


SOCIOLOGICAL LINGUISTICS



EDITED BY J.B. PRIDE AND J. HOLMES





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Introduction



Sociolinguistics has been established as a distinct discipline for some years, comprehending the study of the structure and use of language in its social and cultural contexts. Courses in sociolinguistics rely to a large extent on articles published in a great number of heterogeneous periodicals, reflecting the variety of disciplines which have contributed to the development of the subject: linguistic, anthropological, sociological, psychological, educational journals – articles used to teach sociolinguistics can be found in all these. In this selection then we have tried to achieve these two goals: firstly, the majority of the articles have been drawn together from various periodicals and are ones which we have found useful in teaching an introductory undergraduate course in sociolinguistics; and secondly, there are also contributions which have not yet been published elsewhere, and which represent some part of the most recent work in this rapidly expanding field. Needless to say, any selection of Readings will inevitably reflect a personal view of what areas of study are crucial to the discipline concerned.

Many insights into the social meaning of language have been the result of sociolinguistic research into *bilingualism* and *multilingualism*. It is work of this sort that has revealed most clearly some of the ways in which linguistic variation serves to reflect and clarify socio-cultural values. Dialectal and stylistic variation will always tend to convey different social meanings, but it may on the whole be easier to identify the object of study in the case of languages as such, within bilingual or multilingual speech communities; moreover, bilingualism and multilingualism are far more characteristic of present-day societies than many monolingual speakers would suppose.

The study of the social meaning conveyed by different languages in a multilingual community can be undertaken at two levels, the one logically preceding the other. In the first place one can examine the way the languages are used on the macro-scale, using data from large-scale surveys to reveal community norms of language use. Then, against this background one can examine how the individual exploits his awareness of the society's norms in order to achieve particular effects. Many questions need answering in a description of multilingualism at the level of community norms: how does one abstract from the behaviour of individuals in order to isolate such norms; to what extent do they restrict the individual, or vary in different societies; can the same cultural values be expressed by

different languages in different communities? Some of these questions are discussed in the first section of the book.

The sociolinguistic study of bilingual and multilingual speech communities assumes both formally linguistic and functional aspects. One of its main focal points concerns the intrinsic properties of *standard* languages. What is meant by a 'standard' language, by 'standardization', by a 'vernacular', and by other such closely related terms – 'colloquial' for example, 'dialect', even the term 'language' itself? Garvin (1959) some time ago stated that a standard language should exhibit both 'flexible stability' and 'intellectualization'; namely, responsiveness to culture changes, a degree of formal stability backed up by suitable codification, and a functional range which will embrace in particular what Ferguson (1968) has referred to as 'intertranslatability with other languages in a range of topics and forms of discourse characteristic of industrialized, secularized, structurally differentiated, modern societies'; furthermore, that the language should symbolize the unification, separateness and prestige of the community that uses it. One sees the central importance of each of these considerations in the study of sociolinguistics generally. There is its renewal of interest, for example, in what had been a main point of departure for modern linguistics, namely the relevance of language to the understanding of culture and vice-versa; and its attention to the fact that in so many parts of the world not only are there very many languages (sometimes hundreds) within given national boundaries, but also several (possibly competing) varieties of those languages – sometimes differing to the extent that neither their native users nor any linguist can confidently say '*this* is an example of *that* language'. Sociolinguistics also explores the difficulties – and considerable interest – involved in assessing the relative values of different functions performed by languages, functions which are by no means necessarily always headed by that of intellectualization. The need for a measure of uniformity in and among languages confronts, in other words, the need for cultural relativity and change, for some degree of dialectal diversity, and for the kind of functional power that allows 'the principal business of speech behaviour' to be, say, 'the manipulation of emotions by aesthetic devices' (Albert, 1964, on Burundi). A standard language is by no means what common usage would call a standardized language!

Standard languages which symbolize feelings of unification, separateness and prestige, sometimes qualify as *national* languages. Some of the recurrent aspects of this perplexing but important field of study are: what are or could be some of the roles of 'languages of wider communication' (such as English, or French, or Russian) not only as national languages but also as affecting other national languages? how can or should less

widely used languages expand, both formally and functionally? what principles should govern the choice of languages at various levels in the educational system of a country? and so on.

