Sociocultural Linguistics

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Sociocultural linguistics refers to a wide-ranging field of interdisciplinary scholarship concerned with language as a sociocultural phenomenon. Rather than an institutionally bound academic discipline, the field represents a broad coalition of researchers across disciplinary boundaries with a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives. These perspectives draw from sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, socially oriented forms of discourse analysis, and related disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, such as folklore studies, literary studies, social theory, social psychology, and the philosophy of language. Although the field has roots in work done by linguists and anthropologists stretching back over a century, modern efforts to forge interdisciplinary research on language, culture, and society began to take shape in the 1960s and 1970s. One of the leading figures in these efforts was Dell Hymes who—in different programmatic statements—adopted the terms *linguistic anthropology* and *sociolinguistics* to refer to this type of research. Hymes's interest was in linking linguistics with anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines in an effort to study language in its sociocultural context. Early on, *sociolinguistics* became a cover term for this open field of research. However, as the field evolved through the lenses of different disciplinary orientations, *sociolinguistics* narrowed in its referential range. Especially within linguistics departments in the United States, the label became primarily associated with a quantitative approach to the study of language variation as it relates to speakers' membership in social categories. At the same time, linguistic anthropology developed a separate research trajectory oriented to disciplinary concerns in anthropology. To recognize the substantial overlap that exists (historically and currently) between these and related research traditions, and to encourage continued and renewed interdisciplinary dialogue, *sociocultural linguistics* has developed as a less historically loaded umbrella term for the broad area of study originally outlined and pioneered by Hymes and his contemporaries.

Intellectual roots

Among a number of precursors to the modern interest in language, culture, and society, two strands of scholarship hold particular salience for the modern conception of sociocultural linguistics. The first is the North American anthropology spawned by Franz Boas around the turn of the 20th century. In the four-field conception of anthropology forwarded by Boas, language and linguistics became an integral part of the study of human cultures. Boas himself pioneered linguistic analysis in the documentation of

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Native American languages as part of a broader ethnological project. For Boas, language provided a window into culture, which necessitated the need for ethnologists to learn the language of the people they wanted to study. Boas passed down this orientation toward language to numerous students who became influential leaders in both cultural and linguistic anthropology. His students included linguist Edward Sapir who contributed to the concept of linguistic relativity and recognized that "[l]anguage is primarily a cultural or social product and must be understood as such" as he called for linguists to "become increasingly concerned with the many anthropological, sociological, and psychological problems which invade the field of language" (Sapir, 1929, p. 214). Around the same time, dialectologists operating in the tradition of German dialectology, with origins in the late-19th century, increasingly turned an eye toward one of those sociological problems alluded to by Sapir: that of the sociological component of linguistic geography. As dialectologists set out to create maps that documented linguistic variation, they recognized that speech differences were not idiosyncratic but were related to social structure (e.g., McDavid, 1948). Yet after the mid-20th century, the dominant paradigm in linguistics centered on the research program outlined by Noam Chomsky; it was the reaction to that program that helped forge the modern study of language, culture, and society.

As Chomskyan linguistics took center stage, attention turned toward theorizing the formal properties of language by focusing on the grammatical "competence" (i.e., grammatical knowledge) possessed by an "ideal speaker-listener." Chomsky contrasted the ideal speaker's *competence* with *performance*, or what the speaker actually does with language in speaking. The Chomskyan focus on competence in an ideal speaker necessarily takes a homogenous view of language while ignoring the diversity and variation among speakers. In an attempt to argue for the importance of performance in gaining a fuller understanding of language, Dell Hymes (in Bright, 1966) coined the term *communicative competence* to account not just for a speaker's grammatical knowledge but also the social knowledge that allows the speaker to use language appropriately in actual social situations. He argued that one must "conceive of the social factors entering into realization [of language use] as constitutive and rule-governed too" (Hymes, 1974, p. 93). As a result, Hymes forwarded an approach that he first termed the *ethnography of speaking* and eventually the *ethnography of communication*. Rather than setting aside the various dimensions of language relegated to performance in the Chomskyan model, an ethnography of communication attempts to explicate the norms and patterns of communicative behavior—that is, the *ways of speaking*—within a community. The analytic focus is placed on *speech events*—the activities governed by communicative norms—and *speech acts*, the utterances used within speech events. The SPEAKING mnemonic provides a heuristic for approaching the communicative situation. It includes examining the Setting (time, place, location, etc.), Participants (age, gender, social status, etc.), Ends (purpose of event, goals of participants), Act (the organization of speech acts within the event), Key (tone or manner of speaking), Instrumentalities (language or language variety used, speech or writing, etc.), Norms (rules of interaction and interpretation), and Genre (type of speech event). Underlying this approach is the notion of a *speech community* as a social unit rather than a linguistic system. "One starts with a social group and considers the entire organization of linguistic means within

