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Introduction

Key Concepts

How to define and delineate the study of sociolinguistics

What it means to 'know' a language

How language varies across speakers and within the speech of one person

The social construction of identities

The relationship between language and culture

Research design and methodologies for sociolinguistics research

Sociolinguistics is the study of our everyday lives – how language works in our casual conversations and the media we are exposed to, and the presence of societal norms, policies, and laws which address language. Since you are reading this book, you may already have some idea what the study of sociolinguistics entails; you may already have an interest in, and knowledge about, regional dialects, multilingualism, language policy, or non-sexist language. And we will cover all of these topics, along with many others – what social class and ethnicity might have to do with language use, why we do not always 'say what we mean,' the role of language in education.

But we would like to encourage readers to approach the study of sociolinguistics not as a collection of facts, but as a way of viewing the world around you. In sociolinguistics, we seek to analyze data so that we can make generalizations about

language in society, but also to question both our findings and the very process of doing research. Take, for instance, the topic of nicknames. There is a stereotype that men use nicknames and women do not, exemplified in the following joke:

If Diana, Natalie, Naomi, and Maria meet for lunch, they will call each other Diana, Natalie, Naomi, and Maria. But if Matt, Peter, Kirk, and Scott go out for a brewsky, they will call each other Dutch, Dude, Doofus, and Pencil.

We could investigate this sociolinguistic phenomenon by surveying people about their nicknames and also observing or recording interactions in which they are addressed by close friends and family members. We might find, indeed, that the men in our study are often called nicknames, while the women rarely are. But we would like to go deeper than this generalization; why do we ask this question in the first place? Why do we assume that the categories of ‘men’ and ‘women’ are socially relevant? What is it about nicknames that makes using them, or not using them, significant social behavior? And even if most men are called by a nickname and most women are not, how do we explain the existence of individual men who do not have nicknames, and the individual women who do?

Thus, while in sociolinguistics we do analyze speech with the goal of making generalizations, we also question these generalizations and examine how they, in turn, influence how we use language. In short, sociolinguistics is not a study of facts (e.g., men call each other nicknames) but the study of ideas about how societal norms are intertwined with our language use (e.g., what it means to be a male or female member of a particular society may influence the terms we use to address each other).

We will come back to these points repeatedly: language, society, and sociolinguistic research findings must all be viewed in their social contexts, interpreted, and redefined. To begin, however, we will offer a starting point for discussing language in society. By **society**, we mean a group of people who are drawn together for a certain purpose or purposes; this is a rather vague and broad term, and throughout this book we will be engaged in discussing how to draw meaningful boundaries around a group of speakers for the purposes of studying their language. We use the term **language** to mean a system of linguistic communication particular to a group; this includes spoken, written, and signed modes of communication.

These terms are, as you will undoubtedly have noted, inextricably intertwined. A society must have a language or languages in which to carry out its purposes, and we label ways of speaking with reference to their speakers. This connection is inevitable and complex; our purpose here is to study the relationship between language and society in more specific ways which help us more clearly define and understand both the social groups and the ways they speak.

In this introductory chapter, we will present some of the basic concepts in the field of sociolinguistics: what it means to ‘know’ a language, the nature of differences across and within languages, the importance of social group membership in language use, and different ideas about the relationship between the worldviews of

these groups and the languages they speak. Further, we will outline the field of study in terms of approaches and methodologies.

Knowledge of Language

When two or more people communicate with each other, we can call the system they use a **code**. We should also note that speakers who are multilingual, that is, who have access to two or more codes, and who for one reason or another shift back and forth between these languages in some form of multilingual discourse (see chapter 4) are also using a linguistic system, but one which draws on more than one language. The system itself (or the **grammar**, to use a well-known technical term) is something that each speaker ‘knows,’ but two very important issues for linguists are (1) just what that knowledge comprises and (2) how we may best characterize it.

In practice, linguists do not find it at all easy to write grammars because the knowledge that people have of the languages they speak is extremely hard to describe. Anyone who knows a language knows much more about that language than is contained in any grammar book that attempts to describe the language. One of the issues here is that grammar books tend to be written as **prescriptive** works; that is, they seek to outline the standard language and how it ‘should’ be spoken. What sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropologists do is provide **descriptive** grammars of languages, which describe, analyze, and explain how people actually speak their languages.

One example of this difference can be found in the *less/fewer* distinction. Prescriptively, *less* should be used with non-count nouns, such as water, rice, or money; *fewer* is used with count nouns (or noun phrases) such as drops of water, grains of rice, or pesos. So something may be worth *less money*, but it costs *fewer pesos*. Descriptively, however, this distinction does not hold; *less* is often used with count nouns. Most notable is the common sign at US grocery stores indicating that certain cashier lines are for patrons with ‘ten items or less.’ Chances are you will also hear people saying things like *there were less students present today than yesterday*, although of course there may be some dialects of English where this distinction is still commonly employed.

While linguists are aware of prescriptive rules of language as dictated in reference grammars, the focus of linguistics is not prescriptive rules but the rules inside the heads of speakers which constitute their knowledge of how to speak the language. This knowledge that people have about the language(s) they speak is both something which every individual who speaks the language possesses and also some kind of shared knowledge. It is this shared knowledge that becomes the abstraction of a language, which is often seen as something which exists independent of speakers of a particular variety.

Today, most linguists agree that the knowledge speakers have of the languages they speak is knowledge of something quite abstract. It is a knowledge of underlying

rules and principles which allow us to produce new utterances. It is knowing what is part of the language and what is not, knowing both what it is possible to say and what it is not possible to say. Communication among people who speak the same language is possible because they share such knowledge, although how it is shared and how it is acquired are not well understood. Individuals have access to it and constantly show that they do so by using it properly. As we will see, a wide range of skills and activities is subsumed under this concept of ‘proper use.’

