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عنوان المحاضرة: Sociolects and Social Class in Language Use

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Sociolects and Social Class in Language Use in Yule's *The Study of Language*

1. Introduction:

Language Reflects Society Language does more than communicate information—it also reveals something about who we are, where we come from, and the social groups we belong to. In the chapter “Language and Social Variation”, George Yule introduces the concept of sociolects, or language varieties associated with social groups, especially those based on social class. This lecture explores how social class affects language use, what sociolects are, and how linguists study variation within a single language across different layers of society.

2. What Is a Sociolect?

A sociolect is a variety of a language used by a particular social group, often defined by factors such as income, education level, occupation, or class status. These varieties may differ in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, even among speakers who live in the same geographic region.

Yule defines a sociolect as “a socially defined variety of language, associated with a specific social class.” Examples: In British English: Received Pronunciation (RP) is often associated with upper-class speakers. Estuary English may be linked with middle or working-class Londoners. In American English: Differences in pronunciation between urban professionals and rural laborers. Lexical choices like dinner vs. supper, or sofa vs. couch can carry social meaning.

3. Social Class and Language Variation

Yule explains that social class is one of the strongest predictors of language variation. People of different socioeconomic classes often speak in distinct ways, and this variation is measurable and consistent across communities. Features that Vary by Class: Pronunciation (accent) E.g., dropping the final -g in words like walking → walkin' Grammar E.g., He don't know nothing vs. He doesn't know anything Lexical choice E.g., lavatory (upper class) vs. toilet (middle class) vs. loo (working class) Such variation is not random—it is socially meaningful and often tied to perceptions of prestige or stigma.

4. The Study of Social Variation:

Labov's Research One of the foundational studies in this area, cited by Yule, is William Labov's sociolinguistic work in New York City. Labov investigated the use of post-vocalic /r/ (the "r" sound after a

vowel) in department stores of different status levels: Saks (upper class) Macy's (middle class) S. Klein (lower class) When asked for directions to the fourth floor, Labov observed whether staff pronounced the /r/ in fourth and floor. He found: Higher social classes pronounced the /r/ more frequently. In careful speech (when asked to repeat), all speakers increased their use of /r/. This showed that the use of certain speech features could be tied to social mobility and prestige. Speakers often adjust their language based on context and self-perception.

5. Prestige and Language Attitudes

Yule discusses two types of prestige: Overt Prestige: Associated with the standard variety; speakers may shift toward this in formal settings to gain approval or status. Covert Prestige: Associated with non-standard varieties that express group identity, solidarity, or toughness. Examples: A working-class speaker may continue using a regional accent among peers for covert prestige, even if they can speak "standard" English. In hip-hop culture, using African American Vernacular English (AAVE) can convey authenticity and solidarity. This shows that linguistic choices are strategic and shaped by social values.

6. Gender and Language Use

Although this lecture focuses on class, Yule also connects social variation to gender. Research shows that: Women are more likely to use standard forms than men.

Men may adopt non-standard forms for covert prestige. Social pressures and expectations shape these patterns. Yule suggests that women may use more standard forms to gain social mobility in contexts where language is judged harshly (e.g., in job interviews or education).

7. Why Do Sociolects Matter?

Studying sociolects helps us understand: Language change: Often begins in lower social groups and spreads upward. Discrimination: Speakers of non-standard varieties may face linguistic prejudice. Education: Teachers need to recognize that students' non-standard forms are not "wrong," but part of legitimate varieties. Identity: Language reflects and constructs individual and group identity. Yule stresses that no variety is "better" than another—judgments about language are often judgments about people.

8. Conclusion:

Language Mirrors Social Structure Language is not just a tool of communication—it is also a reflection of the social structure. Sociolects reveal how language use aligns with class divisions, social aspirations, and group identity. George Yule's chapter helps us see that language is both shaped by society and shapes our place within it. By understanding sociolects, we gain insight into the invisible lines that structure human interaction. ---

Discussion Questions

1. Why do people sometimes switch between dialects or sociolects depending on the context?
2. Can you identify a time when someone was judged for how they spoke?
3. How can awareness of sociolects improve language education and reduce bias?

Suggested Readings

- Yule, G. *The Study of Language*, Chapter on "Language and Social Variation"