1 Linguistics and sociolinguistics

> It is difficult to see adequately the functions of language, because it is so deeply rooted in the whole of human behaviour that it may be suspected that there is little in the functional side of our conscious behaviour in which language does not play its part.
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> Sapir (1933)

Language is a complicated business. In everyday talk, we use the word 'language' in many different ways. It isn't clear how 'language' should be defined or what the person on the street thinks it actually is! We talk about how miraculously a child's 'language' is developing but how they make charming 'grammar mistakes', like *me maden that* instead of 'I made that'. Here, language is an ability that is blossoming in the child.

But the word is used in a myriad of different ways. For example, people have strong views about how beautiful or how hideous the 'language' is of some region or country or age group; how it sounds to the ear. People say 'I just adore Italian or an Irish accent.' They grimace or smile at teenager talk on television. Here 'language' is being judged aesthetically. By contrast, we remark that you can't *really* appreciate a culture without knowing the 'language', as when we learn French or Japanese for that reason. Then pupils struggle with rules for tenses like the *passé composé* and *imparfait* or have to memorize genders and irregular verb conjugations, matters of grammar which seem a million miles from cuisine, film, high tech or Zen Buddhism. 'Language' here equates with grammar.

Then, people relate the word 'language' to the expression of thoughts. They often say that they 'can't find the words' for their thoughts or express feelings. Or they are 'hunting for the right words'. Alternatively, we say that language is a means of communication. Politicians often use as an excuse the fact that their message 'just isn't getting across' because the media distorts what they say. In negotiations or relationships, when communication fails, we say, 'they just don't speak the same language'. In another sense, 'language' refers to a school subject. It makes sense to say that 'little Mary is behind in her English', although you'd never know it when you hear her chatting with her friends. 'Language' is being viewed as a set of skills acquired in school. We are taught to write Standard English and spell correctly.

At the same time, we use the term 'language' analogically, as a metaphor. We talk of such things as 'body language', or the 'languages' of music, painting or dance. It is fairly clear that these various ordinary uses of the word refer to different aspects of language, and take different perspectives on the sort of thing language is. Or, alternatively, we have simply grouped together under the heading of 'language' a range of diverse phenomena which are only partially related to each other.

In order to clarify our thoughts about language, let's look at some of the ways language is viewed by linguists. We can then give a precise statement of the specifically **sociolinguistic** view of language, and contrast it to other views of language assumed in linguistics proper.

The primary aim of all linguistic scholarship is to determine the properties of natural language, the features it has which distinguish it from any possible artificial language. This means that linguistics will be universalistic in its basic aims. It will examine individual natural languages in the course of constructing a theory of **universal grammar** that explains why the whole set of **natural languages** are the way they are. Natural languages, English, French and so on, are in fact the data for this theory of natural language. Artificial languages are of interest too since they can exhibit certain properties any language has, but they also have features that can sharply distinguish them from any naturally evolved language.

We will look at some artificial languages to illustrate this. The linguist Noam Chomsky, in his influential book *Syntactic Structures* (1957), employed the following languages in the course of his arguments:

(i) ab, aabb, aaabbb, . . . and all sentences of the same type.
(ii) aa, bb, abba, baab, aaaa, bbbb, aabbaa, abbbba, . . . and all sentences of the same type.
(iii) aa, bb, abab, baba, aaaa, bbbb, aabaab, abbabb, . . . and all sentences of the same type.

Why would we want to call (i), (ii) or (iii) languages? The answer is that they have certain properties of any language. They have a vocabulary of symbols, in this case two letters of the alphabet 'a' and 'b'. Also, they have a **syntax**. That is, each of the languages has specific rules for joining together their symbols to produce the sentences or strings of that language. If the rule of syntax is not followed, then the **string** or sentence produced is not a sentence of that language.

Consider the syntactic rules of the three languages. In language (i) the rule seems to be that for each sentence, whatever the number of occurrences of the first symbol, a, it is immediately followed by exactly the same number of occurrences of the second symbol, b. In language (ii), the rule is that, for each sentence, whatever the arrangement of a and b in the first half of that sentence, then that arrangement is repeated in reverse in the second half of the same sentence. I'll leave the reader to work out the equally simple syntax of language (iii).

Note that the output of the application of their respective syntactic rules to the symbols of these languages is an *infinite set of strings* which are members of the language sharply distinguishable from another infinite set of strings which are not members of the language.