Competence and performance

Confronted with the task of trying to describe the grammar of a language like English, many linguists follow the approach associated with Chomsky, undoubtedly the most influential figure in linguistics for the last half century. Chomsky distinguishes between what he has called **competence** and **performance**. He claims that it is the linguist’s task to characterize what speakers know about their language, that is, their competence, not what they do with their language, that is, their performance. The best-known characterization of this distinction comes from Chomsky himself (1965, 3–4) in words which have been extensively quoted:

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker–listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. This seems to me to have been the position of the founders of modern general linguistics, and no cogent reason for modifying it has been offered. To study actual linguistic performance, we must consider the interaction of a variety of factors, of which the underlying competence of the speaker–hearer is only one. In this respect, study of language is no different from empirical investigation of other complex phenomena.

Pinker (2007, 74) points out the consequences of such a view: ‘Though linguists often theorize about a language as if it were the fixed protocol of a homogeneous community of idealized speakers, like the physicist’s frictionless plane and ideal gas, they also know that a real language is constantly being pushed and pulled at the margins by different speakers in different ways.’ It is just such ‘pushing and pulling’ that interests Labov, arguably the most influential figure in sociolinguistics in the last fifty or so years. He maintains (2006, 380) that ‘the linguistic behavior of individuals cannot be understood without knowledge of the communities that they belong to.’ This is the focus of sociolinguistics, and what makes it different from Chomskyan linguistics. We are primarily concerned with real language in use (what Chomsky calls performance) not the language of some ideal speaker (i.e., an idealized competence). This distinction is reflected in methodological differences; syntacticians such as Chomsky will often use **grammatical judgments** to get at

competence, while sociolinguists tend to use recordings of language use (see section below on methodologies, and chapter 11 on Discourse Analysis).

The knowledge that we will seek to explain involves more than knowledge of the grammar of the language, for it will become apparent that speakers know, or are in agreement about, more than that. Moreover, in their performance they behave systematically: their actions are not random; there is order. Knowing a language also means knowing how to use that language, since speakers know not only how to form sentences but also how to use them appropriately. There is therefore another kind of competence, sometimes called **communicative competence**, and the social aspects of that competence will be our concern here.

Exploration 1.1: Grammatical Judgments

Here are a number of statements that can be ‘tagged’ to make them into questions. Add a tag question to each with the tag you would be most likely to use and also add any other tags you might also use or think others might use. See (1) for an example of a potential answer. Indicate for each example which tag you believe to be the prescriptively ‘correct’ tag, or if you might associate certain tags only with certain types of speakers. Compare your results with those of others who do this task. If there are differences in your answers, how can you explain them? Do such differences challenge the idea of a shared communicative competence?

1. He’s ready, *isn’t he?*
Other possible tags: ‘innit,’ ‘ain’t he.’
Prescriptively ‘correct’ tag: ‘isn’t he.’
2. I may see you next week, ...?
3. No one goes there any more, ...?
4. Either John or Mary did it, ...?
5. Few people know that, ...?
6. You don’t want to come with us, ...?
7. I have a penny in my purse...?
8. I’m going right now, ...?
9. The baby cried, ...?
10. The girl saw no one, ...?

Variation

The competence–performance distinction just mentioned is one that holds intriguing possibilities for work in linguistics, but it is one that has also proved to be quite

troublesome, because the performance of different speakers, and the same speaker in different contexts, can vary quite a lot. For instance, speakers in some areas of the Midwestern United States might utter sentences such as ‘The car needs washed’ while others would say ‘The cars needs to be washed’ or ‘The car needs washing.’ Further, an individual speaker might use all three of these constructions at different times. (These different structures for expressing the same meaning are called **variants**; this term will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6.) For sociolinguists, this **linguistic variation** is a central topic. The language we use in everyday living is remarkably varied. There is **variation** across speakers, that is, reflections of different ways that people speak in different regions or social groups, but also variation within the speech of a single speaker. No one speaks the same way all the time, and people constantly exploit variation within the languages they speak for a wide variety of purposes. The consequence is a kind of paradox: while many linguists would like to view any language as a homogeneous entity, so that they can make the strongest possible theoretical generalizations, in actual fact that language will exhibit considerable internal variation. One claim we will be making throughout this book is that variation is an inherent characteristic of all languages at all times, and the patterns exhibited in this variation carry social meanings. (See the link to a website which provides an overview of the field, the sociolinguistics page for the PBS series *Do You Speak American*, in the materials associated with chapter 1 in the web guide to this textbook.)

The recognition of variation implies that we must recognize that a language is not just some kind of abstract object of study. It is also something that people use. Although some linguists, following Chomsky’s example, are focused on what language (as an abstraction) is, sociolinguists have argued that an *asocial* linguistics is scarcely worthwhile and that meaningful insights into language can be gained only if performance is included as part of the data which must be explained in a comprehensive theory of language. This is the view we will adopt here.

We will see that while there is considerable variation in the speech of any one individual, there are also definite bounds to that variation: no individual is free to do just exactly what he or she pleases so far as language is concerned. You cannot pronounce words any way you please, inflect or not inflect words such as nouns and verbs arbitrarily, or make drastic alterations in word order in sentences as the mood suits you. If you do any or all of these things, the results will be unacceptable, even gibberish. The variation you are permitted has limits, and these limits can be described with considerable accuracy. For instance, we can say, ‘It is the fence that the cow jumped over,’ which is comprehensible if somewhat stilted, but most speakers would agree that ‘the fence jumped the cow over’ does not follow English word order rules and is largely incomprehensible. Individuals know the various limits (or norms), and that knowledge is both very precise and at the same time almost entirely unconscious. At the same time, it is also difficult to explain how individual speakers acquire knowledge of these norms of linguistic behavior, because they appear to be much more subtle than the norms that apply to such matters as social behavior, dress, and table manners.

