language and those who use it.

We must acknowledge that a language is essentially a set of items, what Hudson (1996, p. 21) calls 'linguistic items,' such entities as sounds, words, grammatical structures, and so on. It is these items, their status, and their arrangements that language theorists such as Chomsky concern themselves with. On the other hand, social theorists, particularly sociologists, attempt to understand how societies are structured and how people manage to live together. To do so, they use such concepts as 'identity,' 'power,' 'class,' 'status,' 'solidarity,' 'accommodation,' 'face,' 'gender,' 'politeness,' etc. A major concern of this book is to examine possible

Exploration 1.3: Grammatical Judgments

Here are a number of statements that can be 'tagged' to make them into questions, as in the first example. Tag each of the rest with the tag you would use and also add any other tags you might also use or think others might use. Indicate for each example which tag you believe to be the 'correct' tag. If you have more than one response for any item indicate why the one you have chosen as 'correct' is indeed so. Compare your results with those of others who do this task. Consult 'grammar books' to see what opinions they have on what is or is not correct where you find differences. Try to specify what exactly people mean by 'correctness,' i.e., what justifications they offer in resolving the differences you are certain to find in this task. (You can follow up on this topic by consulting Tottie and Hoffmann, 2006.)

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|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. He's ready, isn't he? | 7. I have a penny in my |
| 2. I may see you next week, ... ? | purse, ... ? |
| 3. No one goes there any | 8. I'm going right now, ... ? |
| more, ... ? | 9. The baby cried, ... ? |
| 4. Everyone hates one another | 10. Somebody must win, ... ? |
| here, ... ? | 11. Each of us is going, ... ? |
| 5. Either John or Mary did it, ... ? | 12. The girl saw no one, ... ? |
| 6. Few people know that, ... ? | |

relationships between 'linguistic items' on the one hand and concepts such as 'power,' 'solidarity,' etc. on the other. We should note that in doing so we are trying to relate two different kinds of entities in order to see what light they throw on each other. That is not an easy task. Linguistic items are difficult to define. Try, for example, to define exactly what linguistic items such as sounds, syllables, words, and sentences are. Then try to define precisely what you understand by such concepts as 'social class,' 'solidarity,' 'identity,' 'face,' and 'politeness.' Finally, try to relate the two sets of definitions within some kind of theory so as to draw conclusions about how items in these two very different classes relate to each other. Do all this while keeping in mind that languages and societies are constantly changing. The difficulties we confront are both legion and profound.

There are several possible relationships between language and society. One is that social structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure and/or behavior. Certain evidence may be adduced to support this view: the *age-grading* phenomenon whereby young children speak differently from older children and, in turn, children speak differently from mature adults; studies which show that the varieties of language that speakers use reflect such matters as their regional, social, or ethnic origin and possibly even their gender; and other studies which show that particular ways of speaking, choices of words, and even rules for conversing are in fact highly determined by certain social requirements.

A second possible relationship is directly opposed to the first: linguistic structure and/or behavior may either influence or determine social structure. This is the view that is behind the Whorfian hypothesis (see chapter 9), the claims of Bernstein (see chapter 14), and many of those who argue that languages rather than speakers of these languages can be 'sexist' (see chapter 13). A third possible relationship is that the influence is bi-directional: language and society may influence each other. One variant of this approach is that this influence is dialectical in nature, a Marxist view put forward by Dittmar (1976), who argues (p. 238) that 'speech behaviour and social behaviour are in a state of constant interaction' and that 'material living conditions' are an important factor in the relationship.

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, given what we know about both language and society. Actually, this variant view appears to be the one that Chomsky himself holds: he prefers to develop an asocial linguistics as a preliminary to any other kind of linguistics, such an asocial approach being, in his view, logically prior.

We must therefore be prepared to look into various aspects of the possible relationships between language and society. It will be quite obvious from doing so that correlational studies must form a significant part of sociolinguistic work. Gumperz (1971, p. 223) has observed that sociolinguistics is an attempt to find correlations between social structure and linguistic structure and to observe any changes that occur. Chambers (2002, p. 3) is even more direct: 'Sociolinguistics

is the study of the social uses of language, and the most productive studies in the four decades of sociolinguistic research have emanated from determining the social evaluation of linguistic variants. These are also the areas most susceptible to scientific methods such as hypothesis-formation, logical inference, and statistical testing.' However, as Gumperz and others have been quick to indicate, such studies do not exhaust sociolinguistic investigation, nor do they always prove to be as enlightening as one might hope. It is a well-known fact that a correlation shows only a relationship between two variables; it does not show ultimate causation. To find that X and Y are related is not necessarily to discover that X causes Y (or Y causes X), for it is also quite possible that some third factor, Z, may cause both X and Y (or even that some far more subtle combination of factors is involved). We must always exercise caution when we attempt to draw conclusions from such relationships.

