# Chapter 5 Sociolinguistic perspectives of SLA

*At present, SLA could probably benefit from an enhanced sense of the empirical world's complex socio-cultural diversity.*

Rampton, 1995: 294

1. Introduction
- We review aspects of the relationship between socio-linguistics and SLL theory.
- Sociolinguistics: the study of language in use

Difference from other theorizing about SLL
- Other theorizing about SLL has largely concentrated on <u>modeling the development of language within the individual learner,</u> in response to an environment defined fairly narrowly as a source of linguistic information.

Main topics:
- Variability in SL use
- SL socialization
- Communities of practice and situated SLL
- SLL and the (re)construction of identity
- Affect and emotion in SLL

2. Variability in second language use
2.1 Introduction

One major theme: socially patterned variation in language use

"*sociolinguists are interested in explaining why we speak differently in different social contexts*" (Holmes, 2001)

Topics covered
• A wide range of factors that have been invoked to explain patterns of interlanguage variability,
• and highlight the extent to which these originate in sociolinguistic theory
• show how qualitative research methods developed by sociolinguists have been used to study these patterns
• assess how far interlanguage variability can be attributed to socially motivated choices by second language learners

Definition of VARIABILITY
• SL learners commonly produce different versions of particular constructions, more or less close to the target language form, within a short time span.
• Although one pattern was common, two patterns were clearly in use simultaneously, by single learner, over an extended period of time.

◆ Debated topics in variability

1) Variability leads to problems in the notion of "*acquisition*":
→is a target language form to be counted as "acquired", on the first occasion when a learner is observed to use it without immediate prompting or suppliance by an interlocutor?
→OR, must we wait to accept that it has been fully 'acquired', until the learner is producing the form in 90% or more of expected contexts?

2) why variability is such a striking and distinctive feature of second language use?
Two set of causes (Romaine, 2003)
--- internal: a mixed grouping of linguistic and sociolinguistic elements
---external: entirely sociolinguistic in origin

2.2 Explanations for internal variability

◆ Linguistic markedness
SL learners will tend to produce more target-like performance for structures

that are 'unmarked' in linguistic terms, and will produce less target-like performance for 'marked' structures.

**Markedness** is a linguistic concept that developed out of the Prague School. A marked form is a non-basic or less natural form. An unmarked form is a basic, default form. For example, *lion* is the unmarked choice in English— it could refer to a male or female lion. But *lioness* is marked because it can only refer to females.

◆ Language change
Current variation in a given language may reflect ongoing processes of language change.
A 'wave' model of language change
A new language rule may be implemented initially only in a particular linguistic environment, and can then spread step by step to other environments.

◆ Universal developmental constraints
The possibility that second language interlanguage share characteristics with other 'simple' and rapid evolving linguistic systems, in particular contact languages such as pidgin.

Schumann 1978 made a more general claim:
'*pidginization may be a universal first stage in second language acquisition*'

◆ L1 transfer
Studies of the acquisition of *definite article* by learners from different first language backgrounds

2.3 Explanation for external variability
◆ Style and task-based variation
In first language
FL speakers vary their language use in regular ways, dependent on style, task, and interlocutor.

In second language
Similarly, SL learners control a number of varieties of SL, ranging from a more pidgin-like style used in informal and unmonitored speech, to more target-like 'careful style' used in tasks with a focus on form. (Tarone, 1988)

◆ Gender-based variation
Sociolinguistic studies of native varieties

→Women have preference for a more conservative or high prestige speech styles, as compared with men.

Romaine (2003) suggested that there is little evidence for this types of social variability in second language speech.

<u>Beyond Gender focus</u>
Some studies have shown that change of interlocutor may also have an effect on SL speech style.

Young (1991): the identity of the interlocutor– Chinese or English- also has influenced the likelihood that learners would mark or fail to mark English nouns as plural.

