



AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLINGUISTICS

RONALD WARDHAUGH
AND JANET M. FULLER

EIGHTH EDITION



WILEY Blackwell

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Series Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[List of Figures](#)

[List of Tables](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Companion Website](#)

[1 Introduction](#)

[The Nature of Language](#)

[Knowledge of Language](#)

[Variation](#)

[Language Users and Their Groups: Identities](#)

[Language and Culture](#)

[The Interdisciplinary Legacy of Sociolinguistics](#)

[Overview of the Book](#)

[Chapter Summary](#)

[Further Reading](#)

[References](#)

[Part I: Languages, Communities, and Contexts](#)

[2 Languages, Dialects, and Varieties](#)

[What is a Language?](#)

[Language or Dialect?](#)

[Standardization](#)

[Regional Dialects](#)

[Social Dialects](#)

[Styles and Indexes: The Social Meanings of Linguistic Forms](#)

[Chapter Summary](#)

[Further Reading](#)

[References](#)

[3 Defining Groups](#)

[Speech Communities](#)

[Communities of Practice](#)

[Social Networks](#)

[Social Identities](#)

[Beliefs about Language and Social Groups](#)

[Chapter Summary](#)

[Further Reading](#)

[References](#)

[4 Language in Context: Pragmatics](#)

[Speech Acts](#)

[Implicature](#)

[Politeness](#)

[Pronouns](#)

[Naming and Titles](#)

[Chapter Summary](#)

[Further Reading](#)

[References](#)

[Part II: Theory and Methods](#)

[5 Language Variation and Change](#)

[Variables and Correlations](#)

[Data Collection and Analysis](#)

[Doing Quantitative Research: What Do the Numbers Really Mean?](#)

[Regional Variation](#)

[Social Variation](#)

[The First Wave of Variation Studies](#)

[Language Variation and Change](#)

[The Second Wave of Variation Studies](#)

[The Third Wave of Variation Studies](#)

[Chapter Summary](#)

[Further Reading](#)

[References](#)

[6 Ethnographic Approaches in Sociolinguistics](#)

[Ethnography: Participant Observation](#)

[The Ethnography of Communication](#)

[Ethnomethodology](#)

[Critical Ethnography](#)

[\(Socio\)linguistic Ethnography](#)

[Digital Ethnographies: Research in Online Communities](#)

[Ethnography in Combination with Other Sociolinguistic Methods](#)

[Chapter Summary](#)

[Further Reading](#)

[References](#)

[7 Discourse Analysis](#)

[Conversation Analysis](#)

[Interactional Sociolinguistics](#)

[Critical Discourse Analysis](#)

[Corpus Linguistics](#)

[Chapter Summary](#)

[Further Reading](#)

[References](#)

[Part III: Multilingual Matters](#)

[8 Languages in Contact: Multilingual Societies and Multilingual Discourse](#)

[Multilingualism as a Societal Phenomenon](#)

[Language Maintenance and Shift](#)

[Diglossia](#)

[Multilingual Discourse](#)

[Chapter Summary](#)

[Further Reading](#)

[References](#)

[9 Contact Varieties: Structural Consequences of Social Factors](#)

[The Structure of Codeswitching](#)

[Loanwords and Calques](#)

[Convergence](#)

[Ethnicized and Social Dialects as Contact Varieties](#)

[Mixed Languages](#)

[Lingua Francas](#)

[Pidgin and Creole Languages: Definitions](#)

[Creole Formation](#)

[Geographical Distribution](#)

[Linguistic Characteristics of P/C Languages](#)

[From Pidgin to Creole and Beyond](#)

[Chapter Summary](#)

[Further Reading](#)

References

10 Language, the Nation, and Beyond

Language and Nation

Language and Migration

Language and Globalization

Language and the Digital World

Chapter Summary

Further Reading

References

Part IV: Sociolinguistics and Social Justice

11 Language, Gender, and Sexuality

Defining Terms: Sex Category, Gender, and Sexuality

Sexist Language

Deficit, Dominance, and Difference

Gender and Sexuality Identities

Discourses of Gender and Sexuality

Chapter Summary

Further Reading

References

12 Sociolinguistics and Education

Social Dialects and Education

Education in Multilingual Contexts

Education and World-Wide English

Chapter Summary

Further Reading

References

13 Language Policy and Planning

[Terminology, Concepts, and Development of the Field](#)

