

Sociolinguistics: Language Use

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- **Sociolinguistics:** studies the relationship between language, 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 its function in social context
 - 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 you were doing a class project with
 - 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 linguistic performance with variations in
 - personal and group identity, like
 - gender
 - ethnicity
 - class
 - place of origin (northern vs. southern California, Texas, Boston, New York, New Orleans...)
 - differences in authority, age, wealth, status
 - choice of social identity (cool; studious; rebellious; etc.)
 - the physical and 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 study details of both how language is used, and of social situations
 - we can learn about language by figuring out how it is used in different contexts
 - we can learn about culturally constructed rules of
 - social interaction
 - hierarchy
 - gender roles, and many other things
 - by looking at how language is used in interactions
- 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
 - an example of code-switching: Latinos in the US who speak
 - 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

- this highlights a contradiction in our culture
 - between our ideal culture’s ideology of equality
 - and our real culture’s unequal valuation of white people’s English and African-American vernacular
 - by showing how absurd it is when people act as though the ideal were real
 - pointing out this contradiction creates surprise and tension
 - it makes us a little uneasy
 - which we relieve by laughing
 - the fact that it is funny proves that we really do have these expectations of
 - who speaks what dialect
 - but even more: that it is unheard-of for an older white lady to speak “Jive”
 - she would not value it enough to learn it
 - note that a black person speaking “standard” English 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 Standard English
 - but we don’t expect Euroamericans to learn Black English Vernacular
 - the clip shows that Jive and Standard English are equally effective
 - note the (fictional but believable) example of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in action
 - the “Jive Lady” is very polite in Standard English
 - but she can be rude and crude in Jive
 - you would not expect her to be rude like this in Standard English
 - the language she is using affects the sorts of things she will say, her behavior, maybe even her thinking about the interaction
 - alternative explanation
 - she has never been properly socialized in Jive
 - so she has not really learned to understand
 - how rude the terms are
 - she has never been seriously sanctioned for using them
 - like my former roommate and his limited, profane Italian...
 - this illustrates how much you can start to figure out from looking at how people use language
- Performance can relate to, or give hints about many other aspects of identity and social interaction
 - 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”, “hallelujah”, 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
 - BEV has present tenses that distinguish habitual from occasional or unique actions
 - “He runnin” (a unique, specific action)
 - “He be runnin” (a habitual action)
 - BEV has 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
 - Many SE speakers consider BEV a marker that the speaker is lower class, uneducated, etc.
 - they respond to the meaning placed on the dialect itself (this speaker is low-status)

- Many BEV speakers use BEV consciously
 - to mark their own AA identity
 - to create group solidarity
- but many BEV speakers may not become fluent in another dialect, like SE
 - putting them at a disadvantage when dealing with SE 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 right up to today
- 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?
- Example of gender differences in language use: Deborah Tannen
 - The BEV example looked at differences in dialect
 - Here, Tannen looks at differences in language *use* or *performance* within a single dialect, where men and women use the language differently
 - note that this is specific to how our culture constructs appropriate use of language by the two main genders
 - no claim that it is a universal difference between men and women
 - Tannen says that for each gender, “ways of talking are ritualized”
 - these ways of talking seem natural because we are used to standardized ways of doing them

- this is a metaphorical, not very correct use of the term “ritualized”
- what Tannen really means is “standardized” or “rule-bound”
- men’s standardized 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 standardized ways of speaking
 - maintaining appearance of equality, downplaying the authority of the speaker
- examples
 - examples with male pilots not asking directions in an emergency
 - examples of female vs. male 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 gender’s rules to interpret behavior by both their own and the other gender
 - leads to misunderstanding and ineffective interactions, just like ethnocentrism does
 - “gender-centrism”?
- 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