

Social Factors Affect Language Teaching (LT) and Language Learning (LL): A Sociolinguistic Perspective

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***Abstract:** Language teaching and language learning are connected with Sociolinguistics in many ways. Different social factors affect language teaching and language learning. This article examines some social factors like situation, context, and social setting that affect language teaching and language learning based on literature review. This paper describes the main factors which influence linguistic choices and explains how well contemporary teaching can take account of them. It also investigates obvious variations in the use of language used by people belonging to varieties of occupations.*

Introduction

English, or indeed any language, does not operate like a machine altering and ordering words by grammatical rules, resulting in an acceptable linguistic outcome. Whether language is perceived as correct, by its audience, is extremely a complex issue based on situation, context and a wide range of social factors. It examines the ways in which the language of social groups varies and the way language changes depending upon audience and context.

In *Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages* (2007) Sandra Silberstein argues that people use language as a tool to mark their identity and membership to certain social categories, for example, class, ethnicity, age, sex. Silberstein suggests that such categories are a social construct produced through speech rather than standing independent of it. Mary Ellen Butler-Pascoe and Karin M. Wiburg (2003) put emphasis on “the importance of culture and community for second language learning”. They further point out “Current theories of learning, such as social constructivism, recognize that learning is influenced by the social and cultural context in which it occurs (P.188). It is believed that this is extremely an interesting question and one that, for the purposes of this paper, will remain unanswered!

Social Factors

There are several social factors that correlate with language variation. The major ones are given below.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity can result in significant linguistic variation. The adoption of L2 phases and grammatical constructs into L1 typify the language of many ethnic minorities. Studies of language variation due to colonisation have resulted in a general acceptance of the theory that where two languages blend to form pidgin, the language of the dominant group is in greatest evidence in the vocabulary and the language of the subordinated group is most in evidence in the grammar.

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Researchers like Corder, S.P. (1967) and Selinker, L (1972) have identified a linguistic middle ground, labelled as “interlanguage”. The term “interlanguage” is used to describe the adaptation of the L2 with aspects of the speakers L1, until eventually the speaker becomes proficient in the L2. However the idea that “interlanguage” is always temporary, and represents a simplification of the L2, is open to question.

There are examples of sustained pidginisation of language and it should also be noted that Labov, W. (1972) in his study of inner-city youths in New York, reported that far from being sloppy and ungrammatical their use of language was as consistent and rule governed as any prestige language. In summary, history and politics will influence the development of language but perhaps not always entirely in predictable ways, with groups using language to deliberately maintain and identify their separateness.

Age

Language does not stand still; it is an ever changing, living entity. The use and common interpretation of particular words or phrases change over time. However, people are often reluctant to revise their understanding or use of language. This leads to differences in the use of language that are symptomatic of people’s age. The word “gay” is a prime example. At the beginning of the twentieth century it was widely used to indicate ‘happy’, ‘full of fun’ or ‘brightly coloured’. Today it is usually used as a casual term for ‘homosexuality’. New words and phrases constantly enter language, often taking existing words and blending or altering them; “gaydar” (mixing gay and radar) an informal term for the ability of one homosexual to recognise another person as being homosexual (Hornby, 2005)

Vivian Cook suggests “At particular ages students prefer particular methods. Teenagers may dislike any technique that exposes them in public; role play and simulation are in conflict with their adolescent anxieties. Adults can feel they are not learning properly in play-like situations and prefer a conventional, formal style of teaching.” (Vivian Cook, 2008)

As technology has changed, the young people have been quick to adopt it and create an entire language awareness to refer to it. Most users of the internet are familiar with the use of “google” as a verb meaning to search for something using an internet search engine; the word appears in the 7th edition of the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary. Rather like “hoover” the leading brand name has become a generic verb.

Gender

There are recorded differences in the ways men and women use language. These differences are observable across a whole range of linguistic variables. Llamas and Stockwell in their chapter on sociolinguistics, use the phrase “genderlect” to describe the idea. Lakoff’s (1975) observations were cited as demonstrating that women were linguistically less powerful. However, Freeman and McElhinney (1996) point out that whatever linguistic skills are highly prized in society, society tends to perceive men as having them and women lacking them! The real issue is perhaps that society has different linguistic expectations of the sexes. These differences are not confined to lexical and grammatical differences but are also clearly evident in prosodic features. Peter Trudgill

(2000) points out “languages do differ considerably in the extent to which sex differences are lexicalized. In German, for example, you have to specify whether a friend is male, Freund, or female, Freundin.”

Geography

All languages demonstrate geographic variation. Regional differences can be strong or subtle. The matter is complicated further in industrialised societies where geographic mobility is common. Some languages experience such strong regional variation (Northern and Bavarian German, for example) as to make comprehension a real issue. It is important to distinguish between regional variation known as “dialect” which refers to lexical and grammatical variations to standard language and “accent” which refers to the pronunciation pattern. In practice these two factors often combine to form what most people consider a recognisable regional variation. Several studies have shown that people generally react less favourably to people whose accents differ from their own. Because of geographic location pronunciation varies. A teacher in Scotland might face difficulty teaching English learners. Scottish accent is difficult and different from English accent.

