Language in Society and Language Use

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Introduction

The following presentation is intended to give students an idea of what this course will be about. Basic principles and assumptions of sociolinguistics are explained in the following slides and typical concerns of the field can be recognised.

To begin with several reasons for going to this seminar are given and then possible themes for presentations and term papers are discussed.
Several good reasons for going to the present seminar:

1) To find out about how language and society interacts, how social attitudes, social ambition and social bonding affect the manner in which people speak.

2) To learn about how the internal structure of language interacts with external social factors.

3) To discover more about how languages change and how they don’t, given the significance of social factors on this process.

4) To look as specific social situations and see how these general principles are confirmed or refuted. Key sociolinguistic investigations, largely in America and Britain are of interest here.
5) To examine closely how speakers use social networks to strengthen their identification with the social group to which they feel they belong.

6) To look at how men and women use language to express the relationship of the sexes (gender-related language use).

7) To see how such socially relevant phenomena as politeness are expressed in different languages.

8) To learn about the wider context in which societies are embedded and how language relates to culture in general (linguistic anthropology).

9) To throw new light on the relationship of the standard of a language and the dialects which are also found. In the Anglophone context, to consider how and why regional standards arose and how countries, which are now independent, developed standards of their own.
Areas for presentations and term essays

(These areas are quite large and issues within them can be treated separately in different sessions if students wish)

1) The history of sociolinguistics

2) Models of sociolinguistics (accommodation, social networks)

3) Individual sociolinguistic studies (New York, Norwich, Belfast, Dublin, etc.) (also possible: English overseas, extraterritorial varieties)

4) Sociolinguistics and gender-related language differences

5) Sociolinguistics and speech act theory
Areas for presentations and term essays (continued)

6) Sociolinguistics, solidarity and politeness
7) Sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, ethnolinguistics
8) Sociolinguistics and language change
9) Sociolinguistics and second language acquisition
10) Sociolinguistics and education, language planning
Sociolinguistics and sociology

- **Sociolinguistics** as a separate discipline develops in the early sixties, first in the USA, later in Britain and then throughout the rest of the western world. This is true although considerations of language in relation to society go back a considerable way and although the significance of society for language was stressed by the structuralists at the beginning of the 20th century.

- **Sociology** is the study of social structures. This is a discipline which was developed into its modern form in 19th century France and in Germany in the early 20th century. In its analysis of social forces it is of immediate relevance to sociolinguistics although sociology itself is not concerned with language.
Some basic assumptions

- The basic assumption of sociolinguistics is that the variation we can observe in language is non-random, i.e. variation in language is socially significant. The task of the sociolinguist has been to quantify this variation and to give a principled account of its occurrence. In a nutshell the findings of sociolinguistics have shown that language variation is largely determined by social class and status. Variation furthermore correlates with the relative security of a group’s position in society with a general tendency of lower-status groups to imitate higher-status groups as long as this imitation has a chance of leading to an improvement of social status as with the lower-middle classes in the western world.

- There is often a discrepancy between what speakers say of their language and what they practice. For instance in Peter Trudgill’s study of English in Norwich it was shown that the working-class have a low opinion of their own variety of language but continue to use it. This led to assuming that varieties can have covert prestige for their speakers.
Sociolinguistics and dialectology

- In a way it is true to say that sociolinguistics arose out of dialectology. Those linguists involved in this area in the last century and the beginning of the present century were interested in registering language use and as such were half on the way to being sociolinguists. However, many aspects of dialectological research are unacceptable to modern sociolinguists. The chief deficiency of the dialectological approach is that older, male, rural speakers were given preference as informants. This went against the basic principle of all sociolinguists, namely that the choice of informants be random and thus unbiased by the field worker. Characteristic of sociolinguistic methods are the following features:

  - 1) The prior definition of one's area of investigation
  - 2) The impartial choice of informants
  - 3) The choice of optimal methods of investigation (e.g. tape recording rather than questionnaire)
Gathering information

- The procedure of interviewing informants has the disadvantage that the field worker very often has a negative (or standardising) effect on the informants. This is called the observer's paradox, namely that the nature of the object of investigation changes under observation (more on this below). A dialogue situation in which the informant is not made aware of his status as informant is much more favourable and less likely to distort the results.

