Sociolinguistics

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The social study of language

The scope of enquiry

Sociolinguistics is the field that studies the relation between language and society, between the uses of language and the social structures in which the users of language live. It is a field of study that assumes that human society is made up of many related patterns and behaviours, some of which are linguistic.

One of the principal uses of language is to communicate meaning, but it is also used to establish and to maintain social relationships. Watch a mother with a young child. Most of their talk is devoted to nurturing the social bond between them. Listen to two friends talking. Much of their conversation functions to express and refine their mutual compact of companionship. When you meet strangers, the way they talk informs you about their social and geographical backgrounds, and the way *you* talk sends subtle or blatant signals about what you think of them. It is these aspects of language use that sociolinguists study.

In the thirty years or so that it has been recognized as a branch of the scientific study of language, sociolinguistics has grown into one of the most important of the 'hyphenated' fields of linguistics. This term distinguishes the core fields of historical and descriptive linguistics (phonology, morphology, and syntax) from the newer interdisciplinary fields like psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, neurolinguistics, and sociolinguistics or the sociology of language. Stranded at times between sociology (one of the field's putative parents) and linguistics (the other), the practitioners of sociolinguistics have so far avoided the rigorous bounds of a single theoretical model, or the identifying shelter of a single

professional organization. They apply a plethora of methods to a multitude of subjects that all have in common one single thread: languages and their use in social contexts.

There are indeed some sociolinguists who wonder how language can be studied in any other way. They believe that the search of the formal linguists like Noam Chomsky for an autonomous linguistics, with the goal of describing the idealized competence of an idealized monolingual in an idealized monovariety speech community, is as doomed to failure as was the earlier effort of structural linguists to account for language structure without taking meaning into account.

While Noam Chomsky revolutionized many aspects of linguistics, he followed structural linguists like Leonard Bloomfield in choosing to study language autonomously, as a self-sufficient system. He aimed to find a basic universal grammatical structure that could account for the similarities in the organization of languages, without needing to appeal to the social context in which language is used. For Chomsky, the existence of variation in language simply confuses, diverting the linguist's attention from the wonderful abstract system that separates human language from other communication systems. For the sociolinguist, however, the most important verity is that a language—any language—is full of systematic variation, variation that can only be accounted for by appealing, outside language, to socially relevant forces and facts.

Sociolinguistics takes as its primary task to map linguistic variation on to social conditions. This mapping helps understand not just **synchronic variation** (variation at a single point of time), but also **diachronic variation** (variation over time) or language change.

The close intertwining of linguistic and social facts is crucial to a sociolinguistic approach. Even before small children can speak clearly, they develop a distinct style of address to be used when speaking to anyone or anything smaller. As they grow, they add more and more variations to their speech, and these come to be associated with recognizable **styles**. As early as the age of five, children asked to play roles try to imitate the styles of speech of many different people. These small variations in language that everyone acquires in normal upbringing can be used to identify us, or the person we are talking to, or the subject we are talking

about. There is no single-style or single-variety speaker; no speech community that does not have a choice of varieties; and many fewer monolinguals than English speakers might imagine.

The existence of patterned variation in language makes it possible to identify ourselves and others as belonging to certain groups. The social prestige or stigma associated with these variations makes language a source of social and political power. Only by including both linguistic and social factors in our analysis can this complex but rule-governed behaviour be accounted for. To do this is the chosen goal of the sociolinguist.

Complementary approaches

Eschewing the normal acrimony of academic debate, we might say that the various complementary approaches to the study of language each find a different aspect of the complex phenomenon to be of enthralling interest. The formal linguist pursues an autonomous universal system, significant elements of which are to be explained by the very design and structure of the human brain. The psycholinguist asks how such a system works and how it can be learned or lost. The sociolinguist asks how it is used in a living and complex speech community. The answers to each of these questions is important to the applied linguist, concerned, among other matters, with how to help people learn language and how to use it effectively to deal with problems of practical everyday life.

Just as the formal linguist and the psycholinguist focus their attention on the language as a system with universal features, so the sociolinguist looks at the complex connections between the variations within a language and the matching variations in the social groups that use it. Why, the song asks, do *I* say /təmˈɑːtəʊ/ and *you* say /təmˈeɪtəʊ/. Why do I say 'Good morning!' to some people, and 'Hi!' to others? How did Professor Higgins know which parts of Eliza Doolittle's speech needed to be changed to make her pass for a member of the upper class? Sociolinguistics is all about variation, and seeks socially relevant explanations for regular patterns of variation in language use.

A sociolinguist is interested in the way that members of a speech community can, and do, identify and respond to fine

differences in language usage that are associated, within a speech community, with social or economic or political or religious or cultural or other divisions of the society. At what is often called the **micro** end of sociolinguistics, the sociolinguist's goal might be to show how specific differences in pronunciation or grammar lead members of a speech community to make judgments about the education or economic status of a speaker. In New York City, for instance, pronouncing the word 'this' as /dɪs/ or pronouncing 'bird' as /bɔɪd/, marks the social class of the speaker. In the same way, the choice of lexical items (saying 'doctor's surgery' instead of 'doctor's office') makes clear on which side of the Atlantic a speaker of English has been living. Over-average use of tag questions would seem to mark young females in New Zealand. A high proportion of words from Modern Standard Arabic marks the vernacular speech of educated Arabs. As much as speech itself communicates content, so the form of speech, the selection among available socially marked **variants**, communicates important social information about the speaker and the listener and about their relationship to each other. In other words, adapting Marshall McLuhan's famous words, the medium (the variety chosen) becomes the message itself.

