

Introduction

WHAT IS SOCIOLINGUISTICS?

If I had a penny for every time I have tried to answer the question, 'So what *is* sociolinguistics?', I would be writing this book in the comfort of an early retirement. And if there was a way of defining it in one simple, yet comprehensive, sentence, there might not be a need for weighty introductory textbooks.

Sociolinguistics is a very broad field, and it can be used to describe many different ways of studying language. A lot of linguists might describe themselves as sociolinguists, but the people who call themselves sociolinguists may have rather different interests from each other and they may use very different methods for collecting and analysing data. This can be confusing if you are coming new to the field. Is sociolinguistics about how individual speakers use language? Is it about how people use language differently in different towns or regions? Is it about how a nation decides what languages will be recognised in courts or education?

The answer is: yes, yes, and yes. Sociolinguists conduct research on any of those topics. For example, if a speaker describes a funny or amusing situation as 'kicksin', I know they are from, or have spent a good deal of time in, the English-speaking Caribbean. I am drawing on sociolinguistic (social and linguistic) knowledge to draw this inference.

Or take the case of Jennifer, who grew up in a small traditionally fishing village in the north-east of Scotland, but spent many years teaching English in Greece. Jennifer can draw on a number of different styles or ways of speaking, depending on who she is talking to. If her interlocutor is a member of her family, she still uses a variety of Scots which is virtually incomprehensible to other native speakers of English. She says 'fit' instead of 'what'; 'na' instead of 'don't'; 'doon' instead of 'down'; 'be'er' instead of 'better', and so forth. But in Greece she quickly learnt that she needed to adopt a less regionally marked way of speaking if her students were going to understand her, and when she later began attending professional conferences with an international audience, she had the same experience. Everyone can modify the way they speak depending on who they are with or what the situation is. When they do this, they are drawing on their sociolinguistic knowledge. And every time they change the way they speak, depending on their interlocutor or situation, they provide more sociolinguistic information that builds up the sociolinguistic knowledge in the community.

HOW DO SOCIOLINGUISTS STUDY SOCIOLINGUISTICS?

Sociolinguists use a range of methods to analyse patterns of language in use and attitudes towards language in use. Some sociolinguistic patterns can only be observed systematically

2 INTRODUCTION

through close examination of lots of recorded speech and a good understanding about the speaker's background or place in a community.

On the other hand, sociolinguists who are interested in investigating national language policies might never need to use any audio or video recordings at all. A lot of relevant information on language planning can be gleaned from library and archive materials, or from more free-form discussions with members of the communities being studied. For example, official newspaper reports and letters to the editor provide the researcher with a range of perspectives just in one medium.

A major challenge that sociolinguists face is that a lot of the time speakers are completely unaware of the ways in which language is used differently in different contexts. Or if they are aware, they can only talk about it in very general terms. For example, when dialectologists want to find out where one traditional local dialect begins and ends, they can often ask people directly. It's not unheard of for people to be able to identify (correctly) the village – or even the house! – where people stop using one pronunciation of the word for 'child' and start using another pronunciation. But when sociolinguists try to get people to discuss the different ways they use language, the answers they get are typically more vague: 'Of course I change the way I speak. How? I don't know, lots of ways . . .' So sociolinguists have devised a number of different methods for getting at these semi-conscious or subconscious norms. We will examine a number of such methods in this book.

MAKING BROADER CONNECTIONS

As well as differing in the kinds of methods they use, different kinds of sociolinguists may have different goals – what they want their research to shed light on, or how they hope it might change the field. This book also tries to make these kinds of issues clear to readers. In order to do this, it stops at various points to comment explicitly on relevant theoretical issues raised by the data or methods being discussed at that point. I feel this is very important for a number of reasons. The first is that students often have the opportunity to take only one sociolinguistics course in an undergraduate linguistics degree. This means it is particularly helpful if they can see quickly – as the subject unfolds – where and how sociolinguists might have something to contribute to or learn from descriptive or theoretical linguists.

The second reason is that many people take sociolinguistics as an 'outside' subject while they are pursuing a degree in another field, e.g. languages, social anthropology, sociology, media studies, or communication. For these students, it is even more imperative that an introduction to sociolinguistics provides them with both the basic findings and linguistic insights of the field, and also an immediate sense of how and where sociolinguistic research intersects with and can inform research in their major subject.

