

I

Introduction

I.1 Sociolinguistics

I.1.1 *A description*

We can define sociolinguistics as *the study of language in relation to society*, and this is how we shall be taking the term in this book. Sociolinguistics has become a recognised part of most courses at university level on ‘linguistics’ or ‘language’, and is indeed one of the main growth points in the study of language, from the point of view of both teaching and research. There are now major English-language journals devoted to research publications (*Language in Society*, *Language Variation and Change* and *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*) and a number of introductory textbooks, apart from the present one. Most of the growth in sociolinguistics has taken place since the late 1960s. This is not meant to imply that the study of language in relation to society is an invention of the 1960s – on the contrary, there is a long tradition in the study of dialects and in the general study of the relations between word-meaning and culture, both of which count as sociolinguistics by our definition. What is new is the *widespread* interest in sociolinguistics and the realisation that it can throw much light both on the nature of language and on the nature of society.

Like other subjects, sociolinguistics is partly empirical and partly theoretical – partly a matter of going out and amassing bodies of fact and partly of sitting back and thinking. The ‘armchair’ approach to sociolinguistics can be fairly productive, whether it is based on facts collected in a systematic way as part of research or simply on one’s own experience. In particular, it allows the beginnings of an analytical framework to be worked out, containing terms such as LANGUAGE (a body of knowledge or rules), SPEECH (actual utterances), SPEAKER, ADDRESSEE, TOPIC and so on. And of course personal experience is a rich source of information on language in relation to society. However, it will soon become clear that the armchair approach is dangerous for two reasons if it is applied to personal experience alone. First, we may be seriously wrong in the way in which we interpret our own experience, since

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most of us are not consciously aware of the vast range of variations in speech which we hear, and react to, in our everyday lives. And secondly, personal experience is a very limited base from which to generalise about language in society, since it does not take account of all the other societies where things are arranged very differently.

However, the reason why interest in sociolinguistics has grown so rapidly over the last decades is not because of the achievements in armchair theorising but because of the empirical discoveries made in the course of systematic research projects. Some of this research has taken place in 'exotic' communities, and this has produced facts which many readers of this book will find stimulating because they are so unexpectedly different from the kind of society which they already know. For instance, British people are generally surprised (and interested) to hear that there are societies where one's parents *must not* have the same mother-tongue (see below, 1.2.2). Other research projects, however, have been in the kind of complex, urban industrial society to which most readers will be accustomed, and this research too has provided some surprises, such as the discovery that differences between social classes are as clearly reflected in speech in America as they are in Britain, although the United States has an image of being much less class-conscious (the evidence for this claim will be discussed in chapter 5, especially 5.2.2).

It is important to recognise that much of the interest in sociolinguistics has come from people (such as educationalists) who have a *practical* concern for language, rather than a desire simply to understand better how this small area of the universe works. In particular, it became possible in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s to fund relatively large-scale research projects connected with the speech of underprivileged groups, on the grounds that the findings would make possible a more satisfactory educational policy. Chapter 6 is largely devoted to the issues raised in and by this research, but the research reported in chapter 5 would probably not have been possible in a different social climate, and the same may also be true of that reported in chapter 4, though perhaps to a lesser extent.

1.1.2 Sociolinguistics and linguistics

Throughout this book I shall refer to sociolinguists and linguists as separate people, but of course there are many sociolinguists who would also call themselves linguists, as well as the large number whose background is in sociology, anthropology or social psychology. The question of who is a sociolinguist and who is not, is neither interesting nor important; but it is important to ask whether there is a difference between sociolinguistics and linguistics and, if so, what it is. A widely held view is that there is such a difference, and that

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linguistics differs from sociolinguistics in taking account only of the *structure* of language, to the exclusion of the social contexts in which it is learned and used. The task of linguistics, according to this view, is to work out ‘the rules of language X’, after which sociolinguists may enter the scene and study any points at which these rules make contact with society – such as where alternative ways of expressing the same thing are chosen by different social groups. This view is typical of the whole ‘structural’ school of linguistics which has dominated twentieth-century linguistics, including transformational-generative linguistics (the variety developed since 1957 by Noam Chomsky).