Types of language variation

- Just as the methods of the dialectologists were unacceptable to sociolinguists so was the terminology they used. For one thing the sociolinguists wanted to get away from the use of the term dialect. It carried with it the implication of a rural type of speech which is particularly conservative. The more neutral term variety was chosen which had the additional advantage that it did not imply implicit contrast with a standard variety of language. The term variety simply refers to a variant of a language. It may be the standard of this language or not, it may be a rural or an urban variant, a social or peer group variant, etc.
Contact between speakers

- One of the aspects of contact between speakers of different varieties of a language is **accommodation**. By this is meant that one of the speakers attempts, in fact to face interaction, to approximate his speech to that of his partner in conversation for a variety of reasons, to make him feel at ease, in order to be accepted, etc. This accommodation can be long-term or short-term and is most readily accomplished by children.

The linguistic variable

- This term refers to a specific feature of a language which shows particular variation in a community and which is used as a tag for classifying a speaker's speech. For example in New York the realisation of /r/ is just such a variable. A common non-linguistic designation for a linguistic variable, which derives from the Bible, is *shibboleth*, speakers of one community pronouncing this word with an initial *sh*-sound and speakers of another pronouncing it with an initial *s*-sound, i.e. /sh/ versus /s/. A linguistic variable need not only be phonological. Examples of grammatical variables are double negation, the use of *ain’t* and the lack of marking with verbs in the 3rd person singular among African Americans.
Indicators and markers

- It has been established in the case of the variable (ng) (as in English *walking* [w>kiŋ]) that the index scores for [ŋ] — as in [wp:kin] — tend to decrease as the formality of the speech situation increases, no matter which particular social group is involved. One explanation for this focusses on the fact that whenever there is class differentiation with a linguistic variable, speakers of all classes will direct their attention towards the higher status variants and tend to increase their use of those variants. Stylistic variation is, going by this account, a direct result of social class variation.

Class and style

- However, not all variables which are subject to class differentiation show stylistic variation as well, i.e. variables correlate with social class variation in terms of different index scores, but do not alter even if the speech situation changes. Variables which are subject to stylistic variation as well as class, sex or age variation are referred to as markers. Variables which are not involved in systematic style variation are called indicators, an example would be the fricative *t* [8] of southern Irish English, in a word like *put* [pu8], which is found in all styles of this variety of English. Indicators do not contribute to the description of class differences as markers do, since speakers appear to be less aware of the social implications of an indicator than of a marker.
Geographical variation and language contact

• Variation has not only social sources but also spatial ones. When speakers disseminate into new locations, the language they take with them changes with time, for instance, in Canada or South Africa where there has been considerable language contact. These changes very often are connected with the establishment of different standard forms of languages at the new locations (as in central Canada). Furthermore, at overseas locations, English has been subject to language contact and this has in turn led to changes in the forms of the language when this has taken place. South Africa is a good example of a contact situation with Afrikaans (a colonial form of early modern Dutch) the language with which English has been in contact.
The Development of the Discipline of Sociolinguistics
The main sociolinguist is William Labov, an American linguist who started by investigating language use in Martha’s Vineyard (an island off the north-east coast of the United States) and in New York city. His seminal investigations were based on principles and methods which have become standard in sociolinguistics and which led to insights which are generally accepted today.
Labov’s principles and assumptions

1) Basic assumption: Linguistic variation is socially determined.

2) Speakers are in a double bind: on the one hand they show an identification with their locality through the use of a local variety of language. On the other hand they aspire to social acceptability and hence in their speech they move towards the standard of their area.

3) Surreptitious interview methods mean that the observers paradox is minimised. (N.B.: The observer’s paradox maintains that the linguistic behaviour of informants changes under observation, usually because people then talk the way they think the linguist wants them to).
Labov’s data collection methods

• Labov further stressed the need to collect data reliably. The linguist must be aware that an informant will show the following features in his speech: 1) style shifting (during an interview), 2) varying degree of attention, i.e. some speakers pay great attention to their own speech (so-called 'audio-monitoring'); in excited speech and casual speech the attention paid by the speaker is correspondingly diminished, 3) degree of formality, determined by the nature of the interview; it can vary depending on how the informant reacts to the interviewer and the situation he/she is placed in.
How does language change?

