

Language, Society, and New Media

Sociolinguistics Today

Marcel Danesi



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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2016
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Danesi, Marcel, 1946-

Language, society, and new media : sociolinguistics today / Marcel Danesi, University of Toronto.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Mass media and language. 2. Socialization. 3. Language and culture.

4. Sociolinguistics I. Title.

P40.5.S57D36 2015

302.2301'4--dc23

2015004466

ISBN: 978-1-138-02458-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-02459-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-77565-4 (ebk)

Typeset in Goudy Old Style
by Saxon Graphics Ltd, Derby

Language, Society, and New Media

Language, Society, and New Media uses an interdisciplinary approach, integrating frameworks from sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology and emerging strands of research on language and new media, to demonstrate the relationship between language, society, thought, and culture to students with little to no background in linguistics. Couched in this integrative “e-sociolinguistic” approach, each chapter covers the significant topics in this area, including language structures, language and cognition, and language variation and change, to elucidate this relationship, while also extending the purview of the field to encompass forms of new media, including Facebook and Twitter. Discussions are supported by a wealth of pedagogical features, including sidebars, activities and assignments, and a comprehensive glossary. In *Language, Society, and New Media*, Marcel Danesi explores the dynamic connections between language, society, thought, and culture and how they continue to evolve in today’s rapidly changing digital world, ideal for students in introductory courses in sociolinguistics, language and culture, and linguistic anthropology.

Marcel Danesi is Professor of Linguistic Anthropology and Semiotics at the University of Toronto, Canada. He has written extensively on linguistic and cultural topics and his books have been translated, overall, in to 10 languages. He is currently the editor-in-chief of *Semiotica*, the leading journal in the field of semiotics and interdisciplinary studies.

Preface

Language is a truly fascinating and enigmatic phenomenon. Why did it come about in the human species? What is it? What does it allow us to do that other species cannot? The scientific discipline that aims to answer questions such as these is known as *linguistics*. The particular approach that focuses on the relation between language, society, thought, and culture is known under various rubrics—sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, cultural linguistics, the sociology of language, and a few others. The purpose of this book is to introduce the formal study of this relation—a study that has become increasingly more important in an age, designated the “global village” by the late communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, where languages, societies, and cultures are in constant contact and flux. Traditionally, linguists have aspired to document and examine the use of language in specific societies or by particular communities and groups, focusing on how language binds them together and on how languages vary across geographical and social spaces. Anthropologists have focused instead on how language shapes cognition and how material culture, symbols, rituals, rites, and belief systems are intertwined with it. This book will amalgamate several of these approaches, although it remains essentially an introductory text in sociolinguistics. It will also expand traditional sociolinguistics to the study of language as it is used in new media, from text messaging devices to Facebook and Twitter. This particular application of sociolinguistic theory and method will be called “e-sociolinguistics.”

The underlying premise that will guide the present treatment is the idea that language varies according to individuals, situation, and media of usage. This is not a discovery of this book, of course. It has been part and parcel of sociolinguistics since its inception. The difference is that it will include topics that normally fall under different disciplines but which share a lot of ideas and practices. I believe that this type of integrative approach is necessary for two reasons: first, there is much overlap among the fields; second, I have found in my own courses that one can present a better picture of the language–society–media connection if one also deals with the language–cognition–culture

connection at the same time. This might seem quite ambitious, but it is not. It really is a matter of emphasis.

I sincerely hope that readers of this book will find it useful in some way. I feel privileged to have had so many students over the years who have inspired me to bring all my experiences together and to write a book that I truly hope will be worth reading.

Marcel Danesi
University of Toronto, 2015

Features

This book will cover, as mentioned in the Preface, both traditional areas of sociolinguistics and selected themes in linguistic anthropology and e-sociolinguistics. It is intended primarily for undergraduate courses.

The chapters will have:

- 1 examples of classic and relevant research on the themes covered;
- 2 text boxes providing further information on a topic; and
- 3 cross-references to other chapters, so as to create an ongoing cohesive treatment.

At the end of each chapter there will be:

- 1 a section for reviewing technical terminology;
- 2 textual material for analysis; and
- 3 exercises and questions for discussion that can be done as assignments or as suggestions for further investigations.

At the end of the book there is a glossary of technical terms for easy reference.

Rapid Overview

Linguistics proper focuses on language as a system of rules of grammar or pronunciation; sociolinguistics, on the other hand, focuses on language as a social phenomenon and, thus, as a key to understanding how humans think, act, and behave as part of living together in groups. This book will introduce basic notions and describe key findings in this interdisciplinary area, focusing on how language mirrors social and cognitive phenomena.

Another area that this book will cover is the study of how language is used by people to interact meaningfully, systematically, and for various social functions—an area called *pragmatics*. Language is a highly adaptive and context-sensitive instrument that is shaped by forces that are largely external to it. Its forms and rules are not only intertwined with each other, but are also highly susceptible to the subtle influences that usage has on them. Geographical variation will also constitute a major topic of this book, discussing how language forms vary across physical space. If there is an abundance of differences in a specific speech area with regard to the main language of a society, they are said to constitute a version of that language called a geographical dialect or simply dialect. On the other hand, if the differences characterize how certain social groups or communities speak, the version is called a social dialect or a sociolect. Dialects develop over time as a consequence of separation of groups from a region, divisions within a society, such as those related to economic class and religion, and so on. Dialect speech is often a marker of identity. People may adopt particular pronunciations to distinguish themselves from others for varying social reasons. The related question of bilingualism, multilingualism, and ethnic speech in various communities will be discussed in detail, since these illustrate concretely how languages adapt to new situations. A special focus will be put on the case of Spanish in the United States as a marker of identity and a code for community solidarity, among other sociolinguistic functions.