Rod Ellis' alternative typology for interlanguage variability
Different from Romaine's list in two ways (weakening the idea that sociolinguistic influences are central to second language variability)
1)  Ellis divided explanations of systematic variation into three, including 'psycholinguistic context', alongside the linguistic context and external or situational context (in Romaine's list).
2)  Inclusion of the category of **non-systematic variation (NSV-**by myself**)**
Ellis claimed <u>a positive psychological reason </u>for the existence of NSV or free variation
Learners experience an expressive need for greater variety in their interlanguage. →This need leads them to learn new forms piecemeal and to use them as alternative expression for existing form-meaning combinations. →Once the items are being used in free variation, they are then available for subsequent integration into the interlanguage system, and will also eventually acquire differentiated social or pragmatic functions.

Summary:
The overall significance of sociolinguistic factor is not clear.


2.4 Quantifying second language variability

Origin of this approach
The quantitative approach to the description of variation in interlanguage use was originally developed within mainstream sociolinguistics to study first language variation

Pioneer in this approach
William Labov 1970

Methodology and findings:
Labov and his followers <u>systematically recorded first language speech samples from people representing different social groups, in a variety of situations.</u>

<u>They have shown that the relative frequencies of use for more positively and negatively esteemed variants can be correlated with factors such as the immediate linguistic context, the speaker's social class, age and gender, and the formality or informality of the speech setting.</u>

Analysis tool: VARBRUL

In linguistics, **variable rules analysis** is a set of statistical analysis methods commonly used in sociolinguistics and historical linguistics to describe patterns of variation between alternative forms in language use. It is also sometimes known as **Varbrul analysis**, after the name of a software package dedicated to carrying out the relevant statistical computations (*Varbrul*, from "**var**i**a**b**le rul**e".) The method goes back to a theoretical approach developed by the sociolinguist William Labov in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and its mathematical implementation was developed by Henrietta Cedergren and David Sankoff in 1974.


2.5 Acquiring sociolinguistic variation in interlanguage

Rehner et al (2003)
Aims to study the acquisition by SL French learners in an immersion setting of a 'complete repertoire of variants and of their linguistic and extra-linguistic constraints'
Three types of variant:
1) Vernacular
2) Mildly marked
3) Formal

Findings:
1. Immersion students rarely or never use vernacular variants
2. They do make use of mildly marked variants, though at lower frequency than native speakers.

Conclusion:
This study suggests that even students who encounter the second language mainly in school are acquiring a repertoire of variants, including some awareness of their social meaning.

SUMMARY:
- Complex nature of SL variability
- It is clear that sociolinguistic factors play a role, although probably outweighed in importance by linguistic factors.
- There is little hard evidence that beginning SL learners control stylistic variation.
- It is clear that more advanced learners who engage actively with FL users move rapidly towards commonly norms of informal usage..

3.  Second language socialization
Language socialization:
Language socialization can be broadly defined as "<u>an investigation of how language both presupposes and creates anew, social relations in cultural context</u>".

Origin of language socialization:
It is rooted in anthropological linguistics, and centers on ethnographic studies of children learning to talk (and to read and write) their first language, in non-Western, non-urban societies.

3.1 Developmental links between first language and culture
Basic assumption:
Language and culture are not separable, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other.

Ochs and Schieffelin (1995) point out
Socialization perspective differs from functionalist approaches to grammar development

Functionalist approaches concentrate on studying the local, moment-to-moment performance of speech acts, or creation of information structure, and their influence on the selection and learning of isolated elements of the language system.

A language socialization perspective aims to take systematic account of the wider frameworks and socially recognized situations within which speech acts are performed.

In summary, a language socialization perspective predicts that there will be a structured strategic relationship between language development and 'culturally organized situations of use'.

•   Follow-up studies
Ochs and Schieffelin 1984 & 1995
Examine talk to children and by children in a variety of different societies
Show that these practices are themselves culturally organized,

Ochs and Schieffelin 1995
Show that their grammar choices are also linked to their social and gender role.

3.2 Second language socialization

First SL researcher to use the language socialization perspective: Poole

Poole (1992)
Conducted a ethnographic study of adult English SL classrooms
Claimed that 'a teacher's language behavior is culturally motivated to an extent not generally acknowledged in most L2 literature'

e.g. teachers scaffolded their learners extensively, and led and directed whole class tasks as group activities. However, in the closing stage of these same tasks, the teachers praised the students as if they alone had accomplished them. This was reflected in teachers' use of pronouns. Teachers introduced the task with "Describe the picture and see if *we* can make a story out of it". However, in the end of that same task, the teacher praised the class "Good work you guys*! you-you* did a good job. I am impressed."