A worthwhile sociolinguistics, however, must be something more than just a simple mixing of linguistics and sociology which takes concepts and findings from the two disciplines and attempts to relate them in simple ways. It certainly must go beyond Horvath's view (1998, p. 448) that sociolinguists should just pick and choose freely from sociology: 'What my kind of sociolinguists do is go periodically to sociology and find "social networks" or "the linguistic market place" . . . and we find [these concepts] terribly useful in understanding the patterns that emerge from our data. However, we are not engaged in the sociologists' struggles over the importance of social networks *vis-à-vis* other ways of dealing with the structure of society and may remain blissfully unaware of whether or not these models have become contentious within the home discipline.' A serious scientific approach is incompatible with 'blissful unawareness' in an essential part of its underpinnings. Hymes (1974, p. 76) has pointed out that even a mechanical amalgamation of standard linguistics and standard sociology is not likely to suffice in that in adding a speechless sociology to a sociology-free linguistics we may miss what is important in the relationship between language and society. Specific points of connection between language and society must be discovered, and these must be related within theories that throw light on how linguistic and social structures interact.

Holmes (1992, p. 16) says that 'the sociolinguist's aim is to move towards a theory which provides a motivated account of the way language is used in a community, and of the choices people make when they use language.' For example, when we observe how varied language use is we must search for the causes. 'Upon observing variability, we seek its social correlates. What is the purpose of the variation? How is it evaluated in the community? What do its variants symbolize?' (Chambers, 2003, p. 226). For Chambers these questions 'are the central questions of sociolinguistics.' Chambers is not alone in holding such views. Others too believe that sociolinguistics is the study of language variation and that the purpose of such study is to find out what variation tells us about language and speakers' 'knowledge' of language, in this case their unconscious knowledge of subtle linguistic differences.

We will also see that there is some opposition to this idea that sociolinguistic investigations should be confined to fairly straightforward correlational studies of this kind. Critics such as Cameron (1997) claim that these studies do not provide very satisfactory explanations for linguistic behavior because of inadequacies with social theory – sometimes there is none at all – and failure to appreciate the difficulties in using social concepts. Any conclusions are likely to be suspect. What is needed, according to Cameron (p. 62), is more social engagement so that sociolinguistics would ‘deal with such matters as the production and reproduction of linguistic norms by institutions and socializing practices; how these norms are apprehended, accepted, resisted and subverted by individual actors and what their relation is to the construction of identity.’ Milroy (2001, pp. 554–5) makes a somewhat similar claim in discussing the processes of standardization and change: ‘Social patterns are adduced only in so far as they may elucidate patterns of language by exhibiting co-variation with linguistic variables . . . and as long as internal analyses are quite strongly biased in favor of linguistic, rather than social, phenomena, the quantitative paradigm will be to that extent impeded in its attempts to explain the social “life” of language and the social origins of language change.’ I will have more to say on this issue later in this chapter. However, one point is clear in the above disagreement: sociolinguistics, whatever it is, is about asking important questions concerning the relationship of language to society. In the pages that follow I will try to show you some of those questions.

Sociolinguistics and the Sociology of Language

Some investigators have found it appropriate to try to introduce a distinction between *sociolinguistics* or *micro-sociolinguistics* and the *sociology of language* or *macro-sociolinguistics*. In this distinction, sociolinguistics is concerned with investigating the relationships between language and society with the goal being a better understanding of the structure of language and of how languages function in communication; the equivalent goal in the sociology of language is trying to discover how social structure can be better understood through the study of language, e.g., how certain linguistic features serve to characterize particular social arrangements. Hudson (1996, p. 4) has described the difference as follows: sociolinguistics is ‘the study of language in relation to society,’ whereas the sociology of language is ‘the study of society in relation to language.’ In other words, in sociolinguistics we study language and society in order to find out as much as we can about what kind of thing language is, and in the sociology of language we reverse the direction of our interest. Using the alternative terms given above, Coulmas (1997, p. 2) says that ‘micro-sociolinguistics investigates how social structure influences the way people talk and how language varieties

