

Sociolinguistics: Society and Language

Jessie Grace U. Rubrico, PhD

Each society is a *speech community* sharing a language. It is composed of people from different social orientations identified according to their social status, the circle they move in, or the different functions they perform in society. These differences in social orientations are a basis for variations in language use within the community. These variations in language usage are referred to as *social dialects* or *sociolects*, the focus of *sociolinguistics*.

Sociolect

Sociolinguistics studies how society affects language use. It looks into how speakers from the different strata of society vary in their usage of language. It explores the variables affecting these variations: the speakers' *socioeconomic* status – rich or poor, illiterate or highly educated, manager or janitor, college student or bum; *gender* - male or female, gay; *age* –young, older, old; *ethnicity* - *Bisaya, Tagalog, Muslim, Tingguian, T'boli, Malay, Tamil, or Chinese*; *religion*, and other dimensions valued by society.

Social status or class is an important determinant in language use. Society has basically two categories: the 'working class' and the 'middle class': the former performing manual work with fewer years of education and the latter having higher educational attainment performing non-manual labor. Another variable in social class is the economic status which classifies its members into 'lower' and 'upper' classes. People in the community are aware of the dissimilar patterns of speech marking social class and are able to shift styles to match the style of the person they are interacting with. Speakers from the middle class group, for instance, try to use prestigious speech patterns associated with the upper class in formal occasions to reduce the social distance between them. When speakers modify their own speech to overcome or minimize social distance, speech accommodation brings about convergence. When speakers, however, prefer to keep the social distance, there is divergence. Speech accommodation is the facility of the speakers to modify their speech toward or away from the style of the person they are interacting with. Prestige is usually the motivation for modifying speech styles. The shift, therefore, is upward. But some, like the labor groups, value the speech features that distinguish them from other social groups and, hence, are not motivated to shift styles. Another case in point is the motivation of some members of the ethnic minorities in the community to learn the dominant language of the speech community. The Mandayas and the Bagobos of Davao have to learn Bisaya, the regional lingua franca.

Another sociolect is that which the young people use in informal and casual speech, especially among themselves. Their vocabulary is generally not understood by those older than them. Here are some from Tagalog: *dedma* (indifferent), *yosi* (*cigarette*), *promdi* (*from the province*), *sked* (*schedule*), *syota* (*girlfriend*), *tangengot* (*stupid*), *praning* (*paranoid*), *sosi* (*social*). Toilet is *c.r* (for comfort room), powder room or ladies' lounge. Grass used to be a fodder for cows and horses, but drug addicts use it for 'marijuana'. Money is *datung*, *atik*, or *kwarta* and a girlfriend is *syota*.

Most of the words listed above are classified as *slang*. This conveys an informal variation of language use employing new terminologies coined by some groups in the community and defined according to their context of usage. Sometimes, instead of coining new words, they just give new meaning to existing words, like the following Tagalog words: *ube* (color violet, to mean 100 pesos); *ulupong* or *ahas* (snake, for traitor); *mongha* (cloister nun, for a woman who seldom goes out of the house). This type of language identifies those who belong to the group that created it. The out-group is not meant to understand it.

The gay crowd has created *gay lingo*, a sociolect for their own consumption. It's a secret language or *argot* which is not supposed to be understood by outsiders. But some terms from gay lingo are now used in the mainstream –like Tagalog words *bading* (gay, homosexual), *tsimay* (housemaid), *bagets* (young), *tsibug* (eating), *chika* (chat), *jowa* and *syota* (partner, girlfriend).

Gender is another variable in language use. A study conducted by Carmencita F. Montenegro (1982) among 200 college students (aged 19 to 24 years old) of the University of Santo Tomas Manila proved that males and females differ in using language. Females use more positive adjectives. Compared to the male subjects, females frequently use loanwords from English thinking that it is a more prestigious language.

On the other hand, doctors, scientists and other professionals or technical groups have their own *jargons* - sets of occupation-related words or special technical vocabulary. Tonsillectomy and appendectomy are medical terms for removing the tonsils and the appendix respectively. In addition, the advent of computers and the internet has introduced a set of related jargons like modem, ram, cd-rom, software, prolog, byte, download, upload, laptop, desktop, e-mail, e-group, e-learning, social networking, etc.

Different groups use different varieties of language within a speech community. Be that as it may, there is a *standard* language used by the educated in the academe, in government, in formal writing, newspapers and books, and during formal occasions. This is usually adopted as the official language of the country. The *standard* language is the basis of variation in language use. For example, the Cebuanos say *wa:a* and *ba:y* but this is written as *wala* (*none*) and *balay* (*house*) as they appear in the *standard lexicon* of Cebuano-Bisaya.