it, rather than start with some one partial, named organization of linguistic means, called a 'language'" (Hymes, 1974, p. 47). The perspective provided by Hymes became an important part of a broader movement that enriched the study of language by focusing attention on heterogeneity and variation.

Linguistic variation and change

From the beginning, a key element of sociocultural linguistic research has been the way language varies across groups of users in any given society. Having done dissertation work in the tradition of German dialectology, John Gumperz became one of the early figures to link dialectology with the inchoate field of language, culture, and society. In the mid-1950s, Gumperz collaborated with Charles Ferguson to examine the patterns of multilingualism and linguistic diversity in South Asia (Ferguson & Gumperz, 1960). Their ethnographic fieldwork focused on the social processes of language contact and the social patterning of variability in a multilingual society. Their contributions include the 1958 paper by Gumperz, "Dialect Differences and Social Stratification in a North Indian Village," which examines the subtle linguistic differences among speakers of the village dialect in Khalapur, India. In the study, Gumperz turns his attention to the patterning of phonological variants, which he found to aggregate into six linguistic subgroups in the village. After considering several possible social factors to explain these subdialects—including residential patterns, rituals associated with caste status, contacts made through work or economic activity, adult friendship groups, and children's play groups—Gumperz concludes that although some correlation existed between linguistic grouping and ritual status, the overriding determining factor was informal friendship contacts. Friendship groups, which also related to caste membership (touchable castes avoided contact with untouchable castes), shared the same linguistic features. The work underscores the notion that dialects are not merely regional in scope but also social. People living in the same community who otherwise speak the same regional dialect (the concern of dialectologists) can be seen to pattern into social groupings (the concern of sociolinguists). Variant forms arise that are associated with social *prestige* or *stigma*, and these social factors play a role in linguistic variation and change.

The social dimensions of language variation and change gained further attention in the work done by William Labov beginning in the 1960s. Labov's early work includes a study of speech patterns on Martha's Vineyard and an examination of social stratification in New York City English. In the Martha's Vineyard study, Labov (1963) shows that positive orientation toward the island is correlated with higher use of linguistic features distinct to island speakers. The study holds implications for the importance of social identity as a driving force behind linguistic variation. In his study of New York City English, Labov (1966) shows that prestige forms (such as the pronunciation of the "r" in "floor") correlate with social class (speakers from higher classes pronounce the "r" more frequently than speakers from lower classes). Another aspect of this research examines the variation that occurs among speakers in situations that differ by degree of formality. Labov pioneered the use of *sociolinguistic interviews* to collect data that

