

Module: Sociolinguistics

Lecture 01: Introduction to Sociolinguistics

“Once you open your mouth, you are placed.”

When we study **language** in relation to **society**, it is called ***sociolinguistics***.

1- What is Sociolinguistics:

In general terms, sociolinguistics may be defined as the study of language in relation to society. It studies the relationship between language and society, between the uses of language and the social structures in which the language users live. It has become a thriving area within linguistics since 1960s, and the father of sociolinguistics is claimed to be **William Labov**.

William Labov, a professor in the linguistics department of the University of Pennsylvania. He is widely regarded as the founder of the discipline of variationist sociolinguistics and pursues research in sociolinguistics, language change, and dialectology.

Sociolinguistics is a term including the aspects of linguistics applied toward the connections between language and society, and the way we use it in different social situations. It ranges from the study of the wide variety of dialects across a given region down to the analysis between the way men and women speak to one another. Sociolinguistics often shows us the humorous realities of human speech and how a dialect of a given language can often describe the age, sex, and social class of the speaker; it codes **the social function of a language**.

Often **culture** presupposes **society** and in turn society is dependent on culture. Hence, **Sociolinguistics** can be defined as the study of **the linguistic identity** of social groups, social attitudes to language, standard and non-standard forms of language, the patterns and needs of national language use, social varieties and levels of language, the social basis of multilingualism, and so on.

Sociolinguistics studies issues like accents, dialects, language change, age, gender, ethnicity, social context, pidgins and creoles, code-switching and code-mixing etc.

2- Sociolinguistics and Sociology of Language:

The different orientations of sociolinguistic research have traditionally been subsumed under two umbrella terms: '**Sociolinguistics**' and '**The sociology of language**'. In this distinction, **sociolinguistics** is concerned with investigating the relationships between language and society with the goal to understand more thoroughly the structure of language and how languages function in communication. The equivalent goal in **the sociology of language** is to discover how social structure can be better understood through the study of language, e.g. how certain linguistic features serve to characterize particular social arrangements. Therefore, both sociolinguistics and the sociology of language require a systematic study of language and society.

In brief, sociolinguistic tends to put emphasis on language in social context whereas the sociology of language emphasizes the social interpretation of language.

3- Some Useful Definitions:

- ✓ **Society:** a society is a grouping of individuals, which is characterized by common interests and may have distinctive culture and institutions. In a society, members can be from a different ethnic group. A 'society' may refer to a particular people, such as the Nuer (**The Nuer are a confederation of tribes located in Southern and Western Ethiopia. Collectively, the Nuer form one of the largest ethnic groups in East Africa. They are a pastoral people who rely on cattle for almost every aspect of their daily lives**) to nation state such as Switzerland, or to a broader cultural group, such as a Western society. Society can also refer to an organized group of people associated together for religious, cultural, scientific, political, patriotic, or other purposes.

- ✓ **Social Class:** Anthropologists, historians and sociologists identify class as universal, although what determines class varies widely from one society to another. Even within a society, different people or groups may have very different ideas about what makes one “high” or “low” in the hierarchy. The most basic class distinction between the two groups is between the powerful and the powerless. Social classes with more power usually subordinate classes with less power, while attempting to cement their own power positions in society. Social classes with a great deal of power are usually viewed as elites, at least within their own societies. Accordingly, **Bernstein** believes that there is a direct and reciprocal relationship between a particular kind of social structure, in both its establishment and its maintenance, and the way people in that social structure use language. Moreover, this relationship is a continuing one in that it is handed down from generation to generation.

- ✓ **Speech Community:** is a concept in sociolinguistics that describes a more or less discrete group of people who use language in a unique and mutually accepted way among themselves. It is defined as ‘all the people who use a given language (or dialect) (**Lyons 1970**). What makes a particular group of people speak a particular dialect has to do with a number of factors which may play a more or less significant role in any particular case. These include socio-economic status, ethnicity, sex, and geographical location. Linguists working on language variation often characterize speech communities in terms of extra-linguistic factors, i.e. along ethnic or geographical lines. **Gumperz (1962)** refers to it as ‘**linguistic community**’ and argues that it is "a social group which may be either mono-lingual or multilingual, held together by frequency of social interaction patterns and set off from the surrounding areas by weaknesses in the lines of communication." Linguistic communities "may consist of small groups bound together by face-to-face contact or may cover large regions, depending on the level of abstraction we wish to achieve." A purely social concept. Moreover, speech communities can also be members of a profession with a specialized jargon, distinct social groups like high school students. In addition, online and other mediated communities, such as many internet forums, often constitute speech communities. Members of speech communities will often develop slang or jargon to serve the group’s special purposes and priorities.

4- THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY :

There is a variety of possible relationships between language and society.

- 1- One is that social structure may either influence and determine linguistic structure/ or behaviour. e.g. the age-grading phenomenon, whereby young children speak differently from other children and , in turn, children speak differently from mature adults; varieties of language may also reflect regional, social or ethnic origin and possible even sex of people; 'power' may also explain much of linguistic behaviour.
- 2- Another possible relationship is that the influence is bi-directional: language and society may influence each other. This influence is considered to be dialectical in nature, i.e. that 'speech behaviour and social behaviour are in a state of constant interaction' and that 'material living conditions' are an important factor in the relationship.

In fact, there are different ways that society can impinge on language which makes the field of sociolinguistic reference extremely broad. Studies of the various ways in which social structure and linguistic structure come together include personal, stylistic, social, sociocultural and sociological aspects. However, sociolinguistics should not be viewed as a mechanical amalgamation of standard linguistics and standard sociology. **Del Hymes** has pointed out that '**specific points of connection between language and society must be discovered**' , and these must be related within theories that throw light on how linguistic and social structures interact. Or, as **Gumperz (1971)** has observed, '**sociolinguistics is an attempt to find correlations between social structure and linguistic structure and to observe any changes that occur**'. Social structure itself may be measured by reference to such factors as social class and educational background; we can then attempt to relate verbal behaviour and performance to these factors.

5- What does Sociolinguistics deal with?

The scope of sociolinguistic research is extremely broad. Here are some issues that form the core of sociolinguistics studies and tend to attract a lot of interest.

Language Use in Social Context

- Social Practices and Language Use
- Social Relations and Language Use
- Relationship between the Social Structure and Language

Language Variation

- Style and Register
- Social and Regional Variation
- According to Users: Class, gender, age, ethnicity

Language Maintenance and Change

- Bilingualism
- Multilingualism
- Code-choice and Code-switching
- Drivers of Change
- Language Maintenance

End of Lecture One!