

Chapter 4

SOCIO-LINGUISTICS

Language is a social-cultural-geographical phenomenon. There is a deep relationship between language and society. It is in society that man acquires and uses language. When we study a language which is an abstraction of abstractions, a system of systems, we have to study its further abstractions such as dialects, sociolects, idiolects, etc. That is why we have to keep in mind the geographical area in which this language is spoken, the culture and the society in which it is used, the context and situation in which it is used, the speakers who use it, the listeners for whom it is used and the purpose for which it is used besides the linguistic components that compose it. Only then can our study of a language be complete and comprehensive. So we must look at language not only from within but also from without: we should study language from both the points of view of form and functions. Socio-linguistics is the study of speech functions according to the speaker, the hearer, their relationship and contact, the context and the situation. The topic of discourse, the purpose of discourse, and the form of the discourse. An informal definition of socio-linguistic suggested by a linguist is the study of: *"Who can say what how, using what means, to*

whom and why." It studies the causes and consequences of linguistic behaviour in human societies: it is concerned with the function of language, and studies language from without.

Socio-linguistics is a fascinating and challenging field of linguistics. It studies the ways in which language interacts with society. It is the study of the way in which the structure of a language changes in response to its different social functions, and the definition of what these functions are. 'Society, here is to cover a spectrum of phenomena to do with race, nationality, more restricted regional, social and political groups, and the interactions of individuals within groups. Different labels have sometimes been suggested to cover various parts of this spectrum. **ETHNOLINGUISTICS** is sometimes distinguished from the rest, referring to the linguistic correlates and problems of ethnic groups—illustrated at a practical level by the linguistic consequences of immigration; there is a language side to race relations. The term **ANTHROPOLOGICAL LINGUISTICS** is sometimes distinguished from 'sociological linguistics', depending on one's particular views as to the validity or otherwise of a distinction between anthropology and sociology in the first place (for example, the former studying primitive cultures, the latter studying more 'advanced' political units; but this distinction is not maintained by many others). 'Stylistics, is another label which is sometimes distinguished, referring to the study of the distinctive linguistics characteristics of smaller social groupings. (But more usually, stylistics refers to the study of the literary expression of a community, using linguistics gradually merges into ethno-linguistics, anthropological linguistics, stylistics and the subject-matter of psychology.

Broadly speaking, however, the study of language as part of culture and society has now commonly been accepted as **SOCIOLINGUISTICS**. But there are also some other expressions which have been used at one time or another, including 'the sociology of language', 'social linguistics', 'institutional linguistics', 'anthropological

linguistics', 'linguistic anthropology', 'ethnolinguistics', the 'ethnography of communication', etc.

The scope of socio-linguistics, therefore, is the interaction of language and various sociologically definable variables such as social class, specific social situation, status and roles of speakers/hearers, etc. As J.B. Pride says, socio-linguistics is not simply 'an amalgam of linguistics and sociology (or indeed of linguistics and any other of the social sciences)'. It incorporates, in principle at least, every aspect of the structure and use of language that relates to its social and cultural function. Hence there seems no real conflict between the socio-linguistics and the psycho-linguistic approach to language. Both these views should be reconciled ultimately. Linguisticians like John Lyons and cognitive psychologists like Campbell and Wales advocate the necessity of widening the notion of competence to take account of a great deal of what might be called the 'social context' of speech.

No doubt that the study of language as part of culture and society has the now commonly accepted label 'sociolinguistics.' But there are also some other expressions which have been used at one time or another, including 'the sociology of language,' 'social linguistics,' 'institutional linguistics,' 'sociological linguistics,' 'anthropological linguistics', 'anthropology', 'ethnolinguistics', and 'the ethnography of communication'.

LANGUAGE VARIATION

Language with its different varieties is the subject matter of sociolinguistics. Socio-linguistics studies the varied linguistic realizations of socio-cultural meanings which in a sense are both familiar and unfamiliar the currency of everyday social interactions which are nevertheless relative to particular cultures, societies, social groups, speech communities, languages, dialects, varieties, styles. That is why language variation generally forms a part of socio-linguistic study.

