

Chapter 10

Sociolinguistics, Speaking and Intelligibility

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Introduction

Sociolinguistics basically refers to the study of the relationship between language and society. It's main essence is to examine how language use varies depending on the social factors. These factors may include culture, ethnicity, education, gender, social class, occupation, geographic location and others. It explores how social factors influence language use, language variation, language change among other things. It further analyses language in the social context and how language shapes and reflects social relationships and structures, how language is used to structure and negotiate social identities and how language varies overtime and space. In every speech community or society, language plays a vital role as the basic tool for communication for a speech community to function appropriately, language becomes an indispensable factor for communication among members of the community. Hudson(1980:1) defines sociolinguistics as the study of language in relation to society.

The primary concern of sociolinguistic scholarship, according to Colmas, F(1998),
Is to study correlations between language use and social
structure; It's focus is different from other disciplines that
take an interest in language, in particular from what are
sometimes called "autonomous" or "theoretical linguistics "
psycholinguistics, and neurolinguistics which are interested
respectively in the human mind, the individuals acquisition
and use of language, and the cognitive and biological apparatus
of language storage and processing.

The source defines Sociolinguistics as that which concerns itself with the description of language use as a social phenomenon and, where possible it attempts to establish casual links between language and society, pursuing the complementary questions of what language contributes to making community possible and how communities shape their languages by using them.

Communication could be seen as the process of exchanging information, ideas, thoughts, opinions, or messages between individuals, groups or organizations through a common system, symbols and signs. For communication to be effective in the speech community, there should be a sender, the message, the channel, receiver and the feedback. Beyond these, language plays an important role in communication whether it is spoken or written. Without language, human beings cannot interact effectively, communicate or exchange behaviors. Language use facilitates communication and enables users to co-exists in their different speech communities. And, where the major elements are lacking in the speech community communication is hindered.

It should be noted that where these factors are absent, communication cannot function. To explicate the items that contribute to effective communication, we should understand that the sender has to do with the person or entity conveying the message. The message on the other hand is the information, idea or thought being communicated to the listener. The medium or avenue used to convey the message is the channel which could be a letter, face-to-face, text, email, phone while the feedback has to do with the response or reaction of the receiver of the message.

In addition, good communication entails clarity. A speech that is not clearly presented can be misunderstood and the essence of the communication will be defeated. Above all, clarity is crucial in any communication as it ensures that the listener or receiver of the message is able to comprehend effectively and so reduce misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the message

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communicated. Other functions of clarity are saving time, building trust, preventing errors, facilitating decision-making, enhancing credibility, promoting effective feedback, reducing anxiety, improving relationships and increase in efficiency. For example, if words are not properly articulated by the sender of the message, it could either be misinterpreted or conveys an entirely different message. This implies that whatever is not well spoken could be misunderstood by the hearer of the message.

Speaking

This refers to the act of communicating thought, ideas and messages through verbal language. It talks about considering the articulation of words, phrases and sentences using the mouth, tongue, lips and vocal cords. Good speaking skills is crucial in the sense that it helps in appropriate conveyance of meaning, expressing oneself and connecting with others. The basic aspects of speaking include articulation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, tone, clarity, confidence. In this section of the chapter, our major is on articulation, fluency and clarity. In the context of speaking, articulation refers to the process of pronouncing words clearly and correctly, using the different speech organs to produce the sounds accurately. Effective or good articulation includes clear formation of sounds. This entails precise movement of the tongue, lips and teeth to produce distinct sounds. It also includes accurate placement of the speech organs while speaking. Proper articulation helps to ensure that words spoken are intelligible and that the listeners can clearly understand what is spoken and probably decide the message accurately.

Some common errors that are associated with articulation are distorting sounds where for example, the “th” is articulated as “d”, or “t”, “g” is articulated as “k” or outright lying removed as in “they” articulated as ‘dey,’ “these” as ‘dis’, them as “dem”, then as “den”, and goat, go, give as koat, ko and kive and in the case of removal of last letter “g” in words like taking, talking, dancing and another error is the direct replacement of sounds. For instance, saying “buz” instead of “bus” that is replacing the “s” with “z”. All these if not consciously check can distort the flow of a conversation or communication.

Fluency as far as speaking is concerned is the ability of the speaker or writer to speak or write smoothly, easily, effectively and efficiently with a natural flow and Rhythm. Fluency in this direction is the capacity to effortlessly and accurately express oneself by not struggling to find words or grammatical expressions to communicate effectively with. Some of the factors that enhance fluency are seamless flow of speech or writing without hesitation or unnecessary pauses.

