SOCIOLINGUISTICS

The Study of Speakers’ Choices

Second edition

Why do we speak the way we do? What are the social factors that influence our choices of expression? This best-selling introduction to the study of language and society encourages students to think about these fundamental questions, asking how and why we select from the vast range of different words, accents, varieties and languages available to us.

In this new and updated edition, students are taken step-by-step through the analysis of linguistic expressions, speech varieties and languages in complex settings. Enriched with recent findings from different languages and speech communities around the world, this comprehensive textbook equips students with knowledge of the main concepts and gives them a coherent view of the complex interaction of language and society.

- ‘Questions for discussion’ help students understand how speakers’ choices are conditioned by the society in which they live.
- New to this edition are lists of further reading and a repertoire of online resources, including 100 flashcards, enabling students to investigate more deeply and advance their learning.
- Includes a topical new chapter on research ethics, guiding students on the ethical questions involved in sociolinguistic research.

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Preface to the second edition

Preparing the second edition of a textbook is a great pleasure. While making new mistakes is perhaps more exciting than correcting past ones, being given the chance to revise, augment, update and, hopefully, improve a text written several years ago is a great privilege. Not only does it imply that the original edition has found its readers, which is, of course, a matter of satisfaction; it also shows that the field continues to thrive and evolve. I have been intrigued by the multifarious interconnections between language and society for many years. Knowing that they are subject to coordinated and ever more sophisticated research that has a place in university curricula makes it a rewarding task to introduce new generations of students to sociolinguistics.

Revisiting one’s own writing is an interesting experience that makes you reflect not just on the book at hand, but on the accumulation of knowledge, the many factors that have an influence on how an academic field develops and on progress of scholarship in general. A critical view that takes nothing for granted and tries to look beyond the confines of our own preconceptions is essential for the scientific enterprise. Every research paper and every book could always be better, but many never will be. We all have erudite friends who took the notion that further improvement is still possible too seriously – and thus never finished their PhD theses. Lest excessive perfectionism forever stops us in our tracks, we publish despite some uncertainties and shortcomings and, therefore, happily seize upon the opportunity to make up for some of the inadequacies.

Working on the second edition of Sociolinguistics was pleasant enough. It allowed me to take stock and assess new research that has been undertaken since I first planned this textbook. I reworked it cover to cover and in the process weeded out some misprints and other minor mistakes; not many though, thanks to Jo Breeze who was the Production Editor for the original edition. There were no big blunders that called for correction, and in the meantime no major discovery or theoretical breakthrough has fundamentally changed the way research about language and society is done. Hence, the substance of the book is unchanged; but I brought it up to date by incorporating many references to recent research, adding examples and reinforcing arguments by supplying latest data. Sociolinguistics is an empirical science, and data are accordingly very important. Data collection,
processing and storage is, perhaps, what has changed most in sociolinguistic research these past couple of decades. This is largely due to advances in technology. Recording devices have been miniaturized, and specialized computer software has been developed to create digital transcriptions from digital audio or video recordings. Large corpora of print, speech data and transcriptions can be shared easily and subjected to statistical analyses on a scale that was hard to imagine just a few years ago. The exponential growth of the Internet has also changed our reading behaviour and the way we come by the information we need for our research. This edition does justice to these developments by including a new list of useful online resources at the end of each chapter.

Rather than objectifying languages, dialects and other varieties by treating them as closed and in that sense invariant systems, sociolinguistics should take a speaker-centred approach focusing on communities and their linguistic resources. The pivotal question uniting the chapters of this book, in this edition as in the original one, is what it is that speakers do with their language(s); how they pass them on to following generations; how they allow them to be influenced by other languages; how they adjust their speech to that of their interlocutors; and how they interact with speakers of other idioms. Empirical research adopting such an approach necessarily has to do with people and, like other research involving human subjects, must conform to certain widely accepted principles. Although sociolinguistic investigations are usually of low risk to informants and research partners, more attention has been paid in recent years to problems of research ethics. I have therefore added a chapter at the end of the book discussing the conditions that must be met for planning and executing ethically sound research that does not exploit informants or in other ways violate their rights. This new chapter not only takes into account evolving sensitivities in the social sciences, but is also a logical consequence of the central position assigned to speakers in sociolinguistics.

Questions and suggestions by students of Chuo University and Tokyo University where I occasionally taught this book as well as critical comments by colleagues helped me to improve it for its present edition. Andrew Winnard of Cambridge University Press suggested the revision and encouraged me to see it through. My gratitude is due to him, Jo Breeze and other members of the editorial department.