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A Course in Applied Linguistics

M.A. in English Language and Linguistics

(Sociolinguistics)

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Sociolinguistics, at its core, is about studying language in society. However, it goes beyond this simple definition to focus on linguistic

indicators of culture and power. By examining the influences of ethnicity, gender, ideology, and social status on language events, sociolinguistics aims to be descriptive while recognizing the social forces at play. Sociolinguists often use their knowledge to impact areas like government language policies and educational practices. Despite the ethical dimension, most studies in sociolinguistics strive for scientific objectivity, aiming to provide detailed and systematic accounts of language in diverse social contexts.

Categorizing the ways people speak

Idiolect and sociolect

When people talk in ways that are unique to them, we call it their 'idiolect.' But many times, individuals use language in ways that are common among many people, which we refer to as '**sociolects.**' These shared language patterns help us define them as part of a particular social group. **Sociolinguistics** focuses on studying these **sociolect** variations, aiming to discover the patterns and structures that govern them. It involves looking at broader trends instead of specific instances.

By doing this, sociolinguistics doesn't overlook the importance of individual experiences; in fact, making social patterns clear can greatly help us understand how individuals fit into society.

Standard, non-standard and codification

The tension between the 'standard' version and non-standard variations in languages is a common issue worldwide. Standardization is the process of choosing a language variety as the 'standard' form, endorsed by governmental bodies, educational institutions, and media outlets. This formalization often involves regulating usage in educational settings, presenting government communications in this form, publishing national materials, and establishing it as the correct version. Standard forms also feature 'codification', such as grammar guides and dictionaries, veneration of religious or culturally significant texts, and teaching of the standardized language to children in schools.

Prestige, stigmatization and language loyalty

On the contrary, non-standard language forms are often viewed as 'inferior' or 'incorrect' and are subject to social stigma, while standard forms are considered prestigious. One can determine the relative prestige or stigma of a language variety by considering the following:

1. Has the variety been formally 'standardized' and documented?
2. Is there a community of speakers actively using this variety?
3. Do the speakers acknowledge the historical roots of their language?
4. Do they perceive their language variety as distinct and self-sufficient?
5. Is the variety used across all social functions and settings, or is its usage limited?
6. Do speakers view their language as 'pure' or a blend of other forms?
7. Are there informal rules governing the use of the variety, even in the absence of official grammar guides? Is there a distinction between 'correct' and 'incorrect' forms in the eyes of the speakers?

Speech communities

How people talk can show which group they belong to. We can call this group the 'speech community,' which might match with the group based on things other than language, like where they are from, how old they are, their gender, the size of their town or city, their political beliefs, and more. This chapter explains how all these factors, including language, can make a group feel connected and support various social values related to their identity, whether it's local, community-based, or ethnic. Even when there is pressure for everyone to speak the same way, these language differences can be kept strong and supported within a community.

Descriptive tools of language variation

To understand language better, we break it down into different parts for study. Linguistics typically divides language into categories from small units like individual sounds or letters to larger ones like whole texts and conversations. Each of these levels is usually linked to a specific area of study within linguistics.

Language element		Linguistic sub-discipline
Discourse		discourse analysis
text		text linguistics
utterance		pragmatics
sentence	meaning →	semantics
clause		} &
phrase	structure →	
	syntax word/lexeme	lexicology
morpheme		morphology
sound/phoneme		phonology

The linguistic variable

Phonological variation

Sociolinguistics examines language variations based on location and communication style, focusing on pronunciation and daily actions. Researchers use "linguistic variables" to understand these differences, such as pronunciation of sounds like "r." Accents are also a significant area of study, as they reveal natural language patterns and are easier to study than specific words. The International Phonetic Alphabet aids in systematically analyzing accents.

Grammatical variation

In sociolinguistics, they study how grammar can change in language. For example, some British schoolchildren might use the wrong verb forms like saying "I goes" instead of "I go." In African-American Vernacular English, they have unique grammar rules, like saying "he a big man" instead of "he is a big man." These differences show how language can reflect social groups and identities.

Lexical variation

Dialectal variation in language mostly comes from using different words and phrases in different regions. For example, people in various places may use distinct terms for the same things. For instance, in Yorkshire, your nose might be called a "neb," while in the U.S., a police baton is called a "truncheon" in the UK and a "lathee" in India. These lexical differences help identify where someone is from .

There are also phrasal variations like how Irish and Scottish people might say "Is that you?" instead of "Are you finished?" like English speakers, or "Are you done?" like Americans. Prepositional differences are harder to explain, such as Americans saying "talk with" and "meet with" while the British say "talk to" and just "meet." These variations often stem from historical or language influences over time.

Linguistic variation

Sociolinguistics studies how people use different languages and their variations, such as code-switching. In countries like Switzerland or Canada, rules may be in place for language usage, such as writing and speaking. Governments may also control language use by standardizing spellings or regulating word usage. Researchers also study how new languages, called 'pidgins,' form when different languages interact and can evolve into 'creoles' when they become the main language for new generations. Overall, sociolinguistics investigates how people use language, its development, and how authorities influence its use.

Applications of sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistic studies have a practical application, influencing government policy on education and language planning globally. In the UK and USA, sociolinguistic insights have been directly applied to teacher-training courses and educational programs. Teachers who understand the sociolinguistic context can improve their teaching skills, recognizing diversity as richness. For example, corrective teaching can be replaced with awareness of multidialectalism, allowing students to access prestigious standard forms and confidence in their language abilities.

Sociolinguistics has also been used in various fields, such as film actors imitating accents, criminals identifying their accent origins, politicians, advertisers, and assertiveness trainers learning discourse patterns to convey their messages effectively. Sociolinguistic studies have also contributed to understanding how languages change, with research ethics and naturalistic data being used in linguistic study. Sociolinguistics reveals the complexity of context when studying language in its real, applied setting and suggests ways to understand this context and the richness of language uses.