However, not all students of language would accept this view. Some would argue that since speech is (obviously) social behaviour, to study it without reference to society would be like studying courtship behaviour without relating the behaviour of one partner to that of the other. There are two particularly good reasons for accepting this view. The first is that we cannot take the notion ‘language X’ for granted, since this in itself is a social notion in so far as it is defined in terms of a group of people who speak X. As we shall see in chapter 2, the problem is that this group will in all probability be defined, in a complete circle, as ‘the group who speak X’, especially when we focus on detailed differences between dialects and try to define ‘dialect X’ instead of ‘language X’. This argument has been developed especially by William Labov (1972a: viii). The second reason is that speech has a social function, both as a means of communication and also as a way of identifying social groups, and to study speech without reference to the society which uses it is to exclude the possibility of finding social explanations for the structures that are used. This view is typical of J. R. Firth (for example, 1950, 1964), who founded the ‘London School’ of linguistics, and whose followers include Michael Halliday (1985) but it is still not widely accepted by linguists.

This book will argue that the findings of sociolinguistics are highly relevant to the theory of language structure – for instance, in relation to the nature of meaning (3.2) and of grammar (7.3). The view I prefer is therefore the second one, according to which linguistics ignores society at its peril. I point this out to warn the reader against possible bias, but it is also clear that there is a big difference between recognising that one *should* take account of the social dimension of language and knowing *how* to do so.

I shall refer throughout to ‘sociolinguists’ and ‘linguists’ as though they were separate individuals, but these terms can simply be used to reflect the relative amount of attention given to the social side of language, without taking the distinction too seriously. There is no denying that remarkable progress has been made in the study of language structure within the structural tradition, by people who would call themselves ‘linguists’ and not ‘sociolinguists’.

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Moreover, it is clear that some areas of language, such as those covered in this book, relate more directly to social factors than others do. Those who concentrate on other areas, taking a more or less 'asocial' approach, we can call 'linguists', as opposed to 'sociolinguists'. However, although I am not arguing that the topics covered in this book are the only ones which should be studied, I do believe that all who study language, from whatever point of view, should be much more aware of the social context of their subject matter than is often the case, and the topics covered here seem most relevant in this context.

1.1.3 Sociolinguistics and the sociology of language

I defined sociolinguistics as 'the study of language in relation to society', implying (intentionally) that sociolinguistics is part of the study of language. Thus, the value of sociolinguistics is the light which it throws on the nature of language in general, or on the characteristics of some particular language. As we might expect, students of society have found that facts about language can illuminate their understanding – after all, it is hard to think of any characteristic of a society which is as distinctive as its language, or as important for its functioning. 'The study of society in relation to language' (the converse of our definition of sociolinguistics) defines what is generally called THE SOCIOLOGY OF LANGUAGE.

The difference between sociolinguistics and the sociology of language is very much one of emphasis, according to whether the investigator is more interested in language or society, and also according to whether they have more skill in analysing linguistic or social structures. There is a very large area of overlap between the two and it seems pointless to try to divide the disciplines more clearly than at present. Much of what follows in this book could equally well have been written in a textbook on the sociology of language. On the other hand, there are some issues which such a textbook ought to include which this one will not, notably most of what is called 'macro' sociology of language, dealing with the relations between society and languages as wholes. This is an important area of research from the point of view of sociology (and politics), since it raises issues such as the effects of multilingualism on economic development and the possible language policies a government may adopt. However, such 'macro' studies generally throw less light on the nature of language than the more 'micro' ones described in this book, because the notion of 'language X' is usually left unanalysed. (There is a good discussion of the relations between sociolinguistics and the sociology of language in the introduction to Trudgill 1978.) For more information on the sociology of language, see Gibbons 1992 (a brief overview) and Fasold 1984 (the main textbook).

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1.2.1 *An imaginary world*

What, then, is there to say about language in relation to society? It may be helpful to start by trying to imagine a society (and a language) about which there is very *little* to say. The little world described below is completely imaginary, and sociolinguists would agree that it is highly unlikely that any such world either does or even could exist, given what we know about both language and society.

