Sociolinguistics is the study of language within society. The main focus of investigations in this field is on how social factors create differences in languages and language use. As a broad field, sociolinguistics encompasses both micro- and macro-level domains. Common to both areas of investigation is the sociolinguistic quest to understand how social factors create linguistic variation. Many individual, cultural, and sociopolitical factors are recognized as creating this variation. This article gives a brief overview of the areas of investigation of sociolinguistics.

Keywords Accent; African American English; Cross-Cultural Communication; Critical Discourse Analysis; Discourse Analysis; Ethnography of Communication; Language Maintenance; Language & Society; Language Use; Sociolinguistics; Speech Accommodation Theory; Speech Community; Standardization; Variety

Sociolinguistics

Overview

Sociolinguistics is the study of language within society. The main focus of investigations in this field is on how social factors create differences in languages and language use. At the micro level, researchers focus on issues such as variations in pronunciation and grammar and ask why these variations exist. At the macro level, entire communities are examined, and researchers ask how events, such as the contact of a language with another language, create linguistic change.

Within the field of sociolinguistics, there are several subfields such as critical discourse analysis and the ethnography of communication. Each of these subfields focuses on a specific aspect of the relationship between society and language in order to understand how society impacts language or how language reflects and changes society. Today, the field of sociolinguistics is robust with many individual, cultural, and sociopolitical factors being recognized for their impact on language and language use.

Language Variation

Languages and language use can vary in many ways. Languages can be completely different, as in the differences between the 7,105 languages counted as living languages within the world (ethnologue.com, 2013). Languages can also be differentiated by their varieties. A variety of a single language is a form of the language that consistently makes use of distinct words, syntactic ordering, and grammatical choices (Stockwell, 2003). For instance, English is an international language that has many well-recognized varieties. American English is perhaps the most well-known English variety in the United States as well as many other areas of the world. American English has many words that are different from British English. For instance, the British would say flat, lift, and rubber for the American equivalents of apartment, elevator, and eraser. Spelling between the two varieties is also different. In British English the letter groupings our, and se are used instead of the American or and ze. Thus, the American color and analyze are spelled colour and analyse in British English (Jones, n.d., n.d.a.).

Many of the recognized varieties of English developed in countries that were once colonies of England, but new varieties have continued to develop as globalization has made knowledge of English an important asset. Some of the English varieties (colonial or otherwise) include South African English, Indian English, Australian English, and Hong Kong English (Kachru, 1988). Sociolinguists study how social factors lead to the development of new language varieties and record the language changes that occur.

Accent, Register, & Style

Although speakers may use the same variety of a language, they may sound different due to their accent. An accent is a variation within a variety that is caused by differences in pronunciation of vowels and consonants. Speakers in the American South, East, and West can be recognized by their regional accents. A common accent variation is in the pronunciation or elimination of "r" in words such as farm or car. Sociolinguists have found that accents occur in accordance with social factors such as an individual's level of education and social status. Thus, they can be used to investigate micro- and macro-level social patterns (Stockwell, 2003).

Language varieties and accents are two variations that are generally influenced by geographic location or origin. Speakers tend to speak the variety of a language that is predominant in a given location, and accents are generally acquired from birth by exposure to a certain form of pronunciation. Other forms of linguistic difference occur when speakers change their word choices and discourse style to meet the demands of a particular social situation. The term to describe this variation is register. An individual's choice of register reflects attention to three factors: the field, defined as the social setting and purpose of interaction; the tenor, which describes the relationship between the participants in the interaction; and the mode, which is the medium of communication.

Register differences may reflect that a given situation is more or less formal or that the participants are more or less well-acquainted with one another. For instance, the register used by friends playing a game of soccer would be different from that used by an employer and employee during an interview. Register differences are also influenced by the format of communication. A potential employee expressing gratitude for an interview may make different word and grammatical choices when speaking at the end of the interview than when writing a formal thank you note or follow-up e-mail a day later.

A final form of variation is that of style. Within a given register, individuals may vary their speech according to their individual style. Style represents an element of language use that is due to social factors such as one's gender, class, and ethnicity. Style involves conscious and subconscious choices that an individual makes that reflect and project identity. Sociolinguists are particularly interested in style because it is the point in linguistic variation where sociological factors may have their greatest impact (Stockwell, 2003).

Further Insights

Social Aspects of Style

The research on style is broad. The following section gives a brief overview of this research.

Gender

Much research has been conducted to determine how gender impacts language use. Early research focused on comparing male and female speech to identify how men and women used language differently. One of the findings of this research that has been upheld cross-culturally is that men tend to use vernacular, local forms of a language more often than women, who tend to choose a standard variety having more prestige. Furthermore, when language change is in process, women tend to use the newer forms of the language more frequently. Many of the other differences identified have been linked to discrepancies in the social status and power of men and women in society.