Our task will be one of trying to specify the norms of linguistic behavior that exist in particular groups and then trying to account for individual behavior in terms of these norms. This task is particularly interesting because most people have no conscious awareness of how their linguistic behavior is conditioned by social norms. We will also see how the variation we find in language allows changes to occur over time and often points to the direction of change. A living language not only varies, it changes.

Exploration 1.2: Variation in Greetings

How do you greet your friends, your family, your colleagues, your professors and your acquaintances? Are there different verbal exchanges as well as different embodied practices (e.g., air kisses, shaking hands, fist bump)? Does the situation matter – that is, do you greet your family differently if you have not seen them for a long time, or friends in different ways depending on whether you run into each other by accident on campus or if you are meeting for dinner? Are there ways of greeting, either that you use or that you do not use, that index membership in particular groups? Are there ways of greeting that you find inappropriate – in general, or for particular addressees or in particular situations? Compare your own repertoires and practices with those of the other students in your class.

Speakers and Their Groups

In order to talk about how speakers use language, we must talk about both individuals and groups, together with the relationships between people within and across groups. One of the current ways of thinking about this focuses on speaker identities. The term **identity** has been used in a variety of ways in both the social sciences and lay speech. In the current social theory, identities are not fixed attributes of people or groups but are dynamically constructed aspects which emerge through discourse and social behavior. Although we do look at identities of individuals, what we are primarily concerned with is *social* identity: ‘Identity is defined as the linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories’ (Kroskrity 2000, 111). Our special focus is on how language constructs speaker identity.

In such a view, identities are not preconceived categorical affiliations such as ‘male’ or ‘female’ but nuanced ways of being that we construct; while we may indeed reference such categories, our identities are not simply a matter of listing demographic identifiers (e.g., ‘single white female, 45, architect, nature lover’). So while

a speaker may introduce a comment by saying *As a mother . . .*, thus explicitly referencing this aspect of her identity, what will emerge is a more nuanced picture of what type of mother she is – for example, protective, feminist, one who encourages independence, one who is concerned with the upward mobility of her children. Named social categories are not our identities but concepts we use to construct our identities.

Further, our identities are fluid and we do not have a single identity but multiple levels of identity, and shifting and sometimes even conflicting identities which emerge in different contexts. To continue the example above, the speaker may reference her identity as a mother but then also focus on how she identifies strongly with her profession and struggles to balance this with the demands of parenthood; this may be intertwined with her gender identity and her social class identity. In another conversation, this same speaker might focus on her political affiliations to construct a different aspect of her identity.

Likewise, group identity categories are constantly being negotiated. What it means to be the member of a particular social category (e.g., ‘educated,’ ‘Latino’) may vary over time, space, and situation, and how particular speakers identify with or are assigned to these categories may also vary. We will revisit this concept of multiple identities throughout this text because it is highly relevant to our study of language in society.

So far, we have said that the term ‘society’ refers to a group of people unified through some purpose; other concepts such as ‘speech community,’ ‘social network,’ and ‘community of practice’ will be found in the pages that follow (see especially sections devoted to these concepts in chapter 3). We will see how these are useful if we wish to refer to groups of various kinds, since it is among groups that individuals form relationships or reject such a possibility. The groups can be long-lasting or temporary, large or small, close-knit or casual, and formally or informally organized. This is, therefore, another level of complexity we must acknowledge in the pages that follow as we refer to ‘middle class,’ ‘women,’ ‘speakers of Haitian Creole,’ ‘teenagers,’ and so on. We must remember that these categorizations also have a process side to them: all must be enacted, performed, or reproduced in order to exist. Socio-economic class, gender, language background, and age are only important aspects of our identities and groups if we choose to organize our lives in that way; in some contexts they may not be salient social categories and we may instead see ourselves as members of groups based on racial identification, sexual orientation, national belonging, or membership of a particular formal social group (e.g., a Choir, a professional association, or a fox hunting club).

In all of the above we must recognize that **power** has a significant role to play; it undoubtedly has a key role to play in how we choose to identify ourselves and how we form groups with others. Power is ‘the ability to control events in order to achieve one’s aims’ (Tollefson 2006, 46) and is also ‘the control someone has over the outcomes of others’ (Myers-Scotton 2006, 199). It is pervasive in society and never completely absent, although it is exercised on a continuum from extremely brutal to most subtle. It may be exercised and resisted through words as well as deeds.

Bourdieu (1991) conceives of languages as symbolic marketplaces in which some people have more control of the goods than others because certain languages or varieties have been endowed with more symbolic power than others and have therefore been given a greater value. For example, speaking – and especially writing – what is considered the standard language in a given community (see discussion of this in chapter 2) is often necessary to gain employment, may open doors in terms of finding housing, and may lend the speaker more authority even in casual conversations. We cannot escape such issues of power in considering language, social relationships, and the **construction of social identities**. In chapter 2, we will address the issue of standard languages and issues of societal power; in chapter 11 we will discuss the interaction of language and power within social relationships; in chapter 12 we will address gendered aspects of power; and in chapters 13 and 14 we will discuss institutionalized power relationships between the speakers of particular languages (or particular varieties of languages).

Solidarity refers to the motivations which cause individuals to act together and to feel a common bond which influences their social actions. Thus the concept of solidarity is intertwined with both identity formation and group formation. We know that people can unite for all kinds of reasons, some of which they may not even be able to articulate, and the consequences may be great or small. We will also look at some of the consequences for language behavior. For instance, in the next chapter, we will discuss how a sense of belonging contributes to the classification of a particular code as a language or a dialect. In chapter 3, we will look more at how people use language to construct their identities as members of particular groups. Much variationist work (discussed in chapters 6–8) rests on the idea that the use of particular linguistic features corresponds with desired membership in particular social groups; in chapters 9 and 11, we look at how this can be examined with qualitative methods.

