

On the whole people acquire their knowledge of varieties and how to use them appropriately in the same way that they acquire their knowledge of most other aspects of language – by extensive exposure and a process of osmosis. The Chinese Malaysian, like my Lancashire-born mother, built up her linguistic repertoire by hearing the different varieties in use in the community she lives in. More formal varieties – and especially distinctive written varieties – may involve more conscious learning, but most varieties in a person's linguistic repertoire are acquired with little conscious effort.

SOCIAL FACTORS, DIMENSIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

Social factors

In each of the examples discussed, certain social factors have been relevant in accounting for the particular variety used. Some relate to the users of language – the participants; others relate to its uses – the social setting and function of the interaction. Who is talking to whom (e.g. wife – husband, customer – shop-keeper, boss – worker) is an important factor. The setting or social context (e.g. home, work, school) is generally a relevant factor too. The aim or purpose of the interaction (informative, social) may be important. And in some cases the topic has proved an influence on language choice. University students in countries which use English for tertiary education, such as Tanzania, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, often find it easier to discuss their university subjects using English, for example, just as the students from Hemnesberget used standard Norwegian rather than the local dialect to discuss national politics.

Not all factors are relevant in any particular context but they can be grouped in ways which are helpful. In any situation linguistic choices will generally reflect the influence of one or more of the following components:

1. The participants:
 - a. who is speaking and
 - b. who are they speaking to?
2. The setting or social context of the interaction: where are they speaking?
3. The topic: what is being talked about?
4. The function: why are they speaking?

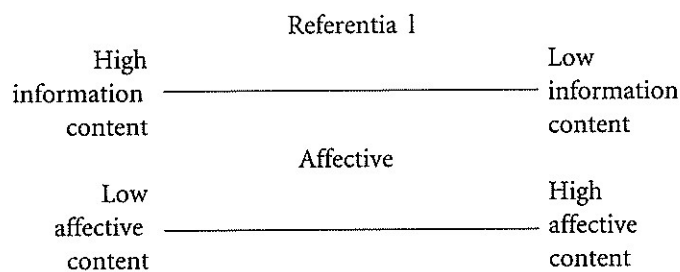
In this book the focus will be on speech, but the same questions can be asked about written communication, as example 5 illustrated. Throughout this book, these social factors will prove important in describing and analysing all kinds of interaction. They are basic components in sociolinguistic explanations of why we don't all speak the same way, and why we don't all speak in the same way all of the time.

This scale is useful in assessing the influence of the social setting or type of interaction on language choice. In a formal transaction such as one with the bank manager in his office, or at a ritual service in church, the language used will be influenced by the formality of the setting. For a friendly chat, people use colloquial language. In Hemnesberget, Bokmål was the language of school and government offices. Ranamål was the language of the home. The written language of notices is often very formal and impersonal, as example 5 illustrates. Often degrees of formality are largely determined by solidarity and status relationships. But not always. A very formal setting, such as a law court, will influence language choice regardless of the personal relationships between the speakers.

The referential and affective function scales

Though language serves many functions, the two identified in these scales are particularly pervasive and basic. Language can convey objective information of a referential kind; and it can also express how someone is feeling. Ray's utterance *Yeah, that bastard Sootbucket kept us in again* simultaneously expresses information about why he is late, while also conveying his feelings about the teacher referred to. Gossip may provide a great deal of new referential information, while also clearly conveying how the speaker feels about those referred to. It is very common for utterances to work like this, though often one function will dominate. In general the more referentially oriented an interaction is, the less it tends to express the feelings of the speaker. Radio broadcasts of the weather forecast tend to put the emphasis on information or the referential function, for instance. By contrast, interactions which are more concerned with expressing feelings often have little in the way of new information to communicate. Talk between neighbours over the fence at the weekend about the weather, for instance, is more likely to be mainly affective in function, and intended to convey goodwill towards the neighbour rather than important new information. In fact the specific content of the conversation is rarely important.

These scales will be referred to and illustrated further in subsequent chapters. Together with the social components identified in the previous section they provide a useful framework for discussing language in its social context in different speech communities, and for discussing the ways in which language reflects its users and the uses they put it to.



■ Social dimensions

In addition to these components it is useful to take account of four different dimensions for analysis which relate to the factors above and which have been only implicit in the discussion so far. These are:

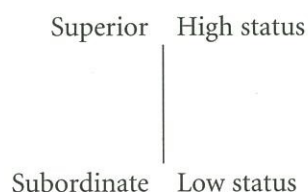
1. A *social distance* scale concerned with participant relationships
2. A *status* scale concerned with participant relationships
3. A *formality* scale relating to the setting or type of interaction
4. Two *functional* scales relating to the purposes or topic of interaction.

