

23 Sociolinguistics

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1 Introduction

Sociolinguistics is the empirical study of how language is used in society. Combining linguistic and sociological theories and methods, it is an interdisciplinary field of research which attaches great significance both to the variability of language and to the multiplicity of languages and language forms in a given society. Within this broad range of interest there are a number of specialities that investigate some aspect of the interaction of language and society, such as, how language relates to social categories of various kinds, e.g., social class, age, sex and gender, ethnicity, speech situation, network, etc. Some of these categories will be introduced in what follows. The present overview also discusses such general questions as how the sociolinguistic notion of language differs from similar notions in other subfields of linguistics; what sociolinguistics contributes to the science of language; what aspects of language sociolinguistic theoretical models are designed to account for; and whether and how a sociolinguistic theory can be built.

2 Language as a Social Fact

Every language is a social product, and every society constitutes itself through language. To study the relationship between the two is a complex endeavor which can be expected to throw light on the foundations of both society and language. Sociolinguistics is concerned with “real-life” language issues in social context. While formal linguistics constructs a simplified language whose behavior can be predicted, sociolinguistics tries to cope with the messiness of language as a social phenomenon. It was Ferdinand de Saussure, the pioneer of structural linguistics as an autonomous science, who called language a social fact. Sociolinguistics can be understood as an attempt to take seriously

Saussure's characterization of language and to find ways of subjecting its social side to scientific inquiry. The concept of language upon which sociolinguistics is predicated differs in characteristic ways from that of formal linguistics. Rather than looking at language as a self-contained fixed structure, sociolinguistics puts language change and variation at the center of its deliberations.

Early on, when linguistics began to be conceived as a natural science, the historical dimension of language was conceptualized in terms of quasi-natural laws, the laws of sound change. For a long time, many linguists and historians of language held on to this approach which testified to a model of the social world where beneath history natural processes are assumed. Only those phenomena which could be reduced to natural processes were considered worthy of investigation. It was, accordingly, thought possible and desirable to study the history of language by focussing on language-internal motivations of change. However, as the body of historical linguistic knowledge grew, it became increasingly obvious that the twin questions of why and how languages change cannot find satisfactory answers in terms of linguistic structure alone. In many cases of observable sound-change it could not be demonstrated that the new form closed a gap in the sound system or was in a specifiable way better than the old one, or that the new state of the language was an improvement. In search of causes of change that lie outside language, scholars thus turned to society, looking at language as it is used and shaped, to some extent deliberately, by people in their social dealings with each other. Conceptually, language became a social fact in whose creation, perpetuation, and modification *homo loquens* had a part to play.

Sociolinguistics is a young discipline. Although social aspects of language have often caught linguists' attention, it was not before the mid-twentieth century that sociolinguistics emerged as a recognizable enterprise. A hybrid that draws on both linguistic and sociological scholarship, sociolinguistics combines an interest in linguistic structures with the recognition that examining the societal dimensions of language requires interpretive methods allowing us to understand how language is reflective of social processes and relationships and what it contributes to making society work as it does.

The formal modeling of logic which theoretical linguistics emulates is not germane to the study of language as a social fact. Nevertheless, sociolinguistics is one of the *language sciences*, and as such it is presented within the context of this handbook. At the same time, sociology lays claim to a number of research domains concerning the relations between language and society. However, the input of linguistics and sociology into the sociolinguistic endeavor has been uneven. Although several progenitors can be identified, historical linguistics and dialectology have contributed most to establishing sociolinguistics as a field of inquiry. Language has long been recognized to vary in both time and space. Historical linguistics and dialectology have demonstrated that such variation is systematic and patterned and could thus be the object of scientific inquiry. When it was found that language varied along yet another dimension which could not be reduced to geographical extension or historical

depth, these two disciplines were quite naturally regarded as offering suitable models for dealing with the underlying dynamics of socially conditioned language diversity.

Traditional dialectology recognizes variability as an essential attribute of language, focussing on the regional distribution of variant speech forms. Identifying regional dialects and distinguishing neighboring dialects from one another are difficult tasks which require a large corpus of utterances by many speakers as a basis for description and involves quantitative analysis of linguistic features. While questionnaires have often been used, the preferred method of data collection is by means of face-to-face interviews with speakers of the varieties in question. In a pioneering study of French dialects Edmont interviewed speakers at some six hundred places throughout France, eliciting hundreds of speech items from a fixed list. The results of this survey were published in one of the first dialect atlases, a collection of maps which indicate the geographical distribution of speech forms (Gilliéron and Edmont 1902–13).

