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# Introduction to Sociolinguistics

## Unit 1



# 1. Introduction to Sociolinguistics

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Welcome to the e-learning material packet for “Introduction to Sociolinguistics”! It will guide you to find out about what sociolinguistics is, the main issues it studies, the methodology it uses, and the terms it operates with.

Each unit will give you text passages to read, [questions to think about](#), [mini research tasks to do](#), [video tasks](#), [review questions](#), [a glossary of terms](#), [quizzes](#), and suggestions for [further reading](#).

Why study sociolinguistics? Sociolinguistics is a discipline that studies issues that all speakers are familiar with, often without consciously realizing it. Looking at issues of language use, cultural differences, and social characteristics of language with the eyes of a sociolinguist is an interesting enterprise because we can realize what makes speakers use language the way they do, how language works in a social context, and how we ourselves use language. It can shed light on subtle social processes like people forming opinions about others based on language use, sometimes discriminating against them based on it, and what we can do about it.

## *1. The topic of this unit:*

The present unit discusses what sociolinguistics investigates, what its most important focus is, and how sociolinguists look at language.

## *2. What is sociolinguistics?*

Sociolinguistics is the branch of linguistics that looks at language in its social context (as used by its speakers) rather than various aspects of its vocabulary or structure in themselves. It studies all those issues of language that have a social explanation (rather than a linguistic one, i.e. that lies in the rules of grammar or pronunciation), the way people use language for various social purposes (this is referred to as ‘the social uses of language’), and how different people use language differently (this is called ‘variation’ in sociolinguistics).

## 2.1. We use language for social purposes

When people speak, communicating meaning and exchanging information is only one purpose. Another very important purpose of language use is establishing and maintaining our social relationships. When we want to meet and get to know somebody (i.e. establish a relationship with them), we talk to them; when we want to continue and strengthen our relationship with them, we talk to them some more. On the other hand, if we don't want to maintain a relationship with somebody, we stop talking to them. The absence of talk between two people often signals a conflict.

Question to think about:

1. A lot of our greetings are formulated as wishes (e.g. English *Good morning!*; Hungarian *Jó napot kívánok!* "I wish you a good day!") – but do we really wish everybody a good morning or good day to that we greet? If not, what all are we communicating when we greet them?
2. Nonnative speakers of English often complain that *how are you?* is a question that native speakers ask but are not really interested in finding out the answer to and take it as a sign of them being uninterested or superficial. Linguistically, it is a formulaic question that serves a different purpose rather than its surface meaning, requesting information. What purpose do you think it serves? Are there questions in your native language that work this way, which a nonnative speaker could misunderstand the intention of?

## 2.2. Linguistic issues that have a social explanation

How we address people is a sociolinguistic issue and not a linguistic one: the address form we choose depends on what our relationship is with the interlocutor (which is a social issue). If we are in a formal relationship with the person and s/he is of higher social standing, we will likely address them with title plus last name in English (*Ms. White, Dr. Smith*) or use their professional title (*doctor, officer*) rather than their first name (*Jane, John*) or a diminutive (*Johnny, Chris*).

In languages that have more complicated address systems, for instance, involving a formal vs. an informal pronoun address, speakers make complicated linguistic choices of matching greetings, pronouns, corresponding verb forms, and various address terms: in several Indo-European languages the informal pronoun is the 2SG pronoun (*tu* in French, *ты* in Russian, *ty* in Polish etc.) while the formal is the 2PL pronoun (*vous* in French, *вы* in Russian, *wy* in Polish etc.). But deciding whom to address formally and whom to informally is determined on the basis of the interlocutors' relationship: the formality or informality of it. What makes a relationship formal vs. informal is also a social and cultural issue (as we will see in the unit on address forms), but what is important for the present discussion is that it is not a linguistic one, making address behavior a quintessentially sociolinguistic phenomenon.

### 2.2.1. Questions to think about:

1. Can you think of differences in how you address people in the languages you speak? (E.g. in some languages adult strangers routinely address each other formally when they first meet and for some time afterwards, whereas in other languages it is fine to use informal address immediately.)
2. In some cultures speakers believe that formal address is inherently about respect. Do you think that is necessarily the case? Can you think of examples and/or counterexamples?

### 3. *Different people use language differently: Variation*

Sociolinguists study how different people (men vs. women, older vs. younger people, highly educated vs. uneducated people, upper class vs. lower class people etc.) use language differently, how the same person uses language differently with different people and in different situations, and how groups of people (of the same gender, age, educational background, class, or regional affiliation etc.) nevertheless use language similarly to each other.

They also study what attitudes speakers have towards these different ways of speaking, and how these attitudes impact so many things in our lives: how people are treated (positively or negatively) because of their accents or because of their choice of language in a particular situation, how speaking one dialect rather than another can give speakers advantages, and what we can do to use such knowledge to treat people more fairly in the educational context or at the workplace.

