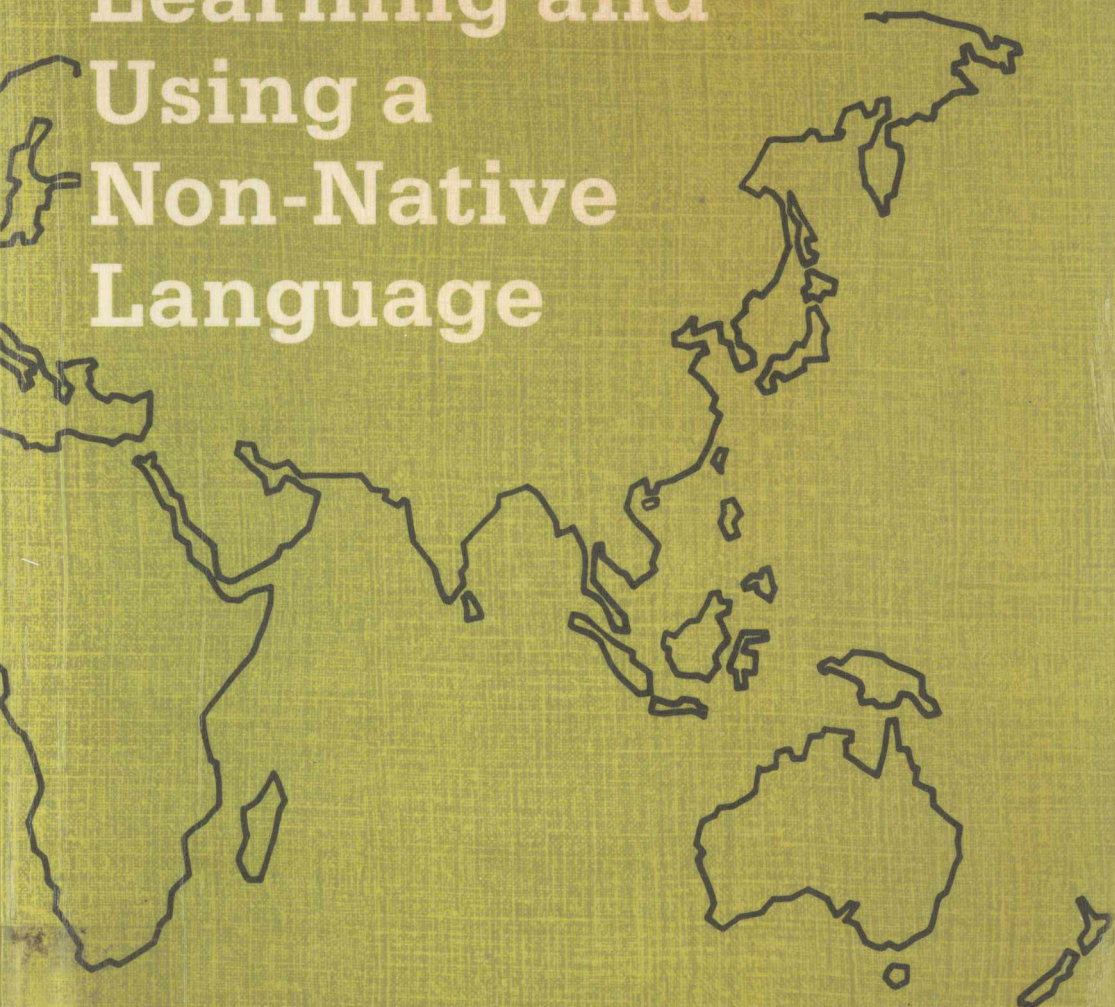


The Sociolinguistics of Learning and Using a Non-Native Language



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Pergamon Institute of English

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Foreword

Recently there has been a deluge of literature and programmes that are sociolinguistically based, often with the aim of assisting disadvantaged speakers of a language, in particular non-standard English. Thus, sociolinguistics and bilingual education have, above all in the USA, come to be associated with discriminated and dislocated minorities.

However, it is quite erroneous to believe that sociolinguistics is merely a tool for accomplishing a kind of linguistic 'social work' and this book is an attempt to demonstrate the subject's general value and vital importance for those involved in teaching a non-native language to all types of learners. Whether it be English in Hong Kong, French in Manchester, Swahili in Ohio, Welsh in Wales, Russian in Sophia or whatever, the implications of sociolinguistic work are of immediate and direct relevance to every language teacher.

