

Language and Society: What Relationship A Socio-Linguistic Reading

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Abstract:

Scientific literature strongly affirms the undeniable existence of a close relationship between language and society, a view supported by both sociologists and linguists, whether classical or contemporary. This understanding stems from the inherently social nature of language, which is not considered an individual phenomenon but rather a fundamental means of communication and social interaction. Historical evidence also indicates that no linguistic system can emerge or develop outside the framework of human societies and their social contexts. As a result, a reciprocal relationship has been established between language and society, attracting significant academic interest in fields such as the *sociology of language* and *sociolinguistics*.

Keywords: Language; Society; Linguistics; Science; Social Organization.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Most social and linguistic studies agree that between language and society there exists a relationship that cannot in any way be denied, neither by sociologists nor by linguists, and this has been acknowledged by both the ancients and the moderns alike, considering that language can only exist as a social, not an individual, phenomenon. It is neither possible nor reasonable to find an individual language, since the individual can only possess the language of the group to which he belongs. This was expressed by the Norwegian linguist A. Sommerfelt, who stated¹: Language is a social phenomenon, and the changes it undergoes

are also of a social nature... The French linguist J. Vendryes does not differ from him when he also emphasizes the social nature of language, saying²: Within society, language was formed and came into existence the day people felt the need to understand one another...

The same applies to society itself, for no society can be conceived without language, since it is the nerve of life's movement in any society, whatever its nature, and the means of communication among its members. Likewise, all stages of history reveal to us that no linguistic system whatsoever can exist except within the framework of human groups. Ibn Jinni in the 4th century AH acknowledged this when he stated: Language is sounds through which every people express their purposes... thus declaring clearly and explicitly the social nature of language, considering that the word people in his usage means society, especially since the word was not used with the meaning it carries today — i.e., society. Similarly, Jean Piaget in the 20th century declared his support for this view in his statement: Language is a social institution governed by laws imposed upon human beings...

Sociologists too, despite their various types and orientations, acknowledge that language is nothing more than one of the social phenomena.

Modern linguistic studies since the late 1950s have devoted great attention to the study of this relationship between language and its socio-cultural environment, due to the important role of language in society. This interest arose from the new concept of language as a social phenomenon, and from here stems the importance of the social study of language, since it clarifies the relationship between language and social life, and the influence of the latter on the various phenomena of society, considering that language in itself is the product of a social relationship. The social nature of man is what imposed the existence of language, as it is a social activity inasmuch as it is a necessary response to the need for communication

among people³. This relationship is bound to affect the linguistic structure, its composition, multiplicity, and diversity. This is what created that close bond between language and the social sciences, and linguistic studies thus opened themselves to these sciences.

From this perspective, we find that language constitutes the nucleus of thought in two distinct fields of knowledge: sociology and linguistics. This is due to the clear overlap between social phenomena and the linguistic phenomenon.

In this article, I shall attempt to lift the veil on that dialectical relationship existing between language and society by exploring the mutual influence between them, seeking to answer the following problem: What relationship binds language to society? And what is the nature of this relationship in the view of sociologists on one hand, and linguists on the other?

In our effort to determine the general framework of this research, I have started from certain hypotheses, including:

- From the concept of society and the concept of language, language is nothing but a social phenomenon.
- Society is affected by the developments and transformations that occur in language, and language is affected by the various social transformations.
- Sociologists study language as a social phenomenon that is influenced by and influences other phenomena.
- Linguists' perspective on language in light of social transformation.

These hypotheses oblige us to adopt an analytical method, by analyzing this relationship in light of social and linguistic research, and at times we resort to comparison in order to approach these studies.

The objectives we aim to achieve from this research consist in grasping the reality of language in its social dimension, to uncover that mutual influence that touches both

language and society and results from this relationship, making socio-linguistic study of utmost importance in both the linguistic field on one hand and the social field on the other.

2.On the Concept of Language:

Language is generally defined as a set of symbols and signs that may serve as a means of communication. I do not wish here to delve into that research which seeks to uncover the linguistic root by moving from one dictionary to another, for that is the concern of those who investigate the origin of a particular language. Rather, the aim of my study is to grasp the philosophical and social dimension that characterizes language in general, that is, the study of language in itself⁴.