Later research examined men and women in their interactions with members of their own sex. In American gender research, women have been found to mirror one another's talk, to collaborate in the co-narration of stories, and to use language to provide support. Men, on the other hand, build camaraderie by playfully teasing and antagonizing one another. Today's research often focuses on how individuals create gender through talk. This research separates the socially constructed behavior and language use of gender from the biologically determined physical characteristics of sex (Coates, 2007).

Class

Social class is determined by economic and cultural factors. One's occupation usually determines one's economic standing with those who own the means of production being considered of a higher class than those who labor for others. Cultural factors are determined by level of education and exposure to sophisticated forms of the arts. Those with higher levels of education tend to be considered of a higher class.

Class has been found to influence how one perceives the world and to lead to the development of class-based accents and vernaculars. One's occupation frequently determines who one socializes with and therefore social groups that share particular interests, hobbies, and values may form out of occupational associations. These social groups may develop phonetic, grammatical, and word use patterns that are particular to and define the group. Class frequently serves to define which forms of language are considered more prestigious than others with the preferred language and language forms usually being those used by the more dominant class. Sociolinguists investigate how speakers mark their class with language and how class assigns prestige to particular language uses (Kerswill, 2007).

Ethnicity

Ethnic varieties of a language may develop to distinguish members of the ethnicity from other social groups. In the United States, African American English is an established ethnic variety of English with distinct grammatical and lexical forms. Whether a member of a particular ethnic group chooses to use an ethnic variety of a language may depend on how closely the individual identifies with the ethnic group as well as on other contextual factors (Wolfram, 2007).

Politeness & Power

Individuals may change their style to reflect their social status in an interaction. This is especially true when speakers are making requests of another person. In such cases, speakers generally choose polite linguistic forms and the degree of politeness that the speakers use may be impacted by their social status.

Sociolinguists study the relationship between power and politeness from several perspectives. The most longstanding and influential research in this area was presented by Brown and Levinson (1987). They posited that individuals have two main face needs: negative face, the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions and positive face, the desire to be accepted. These researchers presented a specific formula that took into account power, social distance, and the degree of imposition to face that a request imposed. They said that individuals would choose more or less linguistically polite forms depending on these factors. Later writers have challenged Brown and Levinson's work, suggesting that power and politeness are dynamic forces that can be used to negotiate identity and that should be conceptualized differently depending on the cultural context (Harris, 2007).

Speech Accommodation Theory & Identity Projection

Style variations reflect a complex interplay of factors related to individual identity and the context of the situation. Speakers may choose a particular grammatical or lexical style to indicate that they are members of a specific social class or ethnic group. However, individuals may also accommodate their speech to the needs of their audience in order to win approval. This idea, posited as part of speech accommodation theory, says that individuals will shift their speech, rate, accent, content, and pausing, among other factors to be more like the addressee. The purpose of this seems to be to produce a more favorable reception to the speaker and the speaker's ideas. If speakers want to differentiate themselves from an individual or group, they may maintain their style or make it different (Bell, 2007).

An example of how speech accommodation theory and identity projection work together in a given situation to affect style follows. Consider a speaker who uses a local variety at home with friends. At home, the speaker's use of the local variety indicates membership within a group of people who use that variety. In the informal situation, the speaker projects the identity of a member of that particular group. However, a day later, the speaker must address an audience at a local university. The speaker chooses to use the more prestigious, standard variety of the language during the address. The choice indicates that the speaker is accommodating to the perceived needs of the audience, who expect speakers to use the standard variety of the language in an academic setting. It also reflects how the individual wants to be perceived by the audience. In this case, the speaker wants to project an identity as a member of the academic community.

Macro-level Variations

Obviously, the factors that impact language use are complex, and it is difficult to ascribe any one particular use of language to any one specific social factor. Nevertheless, sociolinguists have been able to identify many factors that influence linguistic variation at the individual level. When sociolinguists examine communities for their speech patterns, one of the issues they are interested in is how individual level variations work to produce macro-level changes. Such changes include the development of pidgins and creoles. A pidgin is a language that may develop in areas where two languages come into contact, and one language is more dominant than the other. In this instance, the pidgin is a grammatically simplified version of each language, and the dominant language provides most of the words of the pidgin. The pidgin becomes a creole when a new generation learns the pidgin as its first language (Mufwene, 2007).

Another macro-level change is the standardization of a particular variety of a language. Standardization occurs when one variety of the language is elevated to a position where it is considered to be the "correct" form of the language. Standardization occurs in three stages. First, the language is approved for use by the major institutions of a society, such as government and education. Next, it is codified into dictionaries and grammars. Finally, it is taught and used within the society's prestigious texts (Stockwell, 2003).