Unfortunately, a great deal of distrust and frustration seems to exist between language practitioners and language theorists. This is partly due to the general but unfounded supposition that the theorizer knows more. The communication gap between teacher and theorist is also widened through the use of sometimes frustrating jargon, unfamiliar name-dropping and limited access to specialist, academic publications.

Furthermore, it often seems to be the case that lacking experience of classroom reality, theorists fail to understand the problem of applying their often too abstract findings. This book is essentially an attempt to overcome these difficulties by presenting the most vital and profitable discoveries which are important for learning a non-native language in a clear and concise manner. All the references are given within the text itself and it is hoped that this neither slows down nor interferes too much with the flow of the argument.

Thus, the book aims at providing insights into the social dimensions of assimilating, employing and imparting a linguistic system different

from that natively learnt. However, the presentation here is not merely descriptive but constitutes an argument for a humanistic and pluralistic understanding of language as essentially an act of meaning. A new framework for considering the dynamics of bilingualism and a symbolically-orientated explanation of the concept communicative competence together with a comprehensive and critical review of the most exciting sociolinguistic research currently carried out is what awaits the reader.

Kyoto, 1982

LEO LOVEDAY

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What is sociolinguistics?

If the main concern of this book is the social dimension of learning and using a non-native language, the primary question which must first be answered is what exactly does the subject *sociolinguistics* refer to and what does it offer.

The hyphenated name of the discipline immediately points to its two central concerns: society and language. Simply put, it investigates and theorizes on the relationship between these two areas, which is a relationship long tabooed by a traditionally dehumanized linguistics. What then is this relationship between language and society?

In fact, we are all familiar with the complex links between society and language, although perhaps not immediately on a conscious level. It is common knowledge that people speak differently according to their background and that it is frequently possible to relate aspects of a person's speech to his place of origin or education or social group or generation or even occupation, among others. Moreover, we all alter the way we speak according to whom we are with and this can depend on how intimate we feel our interlocutors to be or on the actual circumstance we find ourselves in, e.g. some may speak to close relatives (spouses, parents, children) quite differently in public than in their own home.

On top of this, we judge people not only on the basis of what they say but how they sound, especially when meeting someone for the first time. Although this popular knowledge about language and its speakers is really a collection of stereotypic associations which may be more fiction than fact, we apply it constantly in our daily encounters. Such knowledge and linguistic behaviour was, however, long considered unworthy of study by linguists and teachers of non-native languages. The reason seems to have been the result of an exaggerated respect for

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the written forms of language, on the one hand, and an over-narrow interest in the historic development of language, on the other. Then in the middle of the 1960s there was a re-discovery of and a new awareness for the inextricable links between language and social behaviour by principally American scholars. Up until then those who studied language were not at all concerned with patterns of language use and its accompanying belief system but were much more interested in establishing language as an absolutely independent entity.

Sociologists, amazingly enough, have traditionally focused their attention on social stratification and organization without taking the different ways groups spoke or communicated into account. Fortunately, both linguistics and sociology have today developed beyond their classical limitations and together with other social sciences such as anthropology have helped to father the discipline *sociolinguistics* which now sees itself as an autonomous enterprise rather than as a sub-section of something else.

Sociolinguistics, however, is not only concerned with the linguistic indicators of social background mentioned above. It is also very interested in (1) the various conventions we follow in order to organize our speech with each other that are oriented towards social goals. In fact, many conversational and interactional structures have been found to exist as part of, for instance, telephoning, joke telling, narrating stories, classroom talk between students and teachers and so forth. A considerable amount of research of this nature is associated with a school of sociologists who have a rather awesome name. They are *ethnomethodologists* which simply means people who study the methods and means that social groups employ to achieve their objectives. They believe that social reality cannot be captured by statistical tables but is actually 'constructed' in the process of interaction. Among the leading ethnomethodologists working on language are Sacks (1972) and Schegloff (1972a, b). Other investigators in the same field do not regard their research so sociologically and instead see themselves more within the linguistic camp. Their work is generally called *discourse analysis* and under this category belong the studies on the structuring of teacher-pupil interaction (Coulthard 1977) and with special reference to the non-native language classroom (Heaton 1980). Another group

of analysts of the patterns for arranging oral messages are anthropologists who study myths, folktales, riddles and rituals with reference to the society in which they are produced.

A different domain from the structure of communicating language is (2) the study of how *social norms and values affect linguistic behaviour*, e.g. Basil Bernstein's theories (1971, 1973) on the divergent speech styles of working class and middle class English children which are seen to result from differing attitudes towards explicitness. Research into the social reasons for linguistic behaviour is not, of course, restricted to the stylistic differences between different groups within one society but also deals with communicative variation between different linguistic and ethnic communities.

