Sociolinguistic analysis

There are two qualitatively different ways of sociologically probing into language. They are not only thematically and historically (or to be more precise periodically) delineated. One of them is mimetic - it believes language and communication and their functioning mechanisms reflect or represent the social structures, layers and mechanisms. This trend of sociolinguistic theorising and analysis could be termed traditional or linguistic sociolinguistics. The second sociological approach to language and communication is rhetorical and believes that communication shapes our identities. Consequently, the two mainstreams, despite their common sources and shared goals, concentrate their efforts on quite different problems.

Traditional (co-relationist) sociolinguistics is preoccupied with defining variation, linguistic change, dialect, bilingualism, register, style, pidgin and Creole language formations, code-switching, the different languages men and women use, language variation and change, language planning and linguistic policy. This type of sociolinguistic approach to language issues is corelationist in essence and implies a conception of the independent, though connected autonomous categories. Sociolinguistics analyses the match between these closely related but complete in themselves systems. The rhetoric trend deals predominantly in issues of the following type: identification and language, linguistic approach to socialisation, empirical studies of verbal habits of human groups, enculturation processes, engendering process, enactment of role relations, ethnographic problems, anthropological investigations and others. This latter might be better termed linguistic sociology in opposition to the first which quite deserves the name social stratification of language or sociolinguistics. “Social categories must be interpreted in terms of situational constraints” is this approach’s founding assumption. Status and role are not permanent qualities of speaker, rather they are abstract communicative symbols. The distinction between social and linguistic categories is obliterated. Communication is not governed by fixed social rules. It is a two-step process in which the speaker first takes in stimuli from the outside environment, evaluating and selecting among them in the light of his own cultural background, personal history and what s/he knows about his/her interlocutors. Then the speaker decides on the norms that apply to the situation at hand. These norms determine the speaker’s selection from the communicative options available for encoding his intent.
For any communication to be possible we need a code. This the rule system for matching overt linguistic behaviour with meaning. Often language and code are equated. This a gross simplification and overgeneralisation because it precludes the vistas of functional, social, register and various other types of codes that constitute everyday communicative exchange in all spheres of life.

Men and women are claimed not to share the same communicative competence. Their rule systems for the use and interpretation of utterances are different as a result of their different patterns of socialisation into two contrasting subcultures. Women are said to develop a co-operative repertoire of verbal behaviour with other women, where intimacy, connectedness and empathy are the powerful structuring parameters. Men are believed to acquire and employ a competitive repertoire of verbal behaviour. The ethos of power, the strife for institutionalised hierarchisation and paternal leadership are the factors shaping and motivating the communicative competence of men. When the two subcultures interact, the character of the parameters of communicative competence and linguistic strategy change. In men-women interaction men tend to be overprotective, to simplify their meaning and to sound overtly and purposefully endearing. Women on their part become less assertive and demonstrate eagerness for subordination. The communicative styles and rule systems of men and women are overlapping and not mutually exclusive. Men and women do know equally well how to do the same things communicatively but are subject to different contextual constraints. Men gossip. This is not a type of verbal behaviour characteristic of women only, but they do it in different circumstances and under a different name or label. The construction of gender identity through socialisation takes different paths for boys and girls. Cultural stereotyping is an integral part of socialisation. “Boys will boys” is self-explanatory and there is not a parallel expression to capture symbolically the stereotype of girls. That is the male stereotype gets named and what is not specified there remains as an attribute for the other gender. The linguistic differentiation between men and women is that of style, not one of competence.

The distinction between the communicative behaviour of men and women is not coterminous with the notion of linguistic engendering. The latter refers to the ways attitudes are conveyed in and through language. Hailing and interpellation are the two phases of one and the same process of fixing identities. Public communication legitimises ways of being. By the way we address one another we enact and mutually impose identities. (Just think of
“êîïåëå” used between closed friends and between strangers. Only in the second context can the word be interpreted as evoking a stereotypical suprapersonal identity ascription. In the first case it is entirely desemanticised and has acquired the opposite mark of affective meaning.) Interpellation is the process by which communication positions people in ideologies. Ideologies are hierarchical patterns of ideas that reinforce one another. The overriding ideology of a culture is its main defining characteristic. Cultures are established and maintained by systems of meanings and ways of expressing these meanings. Cultures are “our lived systems of meanings and values”. The derivation of our meanings socialises events for a group. The connection between language, culture and society is POWER. Power is the exchange value which correlates the others in a meaningful net of complex interrelations. The struggle to resist or achieve power is the mechanism for generating rivalling ideologies. As systematic and comprehensive sets of ideas ideologies ‘explain’ people why things happen as they do and attach value judgements to all events and tend to justify the status quo. Cultural criticism is a new trend in the humanities which concentrates on the problems of cultures, ideologies, communication, etc. on a highly abstract level. Ethnomethodology tries to diminish abstractedness and focuses on the study of commonsense knowledge, everyday communication and practical reasoning.

