Introduction

Sociolinguistics and 'Wicked Problems'

PREVIEW

KEY TERMS

African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

communicative competence

sociolinguistics

speech community

wicked problems

In this introduction we will explain how sociolinguistics is relevant to helping us to solve real-world problems. We will also explore some of the challenges we face when we talk about concepts such as 'language' and 'society', and introduce some of the more recent concepts, theories, and practical tools that sociolinguists have developed to talk about and analyse the relationship between language and social life.

0.1 Introduction

This book is about the relationship between language and social life. By 'social life' we mean both the way we interact with other people in our daily lives and broader aspects of social life related to economics, politics, justice, technology, and the environment. The main goal of the book is to convince you that there *is* a relationship between language and social life and that *it matters*, that understanding more about language can actually help us solve our day-to-day problems of getting along with others as well as bigger problems related to economics, politics, justice, technology, and the environment.

In 2017, the World Economic Forum asked over 30,000 young people about the issues that they cared about most as part of its Global Shapers Survey (World Economic Forum 2017), and, not surprisingly, 'language' was not one of them. Instead, respondents said they were worried most about climate change, war, inequality, corruption, discrimination, and the access people have to economic and educational opportunities. At the same time, it can't be denied that language has some role in all of these problems: the way people use language to communicate ideas and manipulate people can influence the policies governments make about problems such as racism or whether or not citizens are willing to fight in wars. Language can be used as a weapon to maintain unequal power relationships or to make people feel like they are less important or that they don't belong. And whether or not individuals have access to particular languages or the languages they speak are respected and valued can have a dramatic impact on their economic and educational opportunities. In this book, we will not just explore the relationship between language and social life on a theoretical level; we will try to focus on the practical consequences of this relationship. In particular, we will explore how language contributes to the social problems that people are most worried about and how understanding how language functions in social life can help people to address these problems.

The field of study that you will learn about in this book is known as **sociolinguistics**. Sociolinguists study lots of things from the different ways people in different groups use language, to the attitudes and prejudices people have about the ways different people talk. Of course, understanding the relationship between language and social life alone won't solve any of the problems we mentioned above. Solving these problems requires input from lots of different kinds of people: scientists and engineers, psychologists and sociologists, politicians and entrepreneurs. The point we want to make in this book is that sociolinguists should also have a seat at the table.

Problems like those the young people who responded to the Global Shapers Survey said they worried about have been referred to as **wicked problems**, not because they are 'evil', but because they are difficult to solve and solutions inevitably involve the difficult task of getting people who think differently and speak different 'languages' (such as the

'language of science' or the 'language of business') to work together. The term was first used by design professor Horst Rittel and planning professor Melvin Webber way back in 1973 to describe problems that are made up of many different interdependent components, which are often themselves symptoms of yet other problems. Because of this, often when we try to solve one aspect of a wicked problem, we can actually make other aspects of it worse.

A good example of a wicked problem is income inequality. Although the gap between the rich and the poor in some countries is growing smaller, in many countries, especially large countries like China, India, and the United States, while the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer. Income inequality is not just a problem in itself; it is associated with other problems such as rising crime rates, poor health, political inequality, and increased corruption in the public and private sectors. Figuring out the causes of inequality and coming up with solutions requires input from many different stakeholders, including economists, businesspeople, politicians, social workers, engineers, and educators. That's because inequality is not just an economic problem; it's a political, social, technological, and educational problem. But it is also a sociolinguistic problem.

Inequality is a sociolinguistic problem because, as we will explore in this book, *linguistic resources* (different kinds of 'language' and different ways of speaking, reading, and writing) are *valued* differently in different contexts, and *access* to these resources (the chance to learn different 'languages' and different ways of speaking, reading, and writing) are unequally distributed. In sociolinguistics there is considerable research – some of which we will talk about in this book – on how racial and class disparities as well as unequal opportunities in education and employment are made worse by unequal access to linguistic resources as well as by policies based on incorrect or biased ideas about language.