### Questions to think about:

1. Can you think of ways in which you use language differently than your parents? Think of word choice.
2. Do you have any friends who use language differently than you? In what way?
3. Have you ever had the experience that you went to a different city or part of your country and realized that people spoke slightly differently there? What features of language (pronunciation, word choice, grammar etc.) were different in their speech?
4. Can you think of any features of language that are different in how men and women in your generation speak?
5. Do you think you speak differently with your parents than with your friends? In what ways?

For instance, women usually know more color terms and swear less than men, and they also tend to use more standard language than men in many situations. Less educated people's speech often has nonstandard features in it: for instance, the use of multiple negation (also known as double negation, e.g. *He ain't going nowhere with nobody* or *I ain't got no money*) is much more frequent in less educated English speakers' speech than that of educated speakers. Not all nonstandard features of language use are of the same degree of nonstandardness: for instance, in English, saying *standin'* instead of *standing* is not regarded in the same way as double negation – the speaker using *-in'* is not likely to be considered uneducated, whereas one using double negation might be.

#### Questions to think about:

1. Is there a dialect that is usually regarded higher than another one in your native language? For instance, are speakers of a regional dialect stigmatized in some situations (i.e. thought to be inherently less smart, less educated, less successful)?
2. If you (or a friend of yours) started using a regional dialect at the university in speaking with professors, would that change what the professor thought about you (or your friend)? Should it?

#### Research tasks:

1. Ask 5 female and 5 male friends of yours if they know what color the following color names (or their equivalents in the friends' native language) indicate and whether they actively use the ones they know: *fuchsia*, *maroon*, *turquoise*, *aquamarine*, and *terracotta*. Which gender group knew more of the color terms? Is there a difference in their self-professed usage?
2. Think of some words in your native language that are much more likely to occur in females' usage than in males' (e.g. *cute* or *marvelous* in English), or vice versa, and ask 5 female and 5 male friends of yours if they ever use them.

#### Video task:

Watch the first few minutes of President Barack Obama's speeches addressing different audiences.

The first is Obama addressing Congress in 2009:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSJugLU5M58>

The second is Obama speaking at a university in Indonesia in 2010: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge5tj1kG5\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge5tj1kG5_g)  
The third is Obama delivering a commencement address at Morehouse College, a historically black university in Atlanta, Georgia, in 2013: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e50Tt9qJRQk>

What differences can you detect in the way he speaks in these three speeches? Make a list of linguistic characteristics such as choice of vocabulary, grammatical features, and style, as well as any extra-linguistic features such as posture and facial expressions.

#### *4. We reveal a lot about ourselves when we speak*

When we speak, we reveal a lot about ourselves, about who we are socially (as far as our age, gender, social position), and about what our relationship is with the person we are speaking with. Imagine that you are sitting on a bus, with two people talking behind you. Even without turning around to see them, you will be able to figure out who they are socially (their age, educational level, social standing) and what their relationship is: whether they are in a formal relationship (e.g. a teacher and her student who met on the bus coincidentally) or in an informal one (e.g. an aunt and her niece).

Sociolinguists distinguish five levels of characteristics that affect our language use: the personal, stylistic, social, sociocultural, and sociological levels.

The personal level includes characteristics such as voice quality and pitch. Even though people's voice quality is greatly determined by biology (i.e. the person's size and gender), there is a considerable element which is social: we unconsciously manipulate our pitch according to cultural expectations and also our goals in interactions.

In some cultures women use the higher end of their pitch range: for instance, Russian, Ukrainian, and Japanese women do this, unconsciously. At the same time, Croatian and Serbian women use the lower end of their pitch range. It also seems that people can manipulate their pitch depending on the social situation. In one study, American college age women were studied when talking on the phone to college age men, some of whom were just friends of theirs, while others they were romantically involved with. The researchers found that when the women were talking to their boyfriends, they used higher pitched voices than with the other men, most likely because through the medium of the telephone this was the only way to accentuate their femininity.

#### **Video task:**

Watch researcher Rébecca Kleinberger (MIT) talk about voice quality differences and why we don't like to hear our own voices: [https://www.ted.com/talks/rebecca\\_kleinberger\\_our\\_three\\_voices](https://www.ted.com/talks/rebecca_kleinberger_our_three_voices)

The stylistic level involves the formality or informality of the speech situation, that is where and who we are talking to. People modify their speech according to the speech situation: in formal situations (e.g. talking to a stranger in a status-marked setting or to somebody that we are in a power relationship with, as teacher vs. student, boss vs. employee) we adjust our language use (phonology, grammar, and vocabulary) to be more formal, that is, standard, whereas in informal situations (e.g. talking to close family members, friends, classmates) we use more informal language.

