

An abstract painting with a textured, expressive style. The upper half is dominated by warm, fiery colors like red, orange, and yellow, suggesting a sunset or a turbulent sky. The lower half transitions into cooler tones of deep blue, purple, and green, which could represent the sea or a landscape at dusk. The brushstrokes are visible and energetic, creating a sense of movement and depth.

John Edwards

SOCIOLINGUISTICS

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

John Edwards

SOCIAL LINGUISTICS

A Very Short Introduction



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beirt a bhfuil grá mór agus
cion agam dóibh*

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Chapter 1

Coming to terms

The acquisition of language cannot be accounted for solely on the basis of postnatal experience. Human beings must be genetically prepared or “pre-wired” to learn language. Since it would be silly to think that children born in France have a different sort of evolutionary wiring than their counterparts in Finland, brains must be equally “ready” in all the many language communities of the world. This, in turn, implies that at some fundamental level all languages may be cut from the same cloth. Noam Chomsky has been the single most important champion of this approach, in which linguistics intertwines with philosophy, psychology, and epistemology. All languages are not, of course, similar at more immediately observable levels, which means that linguists also concern themselves with the structure of words (morphology) or phrases (syntax), with meaning (semantics), with sound (phonology), and with lexicon (vocabulary). In effect, their work amounts to a detailed fleshing-out of the environmental “shaping” that directs the general genetic preparedness into specific language channels.

The environmental contexts of language are its obvious and immediate facets, and what might be called the “social life of language” has always been of great interest to a wide variety of people. Central here is the relationship between language and identity, whose consequences are always interesting and sometimes

dramatic. A thousand years before the dawn of the modern era, some Ephraimites attempted to “pass” as Gileadites: they had been defeated and hoped to return home across the Jordan. They were detected, however, because of their inability when challenged to pronounce the word *shibboleth* in the Gileadite manner. In Judges 12:6, when the impostor “could not frame to pronounce it right . . . they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan” (KJV). More generally, and more peacefully, Publilius Syrus—once a slave, then a famous Roman epigrammatist—observed that “speech is a mirror of the soul.” In the seventeenth century, John Locke wrote that language is the “great instrument and common tie” of society. And, in the twentieth, the linguist Edward Sapir argued that language was simply the most basic linchpin of humanity. In both its ordinary communicative role and as the most immediate symbolic marker of human affiliation, language is preeminently a social phenomenon.

Scholarly inquiry into sociolinguistics and the sociology of language can be traced to the nineteenth century, and no doubt existed much earlier. The terms used today, though, are relatively recent. Japanese scholars in the 1930s had proposed the uniting of sociology and linguistics, and the word *sociolinguistics* was apparently introduced by a Cambridge anthropologist, Thomas Hodson, in 1939. The single most important antecedent to modern study, however, appeared in 1952.

In that year, an assistant professor of English in Houston cited H. L. Mencken’s *The American Language*, suggesting that its great popularity did not indicate a broad public concern with language or linguistics per se but, rather, that it was “socially satisfying or harrassing” to many people. Haver Currie was able to point to some existing American academic attention to those social aspects of language that interested Mencken’s readers, but he lamented that the United States lagged behind Europe in the study of “folk” or “common” speech. Unaware of Hodson’s coinage, Currie then suggested that a scholarly field called socio-linguistics [*sic*] might usefully be dedicated to the interaction of language and society.