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Sociolinguistics in Language Teaching
Fall 2011

Week 4 - Answers

Mesthrie, et al. (2009), Chapter 5

1. When and how is variability meaningful? Please provide some of your own examples.

One of the main ideas underlying a sociolinguistic approach to language is that not only are there varieties of languages spoken, but these varieties also mean something. They are indexical in that languages and language usage patterns, across different levels, triggers certain beliefs about the speaker. These beliefs are remarkably stable across different speech communities or groups of people, although there is obviously some degree of variability in these beliefs, especially depending on an individual's group memberships.

Variability can occur at different levels. At the most simple of these levels is the level of register across a somewhat stable variety or dialect. Within the London dialect of English, for example, there are obviously different registers, less formal and more formal. Regarding regional or socio-economic dialects, one can also vary their language by moving back and forth from one to another for different purposes. On the greatest scale of linguistic variability we then have people switching back and forth between different languages or *codes*. All these different varieties mentioned here are *codes*. I like this term because it underlies the fact that language use triggers all this indexical information. Interview room real sense all language use comes with all sorts of associations or beliefs. And it is obvious that people really to these different types of uses.

Another very important aspect of this is that we need to see quite clearly that these three different levels mentioned above really entail more or less the same process, just on very different levels. From the perspective of language production should be clear that these first two levels, the levels of register shift and dialectal variability are not always conscious. That means when people are planning they aren't often aware that they are altering their language. It happens in a rather natural way based on triggers from the environment. In order to be able to do this a person needs a sufficient level of proficiency. The language system itself needs to be integrated with these outside triggers, and we talked about this in relation to language in the world last week but I hope that we can now see the very deep connection between language and the world not just in how language is coded but in how language is used. Our language use (ALL OF OUR LANGUAGE USE) is generated in relation to the world itself and we can see this very clearly were looking at this type of variability. It may not be controlled overtly in the mind of the speaker all the time, but it is controlled by the world itself provided the speaker has the right type of internal connections. It is these internal connections, the type of integrated

linguistic system that we need to try to develop in our students and the key word here is integrated. These integrations or connections need not only be between linguistic items but between linguistic information and extra linguistic information, that is, information basically just about the world around us. Moving back to our original idea it has been argued that for bilinguals to be successful they do need to be somewhat aware of what they are doing simply because activating a different linguistic system is more of a challenge and the repercussions are also much greater. Unless people are in altered psychological states they are usually quite aware of which languages they are using and is often based on some sort of choice.

In a general sense we can move our students through these different stages. When we are thinking about a naturalistic type of language acquisition we usually assume that students are moving from variation in their own dialect and then dialectal and then finally multilingual variation, but in dealing with our students as later language learners we are probably going to try to help them move in exactly the opposite direction. The first thing our students need to learn is when they can use their home language (in this case Korean) and when they can use their target language (in this case English). We can then begin to get them to understand something about the dialectal variation within the target language and then finally maybe we can get them to understand register shift within the target language. Of course this doesn't mean that we believe we have finished one stage before moving onto the next one we honestly want to do all three things at once but as far as our general focus goes we may want to follow this type of sequence.

It is also very important to acknowledge that this variability is not because people are stupid or lazy and it's not used to cover up deficiencies in their linguistic system in a general sense, but rather variability is used to show a heightened linguistic use. We vary our language for many reasons but one of the main reasons that we've have to vary our language is so that we can force better relationships with other people, our interlocutors. As we mentioned in class, language is not just about transferring information. That's just one small aspect of the functions of language. One of the main functions of language is simple to establish, preserve, and heighten relationships and the way we do this or fail to do this is by varying our language appropriately. This may involve making the appropriate register shift when dealing with a person in a certain situation or an interlocutor who has a certain position of power. It may involve shifting into a common language or dialect to generate intimacy between interlocutors. The basic term for this, as we should well know by now, is convergence. On the other side we may actually do the opposite in order to generate distance between ourselves and interlocutors who are maybe bothering us and this of course is called divergence.