Every speaker moves on a formal–informal continuum, but what constitutes the most formal language use for one person may differ from that of another: a highly educated English speaker is unlikely to use double negation even in their most informal language use (i.e. when having a relaxed conversation with their best friend or spouse), whereas a little educated person might use double negation even at their most formal.

What kind of linguistic features speakers use to signal formality vs. informality varies in every language: in English, the formal variant of the *-ing* suffix (pronounced with a final velar nasal [ɪŋ]) vs. the informal variant (with an alveolar nasal [ɪn]) is a very common such feature; in Hungarian the deletion of the [n] from the end of the inessive case suffix *-ban/ben*, meaning “in”, as *-ba/be* is common.

#### Questions to think about:

1. Some people believe that saying things like *standin'*, *sittin'* or *singin'* in English, or *Londonba voltam* “I was in London” in Hungarian is simply careless or even incorrect. How do we know that this is simply informal rather than careless or incorrect?
2. Can you think of some (phonological or grammatical) linguistic features in your native language that signal informality of speech?

The third level is the level of social characteristics such as age, gender, level of education, social class, region, and possibly, others. (What is a meaningful social characteristics varies by society: in some societies race or religion is also important.) These characteristics assign people in social groups who tend to use language differently.

Young people use language differently than older age groups: people between 18 and 25 use a lot of slang, whereas older people do not; middle aged people use more standard language than younger and older age groups.

Women use language differently than men – countless sociolinguistic studies attest to that. Beyond eye catching differences such as women using more color terms and swearing less than men, they have also been shown to speak more standard language than men in many

studies on many languages. They also tend to use their local dialect less than men of the same social class. And there are also lots of differences that are language- and/or culture specific.

Table 1 below shows that women in Norwich tend to be more standard in their use of the *-ing* ending in almost all speech styles and social classes than the men of the same social class.

Table 1. The (ng) variable in Norwich: percentage of nonstandard forms

Social class <sup>a</sup>	No.	Sex	Style <sup>b</sup>			
			WLS	RPS	FS	CS
MMC	6	M	0	0	4	31
		F	0	0	0	0
LMC	8	M	0	0	27	17
		F	0	0	3	67
UWC	16	M	0	18	81	95
		F	11	13	68	77
MWC	22	M	24	43	91	97
		F	20	46	81	88
LWC	8	M	66	100	100	100
		F	17	54	97	100

<sup>a</sup> Social class: MMC (middle middle class), LMC (lower middle class), UWC (upper working class), MWC (middle working class), LWC (lower working class).

<sup>b</sup> Style: WLS (word list), RPS (reading passage), FS (formal), CS (casual).

Source: based on Trudgill (1974, p. 94)

Social class is in most societies the most important social characteristic that stratifies people's speech such that the higher on the social scale somebody is, the more standard their speech tends to be. Trudgill's data from Norwich above provides a good example of this as well.

Regional variation is probably the kind of difference that most non-linguists are aware of: depending on where in the language area you come from, your speech might be different from others from other areas. Map 1 below shows the most prominent dialect areas of the eastern United States. All subsystems of language are affected by regional variation: the pronunciation, the grammar, and the vocabulary. Some examples are, for instance, the lack of postvocalic *r* (pronouncing words like *car* and *guard* as [ka:] and [ga:d]) in the lower South dialect areas and around Boston; the use of double modals (*He might could do it*, meaning "there is a small chance he could do it") in parts of the US South; or the use of the word *spendy* "expensive" in the Pacific Northwest.





Map 1. Dialect areas of the Eastern United States.

### Research tasks:

1. Look around PBS's "Do you speak American?" website, <http://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/americanvarieties/>, and note some pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary features of various regional varieties of American English.
2. What other features besides *spendy* are typical of the Pacific Northwest?

The first three levels of differences – personal, stylistic, and social – constitute fine differences of language use investigated by micro-sociolinguistics. The remaining two levels, sociocultural and sociological levels discussed below, are part of macro-sociolinguistics, also known as sociology of language. At these macro levels investigations target characteristics that exist on the societal level.

The fourth level, that of sociocultural characteristics, concerns cultural differences between large groups of people within the same society and between different societies. The notion of personal questions is a good example: what constitutes a personal question (that is, a question one is not supposed to ask except maybe one's closest friends or family members) differs between societies. In North America, asking people about how much they make is such a question, whereas in Eastern and Central Europe this question is much more acceptable (and definitely was acceptable 20-30 years ago). Within the United States, New Yorkers constitute a distinct group set aside by the sociocultural characteristic of having a greater tolerance for conversational overlap (i.e. when the next speaker is already speaking while the previous one is still finishing their turn), making them appear as pushy and rude in the eyes of non-New Yorkers, who are irritated when a New Yorker starts talking "before they finished what they were saying". In this case, nobody is pushy or rude, simply New Yorkers and non-New Yorkers have different rules for when it is acceptable to start talking in a conversation.

