

University of Biskra

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THEME TWO: Sociolinguistics

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1. Definition(s) of Sociolinguistics

The term “sociolinguistics” is a derivational word. It is composed of two words, “socio”, pertaining to society, and “linguistics”, pertaining to language. In a broad explanation, sociolinguistics is defined as a branch of linguistics that involves the study of language from the perspective of society. More specifically, sociolinguistics combines two disciplines, sociology and linguistics. In the literature, some experts call it sociolinguistics; whereas, others label it the sociology of language. These two labellings do not mean that sociolinguistics and the sociology of language could be used interchangeably. Rather, it has been made clear by many sociolinguists that the choice of one name of these two labellings depends primarily on what sociolinguists focus on in their investigations. An elucidation of this point will be given in Section 3 that concerns the scope and foci of sociolinguistics.

Regarding the definition(s) of sociolinguistics, we have found it more appropriate to display some definitions that were provided by the major contributors to the field of sociolinguistics, and the pioneering sociolinguists that some of them are among the founding fathers of this discipline. What is remarkable with these definitions is that each of these scholars focused on a specific aspect to show how language could be described in relation to its actual use in real-life situations. Precisely, these definitions present the relationship between language, linguistics, sociology, or its aspects, and sociolinguistics as well as the relationship between language and society.

1. Sociolinguistics is concerned with the relationship between language and the context in which it is used. It studies the relationship between language and society. It explains how we people speak differently in different social contexts. It discusses the social factors and functions of language and the ways it is used to convey social meaning (Holmes, 2001).
2. Sociolinguistics is concerned with the relation of language and setting (Eastman, 1975).

3. Sociolinguistics is any study of language in relation to society (Mathew, 1997).
4. Sociolinguistics is that part of linguistics which is concerned with language as a social and cultural phenomenon (Trudgill, 1983).
5. 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 (Spolsky, 1988).

From these definitions, it is clear that sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics dealing with the relationship between language and society. It is concerned with both the effect of language on society and the effect of society on language. In these perspectives, language is the communication tool, and society is about the communities if people; the place is very important because the language style of people reflects the place to which they belong.

What is more, sociolinguistics investigates how language use is a determinant of a given society's linguistics requirement. This simply means that every society has its particular linguistic codes that are acceptable for communication and interaction. Thus, sociolinguistics strives to display how groups in a given society are separated by certain social norms, and how the adherence to these norms could be used to categorise individuals in very-defined social and social-economic classes.

2. History of Sociolinguistics

Interest in the social aspects of language, the intersection of language with society, has been the concern of many people as long as humankind has had language. Nevertheless, formal and systematic studies of language in relation to society can be dated only to quite recently. In other words, sociolinguistics, as a branch of linguistics or as an independent discipline, has grown since the second half of the twentieth century.

It is conspicuous that the available literature on the history of sociolinguistics indicates that there are many stories and views on the emergence of this discipline in the scene of

academia. Thus, a brief synthesis of this literature can give us two main explanations. Firstly, some scholars claim that sociolinguistics came as a reaction to the failure of some linguistic theories in giving a thorough description of language. This refers to the various schools of linguistics that have arisen right after the birth of modern linguistics at the beginning of the twentieth century, following the publication of De Saussure's seminal, posthumous book, "Cours de Linguistique Générale", that pioneered structural linguistics. It also was a starting point for Noam Chomsky's transformational generative grammar theory that focused on an abstract, formal-oriented outlook. What is worth noting with these linguistic theories is that all of them ignored or did not give great attention to studying language in use. In doing so, they eliminated the relationship between language and society. Thereafter the shift of focus to consider language use in social life, with the arrival of Dell Hymes's communicative competence, permitted to turn to a new perspective in which the study of language could not be deprived of the context where it operates, i.e., more importance was given to the social context. This new linguistic orientation allowed for the emergence of the study of language in relation to society; and therefore, this has led to the appearance of sociolinguistics as a branch of linguistics.

