I
Introduction

1.1 Sociolinguistics

1.1.1 A description

We can define sociolinguistics as *the study of language in relation to society*, and this is how we shall be taking the term in this book. Sociolinguistics has become a recognised part of most courses at university level on 'linguistics' or 'language', and is indeed one of the main growth points in the study of language, from the point of view of both teaching and research. There are now major English-language journals devoted to research publications (*Language in Society*, *Language Variation and Change* and *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*) and a number of introductory textbooks, apart from the present one. Most of the growth in sociolinguistics has taken place since the late 1960s. This is not meant to imply that the study of language in relation to society is an invention of the 1960s – on the contrary, there is a long tradition in the study of dialects and in the general study of the relations between word-meaning and culture, both of which count as sociolinguistics by our definition. What is new is the *widespread* interest in sociolinguistics and the realisation that it can throw much light both on the nature of language and on the nature of society.

Like other subjects, sociolinguistics is partly empirical and partly theoretical – partly a matter of going out and amassing bodies of fact and partly of sitting back and thinking. The 'armchair' approach to sociolinguistics can be fairly productive, whether it is based on facts collected in a systematic way as part of research or simply on one's own experience. In particular, it allows the beginnings of an analytical framework to be worked out, containing terms such as LANGUAGE (a body of knowledge or rules), SPEECH (actual utterances), SPEAKER, ADDRESSEE, TOPIC and so on. And of course personal experience is a rich source of information on language in relation to society. However, it will soon become clear that the armchair approach is dangerous for two reasons if it is applied to personal experience alone. First, we may be seriously wrong in the way in which we interpret our own experience, since

1

most of us are not consciously aware of the vast range of variations in speech which we hear, and react to, in our everyday lives. And secondly, personal experience is a very limited base from which to generalise about language in society, since it does not take account of all the other societies where things are arranged very differently.

However, the reason why interest in sociolinguistics has grown so rapidly over the last decades is not because of the achievements in armchair theorising but because of the empirical discoveries made in the course of systematic research projects. Some of this research has taken place in 'exotic' communities, and this has produced facts which many readers of this book will find stimulating because they are so unexpectedly different from the kind of society which they already know. For instance, British people are generally surprised (and interested) to hear that there are societies where one's parents *must not* have the same mother-tongue (see below, 1.2.2). Other research projects, however, have been in the kind of complex, urban industrial society to which most readers will be accustomed, and this research too has provided some surprises, such as the discovery that differences between social classes are as clearly reflected in speech in America as they are in Britain, although the United States has an image of being much less class-conscious (the evidence for this claim will be discussed in chapter 5, especially 5.2.2).

It is important to recognise that much of the interest in sociolinguistics has come from people (such as educationalists) who have a *practical* concern for language, rather than a desire simply to understand better how this small area of the universe works. In particular, it became possible in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s to fund relatively large-scale research projects connected with the speech of underprivileged groups, on the grounds that the findings would make possible a more satisfactory educational policy. Chapter 6 is largely devoted to the issues raised in and by this research, but the research reported in chapter 5 would probably not have been possible in a different social climate, and the same may also be true of that reported in chapter 4, though perhaps to a lesser extent.

1.1.2 Sociolinguistics and linguistics

Throughout this book I shall refer to sociolinguists and linguists as separate people, but of course there are many sociolinguists who would also call themselves linguists, as well as the large number whose background is in sociology, anthropology or social psychology. The question of who is a sociolinguist and who is not, is neither interesting nor important; but it is important to ask whether there is a difference between sociolinguistics and linguistics and, if so, what it is. A widely held view is that there is such a difference, and that

linguistics differs from sociolinguistics in taking account only of the *structure* of language, to the exclusion of the social contexts in which it is learned and used. The task of linguistics, according to this view, is to work out 'the rules of language X', after which sociolinguists may enter the scene and study any points at which these rules make contact with society – such as where alternative ways of expressing the same thing are chosen by different social groups. This view is typical of the whole 'structural' school of linguistics which has dominated twentieth-century linguistics, including transformational-generative linguistics (the variety developed since 1957 by Noam Chomsky).