Many non-native language teachers are probably aware of the way norms governing speaking in the native language can conflict with those for speaking in another. Yet this area has received very little attention until quite recently although, as we all know, perfect grammar and pronunciation are rarely enough for effective mutual understanding in a non-native language. Much sociolinguistic work has been carried out on this aspect under the concept of *communicative competence* which was coined by Hymes (1972, 1974b). This perspective derives from anthropological concerns with the cultural frames in which language moves and has led to the creation of its own school in sociolinguistics known as the *ethnography of speaking* (Bauman & Sherzer 1974).

(3) The *variety and diversity of language related to the social framework of its speakers* constitutes a central domain of sociolinguistics. It might at first seem synonymous with the field described above under (2) but the difference lies in its much more traditionally sociological aims. There are many linguistic markers providing social information ranging from an accent which includes features such as nasalization and pitch to choice of vocabulary as well as the grammatical system. In some multilingual communities the languages spoken themselves may provide indications of the social status of its speakers. Linguistic diversity as a topic for investigation is the primary objective of sociolinguistics. The most notable contemporary British research here has been that of

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Trudgill (1974) on the social differentiation of Norwich English and, more recently, Milroy's (1980) study of the social networks reflected in Belfast English. Investigations in this sphere are, of course, very relevant to the non-native language learner since he/she should be able to recognize the social and regional forms of the language to be acquired as well as possess an awareness of the beliefs and prejudices attached to the various forms if he/she wishes to properly understand and use the non-native language.

(4) The *political use of linguistic resources* is a further object of sociolinguistic study. Institutions such as the Academie Française which attempts to officially prescribe what is acceptable and what is not in French or the 'purification' of the German language under the Nazis or even the rather dubious language compensation programmes for deprived black American children are all examples of the political exploitation of language. On a much larger scale are the spelling reforms of Communist China aimed at democratizing the access to the complicated writing system or the adoption of Gaelic as a national language by the Republic of Ireland when it was the mother tongue of only 3% of the population. In fact, language choice is a matter of considerable sociopolitical consequence in a great many countries of the world today. Naturally, educational policies regarding which non-native language is to be taught in schools can also be sociopolitical. For instance, there is the relatively recent decision to teach Maori to New Zealand whites, the widespread teaching of Russian in the Eastern bloc and the desire to introduce a local, indigenous language in the school curriculum of new African states. Much of contemporary research in this area is directed towards educational decision making and generally goes under the name of *language planning*. The field is particularly associated with Fishman (1968b) who has been a founding figure in sociolinguistics with his studies on the problems of multilingual communities. Additionally in this category is the work on pidgins and creoles whose historically low-status has been promoted through their sociolinguistic treatment, e.g. the establishment of neo-Melanesian, originally an English-linked pidgin, as one of the official means of communication in contemporary New Guinea.

(5) The *social aspects of being bi- or multilingual* are, without doubt,

very important for learners of non-native languages. Most studies in this area have concentrated on minority groups within different countries, usually assuming certain political undertones connected to a wider recognition and acceptance of such groups cf. Gumperz (1977, 1978) on the possible breakdowns in communication between Londoners of Indian origin interacting with speakers of English as a native language. Other sociolinguists have been interested in the way non-native speakers switch around their languages, using one only for a particular activity. This phenomenon has been called *code switching*. Other studies have examined the social motivation for borrowing items from one language into the other. A further strand of research concentrates on the how and why of bilinguals' remaining loyal to one of their languages. A historical case of this is why Cornishmen gave up their Celtic tongue but the Welsh managed to maintain it.

Within all the five domains outlined above, the sociolinguists concerned will differ in the amount of emphasis they place on the linguistic, social, anthropological or applied aspects of their work and may even disagree about their categories and approaches. In fact, the territory that sociolinguistics covers is vast and the roads linking its various provinces have not yet been firmly laid. There already exist a number of introductions to the discipline: Trudgill (1974), Bell (1976) and Hudson (1980) but an alternative to leafing through these is for the reader to gain an awareness of his own linguistic behaviour, attitudes and experiences in and outside the classroom and compare these with the themes presented here.

If any abstract diagram of where the sociolinguistics of non-native language learning and using lies within the web of academic interests then it might look something like Fig. 1.