Whether the community be bi- (or multi-) lingual or monolingual, variety within languages is the rule. What is meant therefore by the terms *dialect* and *style*? There is no simple answer. The question, for example, 'where (socially and structurally as well as geographically) does this dialect – or language – end and the next begin?' is both persistent and challenging. Criteria for decisions about this and about very many other associated problems are numerous and often contradictory in effect, nor is it easy to assign relative degrees of importance. There may be said, however, to be three main criteria: *linguistic structure*, *intelligibility*, and *social function*. Structural diversity (in both regional and social space) can often be so extreme as to force one to Zipf's conclusion that 'if a linguistic description has to be consistent it must be that of an idiolect' (i.e. the speech of one individual); one might add 'at one point in time'. Moreover isoglosses (structural boundaries) will by no means always coincide as between one level of analysis (grammatical, phonological, etc.) and another – or even between one system and another at a given level (sentence structure, word structure, etc.); and the problem of gradual transitions always remains. Measures of intelligibility may, or may not, provide a simple and reliable key to structural distance. But what is meant by intelligibility? How does one deal with evidence of 'non-reciprocal' intelligibility (Wolff, 1959)? Village dialects in India have been said to form 'a continuous chain from Sind to Assam, with mutual intelligibility between adjacent areas' (Gumperz, 1964) – but not between more distant areas. How important are beliefs about intelligibility as compared with the results of tests (see especially Haugen, 1966)? Social function is certainly not the least important criterion. Many factors can apply here: social class of various sorts (compare the caste system in India, for example, with socio-economic stratification elsewhere), topic (consider the linguistic choices involved in certain religions, or attaching to local or non-local topics, etc.), and so forth. One crucial factor is that of interpersonal relationship, reflected in styles of speaking or writing: what is meant by 'formality' in any given speech community, how are subjective feelings of status expressed, etc.? Dialectal variation is always likely to be closely bound up with stylistic variation, the one a function of the other. It is the potential range of this interrelationship that is conveyed by our selection in Part Three.

Any individual member of a community must acquire far more than the formal or structural features of his language(s). He must undergo a process of socialization; he must acquire a knowledge of the social and cultural values of his society, the constraints which the society imposes on behaviour

— including language behaviour. A knowledge of the different aspects of dialectal and stylistic variation examined in Part Three is part of the *communicative competence* which must be acquired by the ideal speaker-hearer in any speech community. Any measure of his linguistic proficiency will therefore involve consideration of his ability to speak appropriately in different social contexts, as well as his skill in manipulating the phonology and syntax of the different linguistic codes used in the speech community.

Before adequate methods of measuring communicative competence can be devised a logical prerequisite is detailed studies of the social environment in which the individual acquires language. In the past successful language acquisition has too often been regarded as an inevitable result of sufficient exposure to the language, without any attention to the kind of language the individual is being exposed to. Second-language teaching, in particular, has often been less successful than it might, as a result of the restricted variety of linguistic contexts with which students are provided.

Another aspect of successful language acquisition is the effect of the individual's motivation on the degree of proficiency he attains in the language. Psychological attitudes are often developed early in the socialization of the child and may well lead to discrimination on the part of the individual as to which codes he wants to acquire. Motivations of this sort seem to be of central importance to successful language learning.

Exposure to a rich variety of linguistic material is as important in first-language acquisition as in second-language learning. In any speech community however, social variables will inevitably influence the linguistic codes to which the individual is exposed. In rural areas of Tanzania, the child's contact with English, for example, may well be limited to the English taught in school. Even leaving aside the variation in linguistic competence of different English teachers, the child's proficiency in English will inevitably be restricted since his experience of English has been confined to only one social domain, very few role-relationships and a limited number of speech functions. His communicative competence in English will, therefore, be limited to the ability to manipulate the language in only very restricted social situations no matter how strong his motivation to acquire the language.

Opportunities to acquire a wide range of the linguistic codes used in a community may also be affected by its social structure. In some communities the social class to which an individual belongs determines the range of codes to which he is exposed. A member of the highest caste in India, for example, will generally control a wide range of linguistic codes; the social elite in Haiti can be defined as the 10 per cent who speak both Haitian creole and also standard French, compared with the 90 per cent who are monolingual in the creole. In monolingual English-speaking

communities, too, the social class to which one belongs can affect the variety of linguistic styles with which one is familiar. The upper-middle-class executive may feel linguistically inadequate in a working men's club. His communicative competence is restricted to the social contexts with which he is familiar. Similarly, an individual who has had only limited education may feel unable to express himself appropriately at a scientific congress, should he find himself there. In other words we are all confined, to some extent, to the styles we have acquired in the social situations within which we have been socialized. The influence of social factors on communicative competence is evident in all societies; various aspects of this area of sociolinguistics are examined in Part Four.

The areas examined in this selection of readings moves then from the generally macro-level of sociolinguistic study in Parts One and Two to the generally micro-level in Parts Three and Four in two related ways. Firstly, the emphasis moves from the social constraints on the use of codes which are imposed on the whole community to the social constraints on the individual's opportunity to acquire those codes. And secondly, there is more emphasis on code-switching between different languages in order to convey different social information in the earlier sections, while the later sections focus more on intra-language switching, i.e. switching between dialects or styles.

Finally, we are aware that there are areas of sociolinguistics which we have inevitably neglected, and can only plead limitations of space and hope that the selection we have made will prove an interesting introduction to the field which may whet the reader's appetite and encourage him to read further.

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The importance, yet complexity, of the place of language in society has made sociolinguistics a study of prime importance for social scientists in many disciplines. It is a field whose boundaries still await definition, but a number of distinct sociolinguistic themes have already been studied in depth, much methodological and theoretical groundwork has been done and much valuable descriptive material accumulated.

This book presents a selection of articles covering the main areas of contemporary sociolinguistics. It pays particular attention to the concepts of multilingualism, language standardization, dialectal and stylistic variation, and the acquisition of what Hymes and others have called 'communicative competence'.

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