At the other—the **macro—end** of the spectrum, sometimes labelled the **sociology of language** as distinct from sociolinguistics, the scholar's primary attention turns from the specific linguistic phenomena to the whole of a language or **variety** (a term we use to include any identifiable kind of language). In macro-sociolinguistics, we treat language (and a specific language) alongside other human cultural phenomena. We might ask, for instance, about the significance of a group of immigrants shifting completely to a new language or maintaining their old one for some purposes. Why did most immigrants to the USA from Northern Europe drop their home language so fast, while Asian immigrants to Britain seem to be keeping theirs alive? How did Welsh survive English occupation, or how did Basque and Catalan stay alive under Franco's policy of enforcing the use of Castilian Spanish? We might investigate the close bonds between language choice and social identity, asking why their language remained so important to Maoris, Basques, or Frisians that they have been willing to undertake political action to preserve it. We

might ask why speakers of certain varieties are influential and powerful, and why speakers of other varieties are regularly discriminated against. These questions concern the use of a language or a language variety as a whole rather than individual variations, and asking them makes the study of language a means to understanding a society.

Some scholars use this difference of perspective to divide the field into two. They want to distinguish between sociolinguistics, which emphasizes the social influences on language, and the sociology of language, which emphasizes the role of language in society. In this book, however, I shall examine both aspects together, arguing for a common concern for the connection between language and society rather than a need to give priority to one or the other.

There are, as we will see, a large number of discrete but related phenomena that can be considered from the two perspectives. Included are topics like language and gender, social stratification, language planning, language and power, language and ethnicity, language and nationalism. To capture relevant dimensions of the patterns under study, the sociolinguist is regularly forced to broaden the scope of enquiry from the parent disciplines of linguistics and sociology to other fields like social psychology, gender studies, public policy management, political science, and history.

If there is a common theme that emerges from the studies of sociolinguists, it is that the complex interplay of language structure with social structure means that any user of language is constantly responding to and signalling social information. My identity (or rather my various identities) is recognizable from my choice among all the variants that a language offers. One might even go so far as to claim that it is this choice of identity that accounts, better than the other factors we will consider, for the observable variation in natural speech.

But before we can consider these more specific topics and the theories held to explain them, it is valuable to make clear what the data of sociolinguistics are, and what methods are used to collect these data.

The methods of enquiry

What to study and *how* to study it are closely related questions. A theory tells us which facts count as data. A science advances either by posing new important questions about the data or by finding new ways of observing data to answer important questions. Noam Chomsky initiated a revolution in linguistics by asking how to account for the fact that everyone who learns a language (a first language, that is to say) shows evidence of control of rules that are not evident from normal exposure to people speaking. Sociolinguists ask a different question: how to account for the variation that exists in every language. Because of what they study, they are just as concerned with how to answer the question as with the question itself.

The reason for this concern is because we need to observe a dynamic phenomenon in its natural setting. In biology, one common way of studying frogs is by dissecting them, but of course a dead frog doesn't do very much. In sociolinguistics, the analogous riddle is what Labov labelled the **observer's paradox**, namely: how can we observe the way people speak when they are not being observed?

The enigma arises because sociolinguists believe that language use is always sensitive to the social relations among the participants in a speech event. We speak differently to superiors, to colleagues, to friends, and to children. Our speech patterns regularly change when another person (especially a stranger) enters the conversation. Even young children quickly develop markedly different styles for talking to different people. Given this sensitivity of speech to audience, how can a linguist, who is a stranger and an outside observer, witness and record the **vernacular** and unmonitored speech patterns that close friends use among themselves? Doesn't the presence of the sociolinguist kill the naturalness of the speech just as effectively as the dissector's scalpel kills the frog? There has been no definitive answer. Sociolinguists have countered the paradox in different ways, as we shall see.

What are the data?

The question of what constitutes interpretable data is a key one in any discipline. In sociolinguistics, there is a tension between the

observers and the quantifiers. Joshua Fishman has recounted that when he and John Gumperz were working together on a study of bilingualism among Puerto Ricans in the Jersey City *barrio*, Gumperz would occasionally ask him to produce evidence to back up an assertion. Fishman, with his background in sociology and psychology, would bring in bundles of computer print-out of statistical calculations. When Gumperz himself was similarly challenged by Fishman, Gumperz, trained as an ethnographer, would describe a conversation he had overheard at a party the night before. Note that Fishman used elicited data that could be analysed statistically, while Gumperz discovered his data through observation of the use of language in a natural setting.

If we try to understand the basis for these two approaches, we might say that sociologists seek their evidence in the patterns underlying the answers of a large number of people to many carefully designed questions. The social forces that control individual speech behaviour are expressed, sociologists believe, in the statistically determinable tendencies that can be extracted by analysing large quantities of data. Ethnographers, on the other hand, trained to compare the behaviour of individuals in one culture with the patterns of behaviour observed in many other cultures, have learned to present their intuitions through the interpretation of single events that they carefully observe. The two approaches are complementary.

Whatever method they choose, what sociolinguists are looking for is evidence of socially accepted rules accounting for variations in speech. The evidence is in part the speech variation (the differences in pronunciation or word choice, or in grammatical choice), in part the characteristics of the speaker (age, gender, education, place of birth, and domicile), and in part the nature of the speech encounter (its place, its topic, the role relations of the speakers). Some of these data can be collected by observation, some by elicitation. Whether to trust the observation is of course a problem: the speaker might be pretending or lying, the observer might be looking too hard or not noticing something critical. All of these methodological problems are inevitable in the study of a living phenomenon like language in its social use.