The solidarity - social distance scale



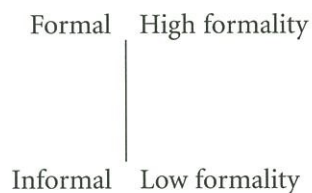
This scale is useful in emphasising that how well we know someone is a relevant factor in linguistic choice. In Wales, the choice of *Meg* vs *Mrs Billington* reflects consideration of this dimension, for instance. People's choice of *Ranamål* vs *Bokmål* in Hemnesberget, or German rather than Italian in Sauris, similarly reflects judgements about a relationship on this dimension.

The status scale



This scale points to the relevance of relative status in some linguistic choices. The choice of *sir* by Ray in the first example, for instance, signalled that the school principal was of higher status and entitled to a respect term. Similarly the name avoidance by her secretary and the use of *Mrs* by the caretaker reflected the higher status of Margaret Walker-Billington, since she called both of these people by their first names. Sam's [h]-dropping in example 4 reflected his lower social group status in the society as a whole, while the educationally and occupationally higher-status Jim dropped none.

The formality scale



Exercise 5

Answer the following two questions for each of utterances a, b, and c, below.

- (i) What information does the utterance provide about the relationship between the people talking in the context of their talk?
- (ii) What is the function of the utterance in the context?

Does it convey primarily affective or referential information?

- (a) Here is the forecast for the Wellington district until midnight Tuesday issued by the meteorological service at 6 o'clock on Monday evening. It will be rather cloudy overnight with some drizzle, becoming fine again on Tuesday morning. The outlook for Wednesday – a few morning showers then fine.
- (b) Good morning little one – you had a good big sleep, didn't you, pet?
- (c) Excuse me, Mr Clayton. I've finished your letters, sir.

Answers at end of chapter

Exercise 6

Your local walking club is discussing the preparations for their next weekend away.

Using the four dimensions of sociolinguistic analysis proposed in this chapter, identify four linguistic features likely to characterise their discussions in each of these situations:

- (a) during an organised meeting in the club meeting room and
- (b) when they discuss the details over a drink in the local bar.

■ Looking for explanations

Sociolinguists aim to describe sociolinguistic variation and, if possible, explain why it happens. Why, for example, should Ray describe a teacher differently when talking to his mother and when answering the school principal? Why do different people call my friend Margaret by different names? Why should a formal grammatical construction with formal vocabulary sound sarcastic when used by your mother?

The first two steps which need to be taken are:

1. to identify clearly the linguistic variation involved (e.g. vocabulary, sounds, grammatical constructions, dialects, languages)
2. to identify clearly the different social or non-linguistic factors which lead speakers to use one form rather than another (e.g. features relating to participants, setting or function of the interaction).

Then we can begin to look for patterns which will help to formulate an *explanation* of why people use one set of forms in some contexts, but different forms in others.

When the two sociolinguists Blom and Gumperz visited Hemnesberget what did they ask? First of all, 'what are the linguistic forms used in this village?' Secondly, 'what are the social factors which lead people to use one set of forms rather than the other?' And finally, 'can we explain why particular social factors lead to the use of one set of forms rather than another?'

In other words the sociolinguist's aim is to move towards a theory which provides a motivated account of the way language is used in a community, and of the choices people make when they use language.

The relationship between linguistic choices and the social contexts in which they are made is sometimes easiest to see when different languages are involved. The first section of this book focusses on multilingual speech communities and describes some of the ways in which social considerations affect language choice. But there is plenty of language variation in monolingual communities too, and it is just as socially meaningful. The second section of the book focusses on social features of the language user. It explores the range of social information conveyed about participants by their linguistic choices within one language. In the third section the focus shifts to the uses of language, and the influence on language of the social context in which it is used and the functions it expresses.

ANSWERS TO EXERCISES IN CHAPTER 1

Answer to exercise 1 (a)

Ray greets his mother with the friendly form *hi*, compared to the more distant and formal *good afternoon* used to the school principal. He uses *mum*, an address form which indicates that he gets on well with her. He could have used no address form at all. Note that he uses the respectful address form *sir* to the principal. Finally he refers to his teacher as *that bastard* and uses a nickname *Sootbucket* for him, an indication that he is treating his mother as an intimate. This contrasts with the way he refers to the teacher when talking to the principal, when he uses *Mr Sutton*.

We choose our words carefully according to whom we are talking to. Language choices convey information about the social relationships between people as well as about the topic of discussion. The kind of information which is relevant to language choice includes how well we know the other person and whether they are socially superior.

Answer to exercise 1 (b)

Most people greet friends and family differently from those they do not know so well, and from those who are in a superior relationship to them, such as the school principal or the boss at work. Often nicknames or endearments are used between people who know each other well (e.g. *mornin' sweetheart*, *hello love*). It is common to avoid names and use only a formal greeting, such as *good morning*, to superiors. The particular forms you use may vary from those suggested, but the general patterns described here should apply.

