

Sociology of language

The sociology of language arose in the 1950/60s and its interests were those of the American structuralist sociology of that time. Its orientation is to the large scale – it is sometimes called ‘macro-sociolinguistics’. It concerns itself with whole languages and their distribution and usage within society and not, for example, with language features or structures or with more micro-social processes. Typically the focus is on the use of languages by particular groups. The usual research method is a survey asking who speaks what language – including that mega-survey of social information, the national census, which routinely includes a language question. The focus has often been on what languages a particular ethnic group speak, especially if their language preference is changing. The sociology of language was founded by Joshua Fishman, its longtime chief advocate and theorist, and especially influential as an editor.

Variationist sociolinguistics

This is the dominant paradigm in the United States, whose academy tends to set the trend for the rest of the West, but it is also widely adopted elsewhere. Its focus is on linguistic issues and its founder, William Labov, originally opposed the concept and label of ‘sociolinguistics’ because he believed this approach should be seen as the best way just to do linguistics. Variationism has focused on researching how particular linguistic features vary with different social factors such as age or gender. Variationism works at the micro level linguistically, although its social dimension has been derived from traditional sociology. Most of the analysis is of the phonology of the language, looking at where different speakers use different vowel or consonant pronunciations. The field has been dominated by Labov, whose interest has been more in language change than in sociolinguistic variation itself.