Given these concerns, many studies make use of multiple data collected in a number of different ways. If the observed encounter

shows the same pattern as the carefully analysed sample of speech, and if the attitudinal questionnaire is consistent with the statistical observations, a sociolinguist can be more confident that the account of the underlying structure is valid.

The sociolinguist at work

In practice, a number of workable solutions have been found to the 'observer's paradox' of collecting natural speech samples. To analyse variation in pronunciation, sociolinguists studying microlinguistic variation regularly count the frequency of occurrence of a linguistic feature under defined social conditions. For finer differences, they may make precise instrumental measurements of significant speech sounds. In order to obtain the samples for this analysis, natural speech must be recorded on tape. This produces the methodological problem. Won't speakers become self-conscious, and try to make their speech clearer or more standard in the presence of a tape-recorder? Are the data collected in this way natural?

Clandestine recording has been tried and largely abandoned. There are practical reasons, for the tapes are usually noisy and require very expensive processing. There are also ethical ones. Fifty years ago, a study of spoken English could be based on surreptitiously recorded telephone conversations passing through a university switchboard. In a climate of greater respect for the privacy of their sources, sociolinguists now ask their subjects for permission to use the tapes that they have made. Tape-recorders are now in the open, and researchers are generally satisfied that any initial anxiety effecting the level of formality will disappear as an interview continues.

The **sociolinguistic interview**, modelled on the format developed by William Labov for his now classic doctoral study of New York City English, is one of the most common techniques for gathering samples of language. In the interview, the sociolinguist talks to the subject, attempting to elicit examples of various kinds of speech. The normal stylistic level for an interview like this is fairly formal, for the two people speaking are strangers. There are ways to modify the level of formality. The easiest alteration is in the direction of more careful attention to speech, by giving the person being

interviewed a passage or a list of words to read. It is more difficult to relax the formality. Occasional bursts of informal speech occur when a speaker switches to a topic outside the interview, such as when a mother being interviewed by a sociolinguist speaks to her child who has come into the room. Another circumstance is when the speaker is emotionally involved in an event he or she is narrating. Taking advantage of this, an interviewer might ask a question about an occasion when the speaker's life was in danger and so obtain less self-conscious speech.

Interviews provide a good deal of data, and are therefore invaluable in studying in depth the language variation of the subjects. By selecting a sample of subjects carefully, the researcher can make sure that significant social types (for example, by gender, age, education, occupation) are represented. One way to do this is to draw the subjects from a sample previously studied in a sociological survey. But interviews are expensive in time and effort, so that the number of different people studied is limited.

For studying larger populations, one technique is the covert collection of **non-intrusive responses**. Labov used this technique when he asked salespeople in three New York department stores a question to which the answer was 'Fourth floor'. This utterance gave him two post-vocalic 'r's and a 'th' to record. By asking for a repetition, he obtained a second set of data, this time with added stress. A related approach has been tried using telephone calls made in different languages in a multilingual city, to find out whether there was prejudice against speakers of one of the languages.

Once a natural speech sample has been collected, it must be analysed. Usually, the linguist chooses a **variable**, a specific feature that previous observation suggests is likely to prove of social significance. In New York English, the pronunciation of /r/ after a vowel is such a feature, and in Palestinian vernacular Arabic it is the use of /tʃ/ rather than /k/ in the word for dog, *kalb* or *chalb*. Each occasion where the feature could occur is counted, and the percentage of each **variant** under specific conditions (for example, by speaker or by style) provides statistical data which can be compared with other factors.

Because the interviewer usually has some clear preconceptions about what phenomena are likely to be interesting, a sociolinguistic interview follows a prepared protocol. After an opening

general conversation, there are likely to be questions about children's games and rhymes to elicit older vernacular usage, and a question about some momentous event that might encourage the subject to talk unself-consciously. There may also be word lists to read or pictures to name to check out more careful pronunciation of selected sounds or to check out variations in names of objects. An interview provides extensive statistical data on a large number of linguistic variations.

For sociolinguists working in the ethnographic tradition, the main technique is the recording (either at the same time with a tape-recorder or more usually on paper immediately after the event) of natural speech events in which they have participated. As in other **ethnographic observation**, observers' previous experiences have prepared them to recognize significant exchanges. These examples are not always open to statistical analysis, but are usually vivid cases which encourage our acceptance of the validity of the ethnographer's authority and his or her assertion that they represent a general rule and not an aberrant case.

To obtain statistically analysable data about attitudes and behaviours, a common technique is the questionnaire, a prepared list of questions to which strangers are asked to respond. Questionnaires have been used mainly by social psychologists, who ask the people they are studying (or a carefully selected group of them who can be shown to represent the wider population) a set of questions about themselves, their beliefs, and their behaviours. By repeating the same question in different forms, the psychologist can get some idea of the reliability of the answers, and by careful wording of questions, attention can be focused on those features that are to be analysed. One of the difficulties with direct questionnaires is that they focus attention on the issue so clearly that people answering might tell you what they think you want to know. Another difficulty is that questionnaires are fixed in advance and so they might leave out questions that seem interesting later on. In this respect, interviews are much more flexible, but of course limited because of the time they take to give and analyse.

Questionnaires are particularly useful in gathering demographic data ('How old are you?' 'How many years did you spend at school?' 'What is your occupation?'). They are also used to

study attitudes ('What language do you think is the most useful?' 'What language is the most beautiful?'). With *can-do* questions, they are used to obtain self-reports on language proficiency ('What languages can you read?' 'In what languages can you carry on a conversation?').

The approach in this book

This chapter started out by defining the field of sociolinguistics, and setting as its concern the relationship between language and society. The field of study is focused on variations in language that may be shown to be closely related to variations in society. We then considered the methodological issues that continue to dominate discussion of the field.