[LPP and Nationalization](#)

[LPP in Post- and Neo-Colonial Contexts](#)

[Multilingual Countries and LPP](#)

[Feminist Language Planning](#)

[Endangered Languages and the Spread of English](#)

[Chapter Summary](#)

[Further Reading](#)

[References](#)

[Glossary](#)

[Index](#)

[End User License Agreement](#)

List of Tables

Chapter 4

[Table 4.1 Uses of *tóngzhì* in 1980s China](#)

Chapter 5

[Table 5.1 Percentage of \[r\] use in three New York City department stores](#)

Chapter 9

[Table 9.1 Pidgins and creoles by lexifier language](#)

List of Illustrations

Chapter 2

[Figure 2.1 'Am I a joke to you' meme.](#)

[Figure 2.2 'Am I a joke to you' meme without subtitles.](#)

Chapter 5

[Figure 5.1 Isoglosses.](#)

[Figure 5.2 Use of *r*-pronunciation by department store \(based on Labov 1972\)....](#)

[Figure 5.3 Multiple negation by social class in Detroit \(based on Wolfram 19...](#)

[Figure 5.4 The Northern Cities Vowel Shift.](#)

[Figure 5.5 Percentages of overreporting by research participants \(based on T...](#)

[Figure 5.6 Percentages of underreporting by research participants \(based on ...](#)

Chapter 8

[Figure 8.1 Linguistic landscapes in Berlin, Germany: 'Your multicultural fre...](#)

[Figure 8.2 Linguistic landscapes in Berlin, Germany: 'King of Çiğköfte.'](#)

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RONALD WARDHAUGH AND JANET M. FULLER

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List of Figures

- [Figure 2.1](#) 'Am I a joke to you' meme
- [Figure 2.2](#) 'Am I a joke to you' meme without subtitles
- [Figure 5.1](#) Isoglosses
- [Figure 5.2](#) Use of *r*-pronunciation by department store
- [Figure 5.3](#) Multiple negation by social class in Detroit
- [Figure 5.4](#) The Northern Cities Vowel Shift
- [Figure 5.5](#) Percentages of overreporting by research participants
- [Figure 5.6](#) Percentages of underreporting by research participants
- [Figure 8.1](#) Linguistic landscapes in Berlin, Germany: 'Your multicultural fresh market'
- [Figure 8.2](#) Linguistic landscapes in Berlin, Germany: 'King of Çiğköfte'

List of Tables

[Table 4.1](#) Uses of *tóngzhì* in 1980s China95

[Table 5.1](#) Percentage of [r] use in three New York City department stores122

[Table 9.1](#) Pidgins and creoles by lexifier language259

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The field of sociolinguistics is increasingly concerned with issues of power and inequality, and as these issues become central, more and more sociolinguists are reflective about the history of the field and how we have brought our own biases to the study of language in society. I am proud to be part of a field that is addressing important social issues and doing the difficult work of reflexivity, while I am also aware that there is much room for improvement, in the field and in this book. Many of the chapter reviewers were helpful in pointing out my own anglophone, binary, and Western biases; while I fear these biases are still present in this book, the extent to which I have succeeded in being more inclusive is due to the excellent feedback I got from reviewers. In addition, they provided input on the content to make this up-to-date and accurate. (Any errors are, of course, my own.) For reviews of book chapters I would like to thank Charlotte Gooskens, Marina Terkouafi, Tony Webster, Itxaso Rodriguez-Ordonez, Farzad Karimzad, Aurelie Joubert, Eva Daussa, Emily Davis, Lotte Verheijen, Joana Duarte, and Nanna Hilton. I literally could not have finished the book without their help. I would also like to thank Stefan Dollinger for helpful comments on various chapters which helped improve the content and text.

