APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE
Lecture 1

Introduction to Sociolinguistics

INTRODUCTION

- "I am not at all concerned about the assessment procedure for this module."

- "D'you fink I'm bovvered how I gets me marks?"

- Great variation in the language we use in everyday living.

LANGUAGE

- Code (language): the system of communication two or more people use when they communicate with each other in speech

- Language use (certain features of speech, accent) indicates one's social class, status, region of origin, gender, age group

- Language use reflects SOCIAL STATUS & SOCIAL PATTERNS and DIVISIONS & maintains SOCIAL FUNCTIONS; language sustains and reproduces societal patterns and divisions

- It is essential in:
  - the establishment of social relationships;
  - conveying information about the speaker/writer.

- Individuals have both linguistic & communicative competence.

What is sociolinguistics?

- The study of:

- How individual speakers use language

- How groups of people use language differently across different regions

- How groups of people use language differently depending on their social class (social variation)

- How groups of people use language differently depending on where they live (regional variation)

- How governments decide which codes will be recognised as official

What is sociolinguistics?

- More broadly sociolinguistics is concerned with:

- The study of language in its social context

- The relations between language and society

The Role of the Sociolinguist

'Sociolinguists study the relationship between language and society. They are interested in explaining why we speak differently in different social contexts, and they are concerned with identifying the social functions of language and the ways it is used to convey social meaning …[e.g.] to signal aspects of [our] social identity through … language………the sociolinguist's aim is to move towards a theory which provides a motivated account of the way language is used in a community, and of the choices people make when they use language.'

(Holmes 2001:1-12)

Sociolinguistics: Definitions

- 'Sociolinguistics is an attempt to find correlations between social structure and linguistic structure and to observe any changes that occur' (Gumperz 1971)

Questions sociolinguists ask

- Who uses a particular variety/ code?

- Who do they use it with? Are they aware of their choices?

- What is the role of social class, region, and gender in language choices?

- Why are some codes/ forms of language considered 'better' than others?

- What is the relationship between networks of speakers and the code they use?

- (adapted from Meyerhoff 2011:3)

Antecedents of Sociolinguistics

- Regional variation (rural dialects in Europe) and contact between languages (multilingualism)

Hugo Schuchardt (1882), Addison Van Name (1869-70)

- Early twentieth century: Cultural, anthropological dimension (focus: internal systems of languages and not historical comparisons); early ethnographic studies

Leonard Bloomfield, Edward Sapir

- The term 'sociolinguistics': Haver Currie (1952); Currie noted the absence of any consideration of the social from the linguistic research

Topics in sociolinguistics

- Variation (social, regional)

- Diglossia/ bilingualism

- Social networks

- Identities

- Gender

- Linguistic politeness

- Language attitudes

- Multilingualism and language choice

- Language contact

+ Competence vs. Performance

■What does this quotation show about Chomsky's view of linguistics?

■ Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest and errors (random or characteristic) (Chomsky 1965)

+ Review: Competence vs. Performance

- Chomsky's competence vs. performance

- Competence: What speakers know when they know a language; Finite set of rules- infinite utterances; Structures that can be generated in a language

- Performance: How speakers use their linguistic competence

Review: Competence vs. Performance

- Does an ideal speaker-hearer exist?

- − Is there a homogeneous speech community?

- − Does language serve any function other than communication?

- − Should language exist if it has no function at all?

- − Is there any linguistic structure that is not associated with language use?

- Social approach to language: explanation of what can be said in a language, who says what to whom, in whose presence, when and where, in what manner and under what social circumstances (Mesthrie et. al., 2009)

Introducing communicative competence

- Sociolinguists are interested in what has been coined by Dell Hymes (1974) as *communicative competence.*

- *Communicative Competence:* Knowledge of the conventions by which people engage with each other in social activity

- Appropriateness of language use (e.g. rules of turn taking, influence of the social context)

Communicative Competence

■ Children acquire knowledge of a system of grammar, but also knowledge of a system of its use. [they] 'develop patterns of the sequential use of language in conversation, address, standard routines, and the like. In such acquisition resides the child's sociolinguistic competence (or more broadly communicative competence), its ability to participate in its society as not only a speaking, but also a communicative member' (Hymes 1974: 75).

Matched Guise test

- Sociolinguistic experimental test: it is used to determine the language attitudes of people towards a specific language, dialect, or accent

- Subjects listen to recorded text passages with examples of the languages or varieties in question.

- Evaluation of the speakers that have heard in terms of various character traits, e.g. *body height*, *good looks*, *leadership*, *sense of humour*, *intelligence*, *religiousness*, *self-confidence*, *kindness*, *ambition*, *sociability*, *character*

Characterise speakers of these varieties

- French accent

- Standard English

- Liverpudlian

- Birmingham

- Cockney

+

Sociolinguistic research is concerned with determining the COVARIATION of linguistic and social phenomenon:

- Different accents/dialects are evaluated differently by different people in different contexts.

