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2. INTRODUCTION: KEY CONCEPTS IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Language is commonly used to convey meaning but that is not all we use language for. Language is used for a number of things other than transmitting a message verbally, among them, to initiate, maintain and preserve social relationships with other members of the society. Therefore, language should be understood as a social phenomenon which also reflects the speaker's social environment and relationship to other speakers. As a result of the complexity of human relationships, we do not speak in the same way to a classmate as to a professor. Parents do not speak in the same way to their offspring as they do to their parents, or their boss. But, our way of transmitting messages depends, of course, not only on linguistic matters but also on non-linguistic ones such as body language, contextual and situational factors, among others.

Sociolinguistics can be defined as a field of research and study that deals with the relation between language and society. It copes with the links that can be found between one or more languages and their users who are part of a specific speech community. Sociolinguistics examines the societal and linguistic patterns that govern our behaviour as members of human society and how they affect interaction.

Sociolinguistics is a relatively new field. In the 50's and 60's, sociolinguists began to oppose Chomsky's abstraction of language. Chomsky aimed at finding basic grammatical structures that could account for the existence of structured patterns across languages relying on "ideal" native speaker intuitions to describe and interpret language. Sociolinguists, however, tried to find the reasons for linguistic variations in social and environmental conditions. Chomsky was concerned with the ideal speaker/listener communication in a completely homogeneous speech community who knows the language as a native speaker (rather a fuzzy concept, in fact), that is to say, perfectly. This monolithic view of the native speaker has nothing to do with the conception of the native speaker in sociolinguistics where social and non-linguistic factors are considered of key importance for communication. What is more, Chomsky's description of a native speaker in a homogeneous speech community is far from being considered commonplace or even real. Speech communities are not easy to delimit and geographical proximity is not always a valid criterion in order to find a reliable definition. Does an English speaker from Edinburgh speak the same way as someone from downtown London or Liverpool? Undoubtedly they speak the same language, English, but their use is quite different. And, do

all three speakers belong to the same speech community? They have spoken English since childhood and they live in the same country with the same cultural background. As regards the second issue, the three aforementioned speakers can consider themselves native speakers of the same language, English, in spite of clear societal or dialectal variation.

From the very beginning a break could be perceived between the approaches and methods used by generativists and sociolinguists in their quest for language nature and development. Dell Hymes (1971) coined the term communicative competence as opposed to Chomsky's linguistic competence. *Communicative competence* refers not only to the human ability to use the language in different situations and under different circumstances but it also refers to other non-linguistic aspects which are also part of the communication process, such as: silence, turn-taking, volume, length of utterance, word choice, gestures, etc. All of these being part of the communication process and completing purely linguistic aspects such as phonology, morphology and syntax. Hymes' contribution to the field of sociolinguistics has been paramount and the concept of communicative competence is nowadays widespread in other disciplines and areas of research. In chapter 6 we will see the importance of communicative competence and later developments of the construct in second language teaching and learning.

3. SOCIOLINGUISTICS VS. SOCIOLOGY OF LANGUAGE

When in the late 60's sociolinguistics first developed as an academic field of study, two names were given to this still incipient discipline: sociolinguistics and sociology of language, and both terms were used interchangeably. Nowadays, the aim of sociolinguistics is to investigate and describe the relationship between language and society and the stress is placed on language and its role within communication. Sociology of language, however, centers on the study of society and how we can understand it through the study of language, that is, how we can understand sociolinguistic behaviour by means of the study of linguistic features.

Depending on the scope of the analysis, sociolinguistics may try to analyze specific differences of a group of speakers in a speech community at a micro level. In this case the analysis would refer to speech differences in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary within a single speech community in order to determine some features such as educational background, economic status or social class. In India, for example, there are many castes (traditional social classes

in the Hindu society) and there are distinct linguistic features that distinguish one from another.

Another possibility would comprise a much broader scope of analysis. Sociolinguistics can also refer to a macro level and in that case what interests the researchers is language variation as a human phenomenon that affects large parts of the population. An example of this would be language maintenance when large populations migrate to a different place and the language is preserved because of social factors. Keeping their language can be seen as a sign of identity that distinguishes them from outsiders, or as a source of power as they can communicate without being understood and this can serve trade purposes, for instance. It can also happen that the language just disappears (language attrition) because it becomes a low-prestige language. Another possible scenario may be that the community wishes to blend into the dominant culture or that the amount of speakers decreases as they grow old and die. All in all, macro-sociolinguistics applies to wide-ranging human phenomena and is often referred to, as stated before, as sociology of language.

Some authors prefer to talk about micro-sociolinguistics and macro-sociolinguistics and make a distinction between these two parts of sociolinguistics. Sometimes the first is associated with discrete point cases and studies (micro-sociolinguistics) whereas the second is connected with wide ranging situations. Both tendencies, however, are concerned about the same phenomenon —language and society— although at a different scale. Micro-sociolinguistics involves the use of a language as a whole together with another cultural phenomenon that determines the use of language, whereas macro-sociolinguistics deals with language planning, language policy, etc. In Hudson's (1980: 4-5) words sociolinguistics is "the study of language in relation to society, and the sociology of language is the study of society in relation to language".

4. THE ORIGINS OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Sociolinguistics has spread in the last thirty years together with other branches of linguistics such as psycholinguistics, pragmatics and applied linguistics which, far from having a descriptive or historical approach to language such as pure or traditional linguistics (syntax, phonetics, etc.) maintain an interest in the interdisciplinarity of the field and the contribution of other branches of the humanities to linguistics, such as: psychology, pragmatics, history, gender

studies, computational linguistics, etc. Sociolinguistics, as a new branch of linguistics emerged together with other developments of applied linguistics and was often considered a "step child", until it finally became a consolidated fully acknowledged field of research. It comprises various areas of study and research like historical and comparative linguistics, dialectology, and anthropology.

