Master 2 (Didactics)

Sociolinguistics and Language Education

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Abstract

This chapter begins by distinguishing various meanings of the term *sociolinguistics*. It then traces early developments in the field of sociolinguistics, beginning with the work of geographical dialectologists and then moving to the seminal work of Hymes (on communicative competence. In J. B. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics*. London: Penguin, 1972) and Bernstein (*Class, codes and control.* Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1971). The author next describes three major strands of investigation in sociolinguistics: language variation, language contact, and language change. Work in the area of language variation is based largely on the groundbreaking

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work of William Labov, whose findings have been challenged by current research on language hybridity. Research in the area of language contact includes work on pidgins and creoles, as well as work on World Englishes. Finally, in reference to language change, the chapter highlights the manner in which the linguistic changes that are occurring today raise critical questions about the construct of a standard variety of a language. The paper ends with a summary of current work on language and globalization where there is far greater emphasis on the symbolic value of particular languages within the messy and complex exchanges of global interaction – exchanges where speakers come with different language resources, as well as different pragmatic norms. The final section discusses the pedagogical implications of the issues raised in the paper.

Keywords
English as a global language • Language change • Language standards • Language variation • Sociolinguistics

Introduction

Sociolinguistics is concerned with the relationship between language use and social variables. One of the major debates in the field of sociolinguistics is whether to take social or linguistic factors as primary in investigating this relationship. As evidence of this debate, Wardhaugh (1992) and others make a distinction between *sociolinguistics* and the *sociology of language*. Whereas sociolinguistics takes linguistic factors as primary in its investigations of language and society, the sociology of language investigates the manner in which social and political forces influence language use. Trauth and Kazzazi (1996) in the *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics* make a similar distinction, noting that sociolinguistics can have either a sociological or linguistic orientation. The dictionary, however, adds a third possibility, namely, an ethnomethodological orientation. Hence, three areas of sociolinguistic investigation are delineated:

> (a) A primarily sociologically oriented approach concerned predominately with the norms of language use (When and for what purpose does somebody speak what kind of language or what variety with whom?) (b) A primarily linguistically oriented approach that presumes linguistic systems to be in principle heterogeneous, though structured, when viewed within sociological parameters (c) An ethnomethodolically oriented approach with linguistic interaction as the focal point, which studies the ways in which members of a society create social reality and rule-ordered behaviour. (p. 439)

In this review, sociolinguistics will be viewed as encompassing all three areas listed above. The review will show how all three strands have contributed to a field of inquiry that has significant implications for language education.

Early Developments

Many contend that early work in sociolinguistics was sociologically uninformed, concentrating primarily on an analysis of language structure (Fishman 1968; LePage 1997). A major exception to this characterization occurred in 1968 with the publication of Fishman's (1968) seminal book, *Readings in the Sociology of Language*. In this collection of studies on the relationship of between language and society, Fishman (1968) argued for the benefit of a greater emphasis on the social aspects of language use. He maintained that it was only natural that, since society was broader than language, social structures should provide the primary focus of sociolinguistic studies. Ultimately, Fishman argued that sociologists and linguists would both gain from developing a robust interdisciplinary field. Sociologists could arrive at some reliable linguistic indicators of social class and demonstrate how the diversity inherent in language use is patterned. Linguists, on the other hand, might come to discover that what appears to be free variation in language use is in fact socially patterned.

One of Fishman's major criticisms of early fieldwork in linguistics was that it was devoid of a theoretical orientation. He questioned the value of linguistic fieldwork that provided an extensive inventory of the patterns of use of a single informant without any theoretical justification. His criticism was largely directed at early work in geographical dialectology which tended to investigate the language use of older uneducated informants in rural areas. LePage (1997) also criticized early work in dialectology, maintaining that it tended to assume a static social structure. In his view, early dialectologists mistakenly focused on finding reasons for language change in the language use of their rural informants rather than assuming that language diversity was the baseline.

The study of geographical dialectologists has a long history, beginning in the nineteenth century with historical-comparative linguistics. One of the earliest and most intensive investigations of geographical dialects in the United States was Kurath et al. (1939–1943), whose fieldwork resulted in a comprehensive linguistic atlas of New England. More recently, a comprehensive fieldwork project of American regional dialects led by Cassidy (1985) resulted in a *Dictionary of American Regional Dialects*. In both projects, a large number of fieldworkers were employed to interview individuals of various communities and age groups in order to map out specific features of dialect regions.