In many ways sociolinguistics remains indebted and closely linked to dialectology and historical linguistics. But it has also made its own innovative contributions to the study of language which put it at odds with established research paradigms. A dialect atlas is an absolute map in the sense that it consists of categorical dialect areas which are considered as having a center that is relatively stable. As an object of investigation a dialect thus appears much like a language, as an abstract, categorically distinct system. On the time axis, language is seen as evolving in one direction, one categorical language state following upon another. Any given utterance or piece of text is taken as exemplifying a particular dialect or language state. In contradistinction to these, admittedly simplified, conceptions of language diversity, sociolinguistics recognizes the fluidity of speech, refusing to accept the doctrine that linguistic data must be abstracted from the constraints and distortions of real life communication. It has, accordingly, replaced categoricity with frequency, that is, the frequency of occurrence of variant features of language use in a given speech community. Instead of categorizing a certain pronunciation or a certain construction as either belonging or not belonging to a language *L*, sociolinguistics would measure the frequencies with which such features and constructions occurred in variety *X* compared with variety *Y*. The fact that speech communities and individual speakers had a wide range of possible speech forms at their command was recognized as an essential rather than a haphazard condition of the social functioning of language. Discovering systematic patterns underlying the actual occurrences of variant speech forms and relating them to social characteristics of speakers and speech situations turned into the major challenge that sociolinguists set out to confront. Analyzing variable language data thus became the hallmark of sociolinguistic research, or, more correctly, of one influential strand of sociolinguistic research. Methods of gathering and analyzing such data were developed, giving rise to a notion of language which differs from that of formal linguistics in that it marries structure with inherent variability.

Tied to such a notion of language, the proposition that language is a social fact is now much more specific than it was in the garb of the general acknowledgment that language is a species-specific endowment and needs a community to be sustained. It is specific enough to turn the social dimension of language into an object of scientific investigation. Sociolinguistics is a data-driven empirical science. The researcher's intuition has a role to play for heuristic purposes, but not as the object of analysis. Data must come from speakers in their various social environments.

3 The Micro–Macro Distinction

Traditional scholarly division of labor assigns language and society to different fields of academic research. Sociolinguistics is essentially interdisciplinary in orientation. Crossing the boundaries of established disciplines, it is prone to become the target of criticism on either side of the frontier. In spite of this criticism, some of which will be discussed below, it is no longer contested that sociolinguistics has much to contribute to explaining the relationship between language and the social context in which it is used, and that its insights add to our understanding of the human condition. Its primary concern is to study correlations between language use and social structure. Attempting to establish causal links between language and society, it pursues the complementary questions of what language contributes to making community possible and how communities shape their languages by using them. Since sociolinguistics is a meeting ground for linguists and social scientists, some of whom seek to understand the social aspects of language while others are primarily concerned with linguistic aspects of society, it is not surprising that there are, as it were, two centers of gravity, known, respectively, as *micro-* and *macro-sociolinguistics* or alternatively *sociolinguistics in the narrow sense* and *sociology of language*. These represent different orientations and research agendas, micro-issues being more likely to be investigated by linguists, dialectologists, and others in language-centered fields, whereas macro-issues are more frequently taken up by sociologists and social psychologists. *Variation linguistics* has been used as yet another term for micro-sociolinguistics, and there have been attempts to confine sociolinguistics proper to the study of variation in language. However, sociolinguistic textbooks (for instance, Fasold 1984, 1990, Holmes 1992, Hudson 1990, Romaine 1994), journals (for instance, *Language in Society*, *Sociolinguistica*, *Current Issues in Language and Society*, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *Multilingua*), anthologies and readers (for instance, Ammon et al. 1988, Coulmas 1997, Coupland, Jaworski 1997), and scholarly conferences treat a much wider range of issues. There is now general agreement that both perspectives, those of micro- and macro-sociolinguistics, are indispensable for a full understanding of language as a social phenomenon.

4 Micro-sociolinguistics

Stated in very general terms, 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, age, and ethnicity. It thus strives to correlate dependent linguistic variables with independent social variables. Speech is socially emblematic in the sense that speakers by their choice of words, manner of pronunciation, and other stylistic features identify with others with whom they share social characteristics, such as socio-economic status, occupation, and education, but also place of residence, age, gender, and ethnicity. It is here that sociolinguistics relies most evidently on sociological theory. For, while it is intuitively clear that ways of speaking reveal social meaning, as immortalized in Bernard Shaw's famous play *Pygmalion*, it is much less obvious how individuals cluster into social groups, how social hierarchies are structured, and to what extent social hierarchies can be compared across speech communities, cultures, and polities.

5 Social Class

That social class has a bearing on speech behavior has been recognized for a long time. Among the first to address this issue were Fischer (1958), on the linguistic side, and Bernstein (1960), on the sociological side. The theoretical models of society which informed the early phase of sociolinguistic theory formation were based on notions of social class, as defined in Marxist or Weber-Parsonian terms. These were developed within the context, and for the analysis, of Western industrial societies. In Marxist social theory, class is defined in terms of possession of means of production whose unequal distribution is seen as the chief reason of social conflict (class struggle). The general model of society that is based on this notion is conflictual. According to Parsons' (1952) concept of a stratified social system, each individual is located on a continuum of hierarchically ordered class groupings. The general model of society that is based on this notion is consensual. Society is understood as a system which tends to maintain its equilibrium and, if disturbed, to re-establish it.

The suitability of both of these models for analyzing social systems outside the world of western industrialized countries cannot be taken for granted. Traditional social structures, such as the Indian caste system, remnants of a feudal system in Korea, or tribes and clans in rural African societies, to mention but a few examples, cannot be subjected easily to class analysis. What is more, class, especially as understood within a Weber-Parsonian framework (Parsons 1952), is a composite variable that is calculated by reference to a number of indicators. Income, profession, and educational level are most commonly

used. They are more easily subjected to quantitative measurement than other indicators which, however, may be equally relevant, such as the availability of information. Whatever indicators are used, their relative weight is not necessarily the same for all societies. For instance, both the US and Japan are highly industrialized societies, but educational level is more predictive of social status in Japan than in the USA. Given that, it would be a reasonable and testable hypothesis that speech varieties that are indicative of the speakers' educational level correlate more strongly with social status in Japan than in the US. One of the most significant insights of sociolinguistics is that very minor speech differences are socially indicative, that is, that social speech systems are extremely fine grained.