In view of all these, whatever is not well spoken or well written is not fluent and can easily cause misinterpretation of whatever happens in the process of the good speaking is reveting, as it has the ability of capturing the attention of the listeners and getting them to pay rapt attention to what is being said. However, bad speaking also has the ability to set the listeners on a mind-wandering adventure as they could sit and probably look at the speaker, even though they have been psychologically disengaged from the speaker. In view of this, it is incumbent on the speaker to effectively plan his speech so as to captivate the listeners and be sure that the essence of the communication is achieved. For example, if the following words are wrongly articulated, it will not only distract the ears of the listeners but will also give an entirely different meaning from what was intended. If the speaker for instance wants to articulate

view,
van
goat
gate
zip
zoo
vest
bigger
Rabbit
but eventually articulates,
few
fan
Koat
Ket

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Sip
Soo
Fest
Beaker
Rapid.

These indicate interference of the speaker's first language (L1) with the second language (L2)

Clarity as an aspect of speaking: This refers to the ability to convey messages, words and thoughts in a clear and easy to understand manner. It involves among other things a choice of words, pace with reference to speed, speaking loudly and clearly enough to be heard but not shouting. It also involves using clear and concise language by avoiding all forms of technical terms and jargon unless they are absolutely necessary.

Coppieters (1987) as quoted in Levis (2018:p.11) upholds that

“The language of adult foreign language learners even those who reach advanced proficiency levels, is rarely native-like.

The vocabulary range of such individuals may be impressive but shall have significant gaps, both in the words they know and in their sensitivity to subtleties in meaning”.

The source observes that “nowhere is their lack of native-likeness as apparent as their pronunciation”. This goes a long way to confirm the extent to which it is somehow easy to detect the speech of non-native speakers despite their level of proficiency, as there are occasional slips in their speeches. For effective communication to occur, one must know what to say, how to say it, when to say it, and the effect it creates in the minds of the listeners.

Intelligibility

Good speaking and clarity as far as language use is concerned is an indispensable aspect of sound communication. Effective speaking entails knowing the sounds of the language, the proper articulation of each sound and in company of other sounds. The basic sounds of the English language include consonants, vowels, diphthongs and triphthongs. A sound knowledge of these sounds is an indication for better, clear and effective speaking.

Munro & Derwing (1995:p.76) quoted in Levis 2018:p.11 observes that intelligibility means that “a speaker's message is actually understood by a listener “

Exercise one

Read the following words

Lovely
Inconsistencies
Religious
Chief
Christian
Chevrolet
Resound
Subtle
Transparent
Dignity

A close look at the exercise reveals that there are three words that begin with the letters “ch”. Here, it should be noted that the fact that they share the same letter does not mean that they are all articulated the same way. To this end, it is always worthwhile to confirm the pronunciation of words from a good English dictionary. The “ch” in these words

Chief
Christian
Chevrolet

are all pronounced differently. The first word ‘chief’ is articulated with a /tʃ/ sound, the second ‘ch’ is articulated with a /k/ sound, while the ‘ch’ in the last word is articulated as /s/

In all these, care must be taken by the speaker to ensure that the words they come across are well articulated and when in doubt, they must always consult the dictionary.

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The variation existing in the articulation of the words with letters "ch" is not only peculiar to 'ch' but cuts across a range of other letters as English sounds do not have a one to one symbol representation with the letters. Other examples are as indicated below.

The concentration of this exercise is on the sound /f/ and letters representing it.

Exercise Two

1. Physics
2. Physiology
3. Pfizer
4. Photo
5. Fiction
6. Laugh
7. Cough
8. Graph
9. Feeder
10. Fruitful

In the above exercise, it has been shown that the sound /f/ can feature where we have "phy", "pf", "f" and "gh" all representing one sound. This goes to confirm that one sound can have many letters representing it in different words environments

Exercise 3

Let's consider words with /i:/

1. Key
2. See
3. Seat
4. Heel
5. Beak
6. Seal
7. Feel
8. Quay
9. Peel
10. Seed

Exercise 4

Pick the words with the sound /i:/

1. Spill
2. Speech
3. Lick
4. Bread
5. Search
6. Bead
7. Sweat
8. Sweet
9. Deal
10. Weight

From the exercises above, a critical look at the words will reveal that not all the words have the same sounds despite the presence of same letters in some cases. The level of the learners comprehensibility of the spoken language is synonymous to the level of intelligibility to which the speech is presented by the speaker.

Conclusion

As earlier established, Sociolinguistics has to do with the language use and the society. Speaking occurs in every society even though the language varies depending on the speech community. This chapter therefore draws the following conclusions noting that speaking and intelligibility are shaped by social factors. They include context identity, power dynamics and language attitudes. And that intelligibility does not necessarily have to do with pronunciation, also language teaching should take into consideration sociolinguistics to improve speaking and intelligibility for language learners.

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