

SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF ENGLISH: A LITERATURE REVIEW

İngilizce Sosyolinguistiği: Bir Edebiyat Değerlendirmesi



Sercan ALABAY*

ABSTRACT

It is a well-known fact that language is a vehicle for people to communicate with each other. It is obvious that languages change because of a number of reasons. One of those reasons is social factors. In a community or in a society, there are many different people with many different backgrounds. Where they come from, where they work and the other reasons will affect their use of language. There is a branch of linguistics that deals with these social variations and it is called "sociolinguistics". According to another description of sociolinguistics, it is a term which is used for the study of the relationship between language and society. Sociolinguistics sees language as a varied system that changes from speaker to speaker, not a monolithic one. So it studies all of these psychological, demographic, and other social perspectives. Thus, this article aims to have a look at these perspectives.

Keywords: Sociolinguistique, linguistique, French, English.

ÖZET

Dilin insanların birbirleriyle iletişim kurmaları için bir araç olduğu bilinen bir gerçektir. Dillerin bir dizi nedenden dolayı değiştiği açıktır. Bu nedenlerden biri sosyal faktörlerdir. Bir toplulukta veya bir toplumda, birçok farklı geçmişe sahip birçok farklı insan vardır. Nereden geldikleri, nerede çalıştıkları ve diğer nedenler dil kullanımlarını etkileyecektir. Dilbilimin bu sosyal varyasyonlarla ilgilenen bir dalı vardır ve buna "sosyodilbilim" denir. Sosyodilbilimin başka bir tanımına göre, "dil ve toplum arasındaki ilişkiyi araştırmak için kullanılan bir terimdir" (Yule, 2006). Sosyodilbilim, dili monolitik değil, konuşmacıdan konuşmacıya değişen çeşitli bir sistem olarak görür. Bu yüzden tüm bu psikolojik, demografik ve diğer sosyal bakış açılarını inceler. Dolayısıyla bu çalışma, bu bakış açılarına bir göz atmayı amaçlamaktadır.

INTRODUCTION

1. Sociolinguistics Variation in English

As many other languages, English has experienced a lot of changes and these changes were due to some variations. These can be classified these in two categories and these categories are;

-Intralingual variation

-Interlingual variation

"Intralingual variation" stands for the variations that are found in language itself. "Interlingual variation" is the variation that occurs as a result of interaction of English with other languages.

It is suggested to understand the intralingual variation firstly. This consists of "variables such as demographic, psychological, social and continental diversity" (Çelik,2009).

2. Demography

Age and Gender

It is clear that language use varies from adults to children, men to women. This is the case not only for English but for Turkish and French as well, and this is valid for all languages in the world. If we consider the "age factor" in the first place, we should identify three main categories : "Children", "Teenagers" and "Adults" . Children are the kids who are between the ages of 0 and 11 or 12 when they experience puberty. Teenagers are between the ages of 12 and 18, and the other ones are called as adults.

It is possible to hear different language use in my daily life in Turkish. For example, elder people mostly use the word " talebe" in Turkish nstead of "öğrenci" that means "student" , or he uses "imtihan" for "sınav" that is "exam" in English. The similar examples can be given for English. Teens use "laters" instead of "see you later", "bro" for "friend" , "aight" for "alright" , "peeps" for "people" and "hot-car" for "stolen car" (Çelik,2009). These differences in language usage that result from gender will be summarised below.

- Gender: The other variable about demography that effect language is gender. Women and men use language in different ways. Especially use of vocabulary changes from

men to women. In Turkish we can see this variation very clearly, and this is same for English. According to the study done by Leet-Pregrini(1980) and Lakoff(1975); women swear less while men swear more, women propose while men order, women speak more politely while men speak less politely, women change the topic too often but men do not and women react a comment while men initiate a comment. These are some of the examples for gender variable.

- Sexist Usage vs. Gender Neutral Usage: English society, as well as Turkish society and a number of other societies, was a male-dominant one. This situation affected language use. Some lexical and grammatical usages were affected, too. For example “chairman”, “mankind”, “manhood”, “fireman”, etc. Instead of these words “chairperson”, “humankind”, “adulthood” and “fire fighter” can be used in English (Çelik,2009).In Turkish, we use “insanoğlu” for humans, “oğul” for kids. I think we should also change this usage.

