

## BASIC CONCEPTS IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will try to find out the essence of the social function of language. Language and society are intertwined because a society moves with language. A language defines the linguistic behaviour of a group of people in a given society. We will find out what sociolinguistics means by examining various definitions and unearth their points of convergence.

**Key Words:** sociolinguistics, language, society

### INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistics is a developing branch of linguistics and sociology which examines the individual and social variation of language (Spolsky, 2010). Just as regional variation of language can give a lot of information about the place the speaker is from, social variation tells about the roles performed by a given speaker within one community (ibid.). Sociolinguistics is also considered as a branch of sociology in that it shows the relationship between language use and the social basis for such use (Hudson, 1996). It differs from sociology of language in that the focus of sociolinguistics is the effect of the society on the language, whereas the latter's interest is on the language's effect on the society (Bell, 1976). Sociolinguistics is a practical, scientific discipline which researches into the language that is actually used in order to formulate theories about language change (ibid.).

## 1. SOCIOLINGUISTICS: DEFINING THE CONCEPT

There are numerous definitions of sociolinguistics. However, each of these definitions does not fail to acknowledge that sociolinguistics has to do with language use and a society's response to it. Let us examine some of them:

1. The study of the link between language and society, of language variation, and of attitudes about language (Spolsky, 2010).

2. A branch of anthropological linguistics that examines how language and culture are related, and how language is used in different social contexts (Bell, 1976).

3. A study of the relationship between language and social factors such as class, age, gender and ethnicity (Hudson, 1996).

4. The study of stylistic and social variation of language (Wardhaugh, 2010).

5. The study of language in relation to its socio-cultural context (Van Dijk, 2009).

6. Sociolinguistics is the study of the effect of any and all aspects of society, including cultural norms, expectations, and context on the way language is used (Trudgill, 2000).

In all these definitions, it is clear that sociolinguistics is a discipline that makes a link between sociology and linguistics. It is a branch of sociology and as a concept it is concerned with how language use is a determinant of a given society's linguistic requirements. Every society has its linguistic codes that are acceptable for interaction (Meyerhoff, 2006). Sociolinguistics shows how groups in a given society are separated by certain social variables like ethnicity, religion, status, gender, age and level of education and how adherence to these variables is used to categorize individuals in social classes (Hudson, 1996). The social study of language is a modern linguistic paradigm because it was the modern linguist who first acknowledged and accepted that language by its nature is totally a social phenomenon (Bell, 1976). All the above-mentioned definitions demonstrate that sociolinguistics is related to language use and a society's response to it.

Some of the factors investigated by sociolinguists that can affect the way people speak are listed below:

- **Social class:** The position of the speaker in the society is often measured by the level of education, parental background, profession and their effect on syntax and lexis used by the speaker (Trudgill, 2000). An important factor influencing the way of formulating sentences is, according to many sociolinguists, the social class of the speaker. Thus, there has been a division of social classes suggested in order to make the description accurate (ibid.). Two main groups of language users, mainly those performing non-manual work and those with more years of education are the 'middle class', while those who perform some kind of manual work are 'working class' (ibid.). The additional terms 'lower' and 'upper' are frequently used in order to subdivide the social classes (ibid.). Therefore, differences between upper middle classes can be compared with lower working classes (ibid.).

- **Social Context:** The register of the language used depending on changing situations: formal language in formal meetings and informal usage in informal meetings (Spolsky, 2010). It is notable that people are acutely aware of the differences in speech patterns that mark their social class and are often able to adjust their style to the interlocutor (ibid.). It is especially true for the members of the middle class who seem eager to use forms associated with upper class; however, in such efforts, the forms characteristic of upper class are often overused by the middle class members (Gardiner, 2008). The above mentioned process of adapting own speech to reduce social distance is called 'convergence' (ibid.). Sometimes, when a person wants to emphasize the social distance, s/he makes use of the process called 'divergence', purposefully using idiosyncratic forms (ibid.).

- **Geographical Origins:** Slight differences in pronunciation between speakers indicate the geographical region they come from (Trudgill, 2000). Sociolinguistics investigates the way in which language changes, depending on the region it is used in (ibid.). To describe a variety of language that differs in grammar, lexis and pronunciation from others, the term 'dialect' is used (Hudson, 1996). Moreover, each member of community has a unique way of speaking due to the life experience, education, age and aspiration (Trudgill, 2000). An individual personal variation of language use is called an idiolect (ibid.).