and patterns of use correlate with social attributes such as class, sex, and age. Macro-sociolinguistics, on the other hand, studies what societies do with their languages, that is, attitudes and attachments that account for the functional distribution of speech forms in society, language shift, maintenance, and replacement, the delimitation and interaction of speech communities.’ According to Labov (1970, p. 30) this area of study:

deals with large-scale social factors, and their mutual interaction with languages and dialects. There are many open questions, and many practical problems associated with the decay and assimilation of minority languages, the development of stable bilingualism, the standardization of languages and the planning of language development in newly emerging nations. The linguistic input for such studies is primarily that a given person or group uses language X in a social context or domain Y.

The view I will take here is that both sociolinguistics and the sociology of language require a systematic study of language *and* society if they are to be successful. Moreover, a sociolinguistics that deliberately refrains from drawing conclusions about society seems to be unnecessarily restrictive, just as restrictive indeed as a sociology of language that deliberately ignores discoveries about language made in the course of sociological research. So while it is possible to do either kind of work to the exclusion of the other, I will be concerned with looking at both kinds. My own views are essentially in agreement with those of Coulmas (1997, p. 3), expressed as follows:

There is no sharp dividing line between the two, but a large area of common concern. Although sociolinguistic research centers about a number of different key issues, any rigid micro–macro compartmentalization seems quite contrived and unnecessary in the present state of knowledge about the complex interrelationships between linguistic and social structures. Contributions to a better understanding of language as a necessary condition and product of social life will continue to come from both quarters.

Consequently, I will not attempt to make the kinds of distinctions found in Trudgill (1978). He tries to differentiate those studies that he considers to be clearly sociolinguistic in nature from those that clearly are not, for, as he says, ‘while everybody would agree that sociolinguistics has *something* to do with language and society, it is clearly also not concerned with everything that could be considered “language and society”.’ The problem, therefore, lies in the drawing of the line between *language and society* and *sociolinguistics*. Different scholars draw the line in different places (p. 1). Trudgill argues that certain types of language studies are almost entirely sociological in their objectives and seem to fall outside even the sociology of language. Included in this category are ethnomethodological studies (see chapter 10) and work by such people as Bernstein (see chapter 14). For Trudgill, such work is definitely

not sociolinguistics, however defined, since it apparently has no linguistic objectives.

According to Trudgill, certain kinds of work combine insights from sociology and linguistics. Examples of such work are attempts to deal with the structure of discourse and conversation (see chapter 12), speech acts (see chapter 12), studies in the ethnography of speaking (see chapter 10), investigations of such matters as kinship systems (see chapter 9), studies in the sociology of language, e.g., bilingualism, code-switching, and diglossia (see particularly chapter 4), and certain 'practical' concerns such as various aspects of teaching and language behavior in classrooms. While Trudgill considers all such topics to be genuinely sociolinguistic, he prefers, however, to use that term in a rather different and somewhat narrower sense. Elsewhere (1995, p. 21), he says that such concerns are perhaps better subsumed under anthropological linguistics, geolinguistics, the social psychology of language, and so on.

For Trudgill there is still another category of studies in which investigators show a concern for both linguistic and social matters. This category consists of studies which have a linguistic intent. 'Studies of this type are based on empirical work on language as it is spoken in its social context, and are intended to answer questions and deal with topics of central interest to linguists' (1978, p. 11). These studies are just another way of doing linguistics. Included in this category are studies of variation and linguistic change (see chapters 6–8), and the seminal figure is Labov. According to Trudgill, Labov has addressed himself to issues such as the relationship between language and social class, with his main objective not to learn more about a particular society or to examine correlations between linguistic and social phenomena, but to learn more about language and to investigate topics such as the mechanisms of linguistic change, the nature of linguistic variability, and the structure of linguistic systems. Trudgill's view is that 'all work in this category is aimed ultimately at improving linguistic theory and at developing our understanding of the nature of language' (1978, p. 11). For him this is genuine sociolinguistics. Chambers (2002, 2003) voices a similar view and Downes (1998, p. 9) echoes it: 'sociolinguistics is that branch of linguistics which studies just those properties of language and languages which *require* reference to social, including contextual, factors in their explanation.' However, in reviewing research on language and society, Downes' reach far exceeds that of Trudgill, even that of his glossary of terms (2003, p. 123), where he characterizes sociolinguistic research as 'work which is intended to achieve a better understanding of the nature of human language by studying language in its *social context* and/or to achieve a better understanding of the nature of the relationship and interaction between language and society.'

