



# SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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Sociolinguistics is concerned with the study of language in relation to the people who use it. This exciting discipline, whose major developments cover only the last two decades, has already cast light on many practical problems, such as the linguistic difficulties of the underprivileged, as well as on theoretical questions like the causes and mechanisms of language change.

In this timely new textbook Dr Hudson provides a coherent theoretical framework within which the findings of sociolinguists may be related to a theory of linguistic structure. The comprehensive discussion covers topics such as the validity of notions like 'a dialect'; the balance between individualism and conformity in the use of language; the significance of pidgins and creoles; the dynamics of speech as social interaction; the technicalities of modern social dialectology; and the attitudes evoked by languages and dialects.

Dr Hudson clearly demonstrates that the study of language cannot be divorced from the study of social identity, thought and culture, and that the contribution of sociolinguistics to descriptive and theoretical linguistics is a positive and challenging one. Dr Hudson does not, however, presuppose a great deal of technical knowledge of linguistics on the part of his readers, and his book will also be of interest to students following a wide range of courses in the social sciences.

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To Gay, Lucy and Alice

## PREFACE

I have written this book in the hope that it will do a number of different things, from informing and stimulating the newcomer to providing a theoretical framework within which the findings of sociolinguistics may be related to the theory of language structure (so-called 'theoretical linguistics'). If there is a bias in my selection of topics to cover, it is in favour of those topics which will be of most interest to students of language or linguistics, but I hope that others coming from sociology, social psychology and anthropology may be interested to see how the relations of language to society look to one whose training and research has been almost exclusively in structural linguistics. As a theoretical linguist myself, I have felt free to criticise the tradition within which I work, and the writing of this book has made it clear to me that there is much to criticise in this tradition. At the same time, I have tried to pick out the many positive contributions that a sociolinguistic viewpoint can make to the study of language.

My thinking on sociolinguistics is based on a course which I have been giving in London since 1970, on work with a number of stimulating graduate students, and on discussions with other sociolinguists (most of them British). It will be clear from the text and the references who has influenced me most, but I should like to mention in particular Bob Le Page, who first suggested the writing of this book and who spent a lot of time working through two quite different versions of it with me, discussing many of the theoretical issues and shaping my thinking on them. Other colleagues gave me helpful comments on various chapters – Thea Bynon, David Carmeli, Anne Holloway, John Holm, Joan Russell, Greg Smith, Adrian Stenton, Geoffrey Thornton and Peter Trudgill; and I had especially helpful and detailed comments from Geoff Sampson, Howard Giles and Jim and Lesley Milroy. I hope they approve of what I have done with their comments.

## *Preface*

The book also owes a good deal to my family. My father John read the complete manuscript and his suggestions have certainly made the reader's task easier than it would otherwise have been. My wife Gay did more than her fair share of looking after our two small daughters, one of whom was born while the book was gestating, and the three of them between them kept my spirits up and my feet firmly on the ground. Finally, I have to thank the staff of the Cambridge University Press for their skilled assistance. I hope the result is a reasonably balanced mixture of fact and theory, and of enthusiasm and sobriety.

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# I

## Introduction

### 1.1 Sociolinguistics

#### 1.1.1 *A description*

We can define sociolinguistics as *the study of language in relation to society*, and this is how we shall be taking the term in this book. At the time of writing (1978), sociolinguistics has become a recognised part of most courses at university level on 'linguistics' or 'language', and is indeed one of the main growth points in the study of language, from the point of view of both teaching and research. There are now two major English-language journals devoted to research publications (*Language in Society* and *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*) and a number of introductory textbooks, apart from the present one (others are Burling 1970, Pride 1971, Fishman 1972a, Robinson 1972, Trudgill 1974b, Platt & Platt 1975, Bell 1976, Dittmar 1976, Wardhaugh 1976). Most of the growth in sociolinguistics took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, so it can be seen how young the discipline is. This is not meant to imply that the study of language in relation to society is an invention of the 1960s – on the contrary, there is a long tradition in the study of dialects and in the general study of the relations between word-meaning and culture, both of which count as sociolinguistics by our definition. What is new is the *widespread* interest in sociolinguistics and the realisation that it can throw much light both on the nature of language and on the nature of society.

Like other subjects, sociolinguistics is partly empirical and partly theoretical – partly a matter of going out and amassing bodies of fact and partly of sitting back and thinking. The 'armchair' approach to sociolinguistics can be fairly productive, whether it is based on facts collected in a systematic way as part of research or simply on one's own experience. In particular, it allows the beginnings of an analytical frame-

6.2.2 *Stereotypes and how to study them*

People thus use the speech of others as a clue to non-linguistic information about them, such as their social background and even personality traits like toughness or intelligence. This is an example of the way in which people use information stored in terms of prototypes: if characteristics A and B are typically ('prototypically') associated with each other, we *assume* the presence of B whenever we *observe* the presence of A, or vice versa. If A is some characteristic of speech and B is some characteristic of personality, speech will be used as a clue to personality, which is generally harder to observe directly than speech. Similarly, if some speech characteristic is linked in a prototype with a social characteristic, such as some particular type of education, the former will be used as a clue to the latter. In the sociolinguistic literature, this kind of prototype is generally referred to as a *STEREOTYPE*, so it may be helpful to change our terminology accordingly. However, the reader should be warned that Labov (1972a: 248) has used the term 'stereotype' in a more restricted sense, to refer only to connections between linguistic and non-linguistic characteristics of which people are *AWARE* at a conscious level, in contrast with the majority of such connections.

