What is a sociolinguist?

Sociolinguists study the relationship between language and society. They are interested in explaining why we speak differently in different social contexts, and they are concerned with identifying the social functions of language and the ways it is used to convey social meaning. Examining the way people use language in different social contexts provides a wealth of information about the way language works, as well as about the social relationships in a community, and the way people convey and construct aspects of their social identity through their language. This book explores all these aspects of sociolinguistics.

Example 1
Ray: Hi mum.
Mum: Hi. You’re late.
Ray: Yeah, that bastard Sootbucket kept us in again.
Mum: Nana’s here.
Ray: Oh sorry. Where is she?

Ray’s description of his teacher would have been expressed differently if he had realised his grandmother could hear him. The way people talk is influenced by the social context in which they are talking. It matters who can hear us and where we are talking, as well as how we are feeling. The same message may be expressed very differently to different people. We use different styles in different social contexts. Leaving school, Ray had run into the school principal.

Example 2
Ray: Good afternoon, sir.
Principal: What are you doing here at this time?
Ray: Mr Sutton kept us in, sir.

This response indicated Ray’s awareness of the social factors which influence the choice of appropriate ways of speaking in different social contexts. Sociolinguistics is concerned with the relationship between language and the context in which it is used.
The conversation between Ray and his mother also illustrates the fact that language serves a range of functions. We use language to ask for and give people information. We use it to express indignation and annoyance, as well as admiration and respect. Often one utterance will simultaneously convey both information and express feelings. Ray’s utterance

Yeah, that bastard Sootbucket kept us in again

not only tells his mother why he is late, his choice of words also tells her how he feels about the teacher concerned, and tells us something about his relationship with his mother (he can use words like bastard talking to her) compared to his grandmother and the principal (to whom he uses sir). The way Ray expresses himself indicates that his relationship with his mother is an intimate and friendly one, rather than a formal, distant or respectful one.

Exercise 1

(a) Identify the words in examples 1 and 2 which suggest that Ray’s relationship with his mother is a friendly one compared to his relationship with the principal.

What does this suggest about the social significance of choice of words?

(b) Ray greeted the principal with the words Good afternoon, sir.

How do or did you greet your school principal? Would you use the same words to your father or mother? Would you use the same greeting to your best friend? Why (not)?

(c) Nicknames can express affection as well as dislike. What clues indicate that Ray is not feeling affectionate towards his teacher?

Answers at end of chapter

We also indicate aspects of our social identity through the way we talk. Our speech provides clues to others about who we are, where we come from, and perhaps what kind of social experiences we have had. Written transcripts provide no auditory clues to readers, and examples 1 and 2 are also too short to provide reliable clues to speaker gender or ethnicity, but we can make a reasonable guess at Ray’s age on the basis of his linguistic choices (he is probably in his early teens), as well as his social background. Later chapters will examine in some detail how we express different aspects of our social identity through our linguistic choices, as well as the ways in which we draw on our sociolinguistic knowledge to construct or enact a particular type of social identity.
simply you’re late again! from her husband. Later in the evening the president of the local flower club calls to ask if she would like to join the club. Good evening, is that Mrs Billington? she asks. No, it’s Margaret Walker, but my husband’s name is David Billington, Margaret answers. What can I do for you? Finally a friend calls Hello Meg, sut wyt ti?

My friend lives in a predominantly monolingual speech community and yet she has been called all sorts of names in the space of three hours. What’s more, none of them is deliberately insulting! If she had managed to embroil herself in an argument or a passionate encounter of a different kind, she might have been called a whole lot more names – some very nasty, some very nice! In most languages, there are many different ways of addressing people. What are the reasons for choosing a particular form?

Languages provide a variety of ways of saying the same thing – addressing and greeting others, describing things, paying compliments. As examples 1 and 2 illustrate, our final choices provide clues to social factors, such as the relationship between the people in the particular situation, and how the speaker feels about the person addressed. In example 3, Margaret’s mother’s choice of dear expresses her affectionate feelings towards Margaret. If she had been annoyed with her daughter, she might have used her full name Margaret, or not greeted her at all. Margaret’s friend’s use of sut wyt ti? (‘how are you?’) as a greeting indicates her Welsh ethnicity. The choice of one linguistic form rather than another is a useful clue to non-linguistic information. Linguistic variation can provide social information.

