

Part D: Critical Thinking

12. Consider the famous saying, “*A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.*” Discuss its meaning with reference to examples such as Chinese, Arabic, or Scandinavian languages.

Sociolinguistics: Social Groups

Speech Community

The idea of the relationships between language and society sociolinguistics brings to the study of language also carries a challenge into any scientific inquiry which is delineating the boundaries of society. After all, it would be unscientific and unrealistic for any sociolinguist to consider a whole society as a study sample but it is imperative for a researcher to define a reasonably sized sample that he/she can work with. In other words, sociolinguists need to work with a definable group of people that reflects the complexity found in society.

As a start and from a solely sociological point of view, Stolley (2005, p. 43) sees a society as consisting of “people who interact and share a common culture.” And he also sees that unlike old definitions, the new era of communication, globalization, and transportation, such term is no longer confined to a restricted geographical area. On the other hand, Rapport and Overing (2000) believe that

instead of the idea of a general sense society, the term should be applicable to people that are involved in face-to-face interaction and often related to the concept of sociality.

The same complication is brought to sociolinguistics, as the demarcating exact boundaries of a study is an arduous task. Focusing on language, sociolinguists deploy the term **speech community** which is no less subject to debate than the term society. Initially, the concept of ‘speech community’ attempts to simplify and contain a specific group of people, thus, instead of focusing on the entire society, a speech community would refer to a particular group. However, the problem lies in defining the criteria that outline a speech community. The most common criteria deployed are **shared norms of communication and rules of conduct** (McKay & Hornberger, 1996). In other words, it is that mutual understanding that people hold towards speech that makes them a speech community. Crystal (2008, p. 446) sees a speech community as “regionally or socially definable human group which can be identified by the use of a shared spoken language or language variety”. Crystal’s definition introduces two issues: first, it again provokes the same issues which plague the term society, as what does make a group socially definable? The second problem lies with the word group.

The concept of a group is crucial to sociolinguistics as it enables practitioners to systematically investigate and focus on a small sample that can be deemed

representable. For example, people can be grouped with regard to the code they use, region, gender, ethnicity, and endless other criteria. However, these groups are still constructs and by far they do not mirror the complexity of individuals due to the fact that people simply do not adhere to a clear group but are often involved in complex networks of related groups. Then, excluding the wider picture may well be beneficial for scientific and methodological reasons yet, it might also dismiss important variables.

Social Networks

The notion of grouping and fixation contradicts the changing and the dynamic nature of both language and people who use it. Therefore, while the focus on the different categories society is composed of can yield description of linguistic variables that might correlate with a particular group, the latter may face limitations in accounting how linguistic variables come to exist in certain groups and not others. Therefore, the concept of social network holds the promise for better understanding of the inner dynamics and the processes that result in linguistic variables.

The concept is brought from sociology where the main emphasis is not restricted to a defined group but it includes the relationships that occur between groups (Stolley, 2005). In fact, ‘social networks’ has a remarkable similarity with the idea of ‘system theories’ in which relation between groups are presented as web-like interactions where each group influences and at the same time is influenced by

others. For instance, what happens inside home influences our behavior at school and vice versa. Furthermore, groups can also overlap with each other. Consequently, other factors come to play such as the pattern of communication, the role of the participants, and the boundaries of the group (Donald , Lazarus , & Lolwana, 2006). Now, considering language is a mirror of our behavior, all that was said about the interactions that occur in a society is manifested in language and language use.

Community of Practice

Community of practice is a relatively new concept introduced by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) in their work ‘Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation’, and further developed by Wenger in ‘Community of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and identity’ in 1998. The basic idea behind the concept is that there are shared practices in a community. In other words, people typically come together in groups to carry out activities (Barton & Tusting, 2005). Thus, the type of practice we do and people involved in it have an influence on the way members of a group use language. For instance, it does not come as a surprise for a non-linguist to realize that doctors can have a distinctive way of speaking, the same goes for merchants or teachers.

However, despite the simplicity of the notion, all the complications lie behind the connotation of the word practice. Wenger (1998) relates practice to doing, nevertheless, not simply just doing but “doing in historical and social context that

gives structure and meaning to what we do” (Wenger, 1998, p. 47). He further extends the practice to cover three rudiments: practice as community, as learning, and as meaning. As for the first, practice as an activity in the midst of community requires participation. The last refers to the active involvement and membership in social communities around social enterprises (Wenger, 1998). Furthermore, the picture gets more interesting when participating is related to learning as on this respect Lave & Wenger (1991) associate the construction of knowledge with the active engagement of people around such enterprises. Knowledge and meaning often go hand in hand, thus, when people participate in doing something, they actively engage in the process of constructing and negotiating meaning.

References

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Quiz:

Part A: Definitions

1. Define **speech community** and explain what criteria are often used to identify one.
2. What is a **social network** in sociolinguistics?
3. Define **community of practice** and explain its significance.
4. What is meant by the term **grouping** in sociolinguistic studies?

5. How does Rapport & Overing (2000) describe “society” in relation to communication and interaction?

Part B: Multiple Choice

6. According to Crystal (2008), a speech community can be identified by:

- a) Shared ancestry
- b) A shared spoken language or language variety
- c) Political unity
- d) Social class differences

7. The concept of **social networks** emphasizes:

- a) Fixed, clearly bounded groups
- b) Relationships and interactions between groups
- c) Grammar rules within dialects
- d) Only family-based connections

8. The idea of **community of practice** was first introduced by:

- a) William Labov
- b) Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave

c) Basil Bernstein

d) John Gumperz

Part C: Short Answer

9. Give one example of how a **speech community** might be defined in real life (regional, ethnic, or professional).

10. Why do sociolinguists find **fixed group boundaries** problematic when studying society?

11. How does the **community of practice** model explain the distinctive language use of professions (e.g., doctors, teachers, merchants)?

Part D: Critical Thinking

12. Compare the concepts of **speech community**, **social network**, and **community of practice**. Which do you think best captures the complexity of real language use in society? Support your answer with examples.