Book Review

What Is Sociolinguistics?
G. Van Herk (2012), Wiley-Blackwell,
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1. Introduction

Breaking the boundaries between disciplines and doing interdisciplinary research has become quite desirable (Jourdan & Tuite, 2006). Sociolinguistics, as a field that crosses the boundaries between disciplines, is the study of language in society and there are a lot of major sub-areas in this field including discourse analysis, studies of interaction, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, feminism, etc. (Meyerhoff, 2011).

In recent years, scholars interested in L2 development have studied it via 2 different viewpoints. A group of them focus on the psychological, individual aspects of L2 development which has come to be classified as a sub-category of cognitive science. However, others tend to follow a more sociolinguistically-oriented approach which does not accept ignorance of the sociocultural factors that affect L2 development (Arabski & Wojtaszek, 2011).

Undoubtedly, the role of sociocultural factors cannot be ignored and they need thorough attention in the field of language learning and teaching. The book written by Van Herk provides the reader with an introduction into the major sub-areas of sociolinguistics and the essential definitions. The book is organized into 15 chapters each of which deals with the main theoretical positions and assumptions,

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research traditions, and findings in that area. The chapters also encompass *definitions* of key terms in sociolinguistics, *"where to next?"* boxes which show the direction of research in a specific field, *exercises*, *discussion questions*, and a section entitled *other resources* that lists books, websites, etc. that give more information regarding the topic of interest. After an introductory chapter which deals with the history and types of sociolinguistics and the uses of the present book, 14 chapters follow.

2. Chapter 2: Language and Society

In this chapter of the book, the author draws a distinction between the way linguists, sociolinguists, and normal people define language and society. Furthermore, he notes that the principle of mutual intelligibility is what linguists use to distinguish a language from a dialect while normal people may employ other criteria. However, sociolinguists define dialect as distinct varieties of a language. The focus of sociolinguistics in the study of language is studying the language in use, at the level of social group, not the language of an individual speaker which implies that sociolinguists' studies do not deal with prescribed rules but described tendencies of a social group. Finally, the author defines social group as a speech community, social network, or community of practice.

3. Chapter 3: Place

Geographical location as a factor that influences language variation is discussed in this chapter. There are some factors that cause distinction between dialects and Van Herk names varying points of origin, migration, linguistic and dialect contact, and isolation. He presents an example of the English language and how it has spread in the inner, outer, and expanding circles at the beginning of the chapter to count for the aforementioned contributing factors. The writer has also mentioned the cases of Quebec French and African Nova Scotian English and their histories as examples of language varieties that have taken their features as a result of linguistic and social isolation respectively. Regional language varieties are believed to be a product of social and historical forces that have affected that place. Therefore, each

variety mirrors the language of its original inhabitants, the language of the later settlers, the status of each variety, the degree and type of contact with other varieties, the products and practices of the region, the social and identification choices of its speakers, and a complex interaction with economic, political, attitudinal, and educational forces. Van Herk has maintained that the younger generation is affected by other languages more and that the people we talk to regularly shape the way we speak.

4. Chapter 4: Social Status

From this chapter on, Van Herk tries to picture what each language variety shows about the distinctions that are made in each community. In this chapter, he deals with status and class as use of each variety is usually connected to a specific social class in the community. Each society is divided into different classes and each class tends to use one variety of language. The variety that is used by the upper-class is believed to be the prestigious variety which is correct while the one employed by the working-class is the stigmatized variety. To indicate their aspiration with the rich and powerful whose variety is considered standard, prestigious and unmarked and because of the linguistic insecurity they feel, many people from the lower class try to speak in that variety. This sometimes leads to social hypercorrection which is called the crossover effect. Social mobility accounts to a great extent for how class and language affect each other, i.e. if mobility is difficult and one cannot easily move out of a social group in a society, the varieties are also kept apart. All in all, sociolinguists have to attend to the local concepts of social status when they deal with its relationship to language use.

5. Chapter 5: Time

Seeing the title of this chapter, one might consider this issue to be of utmost importance to historical linguists. However, sociolinguists are also interested in changes in the language at a certain time. Firstly, sociolinguists look at how the social context brings about change in the language spoken by people who speak it. To this end, they try to compare the language used by the younger and the older generations

by looking at language in apparent time. As the difference between these varieties might simply be a result of age grading, they also try to look at the language in real time to verify the results gained from investigations done in a single time. This leads to determining the social and linguistic behaviors in which change occurs. It can also help sociolinguists decide why change occurs when it does. Secondly, sociolinguists study age as a social factor by looking at the way of acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in children, the way language faces a change during the lifespan, and the way language is used to reflect the norms associated with a certain age group.

