

LANGUAGE and CULTURE

David J. Lehner

ABSTRACT

This paper has been divided into two basic parts. The first section discusses earlier thoughts and research about language and where it is spoken. It represents some of the 'first thoughts' (but, by no means, all) about this topic. The second portion of this paper talks of a more 'recent' view of the relationship between cultures and tongues. The reader will discern that 'topics' discussed remain the same in one sense and, yet, different in others. Research has changed direction somewhat. However, the combination of language and culture remains the 'ultimate' as far as teaching is concerned. The demand to study the relationship between culture and language remains-it is to this end that this paper has been written.

INTRODUCTION

The study of the relationship between language and culture is vast, complicated and interesting. It represents the basis of what true language (teaching & learning) and culture are all about. This relationship is huge because ALL things that encompass both language and culture are dealt with-at least, an attempt to this end must be made. Regretfully, it ends in some sort of failure as these two areas are extremely large and complicated. Never-the-less, 'tries' have been made to accomplish this and such attempts will continue.

That this relationship is very complex in nature is an understatement of paramount proportions. In fact, it seems that this complicated relationship is what makes urgent calls for sociolinguistic studies to be carried out. Indeed, little (if anything) is as important! The complexity of both culture and language represent

(in this writer's humble opinion) the ultimate level of language study.

To state that studies of language and its relationship to culture are interesting demands to be made. Again, this concept, of the 'interestingness' of this relationship must be written-as it has been by many famous writers.

I

Sociolinguistics, is the name given to a discipline that concerns itself with the relationship between language and culture. In reality, the two cannot be easily separated because language use is intricately intertwined within the society in which it is used. There was a great growth in this study in the 1960's and 1970's as the relationship between language use and cultural membership became much more clear. Many factors are involved in this complex relationship including the language used by most (if not all) people in a particular society; the interlocutors in any and all language exchanges; the topic(s) discussed; and the personal intentions and experiences of the participants involved-to name just a few possible contributions-to any and all language exchanges. (This, by no means, exhausts the numerous and complex possibilities that exist anytime one investigates language use and culture but it is as good a place as any to start).

Indeed, it is next to impossible to divide language use and culture. The two cannot be separated. Sociolinguistics (as it is now called) represents the study of two of the most interesting components of human existence and their complex, yet highly interesting, relationship.

Why people 'talk' (verbally communicate) in diverse situations and under various conditions (both inside and outside the participants) is attractive in the sense that it really represents the way human beings are and how they interact with each other.

Early definitions of 'sociolinguistics' abound and the reader will now be given some (not, by any means, all). The first ones dealt with communities of speaking. A very uncomplex definition was put forward by John Lyons in 1970. He wrote that: "Speech community: all people who use a given language (or dialect)."

Charles Hockett (1958:8) defined speech communities as: "...the whole set of

people who communicate with each other, either directly or indirectly via the common language”

L. Bloomfield defined a speech community in 1933 as “...a group of people who interact by means of speech.”

John Gumperz in 1962 defined this concept as “...a social group which may be either monolingual or multilingual, held together by frequency of social interaction patterns...”, He later changed this, somewhat primary, definition to the following more complex (and some would argue) ‘more complete form’ of “...any human aggregate characterized by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language use.”

Labov (1972a) and Hymes as well as Halliday in the same year defined speech communities in similar ways to include commonly shared patterns of language use and unclear (abstract) language use variations.

La Page (1968a) and D. Bolinger (in 1975) offered definitions of speech communities which did away with the concepts of ‘speech community’ completely and dealt with societal groups of people that have ‘other’, very distinct, components (especially) in speech patterns as well as a number of non-linguistic items (or ways of doing things) as well as some other commonly held societal characteristics.

The end-result of these changes in how ‘speech communities’ were defined was a move from ‘simple to complex’. This emphasizes just how difficult and, in a sense, ‘all encompassing’ a concept this really was in the beginning. Regretfully, things are still very difficult. Such components as language; dialect; and what really encompasses a ‘speech community’ (to mention just a few obvious, but not all of the factors involved in this concept) have found some sort of ‘place’ in our discussion here.