In his study of English in New York City, Labov (1966) was able to demonstrate that the pronunciation of the initial consonant of words like *this* and *there* correlated with social class. The standard variant [ð] was more likely to be produced by middle-class speakers, while working-class speakers tended to use non-standard [d]. The class division used in the study corresponded roughly to the blue-collar / white-collar divide. Speakers were classified as socially upwardly mobile if their father's occupation was a lower-status or lower-income occupation than their own at the time of the survey. In Labov's sample upwardly mobile speakers were contrasted with speakers whose social class affiliation was stable. The incidence of [ð] in the speech of the upwardly mobile group suggests that speakers adjust their speech behavior to that of the target group of their social mobility. Upwardly mobile speakers were found to use fewer non-standard forms than speakers belonging to the stable group. Clearly, then, the [ð] / [d] distinction is socially meaningful. However, findings of this sort are open to different interpretations. Choice of the standard variant can be viewed as signalling desired class membership, or as the result of increased interaction with standard-pronunciation speakers, or both. In another study of class-indicative speech Trudgill (1974) found that vowel fronting was a class marker in the speech of Norwich, England. In words like *after* and *cart*, middle-class speakers use an unrounded [ɑ:], whereas working-class speakers show a marked tendency to round [ɑ:] or [ä:] instead.

Many other studies (e.g. Macaulay 1976, Ammon 1979, Cheshire 1982, Habick 1991) have revealed correlations between language variation and social stratification, but social class, however defined, has rarely, if ever, been demonstrated to be the only independent variable which determines choice of speech forms. Labov's methodology builds on the difference between styles, ranging from casual to formal to reading. The variable here is the attention speakers pay to their own speech: There is little conscious monitoring in casual speech, whereas reading work lists directs speakers' attention to formal features of their speech, because the contents are clearly immaterial. It is assumed that speakers will conform more closely to the speech norms they have internalized the higher their attention level. On the basis of these assumptions style-shifting (toward more formal) was found to correspond to the effects of upward social mobility. This finding was interpreted as indicating that speech variation is

systematically, though not necessarily consciously, used as a means of social class affiliation. Sex (Labov 1990, Chambers 1992) and ethnicity (Gal 1978, Laferriere 1979), to name but the most conspicuous variables, also interact in complex ways with social class in determining an individual's speech behavior, as do what Fishman et al. (1971) have called social domain (family, school, work, market, church). Speech variation feeds into the social construction of class differentiation, gender differences, and ethnic identities, but all attempts to find simple, constant correlations between these social categories and variation have been frustrated. Observable covariation of social and linguistic factors almost always allow for more than one interpretation. This testifies to the great complexity of the facts sociolinguists have to deal with and to some extent explains their inclination to try to couple positivist faith in objective methodology in gathering linguistic data with interpretations which are grounded in normative ideas about social structure. Owing to the complexity of the variables – speech forms and social class – it may be impossible to do more than make statistical generalizations about covariation. There are, hence, good reasons to look for alternative approaches to exploring the relationships between linguistic variation and social organization.

6 Social Networks

Relating linguistic variation to class is, of course, not the only possible way of analyzing language in society. Social network, a concept first introduced by Radcliffe-Brown (1940), has been proposed as an alternative social variable that is relevant to the study of the social dimensions of language. It is a notion which is focussed on the individual speaker. As a process that transforms the linguistic system, language change does not happen in the abstract. It is the result of speaker-activity in social situations. Some such activities exercise an influence on the speech of others and in this way effect change. Conversational speech is a social activity which can be studied in its own right without projecting a fixed social class model on to it. The nature of this activity itself may hold explanations about language change and variation. Speakers engage in a variety of conversations and entertain relationships with others. They can be described as participating in social networks. Family members, friends, colleagues, customers, neighbors, and other regular or occasional interlocutors can be viewed as points connected by lines (conversations) that form networks. The social networks of which individual speakers are a part vary in size and density and can, therefore, be expected to have an influence on their speech behavior. James and Lesley Milroy have developed a framework for the analysis of linguistic variation which is centered on the notion of social network (J. Milroy 1992, L. Milroy 1987). Networks display patterning, impinge upon speaker behavior, and thus provide a basis for analyzing social relations without assuming class stratification as the starting point. Rather than just

being caused by and reflecting social change, linguistic change is understood, within the social network model, as being a composite part of social change.