In Europe, sociolinguistics started with the study of historical linguistics and linguistic geography, a sound theoretical background with three main fields of interest: dialectology, regional languages and the linguistic situation of colonized countries (Calvet, 2003). In the USA, however, the study of sociolinguistics emerged from the contact of linguistics with other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology. The ethnographic approach of anthropologists, methodology used in social sciences and the analysis of linguistic realization.

Nowadays, sociolinguistics is not only a truly consolidated discipline but it can also be divided into subfields, such as pragmatics, language gender studies, pidgin and creole studies, language planning and policy studies, and education of linguistic minority studies, etc. (Bratt Paulson & Tucker, 2003). According to Shuy (2003: 15), the more recent developments of discourse analysis and pragmatics are considered as part of sociolinguistics by some scholars whereas others consider them areas of study in themselves. In the same way there is no full agreement on whether language change is part of sociolinguistics or the other way round. This situation accounts for the variety of approaches and perspectives towards a discipline that is becoming more and more important these days and which now goes from the theoretical perspective to the applied trend in the form of applied sociolinguistics.

5. LANGUAGE VARIATION

Sociolinguistics is all about variation. From a sociolinguistic point of view the most important source of information is the way social and situational factors affect language and make it vary. For example, when two people meet and one starts talking about, let's say, the weather, the other starts getting information about their conversational partner as they sort out the information contained in their speech. One of the first features that can sometimes be identified is the origin, i.e., where does that person come from (geographic variation). If by any chance we happen to distinguish clear features of his/her speech, we will be able to determine his/her place of origin very precisely, if that is not the case, we may just ascertain

some characteristics and that will give us a rough idea. The same can happen when specific differences are associated, within a specific speech community, with social, economical, political, religious, cultural or any other situational background. Obviously, linguistic variation does not only affect people from different speech communities but also affects the way people speak or react towards someone else's speech, for example, in terms of gender. In most societies we can identify clear differences in the way males and females speak although in Western societies these differences are not so evident. In terms of power relationships the way people use the language is affected by the social connection between them, for example between a teacher and a student, and between a boss and an employee, etc.

↳ Please, go to the exercises section and do exercise 1.

Another aspect of variation is that it has certain bounds. A speaker can vary his/her speech to in some degree, especially to adhere to certain social, economic, religious, etc. class, but s/he cannot vary it beyond certain limits otherwise s/he would be ungrammatical and/or incomprehensible. Speakers have knowledge of these limits, often unconsciously, although some other problems would be to determine how this knowledge is attained and how it can be described. It is much more subtle than other social norms such as those of turn-taking in conversation or social behaviour. At this point, it would be necessary to point out that linguistic norms are quite often more understated than other social conventions, such as table manners and, therefore, harder to describe, or even perceive. It goes without saying that they are also harder to learn and/or acquire in the case of a Second Language as the learner does not only need to learn the code, i.e., the language but also how to use it properly in diverse situations. Social conventions are usually learned or acquired during childhood and adolescence but these rules can vary from culture to culture and as languages often reflect the way their users understand and perceive their lives, it is often the case that Second Language learners, in their tedious task of learning a non-native language, also need to learn social and linguistic conventions. At times, and depending on the affinity between the languages in contact, it can be easy to deduce linguistic forms and uses from the first language, but it is often not so obvious. As a simple example English speakers understand verbal politeness differently than Spanish speakers, and in terms of frequency British English speakers tend to thank more frequently, in everyday situations, than Peninsular Spanish speakers.

↳ Please, go to the exercises section and do exercise 2.

All in all, the aim of sociolinguists is to describe the variations within a language and match these variations with the different groups of people that use them, as well as the corresponding situations. So, sociolinguistics deals especially with variation, among groups, among situations and among places, and the task of the sociolinguist is to find regular patterns of variation in use.

6. SOME INSTANCES OF VARIATION

Labov (2003) states that style shifting is usually correlated to the amount of attention that the speaker pays to his speech. In American English, for instance, the spelling <th-> in words like *thing* and *that* can be pronounced as smooth fricative [θ] or [ð], as a lightly or strongly articulated alveolar plosive [t], as a blend of these two variants, or not pronounced at all in utterances such as *Gimme 'at book* (*Give me that book*). These forms are used at different levels for different social groups and different regions.

In Black English Vernacular, for instance, we can see some markers morphological and syntactic which are characteristic of this ethnic linguistic variety like the "double negative" in English often used by nonstandard speakers to express negatives emphatically in sentences such as: *Nobody don't know about that* (*Nobody knows anything about that*). Plurals are not marked when preceded by numerals as in *He was here for three year now*, and the genitive is not necessarily marked with /s/ but by position in the sentence, as in *I slept my brother house*. Other peculiarities of Black English Vernacular in the United States is the absence of final third person singular <—s> (e.g. She want, he walk) and the dropping of the verb to be in present tense when used as a copula, (e.g. They real fine). With regards to phonology, we can identify frequent deletion of final /l/, before labials as in *help* [hep], or at the end of words with auxiliaries *he'll be home* [hi bi ho:m]. Also frequent reduction of word-final clusters is common in words like *test* [tes], *desk* [des], *looked* [luk], and strong initial stress is often found with words of two syllables like *police* ['po:lis], *define* ['di:fain].

Word choice also determines style shifting as the linguistic 'domain' (home, neighborhood, job, church, store, school, etc.) settles the degree of formality in the words used as well as the amount of colloquialisms in a speaker's speech.

↳ Please go to the exercises sections and do exercises 3 and 4.