What is Sociolinguistics?

Why be interested in studying sociolinguistics?

Socio- + linguistics

Sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society; it focuses on how language is used by the individual speaker and groups of speakers in its social context.

Sociolinguistics (formal definition)

"A term used to describe all areas of the study of the relationship between language and society other than those which are purely social scientific in their objectives, such as ethnomethodology. Sociolinguistic research is thus work which is intended to achieve a better understanding of the nature of human language by studying language in its social context and/or to achieve a better understanding of the nature of the relationship and interaction between language and society."
Sociolinguistics
(formal definition continued)

“Sociolinguistics includes anthropological linguistics, dialectology, discourse analysis, ethnography of speaking, geolinguistics, language contact studies, secular linguistics, the social psychology of language and the sociology of language.” Trudgill (2003:123)

Some Generalizations about Sociolinguistics
To sketch out a general picture of what sociolinguistics is all about, the following four generalizations define the scope, methods, focus, and objective of sociolinguistics.

Scope of Sociolinguistics
First Generalization:
1. The scope of sociolinguistics encompasses who says what to whom, when, where, how, and why.

Focus of Sociolinguistics
Second generalization:
2. Sociolinguistics focuses on the linguistic variation of the individual speaker and the speech community (society), i.e. their use of two or more ways of saying the same thing.

Methods of Sociolinguistics
Third generalization:
3. Sociolinguistics makes use of scientific methods to observe and measure the individual speaker’s and the speech community’s (society’s) linguistic variation, i.e. their use of two or more ways of saying the same thing.

Objective of Sociolinguistics
Fourth Generalization:
4. The major objective of sociolinguistics is to explain how speakers’ linguistic variation (i.e. their variable linguistic behaviors) are correlated with variation in the speakers’ social characteristics (i.e. their variable social backgrounds).
Some Sociolinguistic Terms

Language          Linguistic variation
Society           Linguistic item
Social variable   Linguistic variable
Dialect           Idiolect
Topolect          Sociolinguistic variation
Mutual intelligibility
Accent            Linguistic variety
Speech variety, variety

Language (formal definition)

The word *language* comes from the Old Latin word *dingua* 'tongue; language'.

"A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols [i.e. words that have been formed through the arbitrary combination of speech sounds and that convey meanings] by means of which the members of a society interact in terms of their total culture." Trager (1949; quoted in Crystal 2002:400).

Society

A society is typically diverse and complex in that it is made up of a wide range of individuals who differ in their social characteristics; they may be rich, poor, old, young, educated, uneducated, upperclass, middle class, working class, etc.

Some people may speak only one language, while others may speak two or more.

The circumstances of societies, i.e. speech communities, can vary widely.

Social variable

A society is made up of complex aggregates or groups of people from different social backgrounds.

Sociolinguistics is particularly concerned with the social characteristics of the people who live in a particular society.

Such characteristics as sex, age, educational level, income, place of birth, place of residence, occupation, etc. function as social variables in sociolinguistic research.

Importance of Language

• Language ability – being able to speak, read, and write language(s) – is a fundamental capacity that distinguishes human beings from other animals in the world.

Human Language and Animal Communication Systems

• In 1960 the American linguist Charles F. Hockett identified 13 “design features” which he said are associated with various kinds of communication systems, including those of humans as well as animals; however, it is only in human speech that the majority of these design features can be found combined together.
Design Features of Language and Sociolinguistics
• The following list of design features of language is based on the discussion in Crystal (2002:400-401).
• Some of these design features are particularly relevant to the study of the relationship between language and society, i.e. sociolinguistics.

Design Features of Speech
1. **Auditory-vocal channel**: speech sounds travel from speaker’s mouth to listener’s ear.
2. **Broadcast transmission and directional transmission**: speech sounds can be heard by anyone within range of the speaker and their source identified
3. **Rapid fading**: speech sounds have short duration.
4. **Interchangeability**: speaker can say anything s/he can understand.

Design Features of Speech
5. **Total feedback**: speaker hears what s/he says.
6. **Specialization**: sound waves associated with speech sounds only signal linguistic meaning and have no other purpose.
7. **Semanticity**: speech sounds convey meanings by being related to things in the material world.

Design Features of Speech
8. **Arbitrariness**: the particular sequence of speech sounds associated with a particular meaning and word is (generally) not determined by the physical world.
   For example, the thing called *water* in English has other names (strings of speech sounds) in other registers of English (H₂O) and other languages, because the physical nature of water does not determine what it is called in any language.
   Cantonese: 水 seoi2 ‘water; money (!)’

Design Features of Speech
9. **Discreteness**: human speech makes use of a relatively small set of clearly contrastive (i.e. discrete) sounds (consonants, vowels, tones) that combine together to form the words of a language.
10. **Displacement**: speakers can talk about things related to the immediate situation or to some remote place, as well as things related to the present, past, or future.