The belief that sociolinguistics should give greater emphasis to the social aspect of language use was shared by Hymes, who argued that researchers interested in describing how language is used need to consider the context in which particular interactions take place and how this context affects the interaction. Specifically, Hymes (1972) maintained that the following four questions must be raised in analyzing language use:

1. Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible
2. Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available

3. Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated
4. Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails [emphasis in original] (p. 281)

These questions have significant implications for language education since they suggest that language education should examine standards of correctness in relation to language use and address issues of language appropriateness.

A concern with the social context of language use was also evident in the controversial work of Bernstein (1971), who examined early language socialization. Based on his research in England, he maintained that particular family structures tend to foster a closed communication system that results in the development of a *restricted code* in which there is a great deal of assumed background knowledge. On the other hand, some family structures promote an open communication system that results in an *elaborated code* where the speaker assumes that the audience needs to be supplied with necessary background knowledge. Bernstein contended that children who have access to the latter code have greater chances of success in formal educational contexts.

The work of Fishman, Hymes, Bernstein, and others, which challenged investigations that assumed a static linguistic situation, was brought about to a large extent by an interest in urban rather than rural dialectology. Linguistic communities were viewed as heterogeneous with languages and language varieties coming into regular contact. Emphasis was now placed on linguistic diversity. The new emphasis on linguistic diversity resulted in investigations of language variation, language contact, and language change.

Major Contributions

Language Variation

One of the major contributors to modern sociolinguists is William Labov. Labov's work provided a significant shift in how sociolinguists approached linguistic variation. His MA thesis entitled, "The Social Motivation of a Sound Change," published in *Word* in 1963, was based on work he did in the resort area of Martha's Vineyard. In this study he demonstrated how linguistic variation served as a means for individuals to mark their identity as natives of the area as opposed to summer visitors. Labov's most important contribution came from his doctoral thesis, published in 1966 and titled *The Social Stratification of English in New York City.*

In this study, Labov worked with a random sample of New Yorkers from the Lower East Side stratified into four socioeconomic classes based on occupation, income, and education. He investigated to what extent variables like *ing* vary in how they are pronounced based on an individual's socioeconomic class. Using interview data, Labov mapped the percentage of time that speakers dropped their *gs* (using "in" rather than "ing") in casual speech, careful speech, and reading style. What he found

was a consistent pattern of the lower-working class using the reduced form more than the upper-middle class. However, like the upper-middle class, the lower-working class had a lower frequency in their use of the reduced form in the reading style than in the casual speech.

What was significant in Labov's study was that he drew on natural data to quantify the existence of particular linguistic variants among specific groups of individuals. He then used this information to write a variable rule that described general tendencies in the use of a particular variant like *ing*. The quantities he used were not based on individual use of a variant but rather on the mean score for a social group. His methodology was highly innovative in that he used naturalistic speech to make generalizations regarding linguistic variation. Even more importantly the generalizations he made from this data demonstrated the relative frequency of a particular linguistic feature rather than the mere presence or absence of this feature.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Labov's work in developing variable rules that characterize the use of a particular linguistic feature in a specific social group was applied to the Black community in the United States. In 1965, Labov with Cohen and Robins carried out a study for the US Office of Education and Welfare on the structure of English used among black American and Puerto Rican speakers in New York City. In a later study, Labov (1969) developed a variable deletion rule to account for the deletion of the copula (e.g., The man rich) among the speech of Harlem street gangs. An interest in delineating the features of a Black English Vernacular led to many investigations in the 1960s such as the studies undertaken by Stewart (1964) and Wolfram (1969). More recently, there has been a vigorous debate over the role that African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Ebonics should play in the schools, with some arguing that it should be recognized and promoted in its own right as a legitimate variety of English and others arguing that the role of the school should be to replace this variety of English with Standard American English (see Rickford 1996). There has also been continuing research on teachers' attitudes toward AAVE. (See, e.g., Blake and Cutler 2003; Denny 2012.)