With regard to language change William Labov proposed three phases which can be summarised as follows: 1) origin, a period in which many variants exist for one and the same phenomenon, 2) propagation, the period in which one of the variants established itself and 3) the conclusion in which the remaining variants are done away with. Various external factors can accelerate the process of language change, above all social pressure from above or below. Additional factors are the degree of literacy in a community, the restraining influence of a standard of a language, etc. Schematically these three phases correspond to the beginning, middle and end of an S-curve which is frequently used as a visualisation of language change (see next slide).

- Labov proved his theories on language variation and language change by investigating (in an anonymous manner) the English of various employees in New York department stores. Here he chose stores with differing social status. The linguistic variables he was particularly interested in are: (1) the presence or absence of syllable-final /r/, (2) the pronunciation of the ambidental fricatives (/θ/ and /ð/ respectively) and (3) the quality of various vowels.
S-curve as model of language change

1. Initiation
2. Expansion
3. Termination
4. Not affected (residue)
Other models of sociolinguistics and language change
The Social Networks Model
(Lesley and James Milroy)
The Milroy investigated three groups in Belfast in the following parts of the city (see map on previous slide):

*Ballymacarrett* (Protestant East Belfast)

*The Hammer* (Lower Shankhill Road, Protestant West-Central Belfast)

*Clonard* (Lower Falls Road, Catholic West-Central Belfast)

The found that language use was determined by vernacular norms, i.e. people used language that reflected the social network they belonged to.

A social network is the group of people you know, professionally and privately. A social class is an abstraction classification according to socio-economic status in a society. You will not know everyone in your class in your society, but you will know those in your social network.
A discussion of networks necessitates that these be put in relation to the notion of class. Two features of networks need to be highlighted in this connection. Networks are different from social classes. Class is an abstract characterisation of social status whereas a network consists of those individuals who are acquainted with each other. There is of course a correlation with class inasmuch as people in a network usually belong to a single socioeconomic group and those in the strongest networks tend to be lowest on this scale. Given their relatively small scale, networks form a consensus-based microlevel within society. The bonding within a class, on the other hand, is achieved through similarity in socio-political outlook and not by identification with a certain locale. Class bonds, at least for the middle-class, tend to be weak and hence not play a major role in language usage and norms.
Third wave in sociolinguistics

Class (Labov)

Networks (L. + J. Milroy)

Communities of practice

Language use and the linguistic identity of the individual (Penelop Eckert)
Different kinds of identity

At the very least we can distinguish five types of linguistic identity:

1) National identity
2) Regional identity
3) Class identity
4) Ethnic identity
5) Group identity
6) Personal identity
‘Third wave’ sociolinguistic studies

This is a reference to studies of socio-linguistic variation in which individual style, rather than the realisation of variables across social groups, forms the focus of attention. The emphasis here is on small groups of individuals rather than broad communities. The extent to which speakers use their styles of language to construct their social personae and forge their linguistic identity is a central concern of third wave studies. ‘Third’ in the name suggests that it follows the first type of class-based variationist study carried out by Labov in New York City and the second type of social network analysis by James and Lesley Milroy in Belfast.
Insights of sociolinguistics
Language change can be observed

- The reasons for it are ultimately social, deriving from such factors as forms used by prestigious groups. Any item of change starts as a series of minute variations which spread through the lexicon of the language (lexical diffusion). The difference between varying forms increases with time, due to a process known as phonologisation whereby small differences are exaggerated to make them distinct from other phonemic items in a language. Only a subset of any existing variations in a language at any point in time lead to actual later change. Just what variations result in change depends on their status for the speakers of a language. This status may be conscious in the case of identification markers or subconscious, the latter not being any less important than the former for language change.
Which class is most active?

- Lower middle class speakers figure prominently in language change as they aspire upwards on the social scale.

The behaviour of women

- Women tend to use a more standard type of language than their male counterparts (due to their uncertain position in western-style societies?). On the other hand, however, women tend to represent the vanguard in a situation of socially motivated language change.

