Sociolinguistics

The Scientificity of the Language Study

One of the frequently asked questions in academia is whether sociolinguistic or the study of language, in general, is science or not. However, what might sound like an obvious question, it would entail addressing yet other questions of "what is science?" and "what makes a discipline scientific?". The current issue starts with the distinction between physical or natural science and social one. The simplest version some try to adopt that every field of research that falls under natural science is scientific, thus, rendering those disciplines labeled as social, unscientific.

First, according to May, Williams, and Wiggins (2002, p02), science is " seem to represent the production of a body of knowledge that is assumed, in one way or another, to represent the "truth" about the phenomena with which it is concerned". Hence, comes the alternative view in which science is looked at in the knowledge yielded not the name of the field. In other words, it is the how or the methods implemented to attain knowledge that matter the most to designate a field of research as scientific.

Often the main aspect that differentiates scientific knowledge from ordinary everyday knowledge is objectivity. According to Chalmers (1982, p1), scientific knowledge is reliable knowledge because it is objectively proven knowledge". In this regard, sociolinguists attempt to detach their own biases, values, and preferences and describe language use. For instance, in sociolinguistics, it is easy for investigators to be influenced by culture-related topics such as religion, regions, femininity/masculinity, and power relations (Smakman, 2019).

Furthermore, scientific knowledge needs to be verifiable and based on concrete factual observation. In this regard, practitioners in the field of sociolinguistics observe and record data with precision. The result is reliable information that can be obtained again under the same circumstances. Labov's work in variationist sociolinguistics often stands as a good example of the reliance on firm empirical observation to study language in its social context. His work is distinguishable because of his adaptation of the quantitative approach by carrying out statistical analysis to reveal the correlation between linguistic forms and social variables (Gordon, 2018).

However, there is the belief that even adhering to scientific methods does not grant the status of being a science but those fields should be dubbed "a pseudoscience". An epistemic stance that considers the latter a subclass of scientific theories. Neuman (2014, p10) even talks about the term "Junk science" which

denotes to "A public relations term used to criticize scientific research even if it is conducted properly that produces findings that an advocacy group opposes even adhering to scientific methods does not grant some"

In the midst of this intense debate that is still standing, it is rather necessary to opt for a rather a substitute and a productive view on how we should look at the study of language. In this regard, Laugksch (2000) sees that the answer is in the idea of " Scientific literacy" which is " is the capacity to understand scientific knowledge; apply scientific concepts, principles, and theories; use scientific processes to solve problems and make decisions; and interact in a way that reflects core scientific values". Moreover, a researcher needs to acquire "quantitative literacy, or numeracy". That is the ability to perceive how data are collected and measurements are displayed by means of graphs, diagrams, and tables.

Quiz

Part A: Definitions (2 points each)

1. Define what is meant by "scientific knowledge."
2. What is the main difference between **natural sciences** and **social sciences**?
3. Explain the concept of **objectivity** in scientific research.
4. What is meant by **quantitative literacy (numeracy)**?

5. How does sociolinguistics attempt to maintain its scientific credibility?

Part B: Multiple Choice (1 point each)

6. According to Chalmers (1982), scientific knowledge is reliable because:

   a) It is based on tradition

   b) It is objectively proven and verifiable

   c) It is always correct

   d) It depends on personal interpretation

7. Who among the following is associated with **variationist sociolinguistics** and statistical analysis?

   a) Basil Bernstein

   b) John Gumperz

   c) William Labov

   d) Joshua Fishman

8. The term "junk science" refers to:

   a) Research in physical sciences only

   b) Scientific research that is misunderstood by the public

   c) Any social science discipline

   d) A public relations term used to criticize legitimate scientific findings

Part C: Short Answer (3 points each)

9. Why is it important for sociolinguists to control their own cultural or personal biases? Give an example.

10. What role does **empirical observation** play in sociolinguistic research?

11. Briefly explain what **scientific literacy** means according to Laugksch (2000).

Part D: Critical Thinking (5 points)

12. Some argue that sociolinguistics is not a "real" science because it studies human behavior, which is variable and unpredictable. Do you agree or disagree? Support your argument with examples from sociolinguistic studies.