In Chapter 2 an approach to language study is introduced derived from anthropology called the ethnography of speaking or communication. This approach, which starts with language in use rather than with its abstract structure, will provide us with a basis for the study of conversation and of politeness. The way that language variation can be located geographically and socially will start to be explored in Chapter 3. The division into speech communities, and the geographical and political factors that lead to the division of languages into identifiable dialects, are also described in that chapter. Social factors are turned to in Chapter 4. After defining the notion of style to represent the socially determined variation in the speech of an individual, gender and social-class effects on language are examined. In Chapter 5 there is a discussion on the bilingual—the speaker with two distinct languages—and bilingualism—the effects of this knowledge and the ways that the bilingual decides which language to use. In Chapter 6 bilingualism is viewed as a phenomenon from a social perspective, considering the nature of multilingual societies, the forces leading to shifts in language use, and the establishment of stable bilingualism or diglossia. In Chapter 7 ways in which the knowledge gained by sociolinguistics is applied to social problems are discussed, such as language policy and planning and language education.

2

The ethnography of speaking and the structure of conversation

The ethnography of speaking

Sociolinguists believe that the study of language must go beyond the sentences that are the principal focus of descriptive and theoretical linguistics. It must go beyond language and bring in social context. It must deal with the 'real' texts that make up human communication and the social situations in which they are used. The focus of attention shifts from the sentence to the act of communication, the **speech event**.

Building on a model of communication first proposed by Roman Jakobson, Dell Hymes suggested that any communicative use of language or speech event is constituted by seven distinct factors, each associated with a different function. The first two are the speaker-writer and the hearer-reader; the third is the message form passed between them which is drawn from the resources of a speech code. The message form expresses a topic, some propositional content which is passed by some physical means, some channel, visual in the case of writing or sign language or aural in the case of speech. The speech event is located in some setting or other. It is possible to study these one at a time, but each must be included to understand the working of the system. In particular cases, one or more of these factors can be emphasized. The emotive or expressive function stresses the speaker-writer's attitude. The referential or denotative function stresses the topic. Some messages just check that the channel is open ('Can you hear me?') or assure that it is ('Uh huh').

Dell Hymes proposed that this model should provide the basis for an **ethnography of speaking** (sometimes also called an

ethnography of communication), which is an approach to the description of speech events that calls for an analysis of each of the relevant factors. Each of them may be studied independently, but all are closely interrelated in forming the structure of the whole event. For each **genre** or kind of speech event, the factors are realized and related in appropriate ways.

Consider for instance how we might describe a sermon. The typical speaker is a clergyman, the listeners a group of people constituting a religious congregation, the setting a church or synagogue or mosque, the channel direct voice or voice amplified by loudspeaker (or in a modified version, transmitted by radio or television), the message form (i.e. the actual sounds, words, and sentences uttered by the speaker) a register of a language presumably understood by the congregation, and the topic some appropriate religious content.

Underlying the event is a complex set of socially recognized rules, which can be most easily recognized by considering possible breaches of them. Imagine for instance a preacher who stands there and says nothing, or reads out an account of a football match. Or think what might happen when the preacher uses for his sermon a liturgical language like Latin or Coptic or Sanskrit that is still used for prayer but that the congregation may no longer understand. Or a congregation that sings a hymn while the preacher is speaking, or goes to sleep. Or when a lecturer starts to give a sermon on morality in a physics class. These breaches of normal conditions for a sermon suggest how one might build a set of rules to describe a typical sermon as a speech event. One might do the same for other recognizable speech events, like a chemistry lecture, or a dinner-party conversation, or a bargaining session, or a lovers' quarrel.

The major value of the ethnography of speaking to sociolinguistics was in setting up an approach to language that went far beyond the attempt to account for single written or spoken sentences. It widened the scope to include all aspects of the speech event. This proves invaluable in considering the structure of one of the commonest of speech events, the conversation, when two or more people speak to each other.

The structure of conversations

Linguists have as a general rule focused on the smaller units of language like sounds, words, and sentences, leaving it to other scholars to examine the larger units that make up speech events. In the case of the written language, the study of texts and genres has been the task of the literary scholar. There is also a crossover field of stylistics and poetics where occasionally linguists and literary scholars study the same objects, and more occasionally talk to each other about their different views. Oral literary texts were also studied by folklorists and literary scholars, but the study of natural chunks of spoken language was generally ignored by linguists until ethnographers, sociologists, and sociolinguists started to explore its structure.

Because so much earlier linguistic analysis was based on the written language, it is understandable that the sentence should have been considered as the important unit to study. But sentences are less useful in the study of speech, for if you look at the verbatim transcription of a normal conversation, you will see how few sentences are finished. More usefully, the **conversational interchange** is the basic unit of the spoken language. Its structure was first teased out in some innovative studies of telephone conversations, where it was shown that a normal telephone conversation has a number of distinct parts:

Who	Utterance	Comment
Caller	(dials; phone rings)	This is the *summons*
Other	Hello?	*Answer*
Caller	Hello, this is Joe. Is that Bill?	*Identification*
Other	Yes	*Identity stage*
Caller	The meeting is still on?	*Message*
Other	Yes. I'll see you there.	*Acknowledgement*
Caller	OK. Bye.	*Close*
Caller		*Hangs up*

How do we know that telephone conversations are rule-governed behaviour? One quick way is to imagine what is likely to happen if someone doesn't follow one of the rules we propose. If when you make a telephone call, you hear the receiver being lifted but no one speaks, the conversation is usually stuck. You will usually issue another summons, saying something like 'Hello! Are you there?' If, on the other hand, like many children who have not learned the rules yet, you start speaking as soon as the receiver is lifted, not waiting for the answerer to say something, there is a moment of confusion. If you call a number and hear a voice saying 'I'm busy at the moment. Please call back' or 'I'm not here at the moment. Please leave a message after the beep', you assume you are talking to a machine and behave accordingly. To hang up without a formal close is considered abrupt and insulting behaviour.

