An Introduction to Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is a sub-branch of linguistics that scientifically studies the relationship between language and society. However, a one-sentence definition hides considerable complexity as many weighty introductory books have been written to divulge the different ways language can be investigated in relation to society. The convolutions in sociolinguistics emanate from the fact that probing into language as a subject of its own merit alone is an arduous task because of the intricate nature of the structure of language. Thus, the inclusion of social aspects further perplexes any endeavor and necessitates alternative tools to explore language use.

There is an agreement in the literature that the gestation of sociolinguistics goes to its founding fathers: William Labov, Basil Bernstein, Dell Hymes, John Gumperz, Charles Ferguson, and Joshua Fishman. Their work covers broad range of topics from the interest of Labov on how social determinates are imbedded in language use, the theory of language code of Bernstein, the communicative competence and the necessity of knowledge of social norms in communication with Hymes, the emphasis on interactions in Gumperz' work, Ferguson's concept of diglossia , to multilingualism with Fishman.

Despite the diversity of the topics tackled in sociolinguistics, society remains a defining criterion of the field. In regard to the latter, and going further asserting the importance of the role of society, Labov (2010, p. 7) avows that "The central dogma of sociolinguistics is that the community is prior to the individual". Aligned perfectly with Labov, but said much before, Whitney (1867, p .404) stated that:

"Speech is not a personal possession, but a social; it belongs, not to the individual, but to the member of society. No item of existing language is the work of an individual; for what we may severally choose to say is not language until it be accepted and employed by our fellows. The whole development of speech, though initiated by the acts of individuals, is wrought out by the community."

The importance of Whitney's view on speech lies in the fact that it was said in a time when sociolinguistics itself was still not recognized as a science. Second, Whitney further asserts that what actually matters in language and what connects a word with an idea has nothing to with the origin of the word , length, nor its phonetic form, but it is that mutual intelligibility or understanding people have in a society for the word, an idea that shapes the study of language nowadays. (Whitney, 1867)

Sociolinguistics and the Sociology of Language

Being both an individual and a social possession, language use can be looked at from two different perspectives, either with the focus on the speech of individuals or by

scrutinizing the way it is used by large groups of people. In this regard, investigators differentiate between sociolinguistics or macro-sociolinguistics in which the emphasis is laid on individuals and how language functions in communication and sociology of language or macro-sociolinguistics where the interest is more in understanding the structure of society through language (Wardhaugh, 2006).

At the micro-level, sociolinguists endeavor to account for the variation exhibited in one's way of speaking by examining how social attributes such as sex, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, and class are reflected in language use. the core idea is that variation is rather an important aspect in language to function. This goes against Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky's views who downplay the differences found in language performance, thus, obscuring a fundamental truism in language.

On the other hand, sociolinguistics is also concerned with macro-level topics that cover the interaction between large groups of people and language. In this vein, speech community, community of practice are examples of the concepts coined to offer a better understanding of how people are grouped and attempt to explain how such groups influence language use. Furthermore, in relation to society, several questions are raised for instance why languages change over time, and why one language gets to dominate others (Trudgill, 1984).

References

Labov, W. (2010). *Principles of linguistic change. volume 3: Cognitive and cultural factors*. Malden, MA Oxford Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

Trudgill, P. (Ed.). (1984). *Applied sociolinguistics*. London ; Orlando: Academic Press.

Wardhaugh, R. (2006). *An introduction to sociolinguistics* (5th ed). Malden, Mass., USA: Blackwell Pub.

Whitney, W. D. (1867). *Language and the Study of Language*.

Quiz

Part A:

1. Define **sociolinguistics** in your own words.

2. What does William Labov mean when he says, *"The community is prior to the individual"*?

3. Explain the difference between **micro-sociolinguistics** and **macro-sociolinguistics**.

4. What is meant by the term **speech community**?

5. How does Whitney (1867) describe the nature of speech?

Part B: Multiple Choice

6. Which of the following is **not** one of the founding figures of sociolinguistics?

   a) William Labov

   b) Basil Bernstein

   c) Noam Chomsky

   d) Dell Hymes

7. Which of the following best describes **macro-sociolinguistics**?

   a) Focuses on individual speakers' accents

   b) Studies how language use reflects large social structures

   c) Examines speech errors in communication

   d) Analyzes personal language habits

8. According to Labov's variationist approach, language variation is:

   a) A sign of linguistic decay

   b) An essential aspect of how language functions

   c) A problem to be eliminated by grammarians

   d) A feature that only exists in non-standard dialects

Part C: Short Answer

9. Give an example of how **social variables** (such as class, gender, or age) can influence language use.

10. Why do sociolinguists argue that **variation is important** rather than a problem?

11. In your opinion, why is the study of sociolinguistics important for understanding society today?

Part D: Critical Thinking

12. Consider the statement: *"A language only exists when it is accepted and employed by a community."* Discuss how this idea challenges the view of language as an individual possession. Provide examples.