Exploration 1.3: Idiolects

An idiolect is an individual's way of speaking, including sounds, words, grammar, and style. The first author of this book, Wardhaugh, speaks in such a way that he is regarded as North American almost everywhere he goes but in certain aspects shows his origins in the north of England. He pronounces *grass* and *bath* with the vowel of *cat*, does not pronounce the *r*'s in *car* and *cart*, and distinguishes the vowels in *cot* and *caught* (and pronounces the latter word exactly like *court*). He also distinguishes the vowels in *Mary*, *merry*, and *marry*. He sometimes pronounces *book* to rhyme with *Luke*, and finds he has to watch his pronunciation of *work* because he

has a 'relic' Geordie pronunciation homophonous to *walk*.) He now says words like *tune*, *duke*, and *news* like *toon*, *dook*, and *nooz* (but when, as a young man, he served in the Duke of Wellington's Regiment, he used to say *Jook*). In vocabulary he knows Geordie dialect words like *bumler* 'bumble bee,' *canny* 'nice,' *gob* 'mouth,' *hinny* 'honey,' *lug* 'ear,' *plodge* 'wade,' and *tettie* 'potato' but no longer uses them. His grammar, both written and spoken, is that of Standard English.

Try to characterize your own speech in a similar way, identifying the aspects of your background and exposure to different ways of speaking which you believe influence your speech. How does your description compare to others in the class, and with what others say about you?

Language and Culture

There is a tradition of study in linguistic anthropology which addresses the relationship between language and **culture**. By 'culture' in this context we do not mean 'high culture,' that is, the appreciation of music, literature, the arts, and so on. Rather, we adopt Goodenough's well-known definition (1957, 167): 'a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves.' Such knowledge is socially acquired: the necessary behaviors are learned and do not come from any kind of genetic endowment. Culture, therefore, is the 'know-how' that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living; for language use, this is similar to the concept of communicative competence we introduced above. The key issue addressed here is the nature of the relationship between a specific language and the culture in which it is used.

Directions of influence

There are several possible relationships between language and culture. One is that social structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure and/or behavior. Certain evidence may be adduced to support this view. For instance, given the evidence of the **age-grading** phenomenon (i.e., young children speak differently from older children, and, in turn, children speak differently from mature adults), we could argue that the social organization of age groups influences the language used in these groups. Another possible piece of evidence for this direction of influence is studies which show that the varieties of language that speakers use reflect such matters as their regional, social, or ethnic origin and possibly even their gender.

In both cases it might be that social structures account for – possibly even determine – linguistic differences.

A second possibility is directly opposed to the first: linguistic structure and/or behavior may either influence or determine social structure or **worldview**. This is the view that is behind the **Whorfian hypothesis**, which we will discuss in more detail in the next section. Such a view is behind certain proposed language reforms: if we change the language we can change social behavior, for example, a deliberate reduction in sexist language will lead to a reduction in sexist attitudes.

A third possible relationship is that the influence is bi-directional: language and society may influence each other. Certain language reforms can also be seen as relying on this perspective; the reforms are made because of changes in societal norms, for example, awareness that generic ‘he’ is not inclusive may increase the power of female speakers, enabling them to claim inclusion. Consequently, language change and a greater awareness of gender equality co-occur, hand in glove as it were.

A fourth possibility is to assume that there is no relationship at all between linguistic structure and social structure and that each is independent of the other. A variant of this possibility would be to say that, although there might be some such relationship, present attempts to characterize it are essentially premature, given what we know about both language and society.

The Whorfian hypothesis

The claim that the structure of a language influences how its speakers view the world is today most usually associated with the linguist Sapir and his student Whorf, a chemical engineer by training, a fire prevention engineer by vocation, and a linguist by avocation. However, it can be traced back to others, particularly to Humboldt in the nineteenth century. Today, the claim is usually referred to as ‘Linguistic Determinism,’ the ‘Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis,’ the ‘Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis,’ or the ‘Whorfian Hypothesis.’ We will use the last term since the claim seems to owe much more to Whorf than to anyone else.

Sapir acknowledged the close relationship between language and culture, maintaining that they were inextricably related so that you could not understand or appreciate the one without a knowledge of the other. Whorf took up Sapir’s ideas but went much further than saying that there was merely a ‘predisposition’; in Whorf’s view the relationship between language and culture was a deterministic one; the social categories we create and how we perceive events and actions are constrained by the language we speak. Different speakers will therefore experience the world differently insofar as the languages they speak differ structurally.

One claim is that if speakers of one language have certain words to describe things and speakers of another language lack similar words, then speakers of the first language will find it easier to talk about those things. We can see how this might

be the case if we consider the technical vocabulary, that is, **register** (see discussion of this in chapter 2) of any trade, calling, or profession; for example, physicians talk more easily about medical phenomena than those without medical training because they have the vocabulary to do so. A stronger claim is that, if one language makes distinctions that another does not make, then those who use the first language will more readily perceive the relevant differences in their environment. If you must classify camels, boats, and automobiles in certain ways, you will perceive camels, boats, and automobiles differently from someone who is not required to make these differentiations. If your language classifies certain material objects as long and thin and others as roundish, you will perceive material objects that way; they will fall quite 'naturally' into those classes for you.

This extension into the area of grammar could be argued to be a further strengthening of Whorf's claim, since classification systems pertaining to shape, substance, gender, number, time, and so on are both more subtle and more pervasive. Their effect is much stronger on language users than vocabulary differences alone. The strongest claim of all is that the grammatical categories available in a particular language not only help the users of that language to perceive the world in a certain way but also at the same time limit such perception. They act as blinkers: you perceive only what your language allows you, or predisposes you, to perceive. Your language controls your worldview. Speakers of different languages will, therefore, have different worldviews.