Secondly, another historical account viewed that the word "sociolinguistics" was apparently coined already in 1939 in the title of an article by Thomas C. Hudson, "Sociolinguistics in India". From other sources, the term was first used in linguistics by Eugene Nida in the second edition of his book entitled, "Morphology" in 1949. Some other linguists attributed the term to Harver Currie (1952), who himself claimed to have created it. Spolsky's story about the origin of the term sociolinguistics is also worth to be considered. According to him, six names are thought to be the founding fathers of the term. These people are William Labov, who pioneered a school devoted to showing the relevance of social determinants of variation for the linguistic theory; Basil Bernstein, the British sociologist whose work on class-

related “codes” led to a brief introduction of American sociolinguistics; Dell Hymes, whose adaptation of Roman Jakobson’s theory of communication shaped the ethnography of communication and educational linguistics that together moulded sociolinguistics. John Gumperz, the founder of interactional sociolinguistics, Charles Ferguson, and Joshua Fishman attended the Linguistics Institute of Bloomington in the summer of 1964, an event seen to have been the date of birth of the field. Overall, all these previously-mentioned names could be considered to have participated in the development of sociolinguistics as we know it today.

3. The Scope and foci of Sociolinguistics

Language is a communication tool used by humans to interact with each other. As a means of communication, language can be studied either internally or externally. Firstly, an internal study of language concerns only the description of language structure at the different linguistic levels: phonological, morphological, syntactic, etc. Secondly, on the other hand, an external study of language deals more with the factors outside of language. Its main concern is to study language use and how everything humans speak will always be influenced by the surrounding circumstances. In this respect, this concern is about the interplay between language and society, or in one word, sociolinguistics.

The scope of sociolinguistics is identified at the level of two concepts: Micro- and macro-sociolinguistics. These two concepts were first introduced by Fishman (1972). For other sociolinguists, mainly Hudson (1980) and Wardhaugh (2006), micro-sociolinguistics refers to sociolinguistics in a narrower sense; whereas, macro-sociolinguistics is the sociology of language. What is worth about these two concepts is that they bear different senses and their foci are also at opposite sides.

In what follows, a presentation of the fields would identify what the main concerns and foci of each of them are:

- **Micro-sociolinguistics:** Also referred to as sociolinguistics in a narrow sense, this field of sociolinguistics explores the ways in which society influences a speaker's specific language, and also how people communicate with one another and live with different social factors. It also deals with how language varies with social attitudes, such as sex, class, and age. In short, micro-sociolinguistics studies the context of language to know more about language. Here, the focus is on language.
- **Macro-sociolinguistics:** Also known as the sociology of language, the second field of sociolinguistics focuses more on society as a whole in relation to language. This means that sociolinguists study language use to know more about the social structure; for example, sociolinguistics looks at issues as to why some immigrants keep their native language in some contexts, or how social identity can affect language.

Overall, there is a difference between micro- and macro-sociolinguistics but the main difference is fundamentally on emphasis. It depends on whether the sociolinguist is more interested in language or society.

4. Methods of Sociolinguistics

The development of sociolinguistics has been on-going since its emergence in the late twentieth century. Since then, the methods used to investigate the sociolinguistic phenomena were numerous and varied in both theoretical and methodological grounds. However, it is worth noting that almost all these methods have been conditioned by the research objectives and guided by the disciplinary directions within the study of language and society, namely sociological, sociolinguistic, or linguistic goals.

In line with this brief introduction, it is ostensible that the adopted research methods were either quantitative (empirical) or qualitative (descriptive). The quantitative method usually strives to provide analytical contributions to sociolinguistic studies with an aim to

realise an objective analysis of subject meaning. Whereas, a qualitative approach attempts to produce varying sets of accounts in order to generate interpretations of what sociolinguists are researching. Regarding these common methods, it is noticeable that the field is in a continuous process of theoretical reformulation and methodological redefinition.

What is also remarkable concerning the methods of sociolinguistics is that new lines of inquiry are being opened up and new techniques are being devised to enable sociolinguists to obtain a greater refinement and precision in analysis. By making use of the scientific methods, investigators seek to enrich their audience with a better understanding of the nature and function of language in accordance with the dire need to solve the real human problems of society.