An Introduction to Sociolinguistics

Ronald Wardhaugh

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Preface

This book is intended to provide students with a sound, basic coverage of most of the topics dealt with in courses described as either 'Sociolinguistics' or 'The Sociology of Language.' It assumes very little previous knowledge of linguistics, anthropology, or sociology, and so should prove to be most useful in a first-level course. It may also be used as a supplementary text in a higher-level course which deals with a narrow range of topics but in which the instructor wants students to become familiar with topics not treated in that course. Each of the sub-topics covered here concludes with a 'Discussion' section. The material in these sections is designed to encourage further discussion and research; it may also lead to assignments of various kinds.

It is obvious that a book of this kind draws on a wide 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. My students have also provided me with numerous insights into what works in the classroom and what does not. Finally, the secretarial assistance provided by Angie Camardi and most especially Judy Morris enabled me to complete the manuscript to meet some very stringent deadlines. I am most grateful to both of them.

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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. By such a definition 'society' becomes a very comprehensive concept, but we will soon see how useful such a comprehensive view is because of the very different kinds of societies we must consider 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 shall see, speech in almost any society can 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 matter. Sometimes 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. We will return to this matter from time to time.

OUR KNOWLEDGE OF LANGUAGE

When two or more people communicate with each other in speech, we can call the system of communication that they employ a code. In most cases that code will be something we may want to call a language. 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, either by code-switching or code-mixing (see chapter 4), are actually using a third code, one which draws on those two languages. The system (or the *grammar*, to use a well-known technical term) is something that each speaker

'knows', but two very important questions for linguists are just what that 'knowledge' is knowledge of and how it may best be characterized.

In practice, linguists do not find it at all easy to write grammars because the knowledge that people have of the languages that they speak is extremely hard to describe. It is certainly something different from, and is much more considerable than, the kinds of knowledge that we see described in most of 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 describes the language. What is also interesting is that the knowledge is both something that 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. We might even find it possible to talk about 'dead' languages, e.g., Latin or Sanskrit. In such cases we should note that it is the speakers who are dead, not the languages themselves, for these may still exist, at least in part. In the same sense we may even be tempted to claim an existence for English, French, or Swahili independent of the existence of those who speak those languages.

Today, most linguists agree that the knowledge that speakers have of the language or languages they speak is knowledge of something quite abstract. It is a knowledge of rules and ways of saying and doing things with sounds, words, and sentences, rather than just knowledge of specific sounds, words, and sentences without any guiding principles for their use. It is knowing what is *in* the language and what is not; it is knowing the possibilities the language offers and what is impossible. This knowledge explains how it is we can understand sentences we have not heard before and reject others as being *ungrammatical*, in the sense of not being possible in the language. Communication among people is possible because such knowledge is shared with others, although how it is shared – or even how it is acquired – is not well understood. Certainly, psychological and social factors are important and possibly genetic ones too. Language is however a communal possession, although admittedly an abstract one. Individuals have access to it and constantly show that they do so by using it properly. As we shall see, a wide range of skills and activities are 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 which is associated with Noam Chomsky, undoubtedly the most influential figure in late twentieth-century linguistic theorizing. 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 concern the learnability of all languages, the characteristics they share, and the rules that speakers apparently follow in constructing and interpreting sentences; the 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.

Chomsky has distinguished between what he has called *competence* and *performance*. 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.

From time to time we will return to this distinction between competence and performance. We will insist that the kind of competence that must be explained involves much more than Chomsky wishes to include, and indeed includes much that Chomsky subsumes under what he calls performance.

Discussion

1. Hymes (1964b, p. 16) presents the following two instances of behavior which the participants, speakers of Ojibwa, an American Indian language, describe as language behavior:

   > An informant told me that many years before he was sitting in a tent one afternoon during a storm, together with an old man and his wife. There was one clap of thunder after another. Suddenly the old man turned to his wife and asked, 'Did you hear what was said?' 'No,' she replied, 'I didn't catch it.' My informant, an acculturated Indian, told me he did not at first know what the old man and his wife referred to. It was, of course, the thunder. The old man thought that one of the Thunder Birds had said something to him. He

was reacting to this sound in the same way as he would respond to a human being, whose words he did not understand. The casualness of the remark and even the trivial character of the anecdote demonstrate the psychological depth of the 'social relations' with other-than-human beings that becomes explicit in the behavior of the Ojibwa as a consequence of the cognitive 'set' induced by their culture.