- Value judgements about language varieties (accents/dialects/languages) are based on SOCIAL rather than LINGUISTIC grounds.

- Attitudes often associated with the social structure of society.

- ALL LANGUAGE VARIETIES ARE EQUAL!

Some Key Research Questions & Concerns

- Can a sociolinguistic theory of language use be developed?

- What are the best research methods and tools to study language in social contexts?

- In what ways do different communities (ethnic/social/political) differ in their language use?

- What patterns of communication are formed and change over time and space in different communities?

Some Key Research Questions & Concerns

- What patterns of language use are apparent in multilingual individuals and communities?

- Is language a marker of individual/group identity?

- Is language used as a weapon in social conflict?

- Do attitudes towards language use and practice reflect social divisions (e.g. class) and practices. Could a more sophisticated understanding of such issues help to alleviate problems of for e.g. restricted access to resources and discrimination against specific social groups?

SOCIETY

- Write down a draft definition of the term.

- Society: Group of people who are drawn together for a certain purpose (Wardhaugh, 2010)

Three theoretical approaches to the study of human societies

- Functionalism (dominant perspective)

- Marxism (fundamental differences of interest between social groups)

- Interactionism (understanding actions between individuals)

Functionalism

- Functionalism – a society is a system comprised of functioning parts. Each part has a role which contributes to the functioning of the whole.

- Functionalism: Understanding any part of society, e.g. family or school, the part must be examined in relation to the society as a whole. (Wardhaugh, 2010)

- Functionalist's question: what is the contribution of a part of society, e.g. family, to the maintenance of the social system as a whole?

Functionalism

Write down a range of 'norms' and 'values' in British society and/or your home society & examples of cultural dissonance.

i.
ii.
iii.
iv.
vi.

Functionalism: norms and values

- Norms: 'a specific guide to action which defines acceptable and appropriate behaviour in particular situations' (Haralambos and Holborn 1991: 5)

- Examples: dress codes at school, at home and at a party.

- Laws for some norms: e.g. a law forbidding nude bathing.

- Values: what is good, desirable and of lasting worth, e.g. the value placed on human life → this value determines norms of behaviour (standards of hygiene, settling of disputes, work-safety regulations).

- Basic assumption: It is necessary for an ordered and stable society to share norms and common values. (implicit in sociolinguistic research)

+ Functionalism: Status & role

- Status: social positions that society assigns to its members
  i. 'ascribed' – determined by birth (e.g. sex, birth order in family, aristocratic title)
  ii. 'achieved' – through personal development (e.g. marriage status, degree title)

- Role: group of norms that define how a person with a particular status is expected to behave; prescribes and describes behaviour (even linguistic behaviour).

- Social roles organise and regulate behaviour, e.g. husband, mother, student, friend, patient, teacher, poet.

- In any one day we all take on different social roles.

- Activity: Application of Functionalist Theory to Linguistic Data – consider the next slide….

  i. What are the roles of the two speakers in the two extracts?

  ii. Is their status ascribed or achieved?

  iii. How does the language used by the interactants reflect the roles of the speakers?

  iv. What do you consider to be the *norms* and *values* of this speech event?

Activity

Extract 1:

Physician: You can drop your trousers, fact, why don't you just take them off. (.6)

Patient: ((leans forward on the examining table, looking at the physician))

Physician: Take your trousers off

Extract 2:

Physician: Okay so: what do you think, maybe we'd just take the top of your-your dress off?

+ 'Language'/'speech' community

- Language community - speakers of the same language

- Speech community - group sharing same linguistic competence &/or behaviour

´Each individual creates the systems for his verbal behaviour so that they shall resemble those of the group or groups with which from time to time he may wish to be identified, to the extent that:
a. he can identify the groups,
b. he has both opportunity and ability to observe and analyse their behavioural systems,
c. his motivation is sufficiently strong to impel him to choose, and to adapt his behaviour accordingly.´ Le Page (1968)

(See Hudson 1993:21ff for review of different definitions of the term)

'‘Language’/’speech’ community

- Linguistic repertoire of a speech community: linguistic varieties used, e.g. dialects, styles, accents

Relationship between language & society – views of social scientists

- There is no relationship between social structure & linguistic behaviour.

- Society and linguistic behaviour may influence one another:
  - Social structure may determine linguistic behaviour and structure

  - Linguistic structure &/or behaviour may influence social structure.

Relations between language and society

- **Social structure influences or determines linguistic structure**

- 'language is indexical of one's social class, status, region of origin, gender, age group' (Mesthrie et al. 2005: 6)

- Note: an index is a logical relation between sign and object (such as cause and effect), e.g. a weathercock, which stands for the wind but which is directly influenced by the wind direction. (Noth 1990 cited in Mesthrie et al. 2005: 2)

- indexical aspect of language: use of particular features of speech (including accent) associated with an individual's social group (or background)

- Variation between different social classes, age groups

Relations between language and society

Linguistic structure &/or behaviour influences social structure (Sapir-Whorf hypothesis/structuralism)

■ Language does not just reflect social structures & events but constructs them. It 'connotes' them.