In brief, then, these artificial languages have vocabularies and syntactic rules for joining their symbols together. And, by following the rules of their syntax, an infinite set of strings can be produced. Natural languages can also be considered in this way. Thus, English can be viewed as a set of strings. And this infinite set is produced by the vocabulary and syntactic rules of English. If linguists can

construct a device, a **grammar**, which can specify the grammatical strings of English and separate them from the combinations of symbols which are not English, they have gone a considerable distance towards making explicit the syntactic properties of the language. And if the types of rule in that grammar are also necessary for the grammar of any natural language, then they might have discovered some of those universal properties of language which it is the aim of linguistics to discover. Chomsky, in fact, used languages (i), (ii) and (iii) to rule out a certain class of grammars as candidates for grammars of natural language. Of course, these artificial languages are also extremely unlike natural languages. One very noticeable difference is that the symbols and strings don't bear any relation to the world. They have no **senses** or **meanings**, but are purely syntactic. The study of meaning and how it relates symbols to the world is called **semantics**.

There are other artificial languages which have strings of symbols which are meaningful. An example is arithmetic. Consider '2 + 2 = 4' or '3 × 3 = 9'. These formulae have a syntax and a semantics. And they are true, while '2 + 2 = 5' is false. These are language-like properties. But there is also something very unlike natural language, the language spontaneously acquired by children, about these formulae. Nothing in the world (we feel) could *ever* make '2 + 2 = 4' false, as long as the symbols themselves don't change their meanings. The formulae appear to be **analytic** or 'always true by definition'.

Contrast this with some sentences from natural language:

1. Arthur *is taller than* Brenda.
2. Brenda *is taller than* Tom.
3. Doreen *is taller than* Brenda.
4. Tom *is shorter than* X?

We can use these sentences to make statements which are true or false, express our beliefs that each sentence designates a state of affairs in the actual world. These sentences are **synthetic**, true or false according to the facts. (Strictly speaking, it isn't the sentences which are true or false, but the **propositions** which they express. A 'sentence' may express many different 'propositions'. However, I will ignore the distinction in this book.) We can capture a

sentence's relation with the world by giving its **truth conditions**. These are precisely the **possible worlds** – possible **states of affairs** – in which it is true. For example, 1 is true in worlds where the individual designated by 'Arthur' is a member of the class of individuals who are 'taller than the individual designated by "Brenda" '; otherwise it is false. Similarly, if 'Doreen' is also a member of that class, then 3 would be true, otherwise false. Only if we know these truth conditions, can we use the sentences to state what we ourselves believe. Or understand what somebody else using the sentence is claiming to be the case. Intuitively, to know truth conditions is part of the 'meaning' of the sentences.

But sentences also relate to each other. For example, if 1 is true, then Arthur is 'bigger' or 'greater' than Brenda with respect to her 'height' or her 'tallness'. Synonymy is one example of **sense or semantic relations**. Such semantic properties constitute **inferential relationships** between the sentences. Another example. We know that, if both Doreen and Arthur 'are taller than' Brenda, and Brenda 'is taller than' Tom, then Doreen and Arthur 'are taller than' Tom. We don't have to look at the world to know this fact. It is a result of a semantic property of the language; the 'transitivity' of the predicate 'taller than'. Similarly, 'is shorter than' in 4 bears a systematic semantic relation to its **converse** 'is taller than'. Example 1 **entails** 'Brenda is shorter than Arthur'. Entailments are inferences that depend on semantic relations. If one thinks about it, this web or network of sense relations seems to describe features of the very same possible worlds in which the sentences are true. Of course it would, wouldn't it? This is because inferential relations between sentences are just those relations where the two sentences are both true! Hence, to specify sense relations is a way to partially describe the 'worlds' of the truth conditions – the ones in which the sentences are true. Hence it is a way of giving the 'meaning' of the sentences.

So far, no *social* factors have been mentioned. How do social factors figure in the explanation of language? They don't seem *directly* related to either syntax or semantics. We can begin a treatment of this question by mentioning a few social aspects of semantics. A fundamental factor in making both the arithmetic and natural language examples work is **convention**. In the first case, of the

arithmetic symbols '2', '4' etc., we have confidence that when we use them, our addressee will understand that we intend to refer to sets of two and four, 2 and 4, etc., respectively. This is an example of co-operative social co-ordination. It connects the sound [tu:] or the mark '2' with any set of two things. It allows an English speaker to use the term with confidence that their intention will be understood. The 'sign' and its 'object' have a **coded** relationship. Similarly with the predicates 'is taller than' and 'is shorter than'. They have a coded relation with the states of affairs they represent. It is important to note that any intrinsic properties that the signs '2' or '4' or 'tall' or 'short' might have *do not explain* the link with their objects. Any noise or mark could just as easily be chosen. This is the property of the **arbitrariness** of the linguistic sign. Signs and objects are arbitrarily linked, by convention. And this is a social phenomenon.