In our imaginary world there is a society which is clearly defined by some natural boundary, impassable in either direction. The purpose of postulating this boundary is to guarantee, on the one hand, that no members of other communities join this one, bringing their own languages with them, and, on the other, that members of this community never leave it and take their language to another, thereby complicating the perfect coincidence between language and community.

Everybody in this society has exactly the same language – they know the same constructions and the same words, with the same pronunciation and the same range of meanings for every single word in the language. (Any deviation from such an exact identity raises the possibility of statements such as ‘Person A knows pronunciation M, but Person B knows pronunciation N, for the same word’, which would be a statement about language in relation to society.) An obvious problem is that very young members of the society, just learning to talk, must necessarily be different from everybody else. We might get round this problem by saying that child language is the domain of a branch of psychology rather than sociology, and that psychology can provide general principles of language acquisition which will allow us to predict every respect in which the language of children in this society deviates from the language of the adults. If psychology were able to provide the necessary principles, then there would be a good deal to say about language in relation to individual development, but nothing about language in relation to society. Needless to say, no psychologist would dream of claiming that this was possible, even in principle.

A consequence of the complete absence of any differences between members of this community is that language change is thereby ruled out, since such change normally involves a difference between the oldest and youngest generations, so that when the former all die only the forms used by the latter survive. Since change seems to affect every language so far studied, this makes the language of our imaginary community unique. The only way to allow for change in a totally homogeneous community is to assume that every change affects every member of the community absolutely and simultaneously: one day, nobody has the new form, the next day, everybody has it. (It is very hard

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to see any mechanism which could explain such change, short of community-wide telepathy!)

Another characteristic of the community we are considering is that *circumstances* have no influence on what people say, either with respect to its content or its form. There are no ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ situations, requiring different kinds of vocabulary (such as *receive* versus *get*) or different pronunciations for words (like *not* versus *-n’t*) (see 2.4, 5.4.5). Nor are there any ‘discussions’ and ‘arguments’, or ‘requests’ and ‘demands’, each requiring not only particular forms but also particular meanings. Nor are there any differences between the beginnings, middles and ends of conversations, such as would require greetings and farewells. None of these differences due to circumstances exist because if they did they would require statements about society – in particular, about social interaction, the topic of chapter 4. Indeed, if we discount any influence of the social context, it is doubtful if speech is possible at all, since spoken messages are generally geared specifically to the needs of the audience.

Finally, we must assume that there is no connection between the culture of the postulated community and the meanings which its language (especially its vocabulary) allows it to express. The language must therefore contain no words such as *cricket* or *priest*, whose meanings could be stated only with reference to a partial description of the culture, as will be argued in 3.2. To assume otherwise would be to allow rich and interesting statements about language in relation to society, since culture is one of the most important characteristics of society. Exactly what kinds of concepts the members of this community *would* be able to express is not clear – possibly they would only be able to assert logical truths such as ‘If p and q, then p’, since any other kinds of word are likely to involve some reference to the community’s culture.

All in all, our blue-print for a community is an unpromising one. All the restrictions imposed on it were necessary in order to guarantee that there should be nothing to say about its language in relation to society, beyond the simple statement ‘Such-and-such community speak language X’. However, it will be noticed that this statement is precisely the kind which is generally made by linguists (or laypeople) about a language, and exhausts what they feel obliged to say about the language in relation to society. The purpose of this section has been to show that the only kind of community (or language) for which such a statement could be remotely adequate is a fictitious one.

1.2.2 *A real but exotic world*

We now turn to a real world, in which there is a great deal to be said about language in relation to society. It is the very exotic world of the north-west Amazon, described by A. P. Sorensen (1971) and J. Jackson (1974)

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(though we shall see in 1.2.3 that things are not so very different in the kind of society to which most of us are accustomed).