Besides this conceptual mainstream of doing sociolinguistics, there is an abundance of practical trends which are actually doing applied sociolinguistic. Before we illustrate some of their common problems or analysis, we should distinguish between sociolinguistics and sociology of language. According to Hudson 1980: “sociolinguistics is the study of language in relation to society”, whereas the sociology of language is “the study of society in relation to language”.

The major field of interest for all approaches trying to uncover or at least bring to the fore the relations between language and society can be subdivided into the following allotments: a) linguistic diversity and the speech community; b) language and social interaction; c) language and representation; d) the role of language in processes of socialisation and ideology construction; e) language, culture and society. The first allotment is further subdivided into: language and regional variation - accent and dialect; language and ethnic identity - national varieties, pidgin, Creole and substandard variants. The second one is portioned in the following areas: language and social class: restricted and elaborated speech variants; language and
situation - register (functional variants), accompanied by the study of styles of making meanings which are overt markers (though multifaceted and complex ones) of social distancing (colloquial speech, informal, etc.); the third bifurcates into ethnography of communication and anthropological investigations; the fourth into language and subcultures: antilanguages; the last interests in language and gender, language and identity, institutionalizations and many others. This last subdivision takes for granted that the existence of ideologies makes life and communication easier. We assume agreement by the commonplaces of ideologies and do not have to reinvent the wheel every time we want to use it. Or to put it Benjamin Lee Whorf’s words: “Whenever agreement or assent is arrived at in human affairs . . . this agreement is reached by linguistic processes. Or else it is not reached.” One obstacle for not reaching agreement is the phenomenon of aberrant decoding (a term coined by Umberto Eco to name the mismatch between intentionally encoded meaning and decoded sense). The major reason still remains the fact that we speak a particular kind of English (or any other national language) depending on which region of the country we come from (accent and dialect), which class we are most strongly affiliated with (restricted and elaborated speech variants), which subculture we belong to, what type of situation we have to behave in accordance with (register), what is our relation to the other participants in the communicative event (style), etc.

Register helps to clarify the interrelationship of language with context of communication by subsuming it under three main headings: field, tenor and mode. Field terms the ongoing activity wherein utterances are embedded so that they help sustain and shape the activity itself. Not all instances of language are closely embedded in sets of actions (like “scalpel, clips, etc. directly refer to surgical proceedings). In such cases the notion of field refers not so much to the ongoing activity, rather to the subject matter of the communicative act. The field is extrinsic in relation to activity-based talk and intrinsic to ‘text’ with degree at least remote from the immediate circumstances of activity. (The classic example of the latter being news) The particular aspect of language most affected by “field” is the vocabulary. Technical, field-specific and specialised vocabularies are portions of lexis which are topic-oriented or activity based and can be looked upon as model generated semantic fields with no specific domain structure but with a topical definitional base. Tenor refers to the kind of social relationship enacted in or by a text or communicative act. This notion highlights the way in which linguistic
choices are affected not just by the topic of communication but also by the type of social relationship within which communication is taking place. The aspects of social relationship most crucial under the heading of tenor include politeness, degrees of formality and the relative statuses of participants. These dimensions of interpersonal relations affect a whole range of linguistic choices. In addition to considerations of topic and social relationship, language is also sensitive to the means adopted for communication. Herein surface notions of phatic communication of social fillers and props, back-channel behaviour (speech is shaped in such a way as to prompt immediate and ongoing responses from other participants) and markers of sympathetic circularity (ways of inviting the listener to assume the speaker’s point of view).

The most common way of describing the relation between language and social class is by distinguishing between two habitual modes of utterance organisation involving contrasting orientation to the production of meaning in and through language. The founder of this approach (Basil Bernstein) has termed the two differing principles of utterance-organisation as the restricted and the elaborate(d) code. These two modes of generating meaning are closely related to two kinds of social formation which not only adopted the former but also are the ultimate cause for their emergence. The first type of social formation is characterised by strong bonds between its members, with clear and well defined social roles. The social identity of the individual members is defined on the basis of relatively set and stable sets of parameters such as sex and age, etc. The social roles are ascribed on relatively fixed and public criteria. The role system is positional and closed. This formation reduces role discretion to fixed positions and closes off potential role ambiguities. Within such a social formation the shared knowledge and assumptions between members of the subculture are high, so that communication goes on against a dense background of meanings held in common which rarely need to be stated explicitly. In the other type of social formation, persons achieve a social role and identity not so much on the basis of publicly obvious and self-evident criteria, but more on the basis of individual disposition and temperament. Within this type of social formation members negotiate and achieve their roles rather than have them there ready-made in advance to step into. In this way, who they are and where they stand is subject to constant definition and redefinition. The respective role system is open and personal. The individual intentions and viewpoints of the speaker need to be spelt out and made explicit. Within a positional or closed role system language is
used to affirm solidarity and to invoke shared understandings. Meanings of utterances are implied and taken for granted. Within the personal or open role system language is used to explore and construct individual identities. There is pressure on language to be more explicit.