Social networks have been demonstrated to function as norm-enforcing agents, for example, with regard to low-prestige varieties. In modern industrial societies use of a standard variety of speech is preferred in general education, most mass communication, and communication in formal settings. Under these conditions, speakers of substandard varieties not only come under pressure to adopt speech forms closer to the standard, but are also offered the possibility to do so. Yet, low-status varieties often persist, even though their speakers are aware of the social advantages – upward social mobility, prestige, power – associated with the standard. For example, the pronunciation as [ʌ] of the vowel in words such as *pull* is characteristic of the Belfast vernacular. Milroy discovered that this substandard variant is used markedly less by speakers with weak network ties. He interpreted this finding as indicating that “to the extent that ties are strong, linguistic change will be prevented or impeded” (Milroy 1992: 176). Social network analysis seems to be a more promising approach toward explicating social facts of this kind than an analysis which hinges on a stratificational class model of society. In accordance with many observations of the sort just cited, Milroy and Milroy (1992) have suggested that the relative density or strength of network ties is predictive of the persistence of speech varieties: strong and closely knit networks support the maintenance of varieties even if they are stigmatized. In L. Milroy’s (1987: 175) words: “The closer an individual’s network ties are with his local community, the closer his language approximates to localized vernacular norms.” Since the strength of network ties, rather than being randomly distributed across a speech community, is a social variable and can hence be related to the wider organization of society, networks are indeed a meaningful construct to explicate the social motivation and significance of the coexistence of speech varieties associated with differential prestige values.

Close-knit networks are indicative of social solidarity. That language behavior can be expressive of social solidarity is a relatively old concept in sociolinguistics. However, as used by Milroy and Milroy, it offers a pivot for linking the social class and network models of sociolinguistics. As they point out (Milroy and Milroy 1997: 61), strong solidarity ties are characteristic of lower and higher social groups, while they tend to be weak in the middle sectors of society. “A high proportion of close-knit ties on the one hand, and of loose-knit ties on the other are consequent upon [different] life-modes which themselves are constitutive of distinct classes.” The network model thus offers an approach to exploring language in the community and discovering in patterns of speech activity the socially meaningful aspects of language varieties which then can be correlated with social stratification. It is, in other words, not just speech forms which are socially indicative, but speech activities, too.

Whether the network approach will have a recognizable influence on the future development of quantitative variation studies time will have to show. So far the social class model of language variation as developed by Labov (1966)

and many of his associates and disciples, which links language variation to variation in social class membership and social mobility, has been by far the most influential, although the notion of social class seems to be on the way out in sociology (Pahl 1989). The need to look for alternatives to social class in sociolinguistics has been acknowledged more than a decade ago by scholars working within the social class model (Rickford 1986). This would augur well for a more prominent place for network analysis. However, established research paradigms and schools of thought tend to be as persistent as low-prestige speech varieties, precisely because they rely on close-knit social networks.

To be sure, the social class approach has its merits and strengths. By accumulating a huge amount of empirical evidence that demonstrates how linguistic variation can be correlated to social parameters, it has added a significant dimension to our understanding of the obvious fact that language, whenever and wherever it is observed, is variable. However, it also has its weaknesses. Language use is found to be socially emblematic in all societies, but not all distinctions in language use are the result of social processes, nor can they be explained as manifesting social distinctions. And even where the distribution of linguistic varieties – dialects, specific expressions, the realization of certain phonemes – correlates with differences in social class membership, such correlations are not always very enlightening. For statistical correlations only state that a variable β , say, vowel tensing before nasals, tends to be present if another variable, α , say working-class membership in Philadelphia, is present. It does not say that vowel tensing before vowels is present *because* the speaker is a blue-collar Philadelphian. If the occurrence of β cannot be demonstrated to be caused by that of α , that is, if no causal connection can be established, the statistical probability of α and β to cooccur can be used to *describe* Philadelphia working-class speech, but has little for explaining its social significance.

So far, no definite set of social invariants that cause language variation has been identified. Rather, though certain generalizations, such as those about social networks and class membership, are possible, the divisions that are reflected in speech may exhibit patterns that are peculiar to one society or culture. Where particular ways of speaking are thought to be determined by social requirements and to reflect social stratification and group affiliation, the general problem is to identify meaningful social groups as independent variables. The problem is confounded by the fact that under certain circumstances individuals can move in and out of social groups, and that societies vary with respect to this kind of social mobility. Inequality in income and wealth is what most conspicuously marks social hierarchies, but while these distinctions are highly stable in some societies, more fluidity is characteristic of others. Social mobility is higher in the USA than in Indonesia, for example, and higher in urban than in rural settings. How this is reflected in language behavior and whether or how different degrees of social mobility affect the velocity and intensity of language change are questions which are as intriguing as they are difficult to handle. Reducing them to specific, testable hypotheses is one difficulty, and the general complexity of social and linguistic systems is another.

Communities that differ sufficiently in terms of social structure, but are comparable in terms of language behavior are hard to find. While this is yet another indication of how closely language and society are linked, it makes comparative research projects difficult to conceive and carry out. Most micro-sociolinguistic studies have, therefore, focussed on a single speech community and the social distinctions reflected in its members' speech. In its dealings with speech communities micro-sociolinguistics overlaps with macro-sociolinguistics.

7 Macro-sociolinguistics

"Speech community" is one of the basic notions of sociolinguistics, one which should not be used without an explicit definition. A common language distinguishes a social group in a sense, but the relationship between language and group affiliation is more complex than that. On one hand, where language is the only commonality, it does not really define a *social* group, and on the other, social groups may be defined in terms of language even though their members make use of more than one language. As Gumperz (1968: 220) was quick to point out, "regardless of the linguistic differences among them, the speech varieties employed within a speech community form a system because they are related to a shared set of social norms." Linguistic rules are like social norms in that their validity is guaranteed by social aggregates. An important lesson of sociolinguistics is that linguistic rules in this sense extend beyond the traditional areas of structural patterning, that is, phonology, syntax, and the lexicon. Choices speakers make of speech varieties including different languages are subject to shared expectations and are meaningful. That behavior is meaningful is another way of saying that it is social, since it can be meaningful only by virtue of being governed by rules, and rules presuppose a social frame of reference.

