

# **An Introduction to Sociolinguistics**

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# Introduction

- One of the principal uses of language is to **communicate meaning, but it is also used to establish and maintain social relationships.** **Sociolinguistics** is the study of the relationship between **language in relation to society** , or of the various functions of language in society. However, 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. Sociolinguistics is “a branch of linguistics that studies all aspects of the relationship between language and society. Sociolinguists study **such matters as the linguistic identity of social groups, social attitudes to language, standard and nonstandard forms of language, the patterns and needs of national language use, social varieties and levels of language, the social basis of multilingualism, and so on**” (Wardhaugh, 2010, P.11).



- One feature that seems to be a fairly stable indication of **lower class** and **less education** throughout the English-speaking world, is the final pronunciation of -ing with [n] rather than [ŋ] at the end of words such as **sitting** and **thinking**. Pronunciations represented by sittin' and thinkin' are associated with working-class speech.

## Definitions of Sociolinguistics within Examples:

- **Wardhaugh and Fuller** (2015, p.1) define sociolinguistics as "the study of our everyday lives – how language works in our casual conversations and the media we are exposed to, and the presence of societal norms, policies, and laws which address language".
- **Sociolinguistics:** An orientation to the study of language that stresses the inter-relationship between language and social life, rather than focusing narrowly on language structure. sociolinguistics highlights the communicative competence of speakers, the choices open to them and the ways in which they tailor language to different functions and interactional ends. Sociolinguistics stresses the variation inherent in a language, as speakers of different backgrounds use language not just for the communication of information but to express (and also to create) an individual and/or group identity. (Hudson, 1996).
- Sociolinguistics can be applied to virtually **any area of daily life** because language is so central to human social experience. The effects of social context on the interpretation of meaning, how the social meaning is conveyed and inferred in particular interactions and how the message is expressed very differently to different people with different styles can be illustrated in the following **example**:

- **Ray:** Hi mum.
- **Mum:** Hi. You're late.
- **Ray:** Yeah, that bastard Soot bucket kept us in again.
- **Mum:** Nana's here.
- **Ray:** Oh sorry, where is she?
- **In this conversation,** there isn't a distance between Ray and his mum. He spoke roughly in swore one. But, his mum gives a signal to him because there is his grandma there. Ray's description of his teacher would have been expressed differently if he had realized his grandmother could hear him. The way people talk is influenced by the social context in which they are talking. It matters who can hear us and where we are talking, as well as how we are feeling. The same message may be expressed very differently to different people. We use different styles in different social contexts.

## **A historical overview of sociolinguistics and sociology**

- During the past four and a half decades, studies of the relations between language and society have integrated to form the field of academic research known as sociolinguistics. In 1952 the late Haver C. Currie published a paper, first drafted in 1949, entitled “Projection of sociolinguistics: the relationship of speech to social status”.(Wardhaugh, 2010).
  - Sociolinguistics until the early 1960s, was largely as a result of William Labov’s work in America, and Peter Trudgill’s in Britain, that it developed into a recognised branch of linguistics. Labov was one of the first linguists to turn his attention away from rural, to urban, subjects, in an attempt to analyse the contemporary features of American speech. Before then there had been a long tradition of studying dialects, usually in remote rural areas, as part of language surveys, but with an agenda largely dictated by concerns to record and preserve historical features of the language. This kind of dialectology was inherently conservative and was part of larger, comparative language studies pursued under the discipline of philology.

- In 1960s, two linguists, Hymes and Gumperz, paved the way to different approaches to the analysis of language. Hymes introduced the ‘ethnography of speaking’ which is an approach to social research which concentrates on how individuals and small groups behave and interact. It has a strongly anthropological character, combined with the skills of linguistic analysis. Hymes’s research concerned Native American languages and cultures, and in the 1960s he was the lead advocate for and theorist of emergent sociolinguistics. Gumperz’s and Hymes’ approaches were broadly consonant with each other, but with very different working scales and methods. Both argued that Chomsky’s definition of competence is too narrow, and that an adequate approach must distinguish and investigate other aspects of language specifically what Hymes called communicative competence.

- For example,
- Two British English speaking visitors (B and C) are talking to
- a local Irish English speaker (A) in Donegal, Ireland.
- A : How long are youse here?
- B : Till after Easter.
- (Speaker A looks puzzled.)
- C : We came on Sunday.
- A : Ah. Youse're here a while then
- It seems that the construction How long are youse here?, in speaker A's dialect, is used with a meaning close to the structure "How long have you been here?" referring to past time. Speaker B, however, answers as if the question was referring to future time ("How long are you going to be here?"). When speaker C answers with a past time response (We came Sunday), speaker A acknowledges it and repeats his use of a present tense (Youse're here) to refer to past time. Note that the dialect form youse (= "you" plural) seems to be understood by the visitors though it is unlikely to be part of their own dialect. Because differences in vocabulary are often easily recognized.