Also, there is one main problematic usage and it is the usage of 3rd person singular pronouns. In English, in some grammatical structures, “he” is used for expressing unknown pronouns. When referring to “anybody”, “anyone”, “everybody” and so on, “he” is used. But for gender-neutral usage , using “they” instead of “he” is offered. Some examples for this can be :

- Each student must complete his assessment by Friday
Students must complete their assessment by Friday
and

- One man’s poison is another man’s poison
What is food to one is poison to another (University College Cork Committee,1994).

After talking about these points, it is recommended to discuss linguistics of socio-psychology.

3. Linguistics of Socio-Psychology:

- Attitudes towards Linguistic Diversity: The attitudes that speaker and listener in a communication is very important when it comes to linguistic diversity. Building up sincere and strong relationships can depend on both speaker and listener’s behaviours. These behaviours make up linguistic attitudes. These attitudes can be divided into three groups and these are “linguistic convergence(accommodation)”, “linguistic divergence” and “hypercorrection”. “Linguistic convergence” occurs when the speakers change their vocabulary, grammatical usage to comply and cooperate with the other speakers in the community. Another description is “it is our ability to modify our speech style toward the perceived style of the person(s) we’re talking to”(Yule,2006). In my opinion, for “linguistic divergence”, it is possible to say that situation is vice versa. For divergence, the speakers refuse to change or

adapt their vocabulary or grammar to the people around them. It can sometimes be considered as an impolite behaviour, though.

It is known that “hypercorrection” is speakers’ correction of their language use as appropriate to the context. Another description for hypercorrection is “being so concerned with getting the grammar right that you get it wrong.”(Lynch,2008). This occurs mostly for pronunciation differences.

4. Social Variation:

Social variation is a very important topic to cover in sociolinguistics. Because it is obvious that social variation is like “basis” of sociolinguistics. We can classify this topic by looking at style, varieties, standard, dialect, jargon, mode and so on.

- Style: The language that is used changes depending on contextual factors. Listener, context, subject and even purpose affect the language. There are three styles for language usage. These are “formal”, “casual” and “intimate”. These styles affect our grammar structures, lexical choices and even intonation. In communication, identifying our style in accordance with context is of great importance. Because it makes communication polite or impolite. I can give some examples for style differences. For “mother”, “mum” is used as casual one and “mummy” as intimate one. In Turkish, we say “N’aber?” as intimate, “ Nasılsın?” as casual, and “Nasılsınız?” as formal one.

- Appropriate Language: As mentioned above, using appropriate language in appropriate context is very important in communication. So, while communicating, people should be careful with the language they use. There are two types of language suggested by Çelik. These are; “Public Language (Polite)” and “Slang (Argot)”. Public language, as it can be understood from its name, it is the language that is publicly accepted, polite and mostly formal. But “slang” is different. It is the language that can be accepted only certain contexts such as between very close friends, members of group, etc. It is informal and not so polite, and the perception of slang usage can differ as a result of generation gap. Elder people can see the way teenagers speak as impolite and slang. Here are some examples for slang use in English:

What’s up, dude? for How are you?

Are you pissed? for Are you upset?

To describe madness; “loony, nuts, psycho”, to describe drunkenness; “sloshed, plastered, stewed, looped, trashed, smashed” are used.

Vulgar and Taboo: These two terms should be mentioned while discussing the subject of “slang”. Because if we have a closer look to the slang language, it is quite possible for us to encounter these two terms. “Vulgar” is

used to describe the four-letter, dirty and obscene words. These words are acceptable to some extent. Using them can be problematic. While “taboo” words are totally banned. Because these words can harm the listener emotionally.

5. Dialectal Variation:

It is high time to have a look at dialectal variations in English language. Dialect is a language variety which shows obvious differences which result from geographical, educational, ethnic and socioeconomic background of speakers. From another point of view, it is “any regional, social or ethnic variety of a language”(Eble,2005).

The most important thing about dialects is that they do not hinder the communication between two interlocutors of same language. Dialectal differences can be about pronunciation, lexical items and grammatical structure. However, the differences that result from just pronunciation is mostly called as “accent”.

There are three main dialectal variations. These are “regional dialects and accents”, “socioeconomic dialects” and “ethnic dialects”.

- **Regional Dialects and Accents:** These dialects and accents are the ones in Great Britain and United States. Here are some examples for dialects of English both in UK and USA.

