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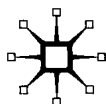
The New Sociolinguistics Reader
Nikolas Coupland and Adam Jaworski

The New Sociolinguistics Reader

Edited by
Nikolas Coupland and
Adam Jaworski



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CHAPTER I

Social Worlds through Language

NIKOLAS COUPLAND AND ADAM JAWORSKI

Sociolinguistics is often loosely defined as ‘the study of language in society’, or ‘the study of language in its social contexts’. Simple formulas like these are hard to avoid, and they do have their place, especially when we meet an academic discipline for the first time and when we need to get some perspective on it. What is it all about? What does it do? What are its priorities? ‘Studying language in society’ is not an unreasonable first attempt at defining what Sociolinguistics is about and what it does, but of course it is more of a slogan than a definition, and it might be misleading. Our own slogan (in the sub-title to this chapter) is a different one – studying ‘social worlds through language’ – and it might at least have the advantage of opening up a discussion about the status of ‘language’ and ‘society’ in Sociolinguistics. Is Sociolinguistics a sort of linguistics (as the word itself seems to imply), and if so, of what sort? Or is it a sort of social science (if that is what we would call the study of ‘social worlds’), and in that case what do we mean by ‘social’ here? But also, we might ask how sensible it is to maintain a distinction between language and society, and whether we actually have to approach Sociolinguistics with this sort of duality in mind. These are some of the issues we will work through in this introductory chapter.

The debate about linguistic versus social priorities has featured in the 50-year history of Sociolinguistics. There have been times when it seemed important to recognize that there were rather distinct treatments of ‘language in society’ in the field. Such differences related to the diverse disciplinary origins of Sociolinguistics and to its ‘founding fathers’ (which is, of course, a sociolinguistically note-worthy expression). For example the Sociology of Language (see Joshua Fishman’s chapter in Part V of this book) applied sociological models to help us appreciate how different languages were placed in different sorts of multilingual settings. In contrast, some people felt that

the term Sociolinguistics should be reserved for analyses of those more small-scale linguistic items, such as accents and dialects (more like some of the studies in Part I), where the technical resources of phonetics and syntactic analysis were needed. Other distinctions recognized that there was a more psychological and subjectively focused ‘wing’ of Sociolinguistics (see some of the chapters in Part IV); and there was certainly an influential anthropological and culturally focused ‘wing’ (see Part VI). Because ‘language in society’ obviously includes the study of how people interact socially, Interactional Sociolinguistics came to be a recognized sub-division, and here we start to see an important overlap between Sociolinguistics and Discourse Analysis (for a comprehensive treatment of Discourse Analysis and its close links with Sociolinguistics, see Jaworski and Coupland 2006).

Although it is still possible to trace these different strands of Sociolinguistics in this way, we have in fact designed this book to reflect what we think is quite a strong *consensus* of opinion in modern Sociolinguistics about the field’s priorities and theoretical assumptions, and about how we should deal with the interface between language and society. Although any academic discipline sustains differences of emphasis and approach, and sometimes a good bit of wrangling about priorities, Sociolinguistics has settled around several key principles and orientations that give it a significant degree of unity, despite its extremely broad reach – into vastly different social, cultural and linguistic contexts. Sociolinguistics is now a broad and vibrant interdisciplinary project working *across* the different disciplines that were its origins. We are therefore able to move on from the old debates about the conflicting priorities and ‘schools’ of Sociolinguistics, and we will use this introductory chapter to highlight some of the key points of agreement. In the different Parts of the Reader, despite the different topics and social issues that they address, it will be possible to see Sociolinguistic converging around very largely the same sets of perspectives. So, for example, Part I deals with the ‘variationist’ approach to structured differences in accent and dialect usage, and within it we can easily trace a shift from ‘classical’, descriptive approaches to sociolinguistic variation (in the chapters by William Labov and Peter Trudgill in Part I) through to more critical, interactional and ethnographic perspectives (in chapters by Jenny Cheshire and Penelope Eckert). It is much the same shift as the one we see in Part II between more formal treatments of ‘women’s language’ and ‘powerful language’ (for example, in William O’Barr and Bowman Atkins’s chapter) through to, for example, Mary Bucholtz’s and Rusty Barrett’s chapters. As we will see below, both these sub-fields and Sociolinguistics generally have incorporated (and have indeed taken the lead in developing) more ‘social constructionist’ approaches to language, situation and social action. What is shared across the full range of modern Sociolinguistics is, we think, more striking than the differences between different approaches.