(A word of warning may be in order. Trudgill, Chambers, Downes, and I – and many others we will come across – approach sociolinguistics from a background in linguistics rather than in sociology – or psychology, or feminist studies, or . . . Readers should always keep that fact in mind when assessing what we say.)

There is also a growing amount of work within a broadly defined sociolinguistics that takes what I will call an ‘interventionist’ approach to matters that interest us. This work has been called ‘linguistics with a conscience and a cause, one which seeks to reveal how language is used and abused in the exercise of power and the suppression of human rights’ by a critic (Widdowson, 1998, p. 136) or ‘with an attitude’ by a proponent (van Dijk, 2001, p. 96). This approach derives from critical theory, which is concerned with ‘the processes by which systems of social inequality are created and sustained. Of particular interest is inequality that is largely invisible, due to ideological processes that make inequality seem to be the natural condition of human social systems’ (Tollefson, 2006, p. 43). Two of its principal exponents are Fairclough (1995, 2006) and van Dijk (1993), who champion an approach called ‘critical discourse analysis.’ 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 how many things that appear to be ‘natural’ and ‘normal,’ i.e., unmarked, are not at all so. They are not so because it is power relations in society that determine who gets to say what and who gets to write what. The claim is that politics, medicine, religion, education, law, race, gender, academia, etc. can only be understood for what they really are within the framework of critical discourse analysis: as systems that maintain an unequal distribution of wealth, income, status, group membership, education, and so on. Fairclough (2001, p. 6) expresses what he sees as the failure of sociolinguistics to deal with such matters as follows: ‘Sociolinguistics is strong on “what?” questions (what are the facts of variation?) but weak on “why?” and “how?” questions (why are the facts as they are?; how – in terms of the development of social relationships of power – was the existing sociolinguistic order brought into being?; how is it sustained?; and how might it be changed to the advantage of those who are dominated by it?).’ He insists that: ‘The tradition of critical research in the social sciences focuses upon what are widely seen as the big issues and problems which people face in their lives in order to arrive at an understanding of the present which can illuminate possibilities for a better future and inform struggles to achieve it’ (2006, p. 162).

This is very much an ideological view. Its proponents maintain that all language use is ideological as are all investigations, i.e., that there is no hope of an ‘objective’ or ‘neutral’ sociolinguistics. Consequently, critical discourse analysis is ideological and judgmental. It claims the high ground on issues; it is ‘a resource for people who are struggling against domination and oppression in its linguistic forms’ (Fairclough, 1995, p. 1) and ‘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’ (Blommaert, 2005, p. 25). We might well exercise caution in assessing such claims: appeals to what is just and right tend to short-circuit genuine scientific inquiry.

Methodological Concerns

Sociolinguistics should encompass everything from considering ‘who speaks (or writes) what language (or what language variety) to whom and when and to what end’ (Fishman, 1972b, p. 46). It must be oriented toward both data and theory: that is, any conclusions we come to must be solidly based on evidence. Above all, our research must be motivated by questions that can be answered in an approved scientific way. Data collected for the sake of collecting data are of little interest, since without some kind of focus – that is, without some kind of non-trivial motive for collection – they can tell us little or nothing. A set of random observations about how a few people we happen to observe use language cannot lead us to any useful generalizations about behavior, either linguistic or social. We cannot be content with ‘stamp collecting,’ no matter how beautiful the specimens are! We must collect data for a purpose and that purpose should be to find an answer, or answers, to an interesting question. Questions phrased in ways that do not allow for some kind of empirical testing have no more than a speculative interest.