Inequality is also a sociolinguistic problem because our ideas about different groups of people, as well as our ideas about fairness and justice, are influenced by the way we talk about these people and these ideas. The way people talk about inequality can sometimes help perpetuate it by reproducing racist, sexist, or classist ideas.

Finally, inequality is a sociolinguistic problem because, as with *all* wicked problems, the people who need to get together to find solutions to it – rich people, poor people, politicians and businesspeople, engineers and educators – often have difficulty cooperating, not just because they may have different 'interests' and different 'agendas', but, because, as we said above, they speak different 'languages' – that is, they have different ways of reading and writing, speaking, and listening to others, which are inevitably associated with different ways of *representing* the world and assigning *value* to different things.

The field of sociolinguistics has changed a lot since the 1970s when it was established. But one thing that hasn't changed is that most sociolinguists are interested in how their study of language can help us to better understand and solve social problems. One of the first linguists to be

called a 'sociolinguist' was William Labov. Labov was interested in how different features in people's speech function as markers of power and prestige. Among his most important contributions was his work on **African American Vernacular English (AAVE)** (which we will refer to later in this book as simply African American English), in which he challenged widespread assumptions that this variety is 'ungrammatical' or 'deficient', assumptions that reinforced racist myths associating intelligence with race. Labov's analysis revealed that AAVE has its own internally consistent rules of grammar and discourse, that it is, if you will, just as 'standard' as so-called 'Standard English'. In explaining the relevance of sociolinguistics to solving real-world problems, Labov (1982: 165–6) put it this way:

> Linguistics is said to be basic research that will give us more knowledge about mankind – but has no immediate application to the problems that most people are worried about . . . A distinctly different view is that linguistics is the study of an instrument of communication that is used in everyday life, an instrument that has evolved as a part of our social and biological history. This is the point of view that lies behind my own research. This approach isn't totally opposed to the other view, but it leads to different answers to the second question – what is linguistics good for? I would argue that linguistic research applies to a good many of the questions facing contemporary society: how to reverse educational failure in the inner cities; how to resolve conflicts and paradoxes that centre around bilingual education; how to implement the responsibility of the law to communicate to the public.

Another important pioneer in 'socially engaged' sociolinguistics was the anthropologist Dell Hymes, who questioned dominant ideas about *competence* in language that linked it to the mastery of grammatical rules. Hymes pointed out that real linguistic competence has more to do with one's ability to get things done in the real world and to show that one is a competent member of one's community, which he called **communicative competence** (Hymes 1966). Language, in this tradition, is always situated in webs of social relationships. It is a tool that people use to exercise and resist power, to show that they belong to particular groups, and to do things with other members of these groups that are important for their lives and livelihoods.

Over the years, sociolinguists have concerned themselves with a range of different social problems. Some of these problems have been more obviously 'linguistic' in nature – such as the right of people to speak the language of their choice, the sometimes negative effects of certain language policies on the education of minority children, the relationship between poverty and language 'death', and the way high-stakes language tests can sometimes discriminate against certain populations. But some of these problems have been less obviously 'linguistic' in nature, such as the role of communication in the spread of diseases such as COVID-19 and AIDS, the language-related barriers migrants face when applying for refugee status in different countries, the communicative dimensions of

poverty, crime, drug abuse, homelessness, climate change, religious conflict, terrorism and surveillance, and the spread of 'fake news' and white supremist propaganda over the Internet. All of these applications of sociolinguistics to social problems begin with an acknowledgement of the enormous power of language to shape human relationships and social realities, and of the potential for language to function both as a weapon to oppress people and as a tool to advance social justice.

More recently, things like the increased movement of people across the globe (partly as the result of war, poverty, and the effects of climate change) and the increased flows of information and culture through digital technologies, have compelled sociolinguists to come up with new ways of talking about and analysing the relationship between language and social life, and the main purpose of this book is to introduce you to some of these new concepts, theories, and practical tools for solving social problems.