Answer to exercise 2

This is just an example of the kind of list you might make.

Name	Speaker	When/where
Robert	grandparents	home, letters
	teachers	school
	doctor	surgery, hospital
	mother	when annoyed
Robbie	mother, father	most of the time
Robbie-Bob	mother	when feeling affectionate
Rob	friends, brother	most of the time
Bob	friends	outside home to annoy me
Robert Harris	parents	when very annoyed
Mr Harris	strangers	letters, shops

Parents often call children by a variety of names depending on how they feel towards them. The person in the example above is called *Robbie* by his mother in most circumstances, but when she is annoyed with him she calls him *Robert* or even *Robert Harris*. Friends often have a range of names for each other too. Friends call him *Rob* most of the time, but *Bob* when they want to tease or annoy him.

In some cultures people have one name which is used only in the family and another for use outside. In some cultures people have a ceremonial name used only on very formal occasions. Marital status is sometimes relevant to choice of address form (e.g. Miss vs Mrs and choice of surname).

Answers to exercise 3

Possible answers:

- (a) addressing your mother
 - (i) at home alone with her: *mum, mummy, mom, ma, Tess*
 - (ii) on the telephone with friends listening: *mother, mater, Tess*
 - (iii) in a shop: *mother*
- (b) referring to your mother
 - (i) at home to another family member when she is present: *mum, mom*
 - (ii) at home to another family member when she isn't present: *the old lady, our mam*
 - (iii) to a friend who doesn't know her: *my mum*
 - (iv) to a sales assistant in a shop when she is present: *my mother*

In addressing and referring to your mother, the term you use is likely to reflect your social background, and may differ according to which country you live in. In England, for instance, some members of high social groups use *mummy* well beyond childhood, while others use *mater* or *mama*, especially in reference. Members of lower social groups sometimes use *ma*, especially for address. Some members of middle social groups use their mother's first name in address, especially when they become adults. Some use her first name in referring to her in front of others. In some families *mum* changes to *mother* as she and the children grow older.

In general the following factors are among those relevant in selecting appropriate terms of address: family norms of address between children and parents at different stages; audience (who is listening?); social context (is it formal or public, or private and personal, for instance).

In reference the relationship between the speaker and the addressee is also relevant as well as how well they know the person being referred to.



Answers to exercise 4

- (i) **Vocabulary choices.** *Tender vs give, state vs tell, destination vs where you're going, exact vs right.* Use of *please* in (c).

Syntax. Both sentences use imperative structures, but the more formal verbs in (c) assist in avoiding the use of the personal pronouns *me* and *you* which occur in (d). The determiner is omitted before *exact fare* and *destination*, which increases the impersonality of the expression. These are both places where *your* could have occurred, for instance.

- (ii) The medium of expression is relevant since (a) and (c) are much more likely in writing than in speech. Written and spoken language differ in many specific ways. Whether spoken or written, sentences (a) and (c) are also more formal and distancing. If they were spoken they would be appropriate only in the most formal context, between strangers or people who did not know each other well, or where the speaker was far superior or more powerful than the addressee. Sentences (b) and (d) would be appropriate in speech in informal contexts. The address form in sentence (b) shows the speaker knows the addressee and suggests they know each other well. It could be seen as softening the directive, making it gentler.

Answers to exercise 5

- (a) (i) This is a recorded telephone message and therefore the speaker does not know the hearer. This is reflected in the lack of address term and the formal syntax.
 (ii) Its primary function is to provide referential information. It is not intended to provide information on how the speaker is feeling.
- (b) (i) Despite the initial greeting *good morning* which can be used to strangers and acquaintances, the speaker clearly knows the addressee well. Two affectionate endearment terms are used (*little one, pet*). These are terms appropriately used downwards in status (e.g. mother to child, older person to younger, nurse to young patient).
 (ii) The use of the tag form (*didn't you?*) is an attempt to elicit a response. However it is not a request for information – the answer is self-evident since it is provided in the utterance itself. This is clearly an utterance with a high affective content.
- (c) (i) The address forms (*Mr Clayton, sir*), as well as the initial phrase, as apology for interruption (*Excuse me*), suggest this is an utterance from a subordinate to a superior and that the two do not know each other well.
 (ii) The primary intention of this utterance appears to be to provide referential information. Note, however, that it might have other functions too if we knew more about the context. The secretary might be indirectly (and therefore politely) asking if s/he might leave since s/he has finished a particular task. Utterances often serve more than one function.

■ Concepts introduced (in the order they occur in the chapter)

Style
 Dialect
 Variety/code
 Linguistic repertoire
 Speech function