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LANGUAGE IN SOCIETY

An Introduction to Sociolinguistics

Suzanne Romaine

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Second edition

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Language in Society

Preface

MODERN linguistics has generally taken for granted that grammars are unrelated to the social lives of their speakers. Thus, linguists have usually treated language as an abstract object which can be accounted for without reference to social concerns of any kind. Sociologists, for their part, have tended to treat society as if it could be constituted without language. I have called this book *Language in Society*, which is what sociolinguistics is all about.

The term 'sociolinguistics' was coined in the 1950s to try to bring together the perspectives of linguists and sociologists to bear on issues concerning the place of language in society, and to address, in particular, the social context of linguistic diversity. Although it is still a young field of research, it gathered momentum in the 1960s and 1970s and continues to do so today. Educational and social policies played a role in the turning of linguists' attention to some of these questions, as did dissatisfaction with prevailing models of linguistics. Since the late 1950s mainstream linguistics has been conceived of as a largely formal enterprise increasingly divorced from the study of languages as they are actually used in everyday life.

Sociolinguistics has close connections with the social sciences, in particular, sociology, anthropology, social psychology, and education. It encompasses the study of multilingualism, social dialects, conversational interaction, attitudes to language, language change, and much more. It is impossible to put all the different approaches to the topic into neat pigeonholes, each of which is distinct in terms of methodology, goals, etc. There is considerable overlap, so that for instance, while dialectologists have studied speech varieties and language change, subjects of paramount interest to many sociolinguists, they have generally employed quite different methods of data collection and concentrated on rural rather than urban speech (see Chapter 5).

Different authors writing about what has now become a very broad field have divided it up in various ways. Some distinguish, for instance, between theoretical and applied sociolinguistics. The former is concerned with formal models and methods for analysing the structure of speech communities and speech varieties, and providing a general account of communicative competence. Applied sociolinguistics deals with the social and political implications of fundamental inequalities in language use in various areas of public life, e.g. schools or courts. A glance at the two-volume work *Sociolinguistics: An International Handbook of the Science of Language and Society* (1987–8, Mouton de Gruyter),

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which contains entries for nearly 200 topics, will give an indication of the multifaceted nature of the field.

More often, however, the field is subdivided into two broad headings: macro- and micro-sociolinguistics, with the macro domain sometimes also referred to as the 'sociology of language'. Macro-sociolinguistics takes society as its starting point and deals with language as a pivotal factor in the organization of communities. Micro-sociolinguistics begins with language and treats social forces as essential factors influencing the structure of languages. A recent example of this approach can be found in a two-volume work, one volume of which deals with what is referred to as the 'sociolinguistics of society' and the other with the 'sociolinguistics of language'. In his preface to the second volume, the author says he is not able to see much in common between issues about form and use of language on a small scale and large-scale socio-political issues. Thus, he presents sociolinguistics as a series of unconnected topics because he finds no common theoretical framework within which to link them.

I have always seen this division into two subfields as an artificial and arbitrary division of labor, which leads to a fruitless reductionism. It is no accident in my view that no convincing sociolinguistic theories exist. As long as scholars are prepared to ignore the forest for the trees, no theory is likely to be forthcoming.

Joshua Fishman, whose work is generally thought of as belonging to the sociology of language, said recently that the sociolinguistic enterprise is undergoing a mid-life crisis. Instead of progressing firmly on two legs (one propelled by linguistic matters and the other by sociological matters), it is trying to move ahead primarily on the linguistic front while merely shuffling on the social. He would like to see the 'socio' put into more prominence. One reason why I have called this book language *in* society rather than language *and* society is to emphasize the fact that the study of society must accord a place to language within it at the same time as the study of language must take account of society.

I cannot promise to produce a sociolinguistic theory in this book. Nevertheless, I hope that some of what I say might contribute to such a framework in the long term. What I offer in this short introductory text is an overview of the field by someone who has spent rather more time among the trees, while trying not to lose sight of the forest. The choice of which topics to include in a small survey of what is now a large and diverse field is to a great extent arbitrary. Every book inevitably reflects its author's assumptions about what is most interesting and important. I have made my choices based on those areas where there has been significant growth in terms of research findings, and also those areas where I have first-hand experience myself.

My research over the past fifteen years has involved me in trying to come to grips with problems of societal multilingualism, language change, and

language contact in the broadest sense, initially with respect to the status of the languages spoken by ethnic minorities in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, and more recently, through my research on the pidgin and creole languages of the Pacific, particularly in Papua New Guinea and Hawai'i. My recent work in Papua New Guinea, in particular, has convinced me that there are crucial connections between the large-scale socio-political issues typically addressed by the sociology of language on the one hand, and the forms and uses of language on a small scale dealt with by sociolinguistics on the other. They are manifestations of similar principles, albeit operating at different levels. Variability is inherent in human behavior.