A white trader, digging in his potato patch, unearthed a large stone similar to the one just referred to. He sent for John Duck, an Indian who was the leader of the *wábano*, a contemporary ceremony that is held in a structure something like that used for the Midewiwin (a major ceremony during which stones occasionally had animate properties such as movement and opening of a mouth). The trader called his attention to the stone, saying that it must belong to his pavilion. John Duck did not seem pleased at this. He bent down and spoke to the boulder in a low voice, inquiring whether it had ever been in his pavilion. According to John the stone replied in the negative.

It is obvious that John Duck spontaneously structured the situation in terms that are intelligible within the context of Ojibwa language and culture .... I regret that my field notes contain no information about the use of direct verbal address in the other cases mentioned (movement of stone, opening of a mouth). But it may well have taken place. In the anecdote describing John Duck's behavior, however, his use of speech as a mode of communication raises the animate status of the boulder to the level of social interaction common to human beings. Simply as a matter of observation we can say that the stone was treated *as if* it were a 'person', not a 'thing', without inferring that objects of this class are, for the Ojibwa, necessarily conceptualized as persons.

Hymes argues that 'in general, no phenomenon can be defined in advance as never to be counted as constituting a message.' How does this observation apply to the above examples? Can you think of possible examples drawn from your own experience? Note that a basic assumption here is that 'messages', whatever they are, require a 'language'. Should every 'language' in which you can send 'messages' be of equal interest to us as sociolinguists, e.g., the language of flowers, semaphore signaling, dress codes, and road signs? If not, what principles should guide us in an attempt to constrain our interests?

2. What obstacles do you see in an attempt to define English as a language when you consider that such a definition must cover all of the following (and much more): both Cockney and Jamaican English; the speech of two-year-olds; fast colloquial speech; the language of formal written documents such as real estate transfers; formulaic expressions such as *How do you do?* and *It never rains but it pours*; completely novel sentences, i.e., sentences you have not heard or seen

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before (e.g., just about any sentence in this book); and slips of the tongue, e.g., *queer dean* for *dear Queen*? What kinds of abilities must you yourself have in order even to consider attempting such a task?

THE PROBLEM OF 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 to be most troublesome, particularly when much of the variety that is so interesting within language is labeled 'performance' and then brushed 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. In fact, to many investigators it appears that it is that very variety which throws up serious obstacles to all attempts to demonstrate that each language is at its core, as it were, 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 one wishes to propose; on too many occasions it is not just a wrinkle or inconsistency but actually a glaring counter-example. When we look closely at any language, we will 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 be seen to exhibit considerable internal variation, and single-style speakers will not be found (or, if found, will appear to be extremely 'abnormal' in that respect, if in no other!).

A recognition of variation implies that we must recognize that a language is not just some kind of abstract object of study. It is 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 which deliberately separates itself from any concern with the use, and the users, of language. Following Chomsky's example, many linguists have argued that you 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 to develop our understanding of language: what it is, how it is learnable, and what it tells us about the human mind. Surveys of language use have little to offer us in this view. Many sociolinguists have disagreed, arguing that an *asocial* linguistics is scarcely worthwhile. Hudson (1980, p. 19) has argued that such an asocial view must lead to a linguistics which is essentially incomplete. An alternative view is 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 an adequate linguistic theory; an adequate theory of language must have something to say about the uses of language. This is the view we shall adopt here.

As we will see, there is considerable variation in the speech of any one individual, but 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; what is surprising, as we will see, is that those limits can be described with considerable accuracy, and that they also apparently apply to groups of speakers, not just to individuals. That is, there are group norms so far as variation is concerned.

