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Week 2 - Answers
Mesthrie, et al. (2009), Chapter 1

1. How are society and language related?

It seems clear that there needs to be some connections between language and society. Language is, in fact, used in context. That is, there is always an audience (either right in front of a speaker or in a writer's head). Language is constructed with that audience in mind. As mentioned in Mesthrie et al. (2009), although there is a cause-effect chain connecting language and society generally language follows the society, rather than society being determined by language. That is language use is constructed based on societal needs rather than society being changed by linguistic needs. This seems to be case even in situations of linguistic contact. In such cases languages change due to the development of new ideas brought about as a result of contact. Society does not change in order to make use of new linguistic possibilities brought about by language contact.

Once we have accepted this fundamental connection between language and society, there are several major issues which arise and which we need to review here before moving forward.

Appropriateness

The first major issue we need to contend with when trying to look at language from a social point of view is that of how we will assess people language use. Assessment isn't just something that teachers or parents (sometimes) might do when confronted with language use. Everyone is constantly assessing the language used by others as well as our own output. This is not to be confused with the assessment of a piece of language's correctness. Correctness is an assessment made purely on the acceptance of the structure of the utterance and is made outside of its actual use. Take a look at the following examples.

- 1) man the dog walk the corner round
- 2) the man walked around the corner with the dog

Utterance 1 is generally seen as being incorrect while utterance 2 is correct. This judgment is based on structural elements alone and how well they conform to sets of accepted norms.

The appropriateness of an utterance refers to how well it suits the context (both situational and linguistic) into which it has been embedded. This may include structural elements, but takes much more into account as shown in the following account.

- 3) Speaker A: What time is it?
Speaker B: Shut your rat faced trap!
Speaker C: It's 3:00.
Speaker D: Time to open a can of whoop ass.
Speaker E: No idea.
Speaker F: Look up.

In the above dialogue the request is met with a variety of responses, only one or two of which seems appropriate from a general point of view (whatever that is). In reality, however, they all might be appropriate depending on the situation. Judgments of appropriateness thus are made on the basis of a wide range of concerns all of which have to do with the expectations a given society might have regarding itself and language use.

Denotational and Indexical aspects of language

Language is often conceived of as a way of providing others with information. On this view we use language to express meanings, that us denote something. This is the denotational as aspect of language. Language emerges from a speaker for a set purpose. In standard approaches to linguistics, this the main thrust of language and investigations into it. From a sociolinguistic point of view, however, language is not just denotational it is indexical as well. Thus in the process of pushing language out of us to achieve certain linguistic goals, we are at the same time revealing much about ourselves. This is possible because people have a wide array of varying beliefs about others. Whether one is aware of it or thinks it fair others are always assessing you based on your language use – this applies to language learners as well. In fact, based on the high level of general familiarity with English, Koreans do it to the Koreans in relation to English use.

Language and thought connections

A sociolinguistic approach to language also opens up the question of the relation between thought and language. This is based, in part, on the perceived effect that language has on others and how one must have constructed their utterances. In a general sense, language affords us many different ways of providing the same approximate information.

- 4) She is old.
- 5) She's a hag.
- 6) The woman is a bit worn about the edges.
- 7) She holds her age well.
- 8) She is remarkably well preserved.
- 9) She is looks great fro her age.
- 10) She is not the youngest thing on two feet.
- 11) She's no spring chick.

The promise is that not only do these utterances convey different feelings: they are also based on different thoughts. This connection between thought and

language seems to obviously apply to language at the lexical level. It has long been recognized that different words have different emotive values. In a general sense words are often perceived as being positively, neutrally, and negatively charged. This charge is based obviously on the effect that these words are supposed to have on others but are also seen as somehow revealing person's thoughts and feelings. Thus, from the lexical point, one of the main purposes of language is to simply reveal our thoughts and this alone forges a deep connection between language and thought.

In a controversial extension of this basic idea, some have argued that connections between language and thought apply at the structural level as well, in, for example, the way different languages deal with issues of time, space, and number. In the strong form of the belief that language and thought are connected, people view language as limiting thought. In the softer view, language and thought are connected but we are able to think outside our languages. We can, therefore, look at the way English for example deals with the issue of number by marking it overtly. Taking this general idea, often called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, one might argue that this leads into speakers actually think differently than Koreans for example who do not mark number in their language overtly. This idea ties into sociolinguistics in that, taking it up a notch to a much larger scale, it can be argued that people whose speak the same language share thought patterns. By extension, people who come from different linguistic backgrounds will have different patterns of thought. This seems to be certainly true at some level. Of course we can overcome these differences in thought but these differences are real and they affect the way that we deal with others. It also means that to learn a new language one needs to somehow adopt at least some of the thought patterns of the speaking community which uses that target language.

What constitutes a *language*?

This is a major question and an impossible one to answer. Its relevance comes into light when we try to discuss norms or standards, but the bottom line is that there is no fitting definition for a specific language. No one knows where, for example, English begins or ends and the same applies to all languages, with the possible exception of language isolates like Korean. Looking more concretely, it is hard to determine the difference between what constitutes a specific language and dialect of that language. The difference really isn't one that can be made linguistically. The certain extent random, but more has to do with political situations than anything else. In the Philippines the official statement is that the country has at least 40 different dialects, but most linguists would argue that these are not actually dialects but different languages based on the fact that they are not mutually intelligible. It seems that the Philippine government, for political reasons, would rather call these dialects focusing on the historic relationship and common origins of these different languages so as to, possibly, enhance unity across a very disparate nation. Looking at a particular language in this way to find the languages themselves are just categories and like all categories there are fuzzy boundaries. Humans often deal with categories by going to the center of the

category and looking at its core and this is what we also do with language. We focus not on the fringes so much but on the perceived central core or norm. In doing so, this helps us identify different languages without difficulty even though in reality it's very difficult to actually do so.

