Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 19

Sociolinguistics: Language Use

- **Sociolinguistics**: studies the relationship between language and language use, and social context
  - this is another aspect of language, apart from how it works as a system
- rather than looking at sound, grammar, and cognition, one can also look at language in terms of
  - speech **performance**: the *way* language is used in specific cases, in specific contexts
    - Linguistic performance style:
      - Word choices, slang, metaphors, foreign terms
      - Cadence/rhythm, pitch, volume, accent, pronunciation… etc.
    - Social interaction aspects of linguistic performance:
      - Who talks most vs. who listens
      - Who interrupts, and whether interruptions are successful
      - Do listeners speak up (“yeah!”) or remain silent…
      - how the focus of attention is divided
        - one-to-one
        - one-to-many
        - group with people getting the floor in turn
        - group with chaotic, overlapping speaking… etc.
  - some aspects of linguistic performance are conscious
    - you might intentionally avoid swearing or using some slang when you talk to authority figures
    - you might consciously talk differently to someone you were trying to pick up than to someone in class
  - and others are unconscious
    - many of the details of *how* you change your speech performance in those contexts may be automatic, unplanned
      - you may know that you are speaking angrily, without thinking about exactly how your pitch, pace, grammar, etc. indicate that
    - you may adjust your performance unconsciously, without thinking about it
      - your friends might notice that you speak differently to some people than to others, when you don’t realize that yourself
  - sociolinguistics tries to correlate variations in language and performance with variations in
    - personal and group identity, like
      - gender or ethnicity
      - differences in authority, age, wealth, status
    - the social setting, like
      - a classroom
      - the hallway outside class
      - a library
      - a church service

    - fans at a football game
    - a candle-lit dinner for two…
  - so sociolinguists have to study both details of how language is used, and details of social situations
    - each casts useful light on the other

- example: code-switching to express identity, such as ethnicity
  - **code-switching**: switching between different dialects or ways of speaking
    - also called
      - **style shifting** when the difference is subtle
      - **diglossia** when the shift is between languages or distinct dialects
    - you probably speak differently to your employer than you do to your friends
    - may be intentional, or may be automatic
    - observing how people code-switch can provide clues about
      - the meanings and values attributed to different ways of speaking
      - insights into how people work those meanings for their own ends
  - a common example of code-switching: Latinos in the US who speak
    - perfect, unaccented English at school and at work
    - Spanish or "Spanglish" with friends and family
    - each style of linguistic performance communicates something beyond what the speaker actually says
      - competence at school and work tasks, membership in the economically and politically dominant social group
      - solidarity with friends and family, membership in the ethnic minority group
    - without ever actually, explicitly saying "I am competent and belong here" or "I am Latino and a member of this group"
      - and more convincingly so, because mastery of the style proves the claim
    - it can also express the speaker's identity or difference from some or all of the audience
      - a student who announced in class that he was a gangster from LA
      - used a lot of street slang, as well as dressing the part, using hand gestures, etc.
      - but wrote good papers in academic English
  - Fictional example of code-switching: the "Jive Lady"
    - fictional, exaggerated, but clear example of code-switching
    - why is this funny?
      - it treats a devalued, low-status "slang" or dialect with the respect accorded to a high-status foreign language
        - an unexpected contradiction
        - but telling: it confirms that we value the two forms of speech differently, or it would not be funny
      - it has a white lady speaking "Jive" (not necessarily good AAVE)
        - an unexpected inversion of social status
        - note that a black person speaking SE is NOT funny, just expected
        - again, confirming an uncomfortable truth about the different values we place on the two dialects

        - we expect African Americans to learn white SE
        - but we don't expect Euroamericans to learn BEV
    - note that it shows that Jive and SE are equally effective
    - note the (fictional but believable) example of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in action
        - the "Jive Lady" is very polite in SE
        - but she can be rude and crude in Jive
            - you would not expect her to every be rude like this in SE
        - so the language she is using affects the sorts of things she will say, her behavior, maybe her thinking
        - alternative explanation
            - she has never been properly socialized in Jive
            - so she has not really learned to understand how rude the terms are, nor ever been seriously sanctioned for using them
                - like my roommate and his limited, profane Italian