Whorf's work on Native American languages led him to make his strongest claims. He contrasted the linguistic structure of Hopi with the kinds of linguistic structure he associated with languages such as English, French, German, and so on, that is, familiar European languages. He saw these languages as sharing so many structural features that he named this whole group of languages Standard Average European (SAE). According to Whorf, Hopi and SAE differ widely in their structural characteristics. For example, Hopi grammatical categories provide a 'process' orientation toward the world, whereas the categories in SAE give SAE speakers a fixed orientation toward time and space so that they not only 'objectify' reality in certain ways but even distinguish between things that must be counted, for example, trees, hills, waves, and sparks, and those that need not be counted, for example, water, fire, and courage. In SAE, events occur, have occurred, or will occur, in a definite time, that is, present, past, or future; to speakers of Hopi, what is important is whether an event can be warranted to have occurred, or to be occurring, or to be expected to occur. Whorf believed that these differences lead speakers of Hopi and SAE to view the world differently. The Hopi see the world as essentially an ongoing set of processes; objects and events are not discrete and countable; and time is not apportioned into fixed segments so that certain things recur, for example, minutes, mornings, and days. In contrast, speakers of SAE regard nearly everything in their world as discrete, measurable, countable, and recurrent; time and space do not flow into each other; sparks, flames, and waves are things like pens and pencils; mornings recur in twenty-four-hour cycles; and past, present, and future are every bit as real as gender differences. The different languages have different obligatory grammatical

categories so that every time a speaker of Hopi or SAE says something, he or she must make certain observations about how the world is structured because of the structure of the language each speaks. (We should note that Malotki (1983) has pointed out that some of Whorf's claims about the grammatical structure of Hopi are either dubious or incorrect, for example, Hopi, like SAE, does have verbs that are inflected for tense.)

Pinker (1994, 59–67) has no patience at all for any of Whorf's ideas. He says that Whorf's claims were 'outlandish,' his arguments were circular, any evidence he gave for them was either anecdotal or suspect in some other way, and all the experiments conducted to test the ideas have proved nothing. More recently, he says (2007, 143) that a convincing experiment 'would have to show three things: that the speakers of a language find it impossible, or at least extremely difficult, to think in the way that the speakers of another language can; that the difference affects actual reasoning to a conclusion rather than a subjective inclination in hazy circumstances; and that the difference in thought is caused by the difference in language, rather than merely being correlated with it for some other reason such as the physical or cultural milieu.'

More recently, Deutscher (2010a, 2010b) has revisited the Whorf hypothesis, noting some of the obvious problems with this hypothesis: 'If the inventory of ready-made words in your language determined which concepts you were able to understand, how would you ever learn anything new?' However, he further discusses some recent research which provides evidence for the connection between language and worldview. One example is that speakers of a remote Australian aboriginal tongue, Guugu Yimithirr, from north Queensland, do not make use of any egocentric coordinates (i.e., deictic words such as 'left,' 'right,' 'behind,' 'in front of') but instead rely solely on the cardinal directions of east, west, north, and south. Research on this language prompted recognition of the same phenomenon in languages of other far-flung places such as Bali, Namibia, and Mexico. Deutscher uses this research not to make strong claims about linguistic relativity, but to urge readers to recognize how deeply encoded some sociolinguistic differences may be, advising us that 'as a first step toward understanding one another, we can do better than pretending we all think the same.'

We will let Franz Boas (1911) and Edward Sapir (1921) have some final cautionary words on this topic. Boas pointed out that there was no necessary connection between language and culture or between language and race. People with very different cultures speak languages with many of the same structural characteristics, for example, Hungarians, Finns, and the Samoyeds of northern Siberia; and people who speak languages with very different structures often share much the same culture, for example, Germans and Hungarians, or many people in southern India, or the widespread Islamic culture. We can also dismiss any claim that certain types of languages can be associated with 'advanced' cultures and that others are indicative of cultures that are less advanced. As Sapir observed on this last point (1921, 219), 'When it comes to linguistic form, Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd, Confucius with the head-hunting savage of Assam.'

Exploration 1.4: Translatability

If you speak more than one language or dialect, are there certain words or phrases which you feel you cannot translate into Standard English? What are these words or phrases – are they simply words for things which are not part of the cultures of the English-speaking world, or concepts or idioms not found in English? What does the view of particular words as ‘untranslatable’ indicate about the connection between language and worldview?

Correlations

It is possible to claim a relationship between language and social structure without making claims about causality, and such correlational studies have long formed a significant part of sociolinguistic work. Gumperz (1971, 223) has observed that sociolinguistics is an attempt to find correlations between social structure and linguistic structure and to observe any changes that occur. Chambers (2002, 3) is even more direct: ‘Sociolinguistics is the study of the social uses of language, and the most productive studies in the four decades of sociolinguistic research have emanated from determining the social evaluation of linguistic variants. These are also the areas most susceptible to scientific methods such as hypothesis-formation, logical inference, and statistical testing.’ The approach to sociolinguistics which focuses on such correlations and the quantitative analysis of them is often called **variationist sociolinguistics** and will be discussed in chapters 6–8.

It is important to note that correlation only shows a relationship between two variables; it does not show ultimate causation. To find that X and Y are related is not necessarily to discover that X causes Y (or Y causes X). For example, to find that female speakers use more standard features than male speakers in a given community does not prove that being female causes a speaker to speak in a more standard manner (see chapter 7 for a discussion of how such findings have been interpreted, and chapter 12 for a broader discussion of language and gender). We must always exercise caution when we attempt to draw conclusions from such relationships.