-British English:

Received Pronunciation-RP (Standard Dialect)

English of England (Northern, Yorkshire, Birmingham, Southern, etc.)

Scottish English

Irish English

Welsh English

-American English:

Midwestern/General American (Standard Dialect)

Boston English

California English

New York English (Çelik,2009)

- **Socioeconomic Dialects:** This dialectal variation results from the class distinction due to economic reasons. There are four economic classes in England. These are Royal Class (The Royal Family, members of the House of Lords, the Dukes), Upper Class(business people, company executives, etc), Upper Middle Class(government workers, the educated, etc) and Lower Class(labourers, blue collar workers, etc) (Çelik,2009). Between these classes , language use differs. For example, the pronunciation of postvocalic /r/ differs between classes. In New York, %32 of upper middle class people pronounce it but only %12 of upper working class pronounce it(Yule,2006).Another pronunciation difference is dropping [h], as in “I’m ‘ungry I could eat a ‘orse”(Yule,2006)

- **Ethnic Dialects:** These dialects are the ones that occur

when the speakers in regional area reflect their mother tongue in terms of pronunciation and morphology while speaking English. Some examples of these dialects are Black English (by Afro-American people), Chicano English (by Spanish-speaking Mexicans) and German English (by German immigrants in Pennsylvania).

- **Standard Dialects vs. Nonstandard Dialects:** Having so many different dialects in a language can sometimes cause problems. So, in order to organize the smooth communication in the areas of government, education, law, broadcasting and so on, there should be standardized usage of language. This dialect includes standard pronunciation and grammar usages. And this standard dialect is defined according to the choices of elite or ruling class.

The standard dialects of English should be clarified. In UK, it is Received Pronunciation (RP); in USA, it is General American (GA). For Turkish, it is “Istanbul dialect” that is accepted as the standard dialect. Lastly, for French it is “Parisien accent”. To keep in mind, it is important that in spite of these dialectal variations speakers of the same language can understand each other with the help of written code, alphabet.

- **Jargon (Register):** The term “jargon” refers to the language which is understandable only to the people who deal with that profession to which the lexemes belong. Jargon is also seen as technical language. Some examples are; “onomatopoeia, morpheme, hat trick, grand slam, stat” etc.

- **Mode:** This term refers to the way or medium we use to communicate. There are two ways to communicate. One of them is Oral (speaking) and the other one is Written (text). It is quite interesting that sometimes, in some languages these two media can show great differences, and sometimes people cannot understand one of these media that leads to “diglossia”.

6. Continental Variation:

English is spoken in a very large scope. It is spoken from USA to Pakistan, from Canada to Australia. It is clear that there are great geographical distances between these countries. Because of this fact, language varies in terms of phonology, vocabulary and syntax. All of these countries were invaded by British armies in the history, so they spread English to these places. But, of course, the “Englishes” that were spoken in these countries did not stay same with the one that was spoken in England. And as a result, there are different continental dialects. Some of these dialects are; British English, American English, Canadian English, Australian English and New Zealand English. The most important thing for us to keep in our minds’ is that Received Pronunciation which is spoken in the southeast of England and which is a variety of British

English is taught to ones who want to learn English as second language.

7. Dialect vs. Language:

So far, this manuscript discussed what the dialects of English language and what kind of reasons cause these different dialects. But sometimes, for some people, differentiating language and dialect is difficult or problematic. Thus, now it is time to talk about what is language and what is dialect.

While discussing what is language and what is dialect, some questions will come to our minds. Some of these questions can be “When will a dialect leave to be a part of language?”, “When does it turn out to be a language?” and “When does a new language occur?”. As suggested by Çelik(2009), three aspects can be used to answer these questions and these are; intelligibility, historical relationships and political concerns.

Firstly, intelligibility will be discussed. As mentioned in the previous topics, dialects do not hinder the communication between the speakers of same language. There can be some differences in terms of language use, but they always understand each other without any difficulties. But when the interlocutors of the same language do not understand each other, here a new language is born and a dialect becomes a new language.

Sometimes the societies who spoke the same language in the past decided to change their language when they gained their independence. Even as orally they could understand each other and even they used the same language, they used different alphabets to represent the same language.

