

BASIC CONCEPTS IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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ABSTRACT

This research paper deals with the study of language in social context. It, also defines the concept of sociolinguistics, communicative competence and linguistic competence. Functions of language, a useful distinction between structural and functional approach to the study of language are dealt with.

KEYWORDS: Sociolinguistics, Community, Linguistic Competence, Communicative Competence

INTRODUCTION

We can define sociolinguistics as the study of language in relation to society. The question of who is a sociolinguist and who is not is not so important as the question of what the difference is between sociolinguistics and linguistics. Broadly speaking linguistics differs from sociolinguistics by taking account only of the structure or form of language, and by excluding social contexts in which the language functions. Hymes (1974) draws a useful distinction between the structural approach and the functional approach, to the study of language:

Table 1

Structural	Functional
The linguist is interested in Describing the structure (form) of language (code).	The sociolinguist is interested in describing the structure of speech, i.e. the ways of speaking.
Analysis of code is primary and analysis of language use is secondary	Analysis of language use is primary and analysis of code is secondary.
language is seen as performing a referential function	language is seen as performing a gamut of sociocultural functions
Language is considered to be homogeneous for the community.	Language is considered to be heterogeneous for the community i.e. it comprises varieties.
Rules in linguistics deal with grammaticality	Rules in sociolinguistics deal with appropriateness.
The linguist is interested in the native speaker's linguistic competence, i.e. his/her ability to produce and understand the grammatical sentences of his/her language.	The sociolinguist is interested in the language user's communicative competence, i.e. his/her ability not only to produce grammatical sentences of his/her language but also his/her ability to use them appropriately in a socio-cultural context
The linguist is interested in analyzing the sentence, out of context.	The sociolinguist is interested in analyzing meaningful discourse .

Functions of Language

In the preceding section we referred to the notion of functions of language. There are several models of language functions. Traditionally linguists have talked about three overlapping functions of language:

- **Cognitive function**, i.e. the expression of ideas, concepts and thoughts.

- **Evaluative function**, i.e. conveying attitudes, values, etc.
- **Affective function**, i.e. transmitting emotions and feelings.

This traditional model was found to be unsatisfactory: so several revisions have been suggested. One such suggestion is by Halliday (1973). He suggests the following three functions:

Ideational function, i.e. the expression of experience

interpersonal function, i.e. the expression of the speaker's role in the speech situation to establish and maintain social relations.

Textual function, i.e. the choice of grammatically and situation appropriate sentences, and the ordering of content in a cohesive and logical manner.

Sociolinguists generally refer to the following six functions of language:

Expressive function, i.e. utterances express the speaker's feelings. For example: I am feeling great today.

Directive function, i.e. utterances attempt to get someone to do something. For example: Clear the table.

Referential function, i.e. utterances provides information. For example: My wife is pregnant.

Metalinguistic functions, i.e. utterances comment on language itself. For example: 'Decoction' is not a common word.

Poetic function, i.e. utterances focus on aesthetic features of language. For example: a poem; an ear-catching motto, a rhyme. She sells sea-shells on the sea-shore. Neighbour's envy – Owner's pride.

Phatic function, i.e. utterances expresses solidarity and empathy with others. For example: How are you?

Linguistic Versus Communicative Competence

The linguist is interested in describing the structure of language, i.e. the rules that deal with grammaticality. Most modern linguistic theories are concerned with this. Consider, for example, a statement by Chomsky (1965:3):

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker listener in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.

Hymes (1971) in a powerful theoretical paper, attempts a critique of this approach to language, and points out that:

- Chomsky's theory posits ideal objects in abstraction from socio-cultural features. Acquisition of competence is seen as independent of socio-cultural features and performance as adulteration of ideal competence.
- ii. Chomsky's theory takes language structure as a primary end in itself and depreciates language use.

Hymes illustrates with a number of examples that, there is nothing like a homogeneous speech community, or an ideal native speaker-listener. What actually exist are a combination of community diversity, differential competence and a

repertoire of codes/varieties/styles.

Hymes, therefore, argues that we require "a theory that can deal with a heterogeneous speech community, differential competence, and the constitutive role of social-cultural features". (277) a linguistic theory that can take into account factors, such as the ones stated above is called a theory of communication competence.