- **Ethnicity:** There are differences between the use of a given language by its native speakers and other ethnic groups (Bell, 1976).

There are numerous factors influencing idiolect, some of which have been presented above; yet two more need to be clarified, namely jargon and slang (Hudson, 1996). Jargon is specific technical vocabulary related with a particular field of interest, or topic (ibid.). For example, words such as convergence, dialect and social class are a sociolinguistic jargon. Whereas, slang is a type of language used most frequently by people from outside of high-status groups, characterized by the use of unusual words and phrases instead of conventional forms (Spolsky, 2010). For example, a sociolinguist might determine, through study of social attitudes, that a particular vernacular would not be considered appropriate language use in a business or professional setting; s/he might also study the grammar, phonetics, vocabulary, and other aspects of this sociolect (Hudson, 1996).

- **Nationality:** This is visible in the case of the English language: British English differs from American English, or Canadian English; Nigerian English differs from Ghanaian English; The study of language variation is concerned with social constraints determining language in its contextual environment (Hudson, 1996). ‘Code-switching’ is the term given to the use of different varieties of language in different social situations.

- **Gender:** Patterns of language use of men are different from those of women in terms of quantity of speech and the intonation patterns (Trudgill, 2000).

- **Age:** The age of the speaker influences the use of vocabulary and grammar complexity (Bell, 1976).

But, what are the main reasons behind a social study of language? Saussure (1916: 98) posed the question: “But what does a language look like, what is it like at a particular moment?”. We know languages change from one moment to another, but what their characteristics are if we could hold them still, freeze them, at one moment in time (Bell, 1976). Ideas of such significance do not occur in isolation, even if we can identify one individual as the seeming originator of them – they are ‘about’ at the time, however subtly that may be (ibid.).

## 2. SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE VARIATION

Language, as it is described in books on semantics and morphology, is often introduced as a uniform entity. However, even within one language community, significant differences can be noticed (Hudson, 1996). Such regional variation of languages is also subject to linguistic investigations (ibid.). General descriptions of languages focusing on pronunciation, or grammar, usually provide information about the standard variety of a given language. Nevertheless, this does not mean that it is in any respect better than its other varieties. The standard language is chosen for such accounts because it is frequently the official kind, and, in the case of English, an idealized version that learners of English as a second/foreign language usually attempt to learn (Trudgill, 2000). One of the most easily noticeable features characterising some regional features of a language is most certainly accent (ibid.). Every language speaker utters words with some kind of accent which can tell the listeners where the speaker is from, as the very term, accent, is characterized the way of pronouncing words, showing which country, or part of a country, the speaker is from (ibid.). Accent is frequently confused with the term 'dialect' which denotes aspects of pronunciation together with words and syntax slightly different from the standard variety (Hudson, 1996). Although various dialects of one language possess grammar rules and distinct vocabulary, speakers of different dialects of one language understand each other without any difficulty (Spolsky, 2010). Moreover, one language user can speak two different dialects, or varieties of one language. In some countries, there are distinct forms of language used on everyday basis and on special occasions. Such a linguistic situation, when one variety of language is regarded more prestigious and one moves vernacular, but both are used depending on situation, is called diglossia (Hudson, 1996).

Apart from regional variations of a language within the boundaries of a country or speech community, there are other factors influencing language change (Bell, 1976). In certain areas of the world, English has been used as a lexifier, i.e., a language which is a source of words for varieties of language called pidgins (Trudgill, 2000). A pidgin, or a contact language, is a mixture of two other languages, usually created because of trading aims between peoples who do not share a common means of communication (Hudson, 1996). English-based pidgins are, for example, used in India and Cameroon. Such varieties of language often

have limited vocabulary, poorly developed grammar and are used only when other types of communication are impossible. When a pidgin begins to be used by a larger number of people, its vocabulary and grammar expand, and it starts to be used in a wider context (Trudgill, 2000). As it is developed as a contact language, pidgin does not have any native speakers, yet if it is used on a wider scale, children of people using it might acquire it as their mother tongue (ibid.). When such a language starts to be used by a second generation of speakers, it is called a creole (ibid.). It is the next stage of development for pidgin and it is characterized by different grammatical features such as avoidance of passive voice, lack of case distinction in pronouns and different word orders (ibid.).

