

**ANDREEA BRATU**

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**SOCIOLINGUISTICS: FOURTEEN TOPICS**



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## Foreword

Sociolinguistics is a relatively new branch of linguistics, concerned with identifying the social function of language and the way it is used to convey social meaning. By examining language in use, we may get information about the way language works as well as about the social relationships existing within a community. David Crystal defines sociolinguistics as:

a branch of linguistics which studies all aspects of the relationship between language and society: the linguistic identity of social groups, social attitudes to language, standard versus nonstandard forms of language, patterns and needs of national language use, social varieties and levels of language, social bases of multilingualism.<sup>1</sup>

It is generally accepted that language has constantly developed to serve as a means of communication between the members of a community. It has never been a rigid, immutable, petrified tool, on the contrary, its life can be compared to that of a living creature: *languages are born* (although it is not known yet how far back the "birth" of the first language(s) can be dated), *they grow and flourish* in prosperous societies at various historical moments, and eventually *die out* along with their last speakers. In the normal course of events, however, as the need for communication never dies out, some of the languages used in the societies that had attained high levels of economic, technical and cultural development at the time were taken over by other communities. Any language changes constantly, in accordance with the evolution of the society. A language is, in fact, a mirror of all the changes occurring in the society at any time given. So much so that the historical study of a language, of its lexis in particular, provides significant details about the major events in the history of that particular community or country. In addition, an analysis of language, and more precisely of language in conversation, may provide yet more insight on its speakers. If the most obvious social function of language is that of enabling communication and of sending messages, another significant role is that of establishing and maintaining relationships. Language also conveys information about the

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<sup>1</sup> Crystal, 1991, p. 319.

speakers engaged in communication. Even without Professor Higgins' linguistic background and training, we can learn many details about our interlocutors through the register, vocabulary and grammar they use.

When people speak/write to each other, they use a means of communication called a *code* (or sometimes a language), and a *system* (grammar). This is something they “know”. It is an abstract knowledge of the rules of using sounds and words. Noam Chomsky has made the distinction between competence and performance, saying that a linguist should describe what speakers *know* about their language (*competence*), not what they *do* with their language (*performance*). A similar distinction was made by Ferdinand de Saussure, between *langue* (group knowledge of the language) and *parole* (individual use of the language). Sociolinguistics deals with the analysis of *the language in use*, analysing the differences that characterize certain communities as opposed to others, and highlighting the factors that influence speakers' linguistic choices.

The language used in everyday life is remarkably rich and varied. It is difficult to demonstrate that each language is a homogenous entity with categorical rules, specifying what is or what is not possible in the language. There is a considerable internal variation in a language, and the speakers make use of all the possibilities they have at hand plus momentary inventions that might be taken up by other speakers and become, in time, part of the language. No one speaks the same way all the time; people constantly exploit the nuances of the language they use for a wide variety of purposes. However, there are certain boundaries to that variation, of which the individuals have knowledge (there are norms of linguistic behaviour that are present in particular groups). There is a variety of possible relationships between language and society. Social structure may either influence or utterly determine linguistic structure and/or behaviour. This can be noticed when analysing the language from the various perspectives regarding the user: social background, sex, age, cultures versus culture, familiar versus formal etc. At the same time, varieties of language depend on the regional, social or ethnic origin of the speakers. Moreover, there are social constraints regarding the use of certain words and definite rules for conversing.

Some of these aspects (14 themes), combining and reflecting the social and linguistic behaviour of the language user, are briefly analysed in

this book. The fourteen topics are grouped according to the major factor that governs language use in each case. *Geography* is the first chapter and contains 4 subchapters: one and two focusing on multilingualism, giving examples of several multilingual countries and explaining the main reasons why multilingualism has developed in various regions of the world. The general presentation of this process is followed by an overview of multilingualism in Britain, supported by recent information about the condition of the three Celtic languages spoken on the island: Welsh, Gaelic and Irish. Subchapter 3 is a collection of definitions explaining the terms used to differentiate between language, variety, types of dialects and registers, while subchapter 4 explains the development of pidgin and creole.

The second chapter is focused on the idea of *linguistic choice*. At varying levels, from general to individual, speakers choose from among the languages and varieties available to them, depending on the situation and on the purpose of communication. Subchapter 5 refers to diglossia, presented as a choice between two languages used in a community, in different fields of activity. At the same time, the concepts of code mixing and switching are illustrated in numerous examples. Language planning and standardisation are the following two topics (subchapters 6 and 7). Bilingual people (it is irrelevant whether they are locals or immigrants) need to make a linguistic choice, pushed by the society they live in. If they want to make use of the opportunities they have, they will need to accept education in the main language of the country and use this language at work, while they may choose to speak their dialect or language at home, with friends and family. The difficulties triggered by this choice are explained from the point of view of the role played by languages and of the approaches used when making planning decisions. Subchapter 8, the last one in this chapter, exemplifies the different possible stages in the life of a language: shift, maintenance, loss, death, revival, with a specific focus on the speakers' attitude to the language(s) they use.