The speech community has also been defined as an attitudinal community. Stereotypes and values accorded different speech forms are viewed as determining membership (Labov 1972b). A more traditional definition reminiscent of dialect studies is that of a socio-geographical community whose members are assumed to exhibit a high degree of homogeneity in speech (Halliday 1978). Other definitions are based on shared repertoires affiliated with a common mother tongue (Kloss 1966), and speakers' claim to membership (Coulmas 1996). Most generally, speech communities can be defined in terms of shared expectations and rules. Whether or to what extent a set of social rules is shared by individual speakers must be determined by surveys. Specific surveys designed to gather data on language characteristics as well as censuses that include questions about language use and proficiency are an important instrument of macro-sociolinguistic research, that is, the sociology of language. Results of such surveys are used, along with other data, to describe the linguistic composition of speech communities, their delimitation and interaction with

each other. Such descriptions are a precondition for analyzing what societies do with their languages, and for recognizing the attitudes and attachments that account for the functional distribution of speech forms in a society.

If sociology is concerned with explaining social life, social relationships, socially meaningful behavior, and group affiliations, language must occupy the sociologist's attention, if only because language is one of the social possessions which most obviously reflects the internal differentiation of human societies. It lends itself easily to being used as a symbol of signaling commonality and marking boundaries. This is, perhaps, most obvious in multilingual speech communities, but there is plenty of linguistic diversity in monolingual communities too, and its investigation by sociolinguists has demonstrated time and again that it is just as socially meaningful. This kind of variation not only manifests subdivisions within communities and "community loyalty" (Milroy and Margrain 1980: 26), it is also characteristic of the individual speaker's language skills. Speakers can and do make choices. In their normal communication behavior they choose to pronounce words such as *mad* as one syllable [mæd] or two [me:əd]; they say "thanks" or "thank you" or they choose some other expression of gratitude; they choose formal and less formal styles, dialectal or standard varieties. The inability to do so marks a speaker as socially incompetent. On the basis of the extensive research into language variation that has accumulated since the late 1960s, it is safe to say that social differentiation requires linguistic differentiation. If "requires" is understood here in a strict sense, it follows that explanations which can be derived from the relationship between language and society thus conceived will pertain, first and foremost, to language. "The social motivation of a sound change," the title of an early article by Labov (1963), is indicative of this perspective. In this article, Labov investigated vowel centralization on Martha's Vineyard, an island on the northeastern coast of the United States. He observed a generational change in the onset of the diphthongs in words such as *white*, *wide*, *house*, and *how* which he tried to correlate with social variables. In so doing he referred to social facts in order to explain linguistic phenomena, regarding social structure and stratification – in this case: occupational differences between farmers and fishers – as the cause of linguistic processes. However, attempts, such as Trudgill's (1978), to limit the sociolinguistic enterprise to establishing causal links in this direction only have not been successful, because language and society are so indissolubly connected with each other.

At any given time, the linguistic differentiation of social groups is a fact that can be observed. It not only reflects social structure, but is also part of the social fabric and as such determines how individuals and groups interact with each other. Language provides the stage on which many social conflicts are played out (Haugen 1966, Edwards 1985, Nelde 1989). People are appreciated and discriminated against for the way they speak (Fishman 1989, Honey 1989); their attitudes towards their own languages and those of others are emotional (Williams 1974), sometimes as strongly as religious beliefs. They have ideas about linguistic goodness and purity (Jernudd, Shapiro 1989, Thomas 1991),

what does and what does not belong to their language, how language should be taught (Stubbs 1976), etc. Language is frequently used as a defining characteristic of nationhood (Wardhaugh 1983) and ethnicity (Fishman 1989b), and it is associated with stereotypes about these (Le Page, Tabouret-Keller 1985). Languages are acquired and defended in order to achieve social goals (Cummins 1986). They have economic utility and are a factor of the transaction costs of economic processes (Coulmas 1992). Accordingly, they are perceived as the key to empowerment and success (Tollefson 1993). These beliefs and attitudes, no matter whether or not they are borne out by reality, are social facts in their own right which interact with other social facts, which in turn may have an effect on how languages evolve. Not only does language reflect social order, it contributes to its perpetuation and / or change. Deliberately guided language change has been promoted as a means to advance modernization, eradicate or reduce racial and sexual discrimination, and create national cohesion (Cooper 1989, Weinstein 1983; see chapter 32). Policies designed to expand the geographical and / or social domains of a language – e.g., Swahili in post-colonial Tanzania – have created social facts (Calvet 1987, Pütz 1995). Dialects have broken away and been established as independent national languages for political reasons. For instance, Maltese, once a substandard Arabic trade jargon was accorded the status of Malta's national language (Hull 1994). Similarly, under German occupation during World War II, Luxembourgers reinforced the differences between *Lëtzebuergesch* and Standard German to turn their speech from a German dialect into a proper language (Kramer 1994).