Social class

There are observable differences in language across class boundaries in a society. Just as higher social groups use language to distinguish themselves, some groups deliberately employ inferior forms in order to disassociate themselves from mainstream society. The language used by professional classes is labelled as “correct” and promoted by government, education and the media as the “standard” form. In contrast, other forms of the language are, therefore, labelled as “incorrect” and considered substandard. Nevertheless, stigmatised varieties often survive even under considerable pressure as groups remain loyal to their form as a means of distinguishing themselves.

Traditionally, one type of English accent has conveyed associations of respectability and a good education. This has been labelled as Received Pronunciation (RP) and was coined by phonetician Daniel Jones in 1918. Today RP, in its pure form, is spoken by less than 3% of the British population (David Crystal, 2003).

Occupation and role

Of all the variations in language that are an everyday occurrence, it is felt that the changes that we most commonly overlook are the changes in language owing to the profession of the writer or speaker, or their relationship to others. In their roles as cleric, advertiser, newscaster, journalist, doctor, politician or taxi driver, thousands of people shape their language to the role they are paid to perform. Unlike regional, gender and class variations these are often “put on” when we go to work in the morning and “taken off” at the end of the day. In English Language teaching world, ESP (English for specific purpose) is connected with different professions like doctors, engineers, bankers etc. It has been found that there are obvious variations in the use of language used by people belonging to varieties of occupations. This is also an experience that both LL and LT are significantly affected owing to practical variations. People of various occupations need diverse language knowledge and linguistic training and orientation. These differences should not be seen as limited to professions with formal or technical variations, like law

or science but rather as encompassing every area of life. The influence of role is evident in the language of groups of builders, school children and shop assistants as well as politicians and sports commentators. The effects of role cannot, of course, be viewed in isolation from the context and situation in which they occur. When taking on a role, paid or unpaid (mother, brother, neighbour, customer) it influences our behaviour and our language in accordance with the relationships that role encompasses.

Social Modes

Formality and informality

Dependent upon role, audience and situation, the use of language varies enormously depending on the level of formality and politeness the speaker or writer wishes to convey. Of course, whether it is perceived as being formal or polite will depend on what common values and assumptions the interlocutors share. Even single word utterances are subject to variation; “yes –yeah, ah ha, yep / no –nah, nope”. Therefore, one can begin to imagine the complex range of subtle alterations possible without even venturing into slang and taboo language.

Cultural awareness

Even at elementary levels, cultural awareness can be introduced to lessons. Something as basic as ways of greeting people can be examined for a case of cultural awareness. A set of pictures / photographs of people in different settings, friends meeting in a cafe, a mother or a father meeting a child from school, two business people greeting each other, a shop assistant greeting a customer etc can be used to elicit suggestions / selections of linguistic choices (hi, hello, good afternoon etc). In the writers’ experience, students will readily attempt to draw comparisons with their own cultural “habits” or practices. In more advanced levels, the exercise can be repeated with more complex scenarios; dissatisfied customer returning goods, a job interview, school parents’ evening, etc.

It is not enough to include sessions like the ones suggested above and assume that learners would adapt their language and patterns of interaction accordingly. It is believed that many cultural values are subconsciously exhibited. Teachers must reflect carefully on all the classroom activities to ensure where they include cultural assumptions these are clarified and discussed and if an activity has not gone to plan; to question whether cultural factors are in evidence.

Politeness, formality, and informality

When teaching modal verbs, a discussion of politeness and formality versus informality will naturally follow; however, very often the factor keeps dictating the impression created by a piece of language. A useful game the writer has played with multilingual classes involves two sets of cards; one pack with polite or rude written on them and the other pack containing every day phrases (appropriate to the language level of the class). Students select a phrase card and then a manner card. They have to say the phrase in a rude or polite manner, as dictated by their card and other students vote on whether they perceive the phrase as rude / polite. This game naturally encourages students to think about what signals politeness or lack of it. With a monolingual class the game could be

adapted to listening / watching audio / video clips or to play the game with the teacher indicating if the phrase appeared to be polite / rude.

Conclusion

It is, therefore, evident that social factors like ethnicity, age, gender, geography, social class, occupation and role, situation and context affect language teaching and language learning. These factors influence the linguistic choice we make. Today's language class room is also affected by these factors. LT and LL are in large measure connected to some complex issues which cannot be ignored. These issues speaking indirectly influence our way of thinking, and understanding. Socio-cultural linguistics, psycholinguistics, curricula and instructional dimensions are some of the major factors. Not all the people in the world speak and learn English in the same way. These are affected by the situations and context. Socio linguistics investigates into what, when, where and how to use a language. A Language is a social-cultural-geographical phenomenon. There is a deep relationship between a language and a society. Human beings acquire and use a language in a society. Language can be considered an abstraction of abstractions, a system of systems. Teachers cannot hope to transform their students' sociolinguistic competence overnight, but by contextualising the presentation of language, regularly reviewing the impact of social and cultural factors on language and including lessons with a functional approach, teachers can hope to increase the sociolinguistic awareness of their students. These things need not be introduced as isolated exercises, but a contextual and social aspect could be incorporated to most exercises and examples. In time this enables students to make more confident decisions about the appropriateness of their L2 language in context.

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