The bottom line is that all this different type of behavior is always undertaken with these general norms of language use in a particular society in mind. What I was trying to argue in class is that in South Korea there are general societal norms related to the use of English. English does have very specific functions

within South Korean society and these functions are not always dissimilar to those we find in other countries even though those countries may be termed English-speaking countries and South Korea is obviously not. English does play a role in South Korean society, for sure. This doesn't mean that English and Korean are competing although people often feel that way. It simply means that English has taken on certain roles within South Korean society. As you mentioned in class many of these roles are limited to written forms of expression, rather than spoken but we have seen a rise in the spoken use of English not just among the four Koreans over the last few years.

Based on all this, then, it is important for us to not necessarily overtly explain all these things to our students, but we do need to ourselves be aware of the situation and use this to establish better models for learning and use in our classrooms.

2. In bilingual or multilingual communities how do people know which language to use?

Basically, people in bilingual or multilingual (hereafter bilingual, following basic usage) communities know which language to use because they are aware of the different practices of their community regarding languages and their valuations/use. The actual use of one language over another is triggered by the situation as well as the interlocutor. So in effect people need to be aware first and foremost of the values and norms of their society regarding different specific languages, but they also need to know something about context and by context here we mean the interlocutory as well as other aspects of the situation. This is not something that we can teach overtly in the classroom, although we could try and have some fun with it as we will see later in the course. Basically students need to work through this and experience it themselves. People may argue that in a situation like South Korea where English is seemingly quite distant this is going to be very difficult but of course that is what classrooms are for. We need to create classrooms as a kind of simulation environment. Traditionally classrooms are used for getting students to learn up out language itself. We cram them with as much information as we think they are learning about the forms of the target language, and of course this is necessary in way, but is only a small part of the picture. To get them to be able to use those forms we need to get them to actually practice and this is where the simulation comes in. As I mentioned the class, we need to create a language classroom that is a social environment. This is quite different types of classrooms that we generally run now, but from my own experience in doing this semester after semester (albeit in a somewhat enhanced context) it is something that is definitely doable.

3. What is code-switching why do people do it?

Before delving into this fascinating topic we first need to make a clear distinction between two types of code switching, specifically, code switching and code mixing. Code switching basically involves making larger shifts from one language to the other. This means that people may utter a sentence or even a

paragraph in one language and then shift over to another again in a larger size linguistic type of unit. Code mixing, on the other hand, involves them using two or more languages with in a smaller linguistic units such as a sentence. So, for example someone may start a sentence in Korean but end it in English. This, again, is a type of variability we are varying our languages not in a regional sense but in a functional sense. To understand what I mean by this we need to review different types of bilingual societies. Some societies, such as Switzerland are what are termed regional bilingual societies in that different languages are spoken in different regions and within any given region that language tends to be used for all different functions. So for example, and the German-speaking region of Switzerland German is used for all functions. Speakers of other languages (such as French or Italian) may use their languages and may get a response in their own language is everyone in Switzerland is required to learn these languages to a certain extent, but it is often not regarded as being terribly acceptable. A functionally bilingual society, such as was discussed in the book in relation to Kenya and parts of East Africa, uses different languages simultaneously, but for different purposes. For example, an Indian living in the Gujarat province of India will speak Gujarati in the home and with close friends when dealing with more personal types of topics. In their jobs they may speak Hindi, depending of course on what their job is, provided they are not a farmer for example. In school they may speak both Hindi and English if they go to university than they will be using English as well as if they are working for an international Corporation. So this Gujarati speaker may use three or more languages in a single day but they will shift their language used depending on the situation at who they are talking to. As we discussed in class, it is easy to see how this is exactly the same type of variability as we see at other levels and people vary their language for the same reasons: they want to converge or diverge from those around them.

4. How is code switching related to variability?

I think we have more or less answered this question already in the answers to the above questions. It is clear that code switching (and here we are talking about both code switching and code mixing) is simply another type of variability. It is language choice but on a less enduring bases in that we make our language choice not for a long period of time but for short periods depending on the situation. The fact that people do code switching code mix underscores the very fact that the situations in which we use language are not just situations in the environment of the language itself creates these types of situations. The we didn't talk very much but the co-text, but it is clear that very often code switches and code mixes are the result of the language that the interlocutory uses. It is a port realization that language itself (co-text) creates the context. This is important for our students to understand because the language they produce provides a wealth of information to the interlocutor which do seem to like it are very strong cues about how they might respond, but when people coming from different sets of norms then huge misunderstandings can and will ensue.