Further, linguistic diversity, such as is characteristic of south Asia (Shapiro and Schiffman 1981) and many African societies (Herbert 1992), forces people to develop adaptive strategies such as creating and using a lingua franca (Calvet 1981). The multiplicity of languages is a social given for every member who is born into such a society. Here again language is a constituent of society rather than a mere reflection of its constitution. It interacts with other universals characteristic of human societies, i.e., technology (material culture), the organization of the social microcosm (kinship), the organization of the social macrocosm (politics) and the organization of the cosmos of beliefs (religion / ideology). The sociology of language explores these connections. Their relationships with micro-sociolinguistic issues are varied, some being more closely linked, others having a more distant connection. It has not proven feasible, however, to draw a sharp line between these two orientations.

Many questions can be investigated with equal justification within micro- or macro-sociolinguistics. For instance, Uriel Weinreich's (1968) concern with language contact focussed on the traces that can be detected in linguistic systems of the contact and interaction of neighboring speech communities through their bilingual members. However, the preconditions and consequences of language contact involve a range of interesting phenomena, social and linguistic, which have both micro- and macro-aspects. "Contact linguistics" is now recognized as a branch of sociolinguistics (Nelde et al. 1995). The following can all be viewed as consequences of language contact: Language generation, i.e.,

pidginization and creolization (Mühlhäusler 1986, Bickerton 1992); language degeneration, i.e., language displacement (Dorian 1989); and novel patterns of language use, i.e., codeswitching (Myers-Scotton 1993a, 1993b). These and some other matters such as diglossia and bilingualism are discussed at length in chapter 21 and, therefore, need not be dealt with here. It is worth noting, however, that it is quite impossible to say, without making arbitrary decisions, whether they should be treated properly in micro- or macro-sociolinguistics. The indissoluble connection between micro- and macro-issues has important repercussions for the question of a sociolinguistic theory.

8 Theories but No Theory

The double reliance on social and language sciences has sometimes been considered the major reason for what has been diagnosed as the theoretical deficit of sociolinguistics. Sociological theory has gone its own system-theoretic way, maintaining at best a very esoteric interest in language and more commonly ignoring the role of language in constructing society altogether. At the same time, the advent of the powerful generative paradigm in linguistics led mainstream linguists to turn their back on society and sociology. They acknowledge variation as an obvious fact which, however, is said to be of no interest to linguistic theory (Smith 1989: 180).

If it were true that there is nothing of theoretical importance in variation, then linguistics would fail to address a whole range of questions which many would ask who want to understand what language is and how it works. Some such questions are the following:

- How is it that language can fulfill the function of communication despite variation?
- What does it mean that most people in London and New York speak “English,” even though it is evident that what is spoken in these two places differs in many significant ways?
- What part of the speech of Anglo-Canadians in Montreal is baffling to outsiders if only English is considered, but easily explained if we take notice of the fact that it coexists and, in the heads and conversations of bilinguals, interacts with French?
- Is the range of language units that are judged to be the same and treated as such by linguists defined by physical parameters or social conventions?
- Why do languages change, and what does it mean that they do; that is, what kind of an object is it that changes while in some sense preserving its identity?

By not admitting such questions to its agenda; by refusing to consider the possibility that social factors should play a role in linguistic analysis because

language is essentially a socially constituted system; and by discounting variation as an imperfection rather than recognizing it as an inherent feature of human behavior and the working of the human mind, linguistics has constructed language as a highly abstract object about which statements can be made in the framework of a coherent theory. But what does this theory have to say about the nature of language? Linguistic theory hence is a theory about language without human beings. It is a formal model of structural relationships of which it is basically unknown how they relate to actual speech. Whatever the merits of this model, it is hardly the theory that will help unravel the structural foundations of society which linguistics was once expected to provide.

On the other hand, sociological theory generally pays minimal attention to language. Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons took little interest in language as a social fundamental. And even where language is assigned a role in explaining social facts, as in Schütz's (1965) concept of "intersubjectivity," the foundation of ethnomethodology, or in Habermas's (1985) "universal pragmatics," it is at a highly abstract level probing the (universal) conditions that make social interaction possible. Thus, sociological dealings with language have produced a theory of language use in social contexts no more than has linguistics.

Since all communities exhibit variation in their speech and the majority of all people use more than one language in their everyday lives, it would seem evident that these facts are something to be accounted for by a theory of language. The question is whether sociolinguistics can fill this gap or will ever be able to do so. To construct such a theory is seen by some as a vital task for putting what so far has been a mainly descriptive endeavor on a more solid foundation (Figueroa 1994). However, sociolinguists are divided amongst themselves as to the feasibility of such an undertaking. Fasold (1990: viii ff) has expressed pessimism about a unified theory of sociolinguistics on a par with that of "linguistics proper," whereas Romaine (1994: 221 ff) thinks that such a theory is both desirable and feasible. It should, she argues, not only supplement linguistic theory with respect to phenomena which cannot be explained properly without reference to social factors, but indeed form the core of a "socially constituted" theory of language, i.e., an alternative paradigm for studying all aspects of language.

On the sociological side, Williams (1992) has criticized sociolinguistics for failing to produce a theory of its own while at the same time uncritically relying on Parsonian structural functionalism and the individualistic consensualist view of society associated with it. He calls for a conflict model of society to be regarded as the cornerstone of a sociolinguistic theory which takes into account power differentials within and across speech communities in analyzing the social forces governing speech behavior. The most promising approach to such a sociolinguistics, he argues, may be found in the work of French sociologists such as Bourdieu (1977) and Achard (1993). A theory about language in society will miss a crucial point if it fails to address power and social control. However, some of the difficulties that stand in the way of a sociolinguistic

theory that does take issue with power differentials and means of social control stem from the fact that sociologists take language for granted rather than as an object of theorizing and at the same time fail to furnish a social theory to which a theory of language use can be easily linked.