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- Additional exercises and examples
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1

Introduction

KEY TOPICS

- What makes a system of communication a language
- What it means to 'know' a language
- How language varies across language users and within the language use of one person
- The social construction of identities
- The relationship between language and culture
- How to define and delineate the study of sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is the study of our everyday lives – how we use language in, for example, our conversations or social media interactions, and how this language use is influenced by the presence of societal norms, policies, and laws which address language. Since you are reading this book, you may already have some idea what the study of sociolinguistics entails; you may already have an interest in, and knowledge about, regional dialects, multilingualism, language policy, or non-sexist language. And we will cover all of these topics, along with many others – for example, what social class and ethnicity might have to do with language use, why we do not always 'say what we mean,' and the role of language in education.

But we would like to encourage readers to approach the study of sociolinguistics not only as an empirical approach

to studying language and society, but as a way of viewing the world around you. In sociolinguistics, we seek to analyze data so that we can make generalizations about language in society, but also to question both our findings and the very process of doing research. Take, for instance, the topic of nicknames. There is a stereotype that men use nicknames and women do not, exemplified in the following joke:

If Diana, Natalie, Naomi, and Maria meet for lunch, they will call each other Diana, Natalie, Naomi, and Maria. But if Matt, Peter, Kirk, and Scott go out for a brewsky, they will call each other Dutch, Dude, Doofus, and Pencil.

We could investigate this sociolinguistic phenomenon by surveying people about their nicknames and also observing or recording interactions in which they are addressed by close friends and family members. We might find, indeed, that the men in our study are often called nicknames, while the women rarely are. But we would like to go deeper than this generalization; why do we ask this question in the first place? Why do we assume that the categories of 'men' and 'women' are socially relevant? What is it about nicknames that makes using them, or not using them, significant social behavior? And even if most men are called by a nickname and most women are not, how do we explain the existence of individual men who do not have nicknames, and the individual women who do?

Thus, while in sociolinguistics we analyze linguistic interactions with the goal of making generalizations, we also question these generalizations and examine how they, in turn, influence how we use language. In short, the goal of sociolinguistics is not to make simple observations (e.g., men call each other nicknames, women do not) but to study the complex ways in which societal norms are intertwined with our language use (e.g., what it means to be a male or

female member of a particular society may influence the terms we use to address each other).

We will come back to these points repeatedly: language, society, and sociolinguistic research findings must all be viewed in their social contexts, interpreted, and redefined. To begin, however, we will offer a starting point for discussing language in society. By society, we mean a group of people who are drawn together for a certain purpose or purposes; this is a rather vague and broad term, and throughout this book we will be engaged in discussing how to draw meaningful boundaries around a group of language users for the purposes of studying their language (see in particular [chapter 3](#)). We use the term language to mean a system of linguistic communication; this includes spoken, written, and signed modes of communication. A note here about terminology: although the majority of the research we will refer to is on spoken language, there is an increasing number of studies looking at written discourse (especially from social media) and we also do not wish to exclude those who communicate through signed languages. Thus, we will use the term 'language user' instead of the more commonly used term 'speaker' as a general term.

The main idea we would like to convey here is that language is inherently social. A society must have a language or languages in which to carry out its purposes, and we label groups of people with reference to how they communicate - e.g., *Spanish speakers, bilinguals, American Sign Language users*. This connection is inevitable and complex; our purpose here is to study the relationship between language and society in more specific ways which help us more clearly define and understand both the social groups and the ways they speak.

In this introductory chapter, we will present some of the basic concepts in the field of sociolinguistics: what defines

a language, what it means to 'know' a language, the nature of differences across and within languages, the importance of social group membership in language use, and different ideas about the relationship between the worldviews of these groups and the languages they use. Further, we will provide a brief discussion of how sociolinguistics draws on ideas from a variety of disciplines for key concepts and approaches to the study of language.

The Nature of Language

A mainstay of introduction to linguistics textbooks (see for example Yule [2017](#)) is a discussion of the nature of language and, often, how it differs from animal communication. Although the human ability to learn language is innate, a person learns a language through contact with others and thus language is **culturally transmitted** – an idea which is at the heart of sociolinguistics. Other features include **discreteness**, **productivity**, and **displacement**, which can be used to distinguish between non-linguistic means of communication such as gestures and language. Another important feature is that the relationship between the form and meaning of a linguistic sign is **arbitrary**; aside from a few onomatopoeic words, such as words for animal sounds (e.g., *meow*, *moo*), the form (including both the sound and the way it might be written) of a morpheme is not derived from its meaning, or vice versa. We see evidence for the arbitrariness of the form-meaning relationship in the presence of synonyms within languages (e.g., *sofa*, *couch*) as well as the fact that words from different languages may have drastically different forms but still have the same meaning (e.g., English *love*, Swahili *kupenda*).

