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LECTURE 1

1. What does our speech reveal about us?

Sociolinguistics is the study of language in relation to human society together with certain aspects of its cultural component¹. This is carried out in terms of group membership based on such factors as region, race, ethnic origin, social class, age and gender.

Sociolinguists are interested in such factors because they result in linguistic variation and determine what “we reveal about ourselves – our backgrounds, our predilections, our characters – in the simplest verbal exchange”². The things that people find out about us as we communicate with them, in social interactions, are, according to Chambers (1995:2), of five general categories:

- Personal.
- Stylistic.
- Social
- Sociocultural
- Sociological qualities.

1. **Culture** is “the total set of beliefs, attitudes, customs, behavior, social habits, etc. of the members of a particular society” – Richards et al. 1985:70.
2. **Our predilections** are our preferences or special liking

1. Personal Qualities

Voice quality and speaking ability are two of the personal qualities that are easily inferred from our speech. Voice quality is determined by each individual's speech organs, and speaking ability is a result of the individual's linguistic experience. Likewise, Nasality or openness, being fluent or hesitant, articulate or vague. Judgment by you may be as that, the person who is fluent might be evasive, deceitful and the one who is articulative but hesitant will seem pensive and thoughtful. Observations about personal speech characteristics though of little interest to sociolinguist as being individualistic and idiosyncratic could be better integrated into sociolinguistic research.

Sapire made an attempt of how personal speech characteristics differ from society to society, or conversely how they maintain or remain constant across social or cultural boundaries, or how these varied personal characteristics are used by listener to form judgments about the speaker.

2. Stylistic qualities

The stylistic characteristics of our speech are partly determined by the relative formality of the interaction, which is influenced by the degree of formality between speakers (ranging between the casualness of long-time friends and the formality of unequal participants). The relative formality of the verbal exchange is also affected by the participant's relative ages and social ranks as well as the function of the interaction.

3. Social qualities

These are qualities that make up the social background that a speaker has in common with certain other people. Some of these qualities are: **social class, gender, and age**. The social class to which the speaker (male or female, young or old) belongs to is determined by his/her education, occupation, and economic status. Class, sex and age are the primary elements of social roles. In social class, the essential distinction is between non-manual and manual workers. The effect of occupational mobility blurs the class lines not only socially but also linguistically. In close-knit social clusters of the kind often found in manual workers communities, the degree to which individuals are integrated into their local networks may affect their uses of regional markers.

As for sex, the essential distinction separates sex roles; which are biological, and gender roles; which are sociological. In various communities, men or women divide the linguistic labor in different ways, in other communities not.

The relative ease with which listeners can estimate speaker's ages appears to be of non-idiosyncratic voice quality, changes that are a normal function of normal aging.

Linguistic differences between groups of people that differ from one another only in age can signal either a regular, maturational or more likely a linguistic change in progress in the community. Our speech also reveals sociocultural and sociological factors.

4. Sociocultural Qualities

The sociocultural characteristics of our speech consist of the topics we talk about and the way we talk about them.

In other words the topics we talk about are culturally determined. The following aspects are of interest in this regard:

1. **Phatic communion:** the use of language, not to obtain or give information, but to establish and strengthen social relationships, or what chambers (1995:8) describes as “the repertoire of speech events we use when we greet people, pass the time in brief encounters..., and take our leave of them”.³
2. **Conversational implicates:** meanings which are implied rather than stated explicitly; that is, whether requests, for instance, are made directly or are made indirectly by means of questions or statements. It has been found, in this respect, that “human societies differ in the extent to which they use indirectness as a communication strategy”.
3. **Conventions, or rules, for maintaining the conversational topic:** how topics are introduced, taken up, dropped, etc.
4. **Ways of assuming a turn as speaker:** how a speaker decides and shows that he/she wants to speak during a conversational interaction. A turn is whatever the speaker says at a time in the course of a conversation.
5. **Intimacy of disclosures:** the extent to which personal feelings and experiences can become a conversational topic, which is normally indicative of a very close relationship.
6. **Amount of overlapping or interrupting:** the extent to which speakers talk at the same time and the extent to which they stop each other from speaking in order to contribute to the conversation.

3. A repertoire is a store or stock of things that we regularly use.

5. Sociological Qualities

The sociological factors involved in communication reveal the social structure that underlines the linguistic structure used. Social structure is the structure of society, that is, established relations between social groups. Linguistic structure, on the other hand, is the structure of language, that is, the conventional units of language together with the conventional relations between them. Two of the relevant sociological matters are address forms and the use of a particular language in a multilingual society.