There is a great deal of culturally and socially determined variation in the possible choices within the pattern set out here. In England, people commonly answer the phone by reciting their telephone number. Telephone operators in offices are trained to answer by identifying their employer: 'English Department. Good morning!' Intercom calls are answered with 'Yes' rather than 'Hello'. Asking 'Is X there?' is interpreted as asking to speak to X. There are national differences in these rules. In some countries, it is considered impolite to ask to speak to someone else before initiating a series of polite social interchanges with the person answering. The development of answering machines and of voice-mail is adding new structures to the rules, setting new challenges for the novice or the conservative.

The important notion from our point of view is that there is a formal structure to conversations, in part determined by the nature of the event (until the answerer says something, the caller has no one to talk to), and in part determined by social rules (what it is appropriate to say to specific people in defined circumstances).

This quick analysis of the telephone conversation demonstrates the existence of socially structured rules for conversational interchanges. There have been studies of various aspects of conversation, such as the nature of service encounters (such as between a customer and a seller), the rules for turn-taking and interruption,

Абылай хан атындағы
Қазақ мемлекеттік
халықаралық қатынастар
және әлем тілдер
университеті
кітапханасы

the organization of invitations, and the normal patterns of social intercourse in casual conversations.

Service encounters also have a fairly straightforward underlying structure. The first element is similar to the bell ringing in a telephone conversation: engaging the attention of the person meant to give the service. The task here is to establish the channel between speaker and hearer. This varies according to the social situation and cultural pattern. In some cultures and situations, it leads to a preliminary social exchange; in others, it involves simply catching the eye of the clerk or ticket-seller and making a gesture without saying anything. Shop-keepers in the Middle East remark on the brusqueness of tourists who start their conversation by pointing to something and saying 'How much?' Their normal conversational interchanges starts with a formal set of greeting, including enquiries after the health of the parties and their presumed families, comments on the weather or some other neutral subject, and finally a mention that there is some commercial purpose to the event. In other words, they require that the topic be broached only after a social exchange.

One kind of service encounter that has been highly developed in some societies is the process of bargaining, where the two parties seek to arrive at a price that satisfies both. In Middle Eastern usage, this often involves appeals to a neutral bystander, who initially is expected to agree with the buyer that the first price is too high, but is ultimately expected to confirm that the seller's last price is a fair one. This kind of negotiation is even more highly developed in industrial bargaining and in diplomatic exchanges.

Turn-taking, the question of who speaks, is one of the most intriguing aspects of conversational interchange. The physical constraint is obvious. If two people are speaking at once, they and others find it difficult to understand everything said. In various formal situations, there are clear rules on the order of speaking. In a classroom, teachers claim the right to control turn-taking. The teacher speaks more or less when he or she wants, and grants permission to students to talk. In a parliament or other public meeting, a chairperson is given the authority to determine who can speak and for how long. In trials, there are clear rules on who speaks first, who has the last word, who may ask questions, and who must answer them. Lay witnesses are often confused and

usually at a disadvantage in their lack of understanding of these rules.

In informal conversations and informal meetings, the issue of turn-taking is often quite complex, depending on power and status. Who has the **floor** (the right to talk at any given moment) varies according to rules of the social group. Once someone has the floor, it is possible to try to interrupt, but a speaker can ignore this. Silence sometimes leaves the floor open, but there are **turn-holders**—ways of signalling that the speaker intends to continue after a break—like 'umm ...' or avoidance of a final intonation pattern.

Much of the study of discourse has been carried out with a focus on the meaning or topic rather than the other more social factors, and is therefore better considered under the rubric of pragmatics. Here, our focus is the social, and we will analyse in some detail two matters concerning the influence of social aspects of the relation of the speaker-writer and the listener-reader in the limitations set in choice of the message form. First we ask, what is politeness and how does it control speech? Second, we will look at the socially controlled choice of forms involved in selecting an appropriate term with which to address the person to whom you are talking.

Politeness and politeness formulas

Because speech events regularly include both a speaker-writer and a listener-reader, it is not surprising that language is particularly sensitive, in the rules for speech use, to the relations between the two parties. Just as a good actor can utter a single sentence expressing a wide range of emotional states of the speaker, so the choice of an appropriate message form can be modified to express a wide range of attitudes of the speaker to the listener. Given the same general situation, I can pass information or make a request or simply greet in a whole set of different ways that will define my attitude to the listener and the importance I give him or her.

In its simplest terms, **politeness** consists of this recognition of the listener and his or her rights in the situation. Requests, which are an imposition on the listener, are mitigated by being made indirectly, as questions ('Could you possibly pass me the salt?') or

as statements ('I think that is the salt beside your plate'), or by adding formulas like 'Please' and 'if you would be so kind'. Social relations are eased by complimenting ('I do like your new car!' or 'Congratulations'). In some languages, there are elaborated sets of politeness formulas, like in Arabic saying *mabruk* to someone who has just bought something new, or *na?iman* to someone who has just had a haircut or a bath or a short nap. For each formula, there is an appropriate reply, *'allah ybarik fik* (may God bless you) to the first and *'allah yn?am ?alek* (may God refresh you) to the second. In American English, the equivalent is saying 'You're welcome' in reply to 'Thank you'.