The shaded space within the dotted area representing sociolinguistics marks our field of focus which emerges where the circles of the disciplines linguistics, sociology/ethnomethodology/social anthropology and foreign language teaching converge. Among the themes of this shaded area are the social dynamics of speaking two languages, the as yet underestimated classroom implications of the connection between culture and language, the much quoted but not fully explicated

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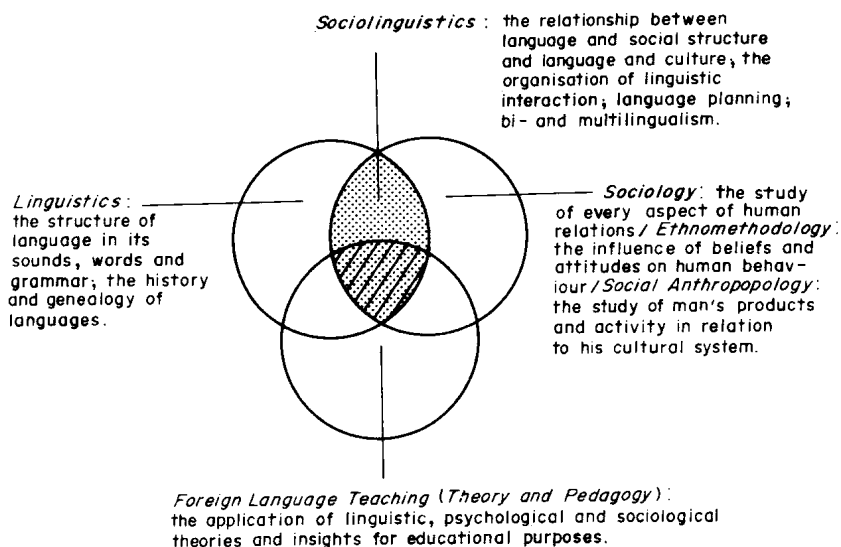


Fig. 1. The sociolinguistics of non-native language learning in relation to academic fields.

notion of communicative competence in a non-native language and the growing legitimization of social and regional non-native varieties of a language.

As stated at the outset, the aim of this book is to convey knowledge about the sociolinguistic aspects of learning a non-native language while foregoing the aura of scientificness created by jargon. However, two abbreviations appear throughout which save space and theoretical complications. These are the terms *L1* and *L2*. An *L1* is used to refer to a first language which some call a 'mother tongue' or 'native language' but the latter expressions can cause confusion in cases where, for instance, two languages are learnt simultaneously as in a bilingual family or if the *L1* speaker is regarded as an ethnic outsider, e.g. certain children who are neither natives of the community nor learn their mother's tongue. An *L2* is sometimes a term for a non-native language that is employed essentially to communicate with other non-natives of the language within one sociopolitical unit, e.g. English in India. It can also describe a second language that is a channel for

communicating with 'foreigners' who are usually not members of the L2 speaker's national, ethnic or racial group. In this book the concept L2 is used in the sense of a non-native language, whether it is naturally or formally acquired and whether it is learnt for intra- or extra-group communication. Its fundamental meaning is a language that has not been learnt in early infancy.

The reader will also come across two related terms: *target* and *source* language. A target language clearly implies a far less complete state of linguistic perfection than that suggested by the term L2. A source language does not contain the notions of acquisitional priority and singularity as the term L1. Although target/L1 and source/L2 are used here interchangeably, their theoretical distinctions already highlight the difficulty of describing what is generally taken for granted or ignored: the social environment and conditions in which a non-native language is acquired and applied.

2

The social dynamics of becoming and being bilingual

According to one of the leading sociolinguistic authorities on bilingualism, Fishman (1978, p. 42), monolingualism is a myth fostered by centuries of Euro-Mediterranean linguistic experiences and derived concepts such as universalism, rationalism and liberty. To the contemporary Western mind bilingualism connotes provincialism, oppression and irrationalism.

The subject of bilingualism has only just begun to be treated seriously and above all in America where hyphenated Americans (Norwegian-, Yiddish-, Italian-, Japanese-, etc.) set about explaining and presenting their linguistic and social reality. Most research in the area has dealt with the purely linguistic, political and psychological aspects of bilingualism but the focus of attention is centered more and more on its social dynamics.

Bilingualism

In fact, it is extremely difficult to give a precise definition of bilingualism. There exists extreme heterogeneity in the level of proficiency, nature of acquisition and social background of bilinguals. For a long time they were regarded as anomalies by linguists who felt the natural state of affairs was to grow up speaking one language. The general layman's understanding of the term is a person who has command of two languages and, particularly, someone who has not had to learn the L2 in an institutional setting but is naturally exposed to it in childhood. Linguists, on the other hand, have experienced great difficulty with the concept and have come up with various classifications, some of which have proven to be more confusing than productive due to the problems of knowing exactly how a bilingual mind operates.