2- An Introduction to Sociolinguistics

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Definition :

**Sociolinguistics**, the study of the sociological aspects of [language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/language). The [discipline](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline) concerns itself with the part language plays in maintaining the social roles in a [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community). Sociolinguists attempt to isolate those linguistic features that are used in particular situations and that mark the various social relationships among the participants and the significant elements of the situation. Influences on the choice of sounds, grammatical elements, and vocabulary items may include such factors as age, sex, [education](https://www.britannica.com/topic/education), occupation, [race](https://www.britannica.com/topic/race-human), and peer-group identification, among others.

Sociolinguistics was given many definitions, among which :

‘Sociolinguistics is the study of our everyday lives – how language works in our casual conversations and the media we are exposed to, and the presence of societal norms, policies, and laws which address language’

And

‘Sociolinguistics’ and ‘language and Society’ are terms that are often used interchangeably to refer to an interdisciplinary field of research in which linguistics and sociology, and other human sciences, join together to study verbal and other human conducts; but in fact their definition is a highly controversial matter.

The purpose of this dscipline is to take language samples from sets of random population subjects and looks at variables that include such things as pronunciation, word choice, and colloquialisms. The is data is then measured against socio-economic indices such as education, income/wealth, occupation, ethnic heritage, age, and family dynamics to better understand the relationship between [language](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-language-1691218) and society.

Thanks to its dual focus, sociolinguistics is considered as a branch of both [linguistics](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-linguistics-1691012) and sociology. However, the broader study of the field may also encompass [anthropological linguistics](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-linguistic-anthropology-1691240), [dialectology](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-dialectology-1690388), [discourse analysis](https://www.thoughtco.com/discourse-analysis-or-da-1690462), ethnography of speaking, geolinguistics, language contact studies, secular linguistics, the social psychology of language, and the sociology of language.

1. **Language and Society Language Scope :**

Sociolinguists are interested in how we speak differently in varying social contexts, and how we may also use specific functions of language to convey social meaning or aspects of our identity. Sociolinguistics teaches us about real-life attitudes and social situations.

Language and society Language is both a system of communication between individuals and a social phenomenon. The area of language and society – sociolinguistics – is intended to show how our use of language is governed by such factors as class, gender, race, etc. A subsection of this area is anthropological linguistics which is concerned with form and use of language in different cultures and to what extent the development of language has been influenced by cultural environment.

1. **The Evolution of Sociolinguistics**

The roots of sociolinguistics are to be found in traditional dialectologyn , the term was first recorded between 1935-1940. The study of language and society – sociolinguistics – can be dated to about the middle of the twentieth century. Before that there were authors who commented on how language use was influenced or indeed guided by socially relevant factors, such as class, profession, age or gender. In the early days, sociolinguistics was an interdisciplinary,loosely defined field of research in which scholars, mainly in linguistics and sociology but also in anthropology, psychology, philosophy, education, gender study and so on, developed a wide variety of lines of research focusing on language and, mainly, on talk in interaction. Indeed the father of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), saw language as a type of social behaviour and in this he reflected French sociological thinking of his day.

Since the 1960s a very fruitful coalition has developed among scholars in linguistics interested in the relation between social phenomena and language,while sociologists and social scientists became increasingly aware of the centrality of language in any social and cultural phenomenon sociolinguistics. The development of sociolinguistics is bound up with the activity of American and British linguists since the early 1960s. First and foremost of these is William Labov who, in a pioneering investigation of the English of New York city published in 1966, arrived at many new conclusions concerning language variation and language change. Labov stressed that 1) structural systems of the present and changes in languages of the past can be investigated in relation to each other, 2) language change can be observed in progress in present-day language varieties and 3) the fact that so-called ‘free variation’ was not in fact free at all but determined by deliberate, if not conscious, choices by speakers. Labov further stressed the need to collect data reliably. The linguist must be aware that informants will show the following features in their speech:

1) style shifting (during an interview),

 2) varying degree of attention, i.e. some speakers pay great attention to their own speech (so-called ‘audiomonitoring’

**3- Principles of modern sociolinguistics**

1) The prior definition of one’s area of investigation

 2) The impartial choice of informants

 3) The use of preferred methods of investigation (e.g. tape recording rather than questionnaire, allowing for later control)

 4) Where possible, the anonymous collection of data

**4- Key Concepts in Sociolinguistics**

Since the basis of sociolinguistic theory is language use I would like to introduce you to certain basic concepts.

1. Speech Community The term 'speech community' is widely used by sociolinguists as well as by linguists. Bloomfield defined a speech community as "a group of people who interact by means of speech" (1933:42). Lyons (1970:326) says that a speech community comprises " all the people who use a given language (or dialect)". The speech community can share more than one language or dialect.
2. **Speech/ Verbal Repertoire**: Speech repertoire refers to the range of languages or varieties of a language available for use by a speaker each of which enables him/ her to perform a particular social role. Gumperz (1964), "verbal repertoire…is not simply composed of linguistic forms. It is always a set of varieties each with its own internal structure". The concept of speech/ verbal repertoire allows us to deal with speech communities of all types – monolingual, bilingual and multilingual.
3. **Speech Situation/Sp**eech Act : within a community one readily detects many situations associated with (or marked by the absence of) speech. Such situations can naturally be described as ceremonies, fights, hunts, meals, and the like. Hymes suggests that such situations may enter as contexts into the statement of 'rules of speaking' as aspects of setting. A speech event is a smaller unit of description than the speech situation. Hymes (1974) says that, the term speech event will be restricted to activities or aspects of activities that are directly governed by rules or norms, for the use of speech. For example a conversation, a lecture, a formal introduction The speech act is the smallest unit of the concept that we are discussing. It represents a level distinct from the sentence, and not identifiable with any single portion of other levels of grammar. A speech act is a functional unit while a sentence is a formal unit.
4. **The Linguistic Variable :**

The recognition of variation implies that we must recognize that a language is not just some kind of abstract object of study. It is also something that people use. Although some linguists, following Chomsky’s example, are focused on what language is, sociolinguists have argued that an *asocial* linguistics is scarcely worthwhile and that meaningful insights into language can be gained only if performance is included as part of the data which must be explained in a comprehensive theory of language. When examining sociolinguistic behaviour linguists have found that some features of a variety tend to vary more than others. Not only that, there are features for which the variation has special social significance. In order to capture such features and describe them, the term linguistic variable is used. This refers to a specific feature which can be used as a tag for classifying a speaker’s speech. For example, as William Labov has pointed out in his investigation of English in New York, the realisation of /r/ is just such a variable. The realisation of /r/ varies significantly across the groups within the city.

**Limits 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.

Coulmas (1997, 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, gender, and age. Macro-sociolinguistics, on the other hand, 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.