Language Contact

Another area of sociolinguistics that has been investigated in recent years is language contact and the development of pidgins and creoles. Pidgins come into being through the interaction of individuals who have minimal needs to communicate with one another and no shared language. Typically they develop in coastal areas for trade or forced labor purposes. Because pidgins are used for limited communication between speakers, they typically have a simple vocabulary and uncomplicated morphological and syntactic structure. In general the language of the economically and politically more powerful group provides the lexicon (the superstrate language) and the less powerful (the substrate language) the syntactic and phonological structure. Technically, a *creole* is a pidgin that has native speakers, namely, children of pidgin speakers who grow up using the pidgin as their first language. Because the code is

now the only language the speaker has available, the lexicon expands and the syntactic structure becomes more complex.

One of the major pedagogical issues surrounding the use of pidgins and creoles is to what extent they should be used in a classroom. In some contexts creoles are used in initial literacy instruction under the assumption that early education is most successful if it is conducted in the child's first language. However, there is great resistance to this option, particularly when a standardized version of the superstrate language exists in the same region, as, it does, for example, in Hawaii. Often this resistance develops from negative attitudes toward the pidgin and creole rather than on any linguistic basis. In response to such negative attitudes, Hawaiian educators have been instrumental in undertaking a successful revitalization of Hawaiian creole (see Cowell 2012).

An interest in language contact has also led to investigations of the language use of bilingual individuals and communities. Ferguson (1959) coined the term *diglossia* to describe the situation of a community in which most of the population is bilingual and the two codes serve different purposes. The term was originally used by Ferguson to describe a context in which two varieties of the same language are used by people of that community for different purposes. Normally one variety, termed the *high or H variety*, is acquired in an educational context and used by the community in more formal domains such as in churches or universities. The other variety, termed the *low or L variety*, is acquired in the home and used in informal domains like the home or social center to communicate with family and friends. As examples of diglossia, Ferguson pointed to situations like the use of classical and colloquial Arabic in Egypt or the use of Standard German and Swiss German in Switzerland. Later, Fishman (1972) generalized the meaning of diglossia to include the use of two separate languages within one country in which one language is used primarily for formal purposes and the other for more informal purposes. The expansion of the meaning of the term made it applicable to countries in which English is one of the official languages of the country such as South Africa, Singapore, and India. In these countries, English often assumes the role of what Ferguson calls the high variety being used in formal contexts with the other languages of the country used in informal domains. The term has also been applied to countries like Peru where the indigenous language, Quechua, is used by many in informal contexts, while Spanish serves the functions of a high variety.

Investigations have also been undertaken on the code switching behavior of bilinguals. One of the main questions addressed in research on code switching is what leads a bilingual to shift from one language to another. In answer to this question, Blom and Gumperz (1972) posit two types of code switching. The first is *situational code switching* in which the speaker changes codes in response to a change in the situation such as a change in the setting or the speakers involved in the conversation. The second type is *metaphorical code switching* in which the shift in languages has a stylistic or textual function to mark a change in emphasis or tone. Some, like Poplack (1980) and Singh (1996), maintain that code switching is closely related to language proficiency. Singh, in fact, argues that this relationship can be

summarized in the following aphorism: “A strong bilingual switches only when he wants to and a weak one when he has to” (p. 73).

One of the most comprehensive theories of code switching is Myers-Scotton (1993). She explains code switching in terms of a theory of rights and obligations. She proposed a markedness model of code switching which assumes that speakers in a multilingual context have a sense of which code is the expected code to use in a particular situation. This is termed the *unmarked* code. However, speakers can also choose to use the *marked* code. Myers-Scotton suggests several reasons why a speaker might make this choice as, for example, to increase social distance, to avoid an overt display of ethnicity, or for an aesthetic effect. In multilingual communities in which English has an official status, English is often the unmarked code in formal educational contexts. When the other languages are used in the classroom, they are often the marked choice chosen to signal such things as anger or social intimacy.

Studies in language contact have several implications for the teaching and learning of another language. Research in creoles has demonstrated that such variants are highly patterned and inherently equal to other variants of a language. However, because they have less social prestige in contexts in which a more standardized version of the language exists, students will be at a disadvantage by not learning the prestige form.

