

Language in Society (CL2.203), IIIT Hyderabad

Assignment 2

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1 Question 1

Sociology of language and *sociolinguistics* are two distinct but related terms. They are *not* interchangeable; there is a difference in the fields of study denoted by them. However, their main point of difference is the *aim* of the study and not its content, *i.e.*, each of them focusses on the same domain (the use of language in society), with differing motivations¹.

The sociology of language, as the name suggests, looks for clarity on the nature and functioning of society, in the use of language. It studies language in society for the sake of a better understanding of society itself. It considers language as a product of society – a “social problem and resource”².

Sociolinguistics, on the other hand, is an examination of the interaction of society and language for the greater knowledge of language one obtains as a result. It aims to better comprehend language as a whole itself through a study of its use in society and the influences society has on it³.

However, this is not a clear-cut, black-and-white, binary distinction. In practice the border between these two fields of study is poorly defined and fluid.

2 Question 2

The *standard language* is a specific variety of a language that has acquired social and political prestige through historical circumstances. It is *not* a linguistic criterion; from the point of view of the linguist, the standard language is a variety like any other. The only reasons for its designation as a “standard” are non-linguistic.

¹Mesthrie, Rajend. *Introducing sociolinguistics*. Edinburgh University Press, 2009. Page 5.

²Fasold, Ralph W., and Ralph Fasold. *The sociolinguistics of society*. Vol. 1. Wiley-Blackwell, 1984. Page ix.

³Fasold, Ralph W., and Ralph Fasold. *The sociolinguistics of society*. Vol. 1. Wiley-Blackwell, 1984. Page ix.

Malayalam has a number of varieties spoken all over Kerala and in Lakshadweep. These are generally distinguished by region and/or religion. For example, the Arabi Malayalam (or Mappila Malayalam) dialect is spoken primarily by Muslims in the northern parts of Kerala (Malabar); there are also distinct dialects spoken in central Kerala and various parts of Travancore.

Malayalam does not have an *official* standard, in the sense that the standard variety is not defined to any degree of clarity by the Government of Kerala or any other authority.

The legislation which made Malayalam and English the official languages of the state of Kerala⁴ and the one which made Malayalam the sole official language of the state⁵ make no mention of which variety of Malayalam is to be used (even though the latter mandates the teaching of Malayalam in schools and its usage in courts).

Popularly, however, there are three approaches to defining a “standard”:

- The poet Thunchath Ezhuthachan created the modern Malayalam script and, in the 16th century, translated the Ramayana to Malayalam as the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇam*, which is widely acknowledged as one of the most important landmarks of Malayalam literature and a standard for early Malayalam. However, it is considerably different from modern Malayalam.
- The varieties spoken by “educated speakers in central Kerala”⁶ (districts Ernakulam, Thrissur) are sometimes taken as an unofficial standard.
- The varieties spoken in central Travancore (districts Pathanamthitta, Kottayam) are considered to have the least “regional stamp” as compared to other regions, *i.e.*, the smallest number of typical regional expressions. This, however, is poorly defined and unreliable.

3 References

1. Mesthrie, Rajend. *Introducing sociolinguistics*. Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
2. Fasold, Ralph W., and Ralph Fasold. *The sociolinguistics of society*. Vol. 1. Wiley-Blackwell, 1984.
3. The Kerala Official Language (Legislation) Act, 1969.
4. The Malayalam Language (Dissemination and Enrichment) Bill, 2015.
5. Krishnamurti, Bhadriraju. *The Dravidian languages*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁴The Kerala Official Language (Legislation) Act, 1969.

⁵The Malayalam Language (Dissemination and Enrichment) Bill, 2015.

⁶Krishnamurti, Bhadriraju. *The Dravidian languages*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.