

Lesson 13: introduction to Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics:

The study of the sociological aspects of language. The discipline concerns itself with the part language plays in maintaining the social roles in a community. Sociolinguists attempt to isolate those linguistic features that are used in particular situations and that mark the various social relationships among the participants and the significant elements of the situation.

Sociolinguistics is the study of how language serves and is shaped by the social nature of human beings. In its broadest conception, sociolinguistics analyzes the many and diverse ways in which language and society entwine. This vast field of inquiry requires and combines insights from a number of disciplines, including linguistics, sociology, psychology and anthropology.

Sociolinguistics examines the interplay of language and society, with language as the starting point. Variation is the key concept, applied to language itself and to its use. The basic premise of sociolinguistics is that language is variable and changing. As a result, language is not homogeneous – not for the individual user and not within or among groups of speakers who use the same language.

By studying written records, sociolinguists also examine how language and society have interacted in the past. For example, they have tabulated the frequency of the singular pronoun and its replacement you in dated hand-written or printed documents and correlated changes in frequency with changes in class structure in 16th and 17th century England. This is historical sociolinguistics: the study of relationship between changes in society and changes in language over a period of time

Influences on the choice of sounds, grammatical elements, and vocabulary items may include such factors as age, gender, education, occupation, race, and peer-group identification, among others.

For example, an American English speaker may use such forms as “He don’t know nothing” or “He doesn’t know anything,” depending on such considerations as his level of education, race, social class or consciousness, or the effect he wishes to produce on the person he is addressing. In some languages, such as Japanese, there is an intricate system of linguistic forms that indicate the social relationship of the speaker to the hearer.

Social dialects, which exhibit a number of socially significant language forms, serve to identify the status of speakers; this is especially evident in England, where social dialects transcend regional dialect boundaries.

Sociolinguists are interested in

- Explaining why people speak differently in different social contexts.
- The effect of social factors such as (social distance, social status, age, gender, class) on language varieties (dialects, registers, genres, etc),
- Identifying the social functions of language and the way they are used to convey social meanings.

The scope of sociolinguistics: and macro-sociolinguistics. (Fishman, 1972).

1. **Micro- sociolinguistics** studies how 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 gender, class, and age. (effects of society on the language)
2. **Macro- sociolinguistics is also called the sociology of language**, it focuses on society in relation to language; in other words, it studies the language use to know more about the social structure.