**Lesson 01: Meaning of Sociolinguistics**

**Introduction:**

Sociolinguistics, more than any other branch of linguistics, has in recent years been simultaneously pulled in several different directions. Most of its practitioners are primarily concerned with the theoretical question of how to explain the linguistic variation which society manifests, and with the methodological question of how to explore it. But, because their field encounters the social implications and repercussions of language use much more immediately than other branches of linguistics, sociolinguists have regularly found themselves called upon to participate in language decision-making: evaluating or planning linguistic proposals related to a wide range of local or international issues. Some sociolinguists have avoided the publicity which often ensues from such encounters, preferring that their research be directed towards the publication of statements along conventional academic lines. [[1]](#footnote-2)

Others have willingly become involved in social encounter, feeling that the application of their skills in the public domain is a responsible and desirable step. Yet others have taken this step with reluctance, believing that the application of sociolinguistic knowledge in this domain is premature, given the limited theoretical and empirical development of the subject to date.[[2]](#footnote-3)

**1-Definition of Sociolinguistics:**

Sociolinguistics is the study of language use within or among groups of speakers.

What are groups? ‘Group’ is a difficult concept to define but one we must try to grasp. For our purposes, a group must have at least two members but there is really no upper limit to group membership. People can group together for one or more reasons: social, religious, political, cultural, familial, vocational, avocational, etc. The group may be temporary or quasi-permanent and the purposes of its members may change, i.e., its raison d’être. A group is also more than its members for they may come and go. They may also belong to other groups and may or may not meet face-to-face. The organization of the group may be tight or loose and the importance of group membership is likely to vary among individuals within the group, being extemely important to some and of little consequence to others. An individual’s feelings of identity are closely related to that person’s feelings about groups in which he or she is a member, feels strong (or weak) commitment (or rejection), and finds some kind of success (or

failure). [[3]](#footnote-4)

We must also be aware that the groups we refer to in various research studies are groups we have created for the purposes of our research using this or that set of factors. They are useful and necessary constructs but we would be unwise to forget that each such group comprises a set of unique individuals each with a complex identity (or, better still, identities). Consequently, we must be careful in drawing conclusions about individuals on the basis of observations we make about groups. To say of a member of such a group that he or she will always exhibit a certain characteristic behavior is to offer a stereotype. Individuals can surprise us in many ways.

The kind of group that sociolinguists have generally attempted to study is called the speech community.For purely theoretical purposes, some linguists have hypothesized the existence of an ‘ideal’ speech community. This is actually what Chomsky proposes, his ‘completely homogeneous speech community’ . However, such a speech community cannot be our concern: it is a theoretical construct employed for a narrow purpose. Our speech communities, whatever they are, exist in a ‘real’ world. Consequently, we must try to find some alternative view of speech community, one helpful to investigations of language in society rather than necessitated by abstract linguistic theorizing.[[4]](#footnote-5)

A term sociolinguistics is a derivational word. Two words that form it are sociology and linguistics. Sociology refers to a science of society; and linguistics refers to a science of language. A study of language from the perspective of society may be thought as linguistics plus sociology. Some investigators have found it to introduce a distinction between sociolinguistics and sociology of language. Some others regard sociolinguistics is often referred as the sociology of language. Sociolinguistics is defined as: The study that is concerned with the relationship between language and the context in which it is used. In other words, it studies the relationship between language and society. It explains we people speak differently in different social contexts. It discusses the social functions of language and the ways it is used to convey social meaning. [[5]](#footnote-6)

All of the topics provides a lot of information about the language works, as well as about the social relationships in a community, and the way people signal aspects of their social identity through their language Sociolinguistics is “the study that is concerned with the interaction of language and setting”. It is the study that is concerned with investigating the relationship between language and society with the goal of a better understanding of the structure of language and of how languages function in communication.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Sociolinguistics is a developing branch of linguistics and sociology which investigates the individual and social variation of language. Just

as regional variation of language can give a lot of information about the place the speaker is from, social variation tells about the roles performed by a given speaker within one community, or country. Sociolinguistics is also a branch of sociology in that it reveals the relationship between language use and the social basis for such use. Sociolinguistics differs from sociology of language in that the focus of sociolinguistics is the effect of the society on the language, while the latter's focus is on the language's effect on the society. Sociolinguistics is a practical, scientific discipline which researches into the language that is actually used, either by native speakers or foreigners, in order to formulate theories about language change. There are numerous factors influencing the way people speak which are investigated by sociolinguistics [[7]](#footnote-8)

Different scholars attempt to define sociolinguistics. The various definitions reveal that sociolinguistics investigates “why”, “how” and “where” human beings use language. Bosede Sotiloye (1992) gives an elaborative definition of sociolinguistics:

Sociolinguistics is a field of study which relates societal problems to linguistic/language problems. It answers the question: how do our social and cultural backgrounds affect our use of language? It is a branch of linguistics which tries to answer questions like who says what to whom, when, where how and why? One of the major aims of sociolinguistics is the study of the use of language in its social and cultural contexts. It studies the norms of the society at large and examines how the individual exploits his awareness of the society’s norms in order to achieve particular effects. [[8]](#footnote-9)

Sociolinguistics is about speech community. Nigeria is an example of a large speech community which accommodates language varieties. Due to the concept of socialization, which is inevitable in a speech community, the individuals therein can shift from being monolinguals to becoming bilinguals or multilinguals. According to Abiodun Sofunke (1992), “sociolinguistics … is another major area of applied linguistics. The sociolinguistic aspect of applied linguistics is concerned with issues which indicate the interaction between language and society. Society is in general divided along class and occupational lines, these divisions being in most cases reflected in language. The elucidation of the nature and use of these socially stratified speech forms is the business of sociolinguistics.” Indeed, an incisive overview of sociolinguistics presupposes examining critical notions and phenomena in the literature.[[9]](#footnote-10)

1. David Crystal : **Applied Sociolinguistics**, ACADEMIC PRESS, INC., 1984, P01 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. David Crystal : **Applied Sociolinguistics**, ACADEMIC PRESS, INC., 1984, P01 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ronald Wardhaugh :**An Introduction to** Sociolinguistics, BLACKWELL PUBLISHING, FIFTH EDITION, 2006 ,P119, 120 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ronald Wardhaugh :**An Introduction to** Sociolinguistics, BLACKWELL PUBLISHING, FIFTH EDITION, 2006 ,P119, 120 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. **BUKU AJAR**: **SOCIOLINGUISTICS**, Riinawati, M.Pd.,P03 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. **BUKU AJAR**: **SOCIOLINGUISTICS**, Riinawati, M.Pd.,P03 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Anthony C. Oha et all, :**COURSE TITLE:INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLINGUISTICS**  , NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA , 2010, P03 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. **Acheoah John Emike** et all: **Introducing Sociolinguistics** ,

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   P37 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. **Acheoah John Emike** et all: **Introducing Sociolinguistics** ,

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