The most common kinds of politeness formulas are involved with greetings. Greetings are the basic oil of social relations. To fail to greet someone who expects to be greeted signals either some unusual distraction or a desire to insult the person. Each social group has its own set of rules about who should be greeted, who should greet first, and what is an appropriate form of greeting.

English greetings range from an informal 'Hi!' through a neutral 'Good morning' to a slowly disappearing formal 'How do you do!' It is common to add a second part of the greeting, a purely phatic 'How are you!' to which no reply is expected. Arab greetings use an elaborate set of paired greetings-plus-responses, depending on time of day or other social aspects of the situation.

The study of greetings, therefore, provides a first useful method of exploring the structure of a social group. A second area showing patterned variation in speech and similarly studied within the ethnography of communication has been the conditions on the use of terms of address.

Terms of address

The choice of second-person pronoun and the related phenomenon of **terms of address** in Western European languages in particular shows the formalization of politeness and status in a language. A number of languages offer the same sort of choice as French of addressing a single person using either the singular pronoun *tu* or the plural *vous*.

In earlier usage, the plural V form (*vous* in French, *Sie* in

German) was used to address someone of higher status, who would return the T form (*tu* in French, *du* in German). Thus, a servant would use V to a master who would reply with T. In medieval French, this moved through the whole chain of being, with God speaking to the angels as T, or men using T for animals. V could also be used between equals. There developed over time a tendency to switch from V–V use to T–T use, as a sign of intimacy. The French verb *tutoyer*, to use T to someone, refers to this change of familiarity. At one stage, in German student society before the First World War, the switch was accompanied by a formal ceremony. In early twentieth-century French society, two adult males who had served in the army together would use T to each other. While the pattern has been relaxed, it remains impolite to use T to a stranger. There have been complaints that students in Canadian-French immersion programmes are sometimes addressed only with the T form, and so have not learned the appropriate use of the V form with adult strangers.

With the growing egalitarianism of modern life, there has been a slow breakdown in the formality of address systems. The ideologically based switch from V to T associated with communism has been documented in Russian novels of the period. French children return T to their parents. Many speakers of Swedish now use T even to strangers.

A related phenomenon in languages that do not have the T/V distinction is the use of address terms. English once had the *thou/you* distinction and still offers a range of address terms, ranging from Title Alone (Sir, Your Majesty, Madam, Constable) through Title + Last Name (Mr Jones, Dr Smith, Lord Clark, Miss Jones, Mrs Jones, perhaps Ms Jones) to First Name to Multiple Names (including Nicknames). The conditions for choosing vary socially. Increasingly, in North American and British academic circles, people who have just been introduced as 'Professor X, meet Dr Y' move immediately to first names. There are still interesting cases of uneven usage. American doctors and dentists use first names to all their patients, but expect Dr X in return. Teachers in many societies receive Title or Title + Last Name, but return first name (or in some schools, last name).

In Arabic, there is an elaborate set of address patterns. One interesting feature is the custom of addressing friends and

acquaintances by the name of their eldest son: a woman is addressed as *um Ahmed*, mother of Ahmed, and a man as *abu Ahmed*, father of Ahmed. The custom is even extended to people without children.

Title plus first or last name is a common pattern in many languages. Non-relatives may also be addressed with terms of relationships, as in an English pattern of training children to address adults of the parent's generation as Uncle John or Auntie Mary. In Tongan, on the other hand, while there is a complex hierarchical system with almost feudal ranks, people are never addressed by kinship or other titles, but only by their name.

Military usage related to address systems shows special patterns. Peace-time armies with strict discipline and emphasis on ceremonial are likely to have strict rules for addressing superiors. In the US Marine Corps, senior officers were addressed in the third person ('Would the General like me to bring him a cup of coffee?') and other officers received 'sir' from their inferiors. Non-commissioned officers were addressed by rank ('Yes, sergeant.') In a different setting, such as under battle conditions, things changed. An officer was addressed directly, often by a regular nickname. Company commanders, for instance, were addressed as 'Skipper' and sergeant-majors as 'Gunny'. More democratic armies often make a point of dropping special address rules along with saluting. These changes parallel the changes from V to T under similar circumstances.

The ethnography of speaking moved the focus of analysis from the sentence to the speech event, and offered a first approach to the analysis of natural speech, by showing patterns that could be understood if social information were included. In this, as in any other study of language in use, the aspect that became more obvious to the sociolinguist was the existence of regularly patterned variation. It provided a wider canvas on which to paint the complexity of language behaviour in its social setting, and a technique for capturing some of the ways in which each may reflect the other. It opened up the way to the study of language in use, to the importance of different channels, to the critical importance of relations between speaker and hearer, and to the social context of language.

Against this wider background, we return to the central issue

with which sociolinguistics is concerned, the existence and nature of regularly patterned variation in language and the role of social factors in accounting for this regularity of pattern. In the ethnography of speaking, the setting is usually defined socially. But setting can also be defined in geographical terms, and can also be placed in terms of the patterning of social class.

3
Locating variation in speech

Speech communities and repertoires

The non-hyphenated fields of linguistics like phonology, semantics, and syntax focus on the language system ideally abstracted from all social context. Psycholinguistics deals with the individual speaker's acquisition and use of language, and relates this to mental processes. Sociolinguistics is concerned with language *in situ* and *in vivo*, alive in its geographical and social setting and space. What this space is like, we now consider. To start with, because our main interest is in social matters, we will deal with social space, and look for the location of varieties of speech within definable social units.

Some of the units with which we are concerned are already familiar and established social groupings. Thus, we can study the language of families, neighbourhoods, villages, cities, states, countries, or regions. However, for theory building and planning observation, we need a more flexible and abstract concept, provided by the notion of a speech community.