Between these two extreme and well defined formations we recognise an amorphous social formation which uses antilanguage as a means of communication. Antilanguages may be understood as extreme versions of social dialects. They tend to arise among subcultures and groups that occupy a marginal or precarious position in society, especially where central activities of the group place them outside of the law. Often the subculture or the group (the ‘anti-society’) has an antagonistic relationship with society at large and their natural suspicion of outsiders makes it difficult to study their language of Polish prison life (grypserka) and that of the Calcutta underworld. In addition to these relatively contemporary cases, some historical records survive of a variety known as ‘pelting speech’ - an argot employed by roving bands of vagabonds in Elizabethan England.

Antilanguages are basically created by a process of relexicalization - the substitution of new words for old. The grammar of the parent language may be preserved, but a distinctive vocabulary develops, particularly - but not solely - in activities and areas that are central to the subculture and that help to set it off most sharply from the established society. Accounts of ‘pelting speech’, for example, contains over twenty terms for the classes of vagabond including ‘rogue’, ‘wild rogue’, ‘prigger of prancers’ (horse thief), ‘counterfeit crank’, ‘bawdy basket’ and so on. Similarly, the language of the Calcutta underworld contains over forty words for the police and twenty words for bomb.

Making up new words is continuous within the antilanguage (another factor that makes them difficult to document - they very quickly go out of date); but often very simple strategies underly the relexicalization process. An argot in use among bar girls in Addis Ababa included many items formed by regularly substituting /ay/ in place of the first vowel of the original and inserting /.../ before repetition of the final. Thus:

- sum (‘name’) becomes saym...m
- birr (‘dollar’) becomes bayr...r
- hed... (‘go’) becomes hayd...d
b...dda (‘copulare’) becomes bayd...d

Source: Demise and Bender (1983)

Other forms of innovation include using items from the parent language in metaphorical ways and borrowing items from nonnative languages.

Whenever differences are registered between groups of people who use ostensibly the same language, these differences become the sight for the interplay of social judgements as part of the intricate symbiosis between language and society. Just as one language encompasses a variety of ways of speaking it, so a single society encompasses a variety of ways of living within it or on its margins. Initially the child enters not society as a whole but a particular localised subgroup. His/her first access to language is by way of a highly specific network of speakers who pass on to the child their own version of the language. This version is marked by a regional variation, social status variation, ethnic variation, etc. The first distinguishing features of this version are its dialect and accent characteristics. Accent as a term covers whole patterns of pronunciation typical of a particular region or social group. Dialect refers to a broader range of differences including vocabulary and sentence structure. The controversy over the scope of the term dialect has given rise to fundamental theoretical underpinnings including the question ‘what is a language?’. The criteria suggested by Bell 1976 for distinguishing one language from another are as follows: a) standardisation, b) vitality, c) historicity, d) autonomy, e) reduction, f) mixture, g) de facto norms. Standardisation refers to the process by a language gets codified in some way. The way is typically made up by the variants in printing and literature, broadcasting and schooling, educating non-native speakers, etc. The notion standard English has nothing to do with the distinctions colloquial/formal or the idea of bad language. Standard English allows for as much swearing as any other variant of English and also has its colloquial versions. By standard English is understood the variety based on the London dialect. One should never forget that a standard variant of any language is just one preferred for various reasons dialect of that language. (RP is a class accent). Social dialects depend on the following principle factors social class, religion and ethnicity.

Sociolinguistic methods of analysis in semantics apply to the areas of connotative meaning, the ratio explicit/implicit expression of meaning, ways of socialisation and the methods for vocabulary
differentiation between groups and subgroups. They also have a say in etymological considerations, social history of words (particular lexical items), prestige forms, preferred elements from synonymous chains and their sociological significance. Connotations are ideological in essence, they are the culturally coded superstrata available in any sign. (Roland Barthes is an interesting author whose “Mythologies” and “Empire of signs” reveal the mythic significance of the cultural connotations of everyday phenomena in the French and Japanese societies respectively). Contemporary cultural criticism claims that we have moved from a logocentric (word-centred) to an occulocentric (image-centred) world, with sight exercising hegemony or domination over our other senses. So now semantics is forced to still further enlarge its scope and encompass humanness and civilisation as such.

The part of sociolinguistics that deals in the role of language in the processes of interpersonal and social interaction has emancipated into various branches of pragmatics, two of which we are going to discuss under the headings of speech act analysis and conversation theory.