In preparing the second edition of this book, I have benefited from discussions, comments, and reviews, and have incorporated some of the ideas which have emerged. However, the old adage about not being able to please all of the people all of the time, let alone even some of the people some of the time, very much applies to authors and their audiences. What one reviewer or colleague loved about the book, another hated. Chapter 4 on language and gender proved, not surprisingly, to be one of the most controversial. Since then, I have given that topic a book-length treatment, which made it even more difficult for me to confine myself to a chapter. Although some readers would have liked to see additional chapters on discourse and pragmatics, I have kept the same choice of topics. My main aim in this edition is to update the material to take account of works published since I first wrote the book in the early 1990s. Although I had hoped to keep this edition about the same length, it has inevitably ended up slightly longer.

Likewise, some readers liked the system of referencing I adopted with no in-text citations; others abhorred it, with one even considering that it set a bad example for students. This edition, however, does incorporate a general bibliography in addition to the annotated bibliographies at the end of each chapter, which I have correspondingly shortened.

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I would also like to thank Isabel Forbes for sending me the article on French usage, and my colleague Olle Josephson at FUMS for bringing the case of *nörd* to my attention, both of which provide examples for my discussion of linguistic change in Chapter 6. Thanks also to Gunnel and André Melchers for discussion of the Swedish T/V system. I am also grateful to Nancy C. Dorian for helping me to locate various pieces of information I needed, and to Jim and Lesley Milroy, and John Rickford, for their helpful comments on a first draft of this book. Thanks also to the many readers who provided feedback.

Contents

List of Figures vii

List of Tables viii

Preface ix

Acknowledgements xii

Chapter 1 **Language in Society/Society in Language** 1
- Language v. dialect 2
- Language and dialect in Papua New Guinea 2
- Language and dialect in Europe 11
- English: language and dialect 17
- Accent v. dialect 19
- Register and style 21
- Speech communities and communicative competence 23
- Language, society, and reality: different words, different worlds? 26

Chapter 2 **Language Choice** 32
- Societal multilingualism 35
- Domains 44
- Diglossia 46
- Language shift and death 49
- Code-switching 55

Chapter 3 **Sociolinguistic Patterns** 64
- Language and social class 67
- Style 74
- Language and style 75
- Gender 78
- Language and age 82
- Language and social network 83
- Standardization 87
- Standardization and its effects in Papua New Guinea 92

Chapter 4 **Language and Gender** 101
- Sex and gender 103
- Man-made language? 106
- Learning to talk like a lady 122

	Gossip v. shop talk	126
	Language reform: a msguided attempt to change herstory?	128
Chapter 5	**Language Change in Social Perspective**	135
	Dialectology and language change	135
	The relationship between variation and change	142
	Using the present to explain the past and the past to explain the present	144
	Change in real v. apparent time	150
	Language change and social ideology	155
Chapter 6	**Pidgin and Creole Languages**	167
	Distribution	169
	Origins and structure	177
	The creole continuum	191
	Pidgins and creoles in social context	193
Chapter 7	**Linguistic Problems as Societal Problems**	205
	Language and educational failure	205
	Difference v. deficit	213
	Language differences in the classroom	214
	Testing: who decides what is right?	219
	Taking appropriate action	220
	One flag—one nation?	224
	Bilingual education: maintenance or assimilation?	227
	Immersion or submersion	230
	Semilingualism: a new deficit theory	233
Chapter 8	**Conclusions**	240
References		249
Index		263

List of Figures

1.1	Map of Papua New Guinea showing New Britain and the distribution of Austronesian and non-Austronesian languages	4
1.2	Languages of north-west New Britain	6
1.3	Dialect continua in Europe	12
1.4	Map of the south Balkan region	16
2.1	Factors affecting language choice for the Buang	47
3.1	Vowel patriotism: the Norwegian language struggle	64
3.2	The Queen's English?	73
3.3	Social and stylistic stratification of postvocalic /r/ in New York City	76
3.4	Woman caught in the act of /h/ dropping	80
4.1	Old maids and old butlers	108
4.2	House persons and cleaning persons	111
√4.3	Why women don't want to be called by their first names	114
5.1	The operation of the High German sound shift	137
5.2	S-curve for language change	143
5.3	Map of the eastern United States showing speech areas and incidence of postvocalic /r/	153
5.4	Areas of England where /r/ may still occur in the speech of older, rural, working-class speakers	154
5.5	'Vous as un joli vouvou'	161
6.1	Sign in Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea warning all cars to stop if they see the red stop sign	168
6.2	Map showing some of the world's pidgins and creoles	170
6.3	Map showing the Caribbean creoles	172
6.4	Three types of creolization	192
6.5	The Guyanese creole continuum	192
6.6	An advertisement for Sun Flower tinned fish in Tok Pisin	199
7.1	Images of standard English and Hawai'i Creole English (HCE)	208
7.2	Papua New Guinean children playing in facilities provided by a mobile pre-school unit 'Skulnabaut' which operates in Tok Pisin	211
8.1	New languages as acts of identity	245
8.2	Jerusalem street signs	246