From a different perspective, the connection of world and words *isn't* arbitrary, though it is equally social. Consider the web of inferential relations sketched above. The semantic structure of language describes the possible worlds in which sentences are true. Now to even establish this structure it is necessary for us to use the signs to express belief, what we take as *actually true*, to coordinate 'taller than' and 'shorter than' with the world as we take it to be. In essence, semantics defines possible states of the world based on our beliefs. Truth has to do with 'senses i.e. the inferential net', the relation of 'words and world', and 'our beliefs'. Without the 'possibly true' world set given through meanings, we couldn't inquire, because we couldn't think hypothetically. Without the inferential relations, we couldn't reliably think out the consequences of our hypotheses to test them and thus be right or wrong in our beliefs, assent or dissent in the light of experience. Thus, crucially, the semantic structure of a language is the very resource necessary for humanity to form any **empirical theory** of the world and use language to inquire – to fix belief and hence deal with everyday experience, be able to live. That the set of sentences can form a coherent theory can be seen by the fact that, if you believe that 1–3 are true, then you can give a true answer to 4, without further looking at the world. Tom must be the 'shortest one of all' in this particular universe of discourse. There is no doubt

that the process of inquiry is social. We have to co-ordinate our beliefs and inferences for language to work.

Are there other properties of natural language which *require* social explanation? The answer is, 'Yes, there are many such properties.' Next we will look at one of the most definitive social properties of language. This property is called **variability**. Consider the English word 'butter'. On the levels of syntax, vocabulary and semantics, it is a single English item; a mass noun which means something like an edible, yellow, dairy product used in cooking and as a spread. Yet although it is one item, if I asked you to describe its pronunciation in English, you would not be able to give a single answer: there are various **phonetic** realizations of 'butter'.

In British English **Received Pronunciation** the *t* is made by putting the tongue tip on the ridge behind the teeth, and releasing the air in a small explosion without vibration of the vocal chords. The *r*, however, is not pronounced, although it is present in the written form. Instead, a vowel sound, schwa (phonetically transcribed as ə) follows the *t*. The schwa is the same sound that is normally final in the word *sofa*. Thus, the RP speaker and many other British English speakers say [bʌtə].

In Canadian and American accents there is a rule that when explosive sounds like *t* are made between two vowels, the vibration of the vocal chords, called **voice**, continues through the whole sequence. This has the effect of turning the [t], which is voiceless, into [d], which is its voiced counterpart. Thus, a Canadian saying 'butter' in fact pronounces it as if it were 'budder'. However, Canadians and many of their American neighbours also have **r-full** accents (as do the Scots and Irish). This means that, unlike the RP British English speaker, they pronounce the written *r* in butter, giving us the final form [bʌtəʳ].

In many British English accents there is yet another variation in the pronunciation of *t* in this environment. The vocal chords themselves are closed tightly and then released abruptly, giving the impression that *t* is missing. In fact, the gap is filled by a so-called **glottal stop**, symbolized by ʔ. So 'butter' is pronounced [bʌʔə]. Such a pronunciation would typify London working-class speech, familiar to North Americans as a Cockney accent from films like *My Fair Lady*.

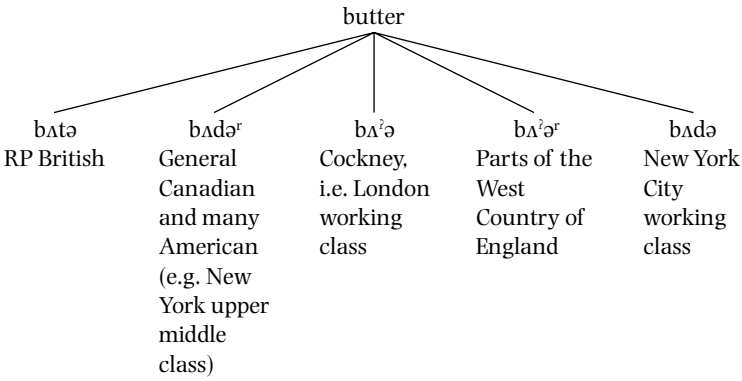
This film, from George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, introduces another feature of the variability we have been describing. For Professor Higgins (modelled by Shaw on the famous phonetician, Henry Sweet) to take such pains to train Eliza Doolittle to pronounce words like 'butter' as [bʌtə], as opposed to [bʌˀə], indicates that the variation must mean something. There is no conceptual difference in the word-meaning itself. The meaning difference of the variation is socially significant and relates to those groups in a social structure who typically use one form rather than another. Such **social meanings** of variants can be further illustrated by looking at two other versions of 'butter'.