Exercise 2
Make a list of all the names you are called by people who know you. For each name note who uses it to you and when or where.
Do some people call you by more than one name?
What are the reasons why people choose one name rather than another for you?
Answers at end of chapter

Exercise 3
We often have different names for people when we are addressing them directly, as opposed to when we are referring to them in different contexts.
Note what you call your mother in different contexts:
(a) addressing her
   (i) at home alone with her
   (ii) on the telephone with friends listening
   (iii) in a shop.
(b) referring to her
   (i) at home to another family member when she is present
   (ii) at home to another family member when she isn’t present
   (iii) to an acquaintance who doesn’t know her
   (iv) to a sales assistant in a shop when she is present.
What influences your choice of address form and reference form in each of these contexts?
Answers at end of chapter
What are the different ways we say things?

Example 4

Sam: You seen our ‘entry’s new ‘ouse yet? It’s in ‘alton you know.
Jim: I have indeed. I could hardly miss it Sam. Your Henry now owns the biggest house in Halton.

The examples discussed so far have illustrated a range of social influences on language choice. Sociolinguists are also interested in the different types of linguistic variation used to express and reflect social factors. Vocabulary or word choice is one area of linguistic variation (e.g. that bastard Sootbucket vs my teacher Mr Sutton, Margaret vs dear). But linguistic variation occurs at other levels of linguistic analysis too: sounds, word-structure (or morphology), and grammar (or syntax) as well as vocabulary. Within each of these linguistic levels, there is variation which offers the speaker a choice of ways of expression. They provide us with different linguistic styles for use in different social contexts. Choices may even involve different dialects of a language, or quite different languages, as we shall see.

In example 4, the most obvious linguistic variation involves pronunciation. Sam ‘drops his aitches’ while Jim doesn’t. Just as vocabulary choices convey social information, so using different pronunciation conveys social information too. Sam is a coal-miner and Jim is an old friend of Sam’s son, Henry. Jim is also the local MP and he has dropped in to see Sam on one of his regular visits from London where he now spends most of his time. The difference in Sam’s and Jim’s [h]-dropping behaviour is the result of their different educations and occupations. In other words, despite their common regional origins they have different social backgrounds, and that is indicated by their speech.

Example 5

(a) Refuse should be deposited in the receptacle provided.
(b) Put your rubbish in the bin, Jilly.
(c) Please tender exact fare and state destination.
(d) Give me the right money and tell me where you’re going.

The sentences in example 5 illustrate language variation in grammar and vocabulary, two different levels of linguistic analysis. The first, (a), uses a passive grammatical structure should be deposited, for example, which avoids any mention of the people involved. By contrast, (b) uses an imperative verb form, put, a possessive pronoun, your, and an address form, Jilly. This utterance is much more direct and it specifies whose rubbish is the focus of the directive. Refuse, deposited and receptacle are all more formal and less frequent words than rubbish, put and bin. Both sentences express the same message or speech function: they give a directive. But they are not interchangeable. If your mother said (a) to you as you dropped a bit of paper on the floor, it is likely you would find it odd. You might assume she was being sarcastic or humorous, but you would not be likely to consider it a normal way of speaking to someone she knew well.
Chapter 1 What do sociolinguists study?

Exercise 4
(a) Identify the linguistic features which distinguish (c) and (d) in example 5 above.
What levels of linguistic analysis does the variation involve?
(b) What non-linguistic and social factors are likely to account for the different ways of saying the same thing illustrated in example 5?
Answers at end of chapter

Example 6
In northern Norway, there is a village, Hemnesberget, which has become famous among sociolinguists because the language used by the villagers was described in great detail by two sociolinguists, Blom and Gumperz, in the late 1960s. Blom and Gumperz reported that the Hemnesberget villagers knew and used two distinct kinds of Norwegian: firstly, the local dialect, Ranamål (Rana is the district, mål is the Norwegian word for ‘language’), and secondly, the standard dialect or standard Norwegian, Bokmål (literally ‘book-language’). Bokmål was used by the teachers in school, it was the language of the textbooks and, after a little exposure, it was the kind of Norwegian that the pupils used to discuss school topics in school too. Bokmål was used in church services and sermons. It was used when people went into the local government offices to transact official business. It was used on radio and television. And it was used to strangers and visitors from outside Hemnesberget. So what did that leave for Ranamål?