As the process of the development of a pidgin into a creole is called creolization, there is also a process of decreolization, which stimulates further change of a language (Bickerton, 1977). When people using a creole have some contact with the standard language, they tend to shift from one form to the other, thus often changing the structures of creole to make it resemble the standard version, which is perceived as having a higher social prestige (ibid.).

### 3. THE NOTION OF SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIATION

A variety of a language is a form that differs from other forms of the language systematically and coherently (Hudson, 1996). Variety is a wider concept than style of prose or style of language (Spolsky, 2010). Some sociolinguists use the term 'lect', apparently a back-formation from specific terms such as dialect and idiolect (Delgado de Carvalho, 1962).

Varieties such as dialects, idiolects, and sociolects can be distinguished, not only by their vocabulary, but also by differences in grammar, phonology and prosody (Hudson, 1996). For instance, the tonal word accents of Scandinavian languages have differing realizations in many dialects (Trudgill, 2000). As another example, foreign words in different sociolects vary in their degree of adaptation to the basic phonology of the language (ibid.). Certain professional registers such as legalese show a variation in grammar from the standard language (Meyerhoff, 2006). For instance, English journalists or lawyers often use grammatical moods such as subjunctives or conditional mood, which are no longer used frequently by other speakers (ibid.). Many registers are simply a specialized set of terms (Spolsky, 2010). Colloquialisms and

idiomatic expressions are usually understood as limited to variation of lexicon, and hence of style (Trudgill, 2000). The concept of language varieties in general, and language registers in particular, can be of great help in translating as well as in evaluating translations.

It will sometimes be useful to refer to considerations of register. Since the concept of a 'whole language' is so broad and therefore rather loose, it is not altogether useful for many linguistic purposes, whether descriptive or comparative (Halliday, 1973). In other words, the concept of language as a whole unit is theoretically lacking in accuracy, and pragmatically rather useless (ibid.). Consequently, the need arises for a scientific classification of sub-languages or varieties within the total range of one language. These varieties, or sub-languages, may be classified in more than one way. The suggested classes include idiolects, dialects, registers, styles and modes, as varieties of any living language (Hudson, 1996). Language registers are recognized as varieties classified according to different subject matters (Bell, 1976). We acknowledge varieties distinguished according to attitude, which are called 'styles', and varieties due to interference, which arise when a foreign speaker imposes a grammatical usage of his native tongue upon the language, which he is using (ibid.). For instance, a Frenchman might say "I am here since Friday". This is lexically English, but grammatically French. Another way of classifying language varieties is in accordance with the user or the use of language (Hudson, 1996). Thus, in the first category, we may list social dialects, geographical dialects and idiolects, whereas the second category includes language registers (ibid.).

The total range of a language may be described in terms of its grammatical, phonological, and, sometimes, even graphological systems (Meyerhoff, 2006). Similarly, the language varieties of any given language have certain linguistic features in common (Spolsky, 2010). These common features of all the varieties of one language constitute the common core of that language (Bell, 1976). Apart from this common core of the language concerned, there are other lexical, grammatical, and stylistic features of each individual language variety, and so these could serve as formal linguistic as well as stylistic markers of the language variety in question (ibid.). It may be worth noting in this respect that these variety markers may exist on any level: phonetic, syntactical, stylistic and, above all, lexical.

#### 4. SPOKEN AND WRITTEN VARIETIES

There are two varieties of language- the spoken and the written within standard (literary) language (Bell, 1976). This differentiation is predetermined by two distinct factors, namely, the actual situation in which the language is being used and the aim of communication (ibid.). The situation in which the spoken variety of language is used and in which it develops and presupposes the presence of the interlocutor, whereas the written variety presupposes the absence of the interlocutor (Coulthard, 1977). The spoken language has a considerable advantage over the written because of such factors as human voice and all kinds of gestures, which give additional information (ibid.).

The written language has to seek means to compensate for what it lacks (Gardiner, 2008). This is the reason why the written language is more carefully organised, more explanatory; the word choice is more deliberate (ibid.). The spoken language is spontaneous. It vanishes after having fulfilled its purpose, which is to communicate the thought, no matter how trivial or important. The idea remains, the language disappears (Trudgill, 2000). The written language is able to live forever with the idea it expresses.

