

# Sociolinguistics and the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages : Theoretical Foundations and Applications

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Sociolinguistics is concerned with language as a social and cultural phenomenon. It examines the relation between language and society with insights and implications beyond grammatical or phonological approaches. The theories and studies selected here are concerned how teachers of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) can provide learners understanding and practice regarding social factors, such as speech acts, gender, and nonstandard varieties towards the goal of "communicative competence".

**Keywords :** sociolinguistics, communicative competence, Dell Hymes, William Labov, speech acts, TESOL

## 1. Introduction

Sociolinguistics is a relatively new subdiscipline of linguistics "which is concerned with language as a social and cultural phenomenon" (Trudgill, 1995, 20-21). Its central focus has been the pursuit of a full understanding of the theoretical notion of communicative competence, defined "as the ability of native speakers to use the resources of their language(s)...not only linguistically accurate but also socially appropriate" (Wolfson, 1989, 3). The goal of sociolinguistics "is to explain the meaning of language in human life...not in the abstract, not in the superficial phrases one may encounter in essays and textbooks, but in the concrete, in actual human lives" (Hymes, 1972a, 41). Sociolinguistics provides a view into the relation between language and society and contributes with insights and implications beyond grammatical and phonological approaches. The theories and studies produced in sociolinguistics provide to the teaching of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) many valuable insights into how learners of English can achieve more fully what Hymes calls "communicative competence".

The contributions of sociolinguistics offers to TESOL are examined in the following two main

categories: 1) the theoretical foundations laid by Dell Hymes (concerning the notion of communicative competence) and practical parameters found by William Labov (in the field of social motivation of speech), and 2) the influence they have cast in a brief overview of research on a) speech acts, b) gender speech, and c) speech of disenfranchised races/ethnicities, namely, the black American community.

## 2. The Pioneers of Sociolinguistics : Dell Hymes' Communicative Competence and William Labov's Social Speech

Hymes, an anthropologist at the University of Pennsylvania, laid down much of the theoretical foundations of sociolinguistics. He was concerned with the nature and acquisition of communicative competence. He broadened the notions of competence and performance which had been described by Chomsky in exclusively grammatical terms. Hymes viewed competence and performance in the context of language and culture by proposing four questions, whether something: 1) is formally possible (in grammatical terms); 2) is feasible (as allowed by the brain); 3) is appropriate (the "intersection" of grammar and culture); and 4) is done (performance) (Hymes, 1972b, 284-6). Hymes also emphasized the need for systematic collection of data to find the "ways" of speak-

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ing and redefined certain linguistic terms in the framework of social interaction, primarily, "speech situation" (e.g., a party), "speech event" (a conversation at the party), "speech act" (a joke or a certain exchange within the conversation at the party) (Hymes, 1972a, 53ff). He proposed a taxonomy which he labeled the "ethnography of speaking" as a comprehensive (if overtly mnemonic) attempt to identify and categorize various components within speech acts: S(setting and scene); P(participants); E(ends as goals and outcomes); A(act sequence); K(key denotes style); I(instrumentalities, or varieties of speech); N(norms meaning behaviors and beliefs); G(genres) (Hymes, 1972, 59-65) (Wolfson, 1989, 7-9).

Hymes' theoretical mapping of the notion of communicative competence and areas of research has had a profound effect on sociolinguistics. His work helped spawn nearly two decades of a wave of teaching known as the "communicative approach" which has only recently been reassessed, namely, for its overemphasis on exclusion of the teaching of grammar (McDonough & Shaw, 1993, 44-45). Canale and Swain have developed a more elaborate conceptual framework of communicative competence in which they identify three main competencies: grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic (Canale & Swain, 1980, 28). Rod Ellis has adopted the communicative competence model to the Japanese school system with a focus on "linguistic form and sociolinguistic rules of use." He concludes that successful competence is contingent on the number of hours of instruction Japanese students receive coupled with later opportunities for use (Ellis, 1993, 122-123).

If Hymes served as the surveyor of sociolinguistics, Labov has been the provider of methods and in the process has also dispelled many intuitions regarding what constitutes authentic speech. His research on speech styles in the 1960's aptly described by his dissertation title The Social Stratification of English in New York City consistently revealed how people are socially motivated to aspire to certain styles of speech yet cannot hide their true vernacular which comes out through casual speech. He found several

phonological variables associated with the prestige variety of New York City, in particular the post-vocalic /r/. He was able to detect them with methods which collected naturally occurring speech in various situations. Perhaps his most famous method was the rapid anonymous interview conducted on clerks of three department stores of different social rank. The results affirmed his hypothesis that the clerks of the highest-ranked store would utter the highest frequency of the post-vocalic /r/ contained in the phrase "fourth floor" and that frequency would descend according to the social hierarchy (Labov, 1972a, 45). Later he conducted a more elaborate speech style evaluation consisting of five tests in his study of the Lower East Side of Manhattan Island, which ranged from recording casual speech to minimal pairs reading. His focus was on the instances when he could capture casual speech---speech that speakers paid the least attention to (Labov, 1972b, 184). He found that speakers of the second highest social status group would speak hypercorrect English in a socially motivated effort to emulate the prestige standard (Labov, 1972b, 191). His primary motivation in both studies was to circumvent the methodological obstacle of ethnographic research--how to observe naturally occurring speech without drawing the speaker's attention to it -- which he labeled "the observer's paradox" (Labov, 1972b, 181-182).

