Sociolinguistics: Study of Language in the Social Context

Dr. Farida Yousaf*

Abstract

Sociolinguistics is the field that studies the relation between language and society, between the users of language and the social structures in which the users of language live. The study of language in the social context has become more important in the modern age. One of the most revealing opportunities for studying language socialization is in the case of children growing bilingually. The study of bilingualism provides and excellent laboratory for observing how a child can learn to be member of two or more distinct societies. A major topic in sociolinguistic is the connection between the structures, vocabularies and ways of using particular languages and the social roles of the men and women who speak these languages. We find reflexes of gender differences in language for most societies differentiate between men and women in various marked ways. Power is an important influence on language in most urban societies. Language has become to be seen as the major locus of ideology and so of major significance with respect to power. Language, culture and thought are impinged into each other in many ways. Most of language is contained with in culture and a society's language is an important aspect of its culture. The relation of language to culture is that of the part to whole. Thus Sociolinguistics explores new areas of interrelationship between language and society and plays a vital role in maintaining the social context of language.

Sociolinguistics is the field that studies the relation between language and society, between the users of language and the social structures in which the users of language live. It is a field of study that assumes that human society is made up of many related patterns and behaviours, some of which are linguistic. The study of language is no longer an abstract study of grammatical rules, but in modern age language is more important in the social context.

Language is a tool of communication and a source of maintaining the social relationship, for instance, mother and child talk to each other in order to nurture the social bond between them and to develop a sense of companionship between themselves. Similarly when we meet strangers, the way they talk, informs us about their social and

* Associate Professor, Department of English, B. Z. Univesity, Multan.

varieties are influential and powerful, and why speakers of other varieties are regularly discriminated against. These questions concern the use of a language or a language variety as a whole rather than individual variations and asking them makes the study of language a means to understand a society.

Sociolinguists believe that the study of language must go beyond the sentences that are the principal focus of descriptive and theoretical linguistics. It must go beyond language and bring in social context. It must deal with the "real texts that make up human communication and the social situations in which they are used. The focus of attention shifts from the sentence to the act of communication, the speech event.

Dell Hymes (1974) suggested that any communicative use of language or speech event is constituted by seven distinct factors, each associated with a different function. The first two are the speaker-writer and the hearer-reader; the third is the message form passed between them, which is drawn from the resources of a speech code, the fourth factor. Fifth is the context, sixth is the channel, visual in case of writing or sign language or aural in the case of speech; seventh is the setting in which the speech event is located. (2)

Bilingual and Bilingualism

One of the most revealing opportunities for studying language socialization is in the case of children growing up bilingually, for they manage not just to keep the two languages separate but also learn to realize which people can be addressed in a mixture of the two languages. In this way, bilingual children can be said to develop control over three distinct varieties of language. The study of bilingualism provides an excellent laboratory for learning how a child can learn to be member of two or more distinct societies.

Bilinguals have a repertoire of domain-related rules of language choice. The home-school or the home-work switch is probably the most common with one language learned at home from parents and the second learned at school and used at work. When there is a language shift in progress, certain traditional domains may remain favoured for the use of one language. Our own society is the most unique example in this case. A Pakistani child learns his mother tongue at home, becomes acquainted to Urdu as national language at school, then as he grows older, he has to acquire the knowledge of English language for academic and official correspondence. In the present Scenario English has become compulsory language from the beginning of education. But in spite of that there are a lot of failures in English every year due to the lack of social context where English can be frequently used in all the four aspects of speech, writing, reading, listening and speaking. Even the most competent teachers of English language refrain from speaking it outside the classroom. Similarly apart from the official correspondence the officers tend to use their mother tongue or national language. In our teaching institutions teachers of language lay more emphasis on reading and writing as these skills are inevitably essential from examination point of view. Due to the ignorance towards speech competence, students know a great deal about English

