What is Sociolinguistics?

• Sociolinguistics is the study of language in relation to society.

Sociolinguistics studies:

• the social importance of language to groups of people, from small sociocultural groups to entire nations and commonwealths
• language as part of the character of a nation, a culture, a sub-culture
• the development of national standard languages and their relation to regional and local dialects
• attitudes toward variants and choice of which to use where
• how individual ways of speaking reveal membership in social groups: working class versus middle class, urban versus rural, old versus young, female versus male
• how certain varieties and forms enjoy prestige, while others are stigmatized
• ongoing change in the forms and varieties of language, interrelationships between varieties

Sociolinguistics also studies:

• language structures in relation to interaction
• how speakers construct identities through discourse in interaction with one another
• how speakers and listeners use language to define their relationship and establish the character and direction of their talk
• how talk conveys attitudes about the context, the participants and their relationship in terms of membership, power and solidarity

Compare:

1. Could I ask you to bring me the paint, please?
2. Get me the paint, wouldja?

• How listeners interpret talk and draw inferences from it about the ongoing interaction

• Sociolinguists describe how language works in society to better understand society, but also to investigate the social aspect of language to better understand its use, structure and development
Society versus Language

- The **Sociolinguistics of Society** concerns the role of languages in societies:
  - societal multilingualism
  - attitudes toward national languages and dialects
  - language planning, language choice, language shift, language death, language education

- The **Sociolinguistics of Language** concerns language function and variation in the social context of the speech community:
  - forms of address
  - speech acts and speech events
  - language and gender, language and power, politeness, language, thought and reality
  - language varieties and change

Main focus on the Sociolinguistics of Language: particularly forms, functions and varieties of English

- Labov and Trudgill are two well-known sociolinguists:
  - Labov: variation in New York City, Black English
  - Trudgill: language and social stratification in Norwich

Sociolinguistics within Linguistics

- Sociolinguistics as interdisciplinary:
  - roots in dialect geography
  - anthropology and sociology
  - philosophy of language
  - linguistic pragmatics and discourse analysis

- language always exists in varieties
- language is always changing
- any adequate linguistic theory should be sociolinguistic
- describing variation by speaker, class, region and time
- failure to account for variation and change should render a linguistic description useless
- but Sociolinguistics outside “mainstream linguistics” till recently

- Saussure introduced “modern linguistics” around 1900, distinguishing *synchronic* and *diachronic* linguistics:
  - **Diachronic linguistics** focuses on the historical processes that affect languages over time and on the classification of languages into families.
  - **Synchronic linguistics** concentrates on the description and analysis of (mainly) spoken language as it is used by its speakers.
In the 19th century, linguistics was centered on diachronic study.

The major achievements of 19th century linguistics included the development of a methodology for establishing relations among languages, and the reconstructing earlier stages of languages, the so-called proto-languages.

Development of Sociolinguistics in USA

- Structuralist linguistic theory in US (like Saussure)
  - stressed synchronic study of language
  - focused on the system of language

- Bloomfield insisted on “scientific” linguistics
  - linguistic description as mathematical
  - formal rules
  - discrete input and output
  - no variables or “free variation”

Development of Sociolinguistics in UK

- Linguistic theory in UK never really followed Saussure; philological tradition and applied linguistics in language teaching and anthropology

- Dichotomies of synchronic and diachronic, langue and parole not systematically observed

These idealizations:
- banished variation from linguistics
- removed talk from society and local context
- made language an abstraction

But Ethnography of Speaking recognized:
- language functions and speech events
- linguistic behavior, social function, context

Linguistic Variation

- Variation through time: stages or periods of a language
  - Old English 449–1150
  - Middle English 1150–1500

- Variation in space: regional dialects
  - New England, New York City (U.S.A)
  - English as spoken in Norwich, Norfolk (U.K)
Varieties of verbs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Kent</th>
<th>Yorkshire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am we are</td>
<td>I am we are</td>
<td>I am we are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you are you are</td>
<td>you are you are</td>
<td>you is you are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to(he) he is they are</td>
<td>to(he) he is they are</td>
<td>(s)he is they are</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Northumberland