We have organized the next sections of this introduction around the concepts of *the linguistic* and *the social*, picking up on the core question that we started with – of how Sociolinguistics makes sense of these fundamental concepts. Our main argument will be that, in contemporary Sociolinguistics, it is actually unhelpful to force these constructs too far apart. We will show how the concept of *social practice* has in many ways dissolved the distinction between ‘language’ and ‘society’. Even so, we will comment on ‘the linguistic’ and ‘the social’ in turn, mainly to show the range of phenomena and issues that turn out to be sociolinguistically important in respect of each. In a later section we then consider the theoretical underpinnings of modern Sociolinguistics, exploring what sociolinguists nowadays believe they can achieve through their analyses. After that, we have a section on the research methods that are used in sociolinguistic research, where we overview the main orientations to linguistic and social data. We will continue to make some passing references to later chapters, but not exhaustively. We will introduce the contents and main arguments of the six different Parts of the book in separate short editors’ introductions. In a final section of the book we list some further study resources that are currently available to students and researchers.

‘The Linguistic’ in Sociolinguistics

What sorts of linguistic phenomena and processes is Sociolinguistics concerned with? We should start with the notion of *diversity*, because, in contrast to many other academic approaches to language, Sociolinguistics is committed to revealing and explaining differences (and indeed different sorts of differences) in how language is used in social life. Everyday references to linguistic diversity might be made using labels and categories such as the following:

Yorkshire dialect
the New York City accent
the Hindi language
childish laughter
newspaper editorials
slang
political speeches
small talk

In each case we are dealing with some supposed ‘type of language’ which exists in some sort of system of differentiation. (Sociolinguists tend to use the term *variety of language* as a neutral expression to refer to any distinctive way

of speaking or writing. So all of the above could be said to be different linguistic varieties, although that doesn't take us very far.)

Michael Halliday (1978) suggested that varieties of language could be organized into two broad sets. The first could be said to show *dialect* variation, in the sense that they mainly reflect 'who the user of language is' (his or her social origins and experience). The second set shows *register* variation, in the sense that they reflect 'what the use of the language is' (what communicative purpose exists and how the language fits into a social context). In these terms, our first four examples could be said to show dialect or 'user' variation, even though we would have to accept a fairly abstract sense of the term 'dialect', because for other purposes we would of course want to establish distinctions between accents and dialects, and between accent/dialect and language. The last four examples would then illustrate register or 'use' variation. A newspaper editorial is, we might argue, linked more to a social context and channel of communication than to a type of user. But we can immediately spot further complications. If we hear something we want to call 'childish laughter', we might well be reacting to a particular use or register of language as much as to a category of language user, and presumably it isn't only 'children' who laugh or speak 'childishly'. Small talk is certainly a particular use (or set of uses) of language (see Justine Coupland's chapter in Part VI), but when we say someone is 'doing small talk', we are probably making some inferences about the speaker's 'type' in some sense or other too. In fact Halliday's main point was that dialect and register are two sides of the same coin. The meaning and significance of any communicative act relates to *both* users *and* uses simultaneously, and to the interaction between them. Very commonly, what is distinctive about a particular variety of language is that it is not only linked to a specific social context but to a specific set of users. Political speeches are rather obviously distinctive both for how they are placed institutionally (they are part of the process of political decision-making) and situationally (they usually happen in government chambers of some sort) *and* for the people who tend to deliver them (they are usually made by people we call 'politicians').

Sociolinguistics has made enormous advances in the analysis of dialect variation (in the more conventional sense of the term dialect) since the days of traditional dialectology (Chambers and Trudgill 1998, and see some of the chapters in Part I), but without losing touch with those early forays into dialect geography. It is conventional to distinguish between *regional* and *social dialects*, where 'social' mainly refers to social class, gender and perhaps age-related varieties of language, as opposed to the familiar idea of dialects being separated across regions or geographical space. Accent then refers to variation only at the level of pronunciation, as opposed to dialect which includes pronunciation differences but also differences at the level of grammar and vocabulary. Varieties we refer to as 'languages' (distinct language codes such

as Hindi, English or Spanish) are usually quite distant from each other in their grammatical forms, their vocabularies and in how they build patterns of meaning at the level of discourse, but sometimes they are quite close. To that extent, differences between languages can be very much like differences between dialects, and there is sometimes ambiguity in whether we should refer to a particular variety as a distinct language rather than a dialect. The political implications of this distinction are of course potentially enormous. For example, Stephen May's chapter in Part V comments on defining linguistic varieties as 'dialects' or 'languages' as a 'language rights' issue. Referring to one's way of speaking as 'a language' creates a sense of greater independence and autonomy than is afforded by the term 'dialect'. Likewise, consider the case of 'black' or African American Vernacular English; there is usually a legitimacy around 'using a different language' which can be denied to 'having a different dialect'. Although some languages are certainly subject to heavy social stigmatization (see, for example, Jeff Siegel's chapter in Part V), 'non-standard' dialects of 'standard languages' such as English quite regularly attract social stigma, relative to their 'standard' equivalents (see Nancy Niedzielski and Dennis Preston's chapter in Part IV).