By examining how language works in its social context, sociolinguistics has greatly advanced our understanding of

the relationship between signs and their meanings. The philosopher Peirce (Hartshorne et al.1931) suggested a three-way typology of signs. A **symbol** is a sign which has developed a conventional meaning; for example, a heart shape indicates love. There is nothing about this shape which inherently leads to this interpretation; it is simply a correspondence which has grown out of use. As noted above, linguistic signs are generally symbols, that is, we understand them because of conventionalized meanings, not because of any 'natural' connection between the sign and its meaning. An **icon** is a sign which in some way resembles the object it refers to, such as a map. Although linguistic signs are not generally held to be iconic, particular varieties may be seen as having an iconic relationship with the people who use them (see [chapter 3](#) for a discussion of this in the section on language ideologies). An **index** is something which 'points to' something – such as literal pointing with your finger to indicate what you are referring to, or the commonly used example of smoke indexing fire. Smoke does not resemble fire, but since the two often co-occur, we associate them with each other (as shown in the idiom 'when there's smoke there's fire'). The concept of indexicality is one which has drawn great interest in sociolinguistics. Put simply, certain varieties often come to index certain types of language users; thus indexicality is inherently a central aspect of the study of language in society. We will expand on the use of this concept in sociolinguistics in the next chapter.

Knowledge of Language

As mentioned in the last section, language is culturally transmitted, and while the ability to learn a language is innate, we are not born knowing a particular language, nor

are we genetically pre-dispositioned to speak a certain variety, but we learn the language(s) we are exposed to. The system (or the grammar, to use a well-known technical term) is something that each language user 'knows,' but two very important issues for linguists are (1) just what that knowledge comprises and (2) how we may best characterize it.

In practice, linguists do not find it at all easy to write grammars because the knowledge that people have of the languages they speak is extremely hard to describe. Anyone who knows a language knows much more about that language than is contained in any grammar book that attempts to describe the language. One of the issues here is that grammar books tend to be written as **prescriptive** works; that is, they seek to outline the standardized language and how it 'should' be spoken. What sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropologists do is provide **descriptive** grammars of languages, which describe, analyze, and explain how and why people actually speak their languages.

One example of this difference can be found in the *less/fewer* distinction. Prescriptively, *less* should be used with non-count nouns, such as water, rice, or money; *fewer* is used with count nouns (or noun phrases) such as drops of water, grains of rice, or pesos. So something may be worth *less money*, but it costs *fewer pesos*. Descriptively, however, this distinction does not hold; *less* is often used with count nouns. For example, it is common in the US to see signs in grocery stores indicating that certain cashier lines are for patrons with 'ten items or less,' although 'item' is clearly a count noun. Chances are you will also hear people saying things like *there were less students present today than yesterday*. While some speakers do still adhere to the *less/fewer* distinction, it is being lost in some varieties.

Linguistics are aware of prescriptive rules of language as dictated in reference grammars, and they are not irrelevant in sociolinguistics; as we will discuss below, language ideologies are also an important part of how language functions in society. However, in the study of language, linguists focus on descriptive grammar, that is, the rules inside the heads of language users which constitute their knowledge of how to use the language. This knowledge includes underlying rules and principles which allow us to produce new utterances, to know both what it is possible to say and what it is not possible to say. Most language users can't articulate these rules, but know how to apply them. It is this shared knowledge that becomes the abstraction of a language, which is often seen as something which exists independent of language users. How this knowledge is used by language users is the core of sociolinguistics. In the following sections, we will explore the ways in which sociolinguists and linguist anthropologists have conceptualized language and its users.