A third reason is even more pragmatic. In a sense, each of the boxes in the text that offer a 'Connection with Theory' represents one attempt to answer the question I started out with: 'So what *is* sociolinguistics?'

SOCIOLINGUISTIC QUESTIONS

Even though sociolinguistics wears many caps, one thing linking all of the practitioners in the field is that they are all interested in how people use language and what they use it for. In other words, sociolinguists are not only interested in documenting the different forms of

language – what it looks like and how it is structured – but also want to answer questions like:

- Who uses those different forms or language varieties?
- Who do they use them with?
- Are they aware of their choice?
- Why do some forms or languages 'win out' over others? (And is it always the same ones?)
- Is there any relationship between the forms in flux in a community of speakers?
- What kind of social information do we ascribe to different forms in a language or different language varieties?
- How much can we change or control the language we use?

This is what we mean when we say that sociolinguists are interested in both 'social' questions and 'linguistic' questions. Inevitably, some sociolinguistics research has more to say about social issues, and some sociolinguistics research has more to say about linguistic matters, but what makes someone's work distinctively sociolinguistic will be the fact that, regardless of its emphasis, it has something to say about both linguistic structure and social structure.

STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

This book introduces some of the different ways in which sociolinguists research language in use. It looks at the ways in which people use language and how these are related to larger issues of social structure. You will find that it is structured rather differently from other introductions to sociolinguistics, and sometimes discusses 'classic' sociolinguistic studies from a novel perspective. However, its structure reflects what I have found works best after nearly twenty years of involvement in teaching sociolinguistics to undergraduate and (post-)graduate classes. It also directly reflects the extremely helpful feedback and advice about structuring a one-semester course in sociolinguistics that I have received from students themselves.

One of its more radical departures from most sociolinguistics texts is that it starts by providing the reader with a very firm grounding in research showing how speakers use language to present themselves to others and to identify or differentiate themselves from others. This includes variation in the form of an individual's choice of language as well as their use of different styles, or repertoires, in a language. In my experience, starting with the individual, and then working through other sociolinguistic topics, has a number of teaching advantages. First, it makes the subject matter directly accessible and relevant to students. As I have noted, people are generally aware of their potential to use language differently in different social contexts, but they lack the means of articulating this sociolinguistic knowledge. The first half of this book provides them with the means to articulate what they already know through personal experience.

Second, I feel that by gradually expanding the focus from the way individuals use language to the way groups of individuals use language enables students to see more clearly what the connections are between sociolinguistics and contact between dialects and languages. Most introductory sociolinguistics texts either finesse this link or add it in as a chapter that is only minimally connected to the larger picture of language in use. The goal of this book is to provide readers with a sense of the seamless connections between

individual speakers and varieties of languages. When readers subsequently choose to specialise or focus their attention on one part of the continuum (as we all must), they will nevertheless do so with a clear sense of how their work fits into a broader social and/or linguistic picture.

In addition to the connections with theory, readers will find two other forms of 'digression' in this text. Exercises are provided in order to consolidate through practice the information that has just been discussed in the text. These are not intended as test questions; I have interleaved them with the text because they are designed to take the reader a little further (sometimes anticipating material which follows later). The text also includes what newspaper journalists call 'brights'. These are short, sometimes quirky, comments which (I hope) remind us that, when all is said and done, we study sociolinguistics because it is fun.

Finally, this edition of *Introducing Sociolinguistics* offers direct connections with primary literature in *The Routledge Sociolinguistics Reader* (*RSR*, Meyerhoff and Schleeff 2010). *RSR* is a collection of thirty-two excerpted articles (some classic, and some relatively recent) covering basic issues and concepts in sociolinguistics that complement the topics covered in this text. Where a reading in *RSR* is complementary or relevant to a discussion in this book, it is indicated with an icon and chapter number in the margin (see left). The *RSR* readings offer students a chance to engage directly with primary research similar to the research being discussed in this introductory framework. However, since the readings in *RSR* have been (for the most part) extensively edited with introductory readers in mind, they should be less daunting than an original journal article or chapter in a specialist book might be. (I say some more about connections between *RSR* and this book at the end of this chapter.)