When we observe how varied language use is we must search for the causes. Chambers (2003, 226) notes, ‘Upon observing variability, we seek its social correlates. What is the purpose of the variation? How is it evaluated in the community? What do its variants symbolize?’ Ultimately, the goal of sociolinguistics is to address the social meanings of language use, and correlation with social variables is one way to address this question.

The Boundaries of Sociolinguistics

Some investigators have found it appropriate to try to introduce a distinction between sociolinguistics (or **micro-sociolinguistics**) and the **sociology of language** (or **macro-sociolinguistics**). In this distinction, (micro-) sociolinguistics is concerned with investigating the relationships between language and society with the goal being a better understanding of the structure of language and of how languages function in communication; the equivalent goal in the sociology of language is trying to discover how social structure can be better understood through the study of language, for example, how certain linguistic features serve to characterize particular social arrangements. Hudson (1996, 4) has described the difference as follows: sociolinguistics is ‘the study of language in relation to society,’ whereas the sociology of language is ‘the study of society in relation to language.’ In other words, in sociolinguistics we study language and society in order to find out as much as we can about what kind of thing language is, and in the sociology of language we reverse the direction of our interest. Using the alternative terms given above, Coulmas (1997, 2) says that ‘micro-sociolinguistics investigates how social structure influences the way people talk and how language varieties and patterns of use correlate with social attributes such as class, sex, and age. Macro-sociolinguistics, on the other hand, studies what societies do with their languages, that is, attitudes and attachments that account for the functional distribution of speech forms in society, language shift, maintenance, and replacement, the delimitation and interaction of speech communities.’

The view we will take here is that both sociolinguistics and the sociology of language require a systematic study of language *and* society if they are to be successful. Moreover, a sociolinguistics that deliberately refrains from drawing conclusions about society seems to be unnecessarily restrictive, just as restrictive indeed as a sociology of language that deliberately ignores discoveries about language made in the course of sociological research. So while it is possible to do either kind of work to the exclusion of the other, we will look at both kinds. Consequently, we will not attempt to limit the scope of this book only to studies which are considered sociolinguistics in a narrow sense. Rather, we wish to include a broad spectrum of approaches and ideas which have been used in the study of language in society.

A further distinction which is sometimes made is that between sociolinguistics and **linguistic anthropology** (Fuller, the second author of this text, has a background in and affiliation with anthropology as well as linguistics, and thus brings this perspective to the study of sociolinguistics). Recent work (Duranti 2003, Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 2008, Bucholtz and Hall 2008) has noted the fuzziness of the distinction between these two fields, arguing that there is considerable overlap in theory, themes, methodologies, and history. Ethnography of communication has long been an area of overlap between these two fields (and others); current approaches to the study of identities and language ideologies also blur the distinction between sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. In chapter 9, we

will discuss several ethnographic approaches which focus on language in society, including ethnography of communication. This is qualitative research and thus methodologically very different from quantitative variationist work; it also tends to address the question of the social meaning of language use less in terms of correlation with the social categories associated with the speaker, and more in terms of how speakers use language to carry out their social lives (including but not limited to positioning themselves as members of particular social categories). Further, other approaches to discourse analysis which have similar aims will be introduced in chapter 11.

There is also a growing amount of work called **critical sociolinguistics** (Singh 1996, Kress 2001) that takes what we will call an ‘interventionist’ approach to matters that interest us; we will discuss its findings in more detail in the final section of this book. This approach derives from critical theory, which is concerned with ‘the processes by which systems of social inequality are created and sustained. Of particular interest is inequality that is largely invisible, due to ideological processes that make inequality seem to be the natural condition of human social systems’ (Tollefson 2006, 43). Two of its principal exponents are Fairclough (1995, 2006) and van Dijk (2003), who champion an approach called ‘critical discourse analysis,’ the topic of a section in chapter 11. This work focuses on how language is used to exercise and preserve power and privilege in society, how it buttresses social institutions, and how even those who suffer as a consequence fail to realize that many of the things that appear to be ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ are culturally constructed and not inevitable; it is power relations in society that determine what is defined as ‘normal.’ The claim is that politics, medicine, religion, education, law, race, gender, academia, and so on can be understood for what they really are only within the framework of critical discourse analysis because such systems maintain unequal distributions of wealth, income, status, group membership, education, and so on. Fairclough (2001, 6) expresses what he sees as the failure of sociolinguistics to deal with such matters as follows: ‘Sociolinguistics is strong on “what?” questions (what are the facts of variation?) but weak on “why?” and “how?” questions (why are the facts as they are?; how – in terms of the development of social relationships of power – was the existing sociolinguistic order brought into being?; how is it sustained?; and how might it be changed to the advantage of those who are dominated by it?).’ He insists that: ‘The tradition of critical research in the social sciences focuses upon what are widely seen as the big issues and problems which people face in their lives in order to arrive at an understanding of the present which can illuminate possibilities for a better future and inform struggles to achieve it’ (2006, 162).

This is very much an ideological view. Its proponents maintain that all language use is ideological as are all investigations, that is, that there is no hope of an ‘objective’ or ‘neutral’ sociolinguistics. Consequently, critical discourse analysis claims the high ground on issues; it is ‘a resource for people who are struggling against domination and oppression in its linguistic forms’ (Fairclough, 1995, 1) and ‘it is not enough to uncover the social dimensions of language use. These dimensions are the object of moral and political evaluation, and analysing them should have effects in

society: empowering the powerless, giving voices to the voiceless, exposing power abuse, and mobilising people to remedy social wrongs' (Blommaert 2005, 25).

As this overview has made clear, there are many different perspectives, approaches, topics, and methodologies within the broad field of sociolinguistics. In the next section, we will introduce some issues involved in this last area, methodologies, which are relevant for all study of language in society.