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List of Tables

1.1 Some differences between American and British English 19

2.1 Conflicting census figures for Macedonia 1889–1905 38

2.2 Speakers of Irish according to census returns 42

2.3 Retention of languages by ethnic groups in Australia 50

2.4 Language choice patterns in Oberwart 52

3.1 Percentage of postvocalic /r/s pronounced 68

3.2 Percentage of non-RP forms in Norwich 69

3.3 Incidence of glottal stops in all environments compared to medial position 71

3.4 Verbs without *-s* 71

3.5 Regional and caste differences in Kannarese 74

3.6 Percentage of forms without final *g* 75

3.7 Multiple negation in Detroit 79

3.8 Percentage of /t/ forms in the speech of Eskilstuna schoolchildren and adults in relation to social class 82

3.9 Two Belfast women compared 84

4.1 Collocations with *man/woman* and *boy/girl* in the British National Corpus 110

4.2 Semantic feature analysis of *man, woman, boy,* and *girl* 112

5.1 Isoglosses between Low and High German consonant shift /p t k/ → /(p) f s x/ 138

5.2 Implicational scale of isoglosses between Low and High German consonant shift /p t k/ → /(p) f s x/ 139

5.3 Markedness metric for *-t/d* deletion 141

5.4 Temporal development of varieties for the rule of *-t/d* deletion 142

6.1 The conceptual field expressed by Tok Pisin *gras* compared with Warapu 189

Chapter 1

Language in Society/Society in Language

I NOTED in my Preface how prevailing trends in linguistics have marginalized the study of the social role of language. In discussing the differences between the concerns of sociolinguistics and mainstream linguistics, Noam Chomsky, who is the leading figure in theoretical linguistics, observed that sociolinguistics was not concerned with 'grammar' but with concepts of a different sort, among them perhaps 'language'. To this he added, 'if such an object can become an object of serious study'. Chomsky then goes on to say that questions of language are basically questions of power, but these are not the sorts of issues which linguists should address. He is certainly right about the former. The latter is a matter of opinion. The narrowing of modern linguistics to the study of grammar has ruled out investigation of many interesting questions about how language functions in society. This book is about some of these issues which form the subject matter of sociolinguistics, chief among them being the question of what we mean by a language.

I can't begin to estimate how many times people have asked me questions such as how many languages there are in the world, how many dialects of English there are, and whether American English is a language or a dialect of English. I am sure my answers are generally seen as unsatisfactory because I invariably reply that it depends on what we mean by terms such as 'language' and 'dialect' and that these are not linguistic but rather social matters. It may at first glance seem incredible to non-linguists that linguists cannot define such essential and basic concepts in purely linguistic terms. The purpose of this chapter is to explain why the notions of language and dialect are fundamentally social and not linguistic constructs. I will also introduce other concepts such as 'communicative competence' and say why these too are primary concerns of sociolinguistics because they depend on society in crucial ways.

Language v. dialect

The term 'dialect' has generally been used to refer to a subordinate variety of a language. For example, we are accustomed to saying that the English language has many dialects. These dialects may be of different kinds. A 'regional dialect' is a variety associated with a place, such as the Yorkshire dialect in England or the Bavarian dialect in Germany. Dialects of a language tend to differ more from one another the more remote they are from one another geographically. In this respect the study of dialects or dialectology has to do with boundaries, which often coincide with geographical features such as rivers and mountains (see Chapter 5 for further discussion). Boundaries are, however, often of a social nature, e.g. between different social class groups. In this case we may speak of 'social dialects' (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of these). Social dialects say who we are, and regional dialects where we come from.

The term 'dialect' also has historical connotations. Historical linguists, for instance, speak of the Germanic dialects, by which they mean the ancestors of language varieties now recognized as modern Germanic languages, such as English, Dutch, and German. The entities we label as the 'English language' or 'Flemish dialect' are not, however, discrete. Any variety is part of a continuum in social and geographical space and time. The discontinuities that do occur, however, often reflect geographical and social boundaries and weaknesses in communication networks.