Language can vary, not only from one individual to

the next, but also from one sub-section of speech-community (family, village, town, region) to another. People of different age, sex, social classes, occupations, or cultural groups in the same community will show variations in their speech. Thus language varies in geographical and social space. Variability in a social dimension is called sociolectical. According to sociolinguists, a language is code. There exist varieties within the code. And the factors that cause language variation can be summarized in the following way:

- nature of participants, their relationship** (socio-economic, sexual, occupational, etc.)
- number of participants** (two face-to-face, one addressing a large audience, etc.)
- roles of participants** (teacher/student/priest/parishoner/father/son/husband/wife, etc.)
- function of speech event** (persuasion, request for information ritual, verbal, etc.)
- nature of medium** (speech, writing, scripted speech, speech reinforced by gesture, etc.)
- genre of discourse** (scientific, experiment, sport, art, religion, etc.)
- physical setting** (noisy/quiet, /public/private/family/formal gathering, familiar/unfamiliar, appropriate for speech (e.g. sitting room) inappropriate.)
- regional or geographical setting, etc.**

MAJOR VARIETIES IN LANGUAGE

1. Code

'A code' is 'an arbitrary, pre-arranged set of signals' (Gleason, 1968:374). A language is merely one special variety of code. The total organization of various linguistic components in a language is the code of that language. It is an abstract system which happens to be accepted arbitrarily in the community which uses it.

2. Dialect and Sociolect

A regional, temporal or social variety within a single language is a dialect; it differs in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary from the standard language, which is in itself a socially favoured dialect. So a dialect is a variation of language sufficiently different to be considered a separate entity, but not different enough to be classed as a separate language. Sometimes it is difficult to decide whether a variant constitutes a dialectal sub-division or a different language, since it may be blurred by political boundaries, e.g. between Dutch and some Low German dialects. Regional dialects (or local or geographical or territorial dialects) are spoken by the people of a particular geographical area within a speech community, e.g. Cockney in London, but due to the increase in education and mobility they are receding.

"Dialect is a specific form of a given language, spoken in a certain locality or geographic area, showing sufficient differences from the standard of literary form of that language, as to pronunciation, grammatical construction and idiomatic use of words, to be considered a distinct entity, yet not sufficient distinct from other dialects of the language to be regarded as a different language."

—A Dictionary of Linguistics (1945)

A. Pie and Frank Gaynor.

Sociolects (social dialects or class dialects), on the other hand, are spoken by the members of a particular group or stratum of a speech community.

3. Isogloss

An isogloss is 'a line indicating the degree of linguistic change' (Gleason 1963 : 398). 'On linguistic maps, a line separating the areas (called isogloss area) in which the language differs with respect to a given feature of features, i.e. a line making the boundaries within which a given linguistic feature or phenomenon can be observed' (A Dictionary of Linguistics).

So an isogloss is a representation of statistical probabilities, a graphic way of portraying a translation in

speech characteristics from one area to another, a bundle of isoglosses may be interpreted as marking a zone of relative great transition in speech. We may, therefore, think of it as indicating **dialect boundary**. It is a term modelled on geographical terms like **isotherm** (a line joining areas of equal temperature) and **isobar** (a line joining areas of equal atmospheric pressure). It is in contrast to another linguistic term **isograph**, i.e. 'any line on a linguistic map, indicating a uniformity in the use of sounds, vocabulary, syntax, inflection, etc'.

Though an isogloss is a convenient way of description, but may be misleading if the apparent sharpness of distinction between the areas is not carefully discounted. The reading of the isoglosses is even more dangerous, since the reader has not seen the intricate mass of data upon which they are based.