<u>This reflects a deep-saved cultural norm concerned with the attribution of success to individuals rather than groups.</u>

Follow-up studies: classroom-based work using a language socialization perspective
• Focused on young children who are learning a new language in a primary school context

Pallotti 2001
Traced how a five-year-old Moroccan girl, Fatma, developed as a conversational participant over a period over a period of eight months in an Italian nursery school.

Pollatti showed
• Fatma's main early strategy was to repeat the utterances of others, or parts of them.
• In the beginning, she simply joined in choral performances of activities like greeting or requesting.
• She began to make individual conversational contributions by appropriating words and phrases already produced by others, but adding minimal new elements, such as a negative expression.

Other studies showed:
Routines and repetition are prominent.

Limitations:
• Most SL research from a language socialization perspective uses ethnographic methods of inquiry and relatively small scale.

- Language socialization researchers have concentrated too one-sidedly on language use, and need to pay more systematic attention to the cognitive dimensions of linguistic and cultural development.

**Ethnography** is a methodological strategy used to provide descriptions of human societies, which as a methodology does not prescribe any particular method (e.g. observation, interview, questionnaire), but instead prescribes the nature of the study (i.e. to describe people through writing). In the biological sciences, this type of study might be called a "field study" or a "case report," both of which are used as common synonyms for "ethnography".

When the method is borrowed and applied in educational, in our case, language education, research, <u>it basically refers to detailed careful day-to-day, movement-by-movement observation and recording of language learners or teachers activities, and the analysis done accordingly.</u>

3.3 Empirical studies of SL learning as a situated social practice

The ideas of socially situated learning which takes place through participation in the activities of one or more communities of practice, has been used to study second language development among both children and adults.

One obvious application is to view the classroom as a community of practice.

3.3.1   Power relations and opportunities for SL learning

Norton (2000)

European Science Foundation study of adult migrants leaning a range of second languages informally in European settings

Losey (1995) classroom-based example

Examine the classroom roles of different ethnic and gender groups

3.4 SL learning and the (re)construction of identity

3.4.1   introduction

Concept of *social identity*

Borrrowed from social psychology

Jajfel (1974)

"that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group, together with the emotional significance attached to that membership"

Criticism:
1) too static
2) too focused on the individual

Norton aimed to develop a more dynamic view of identity
"… *to reference how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future.*"


3.4.2   Adult transformations of identity
Norton's longtitudinal study explored changes in the participants' social identity over time, and in particular, their struggles to achieve the right to speak in SL setting.
Self-report

European Science Foundation
pay attention to learner face and self-esteem
and how they may be threatened or consolidated by attempts to negotiated understanding.

In face-threatening situations, SL speakers may use a range of strategies.
One extreme: **resistance**, more or less complete withdrawal from SL interaction, and reassertion of the speaker's first language identity, by switching to monolingual first language use

The other extreme: work hard during second language interactions to assert a positive, native-speaker-like identity, by indicating explicitly that they had understood, or using excuse formulae when they had to interrupt to clarify meaning.


3.4.3   Adolescents and SL identities
McKay and Wong (1996)
Studied a group of chinese first language immigrant adolescents attending high school in the USA, many of whom were "caught in the [conflicting] demands made by **multiple discourses** in their environment"
• Colonialist and racialized discourse: which positioned immigrants as deficient and backward
• 'model minority' discourse: which celebrated the economic success of Asian Americans
• Chinese cultral-nationalist discourse: which define 'being Chinese'
• Social and academic school discourse
• Gender discourse

Findings:

The individual students 'manage' their identities differently in this complex environment, with differential consequences for their ambitions and success in learning english oral and literacy skills.