6. Chapter 6: Ethnicity

Ethnicity as another factor that is related to language and language varieties is dealt with in this chapter. The writer starts the chapter with the ways that are used by sociolinguists to study the relationship between language and ethnicity. Ethnicity can be considered as a social characteristic affecting the language used by people. Through different social forces, e.g. immigration, people with different social and cultural backgrounds settle in one place. This sometimes leads to a new variety that maintains its associations with the original ethnic group which is called an ethnolect. The choice of a linguistic item will categorize a speaker as a member of a particular community. Sometimes, speakers may know more than one variety but they choose to use a specific one in a special context to build a specific identity in relation to others. The author continues that the way we talk of an ethnic group is the second point where ethnicity and language are related. Over time, ethnic groups are referred to by different names which are called ethnonyms. These ethnonyms reflect the status of an ethnic group and their acceptance in the wider society. The final point of relationship between ethnicity and language lies in understanding how ethnic features can be used by different groups. In some societies, there might be sanctions against using the marked variety. Less frequently however, there is a tendency toward using a marked variety as it might seem appealing to the speakers of the mainstream variety for a reason or other. All in all, analyzing the relationship between language

and ethnicity shows the implicit power relationships between the ethnic groups in that society.

7. Chapter 7: Gender and Identity

The writer introduces gender as something that is performed in contrast with biological and inherent quality and tries to account for how gender is related to language. The chapter continues with the controversial findings of several studies regarding features of women's language and then points out that the speaking situation has a greater influence than gender. The debate regarding the degree of the linguistic differences between genders and the extent to which they reflect differences in access to power or cultural background is believed to be unresolved. Van Herk also mentions the fact that the focus of sociolinguistic studies has come to be the speakers' agentive behavior which suggests the active doer at work and the way one's gender identity is shaped by a combination of their background, experiences, and social expectations. Finally, recent work is said to look at people who are on the margins of mainstream gender assumptions and performances to illuminate the way these assumptions and performances work.

8. Chapter 8: Style

In the eighth chapter of this book, the author addresses the issue of style. As active participants in the sociolinguistic process, we express the same idea in many ways in different interactions. Equipped with communicative competence, we are able to decide on the way of speaking suited to each speech event. Therefore, style is defined as the way we choose to use in each interaction. The style speakers of a language decide to use changes based on their audience members and how much they like to converge or diverge to them. Hence, speakers use different styles to present themselves differently. While style is a shifty concept, register refers to the type of speech that is used in a specific speech situation. Genre is another term that refers to a category of language use recognized and named by the speech community. The register associated with a particular occupation is also termed jargon. The author summarizes the chapter by mentioning that by style shifting,

people define or redefine what it means to be a member of a group.

9. Chapter 9: Interaction

In this chapter, the author tries to deal with an often ignored issue, i.e. the social purpose of language in interactions. In a way, he moves toward examining the way language is used to do things and how speakers use the language to ensure effectiveness of their interactions. He introduces discourse analysis, ethnography of communication, and conversation analysis as some methods that help researchers investigate discourse and its regularities as there are recurrent patterns in interactions. Speakers' communicative competence helps them choose the right words and structures as well as the correct interactional rules of the language. In each and every situation, they are aware that which choices are polite and which are not. They understand each other's face wants and try to behave appropriately in different situations. The linguistic choices that are made are also believed to show the relative standing of the participants in an interaction. They may express solidarity or status in an interaction through style shifting or via other means.

10. Chapter 10: Multilingualism

Chapter 10 deals with the social role of multilingualism in societies. Van Herk starts with the fact that societies can be multilingual in different ways. In some societies, the majority of the population is multilingual and each language serves a different purpose while in some others, multiple communities with different languages exist together. The reasons for a society becoming multilingual have been counted as: population movements due to immigration, etc., boundary drawing between countries, and exogamy. Multilingualism can lead to diglossia or code-switching. In some societies, a diglossic situation exists where two different varieties serve different purposes. The high variety is used in formal situations while the low variety is employed to talk to intimates. Code-switching, which is far more common than diglossia, refers to people's shift in using the languages and happens because of the appropriacy of one code, speaker's attitude toward the topic, identity creation, solidarity, etc. Code-switching shows the resources available to a speaker for interacting in each

situation. The chapter concludes with the fact that a combination of social forces decide on the choice of language in multilingual societies.

11. Chapter 11: Language Contact

Unlike chapter 3 in which the author considered the effects of language isolation, in chapter 11, he looks into the issue of language contact. Extensive contact between two languages can lead to their resemblance. As Van Herk put it in chapter 10, code- switching was a common phenomenon in multilingual societies. Sometimes, code-switching results in nonce borrowings where some words get picked by monolingual people and changed to satisfy the rule pattern of the language. Content words tend to be borrowed more than function words all in all. In some cases, language contact ends up in a new language. Mixed languages can develop which have the qualities of one or more languages equally. However, this is a rare occurrence. Some communities, however, may prefer to use a lingua franca and avoid any mixing. In other cases, a pidgin is formed and used which is a very simplified language. A pidgin may develop into a creole which may itself be decreolized and lead to a creole continuum.