Edward Sapir defined it as a purely human and entirely non-instinctive means of conveying ideas, emotions, and desires through a system of symbols produced voluntarily. Ferdinand de Saussure also considered it a system of conventional signs in the minds of the linguistic community, enabling communication among them, and by this definition he distinguished it from speech. Robert Hall, likewise, regards it as an entity for communication and interaction among human beings.

It is thus clear that language is a system of symbols and signs that serves as a means of communication.

3.On the Concept of Society:

The term society is usually applied to that system established by a group of people who share living in a geographical area, bound together by a set of cultural ties that establish their identity and make them feel a unity of belonging, creating from them an independent entity.

R. M. MacIver and C. Babbage define it as⁵: Society is a system composed of varied customs and prescribed procedures, of authority and mutual aid, of many groupings and divisions, and of various forms of regulation of human behavior and freedoms. This complex system, constantly changing, is called society.

Sociology:

The simplest and clearest definition that can be given to sociology is to say that it is the science of social phenomena, or it is the study of man as a social being, with all the relations that arise between individuals insofar as they live with a collective, not an individual, character.

If speaking of the origin of sociology directly refers us to Ibn Khaldun in Islamic civilization, pointing out that it is the science of human civilization (‘umrān), dealing with human society and its phenomena, then Auguste Comte is considered the actual founder of sociology when he declared that he had established a science which he called sociology (sociologie) in 1838. Max Weber defined it as the science whose function is the study of social action and the understanding of this action through interpretation, which achieves the causal explanation of the course of this action⁶.

Since language is a social action and one of its phenomena, it is a social activity inasmuch as it is a necessary response to the need for communication among all people. On the other hand, language is what encompasses society in its cultural phenomena, bearing the foundations of its identity, and transmitting its history and heritage across generations. Society, through the multiplicity and complexity of its phenomena, is what created language and contributed to the richness of its meanings and vocabulary.

The existence of language requires the existence of society, and here the social nature of language becomes clear, for there is no linguistic system that can exist apart from a human group that uses it and interacts with it⁷.

From this, the reality of language in its close connection with the social sciences is revealed to us. As we have noted, it is considered at the core of the subjects of sociology, since it is a social phenomenon. The gap that once existed between sociology and the linguistic phenomenon has narrowed, such that sociologists have become more aware of the social nature that characterizes language. Thus, sociolinguistics emerged to confirm this convergence. The same applies to linguists, who realized that linguistic repertoire is also influenced by various social transformations, which led to the emergence of what is known as sociolinguistics.

4.The Sociology of Language:

Many researchers have traced the origin of language back to the social nature of man, and for this reason the existence of the function of language and the changes that occur in it are closely tied to social structures and the relations between individuals and social institutions resulting from them.

The history of Western philosophy shows us that the problematic of the relationship between language and knowledge constituted one of the most important philosophical issues since its emergence. However, the important question posed by the sociology of language is that related to the relationship between language and culture on the one hand, and society on the other hand, and this question did not emerge until the Renaissance. This question found its place in many of the works of philosophers of that era, such as Vico and Anthony Ashley, as well as Hamann and Herder. We may be surprised by the insightful flashes of the philosopher Condillac when he argued⁸: Human beings cannot exchange signs unless they are gathered together. This confirms that advanced inquiry into the sociality of

language. We must not overlook the great impact left by Durkheim in Europe and America through his social conception of language as one of the social facts, for this

conception was behind Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between the concepts of *langue* and *parole*, insofar as he linked language to society and collective convention⁹. Vendryes likewise expressed the social nature of language when he made it the result of that social interaction, which then transformed into becoming the strongest bond among members of society. He says¹⁰: Within society language was formed and came into existence the day people felt the need to understand one another.

The ideas of these philosophers extended into the nineteenth century, as can be seen in the works of Wilhelm von Humboldt, through the conception he presented about the advancement of language, considering it as the fine thread between the subjectivity of individual consciousness and the objectivity of the mind shaped by social processes¹¹.

This attention given by sociologists to language as a social phenomenon, and the effort to study it through its relationship with other social phenomena, led to the emergence of a new science called the sociology of language. This field is concerned with studying the linguistic phenomenon from the perspective of its origin and development, by examining the various forms that reveal the extent of interaction between language and culture. It deals with linguistic interaction, as well as the relationship that arises between language and various patterns of social organization.