Language and dialect in Papua New Guinea

A preliminary example from north-west New Britain in the Pacific region will illustrate the problems in applying purely linguistic criteria in deciding what counts as a language or dialect. The Pacific is a good place to begin because it is a vast area containing many indigenous languages, whose number must have been even greater before European contact. In many parts of the region there are extensive chains of interrelated varieties with no clear internal boundaries. The greatest concentration of diversity is found in Melanesia (an area comprising the south-west Pacific island nations of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Fiji), where up to 1,500 languages are spoken, with as many as half found in Papua New Guinea alone. Most of the languages in Papua New Guinea are spoken by small groups; probably 40 per cent have fewer than 500 speakers. There is a great diversity of language types and only a handful of these languages has been investigated in any detail. New

Britain is one of the larger islands in the Bismarck Archipelago off the north-eastern coast of the island of New Guinea, which lies just 100 miles north of the tip of Queensland, Australia. Politically, the islands are part of Papua New Guinea (independent since 1975), and the island of New Britain is divided into two provinces, East and West New Britain (see Fig. 1.1). In the part of north-west New Britain to be discussed here people live in small villages along the coast and in the interior. All are multilingual and it is not uncommon for people to be able to speak four or five languages.

The following ten examples illustrate how people in different villages would request someone to give them betelnut to chew. For the moment, let's use the term 'variety' as a neutral term which does not commit us to any decision about whether the varieties concerned have the status of language or dialect. The grammar is the same in all cases: first, the item desired is named (in this case, betelnut), then follows a third person singular form of the verb 'come', and finally, a first person verb phrase indicating what the person requesting the item is going to do with it. Literally, the request means 'betelnut, it comes, I chew', or loosely, 'give me some betelnut to chew'. Betelnut is the small green nut of the betel palm, which when chewed is a mild intoxicant (and also carcinogen). It is typically chewed with lime pepper and it turns the mouth a bright reddish-orange. Later, it is spat out. Sharing betelnut and other items such as tobacco or yams is culturally important in north-west New Britain and other parts of Papua New Guinea. Offering these items is a sign of friendliness on the part of those who give them, while accepting or requesting them indicates trust that a spell has not been cast over them.

1.	*ezim*	*o-mên*	*da-kîn*
2.	*eliep*	*max*	*nga-ngas*
3.	*bile*	*me*	*nge-nges*
4.	*bile*	*me*	*nga-nges*
5.	*bile*	*me*	*nga-nges*
6.	*vua*	*i-nama*	*nga-songo*
7.	*vua*	*i-nama*	*nga-songo*
8.	*bua*	*i-nam*	*nga-songo*
9.	*vua*	*i-mai*	*nga-songo*
10.	*eilep*	*i-me*	*a-ngas*
	betelnut	3 sing. *come*	1 sing. *chew*

Let's for the moment try to sort these ten utterances into groups based on how similar they are to one another in terms of the words they use and see if we can make a guess at how many languages and dialects there are here in purely linguistic terms. We would certainly want to recognize the first variety as a separate language since it seems to share none of its vocabulary with any of the