Ranamål was the kind of Norwegian that people used to speak to their family, friends and neighbours most of the time. As the local dialect, it signalled membership in the local speech community. People used Ranamål to each other at breakfast, to local shopkeepers when buying their newspapers and vegetables, to the mechanic in the local garage, and to the local people they met in the street. A local person who used Bokmål to buy petrol would be regarded as ‘stuck up’ or ‘putting on airs’. 2

In this example, the linguistic variation involves two dialects. In other words, it is not just a matter of pronunciation differences, or vocabulary choices, or grammatical variation. All these levels of linguistic analysis are involved in the variation noted. Ranamål, the local dialect, differs from Bokmål, the standard dialect, in a number of quite specific ways. Each has its own pronunciation features: Ranamål, for instance, has a palatal nasal sound [ŋ] (as in Spanish señor), which Bokmål does not have. Each dialect has distinctive word-forms or morphological features: the plural of the horses is hestene in Bokmål but hæstan in Ranamål. And there are other words which differ between the dialects too: the Bokmål word for she is hun, while in Ranamål she is ho; the Bokmål word for but is men, the Ranamål word is menn.

The reasons why people chose Ranamål as opposed to Bokmål are similar to the reasons that lead people to select Meg as opposed to Mrs Billington in addressing a British woman. Factors such as who is being talked to, where and for what reasons are important. There are also other factors which may be relevant, such as the topic of a discussion. This was clearly illustrated in Hemnesberget in the linguistic behaviour of university students who tended to
switch dialect when they discussed certain topics. They generally used Ranamål in the village, like everyone else, when they came home during vacations, but when they begin to discuss national politics with each other, Blom and Gumperz reported that they tended to switch unconsciously to Bokmål. The topic was one they associated with discussions outside the village in the standard dialect, and so they switched to the linguistic forms they would normally use to discuss it.

The linguistic variation involved in Hemnesberget is not different in kind from the variation which distinguished Sam and Jim’s accents in example 4, or the choice of vocabulary and grammar in example 5; it is simply a matter of scale. And the reasons for the choice of one dialect rather than another involve similar social considerations – the participants, the social setting and the topic or purpose of the interaction.

Because of these similarities, sociolinguists use the term *variety* (or sometimes *code*) to refer to any set of linguistic forms which patterns according to social factors. Variety is a sociolinguistic term referring to language in context. A variety is a set of linguistic forms used under specific social circumstances, i.e., with a distinctive social distribution. Variety is therefore a broad term which includes different accents, different linguistic styles, different dialects and even different languages which contrast with each other for social reasons. It has proved a very useful sociolinguistic term because it is linguistically neutral and covers all the different realisations of the abstract concept ‘language’ in different social contexts.
In this example, the different linguistic varieties used in Sauris are distinct languages. They are distinguishable from each other in their sounds, their grammar and their vocabulary. Italians from outside the area would not be able to understand the German dialect, nor even the Friulian, although, like Italian, it is a Romance language. The varieties are also distinguishable by the way they are used – their social distribution is different. The local people select the appropriate variety for any particular interaction according to similar social factors to those identified in earlier examples: who they are talking to, in what kind of setting, and for what purposes. Using German in the pub is generally not appropriate, for example, though it has been done. One angry woman used German very effectively to berate her husband for ending up in the pub when he was supposed to be at the dairy with their milk, making cheese. Her use of German isolated him from his friends in the pub and emphasised her point that he was neglecting his domestic responsibilities. People may manipulate the norms to make a point – something we shall see more of in later chapters.
These examples illustrate the range of linguistic variation which can be observed in different speech communities. People may use different pronunciations, vocabulary, grammar, or styles of a language for different purposes. They may use different dialects of a language in different contexts. And in some communities people select different languages according to the situation in which they are speaking.