Geographically, the area in question is half in Brazil and half in Colombia, coinciding more or less with the area in which a language called Tukano can be relied on as a *LINGUA FRANCA* (i.e. a trade language widely spoken as a non-native language). It is a large area, but sparsely inhabited; around 10,000 people in an area the size of England. Most of the people are indigenous Indians, divided into over twenty tribes, which are in turn grouped into five ‘phratries’ (groups of related tribes). There are two crucial facts to be remembered about this community. First, each tribe speaks a different language – sufficiently different to be mutually incomprehensible and, in some cases, genetically unrelated (i.e. not descended from a common ‘parent’ language). Indeed, the *only* criterion by which tribes can be distinguished from each other is by their language. The second fact is that the five phratries (and thus all twenty-odd tribes) are exogamous (i.e. a man must not marry a woman from the same phratry or tribe). Putting these two facts together, it is easy to see the main linguistic consequence: a man’s wife *must* speak a different language from him.

We now add a third fact: marriage is patrilocal (the husband and wife live where the husband was brought up), and there is a rule that the wife should not only live where the husband was brought up, but should also use his language in speaking to their children (a custom that might be called ‘patrilocal marriage’). The linguistic consequence of this rule is that a child’s mother does not teach her own language to the child, but rather a language which she speaks only as a foreigner – as though everyone in Britain learned their English from a foreign au-pair girl. One can thus hardly call the children’s first language their ‘mother-tongue’ except by a stretch of the imagination. The reports of this community do not mention any widespread disruption in language learning or general ‘deterioration’ of the languages concerned, so we can assume that a language can be transmitted efficiently and accurately even under these apparently adverse circumstances, through the influence of the father, the rest of the father’s relatives and the older children. It is perhaps worth pointing out that the wife goes to live in a ‘long-house’ in which the husband’s brothers and parents also live, so there is no shortage of contacts with native speakers of the father’s language.

What is there to say about language in relation to such a society? First, there is the question of relating languages as wholes to speakers, assuming for simplicity that it is possible to talk usefully about ‘languages as wholes’ (contrary to what we shall argue in 2.2). For any given language X, it will first be necessary to define who are its native speakers, but since this means referring to some tribe, and tribes are primarily defined with reference to language, there is clearly

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a problem. The solution is either to list all the long-houses belonging to the tribe concerned, or to specify the geographical area (or areas) where the tribe lives. (Most tribes do in fact have their own territory, which does not overlap with that of other tribes.) However, it will have to be borne in mind that about a quarter of the native speakers of language X will be made up of the married women who are dispersed among the other tribes, and similarly about a quarter of the people living in the area designated as 'language X territory' will be *non-native* speakers of X, being wives from other tribes. Indeed, any given long-house is likely to contain native speakers of a variety of languages, on the assumption that brothers need not be attracted to girls of the same 'other' tribe. In addition to the native speakers of language X, there will be people who speak it as non-natives, with every degree of fluency from almost native-speaker to minimal. Thus anyone wishing to write a grammar for language X will need to say precisely for whom the grammar is claimed to be true – just for the native speakers left at home in the tribal area, or for all native speakers including those dispersed among the other tribes, or for all speakers, native or non-native, in the tribal area.

Secondly, there is the question of discourse: how is speech used in social interaction? There are questions which arise out of the number of languages available: for instance, how do people get by when they travel around within the area, as they very often do? Are they expected to use the language of the long-house which they are visiting? Apparently not – the choice of language is based solely on the convenience of the people concerned (except for the rule requiring wives to use their husbands' language when speaking to their children). If visitors do not know the long-house language, but someone there knows their language, they will use the visitors' language when speaking to them. What about language itself as a subject of conversation? Here too practical needs are put first, namely the need to know as many languages as possible in order to be able to travel and (for young people) to find a partner. It is quite normal to talk about a language, learning its vocabulary and phrases, and this continues into old age; yet people generally do not know how many languages they can speak, and do not think of language learning as a way of gaining prestige. Perhaps this is what we might expect in a society where everyone can be expected to speak *at least* (i) their father's language, (ii) their mother's language (which she will certainly have taught her children with a view to their seeking partners among her tribe) and (iii) the lingua franca, Tukano (which may also be the father's or mother's language). However, in addition to the aspects of discourse which are directly related to multilingualism, there are many other things to be said about the relations between speech and the social circumstances in this complex Amazonian society. For instance, there is a rule that if you are

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listening to someone whom you respect, at least for the first few minutes, you should repeat after them, word-for-word, everything they say.