In his study of American aboriginal languages, Franz Boas discovered features that suggested to him that languages served people, above all else, as cognitive tools for coming to grips with their particular environments and social realities. This can be seen in the fact that specialized vocabularies serve classificatory

functions that are perceived to be critical by particular societies. For example, speakers of English have very few words for *seals*, whereas those who live in regions such as the Arctic have developed a sophisticated vocabulary to refer to them. English-speaking societies on the other hand have developed an elaborate system of color terms, probably because they are needed to refer to a different reality of English-speaking society, such as its emphasis on fashion. Thus, Boas's anthropological approach will be incorporated in this book as part of the broader sociocultural study of language. Writing as a social practice will also constitute a main theme. And, as mentioned, this book will also look at the work in the ever-expanding field of e-sociolinguistics, or the study of how language is changing in the internet age.

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1 Sociolinguistics

I really do inhabit a system in which words are capable of shaking the entire structure of government, where words can prove mightier than ten military divisions.

Václav Havel (1936–2011)

From the dawn of history, humans have used a unique faculty—*language*—to think, to communicate with each other beyond the instinctual use of body signals, to transmit knowledge to subsequent generations, and to do other things that make them unique among species. Human civilization, with its legal systems and written codices of knowledge, is built on language. Altogether, the world's languages constitute humanity's collective memory system. Each word is a capsule of time-specific knowledge, an act of human consciousness, and an implicit principle of social structure. The Greek philosophers saw language as a manifestation of *lógos*, which meant both “word” and “reason or mind,” and thus as the faculty that united thought and speech. The modern-day study of this manifestation is the objective of the discipline of *linguistics*; the study of language as an intrinsic part of social systems is the goal of *sociolinguistics*, a major branch of linguistics.

Humans have always been curious about how language works and what functions it plays in everyday life. Already in the 400s BCE, an Indian scholar named Pāṇini described the Sanskrit language he spoke with a set of about 4,000 rules. His work, called the *Ashtadhyayi*, is considered to be one of the first grammars of any language on Earth. Pāṇini showed that many words could be decomposed into smaller distinctive units. In English, for example, the word *incompletely* is made up of three such units: *in* + *complete* + *ly*. Two of these (*in-* and *-ly*) recur in the formation of other words and are thus intrinsic parts of grammar (the system of rules for forming words and sentences); *complete* is, instead, part of a collection of meaning-bearing forms called a *lexicon*. Pāṇini also described with precision how the words were to be pronounced, looking forward to the modern-day study of sound systems. And he argued that Sanskrit provided an indirect, yet insightful, historical record of how a particular society emerged, developed, and shaped people's worldviews, belief systems, and modes of interaction.

This chapter will provide an introductory overview of what sociolinguistics is all about. Like Pāṇini, the sociolinguist focuses on how grammar and vocabulary mirror social systems. It will present some of the main ideas in a general way. Many of these will then be discussed, developed, and illustrated in subsequent chapters.

1.1 Language

Defining language is an exercise in circular reasoning, because we need language itself to do so. The English word *language* comes from Latin *lingua*, “tongue.” So, a basic definition could be the use of the tongue to create messages for human communication. But that is not all language does. It also allows us to refer to objects, states, and events in the world with sound clusters (words, phrases, sentences) and thus to record them for future reference by means of these clusters. When incorporated into the brain’s memory system, these invariably affect how we perceive the world. The anecdotal proof of this is an everyday occurrence. When we see something, we respond to it in terms of distinctive sound clusters—a plant thus becomes a *tree* or a *flower*, depending on what lexicon (the collection of these clusters) we possess in order to refer to it. If we have no word for something that we feel is important, then we have several options—we can make a new one up or we can borrow a word from another language that seems to fill in the gap.

Wherever there are humans living in groups, there are languages. Animals communicate effectively with their innate signaling systems. Humans also use signals (body language and facial expression). But language is a unique faculty among species. And unlike most signaling systems, it takes on diverse forms according to place on Earth and time period of its usage. For this reason linguists distinguish between language as a faculty and diverse languages as manifestations of this faculty. The faculty is the same across time and space—what varies are the different languages that instantiate it. There is no better or worse language. All languages serve human needs equally well, no matter if the language is spoken by millions of people (like Mandarin Chinese) or a small handful (like some indigenous languages of America), and no matter if it is the main language of one or more nation states or spoken by a small community of people within a nation state. Each language is used to solve universal problems of knowledge and of social organization. In other words, languages enable people to name and reflect on the things that are relevant and meaningful to them wherever they live.

There are about 6,000 languages spoken in the world today. This number does not include dialects (local forms of a language). There are barely a little more than 200 languages with a million or more speakers. Of these, 23 have about 50 million or more speakers each. More than half of the languages spoken today are expected to disappear in the next 100 years—a tragedy that parallels the corresponding loss of natural species and resources on Earth. The