The chapters

Chapter 2 starts with a historical perspective and discusses how both the methodological and theoretical roots of sociolinguistics lie in traditional regional dialect studies. It discusses how researchers were able to show that there are social dialects, just as there are regional dialects, and how the methods associated with traditional regional dialectology have been adapted to sociolinguists' interests. The kinds of differences between the ways different speakers use language can be used to define not only regional but also social dialects.

These methods continue to be very influential in the study of language in society so they provide an important backdrop to interpreting the research that is discussed in subsequent chapters. This is especially true for the kinds of research identified as variationist sociolinguistics. However, I believe it is just as true for any study of the relationship between society and language use and that is why I devote a good deal of space to establishing some of these principles and theoretical tools early in the book. Even qualitative studies, and even studies of language and politics, are improved if researchers understand that their work is concerned with (i) establishing social patterns and (ii) understanding the systematicity or social beliefs underlying apparently unconstrained variation.

Chapter 3 then looks at how we all alter the way we speak depending on where we are, who we are talking to, and what our attitude is towards the people we are talking with. In other words, this chapter focuses on the speech of individual speakers. This kind of variability in language use is highly salient, which means that if you ask the average person to think about the way people use language in their community, one of the first things they talk about are the changes that people make to their speech in different situations or with

different addressees. This can be called style-shifting, and we will see how you can objectively identify features of different speaking styles. Chapter 3 also considers some of the different explanations that have been proposed for how and why people alter their speaking style in different contexts.

Chapter 4 builds on the style-shifting discussed in Chapter 3 and looks more generally at how speakers use language as a scaffold for formulating and expressing attitudes about others. It begins with a discussion of how this relates to sexist language. We return to the dialectology roots of sociolinguistics, but with a new perspective. This chapter explores how people's attitudes to language and language users can be used to complement traditional maps of regional dialects. Also, it introduces and defines the important notion of speaker accommodation or attunement to others. It considers some interesting case studies that indicate that speakers may sometimes believe they are saying one thing, or intend to say one thing, but what they in fact produce is very different.

Chapter 5 develops another strand of research that was implicit in Chapters 3 and 4. It discusses politeness – a feature of language which is clearly very heavily affected by cultural and societal norms or expectations, but which is generally expressed and realised between individuals. Politeness strategies in different languages provide an interesting case study of how macro-social, or societal, factors interact with and are mediated by considerations that are essentially micro-social, or inter-speaker.

In Chapter 6, we draw back from the very personal perspective on style-shifting and language attitudes that have been the basis for Chapters 3–5. Here, we consider issues such as how speakers within multilingual communities decide which language to use and when. We consider some of the ways in which institutions and nation-states have engaged with the politics and emotions surrounding the recognition and validation of different language varieties. Here, too, we introduce the idea that languages have different levels of vitality. This refers to how widely used a language is within a community and how good a chance it has of continuing to be used by successive generations. All these matters are of particular importance now, given the very real concern that many languages today are dying out or being abandoned by their speakers in large numbers. This concern is shared by linguists and the speakers of such lesser-spoken languages. Measures to maintain and enhance the vitality of languages are also a challenge for large institutions like the European Union as more states are admitted to the Union and more language varieties officially and unofficially become part of the cultural and communicative repertoire of the EU. This chapter introduces some of the strategies multilingual speakers use to express their attitudes to what they are talking about, their own identities and their relationships with others. It looks at some examples of code switching and code mixing and shows how they can be analysed from a sociolinguistic perspective.

At this point, there is a shift in focus. In Chapters 7–10 we examine some of the social factors that have often been found to delineate different social dialects. Chapter 7 looks at time. Time has been a hugely important topic throughout the history of philosophy, and sociolinguists are among the few linguists to grapple with some of the problems associated with exploring time. We know that languages change over time, and in this chapter we look at how interspeaker variation can be observed by comparing the speech of a community at different periods. But we also see that traces of the passage of time can be detected even in samples of speech at a single moment in time. We will see that speakers of different ages can provide a window on how languages change over time. We will also look at cases where speakers change the way they speak over time and see how such examples of intraspeaker variation can be used as diagnostics of different kinds of sociolinguistic variation.

