

An Introduction to Sociolinguistics

Second edition

Janet Holmes



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For Rob

Preface to Second Edition

This second edition of my textbook has provided an opportunity to respond to some of the many kind suggestions and comments that readers have sent to me over the last ten years. I have corrected errors and clarified examples. I have expanded the text in places. I have up-dated the references and recommended readings. Thanks to the comments of a number of reviewers, I have also persuaded the publishers to accept a recommendation I made with the first edition, namely, to separate the exercises from their answers. In response to suggestions and requests, I have also added a number of substantial sections to the book, most obviously a new chapter on language, cognition and culture, and sections on social constructionism in the two chapters dealing with gender and language. I hope the amendments and additions increase the usefulness of the book both for students and teachers, as well as increasing its readability.

Janet Holmes
Wellington, New Zealand
June 2000.

Preface to First Edition

This book has been written for people who have never heard of sociolinguistics, but who would like to know what it is. At the end of it, I hope they will not only know what sociolinguists do and why, they might also feel like reading further about some of the topics that have interested them.

Because my aim has been to share my love of the subject with newcomers, I have made some conscious decisions about the content which would have been different for more advanced students. In selecting examples I have used a good deal of material from recent published research, but I have also used many examples which could perhaps be described as 'classics', in the sense that any sociolinguist will be familiar with them. These 'tried and true' examples will be old friends if readers progress to further reading, and should help bridge the gap between this introductory text and more sophisticated sociolinguistic books. Though I have drawn on sociolinguistic research involving a wide variety of languages, I have used a large number of English examples too. English is likely to be a very familiar language for most of my readers, and I know from experience that some points will therefore be understood more quickly and thoroughly using an English example – at least for the initial encounter with a new concept.

I have assumed that my readers will be familiar with very basic grammatical terms, but little more. The glossary at the end of the book defines more specialised grammatical terms which crop up in the text. Similarly I have used a minimum of phonetic symbols in the text, but a sociolinguist cannot avoid talking about speech sounds, and phonetic symbols are the only really satisfactory way of conveying different pronunciations. Appendix 1 describes the phonetic symbols I have used, with a gloss to help readers work out what they sound like.

Different people approach books differently. I have constructed this book on the assumption that most will read section I before section II, and section II before section III. The later chapters refer back to the earlier ones to some extent. However, readers who like a sense of the whole before dipping into the parts may find it helpful to read the first and the last chapters before trying the rest.

Finally, I am sure perceptive readers will be able to guess which are my own particular areas of interest within the broad area of sociolinguistics. I make no apology for that. But I hope that my enthusiasm for sociolinguistics as a whole also communicates itself, so that at least some readers will feel encouraged not only to pursue the subject further, but perhaps also

Preface to First Edition

to address some of the many questions about the relationship between language and society which still await answers.

Janet Holmes
Wellington, New Zealand
December 1990.

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What do sociolinguists study?

What is a sociolinguist?

Sociolinguists study the relationship between language and society. They are interested in explaining why we speak differently in different social contexts, and they are concerned with identifying the social functions of language and the ways it is used to convey social meaning. Examining the way people use language in different social contexts provides a wealth of information about the way language works, as well as about the social relationships in a community, and the way people signal aspects of their social identity through their language. This book will explore all these aspects of sociolinguistic study.

Example 1

Ray: Hi mum.

Mum: Hi. You're late.

Ray: Yeah, that bastard Sootbucket kept us in again.

Mum: Nana's here.

Ray: Oh sorry. Where is she?

Ray's description of his teacher would have been expressed differently if he had realised his grandmother could hear him. The way people talk is influenced by the social context in which they are talking. It matters who can hear us and where we are talking, as well as how we are feeling. The same message may be expressed very differently to different people. We use different styles in different social contexts. Leaving school Ray had run into the school principal.

Example 2

Ray: Good afternoon, sir.

Principal: What are you doing here at this time?

Ray: Mr Sutton kept us in, sir.

This response reflects Ray's awareness of the social factors which influence the choice of appropriate ways of speaking in different social contexts. *Sociolinguistics* is concerned with the relationship between language and the context in which it is used.