In this (so far rather elementary) discussion of sociolinguistic perspectives on 'the linguistic', we are taking several things for granted. First, we are assuming that speech rather than writing is sociolinguists' main concern. Despite significant research on writing systems and literacies (see Sally Johnson's chapter in Part IV) and sign languages (see Rachel Sutton-Spence's chapter in Part VI), speech has indeed been the main focus in Sociolinguistics, and this can be justified in several important ways. Speech arguably has primacy over writing, in biological, cognitive, historical and developmental terms. Speech comes earliest in human development (for each of us individually, as well as in the evolution of communication) and is deeply coded; competence in writing is afforded high status, but writing is a secondary or overlaid system. Speaking is important to cultural learning and transmission; so is writing, but speaking 'comes first' and it is the primary means by which we are socialized into our families and communities. Speaking is also important in the formulation and expression of people's social identities and relationships (see the following section), and so on. These are some of the conventional justifications for focusing on speech, speaking and spoken interaction or 'talk' in Sociolinguistics. Even so, an important recent development has been to approach analysis in *multi-modal* frameworks, which are sensitive to the interplay between visual and spoken communicative modalities. This wider view is particularly important when we turn to the analysis of cultural rituals and routines as well as in relation to performance events of all sorts. Ultimately, it would be a mistake to restrict the study of 'language' in Sociolinguistics to the study of speech.

Another taken-for-granted assumption in our discussion of varieties of language – and one that has become contentious in contemporary Sociolinguistics – is that it is reasonable to work with *objectified* representations of linguistic varieties, as in the eight labelled examples above. Although there is nothing unusual about expressions like ‘Yorkshire dialect’ and ‘the New York accent’ – we find them throughout everyday discourse – there are quite severe limitations to these concepts as analytic categories in Sociolinguistics. One reason is straightforward and based on the problem of describing such categories in a fully coherent way. There is no simple uniformity in how people speak in the northern English county of Yorkshire, and this is immediately apparent when we look into individuals’ and social groups’ patterns of language use – over time, across genders and ages, across social classes, and so on. Even individual speakers will use ‘Yorkshire’ speech features variably, for example, in the different social settings they find themselves in and in the different ‘registers’ that they use. So ‘Yorkshire dialect’ is clearly an idealized concept. This label has some analytic coherence only if we treat it as a general social *norm* against which more variable and particular ways of speaking can be assessed. The same would be true for ‘standard English’, which for some speakers in Yorkshire might define an alternative norm. These problems will return in our discussion of ‘the social’, below.

The objectification of sociolinguistic varieties is troublesome in other ways too; it is not merely the problem that there is always more detectable linguistic variation than can be reflected in the variety label. We have to recognize that labelling as a linguistic activity is fundamentally *ideological*, and this has been the theme of a good deal of research conducted in critical linguistics (for example, Kress 1985). That is, we should ask why some labels come to be used and not others, and whose interests are served by particular ways of referring to social and linguistic categories and not others. This is an important concern in the Sociolinguistics of ‘the social’, but it applies to reflexive processes of categorizing linguistic varieties too. There is rather little political heat around the category ‘Yorkshire dialect’, but in other cases there is much more. Just as ‘a language’ has been said to be ‘a dialect with an army and a navy’ (see Irvine and Gal’s chapter in Part IV), so there are ideological implications in referring to a linguistic variety (an accent or a dialect) as ‘standard’ versus ‘non-standard’. This usage has been conventional in Sociolinguistics for some time and sociolinguists have felt they have been using the terms in a neutral way; that has certainly been their intention. But it is difficult to convince others that ‘standard’ is not an alternative expression for ‘correct’. The politics of ‘standard English’ have been widely debated (for example, Bex and Watts 1999), but it is only recently that there has been more concerted consideration of the normalizing processes of sociolinguistic analysis. Accepting the importance of ideology critique in Sociolinguistics has been one of the most