ranged from casual conversation (least formal situation) to the reading of word lists (most formal situation). He found that the more formal the situation, the more frequently speakers used the prestige variety (associated with upper-middle-class pronunciation). He also found that, overall, prestige forms were used more frequently by those in the higher social classes than those in the lower social classes—with one exception. The lower-middle-class speakers produced the prestige forms more frequently than the upper-middle-class group in the formal situations. They exhibited a *hypercorrection* as they aimed for a target represented by the prestige form. Labov's research drew out the implications of these findings to formulate a theory of language change that takes into account the role played by social pressures. The work also made a substantial methodological contribution to the study of sociolinguistic variation by implementing the use of quantitative and statistical methods to examine correlations between linguistic forms and sociological categories. The linguistic forms, termed *sociolinguistic variables*, typically involve phonetic variants but can also include grammatical and (to a lesser extent) lexical forms, while the sociological categories might include class, sex, age, or race. Research of linguistic variation in this tradition is termed *variationist sociolinguistics*, and is now most typically associated with *sociolinguistics* as an unmarked term. Drawing upon Labov's methods, Peter Trudgill was one of the first to study social stratification in British society; and throughout his career Trudgill has fostered research in (urban) dialectology, merging a focus on sociolinguistic variation with the study of dialects.

Linguistic dimensions of society

A focus on linguistic structure as it relates to variation and change places the lens of inquiry on the social dimensions of language. Yet that focus can also be flipped to examine the linguistic dimensions of society, asking bigger picture questions that deal with how societies use and orient to their languages. In multilingual societies, for example, different languages spoken by the same people may have differing functions. Charles Ferguson introduced the notion of *diglossia* to refer to a situation where two distinct yet related language varieties are used within the same speech community. The varieties exist in a hierarchical relationship with one being the prestigious or high variety (H) and the other the vernacular or low variety (L). Whereas the low variety is learned and spoken as a first language, the high variety is taught in school and is used in more formal interactions. Classic examples include Standard German (H) versus Swiss German (L) in Switzerland, and Standard French (H) versus Haitian Creole (L) in Haiti. In his use of *diglossia*, Joshua Fishman (1967) extended the concept to the hierarchical ordering of distinct languages. Diglossia differs from the concept of code-switching, which is less rigidly prescribed by the relationship between participants and the activity in which they are engaged. John Gumperz and Jan-Petter Blom (in Gumperz & Hymes, 1972) distinguished between *situational code-switching*, where alternation between codes redefines a social situation, and *metaphorical code-switching*, where code alternation enriches an interaction with allusion to different social relationships within the encounter. In later work, Gumperz refined the concepts

with the term *conversational code-switching*, and placed a greater emphasis on close analysis of particular instances of interaction to fully explain the contextual function of code-switching.

In societies where languages come into contact, the behaviors and attitudes toward languages can result in various forms of language displacement, shift, maintenance or even death. Joshua Fishman helped pioneer the study of these and related issues, which are often captured under the label *sociology of language*. In situations of *language displacement*, a dominant language exists in opposition to one or more minority languages. Instances of immigration are one example where *language shift* occurs as speakers of the immigrant language acquire the language of the dominant group. This typically occurs across three generations with monolingualism in the immigrant language of the first generation giving way to bilingualism in both languages in the second generation and finally moving to monolingualism in the dominant language in the third generation. Indigenous ethnolinguistic groups facing encroachment from colonial powers is another situation where language displacement can lead to the complete loss of a language, or *language death*. Of the more than 300 languages spoken in North America when European colonization began, for example, less than half remain and most of those are no longer learned by children — a final stage in the loss of a language. Language shift involves a complex set of external and internal factors that include the orientations speakers have toward minority and dominant languages. Research on language shift and maintenance probes the social, psychological, and political aspects of this process. Of particular interest are language attitudes that impact the valuation/devaluation of languages within a community in light of economic, social, and political pressures.

Language attitudes also impact the value and status of dialects of the same language within a society, forming associations of prestige or stigma with different varieties. It should be emphasized that notions of prestige or stigma are social judgments, not scientific characterizations. From a linguistic perspective, all language varieties are systematic and rule-governed even as speakers attach different value judgments to the varieties. Linguists speak of *nonstandard dialects* (which vary from the socially ratified standard) but not *substandard dialects* (which erroneously imply a lack of communicative function). For example, in the United States, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has been stigmatized and viewed as "lazy English" or "ungrammatical" even though it is a fully fledged linguistic system as complex as any other. Such attitudes impact upon educational issues, such as whether or not to recognize and culturally validate AAVE as a legitimate form of communication among students who speak it outside the school setting where Standard English is taught and used. Related issues impinge upon debates over bilingual education and the status of minority languages within the classroom and society at large. The linguistic dimensions of society are numerous, as are the research angles taken by scholars to study them.