<table>
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<tr>
<th>I is we are</th>
<th>I be we be</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>you are you are</td>
<td>you be you be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to(he) he is they are</td>
<td>(s)he is they are</td>
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Somerset

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<th>I be we be</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>you be you be</td>
<td>(s)he be they be</td>
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Sussex

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</table>

International Variation

**INTERNATIONAL VARIATION**

American English and British English are two major varieties of English. Let us first examine how they differ in spelling or orthography. In Table 1, you will find a few common examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>American English</th>
<th>British English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
|"out"|"out"
|"of"|"of"
|"in"|"in"
|"en"|"en"
|"ed"|"ed"
|"ing"|"ing"
|"-s"|"-s"

Variation even occurs in the speech of a particular person from a particular place in a particular group and situation.

Varieties often differ by high versus low probability for specific items (this indicates necessity of counting!)

Varieties may differ in any kind of linguistic item: pronunciation, word choice, word form and syntax.

- Working class men in Norwich tend to pronounce thin and thing the same way in conversation.
- BE speakers say tube, while AE speakers say subway.
- White rural speakers in the Midwest U.S. say She come home yesterday instead of the standard She came home yesterday.
- Black vernacular speakers say I ask her did she know him, while standard speakers say I asked her if she knew him.

Variety = set of linguistic items with characteristic social distribution.

Variation by group: sociolects (social dialects)
- English as spoken by upper working class women in Norwich,
- by saleswomen in New York department stores

Variation by situation: register
- English as spoken in television sports reporting
- as written in business letters
- in personal e-mail
Sociolinguistic Variables are particular items known to reflect particular social contrasts:
- Presence or absence of 3rd person singular -s in constructions like: she goes versus she go
- Presence or absence of [r] in pronunciations of words and phrases like theater

Again we find patterns of variation:
- from group to group
- from one speaker to the next
- from one style to the next in the group
(again indicates necessity for quantification)

Class and style
In sociolinguistic studies, class is determined by rating status characteristics like occupation, education, residence, and income on numerical scales.

Styles reflect different degrees of formality and awareness of speakers about how they’re speaking versus what they’re saying.

Most formal is word list style, next reading style, then careful style as in an interview, and finally casual style.

Linguistic factors
- Universal constraints on change (based on past changes):
  - front vowels tend to rise
  - stop consonants tend to lose voicing

- Local changes may affect the whole system, e.g.:
  - change in diphthong /ay/ leads to parallel change in /aw/

- Social factors:
  - group member with high prestige provides model
  - pressure from outside group encourages solidarity behavior

Prestige and stigmatization
- Change begins as irregular fluctuation below level of conscious awareness
- no stylistic stratification
- When variation comes to conscious awareness, due to association with certain groups or speakers, one variant gains prestige, another is stigmatized
- Pronouncing “itches” versus “dropping itches” in words like hotel and house

Variable rules
- Language as a system of rules
  - Constitutive rules versus regulative rules
- Assume full forms are stored in memory and reduced in speech, e.g. by rules for contraction:
  She + is $\rightarrow$ she’s
  we + have + been $\rightarrow$ we’ve been
and by rules for deletion:
  we’ve been $\rightarrow$ we been
  last + time $\rightarrow$ las’ time
Phonological rule for final consonant cluster simplification, as in last time:

\[ C \rightarrow \emptyset / C \_\_ \_ C \]

Read: delete a consonant following a consonant at the end of a word, if the next word begins with a consonant.

But according to popular belief, vernacular speakers cause language change, or language deterioration, through lack of education, laziness, unclear thinking.

- Double negation: She never saw nobody try it
  - ain’t for am not, aren’t, isn’t, hasn’t, haven’t
  - I ain’t going, she ain’t seen them, it ain’t me

So-called language experts see change as corruption.

