

Week 1: Introduction to Sociolinguistics

An Advanced Overview

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- 1 What is Sociolinguistics?
- 2 The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis Revisited
- 3 Foundational Figures and Theories
- 4 Research Methods and Ethics
- 5 Discussion and Application

- **Sociolinguistics** is the empirical study of the relationship between language and society. It examines how social factors influence language structure and use, and how language, in turn, shapes social relations.
- It moves beyond a purely formalist view of language (cf. Chomsky's *competence*) to focus on *communicative competence* (Hymes, 1972).
- **Key question:** Why do we speak differently in different social contexts?

Micro-Sociolinguistics

- Focuses on language use in specific, face-to-face interactions.
- Examines how social variables (e.g., age, gender, class) affect linguistic variables (e.g., pronunciation, syntax).
- Includes fields like variationist sociolinguistics and interactional sociolinguistics.

Macro-Sociolinguistics

- Studies language on a large scale, across entire communities or societies.
- Often referred to as the **Sociology of Language**.
- Topics include language policy, language shift and death, and diglossia.

Linguistic Determinism and Relativism

- **Linguistic Determinism (Strong Whorfianism):** Language *determines* thought. This view is now largely discredited.
- **Linguistic Relativism (Weak Whorfianism):** Language *influences* thought. This remains a topic of active research.
- The core idea is that the grammatical and lexical structures of a language can shape how its speakers perceive and conceptualize the world.

Case Study: Grammatical Gender

- Lera Boroditsky's research shows that grammatical gender can influence how speakers think about objects.
- For example, in German, the word for bridge (*Brücke*) is feminine, and speakers tend to describe bridges with words like "beautiful" and "elegant".
- In Spanish, the word for bridge (*punte*) is masculine, and speakers tend to use words like "strong" and "sturdy".
- This suggests that grammatical gender can subtly shape our associations with objects.

Neo-Whorfianism and "Thinking for Speaking"

- **Neo-Whorfianism** refers to the modern, more nuanced research on linguistic relativity.
- Dan Slobin's "**thinking for speaking**" hypothesis argues that we select certain aspects of reality to encode in language, and this process of selection can influence our thought patterns, but only when we are actively using language.
- This is a weaker, more constrained version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

William Labov: The Father of Variationist Sociolinguistics

- Pioneered quantitative methods for studying language variation and change.
- **New York Department Store Study (1966):** Investigated the variable pronunciation of post-vocalic /r/ in three department stores of varying prestige (Saks, Macy's, S. Klein).
- **Methodology:** Asked for an item on the fourth floor to elicit the phrase "fourth floor".
- **Findings:** Use of /r/ correlated with both social class (store prestige) and speech style (careful vs. casual), providing strong evidence for systematic social stratification of language.

Dell Hymes: Ethnography of Communication

- Advocated for studying language in its full cultural context.
- Developed the **SPEAKING model** as a heuristic for analyzing speech events:
 - **S**etting and Scene
 - **P**articipants
 - **E**nds (goals, outcomes)
 - **A**ct sequence (form and content of the message)
 - **K**ey (tone, manner)
 - **I**nstrumentalities (channels, forms of speech)
 - **N**orms of interaction and interpretation
 - **G**enre

Basil Bernstein: Elaborated and Restricted Codes

- **Restricted Code:** Characterized by context-dependent meanings, simple syntax, and a focus on solidarity. Often associated with the working class.
- **Elaborated Code:** Characterized by context-independent (explicit) meanings, complex syntax, and a focus on individual expression. Often associated with the middle class.
- Bernstein argued that the education system privileges the elaborated code, potentially disadvantaging working-class children.

- Criticized the use of broad demographic categories like "social class".
- Proposed the concept of **Communities of Practice (CofP)**: groups of people who come together around a shared enterprise.
- Language use is seen as a social practice that helps to construct and negotiate identity within the CofP.
- Famous study of "Jocks" and "Burnouts" in a Detroit high school.

- **Sociolinguistic Interview:** The most common method. Aims to elicit a range of speech styles, from casual to formal.
- **Participant Observation:** The researcher becomes part of a community to observe language use in its natural context.
- **Corpus Linguistics:** Analysis of large bodies of naturally occurring text and speech.
- **Matched-Guise Test:** A technique for studying language attitudes.

- **The Observer's Paradox:** The very act of observing language use can change it. Sociolinguists have developed various techniques to minimize this effect.
- **Informed Consent:** Participants must be fully informed about the research and give their consent to be recorded.
- **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** The identity of participants should be protected.
- **Representation:** How are the findings presented? Is there a risk of reinforcing negative stereotypes?

Advanced Discussion Questions

- ① How does the concept of "communicative competence" challenge traditional, formalist approaches to linguistics?
- ② If linguistic determinism is false, why do you think the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis continues to be so popular in the public imagination?
- ③ Labov's work is often seen as the beginning of modern sociolinguistics. What was so revolutionary about his methods?
- ④ Consider a community of practice to which you belong. What are some of the linguistic features that are characteristic of this group?

Questions?

Conclusion

- Sociolinguistics is a rich and complex field that bridges the gap between language and society.
- It requires a multi-faceted approach that combines linguistic analysis with social theory.
- This course will equip you with the theoretical and methodological tools to critically analyze the social life of language.