Methodological Concerns

Sociolinguistics should encompass everything from considering 'who speaks (or writes) what language (or what language variety) to whom and when and to what end' (Fishman 1972, 46). It must be oriented toward both data and theory: that is, any conclusions we come to must be solidly based on evidence, but should also make theoretical contributions. Above all, a research project should begin with a research question, but that question must be one that can be answered with sociolinguistic data. We must collect data for a purpose and that purpose should be to find an answer, or answers, to an interesting question. Questions phrased in ways that do not allow for some kind of empirical testing have no more than a speculative interest.

Thus, those who seek to investigate the possible relationships between language and society must have a twofold concern: they must ask good questions, and they must find the right kinds of data that bear on those questions. Here are some types of sociolinguistics studies we will discuss in this book:

- **correlational studies**, i.e., those that attempt to relate two or more variables (e.g., certain linguistic forms and social-class differences, see chapters 6–8);
- **microlinguistic studies**, i.e., those that typically focus on very specific linguistic items or individual differences and uses in order to search for possibly wide-ranging linguistic and/or social implications (e.g., the distribution of *singing* and *singin'*; see chapters 2 and 7);
- **discourse analysis**, i.e., studies of conversational structure and how speakers use language for their social purposes (e.g., how we begin and end conversations and how this is dependent on the relationship between interlocutors; see chapter 11);
- **macrolinguistic studies**, i.e., studies that examine large amounts of language data to draw broad conclusions about group relationships (e.g., choices made in language planning; see chapter 14);
- **critical analyses**, i.e., studies that seek to assess how language is used to create and perpetuate power structures; such studies may focus on discourse or larger patterns of language use and thus overlap with discourse analysis or macrolinguistic studies (e.g., how people talk about multilingualism could be analyzed in discourse, or language planning and policies related to multilingualism; see chapters 11 and 12–14).

Data

Since sociolinguistics is an empirical science, it requires a solid database. As we will see, that database is drawn from a wide variety of sources. These include censuses, documents, surveys, interviews, and recordings of interactions in both public and private spheres. Some data require the investigator to observe or record ‘naturally occurring’ linguistic events, for example, conversations, or gain access to written texts and interactions (as discussed in chapter 11); others require the use of various elicitation techniques to gain access to the data we require or different varieties of experimental manipulation, for example, the matched-guise experiments referred to in chapter 4. Some kinds of data require various statistical procedures, particularly when we wish to make statements about the typical behavior of a group, for example, a social class; other kinds seem best treated through such devices as graphing, scaling, and categorizing in non-statistical ways, as in dialect geography (see chapter 6); still others rely on interpretive analyses which draw on evidence from ethnographic research and/or transcripts of interactions (see chapters 9 and 11).

Labov has written of what he calls the **observer’s paradox**. He points out (1972b, 209–10) that the aim of sociolinguistic research is to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed, but the data are available only through systematic observation. In chapter 7 we will discuss this paradox and certain research methodologies which seek to overcome this quandary. However, we note that while many sociolinguists are focused on vernacular speech, this is only one area of interest in the field of sociolinguistics as a whole. Many other types of language use, from speech in public domains to interviews and written documents, can be the object of study in sociolinguistics.

Research design

Because of the varied methods and research questions in sociolinguistics, the concerns in research design are quite varied. In some cases, when arguments are based on a **quantitative** analysis, it is necessary to pay attention to **sampling** techniques, error estimation, and the confidence level, that is, the **level of significance** with which certain statements can be made. As we will see (chapters 6–7), sociolinguists try to meet these statistical demands when they are required. In these cases, the findings often show trends in correlations between social and linguistic variables. An issue in such research is generalizability, that is, to what extent the findings of a particular study can be applied to a broader population.

However, **qualitative** research also forms part of sociolinguistic research, particularly in critical and interactional sociolinguistics, where the goal is to analyze language as cultural behavior. In this case, the generalizations are not about how particular groups of people speak, but how language is used to perform social functions.

A recurring concern, then, must be with the theoretical framework that is the basis for research, and how the research questions, methodology, analysis, and findings all fit into this framework. In this respect sociolinguistics is like all other sciences.

Finally, researchers must try to assess how they themselves might influence the language use around them, and how they may bring their own biases and assumptions to their analyses and claims. We must also consider these possibilities when we assess the work of others and be critical consumers of everything we see, hear, and read. A healthy skepticism is essential.

Overview of the Book

Sociolinguistics is inherently interdisciplinary; people working on sociolinguistic research as we define it may come from a diverse range of disciplines, including linguistics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and education. We will observe that there are many interconnections between sociolinguistics and other disciplines and also between concerns which are sometimes labeled **theoretical** and others which are said to be **applied**. At the very least, sociolinguistics is a socially relevant variety of linguistics, but it is probably much more. You will be able to form your own views on these issues as we proceed through the various topics treated in the chapters that follow.

These chapters are organized within four general topics. However, there will be considerable moving back and forth with cross-referencing within topics and among topics. Inter-relationships are everywhere, and our themes will recur across the discussions of dialects, multilingualism, discourse, and social justice.

Part I, Languages and Communities, deals with some traditional language issues: trying to separate languages from dialects and looking at types of regional and social variation within languages (chapter 2); trying to figure out what kinds of 'groups' are relevant when we study language use (chapter 3); examining multilingual language use (chapter 4); and reviewing the codes that may develop in such contact situations (chapter 5).

Part II, Inherent Variety, addresses the concerns which are factors in language variation (chapters 6–7) and what these might show us about how languages change (chapter 8).

Part III, Language and Interaction, is concerned with research on language as cultural behavior. In it we will outline some of the traditions of this study based on ethnography (chapter 9), topics in the field of pragmatics which overlap into sociolinguistics (chapter 10), and research of a discourse analytical nature (chapter 11).