Hymes' formulation of the theory of communicative competence rests on the recognition of the following four points:

- Whether and to what degree something is formally possible, i.e. something which is grammatical
- Whether and to what degree something is feasible, i.e. something which is acceptable
- Whether and to what degree something is appropriate in relation to a context.
- Whether and to what degree something is in fact done, actually performed.

The theory of communicative competence, in our view, takes into account not only the facts of language but also of its use. It has therefore been widely applied to language teaching/learning situations.

Basic Concepts in Sociolinguistics

Since the basis of sociolinguistic theory is language use I would like to introduce you to certain basic concepts.

Speech Community

The term 'speech community' is widely used by sociolinguists as well as by linguists. Bloomfield defined a speech community as "a group of people who interact by means of speech" (1933:42). Lyons (1970:326) says that a speech community comprises "all the people who use a given language (or dialect)".

These definitions are too simplistic and do not take a number of factors into account. Gumperz (1962:26) defines a speech that, we will define (a linguistic community) as a social group, which may be either monolingual or multilingual, held together by frequency of social interaction patterns and set off from the surrounding areas, by weaknesses in the lines of communication.

This definition recognizes the fact that, a speech community can share more than one language or dialect.

Labov (1970) emphasizes shared attitudes to language in his definition of a speech community. On the other hand LePage (1968) emphasizes group identity as a characteristic of a speech community.

Each of the above definitions allows us to define a set of people who have something in common linguistically, a language or dialect, interaction by means of speech, a range of varieties, attitudes and group identity. So when you come across the term 'Speech community' in sociolinguistic literature remembers that it can refer to any one or all the characteristics discussed above.

Speech/ Verbal Repertoire

Speech repertoire refers to the range of languages or varieties of a language available for use by a speaker each of which enables him/ her to perform a particular social role. We need this term to refer to languages, varieties, and styles that individuals and groups have in their repertoire to communicate in social situations. We can therefore talk individual and

community repertoires.

To quote Gumperz (1964), "verbal repertoire...is not simply composed of linguistic forms. It is always a set of varieties each with its own internal structure". The concept of speech/ verbal repertoire allows us to deal with speech communities of all types – monolingual, bilingual and multilingual. The verbal repertoire of the so-called monolingual communities comprises varieties, dialects and styles. On the other hand, the repertoire of bilingual and multilingual communities comprises two or more languages and their varieties, dialects and styles. All such communities can be studied within the framework of the concept of the verbal repertoire.

Speech Situation; Speech Event; Speech Act

While linguists analyze language as sentences (devoid of social context), sociolinguists analyze language with reference to the socio-cultural context in which it is used. We therefore need a format of analysis in which we take into account concepts like the speech situation, the speech event and the speech act. According to Hymes (1974), within a community one readily detects many situations associated with (or marked by the absence of) speech. Such situations can naturally be described as ceremonies, fights, hunts, meals, love-making and the like. Hymes suggests that such situations may enter as contexts into the statement of 'rules of speaking' as aspects of setting.

A speech event is a smaller unit of description than the speech situation. Hymes (1974) says that, the term speech event will be restricted to activities or aspects of activities that are directly governed by rules or norms, for the use of speech. For example a conversation, a lecture, a formal introduction

The speech act is the smallest unit of the concept that we are discussing. It represents a level distinct from the sentence, and not identifiable with any single portion of other levels of grammar. A speech act is a functional unit while a sentence is a formal unit. The function of an utterance can be signaled by a conventional formula (for example: I hereby order you to leave this building =command), intonation (for example: `Go: Go. = command: polite request) and social relationship between the speaker and the hearer (for example: Would you mind typing this letter? = command when uttered by a superior: = request when uttered by an equal).

SUMMARY

The study of language in social contexts is the subject matter of sociolinguistics. A sociolinguist is interested in the functions of language and not just form; communicative competence and not just linguistic competence. We also discussed some basic concepts useful for the study of language in socio-cultural contexts, e.g. speech community, speech repertoire, speech situation, speech event and speech act.

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