Address Forms are words used to address other people when we speak or write to them. Based on such social factors as the educational level, occupation, and economic status of the addressees, as well as their relationship with the addressors. Address forms serve to mark the social ranks of the participants, which are manifested in the level of formality observed. Forms of address include “the use of familiar and polite pronouns, terms of endearment (darling...), and the choice between first names, surnames, titles, nicknames, and other forms”.

A speaker’s choice may also be affected by his/her own social background.

Linguistically it is irrelevant to say (Mr. Jones) or as (Sam), yet sociologically, it can make an enormous difference.

Another sociological point of interest is the **use of a particular language in a multilingual society**, that is, when to use one language or another in order to gain and when to code-switch (i.e. shift from one language to another).

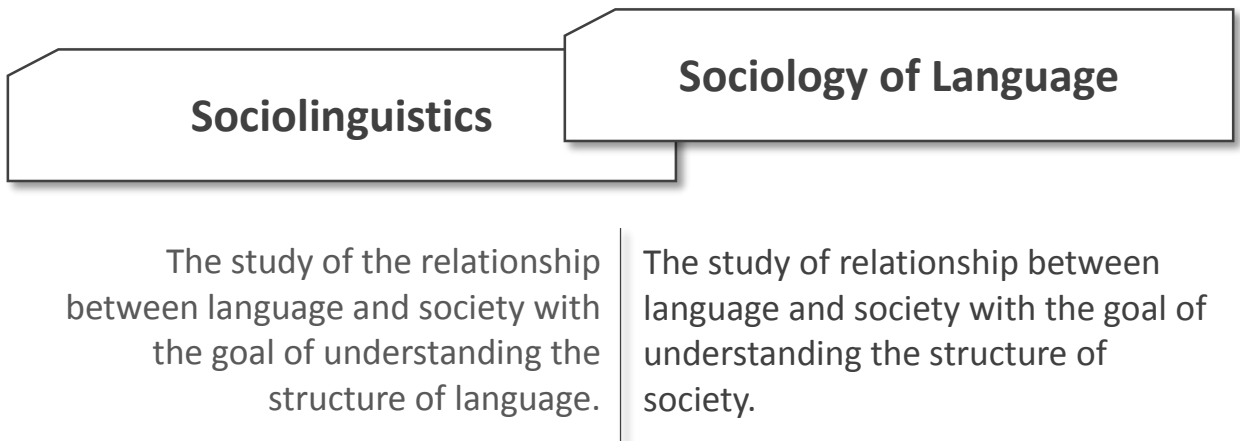
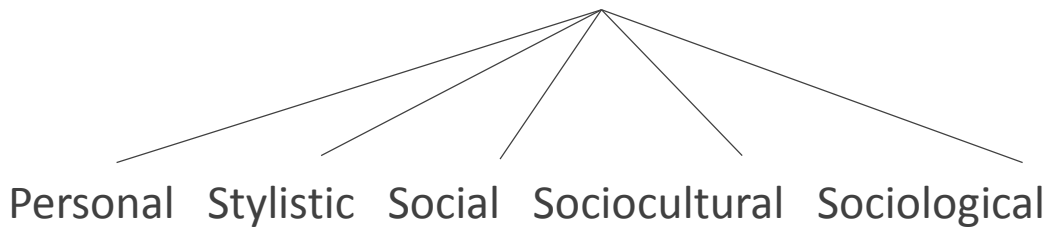
6. The scope of sociolinguistics:

Sociolinguistics can be said to be primarily concerned with how linguistic variation is determined by social and stylistic factors and, to a lesser degree, with the personal and sociocultural characteristics of speakers. This is the view that Wardhaugh (2002:10) expresses in this way:

Sociolinguistics is concerned with investigating the relationship between language and society with the goal being a better understanding of the structure of language and how languages function in communication; the equivalent goal in the sociology of language is trying to discover how social structure can better understood through the study of language.

Adopting the same conception of the scope of sociolinguistics chambers (1995: 11) diagrammatically presents Wardhaugh's understanding of the "complex role of language in society, and the division into overlapping domains of sociolinguistics and the sociology of language" as shown below:

Types of inference from speech acts



As the above diagram shows, sociolinguistics tries to understand language through the study of society. Thus, it can be said that the tasks that sociolinguistics has set for itself cannot be undertaken by, for example, transformational-generative grammarians and other “linguists [who] sit in their armchairs consulting their intuitions about language structure”⁵ (Trudgill and Cheshire 1998: v), that is, linguists who do not base their descriptions and analyses on the real use of language by real people in real communication situations.

5. An intuition is “any linguistic judgment made by a native speaker about grammatical facts of her/his language...” Trask 1993:146