Taboo terms are words speakers avoid to conform with dictums of religion, politeness and prohibited behavior. There are terms which can be spoken by older people but not by the young ones, like words pertaining to the sexual organs. Sometimes, the taboo is gender-related. There are some ethnic tribes in the Philippines which prohibit their females from speaking the names of their fathers, uncles, fathers-in-law, and grandfathers. Swear words are also frowned upon. Taboo words are avoided in social interactions, so *euphemisms* are used instead to refer to those words. So *puta* (whore) is referred to as *babaeng mababa ang lipad* (literally, woman flying low) or the more contemporary *prosti* (clip for prostitute). Young people nowadays say "*jijingle muna ako*" instead of "*ihi muna ako*" (I need to urinate).

Sociolects are a good indicator of the stratification of a given society. They convey the diversity of its speakers in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and social status or class, which is determined by the speaker's family background, education, occupation or profession. Conversely, sociolects are social barriers which may discriminate and erect walls making the social distance wider.

Each person, nevertheless, has a way of using his or her language. Speakers of a language do not speak exactly the same way. This speech variety among speakers is called an *idiolect*. This is influenced by one's family background, place of origin or residence, and associations.

Register

Another variation in language use is the *register*. This has something to do with (1) formal or informal use of language, (2) theme or subject of discourse, (3) the occasion, and (4) status or social roles of the participants. For example, there is a difference in your speech when you're just kidding around with your classmates and when you are reporting in class. Or, it's easy to tell your friends, "*Nasa probinsya ang erpat at ermat ko*" (My father and my mother are in the province.") Yet when you talk to your teacher, you'd say "*Nasa probinsiya ang tatay at nanay ko.*"

Register dictates that the tenor of speech is more formal when talking to older persons, high-ranking officials, persons of authority and power, or persons you hardly know. The formal tone is also often used in writing and in literature. Language is formal in church, during ceremonies and rituals, in speeches during important celebrations, in courts of law, and in other occasions attended by honorable dignitaries and important people in society. Alternatively, informal register is used in gatherings of friends, in the conversations with contemporaries, in writing letters to friends and family members, and in writing comics episodes.

Language variations can also be geographical. For instance, there are differences in the lexical items and accent of Tagalog speakers from Metro Manila, Batangas, Quezon, and Marinduque. Yet these speakers understand each other. They are speaking the *dialects* of Tagalog. In the same way, the Bahasa Malaya (BM) spoken in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya finds many variations as it moves from the center toward the borders. This means that the BM spoken in Klang Valley, Terengganu, Kelantan, and the other states exhibit variances in different degrees from the BM of KL or PJ. All these are dialects of BM. *Dialects* are varieties of a language. These variations may be phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic. Despite the variations, however, all speakers from all dialects of a language can understand each other. This is *mutual intelligibility*.

Dialects evolve when speakers of the same language are separated by geography or by other reasons, thereby, losing contact with each other. Since language is dynamic, it keeps changing systematically. When changes in the centers are not passed on to the different locations of other language speakers, then their manner of speaking the language will gradually become less similar. This is the case especially manifested in the border populace. Say, the BM of Kelantan may be closer to the Thai language than to BM.

Each city, state, or region can be populated by people speaking different languages. Davao City is a case in point. It hosts speakers of Bisaya, Davaweño, Tagalog, Bagobo, Mamanwa, Manobo, Mandaya, and Mansaka. These people need a language they can communicate with, a *lingua franca*. There are three major lingua franca in the Philippines: Bisaya in the Visayas and Mindanao; Ilokano in Luzon; and Filipino, the national lingua franca.

Sociolect, *register*, and *dialect* are the variations of language in society. It depicts the different realizations of language based on the: speaker, listener or hearer, occasion or event, setting, and context of that which is being put across. These are explored in *sociolinguistics*, the branch of linguistics that studies the social dimensions and use of language in different settings. It ranges from the study of the wide variety of dialects across a given region down to the analysis between the way men and women speak to one another. Sociolinguistics often shows us the humorous realities of human speech and how a dialect of a given language can often describe the age, sex, and social class of the speaker as it codifies the social function of a language.

References:

http://www.languagelinks.org/onlinepapers/wika2.html#w_4

Yule G. 2006. *The study of language*. Cambridge: CUP.

Talking Points

1. What are the different sociolects in your native language?
2. How can sociolects discriminate against other members of the speech community?
3. Name the dialects of your native language.
4. How do these dialects vary from the standard language?
5. How does society affect language?