How then is it possible to study these subjective connections objectively, and to analyse the stereotypes which people use? It might be thought that true objectivity would require us to by-pass what is in people's heads, and study the connections between linguistic and non-linguistic variables directly, as described in chapter 5, in order to find out precisely how close a connection there is between the variables. But however objective and accurate this information might be, it would be irrelevant if we were mainly interested in the layman's stereotypes, as in this section, since we would still not know how close they came to the objective truth. The only way to study the layman's stereotypes is to study the layman himself and find some way of making his stereotypes more accessible. As we have just noted in connection with Labov's use of the term 'stereotype', most people are not consciously aware of the connections between specific linguistic and non-linguistic variables, so there is little point in asking people directly about these connections ('What kind of person do you think uses such-and-such a form?'), but there are nevertheless ways of tapping people's knowledge more or less indirectly.

The most straightforward and widely used method is called the *SUBJECTIVE REACTION TEST*, first developed by social psychologists,

climate, and the same may also be true of that reported in chapter 4, though perhaps to a lesser extent. This practical orientation has led to a good deal of discussion of some theoretical issues – those with practical implications, including the ones aired in chapter 5 – but relatively little discussion (or at a less satisfactory level) of theoretical issues with less immediate practical consequences. This imbalance will no doubt strike the reader of this book, though I have tried to clarify theoretical issues of *both* kinds.

### 1.1.2 *Sociolinguistics and linguistics*

Throughout this book I shall refer to sociolinguists and linguists as separate people, but of course there are many sociolinguists who would also call themselves linguists, as well as the large number whose background is in sociology, anthropology or social psychology. The question of who is a sociolinguist and who is not, is neither interesting nor important; but it is important to ask whether there is a difference between sociolinguistics and linguistics and, if so, what it is. A widely held view is that there is such a difference, and that linguistics differs from sociolinguistics in taking account only of the *structure* of language, to the exclusion of the social contexts in which it is learned and used. The task of linguistics, according to this view, is to work out 'the rules of language X', after which sociolinguists may enter the scene and study any points at which these rules make contact with society – such as where alternative ways of expressing the same thing are chosen by different social groups. This view is typical of the whole 'structural' school of linguistics which has dominated twentieth-century linguistics, including transformational-generative linguistics (the variety developed since 1957 by Noam Chomsky). (It is also fairly typical, incidentally, of much foreign-language teaching in Britain.)

However, not all students of language would accept this view. Some would argue that since speech is (obviously) social behaviour, to study it without reference to society would be like studying courtship behaviour without relating the behaviour of one partner to that of the other. There are two particular reasons for accepting this view. The first is that we cannot take the notion 'language X' for granted, since this in itself is a social notion in so far as it is defined in terms of a group of people who speak X. As we shall see in chapter 2, the problem is that this group will in all probability be defined, in a complete circle, as 'the group who speak X', especially when we focus on detailed differences between

dialects and try to define 'dialect X' instead of 'language X'. This argument has been developed especially by William Labov (1972a: viii). The second reason is that speech has a social function, both as a means of communication and also as a way of identifying social groups, and to study speech without reference to the society which uses it is to exclude the possibility of finding social explanations for the structures that are used. This view is typical of J.R. Firth (e.g. 1950, 1964), who founded the 'London School' of linguistics, and whose followers include Michael Halliday (e.g. 1973) and Terence Mitchell (1975). An important recent discussion of the influence of language structure is Brown & Levinson (1978).

This book will argue that the findings of sociolinguistics are highly relevant to the theory of language structure – for instance, in relation to the nature of meaning (3.2) and the analysis of alternatives in a grammar (5.5). My preference is therefore for the second view, according to which linguistics ignores society at its peril. I point this out to warn the reader against possible bias, but it is also clear that there is a big difference between recognising that one *should* take account of the social dimension of language and knowing *how* to do so.

I shall refer throughout to 'sociolinguists' and 'linguists' as though they were separate individuals, but these terms can simply be used to reflect the relative amount of attention given to the social side of language, without taking the distinction too seriously. There is no denying that remarkable progress has been made in the study of language structure within the structural tradition, by people who would call themselves 'linguists' and not 'sociolinguists'. Moreover, it is clear that some areas of language, such as those covered in this book, relate more directly to social factors than others do. Those who concentrate on other areas, taking a more or less 'asocial' approach, we can call 'linguists', as opposed to 'sociolinguists'. However, although I am not arguing that the topics covered in this book are the only ones which should be studied, I do believe that all who study language, from whatever point of view, should be much more aware of the social context of their subject matter than is often the case, and the topics covered here seem most relevant in this context.

### 1.1.3 *Sociolinguistics and the sociology of language*

I defined sociolinguistics as 'the study of language in relation to society', implying (intentionally) that sociolinguistics is part of the