12. Chapter 12: Attitudes and Ideologies

In this chapter, attitudes and ideologies toward languages have been examined. The language choices that are made by speakers of any language show their underlying attitudes toward that variety and the people who speak other varieties. Van Herk mentions two research methods commonly used in research in this field namely, attitude surveys and matched guise tests. He maintains that the results gained usually point out that the standard variety is more acceptable. These attitudes toward varieties can form language myths which may reinforce the higher status of the standard variety in communities and marginalize other varieties. This leads to trivialization of the group who use the non-standard variety. The final point introduced in this chapter is CDA which investigates the way these ideologies are reinforced and tries to make people aware of what this is doing to them all.

13. Chapter 13: Language as a Social Entity

The socio end of the sociolinguistics continuum becomes more prominent in this chapter of the book as it deals with the status and security of languages within a society. The choice of the language that is valued and used in societies is of utmost importance as it sometimes excludes and eliminates minor varieties. Discussions of language maintenance and language policy and planning investigate this issue. Institutional support, power and prestige of the language, demography, and community choices are the factors that affect the retention of a language. The varieties that are not supported will die out as the society uses them in fewer situations and the individuals stop transmitting them to the next generation. Sometimes policies of revitalization slow down the process. Through language planning and language policy, a language gains a higher status and becomes an official language. A process of selection, codification, elaboration, and implementation is followed in language planning.

14. Chapter 14: Education

The author points out that from this chapter on, he tries to show connections between topics discussed. Schools are considered to be interesting to sociolinguists as they are the first place in which students come to build their identity. Furthermore, they are the places were children's sociolinguistic competence and language behavior is shaped through interaction and education. Students and teachers come to schools with different talking forms and attitudes toward varieties. Unfortunately, mismatches between the variety valued at school and the one used by students can have serious outcomes which may lead to considering users of non-standard varieties as failures. Labov (1972) has come to the conclusion that no non-standard variety is an obstacle itself but the way it is treated can stop learning. The school system seems to be quite rigid in its attempt to make learners part of the mainstream. Therefore, education makes students conform to the language and language ideologies of the school system. For those who do not have to adapt and whose sociolinguistic repertoire is similar to that of the school system, being successful is more likely.

Another point that is mentioned in this chapter is the case of those who study another language in their schools. As the author calls it, it is funny that they seem to acquire little competence in the vernacular variety unless they have contact with speakers of the variety which can be due to the fact that standard variety of other languages are taught at schools. All in all, it seems that imposition of language ideologies at schools will marginalize a group of speakers.

15. Chapter 15: What is Sociolinguistics?

After looking at how language and society relate and their different aspects in the previous fourteen chapters and considering different methods and theoretical positions associated with each one of them, in this final chapter, the writer tries to put these components together by examining the way different sociolinguistic approaches reveal information about a language variety through presenting African American English (AAE) as an example. Finally, Van Herk concludes the book by pointing to the complication in "sociolinguistics as a discipline and language and society as objects of study" (p. 194). He cites Wardhaugh (2006) who rightly mentions the fact that the complexity of language is due to the fact that it is a social phenomenon and that society is complex. Therefore, efforts to break down language in formulas seem to be failures.

16. Concluding Remarks

Taken together, the book is a well-written introductory book which familiarizes the reader with comprehensible definitions of the key terms in the field of sociolinguistics. Moreover, the chapters are well organized and the examples presented clarify the points that have been put forward for the readers.

Furthermore, the research done regarding the notions that the book has dealt with has been well presented and the research that can be done concerning each topic has been recommended. The sections dealing with discussion questions and exercises are also valuable venues for pondering over the issues discussed. For readers interested in the topics, other sources have also been introduced.

The blue boxes that are provided in each chapter clarify related issues or talk about a study that is relevant to the topic that is discussed in each chapter. Another merit of the book is the snapshot section which is only provided for some chapters. In this section, a relevant study is presented so that the reader becomes more aware of the issue and so that they can relate the points they have studied to the mentioned example and understand the issue more comprehensively. The fact that the key words are defined in the margins of the relevant page and later on in the glossary of the book also makes the book quite user-friendly.

In addition to the aforementioned privileges, the fact that the writer finishes the book with a chapter which exemplifies AAE gives the reader an opportunity to ponder upon the topics that have been introduced in each and every chapter as a practical example and the writer's own experience are dealt with. This is how the writer has related theory to practice in the field.

However, like all books, the present book also suffers some shortcomings. The provided discussion questions and provided examples sometimes need specific cultural information or familiarity with a specific language variety which is not available for many users of the English language. This will make the book a bit difficult to understand for those interested in sociolinguistics.

Another weakness of the book may be the summing up section which does not provide the reader with a detailed summary of the chapter and sometimes mostly presents a personal opinion. Nevertheless, this may be because of the fact that key terms are sufficiently dealt with in each chapter and in the glossary.

In conclusion, it must be mentioned that the chapters presented in this book can contribute to gaining a comprehensive understanding of sociolinguistic notions and can inspire readers to follow research in the issue they are more interested in. In addition, the book can be a good source for the relevant courses at universities as is delightfully engaging and it takes students on a tour of the field.

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