It must also be noted that scientific fields differ considerably with respect to the importance that is accorded to theory formation. Sociology emphasizes abstract theories more than other social sciences, and sociologists have little patience with purely descriptive research. The same can be said of formal linguistics. The major purpose of empirical studies both in sociology and linguistics is to test theories. By contrast, sociolinguistics is preoccupied with descriptive research. Due to the complexity of the phenomena it has to deal with, methodological questions concerning the delimitation, collection, and processing of empirical data have been much more in the foreground than theory construction. Survey sampling, participant observation, questionnaire design, interview and elicitation techniques, multivariate analyses, probability theory and other methodological tools have been developed or adapted to fit language data. In contradistinction to the formal modeling along the lines of syntactic theory, logic, and computer science, sociolinguistic method is empirical and mostly quantitative, dealing as it does with observable speech behavior. This is not to say, however, that sociolinguistic research is atheoretical. Rather, there are numerous theories or sets of propositions of which it is expected that they will coalesce to form a theory about a particular aspect of the language–society nexus. The remainder of this chapter presents a brief overview of some of the theories and nascent theories that have grown out of sociolinguistic research. Space does not permit an in-depth discussion, and for theoretical notions pertaining to the study of multilingualism the reader is referred to chapter 21.

9 Language Change and Variation

As pointed out above, an important current of sociolinguistic research focusses on language change, and some of the most influential scholars in the field consider that the proper task of a sociolinguistic theory should be to explain and predict language change. Although based on assumptions that differ considerably in detail, this is the common position underlying three major works (Milroy 1992, Labov 1994, Chambers 1994). What are the causes and mechanisms of language change? Why are certain distinctions maintained, while others are lost? What are the forces that resist language change? What are the underlying principles that make predictions of changes in select communities possible? Such are the questions dealt with in this area of sociolinguistic scholarship.

Closely related to the pursuit of knowledge about language change is variation research (Romaine 1985). Indeed, both are often subsumed under the same heading, historical change being conceived as one kind of variation. Among the general questions addressed in this connection are the following: What

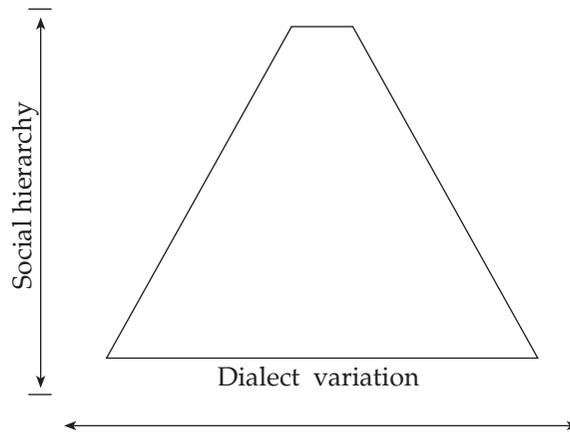


Figure 23.1 Regional and social variation

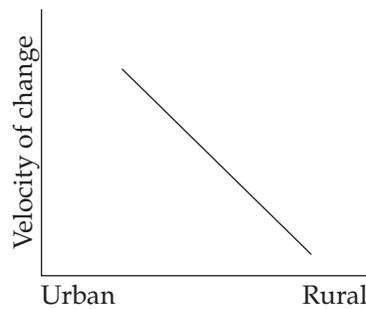


Figure 23.2 Velocity of linguistic change in urban and rural areas

is language variation and what does it imply for our conception of what (a) language is? What are the relevant social attributes that have a bearing on language variation? How do temporal, regional, and social variation interact, and how do they relate to age and gender? Interesting theoretical concepts have been developed which link regional and social variation. Various studies have demonstrated that in industrial societies adherence to a recognized standard increases with speakers' position in the social hierarchy, as indicated in figure 23.1 (adapted from Trudgill 1974).

Another generalization is about linguistic change in urban and rural areas, as portrayed in figure 23.2. Change tends to emanate from urban centers and spread to rural areas where speakers are less mobile and more conservative. However, at a time of rapid social transformations which affect economic conditions and social ties in both urban and rural areas, intervening variables have to be taken into account. In order to explain the retention of localized speech forms in specific settings, the above generalizations have to be supplemented

by information about the socioeconomic conditions, social relations, ideology, and values of the community under investigation (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1995).

Since empirical data on the diffusion of linguistic innovation are available for few languages and with a relatively shallow real-time depth only, the investigation of change in progress makes use of the concept of "apparent time" (Labov 1994: 43ff), that is, the distribution of linguistic variables across age cohorts. If a significant correlation is discovered between age and a linguistic variable, then it has to be determined whether this correlation is a function of change in progress or of age differentiation of language use. In either case, the answer has to be theoretically founded.