In any community the distinguishable varieties or codes (another term sometimes used for this concept) which are available for use in different social contexts form a kind of repertoire of available options. The members of each community have their distinctive linguistic or verbal repertoires. In other words, in every community there is a range of varieties from which people select according to the context in which they are communicating. In monolingual communities these take the form of different styles and dialects.

In a small Lancashire village, my mother’s linguistic repertoire includes the styles of English she needs in the social contexts in which she operates. The way she talks to the woman selling bread in the baker’s shop is different from the way she talks to her bank manager, and that is different again from the way she talks to her grandchildren, and from the language she uses in church. In Malaysia, for similar reasons, a woman’s linguistic repertoire may include two varieties of English, two different dialects of Chinese and different styles within these, as well as standard or Bahasa Malay and a colloquial variety known as Bazaar Malay. As elsewhere, choosing the appropriate variety from this wide linguistic repertoire depends on social factors.

On the whole, people acquire their knowledge of varieties and how to use them appropriately in the same way that they acquire their knowledge of most other aspects of language – by extensive exposure and a process of osmosis. The Chinese Malaysian, like my Lancashire-born mother, built up her linguistic repertoire by hearing the different varieties in use in the community she lives in. More formal varieties – and especially distinctive written varieties – may involve more conscious learning, but most varieties in a person’s linguistic repertoire are acquired with little conscious effort.

Exercise 5
How many varieties (languages, dialects, styles) do you use on a normal weekday?

Consider which variety you use in your home, at school/college/university, at the shops, in a coffee bar.

Do you ever use more than one variety in the same social context? If so why?

These points are discussed further in chapter 2.
(e.g. wife – husband, customer – shopkeeper, boss – worker) is an important factor. The setting or social context (e.g. home, work, school) is generally a relevant factor too. The aim or purpose of the interaction (informative, social) may be important. And, in some cases, the topic has proved an influence on language choice. University students in countries which use English for tertiary education, such as Tanzania, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, often find it easier to discuss their university subjects using English, for example, just as the students from Hemnesberget used standard Norwegian rather than the local dialect to discuss national politics.

Not all factors are relevant in any particular context, but they can be grouped in ways which are helpful. In any situation, linguistic choices generally indicate people’s awareness of the influence of one or more of the following components:

1. The participants:
   (a) who is speaking and
   (b) who are they speaking to?
2. The setting or social context of the interaction: where are they speaking?
3. The topic: what is being talked about?
4. The function: why are they speaking?

In this book, the focus is on speech, but the same questions can be asked about written communication, as example 5 above illustrated. Throughout this book, these social factors will prove important in describing and analysing all kinds of interaction. They are basic components in sociolinguistic explanations of why we don’t all speak the same way, and why we don’t all speak in the same way all of the time.

Social dimensions

In addition to these components, it is useful to take account of four different dimensions for analysis which relate to the factors above and which have been only implicit in the discussion so far. These are:

1. A social distance scale concerned with participant relationships
2. A status scale concerned with participant relationships
3. A formality scale relating to the setting or type of interaction
4. Two functional scales relating to the purposes or topic of interaction.

The solidarity–social distance scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intimate</th>
<th>Distant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High solidarity</td>
<td>Low solidarity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This scale is useful in emphasising that how well we know someone is a relevant factor in linguistic choice. In Wales, the choice between Meg and Mrs Billington involves consideration of this dimension, for instance. People’s choice of Ranamål vs Bokmål in Hemnesberget, or German rather than Italian in Sauris, similarly indicates the speaker’s judgments about a relationship on this dimension.
An introduction to sociolinguistics

■ The status scale

Superior | High status
---|---
Subordinate | Low status

This scale points to the relevance of relative status in some linguistic choices. The choice of *sir* by Ray in the first example, for instance, signalled Ray’s awareness that the school principal was of higher status and entitled to a respect term. Similarly, the name avoidance by her secretary and the use of *Mrs* by the caretaker represented their ways of responding to the higher status of Margaret Walker-Billington, while she called both of these people by their first names. Sam’s [h]-dropping in example 4 signalled his membership of a group with relatively low social status in the society as a whole, while the educationally and occupationally higher-status Jim dropped none.