2. How does a descriptive approach to language vary from that of a prescriptive one? Which one should we aspire to?

As a language learner one is confronted by different approaches to language. This generally comes in the form of the type of feedback or instruction we get from others usually parents, other family members or peers. This early exposure to approaches to language forms the way we see language and especially our language as working. As a language teacher the views of language we accrued as youngsters often carry over into the way we deal with our own students. We often employ the same tactics or ideas as those we were exposed to by others. Concerning these views, we can generally break them down into two main types: **prescriptive** and **descriptive**.

Prescriptive views of language essentially see language as being good or bad. This relates not only to what language learners do with a language they are learning, but also native speakers. A prescriptive grammarian sees grammar as rule-based and absolute. They are not interested in how people use language. They are interested in what they consider to be good language. These rules are usually based on written or more highbrow forms and some might even be idiosyncratic. Prescriptive grammarians use many different reasons to argue for the correctness of certain forms over another, but most of these claims rest on links to older and better (more logical languages).

A descriptive approach to language seeks to collect and understand the language that people actually use, without making judgment of what is good or bad. Rather appropriateness is an issue. Although someone might freely say something, the use might not be appropriate.

In looking at the teaching of a language, especially a foreign language much debate has been generated in regard to the efficacy of the descriptive versus the prescriptive approach. Although we all know that a prescriptive approach is simply wrong and in being so is very limiting to our students in the long run, there are also reasons for using such a faulty approach. Descriptive approaches are often seen as being hard for students to comprehend. There is simply too much information with too little input. For learners to be able to grasp all the underlying nuances they need more exposure to the TL than is often the norm in a foreign language learning situation. A prescriptive approach is easy and, if done well, provides both positive and negative feedback.

3. What is a standard and how can we use this information as language teachers?

The standard is the particular form of a language that sets a model of use for all other forms. How one particular form gets to be the model is usually an accident of history. For English, the standard form traditionally comes from the dialect used in the south-east part of England because that is where printing presses were first set up. As London became the head of the printing industry,

to be printed one had to write using the dialect used around London. This has affected written forms across the English-speaking world. Speaking is a bit trickier, but it is obvious that written language has also affected spoken forms in more recent years, especially since the advent of universal education. The standard usually reveals an older form of the language and is often something which is overtime not associated with any particular region. Thus the standard English of the UK today, received pronunciation (RP), is not spoken in any particular region, but rather is spoken by a group of people who have achieved a certain level of education. The same is often observed for other standards such as High German in German-speaking countries and Filipino in the Philippines. As you can see from the examples of High German and Filipino, standards are quite often artificial in that they are put together with the sole purpose of being a standard. It should all see being served that standards are not used universally within the speech community. They tend to be used in more formal types of situations and this may be coated very specifically with in the sociolinguistic usage patterns of a society.

4. What are the main views on society and which one do you think is the most valid? Why?

Mesthrie, et al. (2009), there are three main views on society which been popular over the last 60 or 70 years. It's impossible to say which one is particularly more valid than any other in an empirical sense as it is difficult to test these models, but intuitively we can feel that some are more useful than others particularly when we are focusing not on just models of society but on language and society.

Functionalism

Functionalism sees different groups as being both separate and integrated into a larger system. The system works based on the idea that each of these groups work together – cooperate – for their own mutual benefit. This model allows for a wide range of different groups each with their own specific characteristics and interests. People functioned both within their group but also obviously with the other group since cooperation is necessary. The society, on this view, is seen as a kind of tapestry which is woven together to form something beautiful.

Marxism

Marxism sees groups as being in conflict with each other. The power group established ways and means of keeping the less powerful group down and conflict ensues based on these norms. Based on rather negative relationships focused on in this theory it really is one of conflict. People identifies strongly with their own group and each group has its own specific purpose either to dominate or two overcome this domination. A theory like Marxism might be used to explain teen groups and their outward revolt against more established societal norms. It also explains that as these same people cease to be teenagers they also cease to revolt and start to follow norms that they had previously found a current and went out of their way to refute.

Interactionism

Interactionism sees people's roles as being non-fixed. Rather they emerge out of the interactions people engage in. It is through interactions that one comes to know the many roles they may have in society. In this model, rather than being attacked history, society is more like a fluid pool in which people need to learn how to swim and which is prey to all sorts of upheaval. People with more experience and society will be able to better deal with these interactions but they are never quite fixed, on this view.

Looking at these three different models we can see that we actually probably want to employ all three if we are going to understand how language actually functions within society. Each one has something to offer. We know that sometimes people fight and that groups are at odds with each other and will work hard to actually move further their own way from each other and reject the norms that the other has. We also know that in children their roles aren't fixed and they are always changing as they become older and as they move through society and in such a situation interactionist model seems to be quite fitting. For adults in society, especially those who belong to a certain class we concede that the functionalist model often best describes that type of situation. In the end we would like to argue that there is more cooperation than conflict within any given society and the most communication is based on the fundamental idea of operation and not conflict. At the same time however, the text nor the fact that there is sometimes conflict and that some groups clash with others within the community and across communities and contact situations. Understanding these things helps us better understand aspects of language use, but also sometimes the way our students, as members of society, feel about language use and other languages as well.