Competence and performance

Confronted with the task of trying to describe the grammar of a language like English, many linguists follow the approach associated with Chomsky, who distinguishes between what he has called **competence** and **performance**. He claims that it is the linguist's task to characterize what language users know about their language, that is, their competence, not what they do with their language, that is, their performance. The best-known characterization of this distinction comes from Chomsky himself (1965, 3-4) in words which have been extensively quoted:

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. This seems to me to have been the position of the founders of modern general linguistics, and no cogent reason for modifying it has been offered. To study actual linguistic performance, we must consider the interaction of a variety of factors, of which the underlying competence of the speaker-hearer is only one. In this respect, study of language is no different from empirical investigation of other complex phenomena.

However, it is exactly the interaction of social and linguistics factors that interests Labov, arguably the most influential figure in sociolinguistics in the last sixty or so years. He maintains (2006, 380) that 'the linguistic behavior of individuals cannot be understood without knowledge of the communities that they belong to.' This is the focus of sociolinguistics, and what makes it different from Chomskyan linguistics. We are primarily concerned with real language in use (what Chomsky calls performance), not the language of some ideal language user (i.e., an idealized competence). This distinction is reflected in methodological differences; syntacticians such as Chomsky will often use **grammatical judgments** to get at competence, while sociolinguists tend to use actual language production (see Part II for discussions of sociolinguistic methodologies).

Further, the knowledge which underlies language production, or performance, is more than just knowledge of grammar; language users must also know social norms for

how to use a language – when it is appropriate to speak or to be silent, what topics are acceptable, what form of a question is appropriate to use with a friend versus your boss. There is thus another kind of competence, sometimes called **communicative competence**. This means knowing social rules for communication. These rules are often linked to language, but are also community-specific.

Communicative competence can be independent of grammatical competence; that is, someone may understand the form of the questions ‘What’s up?’ but not understand that this is a greeting, showing grammatical competence but a gap in communicative competence. The reverse may also be true; for instance a second language learner might use a polite form as dictated by the norms of a community, but not use prescriptively correct word order.

Exploration 1.1 Grammatical Judgments

Here are a number of statements that can be 'tagged' to make them into questions. Add a tag question to each with the tag you would be most likely to use and also add any other tags you might also use or think others might use. If you wouldn't use a tag question in this context, is there some other means for seeking confirmation, such as the use of *right?* or *okay?* which sounds more natural to you?

See (1) for an example of a potential answer. Indicate for each example which tag you believe to be the prescriptively 'correct' tag, or if you might associate certain tags only with certain types of speakers. Compare your results with those of others who do this task. If there are differences in your answers, how can you explain them? Do such differences challenge the idea of a shared communicative competence?

1. He's ready, *isn't he?*

Other possible tags: 'innit,' 'ain't he.'

Prescriptively 'correct' tag: 'isn't he.'

2. I might see you next week, ... ?
3. No one goes there any more, ... ?
4. Either John or Mary did it, ... ?
5. Few people know that, ... ?
6. You don't want to come with us, ... ?
7. I have a penny in my purse, ... ?
8. I'm going right now, ... ?
9. The baby cried, ... ?

10. The girl saw no one, ... ?

Variation

The competence–performance distinction just mentioned is one that holds intriguing possibilities for work in linguistics, but it is one that has also proved to be quite troublesome, because the performance of different language users, and the same person in different contexts, can vary quite a lot. For instance speakers in some areas of the Midwestern United States might utter sentences such as ‘The car needs washed’ while others would say ‘The car needs to be washed’ or ‘The car needs washing.’ Further, an individual speaker might use all three of these constructions at different times. (These different structures for expressing the same meaning are called **variants**; we will explain this term and how it is used in more detail below.) For sociolinguists, this **linguistic variation** is a central topic, and a core belief is that variation in language is socially meaningful. There is variation across language users, that is, reflections of different ways that people use a language in different regions or social groups, but also variation within the language use of a single person. No one uses language the same way all the time, and people constantly exploit variation within the languages they know for a wide variety of purposes. The consequence is a kind of paradox: while many linguists would like to view any language as a homogeneous entity, so that they can make the strongest possible theoretical generalizations, in actual fact that language will exhibit considerable internal variation. One claim we will be making throughout this book is that variation is an inherent characteristic of all languages at all times, and the patterns exhibited in this variation carry social meanings. (See the link to a website