■ The formality scale

Formal | High formality
---|---
Informal | Low formality

This scale is useful in assessing the influence of the social setting or type of interaction on language choice. In a formal transaction such as one with the bank manager in his office, or at a ritual service in church, the language used will be influenced by the formality of the setting. For a friendly chat, people generally use colloquial language. In Hemnesberget, Bokmål was the language of school and government offices. Ranamål was the language of the home. The written language of notices is often very formal and impersonal, as example 5 illustrates. Often degrees of formality are strongly influenced by solidarity and status relationships. But not always. A very formal setting, such as a law court, typically influences language choice regardless of the personal relationships between the speakers.

■ The referential and affective function scales

Referential

High information ———— Low information
content ———— content

Affective

Low affective ———— High affective
content ———— content

Though language serves many functions, the two identified in these scales are particularly pervasive and useful for analysis. Language can convey objective information of a referential kind; and it can also express how someone is feeling. Ray’s utterance *Yeah, that bastard Sootbucket kept us in again* simultaneously expresses both information about why he is late, while also conveying his feelings about the teacher referred to. Gossip may provide a great deal of new referential information, while also clearly conveying how the speaker feels about those referred to. It is very common for utterances to work like this, though often one function will dominate. In general, the more referentially oriented an interaction is, the less it tends to
express the feelings of the speaker. Radio broadcasts of the weather forecast tend to put the emphasis on information or the referential function, for instance. By contrast, interactions which are more concerned with expressing feelings often have little in the way of new information to communicate. Talk between neighbours over the fence at the weekend about the weather, for instance, is more likely to be mainly affective in function, and intended to convey goodwill towards the neighbour rather than important new information. The specific content of the conversation may recur every weekend with little variation.

These scales or dimensions for analysis will be referred to and illustrated further in subsequent chapters. Together with the social components identified in the previous section, they provide a useful framework for discussing language in its social context in different speech communities, and for discussing the ways in which language is used and the uses it is put to.

**Exercise 6**

Answer the following two questions for each of utterances a, b, and c, below.

(i) What information does the utterance provide about the relationship between the people talking in the context of their talk?

(ii) What is the function of the utterance in the context?

Does it convey primarily affective or referential information?

(a) Here is the forecast for the Wellington district until midnight Tuesday issued by the meteorological service at 6 o’clock on Monday evening. It will be rather cloudy overnight with some drizzle, becoming fine again on Tuesday morning. The outlook for Wednesday – a few morning showers then fine.

(b) Good morning little one – you had a good big sleep, didn’t you, pet?

(c) Excuse me, Mr Clayton. I’ve finished your letters, sir.

*Answers at end of chapter*

**Exercise 7**

Your local walking club is discussing the preparations for their next weekend away. Using the four dimensions of sociolinguistic analysis proposed in this chapter, identify four linguistic features likely to characterise their discussions in each of these situations:

(a) during an organised meeting in the club meeting room and

(b) when they discuss the details over a drink in the local bar.

**Looking for explanations**

Sociolinguists aim to describe sociolinguistic variation and, if possible, explain why it happens. Why, for example, should Ray describe a teacher differently when talking to his mother and when answering the school principal? Why do different people call my friend Margaret by different names? Why should a formal grammatical construction with formal vocabulary sound sarcastic when used by your mother?
An introduction to sociolinguistics

The first two steps which need to be taken are:

1. to identify clearly the linguistic variation involved (e.g. vocabulary, sounds, grammatical constructions, styles, dialects, languages)
2. to identify clearly the different social or non-linguistic factors which lead speakers to use one form rather than another (e.g. features relating to participants, setting or function of the interaction).

Then we can begin to look for patterns which will help to formulate an explanation of why people use one set of forms in some contexts, but different forms in others. When the two sociolinguists Blom and Gumperz visited Hemnesberget what did they ask? First of all, ‘what are the linguistic forms used in this village?’ Secondly, ‘what are the social factors which lead people to use one set of forms rather than the other?’ And finally, ‘can we explain why particular social factors lead to the use of one set of forms rather than another?’

In other words, the sociolinguist’s aim is to move towards a theory which provides a motivated account of the way language is used in a community, and of the choices people make when they use language.