Whereas earlier research on language and gender has analyzed and theorized differences between the language of men and women in terms of *deficient, different and dominance,* finding differences is no longer an issue among social linguists, their main concern now is to situate language and behavior with in the larger socio cultural practices and discourses. (Gee 1990)[3.] Instead of studying differences and thus essentializing them as characteristic of men's and women's speech and form of talk gender research is now more occupied with social aspect rather than with linguistic or biological category. Thus the differences are to be located in social context. Haeri's work (2002) on the life histories of highly successful professional women shows that contrary to the idea of Pakistani women as backward and domesticated in the western discourses, there is diversity and variation in women's experience, roles and identities even within a Muslim country like Pakistan. She writes

> "….at a particular moment in the life of a society, a family and an individual, gender identity, roles and relations may be different from or improvisations on the norm which means that the norm itself is subject to historical and situational fluctuations. Likewise gender identity and gender relations do not remain static or unresponsive to social change nor can we assume that they always "fit" the cultural ideal". [4]

Of the social causes of gender differentiation in speech style, one of the most critical appears to be level of education. In all studies, it has been shown that the greater the disparities between educational opportunities for boys and girls, the greater the differences between male and female speech. When offered an equal educational opportunity, there seems to be a tendency for woman to be more sensitive than men to the status norms of language. Hence exploring the correlations between gender-related linguistic differences and social differences between the genders is another way to see how closely language and social variation are related.

Language and Power

Recent contributions to social theory have explored the role of language in the exercise, maintenance and change of power. Language, then has come to be seen as the major locus of ideology, and so of major significance with respect to power. Foucault's work (1980) has ascribed a central role to discourse in the development specifically modern forms of power. It has been argued by social theorists that language, assumptions and meanings, values and attitudes constitute discourse and that the concept of discourse allows us to speak of the importance of language as a way of framing reality and shaping how we see ourselves and the world. (Foucault[5] 1980 Gee 1990) Foucault's concept of discourse does not only refer to language but to processes of social interaction through which meaning is constructed, recognized, contested, negotiated and reconstructed. Gee (1990, 1992) goes on to argue that meanings reside in social practices and discourses rather than in formal properties of language. He defines discourse as a "socio culturally distinctive and integrated way of thinking

Language Culture and Thought

The exact nature of the relation between language and culture has fascinated and continues to fascinate people from a wide variety of backgrounds. That there should be some kind of relationship between the sounds, words and syntax of a language and the ways in which speakers of that language experience the world and behave in it, seems so obvious as to be true.

Culture may be defined as the kind of knowledge which is learnt from other people we share our culture with other people through language. Similarly the exchange of ideas thoughts and concepts are possible only through language.

The word culture refers to some "property" of a community. It can be called the artifacts of the community Good enough (1957) defines culture in the following manner

> "As I see it, a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members. Culture, being what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage, must consist of the end-product of learning knowledge in a most general sense of the term"[7]

If culture is knowledge, it can exit only inside people's mind and language is the only tool to study it. In the same way the term "thought" covers a number of different types of mental activity and lies in the province of cognitive psychologists. It includes memory, inference, proposition and concepts.

Language thought and culture are impinged into each other in many ways. On the first hand all linguistic items are the products of the concepts that are formed by the mind the semantic aspect of language is also based on ideas and concepts. According to R.A. Hudson (1998)

> "What is stored as a language system is a set of remembered concepts, which are the items of language, together with the concepts or properties which constitute their meanings and more concepts which define their social distribution when we speak or listen we make use of the concepts we already know in order to infer propositions (the meaning of sentences) and also to infer social categories defined in terms of concepts" [8]

Language provides a screen or filter to reality; it determines how speakers perceive and organize the world around them, both the natural world and social world. Consequently the language we speak helps to form our world view. It defines our experience for us; we don't use it simply to report that experience. It is not neutral but gets in the way, imposing habits of both looking and thinking. One interesting way in which people use language in daily living is to refer to various kinds of kinship. Kinship

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