Many of the pressures on sociolinguists to change the way they talk about language and society have, in fact, come *as a result* of wicked problems such as increasing inequality, changing forms of racism and discrimination, and the blurring of borders and transformation of traditional communities that has accompanied mass migration, as well as the blurring of boundaries and breakdown of traditional forms of expertise and authority that has accompanied the widespread use of digital technologies. This is not surprising; wicked problems, by their nature, have a way of highlighting the inadequacy of many of the assumptions we have about the way the world works and the traditional tools we have at our disposal to solve problems in it, whether we are economists, politicians, climate scientists, or sociolinguists.

0.2 'There's No Such Thing as Society'

This famous quote comes from an interview that Margaret Thatcher, who was the UK prime minister at the time, gave to *Women's Own* magazine in October 1987. What Thatcher was really trying to say was that what mattered to her and to the British Conservative Party of her day was the goals and opportunities of *individual* citizens rather than the collective goals of the citizenry, and that she believed that people should be responsible for their own well-being rather than depending on (or looking after) other people. What Thatcher actually said was:

I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it . . . They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first.

(Thatcher 1987)

Thatcher's musing about the existence of society was not just a philosophical exercise. It had real consequences on people's lives, serving as the basis for policies such as the privatisation of public services, the rollback of regulations on corporations, and the weakening of trade unions, which resulted in substantial increases in economic and health inequalities in Britain. Thatcher's words highlight the fact that even an idea as apparently self-evident as 'society' is not as self-evident as it may seem, and the way people understand society – how it works, who belongs to it, how people are supposed to relate to it, or even whether it exists in the first place – is influenced by people's *ideological positions* and *political agendas* and can end up having real material consequences on other people's lives.

The way we define 'society' also has a profound impact on the way we approach the study of language. Back in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, pioneers in the study of language and society mostly saw society in terms of countries and ethnic groups. In fact, as we will discuss in Chapter 1, many people during this time regarded a 'common language' as the defining feature of a nation. Among these pioneers was the American linguist Leonard Bloomfield, who in 1933 proposed that the best way to study the relationship between language and society was to divide up society into what he called **speech communities**, which he defined simply as groups of people who speak the same language.

Later, however, sociolinguists like Labov and anthropologists like Dell Hymes and John Gumperz challenged this way of dividing up society as overly simplistic. Labov, for example, became interested in how other social divisions around things like race and class affected the way people talk, and Dell Hymes and John Gumperz re-envisioned speech communities as groups based not so much on sharing the same language as on sharing the same norms and attitudes about how people should *use* language. As Hymes (1974: 50–1) put it: '[a] speech community is defined … as a community sharing knowledge of rules of conduct and interpretation of speech. Such sharing comprises knowledge of at least one form of speech, and knowledge also of its patterns of use.' This modified understanding of speech community focused on *participation* rather than membership, and Gumperz and Hymes emphasised that people naturally participate in multiple speech communities throughout their lives. This understanding of speech community also focused on language not as a system of grammar or collection of vocabulary items but as a *social practice* through which people negotiate their places in the social world.

Near the end of the twentieth century, sociolinguists became more and more interested in the *dynamic* ways people negotiate the multiple and overlapping communities that they belong to, and so came up with new ways of describing social groupings to help them to understand this dynamism. The sociolinguist Lesley Milroy (1987), for example, started to think of language speakers as part of complex *social networks* (see Chapter 3) characterised by strong and weak ties through which different ways of speaking and communicative norms were maintained and circulated, and, in the 1990s, the sociolinguists Penny Eckert and Sally

McConnell-Ginet began using the term *community of practice* (see Chapter 3), borrowed from the field of educational psychology, to describe groups of people who came together around common social practices. Whereas the definition of speech community advanced by Gumperz and Hymes focused on language as a social practice, the 'communities of practice approach' attempts to link the way people speak to a vast range of other social practices, such as what they wear, what they do for a living, and what sorts of political activities they engage in.