Chapters 8 and 9 examine the effects that social class or speakers' social networks have on the variation that exists in the community at large. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we will see that who you associate with through work or friendship networks can have a significant impact on how you talk. We will consider the possibility that it is within very tightly knit friendship networks that the changes which become associated with a particular social class are negotiated and first emerge.

Chapter 10 looks at the effect of gender on speech and distinguishes 'gender' from 'sex'. This chapter is somewhat longer than most others, but this is because of the tremendous interest this topic usually generates in sociolinguistics courses and because research in language and gender has been particularly lively since the early 1990s. The chapter focuses largely on research that has been concerned with the details of linguistic performance and how these details are related to details of social organisation between and among groups of male and female speakers. It links very closely with the discussion of networks and the intimate relationship between social and linguistic practices that is introduced in Chapter 9.

In effect we move from a discussion of the outcomes of contact between individuals in Chapters 2–6, to contact between and within social groups in Chapters 7–10. Finally, in Chapter 11, we broaden the lens even further. In Chapter 11 we consider contact at an even more abstract level, and examine several case studies of the outcomes of contact between different varieties of English and the contact between quite different languages that leads to the creation and development of creole languages. These examples raise timely issues like the question of whether increasing globalisation and cross-linguistic contact is having an effect on the structure of languages and the vitality of languages in a multilingual world. There are links here with Chapters 4 and 6.

ON QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE METHODS

The content of the book is intended to circle round on itself, examining aspects of how people use language and the social meaning of variation from a number of different perspectives – broad and narrow views of variation, idiosyncratic and personal meanings of language in use, as well as more conventionalised, social meanings ascribed to language in use. These different perspectives provide complementary views of what language does in a social world, and this book provides a number of complementary means by which we can analyse the different social functions that language serves. As we will see, quantitative data is complemented by what researchers call qualitative data. In practice, this means that in order to interpret what the distribution of forms means across different groups or in different contexts we need solid data on the distribution of forms; but we also have to know when and how to move beyond the numbers in order to evaluate the way in which those distributional patterns are being used by speakers in a particular social or interactional context.

A note for instructors on the quantitative skills required

Generally, this book doesn't require the reader to be able to handle anything much more complicated than percentages in order to understand the points being discussed. Percentages are OK as a first pass over quantitative data (they make a small adjustment for

the relative frequency with which a form is used by, say, different groups of speakers). However, in some places, I will be reporting the results of studies that have made more sensitive, statistical adjustments.

Readers don't need to be able to do these tests themselves in order to understand what's going on.

Students in sociolinguistics classes have often convinced themselves that they are the kind of people who 'can't do' numbers, and they get very nervous when numbers start to appear. Even these students can handle the quantitative data in this book. The text always demystifies and explains what the tests show (and sometimes explains what the tests are doing). Aside from percentages, the kind of quantitative adjustment you are most likely to encounter in this book is one that provides a **weighting** for the frequency of a form. Very simply, this means that it restates how often a form occurs in the speech of a particular group of speakers, or in a particular style, or in a particular linguistic environment, *given how common that group, or style or environment is in the entire corpus*. So it is a further adjustment, over and above the kind of frequency adjustment a percentage makes.

Weightings don't actually represent a frequency count like percentages, but since most university students feel competent enough to handle percentages, I have found that, for the purposes of an introductory class in sociolinguistics, it works quite well to gloss weightings as 'adjusted percentages'. Other instructors may find better terms for their audience of students.

ON SOCIOLINGUISTIC METHODS MORE GENERALLY

This introductory textbook does not include a separate section or chapter on methods for collecting sociolinguistic data or methods for analysing such data, important though these topics are. Information on these areas is implicit in the discussion of other work – in places, I draw explicit attention to assumptions that are being made in the methods that a particular author or study is associated with, or I indicate specific challenges associated with a particular approach to data collection. But by and large, the focus of the book is on trying to better understand what the principles are underlying research on sociolinguistics and how it links with other areas of study.