The reversal of change

- Language change can in some cases be reversed, i.e. more conservative (older) forms can be re-established if enough speakers use them for purposes of conscious or unconscious identification.
Further issues in sociolinguistics

1) Social networks (smaller and more powerful in their bonds than social classes)

2) Dissociation as a form of language change (changing your language to become more different from others, usually speakers of low prestige.)

3) Sociolinguistics and gender differences (to what extent does the social role of the genders determine their linguistic usage?)

4) Solidarity and politeness are further issues in individual sociolinguistic interaction and have to do with maintaining one’s status and respect in interpersonal communication (technically called face).

5) Sociolinguistics and second language acquisition (how do social factors improve or inhibit the quality of second language acquisition?).

6) Sociolinguistics and education (how are children socialised into their environment through the schools they go to? To what extent do governments try to impose linguistic standards in their countries via the educational system?)
Types of speech communities: Bilingualism

A type of linguistic situation in which two languages co-exist in a country or language community without there being a notable distribution according to function or social class. Within Europe Belgium, in those parts where French and Flemish are spoken side by side, provides an example of bilingualism. Do not confuse this with diglossia. A bilingual is an individual who speaks two languages almost equally and does not show a functional distribution of the languages. One must stress 'almost equally' as one language nearly always predominates with any given individual. True bilingualism can be seen as an ideal state which one can approach but never entirely reach.
Types of speech communities: Diglossia

A type of linguistic situation in which there is a division between two languages or two varieties of a language such that one variety, the so-called 'high' or H variety, is used in public life — in addresses, in the media, in schools and universities, etc. — and another variety, the so-called 'low' variety or L variety, is used in domestic life — with family and friends. Examples of diglossic situations are to be found in Switzerland (Hochdeutsch and Schwizerdütsch), in various Arabian countries (Classical Arabic and the local dialect of Arabic), Paraguay (Spanish and Guaraní).
Types of speech communities: Language Split

This term is used to refer to the type of situation which obtains when for political reasons two varieties which are scarcely distinguishable are forcibly differentiated to maximalise differences between two countries. This applies to the Moldavian dialect of Rumanian, which is now written in Cyrillic and is the language of the Republic of Moldavia within the former Soviet Union, and the remaining dialects of Rumanian. It also applies to Hindi, the official language of India, alongside English, and Urdu, the official language of Pakistan. Note that in these situations much use is made of different writing systems. Thus Hindi is written from left to right in the Devanagari script while Urdu is written right to left in the Persian variant of Arabic. Once language split has been introduced the differences may become real with time, e.g. with Hindi and Urdu the different religions make for different vocabulary which helps the originally artificial distinction between the languages to become real. Historically in Europe Dutch and the Lower Rhenish dialects represent a case of language split.
Types of speech communities: Language Maintenance

The extent to which immigrant speakers of a certain language retain knowledge of the original language in the host country into the following generations. Here language communities vary. The Irish, for example, gave up their native language immediately in the United States whereas the Estonians have shown a remarkable degree of language maintenance. The reasons for this have to do with the attitude of the respective groups to their original language. For the Irish their native language was associated with a background of poverty and deprivation and so they switched gladly to English in America.
Types of speech communities: Language Preservation

This is the extent to which a country has official institutions to preserve the language in an ostensibly pure form. For example, in France an academy has existed since 1634 which acts as a watchdog over the purity of French. There is no corresponding institution in England or Germany (though South Africa, as the only Anglophone country, does have a language academy). In the latter two countries, major publishing houses play the role of language academies, the Oxford University Press in England and the Bibliographisches Institut (Mannheim) in Germany, the publishers of the Duden series of reference books. One should add that the value of prescriptive organs is very much disputed as they cannot stop language change in the form of borrowing (cf. the influence of English on French despite the efforts of the academy).
Types of speech communities: Language Death

This highly emotive term is sometimes applied to those social situations in which a language ceases to exist. The fact itself is of little concern, it is rather the stages which the language goes through which arouse the interest of the linguist. A well-studied instance of language death is Scottish Gaelic in East Sutherland in the north-east of Scotland. The language was progressively abandoned from one generation to the next and during this process the grammar of the language showed clear signs of disintegration, for example in its morphological system. In such a scenario the attention of the linguist is directed at the question whether significant generalisations can be made concerning this grammatical decay.
Recommended literature