10 Gender

Yet another dimension of linguistic variation is among sex and gender distinctions, where the former refers to biological and the latter to sociocultural differences (Eckert 1989). A vast research literature testifies to the great amount of interest that linguistic correlates of sex and gender have attracted in both sociolinguistics and gender studies (Miller and Swift 1976, Coates and Cameron 1988, Lorber and Farrell 1991). In most societies for which data are available, it has been demonstrated that women of all social strata are more sensitive toward prestige norms and deviate less from the prestige speech variety than men (Gordon 1997). The social significance of these differences clearly calls for explanation, and sociolinguistics has much to offer to the study of gender-based constraints in society.

11 Politeness

While most studies about gender and language deal with communities in North America and western Europe, there is also a growing body of literature about the speech of men and women in non-western societies (Chambers 1995: ch. 3). Many of these investigations border on another area of comparative research, politeness, that is, how language is used to define interpersonal relationships in terms of formality, intimacy, solidarity, and deference (Lakoff 1989, Watts et al. 1992). Many descriptions of politeness phenomena in various languages have been published in recent years and have stimulated theoretical discussions about such questions as whether politeness can be defined independently of a given language or speech community; whether it can be measured and how it can be compared across languages; and whether politeness should be construed as a notion belonging to the language system, language use, or both (Brown and Levinson 1978).

The nexus of politeness and gender differentiation in speech plays a significant role in discourse analysis (Schiffrin 1994, Tannen 1993), which has evolved into an entire subdiscipline of sociolinguistics with its own analytic methods and theoretical concepts (see chapter 17). Like variation studies, discourse analysis uses tape recordings of real-life speech for analysis, but its method is more interpretative. While variation studies insists on quantifiable generalizations, discourse analysis tends to draw conclusions on the basis of an in-depth analysis of a small corpus of data. The view that gender-related language variation corresponds to different views of the world and that misunderstandings between men and women arise because the male and female worldviews as encoded in language do not coincide has been articulated on the basis of interpretative rather than quantitative findings (Tannen 1991).

12 Linguistic Relativism

The idea that worldviews are encoded in language has long played a role in sociolinguistics. First advanced by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early nineteenth century, it came to be associated in the twentieth century with the work of Edward Sapir and Benjamin L. Whorf. They focussed on Amerindian languages in which the physical world was encoded in ways that differed markedly from the more extensively studied languages of Indo-European stock. Languages, they concluded from their observations, function as perceptual and conceptual filters, a notion which subsequently became known as the "linguistic relativity hypothesis." A rigid interpretation of this hypothesis sees speakers' cognition strongly influenced, if not wholly determined, by the language they speak. While originally developed in the context of cross-linguistic comparisons, this notion was also applied to intra-linguistic differences. When Bernstein (1971) first introduced the notions of a "restricted" and "elaborated" code, he drew on the linguistic relativity hypothesis, suggesting that habitual use of restricted and elaborated codes implied differential cognitive abilities. Since Bernstein's restricted and elaborated codes were associated with the working class–middle class division, his theory turned out to be politically controversial. The question of whether or to what extent speech habits influence cognitive abilities was, therefore, by and large dropped from the agenda of sociolinguistic research, and the concept of class-related deficient linguistic abilities was replaced by that of differential codes which should each be studied in their own right and not be judged against the "legitimate" norm. Much discussed though it was when Bernstein published his first articles, his theory of language, class, and cognition had little influence on the development of sociolinguistics outside Britain. The question whether the speech habits of socially defined groups correlate with different cognitive abilities is not only difficult to substantiate, but thought illegitimate by many, or at least undesirable to ask.

To what extent the structure of one's language shapes one's view of the world thus remains an unresolved issue. Yet, the idea that language exercises an influence on people's perception and concepts is still espoused by many (Lucy 1992) and often forms the underlying paradigm for describing the relation between language and society (Chaika 1989). The view that language and thought are related has informed sociolinguistics in many different ways. While few scholars these days support a strong variant of linguistic determinism, it is widely thought plausible that if the world is habitually talked about in certain ways, thinking can be influenced thereby. At the same time, it is generally acknowledged that all languages provide the means to express things differently and to express novel thoughts. How speech habits interact with ways of thinking, then, remains one of the many intricate questions into which empirical research is needed.

13 Conclusion

As this overview has demonstrated, sociolinguistics deals with an extremely wide range of observable phenomena that relate to language and society in ways that call for systematic explanations. So wide a range it is, indeed, that there is no room for an essentialist conclusion which would tell the reader in one paragraph what sociolinguistics is all about. We must settle for re-emphasizing the width and extraordinary complexity of the evidence that needs to be taken into account. Social variants have a bearing on language choices at virtually every conceivable level of patterning and use, while the linguistic resources of groups and individuals are at the same time basic to constituting social order. In many areas meaningful correlations, a system of regular connections, could be demonstrated to underlie seemingly disparate and multifarious facts. However, these various relations in both directions outreach the grasp of a single over-arching theory of language and society. At this time, sociolinguistics presents itself as a vast field into which many lines have been drawn. The result is not a unified pattern where everything falls into place, but, rather, a criss-cross of intersecting and overlapping figures. There is a huge number of descriptive studies on the basis of which many specific phenomena can be explained, in the strict sense of the term, although these particularistic explanations have resisted incorporation into a unified explanatory framework. This is not surprising or a reason for discontent. It simply attests to the fact that a single theoretical approach is insufficient to account for what is most essential to human existence, language as a means of conceiving and creating society.