The third chapter, entitled *Language and culture*, includes two major topics that show the inherent connection between language and the cultural background of its speakers: the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (subchapter 9), according to which people's view of the world is shaped by the language they speak, and the concept of taboo (subchapter 10). The latter is

illustrative of how the connection between thinking and language is governed by rules that are valid everywhere in the world (universal taboos). At the same time, it proves that language use is also community-specific. Taboo avoidance and taboo breaking are also explained and illustrated, as well as the modern concept of politically-correct language. The last chapter of the book approaches language use from the point of view of the *speakers'* characteristics. Speech communities are presented in subchapter 11, which also explains communication and the rules that govern it. Role-relationships and politeness rules are presented in subchapter 12, which also briefly explains the concept of face and of face-threatening acts. There is a natural transition towards the following topic (subchapter 13), which includes a survey of the vast research on the forms of address used in various languages. Finally, subchapter 14 focuses on the differences between the language used by male and female speakers, as recorded and analysed in several important sociolinguistic studies.

The book is by no means "original" in what concerns the theoretical aspects presented. It makes numerous references to the most important authors and ideas, concepts, views and examples introduced along the years, in an attempt to make an overview of the most significant topics in the field of sociolinguistics. They are the topics discussed with the MA students of the Department of Anglo-American and German studies of the University of Craiova, whose questions and examples have always made classes challenging and active. I take this opportunity to thank them for constantly making me look forward to our weekly meetings.

Although the message will probably never reach her, I finally have the possibility to thank Margaret Simmons, the American lecturer that our department welcomed many years ago. She was the one who taught sociolinguistics in Craiova for the first time, and introduced me to this field which so wonderfully combines my love of languages and accents and the interest in language change.

I also thank Carmen Nedelcu for her constant support and guidance all these years and for a wonderful collaboration on various projects.

Andreea Bratu  
Craiova, 2016



## A brief history of language

The moment when language appeared is still uncertain, but it is a consequence of the evolution of man. Research in various sciences has been carried out in an attempt to explain the origin of language and its early development. It is known that around 2 million years ago, *Homo Habilis* was characterized by right-handedness, which was related to a strong lateralization of the brain. As a consequence, the brain became enlarged and this development of the two hemispheres had consequences on the further development of the speech centres, which led to the emergence of a simple linguistic system, a proto-language.

Not much later, around 1.8 million years ago, *Homo Erectus* lived in Africa and started to colonize Asia. His brain was of 900 cm<sup>3</sup>, and he used various tools in his everyday activities. His successor down the human chain was the *Neanderthal Man*, who lived in Europe, the Near East and the North of Africa about 150,000 - 30,000 years ago. His brain had already almost doubled in size as opposed to that of *Homo Erectus*, reaching 1,600 cm<sup>3</sup>. He lived in groups, wore clothes, shaped tools, engaged in communal activities, used fire to cook his food and heat the caves where he took shelter. He used to bury his dead and mark the graves with stones, all this prefiguring some sort of communication within a ritual, which used language, in the form of a semi-articulated speech (nasal and imprecise, since he was not able to utter the vowels A [a], I [i] and U [u], essential to an intelligible and efficient speech), accompanied by gestures and signs with precise significance.

The *Neanderthal Man* disappeared about 30,000 years ago, while *Homo Sapiens Cro-Magnon* appeared in Africa. It was in his time that the famous cave paintings at Lascaux (France) and Altamira (Spain) were made. He had the same physique as us and choked on food, which stands proof of an important modification occurred in the morphology of his throat: the larynx was pushed deeper down in the throat, enabling the utterance of sophisticated, articulated speech.

There is no account on the fact that languages developed at the same time in various regions on the planet, apparently with no connection between them. Several theories have been suggested, in an attempt to clear this mystery, but none has brought undeniable proof in its support. Some connect the development of language with the natural need to utter certain sounds in particular moments. The hypotheses most often mentioned are the following four (as they were labelled by Max Müller and George Romanes more than a century ago):

- the *ding-dong* theory - stating that language developed from sounds that naturally reproduced sounds occurring in nature;
- the *bow-wow* theory - according to which language is echoic or onomatopoeic;
- the *pooh* theory - which explains the first sounds as accidental accompaniments of gestures, sounds that later developed into articulated speech;
- the *theyo-he-ho* theory - which sees language as deriving from grunts uttered when working.

The hypothesis of parallel evolution of languages in several regions is called the *candelabra theory*, also referred to as the *polygenesis theory* of language development, and leads to the conclusion that there were various unrelated languages that emerged more or less at the same time. They mark the starting point in the evolution of today's language families.

An opposite theory (*monogenesis*) favours the idea that the numerous languages that exist today developed from a single one, used and spread by Homo Sapiens around the world when he migrated from the African continent.

Research on the human brain, in parallel with modern linguistic research, has made scientists suggest that humans are genetically programmed to develop language (the Chomskian view). Moreover, in spite of the linguistic diversity registered on the planet, all the languages share some linguistic universals which prove the existence of a universal grammar innate to humans.