While all of these different ways of defining society and dividing it up have some practical utility for understanding the relationship between language and social life, as the twenty-first century has progressed, dividing people into classes, cliques, or communities, or even tracing the social networks they are part of has become increasingly challenging. One reason for this is the increasing *deterritorisation* (see Chapter 9) of people (García et al. 2016). Globalisation has brought with it an explosion of relocation, mass migration, and transmigration that has upended traditional associations of people (and their ways of speaking) with fixed geographical locations.

Another force that disrupts our more traditional ways of dividing up society is the Internet and the ways it facilitates both the rapid circulation of cultural products, including different ways of speaking, and the formation of new forms of *light communities* (see Chapter 4) based on a variety of new social and political affiliations and new communicative practices (such as 'memeing').

Because of these trends, the sociolinguist Jan Blommaert (2013a: 193) argues that 'there is a dramatic need to unthink and rethink some of the most basic concepts in social science – notions such as community, identity, and indeed citizenship'. '[S]ince the early 1990s', he explains:

> some fundamental changes have taken place in the ways in which all of these notions take shape in real life … People from more places now migrate to more places, causing unprecedented forms of social and cultural diversity especially in the large urban centres of the world … Adding to this complexity, the emergence and global spread of the Internet and other forms of mobile communication technologies – synchronous with the new forms of migration – have created a 'network society' (Castells 1996) in which people live and act in relation to long-distance, 'virtual' peers in sometimes enormous online communities. Taken together, these two forces have re-shaped social life around the world.

Part of the challenge that we need to address, then, when setting out to understand the relationship between language and social life – and to understand how that relationship is *relevant* to helping to solve real-world problems – is coming up with a way to talk about social life and social groups that captures this complexity. The key puzzle for sociolinguists, says the scholar Asif Agha (2007: 230), is figuring out how 'language is connected to the study of socio-political frameworks that motivate projects of minoritization, dominance and exclusion'. Just as Thatcher's

definition of society as 'non-existent' had important political implications and material consequences, the way sociolinguists define society also has political implications, affecting the ways they are able to contribute to addressing 'wicked problems'.

0.3 'There's No Such Thing as Languages'

If the claim that 'there's no such thing as society' is surprising in a book about language and society, the claim that 'there's no such thing as languages' is probably even more surprising. But this is actually the view of many, if not most, linguists, including perhaps the most famous living linguist, Noam Chomsky, who wrote that the whole idea of 'separate languages' is really a 'socio-political' idea rather than a linguistic idea (1986: 15):

> We speak of Chinese as 'a language,' although the various 'Chinese dialects' are as diverse as the several Romance languages. We speak of Dutch and German as two separate languages, although some dialects of German are very close to dialects that we call 'Dutch' and are not mutually intelligible with others that we call 'German.' A standard remark in introductory linguistics courses is that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy (attributed to Max Weinreich). That any coherent account can be given of 'language' in this sense is doubtful; surely, none has been offered or even seriously attempted. Rather, all scientific approaches have simply abandoned these elements of what is called 'language' in common usage.

What Chomsky meant by this was not just that it is sometimes difficult to draw clear lines between different 'languages' and between 'languages' and 'dialects', a problem that we will discuss further in Chapter 1, but that the whole idea of 'languages' is just not very useful for his brand of linguistics. Rather than 'languages', what linguists like Chomsky are interested in is 'language' as a kind of innate human *capacity* governed by a set of structural rules or 'universal grammar' lodged inside the brain. Chomsky and his followers are mostly interested in understanding these rules rather than in understanding how people actually talk or what they think about how they talk. For them, the relationship between language and society is really irrelevant, since language is seen as a matter of the cognitive/psychological individual who develops 'language' no matter what 'speech community' they live in. So, in some respects, Chomsky saying that 'there's no such thing as languages' has some similarities to Margaret Thatcher saying that 'there's no such thing as society', since what both of them are saying is that they are more interested in the individual than the group.