For general linguistics, a **speech community** is all the people who speak a single language (like English or French or Amharic) and so share notions of what is same or different in phonology or grammar. This would include any group of people, wherever they might be, and however remote might be the possibility of their ever wanting or being able to communicate with each other, all using the same language. The notion is preserved in such a concept as 'la francophonie', the French-speaking world, and it can serve as the basic slogan for political co-operation. Underlying it is the idea of a group of people who could, if they wanted, speak to each other.

Sociolinguists, however, find it generally more fruitful to focus on the language practices of a group of people who do in fact have the opportunity to interact and who, it often turns out, share not

just a single language but a **repertoire** of languages or varieties. For the sociolinguist, the speech community is a complex interlocking network of communication whose members share knowledge about and attitudes towards the language use patterns of others as well as themselves. There is no theoretical limitation on the location and size of a speech community, which is in practice defined by its sharing a set of language varieties (its repertoire) and a set of norms for using them.

The idea that the members of a speech community share norms about the selection of varieties is important. Though they might not all know and use each of the varieties, they recognize the conditions under which other members of the community believe that it is appropriate to use each of them. Londoners recognize Cockney and Mayfair varieties of English though they may themselves use neither. A small social network (such as regular patrons of a coffee shop) forms a speech community, and so does a large metropolis or a country, a region, or a communication network (like the Internet). In each case, the goal of sociolinguistic study of such a community is to relate the significant language varieties to the significant social groups and situations.

In small Israeli Palestinian villages, there are commonly four significant varieties making up the linguistic repertoire: the village vernacular (a dialectal variant of Palestinian Arabic), Classical or Modern Standard Arabic (the *fus-Ha* taught in school and used for writing and public speaking), Modern Israeli Hebrew (learned by those who worked outside the village or went to high school), and some school-learned English. The village dialect is considered appropriate for most daily activities; Modern Standard Arabic is used only in educational or religious or formal public functions; Hebrew is kept for use outside the village; and English for educational use.

In a city, the pattern is likely to be even more complex. Inside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem, there are thirty or more languages used by different residents in different settings. In Hong Kong, while most local Chinese use Cantonese most of the time, many have learned and use *Putonghoa* (Standard Mandarin), whose status changed with the reversion to Chinese sovereignty, and all who go to school learn and (less often) use English. In Toronto, Melbourne, New York, or London, English

is the common language, but in certain neighbourhoods it is regularly found sharing the repertoire with dozens, even scores, of immigrant languages. In other cities, like Brussels, there is a clear division between areas where French or Flemish dialects are dominant.

The speech repertoire may be divided functionally as well as spatially. On the Navajo Reservation in the Western United States, most people *spoke* Navajo up to a few years ago, but most *writing* was done in English. The many FM radio stations announced the Country and Western music they played most of the time in Navajo, but the tribal newspaper was published only in English. The Tribal Council conducted its meetings in Navajo (using an interpreter for communication with government officials), but its decisions were recorded and published in English. Most schools at that time tried to teach Navajo-speaking pupils to read English. In the last few years, more and more children have been starting to speak English.

The notion of speech repertoire and community is also useful in looking at variation within a single language. In a Palestinian village that between 1949 and 1967 was arbitrarily divided in half, with half in Israel and half in the Jordanian West Bank, there is still evidence, twenty-five years after the division was ended, of the existence of two quite distinct varieties of spoken Arabic. Studies of Germany after reunification have shown signs of new linguistic differentiation between the Western and the Eastern half, something added to the older North–South dialectal variations. New York or London studied as speech communities show not just regional variation but also social variation.

Smaller **networks**—groups of people who communicate with each other regularly—also contain consistent patterns. One might, for instance, study the linguistic differences that make up the communicative repertoire in a modern office or research centre equipped with computers and telephones and faxes. A researcher with a problem might send off a quick e-mail question to a colleague in the next room, or ask the same question by telephone. If the answer is complicated, it might be handled by sending (by fax or computer) a copy of a previously written paper. When the exchanges become too involved, the colleagues might arrange (by phone or e-mail) a face-to-face meeting. Each of these

communications media will involve different stylistic choices, and the variants can be considered as making up the repertoire. In the same way, international organizations might, like the European Community, have a formal policy governing choice of language from the repertoire available.

The speech community is, therefore, the abstract 'space' studied in sociolinguistics, the location in which the patterned variations in selection from the available repertoire takes place.

Dialect

There are longer-established approaches to the issue of variation as a result of geographical location. Well before sociolinguistics became identified as a discipline, students of language gave serious attention to the variations in language that correlated with the locality where the language was spoken. The study of regional **dialects** played a major role in the **historical linguistics** that flourished in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, until the interest in diachronic changes (over time) was challenged by the concern for synchronic description of a language system at any one time, with a preference for the present.

It was long obvious (and sometimes troubling) that people who spoke what they considered the same language had different words for the same thing or different pronunciations for the same word. The Bible has an account of the first exploitation of this difference. In the Book of Judges (12: 4–6), there is the story of a struggle between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites. After the battle, the Gileadites made use of the different pronunciation of the Ephraimites (who called a small river *sibboleth* rather than *shibboleth)* to identify the enemy. Two thousand years later, William Caxton, in the preface to one of the first English books that he printed, bemoaned the difficulty he had in choosing between northern and southern English forms. Should one print *eggys* or *eyren*, he asked, and how would a speaker of the northern dialect fare ordering eggs in London? Regional differences in variety continue to be the characteristic of humour (a southern accent is laughed at in Tunisia just as in the USA) and prejudice (it is not always easy to book a room in a northern US hotel by telephone if you have a Black or Southern accent).

