

Lecture: Sociolinguistics

Introduction:

Generally "Sociolinguistics" is defined as the study of the relationship between language and society. It attempts to explain why do people speak differently in different social context as it is concerned with the identification of the social functions of language and the way it is used to convey social meaning.

I. Sociolinguistics:

Sociolinguistics is a developing branch of linguistics and sociology which examines the individual and social variation of language (Spolsky, 2010). It is a term including the aspects of linguistics applied toward the connections between language and society, and the way language is used in different social situations. Sociolinguistics is also considered as a branch of sociology in that it shows the relationship between language use and the social basis for such use (Hudson, 1996). Sociolinguistics is a practical, scientific discipline which researches into the language that is actually used in order to formulate theories about language change (Bell, 1976).

Benzoukha (2013) presents some of the definitions of sociolinguistics that were provided by scholars. Among them:

1. The study of the link between language and society, of language variation, and of attitudes about language (Spolsky, 2010).
2. A branch of anthropological linguistics that examines how language and culture are related, and how language is used in different social contexts (Bell, 1976).
3. A study of the relationship between language and social factors such as class, age, gender and ethnicity (Hudson, 1996).
4. The study of language in relation to its socio-cultural context (Van Dijk, 2009).

II. Language variation in sociolinguistics:

The regional variation of languages is subject to linguistic investigations (Hudson, 1996). The concept of language variation is central in sociolinguistics. Languages vary on individual, regional, national and global levels. Numerous interconnected factors influence how a given language is used. Those factors can be social (such as class, age, gender,...), regional, and ethnic. The differences can be reflected in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and syntax.

III. Factors influencing language variation:

a. Social Class:

According to Trudgill (2000), social class is the position of the speaker in the society which is often measured by the educational level, parental background, the profession and their effect on syntax and lexis that the speaker uses (Trudgill, 2000). He asserts that the speaker's social class affect his way of formulating sentences. Trudgill (2000) distinguished two main groups of language users which are 'middle class' and 'working class'(ibid.).

b. Social Context

Social context is the register of the language used by speakers depending on the different situations. That is, speakers use a formal language in formal settings, and use informal language in informal settings (Spolsky, 2010). Individuals are aware of the differences in speech patterns which mark their social class and they are able to adjust their style according to the interlocutor (ibid.).

c. Geographical Origins

The differences in pronunciation between speakers can identify their geographical region (Trudgill, 2000). Sociolinguistics attempts to investigate the way in which language changes, depending on the region in which the language is used (ibid.). The term 'dialect' is used to describe the variety of language that is different from other languages in grammar, lexis and pronunciation (Hudson, 1996).

d. Ethnicity

According to Oxford Dictionaries, an ethnic group or ethnicity is a category of people who identify with each other, usually on the basis of some factors like a common language, ancestry, history, society, culture, nation or social treatment within their residing area. Bell (1976) claims that there are differences between native speakers and other ethnic groups in the way a given language is used (Bell, 1976).

e. Gender & age

The way men use language differs from that of women in terms of quantity of speech and the intonation patterns (Trudgill, 2000). Moreover, the age of the speaker affects the way he uses vocabulary and grammar (Bell, 1976).

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