However, not all students of language would accept this view. Some would argue that since speech is (obviously) social behaviour, to study it without reference to society would be like studying courtship behaviour without relating the behaviour of one partner to that of the other. There are two particularly good reasons for accepting this view. The first is that we cannot take the notion 'language X' for granted, since this in itself is a social notion in so far as it is defined in terms of a group of people who speak X. As we shall see in chapter 2, the problem is that this group will in all probability be defined, in a complete circle, as 'the group who speak X', especially when we focus on detailed differences between dialects and try to define 'dialect X' instead of 'language X'. This argument has been developed especially by William Labov (1972a: viii). The second reason is that speech has a social function, both as a means of communication and also as a way of identifying social groups, and to study speech without reference to the society which uses it is to exclude the possibility of finding social explanations for the structures that are used. This view is typical of J. R. Firth (for example, 1950, 1964), who founded the 'London School' of linguistics, and whose followers include Michael Halliday (1985) but it is still not widely accepted by linguists.

This book will argue that the findings of sociolinguistics are highly relevant to the theory of language structure – for instance, in relation to the nature of meaning (3.2) and of grammar (7.3). The view I prefer is therefore the second one, according to which linguistics ignores society at its peril. I point this out to warn the reader against possible bias, but it is also clear that there is a big difference between recognising that one *should* take account of the social dimension of language and knowing *how* to do so.

I shall refer throughout to 'sociolinguists' and 'linguists' as though they were separate individuals, but these terms can simply be used to reflect the relative amount of attention given to the social side of language, without taking the distinction too seriously. There is no denying that remarkable progress has been made in the study of language structure within the structural tradition, by people who would call themselves 'linguists' and not 'sociolinguists'.

Moreover, it is clear that some areas of language, such as those covered in this book, relate more directly to social factors than others do. Those who concentrate on other areas, taking a more or less 'asocial' approach, we can call 'linguists', as opposed to 'sociolinguists'. However, although I am not arguing that the topics covered in this book are the only ones which should be studied, I do believe that all who study language, from whatever point of view, should be much more aware of the social context of their subject matter than is often the case, and the topics covered here seem most relevant in this context.

1.1.3   Sociolinguistics and the sociology of language

I defined sociolinguistics as 'the study of language in relation to society', implying (intentionally) that sociolinguistics is part of the study of language. Thus, the value of sociolinguistics is the light which it throws on the nature of language in general, or on the characteristics of some particular language. As we might expect, students of society have found that facts about language can illuminate their understanding – after all, it is hard to think of any characteristic of a society which is as distinctive as its language, or as important for its functioning. 'The study of society in relation to language' (the converse of our definition of sociolinguistics) defines what is generally called THE SOCIOLOGY OF LANGUAGE.

The difference between sociolinguistics and the sociology of language is very much one of emphasis, according to whether the investigator is more interested in language or society, and also according to whether they have more skill in analysing linguistic or social structures. There is a very large area of overlap between the two and its seems pointless to try to divide the disciplines more clearly than at present. Much of what follows in this book could equally well have been written in a textbook on the sociology of language. On the other hand, there are some issues which such a textbook ought to include which this one will not, notably most of what is called 'macro' sociology of language, dealing with the relations between society and languages as wholes. This is an important area of research from the point of view of sociology (and politics), since it raises issues such as the effects of multilingualism on economic development and the possible language policies a government may adopt. However, such 'macro' studies generally throw less light on the nature of language than the more 'micro' ones described in this book, because the notion of 'language X' is usually left unanalysed. (There is a good discussion of the relations between sociolinguistics and the sociology of language in the introduction to Trudgill 1978.) For more information on the sociology of language, see Gibbons 1992 (a brief overview) and Fasold 1984 (the main textbook).

4