Any deviation from standard is undesirable.

Standard language is pure, better, more logical than dialects.

Social stratification in New York

- Hypothesis: any two subgroups of NYC speakers ranked on a scale of social stratification will be ranked in the same order by their differential use of (r)

- Retroflex pronunciation of (r) is a change from above, reflecting pattern of national standard, stigmatizing the traditional r-lessness of NYC speech.

The social motivation of language change

- When linguists described change, they cited internal (systematic linguistic), not external (social) factors.

- Linguists claimed language change was imperceptible, its origins obscure to speakers and linguistics alike (Saussure: language as mutable and immutable).

- Linguists claimed language change proceeded from above, from higher classes to lower classes.

What causes language change?

- Internal versus external factors in change?

- Who propagates language change?

- Does it really proceed from above?

- How can language change be imperceptible if people talk about undesirable features and changes in progress?

- Is language change dysfunctional or does it have positive influence?

- Why do some groups maintain stigmatized features after centuries of condemnation?

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Rapid and anonymous speech events as data

- Employees of three large department stores as test group:
  - Sacks
  - Macy’s
  - S. Klein

- Department stores ranked by pricing, advertising, wages, working conditions, physical appearance of store.
• Method: Ask question to elicit answer fourth floor
• This gives four variants:
  - Preceding final consonant and word final
  - Casual and emphatic

Less differentiation shows greater security as a speaker
Greater differentiation shows less security as a speaker

Compare just white, native born saleswomen:

Fig. 2.3: Comparison of (6) by stores for native New York white native born. Shaded area = % of (6-3) combined area = % under (7-3) % of (8-9) added above. D = total number of cases.

Advantages of rapid and anonymous interviews
  - Easy access, breadth of data
Disadvantages of rapid and anonymous interviews
  - Not much differentiation between styles
  → Reading aloud and word list needed

Attitudes toward variation and change
• Evaluation of variants are uniform across classes and groups; they assign character traits to speakers and groups, e.g.,
  - New York dialect sounds impolite and tough
  - Bostonian sounds refined and snooty
  - Southern drawl sounds lazy and ignorant

• Pre-adolescents are aware of prestige and stigmatized forms, they monitor their speech accordingly; they usually settle back into established class patterns
• Lower class group know prestige forms, but choose not to use them; they continue to use forms they know to be stigmatized
• Covert norms opposed to those of the middle class; attribute positive values to use of the vernacular
Ethnography of communication

Ethnography of communication (or Ethnography of speaking)
- studies uses, patterns and functions of speaking as an activity in concrete social settings in the speech community

Defining speech community:
- shared rules for speaking and shared speech variety
- we all inhabit different, overlapping speech communities

Speech acts and speech events

- Speech situation: scene (cultural) and setting (physical)
- Speech event: within Speech situation, composed of Speech acts
- Speech act: minimal unit of speech event
  By contrast with turns, pairs, sentences etc

Components defining speech events:

- Participants: Addressor, Addressee, Audience
- Form: dialect, variety, register
- Ends: purpose of event, goals of participants
- Key: mock versus serious, perfunctory versus painstaking

For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>speech situation</th>
<th>speech event</th>
<th>speech act</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>market place</td>
<td>transaction</td>
<td>offer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conversation</td>
<td>story</td>
<td>preface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ceremony</td>
<td>prayer</td>
<td>invocation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Form: dialect, register etc
- Dialect is “what you speak” based on “who you are,” i.e. where you were born/where you live, your age, group memberships etc;
- Register is “what you are speaking” based on “what you are doing,” i.e. the particular activity and context
- Genre: poem, proverb, lecture, advertisement
- Norms: “no gap, no overlap” in conversation, “speak only when you’re spoken to” for children

Summary

- Linguistic Variation
- The Social Motivation for Language Change
- Ethnography of Communication

- [http://games.usvsth3m.com/accent/](http://games.usvsth3m.com/accent/) (British Accent Quiz)