The spoken language cannot be detached from its user; the written language can be detached and objectively looked at. The writer has a chance to correct and to improve what has been put on paper. The written language bears a greater volume of responsibility than its spoken counterpart. The spoken language differs from the written one phonetically, morphologically, lexically and syntactically. The most striking difference between the spoken and the written language is in the vocabulary used. There are words and phrases typically colloquial, on the one hand, and typically bookish, on the other hand. If colloquial words find their way into the written language, they immediately produce significant stylistic effects and can be used for the speech characterisation. The spoken language widely uses intensifying words (Gardiner, 2008). These are interjections and words with strong emotive meaning, as oaths, swear-words and adjectives which have lost their primary meaning (ibid.). The spoken language is characterised by the insertion into the utterance of words without any meaning, which are called 'empty words' like 'as well', 'and then' and 'so to say' (ibid.).

The essential difference between the two varieties of language is evidently reflected in the syntactical structure (Wardhaugh, 2010). The main syntactical features of the spoken form are the omission of the part of utterance supplied by the situation in which the communication takes place and a tendency to use the direct word-order in questions and to omit auxiliary verbs, leaving it to the intonation to indicate the grammatical meaning (Trudgill, 2000). Some of the main differences between the spoken and the written varieties are listed below (Gardiner, 2008):

- a) Using a construction with two subjects (a tautological subject) in the spoken form (E.g. 'James, he was there.')
- b) The absence of connectives in most people's speech (E.g. 'Coming back home late. Had his dinner. Went to bed after that.')
- c) Syntactical structures, expressing emotions, which can be understood only through a proper intonation design (E.g. 'Isn't he polite! Don't you tell me that! It's a big lie!')
- d) The written language is characterised by the use of complicated sentence-units.
- e) An important property of the written variety of language is coherence and logical unity.

The choice of colloquial vocabulary falls into the following groups or varieties of choice, depending on the user's intent, social situation and immediate need (Trudgill, 2000):

#### 1. Common Colloquial Words

Slang is the most extended and vastly developed subgroup of non-standard colloquial layer of the vocabulary of a given type of language (Wardhaugh, 2004). Besides separate words, it includes also highly figurative phraseology (ibid.). Slang occurs mainly in dialogues, and serves to create speech characteristics of personages (ibid.).

#### 2. *Professional and Social Jargons*

A jargon is a special type of vocabulary in a given language (Bell, 1976). They are used in emotive prose to depict the natural speech of a character within the framework of such device as speech-characterization (ibid.). They can show vocation, education, breeding, environment and even the psychology of a personage (Gardiner, 2008). Slang, contrary to jargon, needs no translation, jargon is used to conceal or disguise something (ibid.). Certain professional registers, such as legalese, show a

variation in grammar from the standard language. For instance, English journalists or lawyers often use grammatical moods such as subjunctive and conditional, which are no longer used frequently by other speakers. Many registers are simply a specialised set of terms (ibid.).

### 3. Vulgarism

Vulgarism is a word or a phrase from the language spoken by people, as contrasted with a more formal or refined usage of such language. Vulgarisms are divided into 'expletives' and 'swearwords', used as general exclamations and obscene words (Hudson, 1996). They are emotionally and strongly charged and can be used for speech-characterisation (ibid.).

### 4. Dialectal Words

Dialectal words are special word forms that indicate the linguistic origin of the speaker (Trudgill, 2000). They are introduced into the speech of personages to indicate their region (ibid.). The number of dialectal words and their frequency also indicate the educational of the speaker (ibid.).

In linguistics, many grammars have the concept of grammatical mood, which describes the relationship of a verb with reality and intent (Gardiner, 2008). There are various ways of classifying choice of words or varieties in sociolinguistics, but the immediate requirement is the need to use a given variety according to the immediate social requirement.

## CONCLUSION

All in all, language is an important aspect in human interaction. Sociolinguistics is a branch of science that tries to study the link between sociology and linguistics. If linguistic choices are made in accordance with the orderings of society, then every choice carries social information about the speaker/writer. Consequently, some linguists reason that the communication of social information presupposes the existence of regular relationships between language usage and social structure. In short, sociolinguistics has added a lot to the field of the social study of the language.

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