Given the plethora of possible definitions for ‘speech communities’, the way of examining this concept in this paper starts from the premise that there is no way to define a single group of persons that commonly have every, and all, characteristics in terms of everything (linguistic and non-linguistic) that is involved. Sociolinguistics is not so easy. Indeed, the definition of ‘speech community’

remains elusive. However, the 'need' to start somewhere is accepted and despite the complexities of the relationship between language and culture, an introduction of this highly complex topic is undertaken.

The concepts of what, exactly, makes up language (register & dialect) demand to be dealt with and to state that this is very hard to accomplish is an understatement of huge proportions. Nevertheless, such undertakings must be attempted in order to deal with 'sociolinguistics'.

We must discuss the difference between language and dialect. This is, by no means, a simple inquiry. The most basic definition would state that dialect is subsumed under the rubric of language. Indeed, dialect is, very often defined as, a form of 'language'-a type of it. However, because it is spoken in certain forms that are usually defined by geographical location, its potential problems are extensive. Two major ones exist.

The first 'problem' to be dealt with concerns what Haugen wrote in 1966. Ambiguity exists for the difference between language and dialect according to Haugen (and other scholars) because the word 'dialect' comes from the Greek language where it had a very different meaning (in Greek) than it now has in the English language. This has persisted to the present day.

There is also a factor that deals with the 'size' difference between a language and a dialect. Simply stated, a 'language' has more components in it than a 'dialect' and the latter is a 'part' of the former-a language contains various dialects.

The other thing that must be stated when discussing the difference between a 'dialect' and a 'language' has something to do with the 'prestige' factor. A 'language' is more prestigious than a 'dialect'. There are many so-called 'standard' languages whereas there is no 'standard' dialect of ANY language-in the strictest sense.

There is only one (1) type of language that is referred to as 'standard'. Numerous reasons why one dialect (languages are made up of many dialects) has become a 'standard language'. Numerous reasons why one dialect has become a 'standard language' have do to with such things as A) Choice of this dialect form as a 'standard' language. Why this has happened is usually related to such things as politics, trade, wealth, military strength and so on. B) Dictionaries and grammars

have been written so that people agree on which forms are 'correct' and 'incorrect'. C) The use of function of each linguistic unit has been set. In simple terms the 'proper way and purpose for use' has been decided. D) The so-called 'standard' language has been accepted as such by the country in which it is utilized. (Interested readers are cordially invited to peruse the bibliography to look for books, papers and articles written on this subject. In addition, Haugen 1966; and Garvin & Mathiot 1956, should also be read).

By looking at the above the reader will see that, in one sense, the distinction between 'language' and 'dialect', more or less, does not really exist in terms of linguistics. That is, this distinction really has nothing to do with language 'form'. It has many and various non-linguistic causes.

II

In this section of the present paper, a 'newer' (more current) view of sociolinguistics will be investigated. This differs from the first section (60's and 70's) where findings of this then 'new' field were largely taken. This early work was NOT WRONG by any stretch of the imagination. It represents what was thought of society and language at the time. However, over the course of time (1980's & 90's) things in this study have somewhat changed. This represents that a somewhat 'better' understanding of sociolinguistics has taken place.

Sociolinguistics is defined at present by one scholar as "...the study of the social uses of language..." (Chambers 1995:2). It goes without saying that we, as people, tend to forget how language is utilized in daily life because we use it (in many cases) without conscious thought in our interactions with other humans. This occurs at various levels-the most basic of which is represented at the 'individual' level.

The individual level of language begins with the manner in which word pronunciation takes place. People involved in verbal relationships with each other will, first of all, notice the tones utilized. In short, interlocutors will notice, first of all, if the other voice is monotone or not. People realize at an early age that voice 'must' vary in terms of tone. Monotone language is 'frowned' upon by society.

Indeed, intonation (in simple terms, the raising or lowering of ones voice) is used by people to make certain points

The areas of language use in the 'personal' are many and the interested reader is invited to peruse the bibliography in order to find articles of interest in this highly complex, and yet interesting, part of sociolinguistic study.

