

Chahrazed Hamzaoui

Basic Concepts in Sociolinguistics

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Basic Notions in Sociolinguistics

Preface

The primary purpose of this e-book is to provide a resource for readers seeking an understanding of some basic notions in the field of sociolinguistics. Each notion draws on a variety of sources. The breadth of the published sources can be seen in the bibliographic information that is included by the end.

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1. The Boundaries of Sociolinguistics

Some investigators have found it appropriate to try to introduce a distinction between sociolinguistics (or micro-sociolinguistics) and the sociology of language (or macro-sociolinguistics). In this distinction, (micro-) sociolinguistics is concerned with investigating the relationships between language and society with the goal being a better understanding of the structure of language and of how languages function in communication; the equivalent goal in the sociology of language is trying to discover how social structure can be better understood through the study of language, for example, how certain linguistic features serve to characterize particular social arrangements. Hudson (1996, p. 4) has described the difference as follows: “sociolinguistics is ‘the study of language in relation to society,’ whereas the sociology of language is ‘the study of society in relation to language’”.

In other words, in sociolinguistics, we study language and society in order to find out as much as we can about what kind of thing language is, and in the sociology of language we reverse the direction of our interest. Using the alternative terms given above, Coulmas (1997, p.2) says that ‘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, and age. Sociolinguistics is a very broad field, and it can be used to describe many different ways of studying language. It is the study of language in relation to social factors, including differences in region, class, occupational dialect and gender. In other words, it studies how various social factors such as gender, ethnicity, age or social class affect language. It is the study of variation at the individual level (Variation in grammar, pronunciation associated with the speaker’s status which can include social class, education, gender, etc).

Language is variable and changing; thus, language is not homogeneous, neither for individual users nor among groups of speakers who use the same language. Sociolinguistics is based on the premise that language use symbolically represents fundamental aspects of social behaviour and human interaction. Thus, sociolinguists study how people speak differently in various social contexts, and how people use specific functions of language to convey aspects of our identity and social meaning. Sociolinguistics has various subfields and branches such as dialectology, discourse analysis, ethnography of speaking, geolinguistics, anthropological linguistics, language contact studies, etc.

Macro-sociolinguistics, on the other hand, is basically the study of the relationship between language and society. In other words, it studies society in relation to language; thus,

society is the object of study in this field. This field studies the language of a particular community in order to discover and understand the use of the social structures and the way people of that community use them to communicate properly. The idea that language can reflect (automatically or deliberately) attitudes of the speakers are at the base of the sociology of language. Sociologists are interested in the attitudes of these speakers. The focus is on language use in society considering the whole variability in a community (language shift, bilingualism, language power, etc.).

Sociology of language studies what societies do with their languages, that is, attitudes and attachments that account for the functional distribution of speech forms in society, language shift, maintenance, and replacement, the delimitation and interaction of speech communities. The view we will take here is that both sociolinguistics and the sociology of language require a systematic study of language *and* society if they are to be successful. Moreover, a sociolinguistics that deliberately refrains from drawing conclusions about society seems to be unnecessarily restrictive, just as restrictive indeed as a sociology of language that deliberately ignores discoveries about language made in the course of sociological research.

It is also important to notice that there is a lot of overlap between both sociolinguistics and the sociology of language. In fact, sociology of language is also known by the term ‘macro-sociolinguistics’. Although both of these fields study the interaction between language and society, sociolinguistics focuses on language while sociology of language focuses on society. In general, sociolinguistics looks at how social factors affect language whereas the sociology of language looks at the relationship between society and language. Some of the *similarities between Sociolinguistics and Sociology of Language are as under:*

- Both fields deal with the interaction between society and language.
- The boundaries between these two fields are sometimes not clear.

Coulmas (1997, p.3) says in this respect:

There is no sharp dividing line between the two, but a large area of common concern. Although sociolinguistic research centers about a number of different key issues, any rigid micro–macro compartmentalization seems quite contrived and unnecessary in the present state of knowledge about the complex interrelationships between linguistic and social structures. Contributions to a better understanding of language as a necessary condition and product of social life will continue to come from both quarters.