- However, it is worth mentioning that **three** major directions characterize the development of sociolinguistics as a distinct discipline. **One** is a redirection of general or theoretical linguistics into a study of language in society. **The second** has extended the concept of the native speaker's linguistic competence into the concept of communicative competence by changing the focus from an abstract study of language to concrete acts of language use: an 'ethnography of speaking'. **The third** derives more distinctly from sociology and is often referred to as 'sociology of language': it is the study of speech communities. The three orientations cannot be kept strictly apart, but they provide convenient headings for characterizing the principal directions in sociolinguistics (Philips & Stern, 1986).

# Language in Social Contexts



## The study of language in its social context

- The study of language in its social context starts from the assumption that speech varies in different social circumstances and that there are speech varieties within a speech community. It is the business of linguistics to account for these and to study the rules of these variations as normal phenomena of language use. **For example**, other English vernaculars is the tendency to reduce final consonant clusters, so that words ending in twoconsonants (left hand) are often pronounced as if there is only one (lef han). Which means that here is stylistic differentiation among upper-middle-class speakers than among working-class or lower-class speakers. Also there are also social differences.

# sociology

- The **sociology** of language studies how the use of certain types of language affects society. Many sociologists who study the sociology of language also study sociolinguistics, which is the study of how society impacts language.
- Sociology of Language is the study of how language impacts society. Sociologists in this field study language in social structures, social identities, socialization and how language plays a factor in inequalities, discrimination and accessibility to resources. It is common for sociologists who study language to compare various identity groups and how they acquire, use, and experience language. For example, a sociologist may compare languages across various socioeconomic classes or among ethnic and racial identities. (Hudson, 1996)

**For example**, the concept of socialization explores how individuals learn and internalize the values, norms, and behaviors of their society through various social institutions like family, education, and media. **Another example**, someone can not speak loudly or laughing or even make jokes at the funeral places , this polite behaviour comes from accepting the social norms of the society.

## Sociolinguistics and the Sociology of Language

Hudson (1996, p. 4) has described the difference as follows:

*sociolinguistics* is ‘the study of language in relation to society,’ implying intentionally that Sociolinguistics is part of the study of language. the *sociology of language* is ‘the study of society in relation to language.’ .

For the former, society is the object of study, whereas, for the latter, language is the object of study. In other words, sociolinguistics studies language and how it varies based on the user's sociological background, such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class. On the other hand, sociology of language (also known as macrosociolinguistics) studies society and how it is impacted by language.. Sociology of language seeks to understand the way that social dynamics are affected by individual and group language use.

- Some investigators introduce a distinction between sociolinguistics (microsociolinguistics) 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.

# The Micro–Macro Distinction

- Traditionally scholars assign language and society to different fields of academic research. Sociolinguistics is essentially an interdisciplinary field. Since sociolinguistics is a meeting ground for linguists and social scientists, some scholars seek to understand the social aspects of language while others are primarily concerned with the linguistic aspects of society. This distinction is known as micro- and macro-sociolinguistics or alternatively sociolinguistics in the narrow sense and sociology of language. These represent different orientations and research goals, micro-issues being more likely to be investigated by linguists, dialectologists, and others in language-centered fields,
- whereas macro-issues are more frequently taken up by sociologists and social psychologists. Variation linguistics has been used as yet another term for microsociolinguistics, and there have been attempts to confine sociolinguistics proper to the study of variation in language. Nowadays, there is a general agreement that both perspectives, those of micro- and macro-sociolinguistics, are indispensable for a full understanding of language as a social phenomenon (Hudson, 1996).



- ❑ The micro aspect deals with relationships between society and language as a whole by examining, for instance, how speech is used in social discourse. This is particularly so where different languages or varieties of language are in contact, and individuals make different choices at different settings, with different topics or persons. Individual speech at different times may therefore not be the same and varies according to the age of the speakers, their sex, social class, or region of origin.
- ❑ Unlike micro-sociolinguistics, macro-sociolinguistics deals with the general problems of language function in a society. The study of the relationship between language and culture falls within the scope of macro-sociolinguistics. In this case, the language is viewed as a general social phenomenon within a linguistics setting rather than a speech situation of the individual as in micro-sociolinguistics. ( Wardhaugh ,2015,P.17).

