Seminar in Sociolinguistics

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Lecture (1)

What do sociolinguists study?
Sociolinguists

- study the relationship between language and society
- are interested in explaining why we speak differently in different social contexts,
- are concerned with identifying the social functions of language and the ways it is used to convey social meaning.
Language and social context

- The way people talk is influenced by the social context in which they are talking.

- a speaker’s awareness of the social factors which influence the choice of appropriate ways of speaking in different social contexts
Language and social context

• The way a speaker expresses himself indicates that his relationship with his addressee is an intimate, friendly one, or a formal, distant or respectful one.

• 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.
Language and social context

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?
Language and social context

addressing and greeting

- Example 3

Every afternoon my friend packs her bag and leaves her Cardiff office in southern Wales at about 5 o’clock. As she leaves, her business partner says *goodbye Margaret* (she replies *goodbye Mike*), her secretary says *see you tomorrow* (she relies *bye Jill*), and the caretaker says *bye Mrs. Walker* (to which she responds *goodbye Andy*). As she arrives home she is greeted by *hi mum* from her daughter, Jenny, *hello dear, have a good day?* from her mother, and 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?*
Linguistic Variation

- 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.
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?
Linguistic Variation

- Styles
- Dialects (Varieties)
- Languages
Linguistic Variation

- Styles

Example 4

Sam: You seen our ‘enry’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.

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.
Linguistic Variation

- Dialects (varieties)

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’.
Linguistic Variation

- Dialects (varieties)
  - 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*.
  - 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.
Dialects (varieties)

- 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.
Linguistic Variation

English dialects (England)
Linguistic Variation

- Languages

Example 7
In a mountain village, Sauris, in north-east Italy, a sociolinguist, Denison, reported in 1971 that the adults were all trilingual. Before 1866, the village had been part of the Austrian empire, and its villagers all spoke German. In the late 1960s, they still used a German dialect in the home, and to neighbours and fellow villagers. They also used the regional language Friulian with people from the surrounding area outside the village, and the young men, in particular, tended to use it to each other in the pub. These men had gone to secondary school together in Ampezzo, a nearby town, and Friulian had become for them a language of friendship and solidarity. Italian was the language people used to talk to those from beyond the region, and for reading and writing. Because their village was now part of Italy, Italian was the language of the church and the school.
Linguistic Variation

- Languages
Linguistic Variation

Sauris
Linguistic Variation

Languages of Switzerland

- German
- French
- Italian
- Romansh

Linguistic boundaries
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.
- People 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.
Linguistic Variation

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.
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.*
Social Factors

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?
Social Factors

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.
Social Factors

1. A social distance scale concerned with participant relationships

The solidarity-social distance scale: this scale is useful in emphasising that how well we know someone is a relevant factor in linguistic choice.

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

2. A status scale concerned with participant relationships

This scale points to the relevance of relative status in some linguistic choices.

![Status Scale Diagram]

Superior | High status
---|---
Subordinate | Low status
Social Factors

3. A **formality** scale relating to the setting or type of interaction

This scale is useful in assessing the influence of the social setting or type of interaction on language choice.
Social Factors

4. Two **functional** scales relating to the purposes or topic of interaction.

The *referential* and *affective function scales* means that language can convey objective information of a referential kind; and it can also express how someone is feeling.
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.
Sociolinguists aim to describe sociolinguistic variation and, if possible, explain why it happens.

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).

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.
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?
End of class 01