■ 'Sapir-Whorf' hypothesis – an individual's perception of their environment may be conditioned by their language; we perceive the world according to the language we speak; the way we think is influenced by the language we speak.
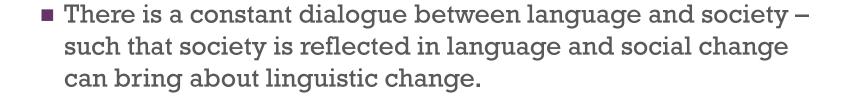
Relations between language and society

Linguistic structure &/or behaviour influences social structure (Sapir-Whorf hypothesis/structuralism)

- 'Sapir–Whorf' hypothesis: relevant to sociolinguistic debates; 'politically correct language', e.g. racism, sexism and discrimination against the aged, minorities

- Would peoples' perceptions be different if particular words did not exist in English?

- Using new terms will change societal attitudes for the better: Whorfian view of the relation between language and thought.

  e.g. Attempts by feminist movement to alter sexist language – air hostess (cabin crew); fireman (fire-fighter); nurse (male nurse)

Language & society are interconnected (Post-structuralism)

- There is a constant dialogue between language and society – such that society is reflected in language and social change can bring about linguistic change.

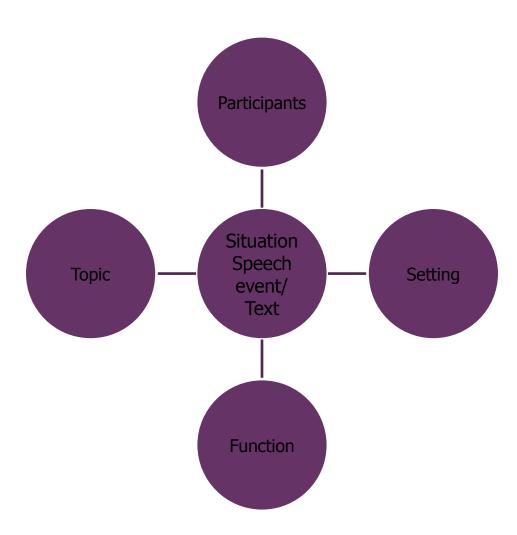- E.g. Titles indicating marital status in the UK – Miss/Master; Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms

How language varies & changes:

- *Diachronically* – historically over time – from decade to decade; generation to generation; century to century

- *Synchronically* –
  a) geographically – from region to region
  b) socially – from one social grouping to another

Social Factors affecting language performance

Participants

Topic

Situation Speech event/ Text

Setting

Function

+Social dimensions/scales (Holmes 2001: 9ff)

■ **Social distance** – the relationships between participants

The solidarity-social distance scale

Intimate   Distant

High solidarity   Low solidarity

■ **Status scale**
            Superior High status

            Subordinate   Low status

■ **The formality scale**
            Formal   High formality

            Informal   Low formality

■ **The referential and affective function scales**
High information content -----------REFERENTIAL------------Low information content

Low affective content -----------AFFECTIVE------------High affective content

Referential or Affective?

■ What is the function of the utterance in these contexts – does it convey primarily referential or affective meaning?

1. Leaning over the garden hedge to neighbour:
'Hey Bill, weather's not too good today'

2. '..and your 'A' Level results are:
English A, French B and Sociology C'

Social (dependent) variables

- **Age**
  (sociolinguistic investigations usually determine age categories in order to establish if there is a correlation between the 'dependent variable' (age) and a linguistic form, e.g. 0-12 years; 13-18; 19-30; 31-45; 46-65; 65+)

- **Educational status** (primary/secondary school; tertiary education)

- **Gender** (male or female)

- **Ethnicity**

- **Social class** (variously determined – traditionally according to upper/middle/working – now in terms of professional or EU scales)

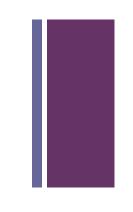| SITUATIONAL FACTORS	
Participants/interlocutors	
Setting	
Topic	
Function	
SOCIAL DIMENSIONS	
Solidarity/distance	
Status: high/low	
Formality/informality	
Referential/affective	
SOCIAL VARIABLES	
Gender	
Age	
Ethnicity	
Class	

+ Summary

- The history of sociolinguistics;

- Relationship between language & society;

- How social theory (e.g. functionalism) influences the study of variation in language use;

- Considered some social factors/dimensions that influence language performance.

CONCEPTS INTRODUCED

- Code

- Communicative competence

- Co-variation

- Diachronic/synchronic

- Dialect

- Functionalism

- Language/speech community

- Linguistic competence/performance

- Linguistic repertoire

- Participant/interlocutor

- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

- Social dimensions/scales

- Social identity/role/status

- Structuralism/post-structuralism

- Variable/Variety/Variation

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