Sociolinguists are different. While they would mostly agree with the statement 'there's no such thing as languages', what this means to them has more to do with the fluid and dynamic way that people use linguistic resources that frequently defies neat attempts to label 'what they are

speaking' as a concrete thing. In fact, some sociolinguists prefer to use the verb 'languaging' (or sometimes 'translanguaging' or 'polylanguaging') rather than the noun 'language' to describe how people communicate verbally (see Chapter 5). Sociolinguists, or at least many of the sociolinguists you'll learn about in this book, think of languages as loose collections of complex and evolving form–function patterns that arise out of the needs and the constraints of actual communication.

But this doesn't mean that what other people call 'languages' (German, Dutch, Chinese) are not important. In fact, the way people divide up, classify, and most importantly, *assign value* to the way they (and others) talk is of primary importance to sociolinguists, because people's ideas about language are constructed out of their actual practices of speech and writing and the ideologies attached to these practices, and because these practices and ideologies have real material effects on people's lives. As the sociolinguists Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook (2007: 3) put it, 'while the entities around which battles are fought, tests are constructed and language policies are written are inventions, the effects are very real'.

So, what sociolinguists focus on is not just the way people actually talk, but also on the ways they think they *ought* to talk, and the ways they judge others for the ways they talk.

As Woolard (2004: 58) notes, ideas about the way people talk 'are never just about language, but rather also concern such fundamental social notions as community, nation, and humanity itself'. Sociolinguists are fond of saying that they are not so much interested in 'languages' as they are in the 'total linguistic fact' of a given situation (Silverstein 1985: 220), by which they mean all of the different, often unstable, ways people use linguistic resources in different situations and the way these resources take their meaning and their *value* from the situations in which they are used and the cultures in which these situations are embedded.

Makoni and Pennycook (2007), along with many other contemporary sociolinguists, believe that the main job of the sociolinguist should be, first of all, to *dis*-invent languages, that is, to challenge the ways that people divide up, label, and *value* the different ways people talk (which usually result in some people having economic, social, and political advantages over others), and, second of all, to *re-constitute* languages, that is, to figure out ways of describing what people are doing when they talk that don't just more accurately describe what's really going on but are also more useful for people in their fight for social recognition, equality, and justice. For Blommaert (2009: 268), this means reconstructing languages *not* as 'stable, closed, and internally homogeneous units characterizing parts of mankind, but as ordered complexes of genres, styles, registers, and forms of use: languages as *repertoires*' (see Chapter 2).

Just as it is important to carefully consider how we define and divide up society if we are going to figure out how sociolinguists can contribute to addressing the pressing social problems of our time, it is equally important that we consider how we define and divide up languages, and that we do so in a way that acknowledges and honours the diverse ways that

people talk and the importance of these ways of talking for their individual and social identities.

0.4 What Now?

In the rest of this book we will guide you through a range of concepts, theories, and real-world examples that hopefully will help you to develop an appreciation for how sociolinguistics can enhance your understanding of the world around you and help you to contribute to making it better. Among other things, we will talk about how people 'imagine' languages and the effects these acts of imagining have on their lives and the lives of those around them, how people regularly mix together different linguistic resources from different sources in order to perform different kinds of identities and do different kinds of things, how digital technologies affect the way we use language and the consequences of this for our private and political lives, and how the ways we use language can perpetuate or challenge racism.

In each chapter we will also try to illustrate how what you have learnt relates to some important social issue such as citizenship, inequality, online harassment, gender and sexuality, migration, racism, and conflict. For each of these 'focal topics' we will introduce two articles written by contemporary sociolinguists working closely on these issues. While we will try to give a complete summary of what these scholars have said, you are also encouraged to seek out and read the original articles and perhaps other articles by these authors.

Finally, we also include a range of different activities in each chapter to give you a chance to test out the concepts that you are learning about, combine these concepts with things that you already know or think about language from your own experiences, and compare your ideas with those of other people you are learning alongside. At the end of each chapter, we provide a list of ideas for larger projects where you can apply the ideas that we have introduced to analysing data that you have collected yourselves.