An example for this situation can be the Pakistan and India. They were both the colonies of British armies. When they gained their independence, they decided to use different alphabets and named their languages differently as Urdu and Hindi. But still the speakers of these two languages can understand each other easily. This situation is called as “mutual intelligibility”. Some examples for mutual intelligibility are Uzbek and Uygur, Bosnian and Slovenian, Belarusian and Ukrainian (Çelik, 2009). But sometimes just the speakers of one language can understand the speakers of other language, not vice versa. And this is called as “one-way intelligibility”.

8. Language Contact:

Today we live in technological era. It is very possible for us to come across with the speakers of other languages on the net. If we are not bilingual, if we do not know the language of the person whom we are talking to or the person does not know our language, then we should find another solution to be able to communicate. These solutions can be “using a third language that we and the

other interlocutor both know”, “mixing two languages’ vocabulary, morphology and syntax” and “using two languages for different set of purposes”. These language usages’ names are respectively “lingua franca”, “pidgin” and “code-switching”. I will talk about each one of them.

- **Lingua Franca:** Lingua franca is the language which is used between the interlocutors of two different languages to communicate. This term was used by Italians firstly. It means “Frankish tongue” which refers to languages of Western Europe (Çelik,2009). It was used for trading purposes. Today English is lingua franca. Because wherever you go, whoever you want to speak, you can use English to communicate.

- **English as an International Language:** As mentioned previously that English is spoken in a very large scope across continents. The speakers of English in these continents have different demographical characteristics, different purposes to use English and English has different developmental processes. When looking at these differences, English can be divided into three groups: Inner Circle where English is first language of speakers (USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand), Outer Circle where English is second language of the speakers (India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Singapore) and Expanding Circle where English is a foreign language to learn for speakers (Turkey, Japan, China, Germany).

- **Pidgin and Creole:** These two terms are used to define new languages that have been born as a result of two interlocutors of two different languages’ effort to be able to communicate. Pidgin is “nobody’s native language; may arise when two speakers of different languages with no common language try to have a makeshift conversation”(Schiffman ,1997). It occurs when both of the speakers do not understand each other’s first language and they used words from both languages, mix morphology and syntax and use the simplest sounds from both languages. Creole is used for the “pidgin” languages when they become the mother tongue of a speaker .

- **Code-Switching:** This term is used for using two languages by mixing them in terms of structures or vocabulary items in succession. It happens in bilingualism and in oral form. An example for this can be the ones that are given by Çelik. “Mom, your friend Alev, geldi. She is at the door!”

“Code-mixing” is another term to be discussed here. This term is used to define the using two languages but when using them, building up sentences with one language’s structure and other language’s words or expressions. Here is an example which is a mix of Hindu and English:“ Yeh train ka time change ho gaya hai kya”(Ghosh,2009).

Conclusion:

Throughout this manuscript, the effects of sociolinguistic variations on languages and dialects have been discussed. It is clear that these variations have great importance in language teaching and language learning processes. Using appropriate lexical items in contexts, knowing how to be polite while talking to people whose grammatical and phonological choices are different from us or knowing how to adopt our speech to the people who speak with standard dialect, being able to handle the problems that can result from speaking different languages from the people who we are talking to are really very important to be communicatively competent in a language. So as “prospective” teachers, “present” language learners, and linguistics should be aware of these facts and learn language by concerning them or teach language to our students by thinking about these variations

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Çelik,M.(2009).Sociolinguistics: Study of language in society. Linguistics.(pp.273-305).2009.

Eble,C. (2005).What is Sociolinguistics?. <http://www.pbs.org/speak/speech/sociolinguistics/sociolinguistics/summary/>

Ghosh,M.(2009). Is Code Mixing & Code Switching A Boon Or A Bane?. Retrieved February,18, 2009.<http://mousumi-randomideas.blogspot.com/2009/02/is-code-mixing-code-switching-boon-or.html>

Lakoff, R.(1975).Language and woman's place. New York:Harper Colophon books.

Leet-Peregrini, H.M.(1980). Conversational dominance as a function of gender and expertise. In H. Giles, W.P. Robinson, and P.M. Smith(Eds.), Language: Social psychological perspectives.Oxford:Pergamon.97-104.

Lynch, J.(2008). Guide to Grammar and Style. Canada: Focus Publishing.

Schiffman, H.(1997). Pidgin and Creole Language. <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~haroldfs/messeas/handouts/pjcreol/node1.html>

University College Cork.(1994). Guide.

Yule, G. (2006). Language and social variation. The Study of Language. New York: Cambridge University Press.