4. Registers

Whereas dialects are the varieties of language according to users, registers are the varieties of language according to use. Registers are 'stylistic-functional varieties of a dialect or language'. These may be narrowly defined by reference to subject matter (field of discourse, e.g. jargon of fishing, gambling, sports, etc.), to medium (mode of discourse e.g. printed material, written, latter, message on tape, etc.), or to level of formality, that is style (manner of discourse). Registers are, therefore, situationally conditioned field-of-discourse oriented varieties of a language'. Some well-known definitions of register are cited below:

1. "By register we mean a variety correlated with a performer's social role on a given occasion. Every normal adult plays a series of different social roles—one man, for example, may function at different times as head of a family, motorist, cricketer, member of a religious group, professor of bio-chemistry and so on, and within his idiolect he has varieties shared by other persons and other idiolects appropriate to these roles. When the professor's wife tell him to 'stop talking like a

professor' she is protesting at a misuse of register."
 —J.C. Catford, *A Linguistics Theory of Translation*, OUP, 1965, p.89

2. Registers are those "varieties of language which correspond to different situations, different speakers and listeners, or readers and writers, and so on."

—R.M.W. Dixon, "On Formal & Contextual Meaning," *A L H (Budapest)*, XIV, p. 38.

3. "By register itself, a linguistic, not situational category, is meant a division of idiolect, or what is common to dialects, distinguished by formal (and possibly substantial) features and correlated with types of situations of utterance (these distinguished by such components as those here enumerated)."

—J. Ellis, "On Contextual Meaning," *In Memory of J.R. Firth*, Longmans, p.83.

According to the role of the speaker, a young lecturer, for example, will speak in different ways when communicating with his wife, his children, his father, his colleagues, his students, when shopping, and so on. Each of these varieties will be a register.

5. Idiolect

Idiolect is a variety of language used by one individual speaker, including peculiarities of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, etc. A dialect is made of idiolects of a group of speakers in a social or regional subdivision of a speech community. Linguists often analyse their own idiolect to make general statements about language. So the idiolect is "an identifiable pattern of speech characteristic of an individual." or "Idiolect is the individual's personal variety of the community language system" (*A Dictionary of Linguistics*: 1954)

6. Diglossia

Where we do find two or more dialects or languages in regular use in a community we have a situation which Fergusson (1959) has called 'diglossia.' He has observed that in diglossia communities there is a strong tendency

to give one of the dialects or language a higher status or prestige, and to reserve it for certain functions in society, such as government, education, the law, religion, literature, press, radio and television. The 'prestige dialect' is often called the standard dialect (the language).

7. Pidgin

A pidgin is a contact language, a mixture of elements from different natural languages. Its use is usually restricted to certain groups, e.g. traders and seamer. Pidgins are used in some parts of South-West Asia. Chinese pidgin, a combination of items from Chinese and English to serve the limited purpose of trade, is another well-known example. An alternative terms used for the pidgin is contact vernacular.

8. Creole

When a pidgin becomes a lingua franca, it is called a creole. Thus a pidgin may extend beyond its limited function and permeate through various other activities. Then it may acquire a standardized grammar, vocabulary and sound-system; and it may then be spoken by an increasing number of people as their first language. It has not such history, not much prestige either. But on account of its wider application and first-language status, it has to be distinguished from a pidgin. A creole or a creolized language is a mixed natural language composed of elements of different languages in areas of intensive contact. Well-known examples are the creoles of the islands of Mauritius and Haiti.

TYPICAL QUESTIONS

- 1. What is an isogloss? How are isogloss useful in determining dialect boundaries?**
- 2. Distinguish between standard language and dialect.**
- 3. Distinguish between dialect and idiolect.**
- 4. Distinguish between pidgin and creole.**

5. ***'What is correct and what is not correct is ultimately only a matter of what is accepted by society, for language is a matter of conventions within society.' Discuss.***
 6. ***What is socio-linguistics?***
 7. ***What do you mean by language varieties? How would you classify language varieties? Give examples from English.***
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