Part IV, Sociolinguistics and Social Justice, looks into three areas of life in which sociolinguistics offers us some hope of understanding pressing problems (and which some sociolinguists argue require our deliberate intervention). Language, gender, and sexuality, one of the great 'growth areas' in language study, is the first of these

(chapter 12). Sociolinguistics and education is the second (chapter 13). Language planning and policy issues, including the spread of English world-wide and the 'death' of many languages, is the third (chapter 14).

Chapter Summary

This chapter provides an introduction to the field of sociolinguistics as well as to some of the major themes that will recur throughout this textbook. We propose broad definitions for the terms 'language' and 'society,' introduce the concepts of 'identities,' 'power,' and 'solidarity,' and explore the possible relationships between language and culture, most notably the Whorfian hypothesis. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the field of sociolinguistics, we also address how it fits into various disciplines and how it overlaps with linguistic anthropology and sociology of language. We note that the field includes work on topics such as critical sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis. Finally, we turn to concerns in methodology, stressing that there is no one best method, but that research must be designed to answer specific research questions.

Exercises

1. Look at the list of grammar rules below. Write an essay defending the use of one of these 'incorrect' grammatical constructions. Why do you think using these constructions is justifiable? Explain how the difference between these rules and natural speech demonstrates the difference between descriptive and prescriptive grammars.

Prescriptive rules and examples:

- Never end a sentence with a preposition; use 'whom' instead of 'who' in object position. Example of a violation:
Who did you give it to? ('Correct' speech: 'To whom did you give it?')
- Adverbs (words which modify a verb or adjective) should end in -ly (unless they are irregular, e.g., *fast-fast* or *good-well*). Examples of violations:
Come quick! The house is on fire! ('Correct' speech: 'come quickly')
That's a real nice dress you're wearing. ('Correct' speech: 'really nice')
You read so slow! I'm already done with the chapter! ('Correct' speech: 'you read so slowly')
- The correct expression is 'It is I,' not 'It's me.'
- The verb 'lie' (past tense 'lay') means that something is in a prone position; the verb 'lay' (past tense 'laid') means that something is being put into a prone position. Examples of violations:
It's laying on the table.
Just lie it down there.

2. Politically correct (PC) language. Below are some examples of so-called PC language. Think about why these terms have been suggested, which ones have been widely adopted, and what attitudes exist toward some of these linguistic terms. What beliefs about the relationship between language and culture are reflected in the suggestion and adoption of or resistance to PC language?
- Firefighter (formerly 'fireman')
- Server (formerly 'waiter/waitress')
- Banned (formerly 'blacklisted')
- Differently-abled (formerly 'disabled')
- Homemaker (formerly 'housewife')
- Native Americans (formerly '[American] Indian' or 'Red Indians')
- Happy Holidays (instead of 'Merry Christmas')
3. Communicative competence. Look at the following joke about British sayings and what they really mean. Discuss how this depiction of cross-cultural miscommunication illustrates the concept of communicative competence.

<i>WHAT THE BRITISH SAY</i>	<i>WHAT THE BRITISH MEAN</i>	<i>WHAT FOREIGNERS UNDERSTAND</i>
I hear what you say	I disagree and do not want to discuss it further	He accepts my point of view
With the greatest respect	You are an idiot	He is listening to me
That's not bad	That's good	That's poor
That is a very brave proposal	You are insane	He thinks I have courage
Quite good	A bit disappointing	Quite good
I would suggest	Do it or be prepared to justify yourself	Think about the idea, but do what you like
Oh, incidentally / by the way	The primary purpose of our discussion is	That is not very important
I was a bit disappointed that	I am annoyed that	It doesn't really matter
Very interesting	That is clearly nonsense	They are impressed
I'll bear it in mind	I've forgotten it already	They will probably do it
I'm sure it's my fault	It's your fault	Why do they think it was their fault?
You must come for dinner	It's not an invitation, I'm just being polite	I will get an invitation soon
I almost agree	I don't agree at all	He's not far from agreement
I only have a few minor comments	Please rewrite completely	He has found a few typos
Could we consider some other options	I don't like your idea	They have not yet decided

(source: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/10280244/Translation-table-explaining-the-truth-behind-British-politeness-becomes-internet-hit.html>)

Further Reading

- Crystal, David (2008). *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
This is a very readable reference work on linguistics and phonetics; it is useful for a quick definition of basic terms and concepts.
- Duranti, Alessandro (ed.) (2009). *Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader*. 2nd edn. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
This volume presents readings on major topics in linguistic anthropology; an excellent reference and the place to begin gaining background on a particular topic.
- Fasold, Ralph. W. (1984). *The Sociolinguistics of Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Fasold, Ralph. W. (1990). *The Sociolinguistics of Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.
This two-volume treatment of issues in language and society is a classic text and a comprehensive treatment of the topics in the field in the 1970s and 1980s.
- Meyerhoff, Miriam (2006). *Introducing Sociolinguistics*. London: Routledge.
An introduction to sociolinguistics textbook covering a wide range of topics and approaches to the field but with a more variationist focus.
- Mesthrie, Rajend, Joan Swann, Ana Deumert, and William L. Leap (2009). *Introducing Sociolinguistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
An introduction to sociolinguistics textbook by multiple authors, including examples from a wide range of languages and cultures and different approaches to the study of language in society from variationist to critical sociolinguistics.
- Sherzer, Joel (1987). Discourse-Centered Approach to Language and Culture. *American Anthropologist* 89(2): 295–309.
This is a foundational article about the relationship between language and culture from a linguistic anthropological perspective.

For further resources for this chapter visit the companion website at



www.wiley.com/go/wardhaugh/sociolinguistics

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