Discourse and interaction

An important element of the sociocultural dimension of language involves the way language is used and interpreted as speakers interact. Scholars have developed various

approaches to the study of *discourse*, or language in use to examine the topic from different analytic angles. Quite distinct from the ethnography of communication approach outlined by Hymes, another approach formulated during the 1960s and 1970s is *conversation analysis* (CA), which was pioneered by sociologists Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson (e.g., Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Influenced by the *ethnomethodology* of sociologist Harold Garfinkel and the analysis of interaction rituals by sociologist Erving Goffman, CA aims to explicate the procedures, methods, and practices used by speakers to design and make sense of their talk in interaction. The focus is on the aspects of conversation that participants themselves orient to in their talk and therefore make salient and meaningful to the interaction order. CA methods involve detailed, fine-level transcriptions of recorded conversations that account for pauses, overlaps, back-channel cues, breaths, laughter, lengthened vowels, and other features of talk. The close analysis of such transcripts provides a great deal of insight into the mechanisms of talk in interaction, including how speakers maintain or cede a conversational turn, accept or refuse requests, signal the end of a conversation, and otherwise direct the flow of talk. CA has contributed valuable tools and procedures for studying talk on the microanalytical level.

Another approach to discourse analysis, captured under the label *interactional sociolinguistics*, was developed by John Gumperz who became interested in the miscues and divergent interpretations that often occur during instances of *cross-cultural communication*. Gumperz borrowed insights from the ethnography of communication, pragmatics, and conversation analysis to formulate a theory of *conversational inference*. As Gumperz points out, understanding always rests on inferences, which interactants make based on knowledge from their communicative and cultural backgrounds. Communicative intentions are signaled between interactants through the use of *contextualization cues*, which include a host of verbal, nonverbal, and prosodic forms that work to invoke an interpretive frame for the unfolding discourse. Contextualization cues are culturally conditioned, so when a speaker interacting with a listener who shares a common cultural background employs contextualization cues (for example, a smile and wink) to indicate a particular interpretive frame (such as an ironic joke), the communicative intent is successfully read by the listener (in this case, interpreted as nonserious). However, one could easily imagine (and has likely experienced) a situation where the contextualization cues used by a speaker to signal humor are misread by the listener who interprets the utterance with serious intent. Such situations are exacerbated in instances of cross-cultural miscommunication where a common language may be shared without a shared set of culturally specific interactive norms. In a classic example provided by Gumperz (1982), he shows how the prosodic contextualization cues used by a West Indian bus driver in London are misread as signs of rudeness by the passengers on the bus due to different contextualization conventions surrounding the signaling of politeness/rudeness in English versus West Indian cultures. As this line of research underscores, the interpretation of language in use clearly involves a great deal of communicative competence that goes beyond knowledge of syntactic rules or semantic content. Moreover, discursive interaction involves an intricate process of meaning negotiation that dynamically unfolds as the interaction proceeds.

