Subject: Sociolinguistics

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Level: Master 1 (LC)

Scope of Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics encompasses a very broad area of research, which, as Meyerhoff (2006) puts it, "can be confusing if you are coming new to the field". Hence, it is important to start by clarifying what can be taken as sociolinguistic research. In clear contrast with other linguistic approaches (such as Psycholinguistics), the focus of Sociolinguistics is on language use, that is, on what can be said in a particular language, by whom, to whom, in whose presence, when and where, in what manner and under what social circumstances. For sociolinguists, the process of acquiring a language is not just a cognitive process involving the activation of a predisposition in the brain, but a social process as well. It is thus not enough to acknowledge language as a set of linguistic items. The focus lies on understanding the uses of language within a society. This implies studying the possible relationship between linguistic items and concepts such as identity, class, power, status, solidarity and gender*. Within Sociolinguistics, a distinction has sometimes been made between core Sociolinguistics and Sociology of Language. Though the distinction is not always clear-cut, Sociolinguistics is largely concerned with the study of the possible correlations between certain social attributes (e.g. class, sex, age) and certain language varieties or patterns of use in an attempt to understand how social structures influence the way people talk. Sociology of Language, on the other hand, focuses on issues such as how these social groups can be better understood through language, the attitudes behind the use and distribution of speech forms in society, the protection, replacement or change in languages and the interaction of different speech communities (Coulmas 1997: 2). There is also a methodological division between authors who believe sociolinguistic research should be limited to correlation studies, and authors claiming that the aim of Sociolinguistics should be not only to provide an account of how language is used in a given community but also to investigate its causes (Chambers 2003:226). This second perspective shows an underlying assumption of language use as an identity-creating practice, thereby stimulating studies into how power relations in society constrain linguistic expression as well as interpretation. It sees language as a system and focuses on the rules governing that system. As sociolinguistic variation is to be regarded as correlated with contextual elements rather than merely fortuitous, there are social and cultural dimensions to the language choices to be considered. Hence, the dynamics of discourse can be analysed to expose cultural conventions and individual strategies, relationships of power and solidarity, status and stigma or conflict and consensus. In this article, Sociolinguistics will be taken in the broader sense as encompassing both fields. Sociolinguistics is thus a vast field, operating as an umbrella for studies focusing on multiple variables with an impact on language use. Contrary to popular belief, it is by no means limited to regional and social dialectology and the study of language variation according to geographic areas and social groups – a line of inquiry that has in fact been criticised for being one-dimensional and unable to account for variables such as register that cut across dialect and social variation. Indeed, the concept of register and the study of language variation according to situation is another important area of study that has become very influential in other disciplines. Within register analysis, the model was proposed by Halliday & Hasan (1991) This model studies language as communication, assuming meaning in the speaker/writer's choices, which, in turn, are systematically

contextualised and interpreted within a broader sociocultural framework. Other areas of study within Sociolinguistics are language change, multilingualism, language interaction, language contact and language planning/policy. Regarding language change, sociolinguists focus on variation in time, on how a given change spreads internally within a language and possible correlations between that change and concepts such as prestige. But change can also happen through language contact with other languages and, in this respect, Sociolinguistics focuses on the outcomes for speakers and their languages when new languages are introduced into a speech community. This area of study develops concepts such as power, prestige and status, and considers different forms of interaction from colonisation to immigration. This is very much related to another area of study, multilingualism, concerned with variation and language use in communities with two or more languages and looking at how multilingual speakers choose which language to use on a given occasion. Another aspect of interest to sociolinguists is language interaction and how forms of language are used to communicative effect in particular cultural contexts. This directly challenges the one-directional assumption that context impacts on language in the sense that it is now accepted that in speaking in a particular way, speakers may help to construct contexts as well. Finally, another area that has attracted attention within Sociolinguistics since the 1960s is language planning, concerned with all conscious efforts aiming at changing the linguistic behaviour of a given community, such as the role of minority languages in education, the selection process of an official language, etc. Along with language planning we can find the concept of language policy, concerned with more general linguistic, political and social purposes behind the actual language planning process. The development of these concepts has only been possible because Sociolinguistics has been open to insights from other disciplines such as Pragmatics, Sociology and Ethnography. In this respect, it is important to mention the development of what Mesthrie et al. (2009) have called Critical Sociolinguistics, an umbrella term for what came to be known as Critical Linguistics and, more recently, Critical Discourse Analysis. With authors such as Fowler and Fairclough as their key proponents, this area of study is concerned with exploring how language creates, sustains and replicates fundamental inequalities and identity structures in society.