Moreover, individuals have knowledge of the various limits (or norms), and that knowledge is both very precise and at the same time almost entirely unconscious. It is difficult to explain how individual speakers acquire a knowledge of these norms of linguistic behavior, for they appear to be much more subtle than the norms that apply to such matters as social behavior, dress, and table manners. This is an issue to which we will return from time to time. As we shall see, the task will be one of trying to specify the norms of linguistic behavior in particular groups and then trying to account for individual behavior in terms of those norms. The task will be particularly interesting because most people have no conscious awareness that much of their linguistic behavior can be accounted for in this way.

Discussion

1. We have said that languages contain a great deal of variety. What evidence can you cite to show some of the variety? Consider, for example, how many different ways you can ask someone to open a

window or seek permission to open the window yourself because the room you are in is too warm. How many ways can you pronounce variants of *and, have, do, of,* and *for*? When might *Did you eat yet?* sound like *Jeejet*? What did you do with the words and sounds? Do you speak the same way to a younger sibling at home over the breakfast table as you would to a distinguished public figure you meet at a ceremonial dinner? If you do not, and it is certain that you do not, what are the differences in the linguistic choices you make?

2. An individual can use language in a variety of ways and for many different purposes. What might cause a speaker to say each of the following? When would each be quite inappropriate?

   a. Do you think it's cold in here?
   b. The airport, as fast as you can.
   c. I do.
   d. I leave my house to my son George.
   e. Do you love me?
   f. How strange!
   g. Can we have some silence at the back?
   h. What a beautiful dress!
   i. Cheers!
   j. Will you marry me?
   k. Do you come here often?
   l. Keep to the right, please.
   m. Damn!
   n. You don't love me anymore.

   Do you know of any grammar book which tells you when to use (or not to use) each of the above? Would you describe your knowledge of when to use (or not to use) each as a matter of competence or of performance? (In thinking about this you might consult just about any discussion of Chomsky's work on linguistic theory.)

3. Do you always agree with people you know about the 'correct' choice to make of certain linguistic forms? What do you, and they, regard as the correct completions of the *tag questions* found in the following examples? (The first is done for you.)

   a. He's ready, isn't he?
   b. I have a penny in my purse, ____________________?
   c. I may see you next week, ____________________?
   d. I'm going right now, ____________________?
   e. The girl saw no one, ____________________?
   f. No one goes there anymore, ____________________?
   g. Everyone hates one another here, ____________________?

h. Few people know that, ______________________________ ?
i. The baby cried, ______________________________ ?
j. Either John or Mary did it, ______________________________ ?
k. Each of us is going to go, ______________________________ ?

What kinds of difficulties did you find in completing this task? What kinds of agreements and disagreements do you find when you compare your responses to those of others? How would you advise an adult learning English as a foreign language concerning this particular problem?

4. Describe some aspects of your own speech which show how that speech varies from certain other people known to you. Do you pronounce words differently, use different word forms, choose different words, or use different grammatical structures? What group norms do these others conform to? How do you define *norm*? (What kind of conformity would be shown (showed?) by my restructuring that last question as: To what group norms do these others conform?)
5. Hudson (1980, p. 14) says that one may be impressed by the amount of agreement that is often found among speakers. This agreement goes well beyond what is needed for efficient communication. He particularly points out the conformity we exhibit in using such forms as *went* for the past tense of *go*, *men* as the plural of *man*, and *best* as the superlative of *good*. This *irregular morphology* has no communicative value; all it shows is our conformity to rules established by others. How conformist do you consider yourself to be so far as language is concerned? What 'rules' do you obey? When do you 'flout the rules', if you ever do?

THE SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION OF LANGUAGE

The scientific study of language, its uses, and the linguistic norms that people observe poses a number of problems. Such a study must go a long way beyond merely devising schemes for classifying the various bits and pieces of linguistic data one might happen to observe. That would be a rather uninteresting activity, a kind of butterfly collecting. A more profound kind of theorizing is called for: some attempt to arrive at an understanding of the general principles of organization that surely must exist in both language and the uses of language. It is just such an attempt that led Saussure (1959) to distinguish between *langue* (group knowledge of language) and *parole* (individual use of language); Bloomfield (1933) to stress the importance of *contrastive distribution* (since *pin* and *bin* are different in English, /p/ and /b/ are contrastive units in the structure of English); Pike (1967) to distinguish between *emic* and *etic* features in language (/p/ and /b/ are contrastive, therefore *emic*, units, but the two