- Performance can relate to, or give hints about many other aspects of identity and social interaction
    - place of origin (US South, Boston, Australia, specific neighborhoods of London, etc.)
    - socioeconomic class
    - level of education
    - age
    - gender
    - sexual orientation
    - choice of social identity (cool; serious student; punk; etc.)
    - and many, many other aspects of social interaction, like…
    - relative authority (who has it, and who doesn't, in a given interaction), by
        - who talks more, vs. who listens more
        - who makes more statements, vs. who asks more questions
        - who uses tone, grammar, word choice expressing certainty and confidence, vs. uncertainty or doubt… etc.
    - the claimed nature or source of someone's authority, by
        - cadence (rhythm), pitch, pauses, "code words" or metaphors
        - Such as
            - a preacher, claiming authority from God or their insight into scripture
                - using words like "the light", "grace", biblical references, etc.
                - dramatic variations in pitch, rhythm, pauses, etc., using form of speech to appeal to emotions
            - a professor, claiming authority from reason and evidence
                - using specific, direct words, technical terms, referring to research
                - less dramatic cadence, etc., emphasizing content over form
            - a politician, claiming authority from popular support
                - using "code words" known to, and popular with, the audience
                    - "choice", "life", "free market", "the children", etc.

        - signaling solidarity with the audience, showing that he/she understands and represents their values
      - dramatic cadence, similar to a preacher's, to create an emotional bond

- Example of meanings attributed to language variants, and how they are manipulated in use: BEV or "Ebonics"
  - **AAVE** (**African American Vernacular English**) = **BEV** (**Black English Vernacular**) = **Ebonics**
  - AAVE/BEV/Ebonics is a dialect of English with some differences
    - vocabulary
      - chillin, homey, etc.
    - phonemic differences
      - the last consonant of a word can be dropped if the word ends in two voiced consonants ("hand") or two unvoiced consonants ("test"), but not one of each ("pant")
        - (voiced = vocal chords vibrate)
        - (unvoiced = vocal chords do not vibrate)
    - grammatical differences, such as a finer division of present tenses than **Standard English** (**SE**), which is a different dialect
      - present tenses that distinguish habitual from occasional or unique actions
        - "He runnin" (a unique, specific action)
        - "He be runnin" (a habitual action)
      - past tenses that distinguish simple past action from past and ongoing action
        - "He bin runnin" (past: "He has been running")
        - "He BIN runnin" (past ongoing: "He has been running for a long time and still is"
    - these are systematic, rule-governed features, not just random errors
      - they are no less "valid" than the systematic differences between Spanish and Portuguese, or any other two similar languages
    - BEV is just as grammatical and effective as any other language
      - NOT just a collection of slang terms
      - NOT "lazy" or "incorrect" English, because the differences are consistent, patterned, rule-based -- just different rules
  - AAVE is often used consciously to mark AA identity
    - but speakers may not learn any alternative, like SE, either
  - Many SE speakers consider AAVE lower class, uneducated, etc.
    - they respond to a meaning (in this case, a value) that their culture leads them to attribute to AAVE and its speakers
  - Review the events in Rickford reading
    - 1996: Oakland school board adopted a curriculum to teach SE by using BEV and explaining the differences
      - recognizing that some students spoke BEV well but had to learn SE as essentially a foreign dialect
      - the curriculum explicitly taught the differences, allowing BEV speakers to learn how to translate into SE
      - granting the same status and respect to both dialects

- huge media coverage and public outcry
  - most public comments ridiculed the idea of BEV as a language
  - many misunderstood the program, thinking that schools would teach BEV
- linguists responded
  - many disliked the made-up name "Ebonics"
  - many doubted some of the historical claims made about its origins
  - but all agreed that it is a different dialect or language
    - (language vs. dialect is just a matter of degree)
  - and many felt that the program was a good idea that would help students master SE
- The Oakland school board took lots of abuse over its "ebonics" proposal, and was voted out of office
  - the whole matter was dropped
- But as of 2005 (according to the LAUSD website in 2010), about 78 schools in LA were using a similar program called Academic English Mastery, starting as early as 1991
  - It "teaches black students how to translate what they call African American Language into Mainstream American English"
  - and it has become a model used nationally
  - the director of the program**,** Dr. Noma LeMoine, gave another seminar promoting it last October (2009)…
- Clearly illustrates that meanings and values are placed on language styles
  - why was the proposal so ridiculed and attacked?
  - why did it attract so much attention?