Thirdly, there is the question of the relation of language to culture, on which we have little information in the reports on the north-west Amazon referred to above, but on which we can make some safe guesses. For instance, it would be surprising if any of the languages concerned lacked a word for 'long-house' or 'tribe', and we might reasonably expect a word for 'phratry' (though such higher-level concepts often lack names, as we shall see in 3.3.1). Similarly, we may predict that each language will have words to express most concepts relevant to the culture, and that most words in each language will express cultural concepts, definable only in terms of the culture concerned.

In the world of the north-west Amazon there is probably nothing that linguists could satisfactorily say about any language without at the same time making some fairly complicated statement about it in relation to society. In particular, they could not say *which* language they were describing by referring to some predefined community who use it (in the way in which one might feel entitled to talk about, say, 'British English' or 'Birmingham English'). The main source of this complexity is the rule of 'linguistic exogamy', which might not be expected to be very widespread in the world. However, the other source is the amount of individual bilingualism (or, more accurately, multilingualism), which makes it hard to decide who is a speaker of a given language and who is not. This characteristic, widespread multilingualism, is anything but exceptional in the world as a whole, as an armchair sociolinguist can easily deduce from the fact that there are some six thousand languages in the world, but only about 160 nation states. At least some states must therefore contain a very large number of languages, and probably most contain a fair number, with an average around forty. In view of the need for communication with neighbouring communities and government agencies, it is fair to assume that many members of most communities are multilingual. It is worthwhile bearing this conclusion in mind in reading the next section, since it shows that the monolingual communities familiar to many of us may in fact be highly exceptional and even 'exotic' from a global perspective.

1.2.3 *A real and familiar world*

Readers are now invited to consider the world in which they themselves grew up. It is unlikely that any reader has had a background quite as linguistically exciting as the one described above, but most of us will certainly find that there is more to be said about our own sociolinguistic worlds than might be expected and much of it is surprisingly interesting.

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In order to focus their thinking, readers may find it helpful to imagine themselves, reasonably fluent in Tukano, sitting in a long-house in the north-west Amazon, telling the residents about their language, in the way that travelling Indians in the area are presumably asked to do if they reach a long-house unfamiliar with their language. The kind of information they would be expected to provide would cover both very general and very specific matters. Who else speaks the language? Where do the speakers live? Do they speak any other languages? What do they say when they first meet a stranger? What is the word meaning 'phratry'? What are the meals eaten at different times of day called? Are there any special ways of talking to young children? How do you count? Is there any way of showing that you're quoting what somebody else has told you? How do you show that the thing you're referring to is already known to the person you are talking to? Are there different ways of pronouncing any of the words according to where you come from? In answering every one of these questions, something will not only have been said about the language but also about one aspect or another of the society that uses it; and such questions could be multiplied by the inquisitive long-house residents until a complete description of the strangers' language has been provided.

The point of this exercise is to make readers aware of how much there is to say about their own language in relation to society. My hope is that, as they read this book, readers will keep their own background in mind and try to imagine what results would have been obtained if research projects comparable with those which will be described below were to be carried out in their language community.

1.3 Speakers and communities

1.3.1 Conformity and individualism

If sociolinguistics is about language in relation to society, we might expect a book on sociolinguistics to be mainly about large-scale social units such as tribes, nations and social classes. These will indeed be mentioned, and there will be a discussion of the relevance of some of them to language, especially in 5.4. However, society consists of individuals, and both sociologists and sociolinguists would agree that it is essential to keep individuals firmly in the centre of interest, and to avoid losing sight of them while talking about large-scale abstractions and movements. The individual speaker is important in sociolinguistics in much the same way that the individual cell is important in biology: if we don't understand how the individual works, to that extent we shan't be able to understand how collections of individuals behave either.

Moreover, there is an even more important reason for focussing on the individual in sociolinguistics, which does not apply to the cell in biology (or not to