

SOCIOLINGUISTICS

- Language is one of the most powerful emblems of social behavior. In the normal transfer of information through language, we use language to send vital social messages about who we are, where we come from, and who we associate with.
- It is often shocking to realize how extensively we may judge a person's background, character, and intentions based simply upon the person's language, dialect, or, in some instances, even the choice of a single word.
- Given the social role of language, it stands to reason that one strand of language study should concentrate on the role of language in society.
- Sociolinguistics has become an increasingly important and popular field of study, as certain cultures around the world expand their communication base and intergroup and interpersonal relations take on escalating significance.
- The basic notion underlying sociolinguistics is quite simple: Language use symbolically represents fundamental dimensions of social behavior and human interaction.
- The notion is simple, but the ways in which language reflects behavior can often be complex and subtle. Furthermore, the relationship between language and society affects a wide range of encounters--from broadly based international relations to narrowly defined interpersonal relationships.

- For example, sociolinguists might investigate language attitudes among large populations on a national level, such as those exhibited in the US with respect to the English-only amendment--the legislative proposal to make English the 'official' language of the US.
- Similarly, we might study the status of French and English in Canada or the status of national and vernacular languages in the developing nations of the world as symbols of fundamental social relations among cultures and nationalities.
- In considering language as a social institution, sociolinguists often use sociological techniques involving data from questionnaires and summary statistical data, along with information from direct observation.
- A slightly different concern with language and society focuses more closely on the effect of particular kinds of social situations on language structure.
- For example, language contact studies focus on the origin and the linguistic composition of pidgin and creole languages.
- These special language varieties arise when speakers from mutually unintelligible language groups need a common language for communication.
- Throughout the world, there are many sociohistorical situations that have resulted in these specialized language situations--in the Caribbean, Africa, South America, Asia, and the Pacific Islands.

- In examining language contact situations, it is also possible to examine not only the details of a particular language but also the social and linguistic details that show how bilingual speakers use each language and switch between them.
- Another approach to language and society focuses on the situations and uses of language as an activity in its own right.
- The study of language in its social context tells us quite a bit about how we organize our social relationships within a particular community.
- Addressing a person as 'Mrs.', 'Ms.', or by a first name is not really about simple vocabulary choice but about the relationship and social position of the speaker and addressee. Similarly, the use of sentence alternatives such as *Pass the salt*, *Would you mind passing the salt*, or *I think this food could use a little salt* is not a matter of simple sentence structure; the choice involves cultural values and norms of politeness, deference, and status
- In approaching language as a social activity, it is possible to focus on discovering the specific patterns or social rules for conducting conversation and discourse.
- We may, for example, describe the rules for opening and closing a conversation, how to take conversational turns, or how to tell a story or joke.
- It is also possible to examine how people manage their language in relation to their cultural backgrounds and their goals of interaction.

- Sociolinguists might investigate questions such as how mixed-gender conversations differ from single-gender conversations, how differential power relations manifest themselves in language forms, how caregivers let children know the ways in which language should be used, or how language change occurs and spreads to communities.
- To answer these questions related to language as social activity, sociolinguists often use ethnographic methods.
- That is, they attempt to gain an understanding of the values and viewpoints of a community in order to explain the behaviors and attitudes of its members.
- Two trends have characterized the development of sociolinguistics over the past several decades.
- First, the rise of particular specializations within this field has coincided with the emergence of more broadly based social and political issues. Thus, the focus on themes such as language and nationalism, language and ethnicity, and language and gender has corresponded with the rise of related issues in society at large.
- Second, specialists who examine the role of language and society have become more and more interested in applying the results of their studies to the broadly based social, educational, and political problems that probably gave rise to their emergence as sociolinguistic themes to begin with.
- Sociolinguistics thus offers a unique opportunity to bring together theory, description, and application in the study of language.