pronunciations of p in *pin* and *spin* are not contrastive, therefore *etic*); and Sapir (1921) and, much later, Chomsky (1965) to stress the distinction between the 'surface' characteristics of utterances and the 'deeper' realities of linguistic form behind these surface characteristics. A major current linguistic concern is with matters such as language universals (i.e., the essential properties and various typologies of languages – see Comrie, 1981, and Greenberg, 1963, 1966), with the factors that make languages learnable by humans (but not by non-humans), and with the conditions that govern such matters as linguistic change.

There just is not one way to do linguistics, although it is true to say that not a few linguists appear to believe that their way is the only way. It is actually quite possible for two linguists to adopt almost entirely different approaches to both language and linguistic theorizing in their work while still doing something that many consider to be genuine linguistics. Perhaps nowhere can such differences of approach be better observed than in attempts to study the relationship of language to society. Such attempts cover a very wide range of issues and reveal the diversity of approaches: different theories about what language is; different views of what constitute the data that are relevant to a specific issue; different formulations of research problems; different conceptions of what are 'good' answers in terms of statistical evidence, the 'significance' or 'interest' of certain findings, and the generalizability of conclusions; and different interpretations of both the theoretical and 'real-world' consequences of particular pieces of research, i.e., what they tell us about the nature of language or indicate we might do to change or improve the human condition.

What we will see then, time after time, is a sociolinguistics without a single unifying theme – except that it is about the relationship of language to society – and without a single unifying approach. That view should not necessarily disturb us, if for no other reason than that the 'parent' disciplines, linguistics and sociology, are not much better off in this respect: internal controversy rather than widespread agreement seems the norm in both. Moreover, there is little reason to suppose that work done with a single theme and approach would encompass all that we would want it to do: it would do no more than illuminate a small part of the various problems that exist and do so in its own peculiar light. In the current state of our knowledge, we can scarcely afford to choose too readily such a limited focus for our investigations.

Discussion

1. Find out what you can about Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* and about Pike's *etic–emic* distinction. How might these distinctions relate to any study of language use in society?

2. Bloomfield's views on contrastive distribution are very important. Be sure you know what is meant by the concept of 'contrast' in linguistics. You might test out your knowledge of the concept by trying to find out how many contrastive consonant and vowel sounds you have in the variety of English you speak. If you find the number of consonant sounds to be any other than 24 and the number of vowel sounds to be far different from 14, you may be on the wrong track.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

I propose, therefore, to look at a considerable variety of ways in which language and society are related. The possible relationships have long intrigued investigators. Indeed, if we look back at the history of linguistics it is rare to find investigations of a language which are entirely cut off from concurrent investigations of either the history of that language or its regional and/or social distributions, or its relationship to objects, ideas, events, and actual speakers and listeners in the 'real' world. That is one of the reasons why a number of linguists have found Chomsky's *asocial* view of linguistic theorizing difficult to accept as anything but a rather sterile type of activity, with its explicit rejection of any concern with the social uses of language.

There is a variety of possible relationships between language and society. One is that social structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure and/or behavior. Certain evidence may be adduced to support this view: the *age-grading* phenomenon, whereby young children speak differently from older children and, in turn, children speak differently from mature adults; studies which show that the varieties of language that speakers use reflect such matters as their regional, social, or ethnic origin and possibly even their sex; and other studies which show that particular ways of speaking, choices of words, and even rules for conversing are determined by certain social requirements. A second possible relationship is directly opposed to the first: linguistic structure and/or behavior may either influence or determine social structure. This is the view that is behind the Whorfian hypothesis (see chapter 9), the claims of Bernstein (see chapter 14), and those who argue that languages rather than speakers of those languages can be 'sexist' (see chapter 13). A third possible relationship is that the influence is bi-directional: language and society may influence each other. A variant of this approach is that this influence is dialectical in nature, a Marxian view put forward by Dittmar (1976), who argues (p. 238) that 'speech behaviour and social behaviour are in a state of constant interaction' and that 'material living conditions' are an important factor in the relationship.

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