Studies on code switching have illustrated the regularity of code switching behavior and the purposes that code switching can serve for bilinguals. Given the many contexts today where English is used as one of the additional languages within a country, more research is needed regarding how individuals make use of English in reference to the other languages they speak. Such research will be valuable in establishing classroom objectives that complement the students’ use of English within their own speech community. In addition, in classrooms in multilingual contexts where the teacher shares a first language with their students, teachers need to carefully consider how they can best make use of their students’ first language to further their competency in a target language. (For a discussion of translanguaging, see Garcia and Li Wei 2014.)

Language Change and Language Standards

One common effect of language contact is language change. In such cases the various languages used within a multilingual context may undergo phonological, lexical, and grammatical changes as bilinguals make use of two or more languages on a regular basis. This situation is occurring in many countries today where English has an official role in the society as in India or South Africa. It is also occurring in countries where English is widely studied and used such as in many Scandinavian countries.

Many studies have been undertaken to determine the types of grammatical changes that are occurring in various multilingual contexts in which English plays a significant role. (See, e.g., Kachru 2005.) Frequently researchers begin by

examining a written corpus of English of a particular multilingual context to determine what kinds of grammatical innovations exist and how acceptable these structures are to both native speakers of English and local speakers of English. In general, when investigations of language change use a written corpus of published English, only very minor grammatical differences are found. (See, e.g., Parasher 1994.)

Often the kinds of grammatical changes that occur tend to be minor differences such as variation in what is considered to be a countable noun (e.g., the standard use of *luggages* in the use of English in the Philippines and the use of *furnitures* in Nigeria) and the creation of new phrasal verbs (e.g., the use of *dismissing off* in the use of English in India and *discuss about* in Nigeria). In contexts in which such features become codified and recognized as standard within that social context, there arises what Kachru (1986) has termed a *nativized variety* of English.

What is perhaps most puzzling in the development of alternate grammatical standards in the use of English is that fact that whereas lexical innovation is often accepted as part of language change, this tolerance is generally not extended to grammatical innovation. In Widdowson's (1994) view, the reason for this lack of tolerance for grammatical variation is because grammar takes on another value, namely, that of expressing a social identity. Hence, when grammatical standards are challenged, they challenge the security of the community and institutions that support these standards.

Work in Progress: Language and Globalization

Rampton (1995, 1997) maintains that globalization, as well as late/post modernity, warrants a fresh look at the issues important to sociolinguistics and second language research. He contends that while current sociolinguistic research assumes that neither language nor societies are homogeneous, "when it meets diversity and variation, one of its strongest instincts is to root out what it supposes to be orderliness and uniformity beneath the surface, an orderliness laid down during early socialization" (Rampton 1997, p. 330).

Rampton believes that the time has come for sociolinguists to challenge the notion that societies are compact and systematic entities and instead to recognize the heterogeneity and fluidity of modern states. In keeping with much of the discourse of postmodernism, he argues persuasively that sociolinguistics should give more attention to investigating issues related to fragmentation, marginality, and hybridity and recognize that "being marginal is actually a crucial experience of late modernity. Being neither on the inside nor the outside, being affiliated but not fully belonging, is said to be a normal condition.. ." (Rampton 1997, p. 330).

The tremendous shift that has taken place in sociolinguistics during the past two decades, as signaled by Rampton, is rooted in a new interest in the effect of globalization on language use. This interest in globalization has resulted in several significant shifts in the way language is viewed. To begin, the entire concept of nationhood is being challenged (see, e.g., Pennycook 2010) so that language is no

longer seen as a discrete system related to concepts of space based on nationhood; rather there is growing recognition that linguistic diversity today is greatly influenced by the global flow of people and cultures. The hybridity of language is particularly evident in popular culture and in the exchanges that take place in spaces where people from diverse language backgrounds and cultures come together. The language that is used in these contexts presents major challenges to traditional views of languages and of language standards. These shifts led Canagarajah (2006) to argue that to be relevant to language use in the present era, sociolinguists need to shift their emphasis from "language as a system to language as a social practice, from grammar to pragmatics, from competence to performance" (p. 234). In defining language as performative, Canagarajah contends that sociolinguists need to consider how "language diversity is actively negotiated in acts of communication under changing contextual conditions" (p. 234).

