# Sociolinguistics

## An Introduction

Peter Trudgill

UGH! GET OFF! YOU REEK OF BOOZE!

"Watch it, Willy! Mrs. Whitehouse says that men are likely to be less sensitive than women to the importance of a high ethical environment in the home."

# Sociolinguistics: An Introduction

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ociolinguistics: An Introduction

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## Phonetic Symbols

| | |
|---|---|
| č | *ch*ew |
| ç | German i*ch*, Scots ni*ch*t, RP* *hu*ge |
| ɖ | retroflex† d |
| ð | *th*is |
| g | *g*uy |
| j | *y*ou |
| ǰ | *j*ust |
| ɭ | retroflex l |
| ɽ | retroflex flap, as in some Indian languages and some types of Swedish and Norwegian |
| ɳ | retroflex n |
| n̩ | syllabic nasal |
| ŋ | si*ng* |
| ɹ | RP *r*ow |
| R | French *r*ose |
| š | *sh*e |
| θ | *th*ing |
| x | German na*ch*, Scots lo*ch*, Spanish ba*j*o |
| ž | vi*si*on |
| ʔ | a glottal stop, e.g. 'cockney' *better* 'be'er' |
| ʕ | pharyngeal fricative, as in Arabic |
| ą | French p*a*tte, North of England p*a*t, Australian p*a*rt |
| ɑ | RP p*a*th, p*a*rt |

* For the term *RP*, see p. 19.

† For the term *retroflex*, see p. 164.

æ RP p*a*t
e Scots *a*te, French *et*
ɛ RP b*e*d
ə *a*bout
ɜ RP b*ir*d (Note: no [r])
i RP *ea*t, French *i*l
ɪ RP *i*t
o French *eau*, Scots n*o*
ɔ RP l*aw*
ɵ a central vowel between ø and o
ɒ RP *o*n
ø French *eux*, German b*ö*se
u RP f*oo*l, French *ou*
ʊ RP p*u*ll
ʉ a central vowel between [y] and [u], cf. Scots 'h*oo*se'
ʌ RP *u*p
y French t*u*, German *ü*ber
~ vowel nasalized, e.g. õ
₊ vowel fronted, e.g. o̟
. vowel raised, e.g. ọ
ː long vowel, e.g. oː

Brackets [ ] indicate phonetic transcription;
oblique dashes / /, phonemic transcription.

# 1. Sociolinguistics – Language and Society

Everyone knows what is supposed to happen when two Englishmen who have never met before come face to face in a railway compartment – they start talking about the weather. In some cases this may simply be because they happen to find the subject interesting. Most people, though, are not particularly interested in analyses of climatic conditions, so there must be other reasons for conversations of this kind. One explanation is that it can often be quite embarrassing to be alone in the company of someone you are not acquainted with and *not* speak to them. If no conversation takes place the atmosphere can become rather strained. However, by talking to the other person about some neutral topic like the weather, it is possible to strike up a relationship with him without actually having to say very much. Railway-compartment conversations of this kind – and they do happen, although not of course as often as the popular myth supposes – are a good example of the sort of important social function that is often fulfilled by language. Language is not simply a means of communicating information – about the weather or any other subject. It is also a very important means of establishing and maintaining relationships with other people. Probably the most important thing about the conversation between our two Englishmen is not the words they are using, but the fact that they are talking at all.

There is also a second explanation. It is quite possible that the first Englishman, probably subconsciously, would like to get to know certain things about the second – for instance what sort of job he does and what social status he has. Without this kind of information he will not be sure exactly how he should behave towards him. He can, of course, make intelligent guesses about his companion from the sort of clothes he is wearing, and other

visual clues, but he can hardly ask him direct questions about his social background, at least not at this stage of the relationship. What he *can* do – and any reasoning along these lines on his part is again usually subconscious – is to engage him in conversation. He is then likely to find out certain things about the other person quite easily. He will learn these things not so much from what the other man says as from *how he says it*, for whenever we speak we cannot avoid giving our listeners clues about our origins and the sort of person we are. Our accent and our speech generally show what part of the country we come from, and what sort of background we have. We may even give some indication of certain of our ideas and attitudes, and all of this information can be used by the people we are speaking with to help them formulate an opinion about us.