- Gender differences in language use
  - Various studies of gender differences in language *use* or *performance*
  - Both of these studies are specific to our current US culture
    - they are not about gender universals
    - how might one go about studying whether or not there are gender differences that do not depend on cultural constructs, but might be based on biological differences between men and women?
  - Deborah Tannen
    - "ways of talking are ritualized"
      - they seem natural because we are used to standardized ways of doing them
      - (note that this is a metaphorical, not very correct use of "ritualized")
    - men's ritualized ways of speaking
      - opposition: banter, joking, teasing, "playful put-downs"
      - avoiding the "one-down position"
      - Dilbert cartoon with Topper: demonstrating a male conversational strategy
      - asking for directions or advice is putting oneself in the "one-down position"
    - women's ritualized ways of speaking
      - maintaining appearance of equality, downplaying the authority of the speaker
    - examples with male pilots not asking directions in an emergency
    - examples of male vs. female medical students and residents

- Tannen points out that her interpretation is opposite to the usual stereotypes of US gender roles
  - supposedly, men are more focused on information, and women are more sensitive to emotional responses
  - but if men are largely jockeying for "one-up position", even to refusing to ask for information, that is more emotion-driven than fact-driven
  - if women's goal of de-emphasizing inequality allows them to more easily exchange information, it seems less dominated by emotional goals
- each tends to use their own rules to interpret the other
  - "gender-centrism"?
  - leads to misunderstanding and ineffective interactions, just like ethnocentrism does
- most workplaces were once, if they are not still, largely male
  - thus the male style tends to be the default
  - users of female style of speaking may be at a disadvantage
  - using the male speaking style may, in many workplaces, lead to more personal success than efficiently exchanging information would
    - because men will misunderstand the woman's speaking style as a sign of ignorance or weakness
- Maltz and Borker
  - cross-sex miscommunication is basically cross-cultural miscommunication
  - so, how can males and females in the same culture have different "cultures" of communication?
  - Maltz and Borker's concepts of gender differences in communication
    - women's speaking style:
      - ask more questions
      - do more to encourage responses and ensure interaction
        - such as by giving encouraging reactions
        - or saying things that call for the listener to reply
      - more prone to use "positive minimal responses" while listening, rather than just at the end
        - "mm-hmm", nods
      - more likely to use "silent protest" when interrupted
      - more often acknowledge the other speaker by using "you" and "we"
    - men's speaking style:
      - more likely to interrupt
      - more likely to dispute the other's comments
      - more likely to ignore the other's comments
        - or to respond slowly with a "delayed minimal response" at the end of the comments
        - or to respond unenthusiastically
      - use more methods to control and change the topic
      - make more direct declarations of fact or opinion
    - in general, men's speech more emphasizes expressing power through the conversation

- each gender uses its own speaking style to understand the other, leading to miscommunication
  - a woman uses “mm-hmm” and nods throughout someone else’s speaking as a way to show that she is listening, and to encourage the speaker
    - but a man may understand this as what it would mean if a man did it: constant, explicit agreement
  - a man might use few “mm-hmms” while listening to indicate that he does not agree
    - while a women may take this to mean that he is not even listening
- Maltz and Borker suggest that this arises because males and females learn speech styles at a time when they are living in somewhat separate subcultures
  - in largely same-sex groups of children
  - which have other, gender-specific rules of behavior that shape how they learn to speak
    - girls:
      - play in small groups
      - of uniform age
      - often must be invited to join
      - usually non-competitive
      - close friendship is important, not relative power
      - friendships tend to be exclusive
      - lack of simple hierarchy makes friendship-politics complex and subtle
      - speech serves to
        - create close, equal relationships
        - criticize without damaging relationships
        - accurately interpret motives, relationships, politics, etc.
    - boys:
      - play in larger groups
      - hierarchically organized
      - relative status is important
      - low-status boys not excluded, but made to feel inferior
      - all about posturing and responding
      - speech serves to
        - assert dominance
        - attract and hold an audience
        - assert oneself when someone else is speaking
- at the very end, they suggest that part of learning adult forms of interaction is learning to at least partially overcome the gender-specific speaking styles acquired in childhood