A view of linguistic diversity as a factor of contextualized social practice rather than nationhood has resulted in a focus on the relationship between language and power, as well as language and identity. Currently, there is a growing recognition that particular linguistic systems have semiotic value. Blommaert (2010), for example, refers to the messy new marketplace of present-day linguistic diversity where specific languages and language varieties have symbolic value because of the prestige and power associated with people who speak that language. Because of the economic and political power ascribed to many English-speaking societies, English often has great semiotic value, appearing in pop culture and advertisements where it used emblematically rather than linguistically. In addition to the relationship between language and power, there is growing interest in the manner in which language use in this messy marketplace affects personal identity. As Norton (2010) points out, every time we speak, "we are negotiating our sense of self in relation to the larger social world, and reorganizing that relationship across time and space. Our gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, among other characteristics, are all implicated in this negotiation of identity" (p. 350).

Problems and Difficulties: Future Directions

In keeping with these new trends in sociolinguistics, further research is needed on present-day linguistic diversity without preconceived ideas about language and nationhood and on native speakers and language standards. Such research should examine how particular varieties of language illustrate the fluidity of modern society. This type of research is presently underway in investigations of English as a lingua franca (ELF) negotiations, in which the speakers are neither insiders (i.e., so-called native speakers) nor outsiders; rather they are users of English in spaces of cross-cultural contact. (See Seidlhofer 2004 for a review of ELF research.) It is exactly these kinds of exchanges that exemplify the marginality of present-day communication. In addition, some research exists on the hybridity and diversity that exists in the language of hip-hop culture. (See, e.g., Pennycook 2007.)

In its ongoing effort to add to existing knowledge on the relationship between sociolinguistics and language education, educational sociolinguistics will continue to face major methodological issues (e.g., gaining access to educational sites and obtaining naturally occurring data) as well as sociopolitical challenges (e.g., convincing policy makers to implement sociolinguistically sound educational programs even though they may not have popular support).

Pedagogical Implications

The previous discussion on language variation, language contact, and language change has several implications for second language classrooms. First, second language pedagogy should be informed by current sociolinguistic research on linguistic diversity. As was demonstrated above, the manner in which individuals use language will often vary based on geographical region, social class, and ethnicity. For second language learners of any language, but particularly languages with wide geographical reach, such as English and Spanish, it is important for teachers to develop materials that will raise students' awareness of such differences and to help them understand the manner in which these differences serve to indicate membership in a particular speech community. Second, globalization has resulted in greater language contact so that many individuals today are multilingual/multicultural and the languages they use are negotiated in particular social contexts, resulting in the blending and hybridity of language use. Such hybridity needs to be acknowledged in pedagogical contexts. Third, a recognition of the complexity of language use today has resulted in greater pedagogical attention to developing a critical view of language in which literacy is not just about reading the word but also on reading the world (Freire 1972). This has led to an interest in formulating pedagogical strategies that develop critical language awareness (e.g., Janks 2010; Wallace 2012) so that readers examine not just what is said but more importantly how issues of power affect what was said and how it was said.

Finally, the teaching of standards should be based on sociolinguistic insights regarding language contact and language change. As was discussed previously, language contact will inevitably result in language change. Since today many individuals are using English in contact with other languages on a daily basis, their use of English is changing, and they are in the process of establishing their own standards of English grammar and pronunciation. In general the research on these emerging varieties of English indicates that the codified and accepted standard of English that exists in these communities has few differences from other standard varieties of English. The situation of multiple standards is important not just for English but for many other widely used languages. Hence, it is important for second language teachers to recognize the integrity of the varieties of the language they teach, to realize that they are important sources of personal identity and signs of the fluidity of late modernity, and to not promote negative attitudes toward such varieties.

Cross-References

- Conditions for Second Language (L2) Learning
- Foreign Language Education in the Context of Institutional Globalization
- Globalization and Language Education in Japan
- Second Language Learning in a Study Abroad Context
- Sociocultural Theory and Second/Foreign Language Education
- The Role of the National Standards in Second/Foreign Language Education

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

Lin, A.: Code-switching in the Classroom: Research Paradigms and Approaches. In Volume: Research Methods in Language and Education

Li Wei.: Research Perspectives on Bilingualism and Bilingual Education. In Volume: Research Methods in Language and Education

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