Lam (2000)

Illustrated the relationship between identity construction and SL development

### 3.4.4 Autobiographical narrative

Pavlenko (1998)

- Analyzed another kind of data in order to explore <u>relationships between SLL and identity formation on a more strategic level.</u>
- Methodology: studied autobiographical narratives produced by literary figures who successfully learnt a language after puberty and became writers in that language.
- Findings: "language learning in immigration" involves a first stage of **continuous losses** (rather than immediate acquisition), and only later a stage of **gains and (re)construction.**

Pavlenko (2001)

- Explored the <u>transformation among women second language english learners of their gendered identities and subject positions, as documented in a larger corpus of autobiographical narratives.</u>
- <u>Fidnings: she identifies a range of spaces as central to the (re)negotiation of gendered identities: educational sites, intimate relationships, friendships, parent-child realtionship and workplaces.</u>
- <u>Conclusion: she claimed that women SL users in this corpus chose or accepted SL english as "the language that gives them enough freedom to be the kind of woemn they would like to be", perhaps because of the positive associations between american english and feminist discourses.</u>

<u>Ohara (2001)</u>

- Documented ambivalence with which English FL learners of Japanese as a SL regard Japanese "feminine" identity, and show how they resist features of spoken Japanese, such as a raised pitched level, which are associated with being "polite, cute, gentle, weak, and modest"

### 3.5 Affect and investment in SLL

- What has been done

Differing degrees of learner success by appealing to factors, such as instrumental or integrative motivation, which are assumed to be relatively

fixed and stable.

However, other researches suggested that learner's attitudes and feelings about SLL may be <u>much more dynamic and negotiable.</u>

- What will be in this section?
  1) Sociolinguistic discussions of **the role of affect and language attitudes** in promoting or inhibiting learning success,
  2) introducing the sociolinguistic concept of **'investment'** as an alternative to traditional social psychological concept of motivation

Krashen **affective filter**
Tries to deal with the impact of attitudes and emotion on learning effectiveness
Limitations: insufficiently flexible and asocial.

Rampton (2002)
Observed the foreign language German lessons on offer to a group of adolescents at a multi-ethnic London secondary school.

Norton (2000)
Showed that Learners' motivation to succeed in SLL, and the amount of effort (investment) is closely related to the social identities they were aiming to construct over time.

Heller (1999)
Compared the social motivations for learning French of local white students with those of students of migrant background.

African students:
1) held ambivalent views towards both French and english, as language of colonialism, and rejected them as languages of personal cultural significance.
2) nonetheless, they saw excellent mastery of the standard varieties of both languages as central to their individual economic success, as skilled multilingual individuals.

A white female student (whose dominant language is English)
1) is pleased to have studied through French, as part of her family identity
2) ambitions for French literacy are self-limiting, as she does not see herself needing or using French in her future career.

4. Evaluation: the scope and achievement of sociolinguistic enquiry

4.1 Sociolinguistic perspectives on interlanguage and interlanguage communication
- The ethnographers of SL communication explore complete speech events in a much more holistic way.
- They take a multi-level view of conversational interaction;
- They are concerned with the relationships between linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of communication, and with the development of pragmatic and discourse competence appropriate to particular identities and communities of practice, rather than centering on the linguistic aspect per se.

4.2 soicolinguistic perspectives on language learning and development
1) sociolinguistically oriented research has provided rich description of the **context for language learning, and the speech events through which it is presumed to take place.**
"learning is a collaborative affair, and language knowledge is socially constucted through interaction."

2) current ethnographies of SL communication and SL socialization offer a great deal of evidence about **how the learning context, and the learner's evolving style of engagement with it, may affect the rate of SLL.**
Patterning of learning opportunities, through communities of practice with structured and sometimes unequal power relationships, is invoked to explain learners' differential success even where motivation is high.

4.3 Sociolinguistic accounts of the SL learner
1) SL ethnographers take a **more rounded view of the learner as a social being.** Thus, dimensions like gender and ethnicity are seen as significant for language learning success.
2) Emphasis on the dynamic and alterable nature of learners' identity and engagement with the task of SLL.
3) Self-esteem, motivation are believed to be both constructed and reconstructed in the course of SL interaction, with significant consequences for the rate of learning and ultimate level of success.
4) Alongside rich characterization of the **learning context,** the importance attributed to **agency and investment** is one of the most distinctive current themes offered by sociolingusitic perspective on SLL.