Lecture 03: Variationist Sociolinguistics

1- Language variation: Variationist Sociolinguistics:

Some scholars tend to consider language variation as a distinct research field commonly referred to as **variationist sociolinguistics**. **Variationist sociolinguistics (VS)** is the study of the interplay between *variation*, *social meaning* and the *evolution* and *development* of the linguistic system itself. Here is how **Guy (1993:223)** describes the 'duality of focus' of VS:

"*One of the attractions – and one of the challenges – of dialect research is the Janus-like point-of-view it takes on the problems of human language, looking one way at the organization of linguistic forms, while simultaneously gazing the other way of their social significan*ce."

Variationist sociolinguistics has evolved over the last nearly four decades as a discipline that integrates social and linguistic aspects of language. Perhaps the foremost motivation for the development of this approach was to present a model of language which could accommodate the paradoxes of language change.

Variationist sociolinguistics is most aptly described as "*the branch of linguistics which studies the foremost characteristics of language in balance with each other – linguistic structure and social structure; grammatical meaning and social meaning – those properties of language which require reference to both external (social) and internal (systemic) factors in their explanation*" (Tagliamonte 2006: 5).

2- Language Change:

Language is always in flux. The English language today is not the same as it was 100 years ago, or 400 years ago. Things have changed. For example, ain't used to be the normal way of doing negation in English, but now it is stigmatised. Another good example is not. It used to be placed after the verb, e.g. I know not. Now it is placed before the verb, along with a supporting word, do, as in I do not know. Double negation, e.g. I don't know nothing, is ill-

regarded in contemporary English. Not so in earlier times. Similarly, use of the ending -th for simple present was once the favoured form, e.g. doth, not do, and pre-verbal periphrastic do, e.g. I do know, and use of the comparative ending -er, e.g. honester, not more honest, used to be much more frequent. Such examples are easily found in historical corpora such as the Corpus of Early English correspondence.

3- Social Identity:

Language serves a critical purpose for its users that is just as important as the obvious one. Language is used for transmitting information from one person to another, but at the same time a speaker is using language to make statements about who she is, what her group loyalties are, how she perceives her relationship to her hearers, and what sort of speech event she considers herself to be engaged in. The only way all these things can be carried out at the same time is precisely because language varies. The choices speakers make among alternative linguistic means to communicate the same information often conveys important extralinguistic information. While you can inevitably identify a person's sex from a fragment of their speech, it is often nearly as easy to localise her age and sometimes even her socioeconomic class. Further, depending on one's familiarity with the variety, it can be relatively straightforward to identify nationality, locality, community, etc.

4- Type of inferences one can make on the basis of speech variation:

Ordinarily we simply take for granted the numerous ways we use language in our social interactions because they are so deeply embedded in our daily affairs. It is sometimes hard for people to understand that a brief telephone conversation could possibly be of interest as an object of serious linguistic study. It is also hard for them to understand how much we reveal about ourselves – our backgrounds, our predilections, our characters – in the simplest verbal exchange.

The best kind of conversational exchange for reflecting upon is one in which the information is almost exclusively linguistic as when you overhear a conversation between strangers sitting behind you in a bus or when you receive a telephone call from a total stranger. On those occasions, you begin the exchange with the minimum of knowledge and presuppositions. Yet, after hearing only a few sentences, you find yourself in possession of a great deal of information of various kinds about people whom you have never seen.

The kind of inferences you tacitly make fit roughly into five general categories, namely: **personal, stylistic, social, sociocultural and sociological.**

5- Social scales and dimensions:

➢ **A social distance scale** concerned with participant relationships.

➢ **A status scale** concerned with participant relationship in terms of social status and position in society

➢ **A formality scale** relating to the setting or type of interaction

➢ **Two referential and affective function** scales relating to the purposes or topic of interaction.

a. **The social distance scale** is used to measure the level of solidarity amongst participants. **Solidarity** is the dimension that accounts for the level of co-operation and social harmony amongst speakers. Or, put simply, it shows how well interlocutors know and understand each other.

b. **The status scale** is used when such social factors as "**social status**" and **"power"** are involved. Speakers of high social standing are commonly entitled to more **power** in the conversation and will be positioned on the high "**superior**" end of the scale. Conversely, speakers of low social standing (due to economic status, lack of education, etc.) will be positioned at the bottom ("subordinate") end of the scale.

c. **The formality scale** refers to the **setting,** the **topic or key** of the conversation**.** The **social distance** between interlocutors may also exert some influence on the formality of the interaction. It is also a vertical scale which implies that there is some *power* involved.

d. The last two scales are used to measure the ration between *information content* and speakers' *attitudes or emotions*. In general, the more referentially oriented an interaction is, the less it tends to express the feelings of the speaker. Conversely, the higher the affective content (attitudes, emotions) the lower the information content of the utterance. Therefore, the referential and affective scales are said to be inversely proportional.

End of Lecture Three!