Design Features of Speech
11. **Productivity**: speakers have an unlimited capacity to express and comprehend meaning by combining words from old sentences to produce new sentences.
12. **Traditional transmission**: speech is passed on to children through (informal and formal) learning, as opposed to genetic inheritance in the case of animal communication systems. Children have the inherited mental capacity to learn any language; which one they learn to speak is determined by their linguistic environment.
Design Features of Speech

13. **Duality of patterning**: at the basic level of speech-sound articulation the individual sounds of any particular language are typically meaningless; it is only at the higher level of speech production that the sounds become meaningful after they have been combined together to form words (or morphemes, i.e. minimally meaningful units).

Design features of speech particularly relevant to sociolinguistics

Features that can be related to linguistic variability:
- Arbitrariness
- Discreteness
- Productivity
- Traditional transmission
- Duality of patterning

Speech has Direct and Indirect Functions:

- To facilitate social relationships among people; it is primarily through speech that we are able to interact with, communicate with, and understand the intentions of other people
- To convey social information about the speaker to the listener/addressee (whether or not either one is consciously aware of this)
  That is, as soon as people open their mouths and start speaking, they reveal things about their social backgrounds.

Social Information Conveyed by a Speaker’s Speech

- Where the speaker was born and raised
- Social class of speaker
- Level of education of speaker
- Social relationship between speaker and listener/addressee
- Level of formality of the social setting (context)

Linguistic variety, Variety

These are neutral terms that can refer to any form of speech, such as language, dialect, accent, sociolect, style, etc.

It has been defined as “a set of linguistic items with similar social distribution”. Hudson (Chp. 2, 1996)

Linguistic item, Linguistic variable

Linguistic item refers to any unit of linguistic structure, such as a speech sound, free or bound morpheme, syntactic pattern, etc.

Because the linguistic item can vary in its meaning, pronunciation, and usage among speakers, it serves as a linguistic variable in sociolinguistic research.
Idiolect

*Idiolect* refers to the linguistic system of each individual speaker as uniquely expressed through his or her own way of speaking. This means that each speaker speaks an idiolect.

Speakers’ Linguistic Knowledge

Generalization:

No two people who think of themselves as speaking the same language possess exactly the same knowledge of that language, because they do not have the same experiences of their language. This statement applies even to siblings growing up in the same family. How can this be the case?

Linguistic variability,

Linguistic variation

One consequence of the differences in the speakers’ knowledge about their language is the phenomenon of variability in the way that language is spoken among the people who make up its community of speakers.

Some Cantonese speakers may or may not recognize Cantonese words

雞纜 *gai¹ hong²* ‘小母雞 (未下過蛋或雖下過蛋但未抱窩孵過小雞的母雞) [pullet, young hen (which has not yet laid eggs or has laid eggs but has not yet hatched chicks)]’ Rao, Ouyang, Zhou (2009:70)

Do you use this Cantonese word in your speech?

• 骨骨, 骨骨 *peng¹ gwat¹* ‘肋骨 (rib bone)’ (185 頁, 饒秉才, 歐陽覺亞, 周無忌. 2009. 《廣州話方言詞典》. 香港: 商務印書館. 修訂版)

What do you call these kinds of lettuce?

1. ________ 2. ________ 3. ________
Different names for these two pieces of living-room furniture?

1.______________ 2.________________

Examples of Phonetic Variation in Hong Kong Cantonese
In listening to Cantonese speakers we can hear that some words can have at least two pronunciations with variation between them (~ = 'varies with'):

你 [ncj ˨˧ ˨˧] 五 [ŋ ˨˧ ˨˧]
男 [naxm ˨˩ ˨˩] 午 [ŋ ˨˧ ˨˧]
女 [neq ˨˧ ˨˧] 吴 [ŋ ˨˩ ˨˩]
過 [kwaːją ˧˧ ˧˧] 百 [pak ˧˧ ˧˧]
光 [kwaj ˥˥ ˥˥] 八 [paj ˧˧ ˧˧]
國 [kwaax ˧˧ ˧˧] 惡 [snk ˦˥ ˦˥]
但 [khaq ˨˧ ʔauq ˨˧] 外 [saj ˦˥ ˦˥]

Social Variability Combines with Linguistic Variability
Some people use these different Cantonese pronunciations in various social situations and with various other Cantonese speakers.

Which pronunciations are considered “correct” or standard Cantonese, and which ones are considered incorrect, i.e., the so-called “lazy” sound瞭音 laan⁵ jam¹?

Different people may use these different pronunciations in different social situations.

Sociolinguistic variation
This term refers to differences in the linguistic behaviors of the individual speaker and groups of speakers (speech communities), i.e., use of different pronunciations, words, grammatical patterns, etc., and how these are correlated with differences in the social characteristics of the speakers who live in the same speech community and think of themselves as speaking the same language.

As stated at the beginning, explaining sociolinguistic variation is the major objective in sociolinguistics.

References