- ❑ Micro-sociolinguistics concerns itself with the actual use of language in different social groups. The subject of analysis in Micro-sociolinguistics is the speech and the speech situation, verbal communication with focus on the individual and not the society as a whole (Hudson, 1996, p.4),
- ❑ while in Macro, the focus is on the society. of language function in a society. The study of the relationship between language and culture falls within the scope of macro-sociolinguistics.

## **The scope of sociolinguistics**

Language and society are interrelated and we can not speak about one without the other. Hudson 1991 says ‘we can not take the notion language x for granted ,since this is in itself a social notion in so far as it defined in term of a group of people who speak x’ . The scope of sociolinguistics identifies aspects of socioeconomic factors in language variation and identifies gender and ethnicity as factors in language variation . It describes how shifts in speech contexts cause changes in speaking styles.

# Social class

Class can be defined as structured inequality between groups. It is easy to detect the social status of people from their speech. People who belong to high social classes are more likely to receive quality education, therefore, enabling people from high social classes to use proper language while communicating (Wardhaugh,2010)

People from different social backgrounds usually have different dialects. Therefore, grammatical differences can help in determining their social backgrounds. In addition, people from different social classes usually have phonological and phonetic differences. Therefore, people from different social status may have different accents . (Wardhaugh,2010)

# Social class

William Labov was one of the first sociolinguists to conduct several known experiments to examine the effects of social class on language use (Coulmas and Fishman, 2002). For example, he investigated specific phonological features in the use of English. Labov selected three New York City department stores, observing the pronunciation of postvocalic "r" varied among the three social classes ( the upper- class, the middle- class and the working class) . The working-class speakers tend to drop the "r" sound more frequently than the middle-class speakers, and the upper-class speakers show the most consistent pronunciation of "r." Labov's findings suggested a correlation between social class and language variation. The speech patterns of individuals were influenced by their social class, reflecting a linguistic stratification in society (Yule,1996)

# Gender

Another dimension of linguistic variation is among sex and gender distinctions, where the former refers to biological and the latter to sociocultural differences. Many studies contributed to the great amount of interest that linguistic correlates of sex and gender have attracted in both sociolinguistics and gender studies. In most societies for which data are available, it has been demonstrated that women of all social strata are more sensitive toward prestige norms and deviate less from the prestige speech variety than men. The social significance of these differences clearly calls for explanation, and sociolinguistics has much to offer to the study of gender-based constraints in society (Coulmas and Fishman, 2002). In applied linguistics and Sociolinguistics, gender refers to words that belong to one of two or three categories: Masculine, feminine, or sometimes neuter. Gender is displayed in a language through morphological markers, like pronouns (his/he, her/she) and lexical choices, like (policeman vs. policewoman).

# Speech community

**Speech community** is one of the basic notions to be investigated by macro-sociolinguistics. A speech community refers to a group of people who share a common language or dialect and communicate with one another on a regular basis. Members of a speech community not only share a common language but also have similar speech patterns, vocabulary, and social norms associated with their language use. (Hymes, D. 1974).

**For example,** New York speakers see themselves as one community because they are rhotic (prestige).

# Ethnicity

It is the factor that determines regional and historical framework of language. It is commonly concerned with describing one's family descend , often specially the place one's ancestors immigrated from. One of the significant elements that shaped the variation in regional dialects and accents was historical migration of different European and Africans groups of people who conveyed their cultures, conventions, traditions and other elements. The process of borrowing words from .other languages such as Latin, Greek, French, Spanish and others affect the framing of English language until it became the shape we have nowadays (Gorden, 2012). For example, the word "Bazaar" for a market or marketplace, commonly used in our language, reflects Persian influence.



# Conclusions

- ✓ Language as a distinctive element of communication presents linguistics varieties, which are geographical, historical, social, and culturally determined.
- ✓ The sociology of language is sometimes called ‘macro-sociolinguistics’. It concerns itself with whole languages and their distribution and usage within society and not, for example, with language features or structures or with more micro-social processes. Typically the focus is on the use of languages by particular groups. Sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language in relation to society.
- ✓ Micro-linguistic studies, are those that typically focus on very specific linguistic items or individual differences and uses in order to search for possibly wide-ranging linguistic and/or social implications.
- ✓ Macro-linguistic studies are those studies that examine large amounts of language data to draw broad conclusions about group relationships.
- ✓ The scope of sociolinguistics is quite broad and includes a range of topics related to language and its use in social contexts.

## References

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*Thank You*