Numerous approaches to the analysis of discourse exist with a range of theoretical and methodological assumptions, yet in one way or another they all engage in a close and systematic examination of text, talk, or human interaction. Despite the bias toward spoken interaction in much work that is categorized as *discourse analysis*, the concept of *discourse* can also be taken to mean any form of human semiotic activity. In addition to spoken language, this may include written texts, multimodal texts, and even the use of silence as a communicative act. Moreover, discourse analysis can vary in the degree to which it focuses on microlevel discourse processes (as CA does) or macrolevel societal concerns, such as social hierarchies, ideological structures, and issues of power. The approach known as *critical discourse analysis* (CDA) focuses on the latter in an attempt to unravel the ideological underpinnings of discourse as it is used to produce, reproduce, or contest forms of social and political power. *Ideology* refers to a system of thoughts and ideas that represents the world from a particular perspective while making the interested positions entailed in that perspective opaque. As a result, ideologies work to legitimate positions by naturalizing certain perspectives as "common sense" (rather than representative of an interested position). Pioneering figures in CDA include Paul Chilton with contributions on metaphor and political discourse, Teun van Dijk with contributions on racism and ideology, Norman Fairclough with contributions on media discourse and the language of capitalism, and Ruth Wodak with contributions on nationalism and the development of the *discourse-historical approach*. Many practitioners of CDA have been influenced by Michael Halliday's *systemic functional linguistics*, which provides a social approach to the study of grammar in contrast to the asocial approach representative of Chomskyan formalism. In addition to spoken discourse, CDA often features work on written texts as well as multimodal discourse, including visual images along with text or speech. Rather than consisting of a single method or theory, CDA contributes to discourse studies by providing a focus on the sociopolitical dimensions — whether overt or covert — of language use.

Regardless of the specific theoretical or methodological assumptions of the approach taken, discourse analysis forms an integral component of much work done by sociocultural linguists of various stripes. One of the general contributions of discourse analysis is to underscore that language use works to construct the social world rather than simply reflect a preexisting world already in place prior to social interaction.

Ethnography, language, and culture

As suggested by Dell Hymes, applying an ethnographic approach to the study of language can provide a rich understanding of the practices surrounding language use. Defined as *participant observation* as it was conceived and employed by British social anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski (whose early 20th-century contributions also include work on the contextual and pragmatic dimensions of language use), ethnography involves careful observation of a particular community while participating in its events and activities. Through the collection of a number of viewpoints, including the researcher's own insights as a participant in the community and broader perspective as a scholar distanced from one's own cultural biases, the ethnographer

produces a description that may include various dimensions of the community's social organization, social activities, and symbolic practices.

An ethnographic approach to language is deeply embedded in North American *linguistic anthropology*, but the use of ethnography pervades the work of scholars of various backgrounds. Within the British intellectual context, an approach championed by Ben Rampton and colleagues has developed under the moniker *linguistic ethnography*, bringing together applied linguists, discourse analysts, and sociolinguists (broadly defined). Work done by linguistic ethnographers often centers on discourse in educational and institutional settings close to home with an aim of working from the inside out to relate contextually specific practices to societal concerns (e.g., inequality, literacy, second language development). Among variationist sociolinguists interested in language variation in relation to social groupings, ethnography has been used to gain an emic perspective on the social categories that are salient to a community instead of simply using taken-for-granted macrosociolinguistic categories or etic categorizations. In the case of John Rickford's research in Cane Walk, Guyana, ethnographic groundwork provided insight into local conceptions of class divisions. Likewise, in the work done by Penelope Eckert, ethnography uncovered differentiation in a US high school where the locally defined social groups of "jocks" and "burnouts" were a fundamental part of the community's social organization and hence linguistic variation. In many ways, a focus on the ethnographic dimensions of language has afforded scholars insights that expand well beyond those originally promised by the Hymesian ethnography of communication tradition.

Aside from ethnography, an anthropological approach to language—particularly as it has developed within *linguistic anthropology*—emphasizes several key ideas pertinent to understanding the social life of language. These include the semiotic process of *indexicality*, whereby contiguity is established between a sign and its meaning. The concept has roots in the semiotics of philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, and was introduced into linguistic anthropology via the work of Michael Silverstein. Silverstein studied with Russian linguist Roman Jakobson and was influenced by his work on the different functions of language. At issue is the way language conveys multiple levels of meaning at once, so that in addition to referential or denotational meaning (i.e., the basic semantic content of utterances) language also conveys contextual or social meaning (e.g., social status, gender, race, regional identity). For example, a British speaker visiting the United States can signal information about his national origins without explicitly stating that he is from Britain. Features of his pronunciation *index* that identity on top of whatever referential content he conveys while speaking. His pitch of voice can also index gender identity; and other linguistic forms might convey affect or enact certain stances—all are types of social, or *indexical meaning*. "This is possible because the language we use carries in it a social history, a series of connections to times and places where the same expressions or the manner in which they are articulated have been used before" (Duranti, 1997, p. 209). Indexicality has important implications in the study of language and *identity* in that linguistic forms act as fundamental resources in the production of identities. Indexicality also bears on discussions of *intertextuality* and *interdiscursivity*—the connections that exist between language use in one context with language use in other contexts. Intertextual links to