The relationship between linguistic choices and the social contexts in which they are made is sometimes easiest to see when different languages are involved. The first section of this book focuses on multilingual speech communities and describes some of the ways in which social considerations affect language choice. But there is plenty of language variation in monolingual communities too, and it is just as socially meaningful. The second section of the book focuses on social features of the language user. It explores the range of social information conveyed about participants by their linguistic choices within one language, as well as the way people use their knowledge of this information to construct different aspects of their social identity. In the third section, the focus shifts to the uses of language, and the influence on language of the social context in which it is used and the functions it expresses.

Exercise 8 (for people who speak English as an additional language)

Write a list of all the times that you used English yesterday. Then think about why you selected English rather than your mother tongue or first language.

Which social factors were important in the selection of English?

Are they all included in this chapter?

These issues are discussed further in chapter 2.

Answers to exercises in chapter 1

Answer to exercise 1 (a)

Ray greets his mother with the friendly form *hi*, compared to the more distant and formal *good afternoon* used to the school principal. He uses *mum*, an address form which indicates that he gets on well with her. He could have used no address form at all. Note that he uses the respectful address form *sir* to the principal. Finally he refers to his teacher as *that bastard* and uses a nickname *Sootbucket* for him, an indication that he is treating his mother as an
intimate. This contrasts with the way he refers to the teacher when talking to the principal, when he uses Mr Sutton.

We choose our words carefully according to whom we are talking to. Language choices convey information about the social relationships between people as well as about the topic of discussion. The kind of information which is relevant to language choice includes how well we know the other person and whether they are socially superior.

**Answer to exercise 1 (b)**

Most people greet friends and family differently from those they do not know so well, and from those who are in a superior relationship to them, such as the school principal or the boss at work. Often nicknames or endearments are used between people who know each other well *(e.g. mornin’ sweetheart, hello love, hi Jono)*. When speaking to superiors, it is common to use a title plus last name *(e.g. Miss Firth, Mr Halliday, Dr Lee)* or to avoid names and use only a formal greeting, such as good morning. The particular forms you use may vary from those suggested, but the general patterns described here should apply.

**Answer to exercise 1 (c)**

We cannot tell from the form Sootbucket alone whether Ray feels positive or negative about his teacher. In western (and especially masculine) culture, it is common to use forms that appear superficially insulting to express friendliness and affection. Even the preceding word bastard can be used in a friendly manner between good (usually male) friends in New Zealand and Australia. Hence the main clue to Ray’s feeling is the wider discourse which indicates he is clearly making a complaint and that is not happy at the way he has been treated.

**Answers to exercise 2**

This is just an example of the kind of list you might make if you live in an English-speaking western monolingual community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>When/where</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>grandparents, teachers</td>
<td>home, letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbie</td>
<td>mother, father</td>
<td>most of the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbie-Bob</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>when feeling affectionate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>friends, brother</td>
<td>most of the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>friends</td>
<td>outside home to annoy me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Harris</td>
<td>parents</td>
<td>when very annoyed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Harris</td>
<td>strangers</td>
<td>letters, shops</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parents often call children by a variety of names depending on how they feel towards them. The person in the example above is called Robbie by his mother in most circumstances, but when she is annoyed with him she calls him Robert or even Robert Harris. Friends often have a range of names for each other too. Friends call him Rob most of the time, but Bob when they want to tease or annoy him.

In some cultures, people have one name which is used only in the family and another for use outside. In some cultures people have a ceremonial name used only on very formal occasions. Marital status is sometimes relevant to choice of address form *(e.g. Miss vs Mrs and choice of surname)*.
Answers to exercise 3

Possible answers:

(a) addressing your mother
   (i) at home alone with her: mum, mummy, mom, ma, Tess
   (ii) on the telephone with friends listening: mother, mater, Tess
   (iii) in a shop: mother

(b) referring to your mother
   (i) at home to another family member when she is present: mum, mom
   (ii) at home to another family member when she isn’t present: the old lady, our mam
   (iii) to a friend who doesn’t know her: my mum
   (iv) to a sales assistant in a shop when she is present: my mother

In addressing and referring to your mother, the term you use may provide a clue to your social background, and may differ according to which country you live in. In England, for instance, some members of high social groups use mummy well beyond childhood, while others use mater or mama, especially in reference. Members of lower social groups sometimes use ma, especially for address. Some members of middle social groups use their mother’s first name in address, especially when they become adults. Some use her first name in referring to her in front of others. In some families mum changes to mother as she and the children grow older.