The sociology of language appeared during the 1950s and 1960s, years that represented a kind of social prelude, following the discovery of the close relationship between language and various social phenomena. Researchers sought to demonstrate the effect of society, its systems, and its civilization on different linguistic phenomena, regarding language as a living being governed by the functions of the life cycle: birth, development, and death¹². In this way, we can say that the sociology of language emerged as an expression of the ideas of that current which made society the basis for the existence, being, and

development of language, by attempting to uncover the effect of social life on various linguistic phenomena.

The sociology of language seeks to examine the social context in which the interactive activities of language and culture occur. It is concerned with linguistic interaction, the relationship between language and social organization, the determination of considerations for linguistic change, the behavior adopted toward language, and the relationship of these changes to the changes in the social organization of human society¹³. It also studies the effect of different social contexts on the linguistic phenomenon in terms of its origin, development, branches, and the evolution of its vocabulary. The greater the social richness and cultural creativity, the more directly this impacts language and its vocabulary.

In summary, the sociology of language is considered a branch of sociology, taking its theories and methodological frameworks as a foundation for describing linguistic phenomena, interpreting the processes of interaction related to them, and their relationship with other phenomena in their origin and development, and in the performance of their functions with respect to society, culture, and personality.

Anthropological studies have sought to investigate the relationship linking language with the culture of different peoples. The anthropologist, when studying the language of any community, is bound to study it within the field in which it exists in society. This is evident in the research of the Polish anthropologist Malinowski, who, in his study of certain societies conventionally referred to as primitive or savage societies, realized that his study could not be valid without knowing the function performed by language in society. The result of his work was that he came to an important realization: the function of language is not merely to serve as a means of communication and understanding, but rather to be a link in the chain of

organized human activity; it is a part of human behavior, a form of action, and not merely a tool that reflects thought¹⁴.

The interest of anthropologists, then, was in the social role played by language through their treatment of the linguistic behavior of the peoples under study, under the prevailing belief that language could be considered a means of inferring various anthropological issues, such as language and culture, the effect of speech on socialization, personal relations, and the interaction of linguistic and social groups. In other words, language is a means of transmitting culture, insofar as it is, in the view of anthropology, the collection of traditions of peoples. Mario Pei confirms this view when he affirms that spoken language extends to all domains of human life without exception or distinction. This means that language is universal, in the sense that it directs and accompanies every human activity in which two or more people participate¹⁵.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu holds that all linguistic processes have a social basis, and that processes of exchange and influence are based on strong relations and domination, and that language is subject to the linguistic market and governed by linguistic capital, as symbolic capital. Language is not only for communication, but it also establishes a semantic and classificatory lexicon by reference to family and social origin¹⁶.

For his part, Pierre Achard clarifies in his book *The Sociology of Language* that the sociology of language is not merely a research study falling within scientific sociological studies, nor is it merely a sociological coincidence, but rather, on the contrary, all social relations, whatever their nature, have their linguistic structure, meaning they are based on a form of communication. From this function possessed by language stems its distinction from the other components of society, such as the school, the family, or even the city, since language is present in all these institutions. Based on this position it occupies within the

social system, Pierre Achard sees that there are two possible models of scientific studies for analyzing the problematic of social language:

- The first: considering language a phenomenon like other social phenomena, about which sociology can develop its scientific conception. According to Pierre Achard, this view takes the same scientific dimension that sociology establishes with respect to other phenomena, such as the sociology of religion, science, or education.
- The second: founded on the act of language, considering it present in all the activities of social actors, since these actors themselves rely on writing, speech, recording various statements and dialogues, and working on various written documents in a language. This leads us to admit that every social study, whatever its nature, analyzes a linguistic act, whether we realize it or not. This makes these studies a strong epistemological inquiry into the sociality of language (sociology of language), more than a mere social inquiry, such that language becomes the hidden driver that gives strength and credibility to every social intervention¹⁷.