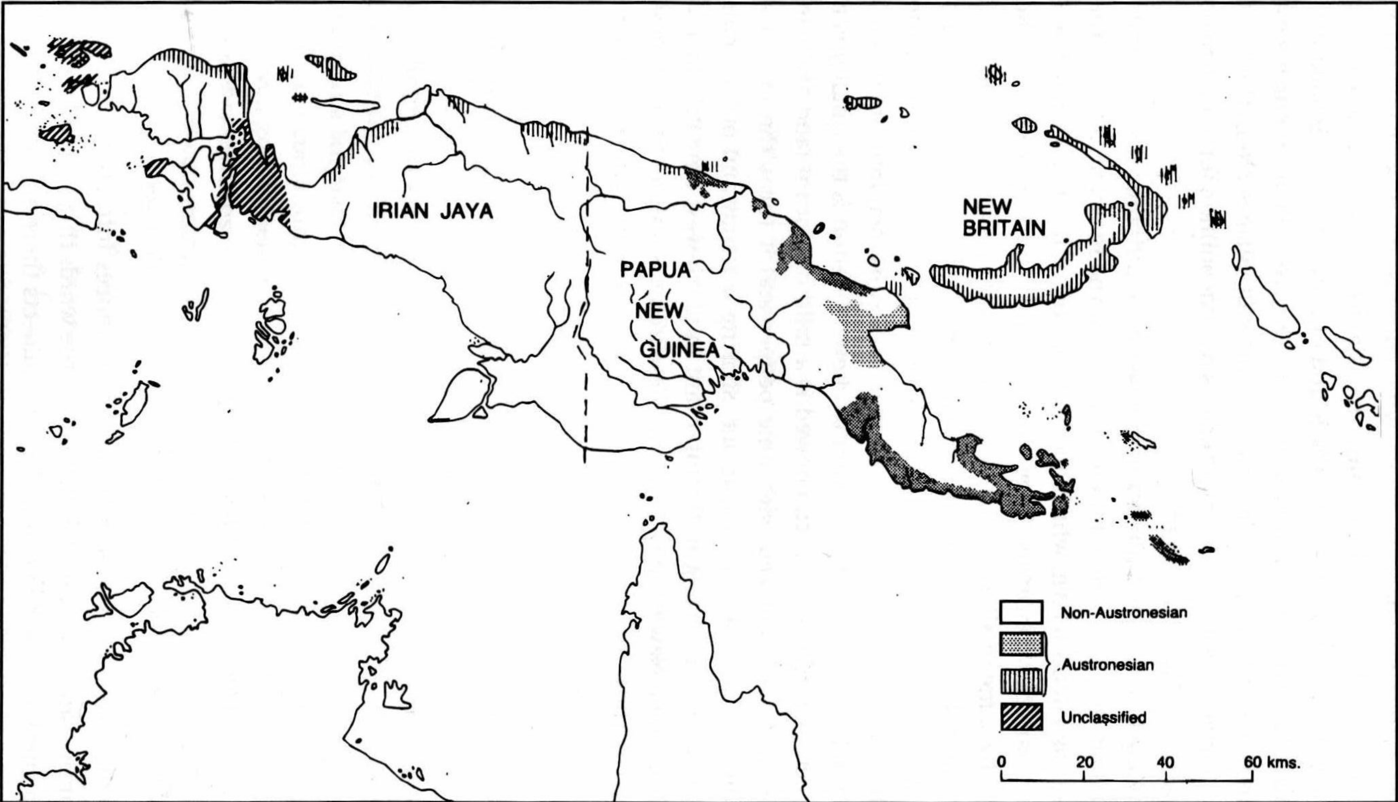

FIG 1.1 Map of Papua New Guinea showing New Britain and the distribution of Austronesian and non-Austronesian languages

other varieties, except possibly some remote similarity in the verb 'to come'. The other varieties, however, obviously have some lexical relationship to one another, though some more so than others. For instance, varieties (6) and (7) are identical, therefore it seems reasonable to suppose that the villages speaking these varieties do not have totally different languages, but rather dialects of the same language, or even the same language. Varieties (8) and (9) are also very similar to (6) and (7), differing only slightly in the pronunciations of the words for 'betelnut' and 'come'. So we might plausibly imagine that these four varieties constitute dialects of one language. Varieties (3), (4), and (5) also show a close relationship, differing only in terms of the vowels in the root and in the prefix for the verb 'chew', so we might consider them dialects of one language. Variety (10) is also not so very different, apart from its use of *eilep* instead of *bile* for 'betelnut' (which is similar to variety 2) and its lack of an initial consonant in the verb prefix for 'chew'.

There are some explicit linguistic procedures we could invoke to back up this impressionistic view. In fact, most of what is known about linguistic relationships in Papua New Guinea has relied on a measure called 'lexico-statistics', a method which still remains extremely popular because it provides a simple means of comparing the speech of different communities. The method relies on counting percentages of apparent cognates, i.e. related forms meaning the same thing, in a word list of 100 or 200 items. Those who use this method generally regard varieties sharing between 81 and 100 per cent cognates as dialects within a language. If there are between 28 and 81 per cent cognates, then the varieties count as languages within a family. Fewer cognates indicate a more distant relationship. These measures of course tell us nothing of what the speakers themselves consider the status of these language varieties to be.

When we ask what varieties the speakers themselves consider to be separate languages, we see that the linguistic evidence is interpreted in another way. We can get an answer to this question by looking at the names given to the ten varieties. In fact, all the varieties are recognized as separate languages each with its own name. They are shown in Fig. 1.2 in a grouping which is based on their linguistic similarities and their supposed historical relationship. The names used by the speakers are given here along with the numbers I used above.

Linguists generally recognize two major language families in Papua New Guinea comprising between 700 and 800 languages, Austronesian and non-Austronesian (or Papuan). We are still a long way from arriving at a generally accepted classification of these languages, particularly the non-Austronesian or Papuan group. It is, however, usually agreed that speakers of the latter group of languages arrived in Oceania long before the speakers of Austronesian languages. The coastal distribution of most of the Austronesian languages, which

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