Labov's work continues to have a profound influence on sociolinguistics. He argues that "there are no single-style speakers"--no one adheres to a single style of speaking all the time, but changes styles depending on the listener and circumstances (Labov, 1972b, 180). Lesile Beebe, chair of Applied Linguistics at Columbia University, affirms Labov's viewpoint with statements such as, "Language is a social mirror," which means people have speaking styles which reflect the social class they belong; and, "Every person is a linguistic chameleon," that is, people shift their speech style according to the situation at hand and depending on the familiarity of other interlocutors (Beebe, October 12-13, 1996, lectures).

The theoretical concepts and methodologies

of Hymes and Labov have helped researchers to observe and analyze the fundamental problem of sociolinguistics: "to discover and explicate the competence that enables members of a community to conduct and interpret speech" (Hymes, 1972a, 52). The foundations and precedents established by these pioneers have great relevance to TESOL because teachers have interests similar to the fundamental problem: how to investigate and instill in learners the competencies to speak and understand English speech.

### 3. Research on Speech Acts

Hymes' ethnography of speaking, fueled by Labov's research, opened the way for many studies on various speech acts. There have been many documented studies on greetings, apologies, refusals, compliments, invitations, and complaints (for an excellent synopsis of studies up to 1989, see Wolfson, 1989, 79-124; for studies from 1989 to 1995, see Cohen, 1995, 398-407). They have shown that a number of social factors between interlocutors, primarily age, gender, status, and intimacy, profoundly influence speech acts. As research of speech acts has developed, theories have emerged to predict or explain rules of speaking among native English speakers. Most prominent of these have been Wolfson's "Bulge" theory (which states that very little elaboration of language occurs in interactions between intimates and between strangers have but much more between acquaintances of uncertain status). Olsh-tain & Cohen's "speech act set" consists of five semantic formulas and seems to exist in apologies.

Two trends in speech act research can be discerned. The studies have moved from an exclusive focus on exchanges between native speakers to comparisons of non-native speaker and native speaker speech. One prominent development in this regard has been the study of pragmatic transfer, defined as the transfer of "native, discourse-level, sociocultural competence" (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990, 55). Second, studies have moved from an exclusive use of one of the two most popular methods of data collection, the ethnographic approach and the discourse comple-

tion test, into a synthesis using both with inclusion of other data collecting tools.

What these studies prove is that native speakers' intuitive notions of rules of speaking often differ with reality and that they often switch codes or break their own rules without knowing (Wolfson, 1989, 40-42). The research that most supports the finding that native speakers are not conscious of their speaking rules is the work by Manes and Wolfson on compliments by Americans. They found that compliments were not original statements based on sincerity as most assumed, but followed very consistent patterns that could be labeled as formulas (Wolfson, 1989, 112). Research also shows that speech acts are often more complicated and involve more negotiation than often assumed or taught in textbooks. Thus communicative competence has been shown to involve but be more than a mastery of grammatical or pronunciation rules. Erickson goes farther to argue that "fluency" involves shared timing and reading listening cues (Erickson, 1995, 290-291).

These study findings are important to TESOL. One is that teachers should inform learners "how to interpret and respond to native speaker sociolinguistic behavior" (Wolfson, 1989, 31). Another is that data collection methods such as ethnography need not remain as the preserve of research scholars; they can be used by students to examine gender speaking styles and stereotypes in their own communities as well develop strategic competence (Freeman & McElhinny, 1995, 269). Also, inappropriate speech behavior should not be seen as simply as a mistake to the researcher or teacher; but as an opportunity (Wolfson, 1989, 73). Cohen suggests teachers employ the following activities to deepen student understanding: give a diagnostic test of the students' level of awareness of speech acts, present model dialogues, have students evaluate speech situations, practice role-plays, and have feedback and discussion (Cohen, 1995, 413-415).

### 4. Research on Gender Speech Styles

A highly controversial area of study in sociolinguistics is on the relationship between

gender and language. Two approaches to this area are 1) the dominance theory, very popular with the early feminists, which "stress(es) men's dominance over women", and 2) the difference approach which emphasizes "men's and women's cultural differences as explanations for gender-differentiated language use" (Freeman & McElhinny, 213).