In the West Country of England there are some local accents which, like Canadian and some American accents, are *r*-full. Speakers would typically pronounce the *r* in 'butter'. And this can be combined with the use of the glottal stop to give the form [bʌˀəʳ]. On British television an advertisement promoting butter used this regional form, presumably because it had a social meaning to British audiences suggestive of honest West Country farmers genuinely in touch with real, non-synthetic cows.

In New York City a working-class accent will, in casual speech, be largely *r*-less like the British RP. But this would be combined with the voicing of the written 't' between vowels giving the form [bʌdə]. Followers of the 1970s *Kojak* detective series on television will recognize this form. Imagine, however, the different social meaning that would be conveyed if Lieutenant Kojak pronounced the word [bʌdəʳ] as might an upper-middle-class New Yorker, or [bʌtə] as might an upper-middle-class Englishman. It would not be the impression of the 'tough New York cop'.

The diagram opposite gives a summary of the various ways 'butter' can be pronounced which we have looked at. The actual situation is far more complex and interesting than I have indicated, but we will be studying this in more detail later in the book. The purpose here is to merely illustrate the property of variability which natural languages possess.

It is clear that this property requires social explanation. This is in contrast with the arbitrary property of language mentioned earlier. In characterizing the variant forms of 'butter', I needed to make reference to the geographical location in which the form



was characteristically employed, and to the socio-economic class of the speaker. I also described the variants in terms of the social meaning which their use might typically convey. In other words, I was explaining the variants in terms of social characteristics of their users.

So what is **sociolinguistics**? I will now propose a 'broad definition', in order to distinguish this branch of linguistics from other ways of approaching language, and also to try to unite the diverse kinds of inquiry which go under this name:

> Sociolinguistics is that branch of linguistics which studies just those properties of language and languages which *require* reference to social, including contextual, factors in their explanation.

This definition comes with a health warning. As we shall see below, it is broader than usual, including what is normally considered sociolinguistics, and then some. Like all definitions of subjects of inquiry, it is determined by methods of explanation. Here the term 'social' is contrasted with those explanations of language which explain it *sui generis*, just as a system of relations between signs, or in psychological or cognitive terms.

We can also relate our definition of sociolinguistics to Chomsky's conception of linguistic theory. I said earlier that the aim of linguistics is universalistic. It sets out to explain why the whole set of natural languages are the way they are. For Chomsky, the basic

answer to this question is that language has the properties it does because the human mind is constructed that way.

Every normal human being 'knows' their mother tongue. This **knowledge of language** is a state of the mind and brain which Chomsky calls **I-language** or 'internalized language'. To 'know a language', whether it is English or Chinese, is to have attained a certain mind/brain state. Every normal member of our species attains this state, called mature linguistic **competence**, during the first years of life. According to Chomsky, the linguist's job is to construct a theory of I-language and how it is acquired (see Chomsky, 1986).

For Chomsky, these two things are ultimately the same. Followers of Chomsky believe that the *only* way to explain the universal features of I-language is to say that we acquire this uniform competence because we are genetically pre-programmed to do so. The answer to the question, 'What is language?' is a theory that specifies this universal genetic endowment. The job of linguistics is to characterize the principles and parameters of our genetically given language capacity that make the acquisition of I-language possible; of course, grammars of individual languages will be predicted as permitted variants of this **universal grammar**. Evidence is advanced that such a capacity – this species specific capacity to spontaneously acquire any natural language – is a separate 'mental organ' or 'cognitive capacity'. This is part of the thesis of the **modularity of mind**, that the mind, and ultimately the brain, isn't functionally or structurally undifferentiated, but made up of distinct faculties. (This very influential view originates with Fodor, 1983.) It follows that the job of linguistics is to tell us about the form and functioning of the **language module**. The inquiry necessarily takes place at an abstract level, but it is clear that language is ultimately viewed as a physical system. Chomsky's conception of language is psychological or **cognitive**, but ultimately **biological**. This is nicely captured in the title of one of the best introductions to Chomsky's thought, Steven Pinker's (1994) *The Language Instinct*.

So where do social explanations fit in? Social explanations will enter into an account of language at the places where we find patterns of language which can't be explained in psychological