prior contexts effectively index the social history created in those contexts and bring them into the current interactional setting.

Another key idea in language and culture is the concept of *language ideologies*, which are sets of systematic beliefs and ideas about language or language use. Language ideologies evolve historically through public articulations that work to rationalize or justify perceptions about the structure and use of language. Language ideologies typically operate as unrecognized premises or taken-for-granted assumptions, although they can sometimes rise to the level of conscious awareness. For example, one common language ideology is what Michael Silverstein (1976) has termed *monoglot standard*. Its premises include the beliefs that (i) where more than one language variety exists only one form is "correct," (ii) there are logical arguments for why that form is "correct," (iii) the form deemed "correct" is spoken by those who hold more prestige, and (iv) learning to speak the "correct" form will lead to positive social and economic outcomes. Contrast the assumptions of this ideology with the discussion earlier about all language varieties being systematic and rule governed. The ideology of the monoglot standard holds definite implications for the way speakers of nonstandard varieties are treated in society, as pointed out in the case of AAVE in the educational setting. In general, language ideologies are interesting because they have an impact on language use and structure. Moreover, language ideologies often intersect with other types of ideologies, such as racial ideologies or political ideologies, to not only impact language use but also social practice.

Wider influences

Beyond the research traditions and directions noted here, the study of language, culture, and society has benefited by reaching into a number of related areas in the social sciences and the humanities. Whether it is Mikhail Bakhtin's *dialogism*, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *symbolic power*, Anthony Giddens's *structuration theory*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *social constructionism*, Michel Foucault's conception of *discourse* and insights on *knowledge-power*, Judith Butler's *gender theory*, Jacques Derrida's *deconstruction*, or various forms of social theory that include critical theory, feminist theory, and poststructuralism, it is clear that there is no dearth of potential influences for language scholars. Much of this has been helped along by the linguistic and discursive turns that took place throughout the social sciences and humanities around the same time that modern sociocultural linguistics began to take shape, providing for a greater overall interest in language among diverse fields of study.

The study of language, culture, and society has historically benefited and currently continues to benefit from the cross-fertilization that takes place as scholars from different disciplinary orientations come together to share ideas and concerns. As with any interdisciplinary domain that draws together a wide range of research traditions housed in distinct academic departments, defining its scope inevitably spotlights certain interests while overlooking others, and risks glossing over salient differences that do exist between different disciplinary orientations. Particularly with regard to current and historical influences and research topics, the sociocultural linguistic universe necessarily

extends beyond what has been mentioned here. This overview should not be taken to be either completely inclusive nor is it intended to be deliberatively exclusive. Moreover, the point of defining sociocultural linguistics as a field of study is not to align all research on language, culture, and society under a single disciplinary banner, but rather to "forge an alliance or coalition that fosters dialogue and collaboration between complementary approaches" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2008, p. 403). Insofar as many scholars involved in the field are accustomed to interacting with different research traditions and moving between institutional settings in their own work, *sociocultural linguistics* provides a means for capturing the substantial overlap that exists in the broad study of language as a sociocultural phenomenon.

SEE ALSO: Dialects; Discourse Analysis; Ethnography of Communication; Identity Construction; Indexicality; Interactional Sociolinguistics; Interdiscursivity; Language Ideologies; National Language Policies; Speech Community

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