In formal use, (between persons who had just 'met' each other) style usually consisted of 'one' (1) pattern. In other words, there was a 'way' to carry out conversations that was accepted. Speech (including word choice) consisted of a 'set pattern'. This way of 'doing a conversation' was 'usually' followed by all and possessed identifying characteristics that demanded serious study.

A highly interesting area of study deals with 'how' language is used. The style utilized by interlocutors. This will say much about the relationship that exists between speakers-relationships; ages; topics discussed; how well people know each other: conversation reasons and etc. Speech styles are very important in this regard. In what manner words are used, so-called, 'formal' and 'non-formal' (casual) forms of words or 'ways' of speaking.

Labov in 1966 performed a highly interesting study of 'how' language was used in New York City. In this work, subjects were asked to talk about games and life-threatening situations. Were different manners of speaking styles and words utilized in order to talk about different things (they were!) ?

In the area of 'free speech' how language was used took on huge proportions. This area has excited persons studying sociolinguistics.

In societies, the social class to which a person belongs is exemplified in linguistic terms. This fell under intense scrutiny by sociolinguists. Indeed, persons could easily (and in most cases, accurately) be classified by manners of speaking and word choice. Much was said indirectly by interlocutors by the manner in which it was expressed and how-such things demanded investigation.

Although many factors exist which influence speech in a plethora of ways-three (3) areas of characteristics in the social domain seem to hold more important positions in this regard: age; sex and class. These, in many ways, social factors subsume within them vast and complex factors which cannot be ignored and studies of what 'exactly' these are is the next (future)-very difficult-area of study in

LANGUAGE and CULTURE

the world of the relationship between society and language.

The most obvious areas of difference between speakers of the same linguistic code with similar backgrounds in terms of place of origin and upbringing to puberty lie in the areas age and sexual persuasion.

Age differences between speakers of the same sex and class will manifest themselves most clearly in the way terms are employed to express similar thoughts to each other. What were the 'in' ways of expression in terms of words used and manners of expression will differ in many cases dependent upon the ages of the participants-although the same or similar meanings, basically, will be the same. It remains the 'work' of linguistic participants to establish common expression grounds for conversation to 'happen'.

Conversation between interlocutors who differ from each other in terms of sexual persuasion will always be much more complex even if the participants are of a similar age. The reasons for the truth of this statement are very obvious. They remain an area of important study which demand exploration.

Topics that people discuss are most often determined by the culture into which they are born. This is most readily apparent in terms of such things as 'phatic communication'. People from the same culture seek each other out in foreign lands. The reasons for this are complex and numerous. However, it is the opinion of this writer (among many others) that the main reason is related to the concept of some kind of a commonality in social terms. Persons from the same culture share things that can be subjects for discussion. This is a true and important.

Social structure positions and how they relate to the participants in any conversation (especially if different) are of paramount importance in terms of topic choice. Indeed, social structure cannot avoid being studied. Whether or not, accurate appraisals for 'all' social interactions can be found, is very difficult and yet, of the utmost necessity.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show (as an introduction) the study of society and language. It is the hope of this writer that it has in some small manner promoted