Those who seek to investigate the possible relationships between language and society must have a twofold concern: they must ask good questions, and they must find the right kinds of data that bear on those questions. We will discover how wide the variety of questions and data in sociolinguistics has been: correlational studies, which attempt to relate two or more variables (e.g., certain linguistic usages to social-class differences); implicational studies, which suggest that if X, then Y (e.g., if someone says *tess* for *tests*, does he or she also say *bes*’ for *best*?); microlinguistic studies, which typically focus on very specific linguistic items or individual differences and uses and seek possibly wide-ranging linguistic and/or social implications (e.g., the distribution of *singing* and *singin*’); macrolinguistic studies, which examine large amounts of language data to draw broad conclusions about group relationships (e.g., choices made in language planning – see chapter 15); and still other studies, for example, those that try to arrive at generalizations about certain universal characteristics of human communication, e.g., studies of conversational structure.

Since sociolinguistics is an empirical science, it requires a solid database. As we will see, that database is drawn from a wide variety of sources. These include censuses, documents, surveys, and interviews. Some data require the investigator to observe ‘naturally occurring’ linguistic events, e.g., conversations; others require the use of various elicitation techniques to gain access to the data we require or different varieties of experimental manipulation, e.g., the matched-guise experiments referred to in chapters 4 and 14. Some kinds of data require various statistical procedures, particularly when we wish to make statements about the typical behavior of a group, e.g., a social class; other kinds seem best treated through such devices as graphing, scaling, and categorizing in

non-statistical ways, as in dialect geography (see chapter 6) or the study of kinship systems (see chapter 9).

A bona fide empirical science sets stringent demands so far as data collection and analysis are concerned, demands involving sampling techniques, error estimation, and the confidence level, i.e., the *level of significance* with which certain statements can be made, particularly when arguments are based on numbers, e.g., averages, percentages, or proportions. As we will see (chapters 6–7), sociolinguists try to meet these statistical demands when they are required. However, many of the conclusions we can draw from sociolinguistic studies are of a non-statistical nature and leave no element of doubt. This is because much of language use is categorical (i.e., something is or is not) rather than statistical (i.e., some phenomenon occurs with this or that probability). A recurring concern, then, must be with considering the certainty with which we can draw our conclusions in sociolinguistics. What is the theoretical framework? What are the relevant data? What confidence can we have in the gathering of the data, and in the analysis? What do the results really show? How should they be interpreted in relation to such concepts as ‘identity,’ ‘power,’ ‘solidarity,’ ‘class,’ ‘gender,’ etc.? What do we mean by such concepts? How useful are they in trying to achieve an understanding of how people function in society? What kind of social theory do we subscribe to? In these respects sociolinguistics is like all other sciences, so we should expect no less than that these requirements be met.

Exploration 1.4: Interpreting Usages

What do you consider to be the meaning or purpose of each of the following utterances? What is a possible social situation for each utterance? What is a probable response? An improbable response? Why? What are some alternative ways of doing the ‘work’ of each of these utterances – or is that not possible in some situations? If you were teaching English as a foreign language, what difficulties do you think you might find in teaching students to respond to and use such utterances?

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| 1. Do you think it’s cold in here? | 8. How strange! |
| 2. The airport, as fast as you can! | 9. I do. |
| 3. I leave my house to my son George. | 10. Cheers! |
| 4. Can we have some silence at the back? | 11. Will you marry me? |
| 5. What a beautiful dress! | 12. Do you love me? |
| 6. Keep to the right, please! | 13. Damn! |
| 7. You don’t love me any more. | 14. Do you come here often? |

We must also strive to be objective, dispassionate, and skeptical. We must keep ourselves out of the problems and issues we are investigating. We must be aware of what Labov has called the ‘observer’s paradox.’ He points out (1972b, pp. 209–10) that the aim of linguistic research is to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed, but the data are available only through systematic observation. Somehow speakers must have their attention diverted away from the fact that they are being observed so that the vernacular can emerge. In this connection I will also refer (pp. 155–6) to the problems inherent in being a participant-observer in ethnographic work. How successfully can we distance ourselves from what we are studying? Since we can never be absolutely sure we have been successful we must be our own fiercest critics. Skepticism must begin at home! I should also add that Clyne (1994) and Bowe and Martin (2007) have raised further concerns about some of the theorizing in the pages that follow. They point out that it comes from work on very few languages and cultures and may have limited or even no applicability elsewhere. How English- or Euro-centered are the findings? This is an important question and we are far from sure how to answer it.