The name associated with the dominance approach has been Robin Lakoff, who ignited interest in gender speech analysis with her claims that women have to speak like ladies in order to be accepted by men; but that such speech at the same time denies them access to power. At the classroom teaching level, Sadker & Sadker found that teachers tend to call on boys more often than girls, interact longer with boys than girls, and frown on girls talking out of turn. The attitude of teachers seem to manifest Lakoff's charges: that "girls should act like ladies and keep quiet" (Sadker & Sadker, 1985, 56).

Proponents of the difference approach, who include Maltz and Borker and the best-selling scholar Deborah Tannen of Georgetown University, say that men and women are the products of their gender-cultures, and miscommunication results from both genders misinterpreting verbal cues. Maltz & Borker found that boys jockey among themselves for status with a hierarchy, while girls desire intimacy and togetherness (Tannen, 1990, 47). According to Tannen, this dichotomy along gender rules of speaking comes out in men as report-talk, which is an exhibition of their knowledge and skill, and enables them to preserve their independence, negotiate, and maintain status in the male world of hierarchy. In other words, for men, to talk is to inform. Women, on the other hand, prefer rapport talk, in which they establish and/or negotiate personal relationships through the sharing of experiences and similarities; for them, to talk is to interact (Tannen, 77).

Both the dominance and the difference theories have their limitations. The dominance argument fails to take into account that "the way a woman is spoken to is, no matter what her status, a subtle and powerful way of perpetuating her

subordinate role" (Wolfson, 1989, 173). The difference approach in its search for a "no-fault" interpretation fails to realize that power and discrimination by men do play a role (Freeman & McElhinny, 1995, 242).

The work undertaken in sociolinguistic gender analysis has ready applications to TESOL. Teachers should inform their students that men and women do converse differently. Male learners of English may not be often aware that their speech can lead to insensitive remarks and thus expose them to cultural misunderstanding, for example, comments concerning the appearance of women (Wolfson, 1989, 172-176). Teachers can address issues of inequity and power present in cross-gender situations to their students and encourage them to collect ethnographic evidence (Freeman & McElhinny, 1995, 268). Finally, teachers should be aware of their classroom behavior and remedy it so that girls are more represented in class interaction (Kelly, 1992, n. p.).

## 5. Research on Black English

Another highly controversial area of sociolinguistics with social and political overtones is the study of nonstandard speech styles. It has been shown that people of differing regions within the United States will have very strong ideas of the "proper" English, which is their own, and incorrect English, which is everyone else ("they have an accent.").

The English variety identified with the most controversy has been African American English (AAE), now renamed "Ebonics". Labov proved that contrary to opinion, Black English Vernacular (an older name of AAE) is not a substandard form or an extremely different form of English, but closely resembles the standard English with its own systematic rules of grammar and pronunciation (Labov, 1969, 17). The origins of AAE have been disputed for a long time, and now sociolinguists accept a combined dialect-creole hypothesis, that African tribal languages and colonial English both played a part in forming AAE, as evidenced by the Gullah dialect found on the coastal islands off South Carolina.

Several explanations have been put forth as to why AAE continues to thrive. Labov argues that AAE shifts away from standard English due to a social motivation to assert its own identity, which is actually strengthened under attack, in the same way like the white residents of Martha's Vineyard, a popular resort island in Massachusetts (Wolfson, 1989, 226). Furthermore, consider the strong emotions felt among educated blacks. Blacks know that AAE is their home language; and as much as AAE is identified with social stratification, they must not lose too much of their native identity which is tied up in that speech or they will be unable to return to their home speech community.

This concern with nonstandard English has pedagogical implications for teachers of children from speech communities which differ from standard English. As Labov pointed out in his *Study of Nonstandard English*, the teacher should realize that though the vernacular may be "the source of interference and difficulty, it is also the best means of direct communication" (Labov, 1970, 5). Labov's words were put into legal force in 1979 when a judge ordered the Ann Arbor Board of Education to educate its teachers in AAE. Lately controversy over AAE has risen again in the Oakland School Board resolution to permit the teaching of "Ebonics".

According to a leading black teacher of English, students should be encouraged to become "language detectives", to learn that "there are many ways of saying the same thing, and certain contexts suggest particular kinds of linguistic performance" (Delpit, 1995, 54). Teachers and learners should also realize "while linguists have long proclaimed that no language variety is intrinsically 'better' than another, in a stratified society such as ours, language choices are not neutral. The language learning associated with the power structure---' Standard English---is the language of economic success, and all students have the right to schooling that gives them access to that language" (Delpit, 1995, 68). Her statement leads back to the issue of communicative competence, but in a new light: not merely for successful social interaction, but as access to life success.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has been concerned with speech acts research and communicative competence with special regard for teachers and non-native learners of English. Hopefully sociolinguistics will continue to make forays into spoken interaction with ready applications for learners of second languages while avoiding the pitfalls of intuition and judgment.

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