

Basic terms of sociolinguistics

1. IDENTITY

Identity

- Identity is a set of qualities, traits, looks, beliefs, and expressions that identify a person or a group.

Society

- A group of people in constant interaction and with a shared goal, who probably share some spacial territory. Usually regulated by shared dominant cultural expectations (laws, traditions, and values).

Social identity

- Social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their membership in social group or groups. Social identity helps people to determine how they relate to others (both inside and outside of the group). Social groups may be defined by some physical, social and mental characteristics of individuals within the group.
- in contrast to personal identity, it is created and shaped throughout a discourse
- in a way, it defines "how a person is perceived" in different situations rather than "what they are"
- **demographic identifiers** can be a part of **social identity** (then they are called social variables), if they build social groups recognized in the given society (age, gender, nationality, race, disability, ethnicity, class, education...); social variables may have an influence on language variation

Personal identity

- rather a matter of psychology
- personal identity is a person's perception of himself as an individual entity
- **not fixed**, as it shapes based on person's actions and experiences
- oftentimes **fluent**, as it can shift rapidly based on the situation and time in which the person finds themselves, e.g., a person will often behave differently when talking to their peer in contrast to a conversation with their superior
- a person often has **multiple identities**, which can in situations blend or even **conflict** with one another, e.g., a police officer with strong philanthropic tendencies may often run into identity conflict where their obligations to the law require them to take actions in situations which can result in hurting another human
- in various situations, the identity of this same person may blend from these two parts in different ways. Maybe during a conversation about illegal immigration, they take stance

close to their philanthropy ideology, and in case of legalization of drugs, they instead shift more towards their sense of law and order.

- Almost every person is able to use more than one language varieties, the **choice** of one them is based on the factors described above.

2. LANGUAGE VARIETIES

Language / dialect

- the principal method of human communication, consisting of words used in a structured and conventional way and conveyed by speech, writing, or gesture
- discerning languages from dialects: rather social convention than linguistic features (dialect continuum)

Language varieties

- specific form of a language or language cluster, this may include languages, dialects, styles, or other forms of language, as well as a standard variety.
- **sociolect** – a social dialect, a form of language used by a socioeconomic class, a profession, an age group or other social group. Not all social groups qualify for this narrow definition of social group. E.g. gamers, IT professionals, gang...
- **ethnolect** – a variety of a language spoken by a certain ethnic/cultural subgroup. It generally refers to the language spoken by a group of immigrants to a country; it has specific features of their original L1 in the language of the general society (e.g., Czech of Ukrainian people in Czechia).
- **dialect** – a form of a language that people speak in a particular part of a country, containing some different words and grammar, etc.
- **idiolect** – personal variety, an individual's unique use of language, including speech. This variety encompasses everything from vocabulary to syntax and pronunciation.

3. CONCEPTS OF POWER AND SOLIDARITY

Concept of Power

- using of language variety to show that a person is a member of a social group, which is more powerful, emphasize the hierarchy of groups
- It can manifest itself in specific phrases, words, a tone, a register, an accent, or dialect that are used to show the speaker has status or wealth, a level of education, a desirable age, or anything which demonstrates power in some regard. It could even examine language's ability to influence through the use of slogans, manifestos, speeches, etc.
- Through the concept of power, language is used to showcase 'I am in a different social group to you, and I am superior'.
- E.g., using complex university terminology when coming back to a home city and meeting a hated teacher from the basic school; using a criminal slang to intimidate a traffic inspector in a tram

Concept of Solidarity

- Language variety is used to communicate 'I am in a different social group to you, but we share the same struggles, and we have a lot of similarities. We are not that different'. This is language used to reconcile two different groups to work for harmony or cooperation between them, or simply to relate to people from different social groups. These concepts can be analysed through political, social, gender, age, racial, religious issues etc.
- E.g., using simpler English when you know the other people don't speak English so well

The **concept of power** is asymmetric in its nature and connected to that of control. Some define power as the ability to control events to achieve one's aims, some as the control over the actions of other people. Power is always present and exercised (and resisted) through both words and deeds on a continuum from brutal to subtle. The concept of power is important in the construction of social identities.