Thus, the sociology of language is included among those social studies that consider language a social phenomenon, or a social institution, between which and society there exists mutual interaction. It is concerned with studying the effect of any social structure on various linguistic phenomena, while at the same time considering language the nerve of any social study, given that it is present in all social phenomena. Sociologists of language are interested in studying language through its diversity in a given society or in multiple societies¹⁸. Their interests also extend to the geography of language, class dialects, language conflict, and linguistic diversity, and the extent of the influence of all these linguistic levels on the cultural, political, economic, and religious structures of a society. This makes us realize that sociolinguistics is capable of uncovering much of what was obscure regarding the nature of language and the nature of society.

5.Social Linguistics:

In contrast, linguists have given special attention to this relationship through the study of the linguistic characteristics belonging to a professional group or social categories, which led to the formation of the academic field of research on the relationships between language and society. At first, Haver C. Currie published an article dealing with the relationship between speech and social status, and with the beginning of the 1960s many articles and studies appeared that addressed the characteristics of language and called for the inclusion of social factors in its analysis. Harris called for the study of the effect of social and professional activity on linguistic style, and Benjamin Lee Whorf also emphasized that a given linguistic model is related to cultural and societal models¹⁹. This was expressed through his joint work with Edward Sapir (Linguistics and Anthropology), in which they studied the language of the American Hopi tribe. Since the members of this tribe spoke and knew only their own language, they could not grasp the meaning of the concept of time or the concept of space, lacking the general intuition for these two concepts. This confirms that our representation and perception of the world is through the mother tongue.

All of these academic research works and others had as their goal the social organization of linguistic behavior. This is what can be called sociolinguistics, where it can be defined as the study of language in its relationship with society. This field of knowledge became recognized as a branch of the social sciences, with its own subject matter and fields of study²⁰.

The end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, as we have mentioned earlier, witnessed a great flourishing of studies concerned with researching the relationship between language and society. But this does not deny the existence of an older intellectual heritage concerned with studying the relationship between word meanings and prevailing cultures.

However, the research of the 1960s can be said to have been distinguished by seriousness in addressing this relationship and took on a scientific direction, thus establishing what became known as sociolinguistics, which enabled the uncovering of much that had been obscure regarding the nature of language and the nature of society. Since its beginning, sociolinguistics has been concerned with the functions that language performs in social institutions and with all the mechanisms that work to organize society. What made this research into the relationship between language and social classes grow and develop was the conception that the language used in any society is the best way for social observation and distinction. Thus, the essence of sociolinguistic research can be said to consist in²¹:

— It is concerned with observing the dimensions of the relationship and its various forms as they appear in the multiplicity of linguistic levels in one society, or in the multiplicity of languages and dialects, and identifying the communities that use them, as linguistic plurality has always been at the core of linguists' interest, and the goals and methods in approaching this plurality have varied.

— Interest in language planning: The American linguist Uriel Weinreich was the first to use the term in a seminar at Columbia University in 1957, but Einar Haugen was the one who introduced it into the literature of sociolinguistics in 1959, through a study he carried out on the intervention undertaken by the Norwegian government to establish a linguistic identity after centuries of Danish dominance. He defined it in that article as encompassing all activities related to preparing a guide on grammar rules or a linguistic lexicon that determines the writing system and the choice of official languages. Over time, the uses of the term expanded to include all activities related to the development of language, such as planning to change the linguistic behavior of a group of individuals, and language planning linked to political and administrative activities to solve all linguistic problems in society. It

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— also includes systematic activities aimed at organizing and developing existing languages or creating new ones²².

— Interest in what is known as social variation, which appears clearly in the linguistic community and records the linguistic differences existing among different social classes. Mario Pei sees it as an established fact that language changes according to the class that speaks it. Some linguistics researchers in Britain declared that there are two kinds of language: one limited to the upper class and not extending to the lower classes, while the other is used only by members of the lower class²³. The linguistic plurality characterizing American society, imposed by the abundance of foreign communities, contributed to the spread of studies related to sociolinguistics. William Labov shows through his study of the speech of New York City that the different pronunciations of speakers are distributed in a pattern that reflects social class differences. This is also evident in the works of the American linguist Basil Bernstein on language and social classes, where through his book *Language and Social Classes: Linguistic Social Codes and Social Control*, he opened the way for the sociological study of language and education. He proposed the idea of the linguistic code, affirming the existence of two opposing social linguistic codes: middle-class children develop exploratory and explanatory use (elaborated code)²⁴, while lower-class children develop more expressive and implicit linguistic use (restricted code). This means that the language of lower-class children is characterized by weakness and fragmentation, while the language of upper-class children is characterized by expansion. From these observations, Bernstein concluded that children of modest social strata under the influence of the restricted code experience cognitive deficiencies and higher rates of academic failure.