Trudgill (1978) tries to differentiate those studies that he considers to be clearly sociolinguistic in nature from those that clearly are not, for, as he says, ‘while everybody would agree that sociolinguistics has *something* to do with language and society, it is clearly also not concerned with everything that could be considered “language and society”.’ The problem, therefore, lies in the drawing of the line between *language and society* and *sociolinguistics*.

Labov (1970, p. 30) has described the sociology of language as follows:

It deals with large-scale social factors, and their mutual interaction with languages and dialects. There are many open questions, and many practical problems associated with the decay and assimilation of minority languages, the development of stable bilingualism, the standardization of languages and the planning of language development in newly emerging nations. The linguistic input for such studies is primarily that a given person or group uses language X in a social context or domain Y.

2. Social Correlates

2.1 Social class

If we consider ‘social class’ to be a useful concept to apply in stratifying society – and few indeed would deny its relevance! – we need a way to determine the social class of particular speakers. This raises various difficulties, as in many societies there are not strict guidelines, and terms such as ‘middle class’ may have many different meanings for the speakers themselves. Further, we must be cautious in any claims we make about social-class structures in a particular society, particularly if we attempt regional or historical comparisons. The social class system of England in the 1950s was different from what it is today and, presumably, it will be different again in another half century, and all these class systems were and are different from those existing contemporaneously in New York, Brazil, Japan, and so on.

Sociologists use a number of different scales for classifying people when they attempt to place individuals somewhere within a social system. An occupational scale may divide people into a number of categories as follows: major professionals and executives of large businesses; lesser professionals and executives of medium sized businesses; semi-professionals; technicians and owners of small businesses; skilled workers; semi-skilled workers; and unskilled workers. An educational scale may employ the following categories: graduate or professional education; college or university degree; attendance at college or university but no degree; high school graduation; some high school education; and less than seven years of formal education.

Once again, however, some caution is necessary in making comparison across time: graduating from college or university in the 1950s indicated something quite different from what it does today. Income level and source of income are important factors in any classification system that focuses on how much money people have. Likewise, in considering where people live, investigators must concern themselves with both the type and cost of housing and its location.

Social class is a notion that has its intellectual basis in theories of social and political economies dating from the nineteenth century, and theories of social class are associated with figures like Karl Marx and Max Weber. There are a number of ways of theorising and, therefore, defining social class. Though we generally think of it now as being a function of a person’s occupation (and/ or their personal wealth), this is only one way of theorising it. Marx drew a fundamental distinction between those who produce capital or resources and those who control

the production of capital which others produce. The former are the working class (Marx's proletariat, derived from a word meaning 'worker') and the latter, the middle class (Marx's capitalists).

At the core of sociolinguistics is the fact that human societies are internally differentiated, whether by gender, age or class. These differentiations (and there are others, including ethnicity) are all at a 'macro' level, that is, broad groups into which people can be categorized. Theories of class have evolved over the last 150 years, starting with that of Karl Marx (1818–83). Discussions of class place different emphases on economic factors and more broadly cultural factors. Marx relates social structure to the position of individuals in relation to the means of production.

He defines *capitalists* as those who own the means of production, while those who must sell their labour to the capitalists are the *proletariat* (Giddens 2001, p. 284). This theory is grounded in the circumstances of mid-Victorian industrial Britain, with its extremes of exploitation and control by many factory owners. Of direct relevance to sociolinguists today was the rise of 'class-consciousness', which led to class-specific ways of seeing the world, and talking about things. Class segregation in Britain led to a divergence in speech at the level of dialect and accent. The new urban vernaculars which emerged in places like Manchester and Leeds had powerful working-class connotations.

Alongside them, there was the increasingly uniform Received Pronunciation of the elite, which consisted not only of the capitalists, but also traditional landowners, senior managers and civil servants, and aristocracy. (Mugglestone, (2003) is an excellent account of this process) Nineteenth-century British English was therefore split up not only into regional dialects, but also into social dialects or sociolects.

-Social Status and Functionalism: Weber and Parsons

In Weber's work, class is theorised in terms of social actions, and a great many more social divisions/classes are recognised than Marx's pair. Individuals' economic situation might be an important factor in defining what class they belong to, but the influence of economic factors is tempered by people's life style and life chances. Weber argued that all three of these factors define a person's status. The shift in definition from Marx to Weber is of particular interest to sociolinguists because Weber's conceptualisation of class tries to capture the significance of an individual's participation in a complex set of associated behaviours