The **concept of solidarity** causes individuals to act together, forming a common bond between them. Solidarity plays a key role in both identity formation and group formation. A speaker's choice of a variety of a language may be influenced by their desired membership in a particular social group.

Let us now list some **examples** of power and solidarity.

- Some (varieties of) languages are considered to have greater power than others. Using the standard language may lead to a better job, which in turn may lend its user more authority in all social interactions. Local dialects, on the other hand, can be considered less prestigious and therefore less powerful. However, using the same dialect (or the same language when abroad) as other people can lead to a feeling of solidarity among its speakers. This can in turn protect a dialect or an endangered language to help its speakers resist power and protect their independence.
- Different varieties of language may be connected to different forms of power; at a high school, a certain dialect may be linked to a nonconformist power while an upper class speech may be associated with institutional power, but either may bring about the speaker's social isolation, depending on the circumstances.
- Linguistic power may also be related to gender, as some papers argue that men are more likely to interrupt other people, try to steer conversation and make categorical statements than women, which are more likely to encourage others to continue speaking and use more instances of you and we. More comprehensive research, however, shows that there are no significant differences between genders in this respect. It is important to consider context: for example, men's societal dominance may be reproduced in conversations between men and women.
- In languages that distinguish between a 'singular you' and 'formal you', their asymmetrical use usually symbolizes a power relationship. A symmetrical use of the formal variant often became understood as polite, and a symmetrical use of the singular variant meant that the two people agreed they had strong common interests, a feeling of solidarity. The disappearance of the formal variant in some languages is argued to have happened because solidarity is more important than politeness in personal relationships.

Socially (non) preferred status

- Different social status can be connected with different power (symbolically or really)
- the choice of the language variety that we use in specific situations, whether to include our selves in the 'ingroup', or to set us apart
- Examples: using a local language or dialect to demonstrate you are not a tourist and you are a native of the area, or using formal language or a broad vocabulary to demonstrate

you are educated; city vs village, from Prague vs not from Prague, dialect vs other dialect

Even though linguists agree that no variety of a language is “better” than any other variety, society still perceives some varieties as more important, more educated and therefore these varieties are highly valued. A standard variety of a language is usually preferred; it brings higher social status, using it assumes higher education and users of a standard may have more professional opportunities. Similarly, nonstandard varieties may have an opposite effect.

However, it is important to consider the fact that power in linguistic sense is context dependent. It depends on the environment and on the social groups and factors involved. An educated person in a village pub may not have as much power as elsewhere. Wardhaugh & Fuller in their book *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* consider the concept of diglossia - a situation where a clear separation exists between functional usages of two dialects or languages. Examples of this phenomenon are: Classic Arabic vs regional colloquial varieties, Standard German vs. Swiss German, Standard French vs. Haitian Creole, etc. In these cases, one of them is considered H variety (“high” variety) and the other is L variety (“low” variety).

Different attitudes about people speaking different varieties

- evaluative reactions to different language varieties. People can have different types of attitudes - positive or negative, i.e. marking status of other speakers or framing the situation. They can for example express power or solidarity (by speaking some dialect that no-one understands or speaking slowly to people learning the language).
- Cf. Jacek’s situation in the Jazz course (Case study):
This is a Czech course, your language is your problem, we will speak Czech
vs
Nobody should be excluded, let’s all speak English
- Every speaker (including linguists) has evaluative attitudes about language varieties!

4. KNOWLEDGE OF A LANGUAGE

- two types of knowledge - structure knowledge (grammar, vocabulary) and ability to use it according to the social context
- Connected to Chomsky’s terms of competence and performance:
Competence: knowledge of the ideal language system that enables speakers to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences in their language, and to distinguish grammatical sentences from ungrammatical sentences (memory limitations, noise, misunderstandings... are not concerned)
- **Performance:** the actual use of language in concrete situations (speech errors and other incorrect usages do not lead to misunderstanding).
- Sociolinguistics is more concerned with performance, which deals with language used by real people within their communities.