These two aspects of language behaviour are very important from a social point of view: first, the function of language in establishing social relationships; and, second, the role played by language in conveying information about the speaker. We shall concentrate for the moment on the second 'clue-bearing' role, but it is clear that both these aspects of linguistic behaviour are reflections of the fact that there is a close inter-relationship between language and society.

In seeking clues about his companion the Englishman is making use of the way in which people from different social and geographical backgrounds use different kinds of language. If the second Englishman comes from Norfolk, for example, he will probably use the kind of language spoken by people from that part of the country. If he is also a middle-class businessman, he will use the kind of language associated with men of this type. 'Kinds of language' of this sort are often referred to as *dialects*, the first type in this case being a regional dialect and the second a social dialect. The term *dialect* is a familiar one and most people will think that they have a good idea of what it means. In fact, though, it is not a particularly easy term to define – and this also goes for the two other commonly used terms which we have already mentioned, *language* and *accent*.

Let us confine our attention for the moment to the terms *dialect*

and *language*. Neither represents a particularly clear-cut or watertight concept. As far as *dialect* is concerned, for example, it is possible to speak of 'the Norfolk dialect' or 'the Suffolk dialect'. On the other hand, one can also talk of more than one 'Norfolk dialect' – 'East Norfolk' or 'South Norfolk', for instance. Nor is the distinction between 'Norfolk dialect' and 'Suffolk dialect' so straightforward as one might think. If you travel from Norfolk into Suffolk, investigating conservative rural dialects as you go, you will find, at least at some points, that the linguistic characteristics of these dialects change *gradually* from place to place. There is no clear *linguistic* break between Norfolk and Suffolk dialects. It is not possible to state in linguistic terms where people stop speaking Norfolk dialect and start speaking Suffolk dialect. If we choose to place the dividing line between the two at the county boundary, then we are basing our decision on *social* (in this case local-government-political) rather than on linguistic facts.

The same sort of problem arises with the term *language*. For example, Dutch and German are known to be two distinct languages. However, at some places along the Dutch–German frontier the dialects spoken on either side of the border are extremely similar. If we choose to say that people on one side of the border speak German and those on the other Dutch, our choice is again based on social and political rather than linguistic factors. This point is further emphasized by the fact that the ability of speakers from either side of the border to understand each other will often be considerably greater than that of German speakers from this area to understand speakers of other German dialects from distant parts of Austria or Switzerland. Now, in attempting to decide which language someone is speaking, we *could* say that if two speakers cannot understand one another, then they are speaking different languages. Similarly, if they *can* understand each other, we could say that they are speaking dialects of the *same* language. Clearly, however, this would lead to some rather strange results in the case of Dutch and German, and indeed in many other cases.

The criterion of 'mutual intelligibility', and other purely

linguistic criteria, are, therefore, of less importance in the use of the terms *language* and *dialect* than are political and cultural factors of which the two most important are *autonomy* and *heteronomy*. We can say that Dutch and German are *autonomous*, since both are independent, standardized varieties of language with, as it were, a life of their own. On the other hand, the non-standard dialects of Germany, Austria and German-speaking Switzerland are all *heteronomous* with respect to standard German, in spite of the fact that they may be very unlike each other and that some of them may be very like Dutch dialects. This is because speakers of these German dialects look to German as their standard language, read and write in German, and listen to German on radio and television. Speakers of dialects on the Dutch side of the border, in the same way, will read newspapers and write letters in Dutch, and any standardizing changes that occur in their dialects will take place in the direction of standard Dutch, not standard German.

A more extreme case which illustrates the sociopolitical nature of these two terms can be taken from Scandinavia. Norwegian, Swedish and Danish are all autonomous, standard languages, corresponding to three distinct nation states. Educated speakers of all three, however, can communicate freely with each other. But in spite of this mutual intelligibility, it would not make sense to say that Norwegian, Swedish and Danish are really the same language. This would constitute a direct contradiction of the political and cultural facts.

This discussion of the difficulty of using purely linguistic criteria to divide up varieties of language into distinct languages or dialects is our first encounter with a problem very common in the study of language and society – the problem of *discreteness* and *continuity*, of whether the division of linguistic and social phenomena into separate entities has any basis in reality, or is merely a convenient fiction. It is as well to point out that this *is* a problem since terms like 'cockney', 'Brooklynese', 'Yorkshire accent', 'Negro dialect' are frequently used as if they were self-evident, self-contained discrete varieties with well-defined, obvious characteristics. It is often convenient to talk as if this

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