— It is concerned with the study of word meanings and the determination of their significations through their social context. This is confirmed by the research of Malinowski

through his effort to show the cultural framework, or what he called the context of situation, for understanding the linguistic text. This new concept of the context of situation had a great impact on the English linguist John Rupert Firth²⁵, developer of contextual theory. The American sociologist William Labov is considered one of the most important researchers affirming the social nature of language, and he insists that language cannot in any way be separated from its essential social component, opposing thus Noam Chomsky's view that language belongs to the individual. In this way, he categorically denies the possibility of separating the sociology of language from linguistics, such that any attempt to study the structure of language or its development, whatever its nature—phonetic, grammatical, semantic, or semiotic—will only be a study originating from within the social context established by the linguistic community that adopts it for communication in its daily life²⁶.

— It is concerned with the study of the social factors governing linguistic usages among individuals, such as the relationships determined between participants in conversation, the style of address, the social status of each, the social roles they perform, the purpose and subject of the conversation, the etiquette of speech, and so forth. This is what was known in linguistic literature by the French linguist Jean Louis Calvet as urban sociolinguistics, or the linguistics of the city, as explained in his book *City Voices, Urban Sociolinguistics*. This type of linguistics stems from a basic hypothesis that linguistic diversity, change, and variation are primarily due to social changes. This means linking the speaker to the utterance context, in terms of placing the speaker within a social category that determines his nature, profession, and even age, which in turn define the nature of both speaker and listener. Here the goal of sociolinguistics becomes to determine the temporal and spatial conditions of utterance that control the process of communication between speaker and hearer.

Thus, it becomes clear to us that sociolinguistics devotes special attention to the study of linguistic characteristics derived from the influence of social and professional activity on

linguistic style and the practice of such activity, whether literary, journalistic, or craft-related. This is clearly evident in the works of Harris. It also studies linguistic diversity in relation to work situations, as indicated in Malinowski's works, and the degree to which linguistic models are connected to cultural models, as demonstrated in Whorf's research, and other works and studies that all converge on the extent to which changes in social structure influence changes in linguistic structure and its development²⁷.

6.CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, we can acknowledge that between language and society there is a relationship of existence, such that it is impossible to conceive of the existence of a society without language, nor the existence of language except within a social system. This relationship between language and society reveals a reality, namely that linguistic phenomena are directly influenced by social phenomena. For this reason, we find that what distinguishes language—its origin and development, its division into families, and its changes in sounds, meanings, and words—can only be understood in light of social analysis. On the other hand, all social research and the analysis of various phenomena cannot be carried out except within the framework of linguistic studies, on the grounds that language itself is a social phenomenon, imposing its presence in all other social phenomena.

Thus, language has ceased to be merely a tool through which communication and understanding among members of society is achieved, but has become a social influence, if not a link in the chain of its activities, responding to all the changes and transformations affecting its institutions. This, in turn, has contributed to the development of the linguistic system in its vocabulary and structures.

This dual relationship linking language and society, and making them inseparably connected, imposes two paths for studying and analyzing it: a sociological path embodied in

the sociology of language, and a linguistic one, or what is called sociolinguistics. The sociology of language dissects language as a social phenomenon that influences the system of society, its bodies and institutions, and contributes to social dynamism. Meanwhile, the function of sociolinguistic studies is to deconstruct the linguistic structure and observe all the changes that occur in language as a result of its social interaction. Or, as Sabri Ibrahim Al-Sayyid sees it, sociolinguistics is the study of language with regard to society, whereas the sociology of language is the study of society with regard to language.

David Hudson has pointed out that despite this distinction between them, it is only a superficial one, stemming from the importance given by the researcher either to language or to society. In fact, there is a great degree of overlap between these two sciences, due to the interrelation of their elements, and sometimes it may even be pointless to attempt to separate them because of the intertwining of the elements forming their subject matter²⁸.

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