In general, the following factors are among those relevant in selecting appropriate terms of address: family norms of address between children and parents at different stages; audience (who is listening?); social context (is it formal or public, or private and personal, for instance).

In reference, the relationship between the speaker and the addressee is also relevant as well as how well they know the person being referred to.

Answers to exercise 4

(a) Vocabulary choices. Tender vs give, state vs tell, destination vs where you’re going, exact vs right. Use of please in (c).

Syntax. Both sentences use imperative structures, but the more formal verbs in (c) assist in avoiding the use of the personal pronouns me and you which occur in (d). The determiner is omitted before exact fare and destination, which increases the impersonality of the expression. These are both places where your could have occurred, for instance.

(b) The medium of expression is relevant since (a) and (c) are much more likely in writing than in speech. Written and spoken language differ in many specific ways. Whether spoken or written, sentences (a) and (c) are also more formal and distancing. If they were spoken they would be appropriate only in the most formal context, between strangers or people who did not know each other well, or where the speaker was far superior or more powerful than the addressee. Sentences (b) and (d) would be appropriate in speech in informal contexts. The address form in sentence (b) shows the speaker knows the addressee and suggests they know each other well. It could be seen as softening the directive, making it gentler.

Answers to exercise 6

(a) (i) This is a recorded telephone message and therefore the speaker does not know the hearer. This is indicated by the absence of address term and the formal syntax.
Chapter 1  What do sociolinguists study?

(ii) Its primary function is to provide referential information. It is not intended to provide information on how the speaker is feeling.

(b) (i) Despite the initial greeting *good morning* which can be used to strangers and acquaintances, the speaker clearly knows the addressee well. Two affectionate endearment terms are used (*little one, pet*). These are terms appropriately used downwards in status (e.g. mother to child, older person to younger, nurse to young patient).

(ii) The use of the tag form (*didn’t you?*) is an attempt to elicit a response. However, it is not a request for information – the answer is self-evident since it is provided in the utterance itself. This is clearly an utterance with a high affective content.

(c) (i) The address forms (*Mr Clayton, sir*), as well as the initial phrase, an apology for interruption (*Excuse me*), suggest this is an utterance from a subordinate to a superior and that the two do not know each other well.

(ii) The primary intention of this utterance appears to be to provide referential information. Note, however, that it might have other functions too if we knew more about the context. The secretary might be indirectly (and therefore politely) asking if s/he might leave since s/he has finished a particular task. Utterances often serve more than one function.

■ Concepts introduced (in the order they occur in the chapter)

Style
Dialect
Variety/code
Linguistic/verbal repertoire
Speech function

■ References

Hemnesberget in example 6 is based on Blom and Gumperz (1972).
The Sauris community described in example 7 is based on Denison (1972).

■ Useful additional reading

These references provide more information on the topics discussed in this chapter.
Hudson (1996), Ch. 2
Saville-Troike (2003), Ch. 3
Trudgill (2000), Ch. 1
Wardhaugh (2010), Chs 1 and 2.

■ Notes

1. Where possible, as in this example, for ease of reading I use conventional spelling to represent a particular pronunciation. However, the English spelling system is not suitable for representing many important sound contrasts, nor for representing the sounds of other languages. It will therefore be necessary to use phonetic symbols too. The symbols used for the sounds of English are described in the Appendix at the end of the book. For sounds from other languages I have used symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet which are also listed in the Appendix with a gloss to describe how they sound.

2. It has been suggested that the distinction between Bokmål and Ranamål is not as clear as Blom and Gumperz claimed. See Maehlum (1996). On a visit to Hemnesberget in 2005, Paul Kerswill, a social dialectologist who speaks Norwegian, confirmed this view. He also noted that while older people used some Bokmål forms in their dialect while speaking to him, young people used only dialect forms.