David J. Lehner

further interest in this area. While admittedly only a brief (and in many ways, incomplete) introduction of this topic, it represents necessary things that must be understood in order for readers to make 'heads or tails' of this area. It is the firm hope of this writer that this paper will further inspire persons to deeply investigate how language affects culture and vice-versa and what complex relations exist between the two. Indeed, many areas demand further study-which can only help the teaching and learning of languages.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Elaine Slosberg 1990. *SPEAKING WITH STYLE: The Sociolinguistic Skills of Children*. London and New York: Rutledge.
- Bell, Allay 1984. *LANGUAGE STYLE AS AUDIENCE DESIGN*. *Language in Society* 13: 145-204.
- Bickerton, Derek 1981. *ROOTS OF LANGUAGE*. Ann Arbor: karma.
- Bloomfield, Leonard 1933. *LANGUAGE* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Bolinger, Dwight L. 1980. *LANGUAGE, THE LOADED WEAPON: THE USE AND ABUSE OF LANGUAGE TODAY*. London and New York: Longman.
- Culvert, Peter 1982. *THE CONCEPT OF CLASS: AN HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION*. London: Hutchinson.
- Cameron, Deborah, and Jennifer Crates 1988. Some Problems in the sociolinguistic explanation of sex differences. *WOMEN IN THEIR SPEECH COMMUNITIES: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND SEX*, Ed. Deborah Cameron and Jennifer Crates. London and New York: Longman. 13-26.
- Chambers, J. K. 1992. *DIALECT ACQUISITION*. *Language* 68: 673-705.
- Chambers, J. K. 1992 a. *LINGUISTIC CORRELATES OF GENDER AND SEX*. *English World-Wide* 13: 173-218.
- Chambers, J. K. 1995. *SOCIOLINGUISTIC THEORY*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Chomsky, Noam 1957. *SYNTACTIC STRUCTURES*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Chomsky, Noam 1980. *RULES AND REPRESENTATIONS*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Davis, Lawrence, 1990. *STATISTICS IN DIALECTOLOGY*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama press.
- Fasold, Ralph 1990. *THE SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF LANGUAGE*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Fischer, John, L. 1958. *SOCIAL INFLUENCES ON THE CHOICE OF A BILINGUAL VARIANT*. *Word* 14: 47-56.
- Fishman, Joshua, A. 1970. *SOCIOLINGUISTICS: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION*.

- Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Hudson, R.A. 1980. *SOCIOLINGUISTICS*. Cambridge University Press.
- Halpern, Diane F. 1986. *SEX DIFFERENCES IN COGNITIVE ABILITIES*. Hillsdale NJ: Erlbaum.
- Hockett, Charles F. 1958. *A COURSE IN MODERN LINGUISTICS*. New York: Macmillan.
- Hyde, Janet Shibley 1981. HOW LARGE ARE COGNITIVE GENDER DIFFERENCES? A META-ANALYSIS. *Psychological Bulletin* 104 (July): 53-69.
- Kroch, Anthony 1978. TOWARD A THEORY OF OF SOCIAL DIALECT VARIATION. *Language in Society* 7: 17-36.
- Labov, William 1963. THE SOCIAL MOTIVATION OF A SOUND CHANGE. *Word* 19: 273-309.
- Labov, William 1970. THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE IN ITS SOCIAL CONTEXT. *Studium Generale* 23: 30-87.
- Labov, William 1975. WHAT IS A LINGUISTIC FACT? Lisse: Peter De Ridder.
- Labov, William 1980. THE SOCIAL ORIGINS OF SOUND CHANGE. *Locating Language in Time and Space*, Ed. William Labov, New York: Academic Press, 253-265.
- Labov, William 1994. *PERSPECTIVES OF LINGUISTIC CHANGE, VOL. 1: INTERNAL FACTORS*. Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell.
- Martinet, Andre 1962. *A FUNCTIONAL VIEW OF LANGUAGE*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Renkema Jan 1993. *DISCOURSE STUDIES: AN INTRODUCTORY TEXTBOOK* John Benjamins Publishing Company. Amsterdam/Philadelphia.
- Ross, Elliot 1982. THE DIVIDED SELF. *The Sciences* (February) 8-12.
- Sapir, Edward 1921. *LANGUAGE: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF SPEECH*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co.
- Stubbs, Michael 1983. *DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF NATURAL LANGUAGE*. The University of Chicago Press-Basil Blackwell Publisher Limited, Oxford, OXA IJF.
- Tannen, Deborah 1984. *CONVERSATIONAL STYLE: ANALYZING TALK AMONG FRIENDS*. Norward NJ: Ablex.
- Trudgill Peter and J. K. Chambers 1991. *DIALECTS IN ENGLISH: STUDIES IN GRAMMATICAL VARIATION*. London and New York: Long man.
- Wells, J. C. 1982. *ACCENTS OF ENGLISH I: AN INTRODUCTION*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zadeh, Lofti A. 1965. FUZZY SETS. *Information and Control* 8: 338-353.