The earliest scholars concerned with regional dialectal variation were the philologists who set out first to explain differences in manuscripts according to the place where the manuscript was written, and later used their collected observations to reconstruct the history of the language. Essentially, there are two principles underlying social accounts of dialect variation. The first is that all languages change over time, as new words are added to deal with new concepts or as contact with other languages and 'phonetic drift' leads to modifications in phonology. The second is that people who communicate with each other tend to speak similarly. Assume a group of people all setting off from one place where they lived together and spoke the same language, with sub-groups stopping off and forming communities isolated by distance or geographical boundaries from other speakers of the language. Over time, the language spoken in each place will change. The longer the groups are isolated, the more their varieties will have changed. With the breakdown of isolation in the modern world, as roads are built and as radio and television enter more and more homes, dialectal variation tends to diminish and languages become more and more homogenized.

Dialectology is the search for spatially and geographically determined differences in various aspects of language. For each village or region that they study, dialectologists want to know the typical local vocabulary or pronunciation. As a result, their subjects of choice are usually older people who have lived all their lives in one location and who have had a minimum of education. Once found, they are quizzed by the fieldworker for names of objects or pronunciations of words or strange expressions.

In the popular wisdom, there is recognition of the 'broad /æ/' of the Yorkshireman, the glottal stop of the Cockney, the Texas drawl, the /r/-less dialect of upper-class Boston. These are **stereotypes**, fixed and prejudicial patterns of thought about people that may be mistaken, but they focus on the most obvious feature of the local accent. There are also obvious differences in lexicon. Peanuts may be called *groundnuts* or *goobers* or *pinders* in different parts of America. There are places in the USA where you buy potatoes in a *bag* and they put your groceries in a *sack*; others where you find potatoes in a *sack* and take your groceries home in

a *bag*. Where older dialect terms remain, you might hear *tote* or *poke* or *toot* used instead of *bag* or *sack*.

Careful plotting of these different variants permit dialectologists to recognize major regional differences. Thus, the eastern United States has a northern zone where both *grease* and *greasy* are pronounced with an /s/, a transitional zone where *grease* is with an /s/ and *greasy* with a /z/, and a southern where both are /z/. Differences may be quite striking: Texas English, for instance, has one fewer vowel than general American usage, making no difference between the vowel of *pin* and *pen*, so that a Texan is careful to distinguish between a *writing pen* and a *sticking pin*.

In long-settled European countries, dialect atlases show the effects of earlier settlement patterns and of contact. One can trace which areas were originally Celtic, or see evidence of the limits of Roman occupation. In a more recently settled country like the USA, the atlases reveal the differences in original settlement on the Eastern seaboard, showing from what part of England the settlers came and what other linguistic groups they were later mixed with. The US atlases also permit plotting the Western movement of pioneers from the Eastern seaboard along the different pioneering trails.

Geographical differences continue to provide grist for the sociolinguist mill, but the studies have become more complex as the influence of other factors has been accepted. A recent study of the Mexican-American border, for instance, indicates that distance from the border is indeed one of the explanations of Spanish language maintenance among people who have crossed into the United States, but that it needs to be set against other sociological factors such as education and mobility. Geographical space, in other words, is not enough to account for language variation.

This becomes clear if we look at the regular discussion of the difference between a language and a dialect. From a linguistic point of view, regional dialects tend to show minor differences from their immediate neighbours, and greater differences from distant varieties. Thus, one can demonstrate the existence of a chain of dialects from Paris to Rome. At the Franco-Italian border, however, although there is no *linguistic* break in the chain, the *political* distinction is enough to make it clear that one has moved from dialects of French to dialects of Italian.

The decision of what language a dialect belongs to is therefore social and political rather than purely linguistic. As long as Yugoslavia was united, linguists could talk about Serbo-Croatian as a language, with regional variations. With the separation into distinct and warring territories, and with the subsequent transfer of populations and insistence on ethnic difference, Serbian and Croatian have now emerged as distinct languages. In the Netherlands, only Frisian is recognized as a distinct language; all other regional varieties are labelled dialects. A language, it has been remarked, is a dialect with a flag, or even better, with an army. The kinds of differences in patterns of variation that are produced by geographical or spatial isolation are regularly transformed into powerful mechanisms for asserting and recognizing social differences.

4

Styles, gender, and social class

Styles

Geography provides a good beginning when we want to explain language variation. Dialectology is able to account for many of the differences that otherwise play havoc with those who seek a pure, unified language with a single set of correct forms. The differences between *dived* and *dove*, between *footpath* and *pavement*, between /bʌtə/, /bʌʔə/, and /bʌdə/ set difficult quandaries for someone trying to describe *the* English language. Being able to add regional labels to variations helps a great deal. Thus, dictionaries can label forms as *British*, *American*, or *Australian*, implying the existence of unmarked correct forms.

But even if this is accepted, there remains the issue of variations within individual speakers who come from a single location. Speakers of English sometimes use 'don't' and sometimes use 'do not'. Some Londoners sometimes say /bʌtə/ and at other times say /bʌʔə/. If you carefully record anyone speaking, you will find that there is still patterned variation in the pronunciation of a single phoneme, in the choice of words, and in grammar.

A first useful explanation is provided by the notion of **style** and the related dimension of **formality**. At times, we are more careful, and at times we are more relaxed in our speech or writing, just as at times we are more careful or more relaxed in other kinds of behaviour, like how we dress or eat. This varying level of attention to variety forms a natural continuum, the various levels of which can be divided up in different ways. Each language has its own way of doing this: some, like Javanese or Japanese, have a finely graded set of levels, marked specifically in morphological and lexical choice.