AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLINGUISTICS

RONALD WARDHAUGH

SIXTH EDITION

An Introduction to Sociolinguistics

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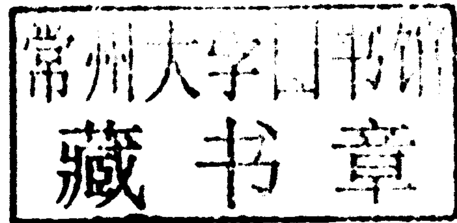
Ronald Wardhaugh



A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This sixth edition first published 2010
© 2010 Ronald Wardhaugh

Edition history: Basil Blackwell Ltd (1e, 1986); Blackwell Publishers Ltd (2e, 1992, 3e 1998 and 4e 2002); Blackwell Publishing Ltd (5e 2006)

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wardhaugh, Ronald.
An introduction to sociolinguistics / Ronald Wardhaugh. — 6th ed.
p. cm. — (The language library)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4051-8668-1 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Sociolinguistics. I. Title.
P40.W27 2010
306.44—dc22

2009012680

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/13pt Sabon by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in Singapore by Fabulous Printers Pte Ltd

4 2011

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Preface

This book is intended to provide students with a basic introduction to most of the topics dealt with in courses described as either 'Sociolinguistics,' 'Language in Society,' or 'The Sociology of Language.' I have tried to draw attention to the issues that arise in dealing with these topics and have deliberately avoided giving a 'simplistic' account of any one of them. I believe that students are best exposed to a new area of interest by being introduced to the problems that make it interesting rather than to cursory accounts of some local successes. To this end I have tried to show why certain findings and issues are important, others controversial, and still others worthy of more attention than they sometimes get. I have also provided a wealth of references since it is important to encourage beginners to look at the literature and not just take someone's word for granted. This edition also includes a set of exploratory tasks for each chapter to encourage the early development of a 'hands on' approach and the idea that all claims require empirical support.

It is obvious that a book of this kind draws on a variety of sources. The breadth of the published sources can be seen in the bibliographic information that is included. I owe a considerable debt to the sources mentioned there. During the many years I taught, my students also provided me with numerous insights into what works in the classroom and what does not. My thanks go once again to Judy Morris and Angie Camardi for all their secretarial assistance with the first edition. For this edition, as for the previous editions, my thanks go to all those who provided comments to me in various ways over the years. It is certainly satisfying to see a sixth edition of this book. I hope it continues to reflect what is happening in this most exciting area of linguistics, one that has evolved so rapidly and so successfully. Fortunately, there is still lots of work to be done, and it is my hope that some of those who read the pages that follow will one day find their names in books such as this one.

R. W.

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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

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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.

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