However, I do realise that it is one thing to be exposed to other peoples' (successful) studies of how speakers use language for social and interpersonal effect, and quite another thing to undertake such a study yourself. For one thing, most research that is published in books and journals is the result of lengthy (sometimes years) work in a community of speakers. Students – working to end-of-semester deadlines – simply cannot reproduce studies of this magnitude, and have to be much more focused in their research. That means making judgements about what kinds of data to collect, how much data is 'enough' and what the most appropriate ways of analysing small quantities of data are.

Readers who are looking for that kind of practical advice may find what they are looking for in the first chapter in this book's companion text, *The Routledge Sociolinguistics Reader* (RSR, Meyerhoff and Schleeff 2010).



That chapter includes a good deal of practical advice about structuring student projects in sociolinguistics, and enables you to explore the different kinds of questions and methods associated with qualitative and quantitative analyses of the same data set. It also takes you step by step through the process of planning data collection and sociolinguistic analysis. It does not provide an introduction to statistical analysis of the data you will gather; that is another matter entirely, and best addressed by some of the excellent texts available that are suitable guides for sociolinguists, e.g. Paolillo (2001) and Tagliamonte (2006). Another practical introduction to sociolinguistic methods, which includes more discussion of issues associated with interviews and data collection in non-Western settings, can be found in Meyerhoff, Adachi, Nanbakhsh and Strycharz (forthcoming).

USING THIS BOOK WITH *THE ROUTLEDGE SOCIOLINGUISTICS READER*

Initially, Erik Schlee and I imagined that *The Routledge Sociolinguistics Reader* would serve as a set of readings that would supplement this book, and we didn't see it primarily as a stand-alone volume. However, *RSR* soon took on a life of its own and the longer Erik and I worked on it, the more substantial it grew. For example, if you go to a recommended *RSR* reading when you find an icon directing you there in this book, you will find that each of the readings the icon links to has its own set of exercises and tasks. Like this book, *RSR* tries to foster links between sociolinguistic research and theory within the social sciences and linguistics in general. So for every reading there, you will find questions that encourage you to think beyond the text (as well as revision questions).

The nice thing about a Reader is that it allowed us to include even more material practising how to interpret and discuss data and themes in sociolinguistics than this book does. On the other hand, because a Reader stays closer to the primary literature than a textbook does, *Introducing Sociolinguistics* can devote more time to interrogating the connections between sociolinguistics and other fields. One of the primary functions of a textbook is to synthesise primary literature and this necessarily requires a certain amount of abstraction and generalisation from what is found in the primary literature. In addition, because this textbook is designed to introduce sociolinguistics to someone new in the field, it needs to take more of a bird's eye view when presenting the general principles and problems that sociolinguists deal with in their research. As a consequence of this, sometimes a textbook can present the fundamental nature of these principles and problems more clearly than individual studies do.

Online resources and web-based support

Working on the two books at about the same time gave us the impetus to develop the links between them beyond the confines of print. In addition to the links in this book in the margins, and some questions in *RSR*, readers can access a website that has been designed to complement both *Introducing Sociolinguistics* and *RSR*. There, we try to make use of some of the functionality that the web offers. You will find interactive exercises, web links and links to sound and video files.

The purpose of the interactive exercises is to highlight the steps and decisions that go into undertaking sociolinguistic analysis in ways that are clumsy and wordy in text alone.

They will let you see in a very practical way the relationship between raw data and the final conclusions that make their way into research reports. The sound and video links were also a very important addition to the *RSR* and *Introducing Sociolinguistics* material – it always seems a shame to be talking about how people use language for social and interpersonal effect without referring directly to examples of what we're talking about. Books are still in many respects the gold standard: they are wonderfully transportable and they are a straightforward medium that stands independent of software upgrades, plug-ins and how fast your internet connection is, and the hardware for reading them is built in to the reader. But for those who can count on an internet connection and who do have the bandwidth, the software, and the time to explore what's out there, Erik and I hope that the companion website will add to the fun of learning about sociolinguistics. Between *Introducing Sociolinguistics* and *The Routledge Sociolinguistics Reader* and the website, students and instructors should find themselves fairly well-supported. We hope that based on the ideas our website offers, you will feel encouraged to find your own examples of sound files and materials, and develop exercises that are tailored even better to your own needs.