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, standardization is an interesting phenomenon because it often reflects how power is distributed within society (e.g., standard forms are often the varieties preferred by the dominant class). Standardization can lead to changes in language attitudes—how people perceive certain varieties of a language and/or the people who use a nonstandard form. For instance, in American society, individuals who do not use standard English may be perceived as being less educated, or if they are bilingual and choose not to use English, as not wanting to fit into mainstream society. Sociolinguists study the ideological positioning of language and its users and examine how a society's institutions (e.g., school and the media) reproduce or change these positions (Garrett, 2007).

Along with the processes of standardization, sociolinguists examine how nations engage in language planning and develop language policies. Because the use of one language within a country's borders has frequently been viewed as an important component of national identity development, sociolinguists explore the role of language in developing and maintaining nationalism, a strong identity by the people of one country with the state of the country. With the advent of globalization, in which more people are crossing borders and living in multicultural communities, sociolinguists are interested in understanding how language planners will accommodate the needs of a multilingual citizenry. An important aspect of language study in this field is of language shift and language maintenance—how younger generations move toward the use of dominant languages and how heritage/native languages are maintained in communities (Wright, 2007).

Research Applications

Techniques of Analysis

Sociolinguists engage in a variety of techniques to study the relationship between social factors and linguistic use. Chief among these is discourse analysis. Discourse analysis involves examining speakers' or writers' interactions in order to understand how they use language to make themselves understood. Discourse analysts may consider such facts as the topic of the interaction; word choices; pronunciation; changes in tone, pitch, and volume; organization of turns; how feedback is given; and repair strategies (i.e., correcting mistakes); among others (Garner, 2007). Subfields of sociolinguistics that utilize discourse analysis include ethnography of communication, cross-cultural communication, and critical discourse analysis.

Speech Community

A key concept for many sociolinguistic studies is the speech community. A speech community is defined as a unit of analysis at a level at which social heterogeneity is organized. Speakers within a speech community do not have to agree about the language they use or use the same language in the same way. Rather, they have to agree about the norms of the language as it is used within the speech community. Many studies examine language use within a speech community in order to understand such linguistic features as dialect, accent, style, and register. Although it provides a popular unit of analysis, a speech community is only one way to model communities. Two other models are the social network and communities of practice models. In a social network model, researchers focus on the speaker's social ties and how the existence and relative density of those ties impacts language use. In a communities of practice model, researchers investigate how mutual engagement in a specific activity (e.g., studying in school) impacts how people do and talk about their activities and how values, beliefs, and power relations are formed or negotiated out of the activity (Mullany, 2007).

Sociolinguistics is a broad field concerned with all aspects of how language and society impact one another. Multiple factors have been found to influence language use at both the individual and societal levels.

Terms & Concepts

Accent: An accent is a variation in the sound of the language that speakers acquire from interacting with their parents and others in the community.

African American English: African American English is a distinct variety of English that exists within the United States.

Creole: A creole is created when a generation of speakers in a community learns a pidgin as their first language.

Cross-cultural Communication: Cross-cultural communication is a field that explores communication between members of different cultures and examines how cultural differences can impact the effectiveness of such communication.

Critical Discourse Analysis: Critical discourse analysis examines language use with a focus on how power and ideology are manipulated or transferred through language.

Discourse Analysis: Discourse analysis is a method of investigating language use. Discourse analysts examine transcripts of written or spoken language and analyze them for linguistic patterns.

Ethnography of Communication: The field of ethnography of communication examines how and why language is used and how language use differs in different cultures.

Language Maintenance: Language maintenance is the process by which communities keep a heritage or native language in use within the community.

Language Shift: Language shift is the process by which new generations of language users within a community move toward using a different language than their predecessors.

Mode: Mode describes the medium of communication in an interaction (e.g., written, spoken).

Pidgin: A pidgin is a language that is formed when two languages come into contact and one is more dominant than the other. The pidgin has a simplified grammar system.

Register: Register is the term used to describe variations that occur due to the nature of the activity in which language is used.

Speech Accommodation Theory: Speech accommodation theory says that individuals will make their speech more like that of the person to whom they are speaking.

Speech Community: A speech community is a community in which language is used and in which the members of the community share the same ideas about how language should be used.

Standardization: Standardization is the process by which a variety of a language becomes recognized in society as being the "correct" form of the language.

Standard Variety: A standard variety is a variety of a language that has gone through the process of standardization and that is upheld as the model for language use.

Style: Unique individual variations in language use are part of an individual's style. Style may reflect social factors such as gender, ethnicity, and class.

Tenor: Tenor is the term used to describe the relationship between participants in an interaction.

Variety: A variety of a language is a form of the language that has consistently distinct words/word choices, syntactical orderings, and grammatical uses.

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