Overview

Sociolinguistics brings together linguists and sociologists to investigate matters of joint concern but they are not the only researchers involved in studies of language in society. Scholars from a variety of other disciplines have an interest too, e.g., anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, educators, and planners. We will see, for example, that a number of anthropologists have done work which we can describe as sociolinguistic in nature, for example in the exploration of kinship systems. The same may be said of certain psychologists, particularly those concerned with the possible effects of linguistic structure on social and psychological behavior. We will see the influence of sociology most clearly in the work on conversation. Many educators too must make decisions about matters involving language, such as the teaching of standard languages and the skills of literacy. As we will discover in the latter case, some sociolinguists have been quite active in trying to influence educators in their attitudes toward certain kinds of linguistic behavior or varieties of language spoken by specific groups of children, such as the English spoken by certain black inhabitants of many cities in the northern United States, a variety sometimes referred to as African American English (see chapter 14). Language planners obviously need a considerable amount of linguistic knowledge in making sound decisions about, for example, which language or language variety to encourage in certain circumstances, or in any attempts to standardize a particular language or variety, or to change existing relationships between languages or varieties. We will observe that there

are many interconnections between sociolinguistics and other disciplines and also between concerns which are sometimes labeled *theoretical* and others which are said to be *practical*. At the very least, sociolinguistics is a socially relevant variety of linguistics, but it is probably much more. You will be able to form your own views on both issues as we proceed through the various topics treated in the chapters that follow.

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. Inter-relationships are everywhere and I make no apology for that.

Part I, *Languages and Communities*, 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); reviewing the phenomena of pidgins and creoles (chapter 3); conceiving of languages as codes (chapter 4); and trying to figure out what kinds of ‘groups’ are relevant when we study language use (chapter 5).

Part II, *Inherent Variety*, is sometimes regarded as ‘core’ sociolinguistics. Here the concerns are factors in language variation (chapters 6–7) and what these might show us about how languages change (chapter 8).

Part III, *Words at Work*, is concerned with some traditional social and cultural issues: language as a possible shaper of culture (chapter 9); speech in a broad social context (chapter 10); terms of address and expressions of politeness and what they mean (chapter 11); and certain essential characteristics of everyday language, i.e., how utterances can be acts and how conversation works (chapter 12).

Part IV, *Understanding and Intervening*, 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). Gender, one of the great ‘growth areas’ in language study, is the first of these (chapter 13). Education, particularly because certain practices seem to ‘advantage’ some students and ‘disadvantage’ others, is the second (chapter 14). Language planning issues, as well as the spread of English and the ‘death’ of many languages, are the third (chapter 15). Chapter 16 provides a few concluding remarks.

Further Reading

The basic texts, going from roughly less difficult to more difficult, are Spolsky (1998), Trudgill (1995), Stockwell (2002), Montgomery (2008), Holmes (1992), Romaine (2001), Coulmas (2005), Llamas et al. (2007), Meyerhoff (2006), Hudson (1996), Mesthrie et al. (2000), and Downes (1998). Fasold (1984, 1990) is a two-volume treatment, and Ammon et al. (1987), Coulmas (1997), and Mesthrie (2001) attempt to provide comprehensive overviews. Murray (1998)

discusses a variety of theoretical issues. Brown (2006) is a superb encyclopedia, and both Asher and Simpson (1994) and Bright (1992) are also encyclopedic in scope.

Foley (1997) and Duranti (1997, 2005) are good, anthropologically-oriented treatments of many of the topics we will deal with. Edwards (1985) and Bonvillian (2003) are concerned with a variety of sociological matters. Fairclough writes about power (2001) and discourse (1995), and Benwell and Stokoe (2006) about identity. For additional sources on critical discourse analysis see Blommaert (2005), Fairclough (2006), and Wodak and Meyer (2001).

Cook and Newson (2007) discuss Chomsky's linguistic ideas, and Smith (1999) discusses both his linguistic and political ideas.

Crystal (1997) is a very readable reference book on language, and Crystal (2003a) and McArthur (1992) contain lots of interesting observations about English.

Recent books of readings are the two volumes of Trudgill and Cheshire (1998) and Cheshire and Trudgill (1998), the more comprehensive Coupland and Jaworski (1997), and Paulston and Tucker (2003).

The basic journals are *Language in Society*, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, and *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*.

Duranti (2001), Trudgill (2003), and Swann et al. (2004) offer useful coverage of terms found in the sociolinguistic literature.

www.linguistlist.org is a highly recommended website.