The fifth and final level of sociological characteristics of language use, also on a societal level. Macro-sociolinguistic phenomena such as what language is used in official contexts, education, the private sphere etc. constitute them, showing societal patterns of language use and distribution of functions of languages.

### 5. Fishman's definition of sociolinguistics

In an early article, Fishman (1965) defined the focus of the discipline of sociolinguistics as "who speaks what, to whom, when, and to what end". "Who" is the speaker, of course, as defined by all of their social characteristics; "what" is the dialect or language they choose out of their repertoire; "to whom" is the interlocutor, again, as defined by all of their social characteristics; "when" is the speech situation in which the interlocutors are speaking; and "to what end" is the purpose of the interaction. These elements basically cover the entire spectrum of what sociolinguists investigate.

## 6. Sociolinguistics as a discipline

The discipline of sociolinguistics is relatively young: although works and discussions of language phenomena that we would label as sociolinguistic today existed earlier as well, they were not categorized under this label explicitly until the late 1950s to early 1960s. The micro-sociolinguistic study of variation was founded by the American linguist William Labov (b. 1927) in the mid-1960s. In British sociolinguistics Peter Trudgill (b. 1943) is the best-known representative of the field. The earliest and most formidable author in the sociology of language was another American linguist, Joshua Fishman (1926–2015).

Hungarian sociolinguistics started in the 1990s. The most well-known and prolific Hungarian sociolinguist is Miklós Kontra (b. 1950), whose work on variation in Hungarian (*Nyelv és társadalom a rendszerváltás kori Magyarországon* [Language and society at the time of regime change in Hungary]) is a comprehensive study of the topic.

### Research task:

1. Look through William Labov's website (<http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~wlabov/>) to get an idea what kind of issues he has investigated during his long career.

## 7. Summary

Sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics which studies how people use language in a social context. It describes linguistic facts that have a social explanation. Different people use the same language differently in different situations – a phenomenon called variation by sociolinguists. Variation can be regional, social, and stylistic.

### Review questions:

1. Give examples from your own experience of linguistic issues that have a social explanation.
2. What purpose do greetings have in language use?
3. What are the five levels of characteristics that sociolinguists study? What are some examples of for each of the characteristics?
4. What is variation? What kind of variation is there in language?
5. When people speak, does it make a difference who they are speaking to? How? Explain this phenomenon with reference to the Obama speeches you have listened to.
6. What is Fishman's definition of the focus of sociolinguistic research? What do the various parts (question words) stand for symbolically?

**Glossary of terms:**

**Macro-sociolinguistics:** a branch of sociolinguistics studying societal patterns and processes of language use. (Also called “sociology of language”.)

**Micro-sociolinguistics:** a branch of sociolinguistics studying fine points of individual, stylistic, social, and regional variation in language.

**Regional variation:** regionally based variation, i.e. the phenomenon that people from different regions of the same language area speak differently. Regional dialects have been traditionally studied by dialectology but are now also studied by sociolinguistics since they often intersect with social dialects.

**Social variation:** socially based variation, i.e. the phenomenon that people from different social groups (e.g. females vs. males, young vs. middle-aged vs. older people, people of different social strata etc.) use language differently.

**Sociolinguistics:** a subdiscipline of linguistics concerned with language as a social and cultural phenomenon, and with linguistic issues that have a social explanation.

**Sociology of language:** a branch of sociolinguistics studying societal patterns and processes of language use. (Also called “macro-sociolinguistics”.)

**Stylistic variation:** the phenomenon that all speakers use language differently in formal vs. informal situations, choosing more standard ways of speaking in formal situations, and less formal, possibly nonstandard, ways of speaking in informal situations.

**Variation:** the phenomenon that people of different social backgrounds and regional backgrounds as well as all speakers in different situations use language differently. The three main types of variation are regional, social, and stylistic variation.

**Quizzes:**

see separate files

**Further reading:**

Read the introductory chapters of some basic books on sociolinguistics. Compare what the authors focus on primarily.

- Chambers, J.K. 1995. Correlations. In: Chambers, J.K. *Sociolinguistic theory: Linguistic variation and its social significance*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1–33.
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- Trudgill, Peter. 1974. Sociolinguistics – Language and society. In: Trudgill, Peter. *Sociolinguistics: An introduction to language and society*. Hammondsouth: Penguin, 13–33.
- Wardhaugh, Ronald. 1998. Introduction. In: Wardhaugh, Ronald. *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1–20.