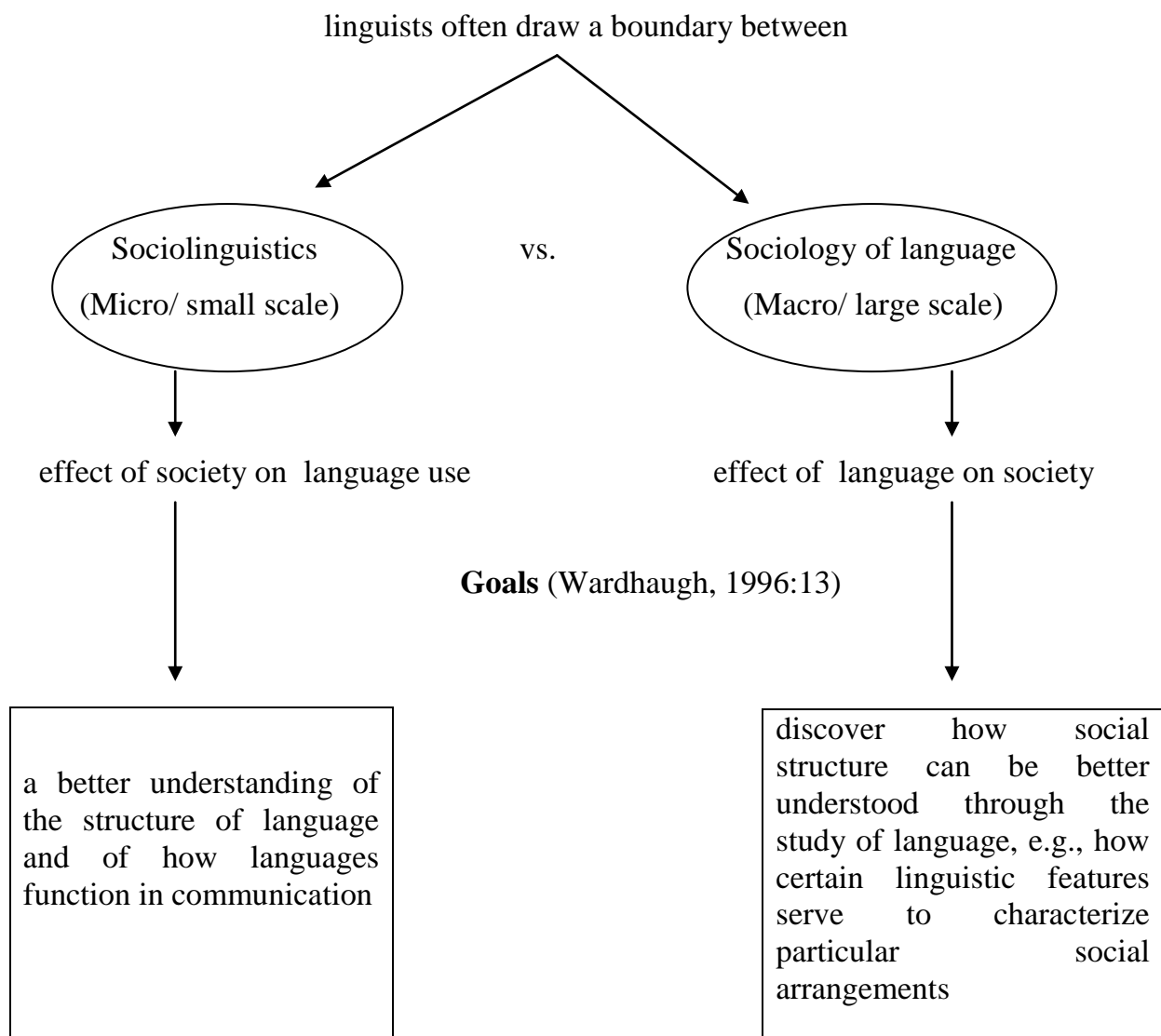


1.1 Introduction to Sociolinguistics: Definition/Emergence/Scope

Literature on sociolinguistics exhibits a variety of definitions. Gumperz (1971:223), a leading authority in the field, states that “sociolinguistics is an attempt to find correlations between social structure and linguistic structure and to observe any changes that occur”. Trudgill (2000:32) also provides a widely cited definition arguing that sociolinguistics covers “the study of the effect of any and all aspects of society, including cultural norms, expectations, and context on the way language is used”. In a simplistic way, sociolinguistics refers to the study of the correlation between language and society.



Sociolinguistics emerged in the second half of the 20th century. The main figures contributing to its emergence are William Labov in the United States and Basil Bernstein in Britain¹. The four other (American) significant founders are: Dell Hymes; John Gumperz, , Charles Albert Ferguson and Joshua Fishman.

Sociolinguistics draws from, but also informs, various disciplines, including linguistics, sociology, dialectology, anthropology, psychology, etc. Koerner (1991:65) observes that “sociolinguistics has its roots in dialectology, historical linguistics, and language contact with considerable influence from sociology and psychology” (in Tagliamonte, 2012:1). Being as such, it grew “into an exceptionally broad field” (Tagliamonte, 2012:1). Therefore, sociolinguistics necessarily encompasses a wide area of research which “can be confusing if you are coming new to the field” (Meyerhoff, 2006:1)

Sociolinguistics and:

Linguistic anthropology: the study of how language influences social life.

Sociolinguistics also has connections with culture through the study of language.

Dialectology: contributed enormously through early studies of regional variation.

Formal linguistics: considers the linguistic system deprived from the social context (asocial linguistics)

Sociology: considers society and social relationships without giving much importance to language. Sociolinguistics was then born to couple between formal linguistics and sociology through the study of the correlation between language and society; the role language plays in the formation of social groups and institutions.

Social psychology of language: Language attitudes and aspects of language usage in a face-to-face conversation

¹ Labov introduced the variability concept (variationist sociolinguistics and the quantitative study of language variation and change). Bernstein initiated the theory of language codes (restricted and elaborated codes)

Linguistics vs. Sociolinguistics

First of all, sociolinguistics is part of linguistics. It is, as Trudgill (1995:20) puts, “a relatively new sub-discipline within linguistics”. The main difference (which is also a source for other differences, including interest, methodology, etc), between linguistics and sociolinguistics is that the former segregates language from the social context where it is acquired/learned and used. The main figure holding such position is Chomsky. For Chomsky (1965), the task of the linguist is to characterize what speakers know about their language (competence) and not what they do with it (performance). The aim of Chomsky and his followers is to construct a theory of language that could account for the similarities across human languages (Universal Grammar). Chomsky (1965:3) observes that: “Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors.”

The fact that (theoretical) formal linguists studied language as a frozen system (closed system) urged other linguists to react against this linguistic orientation claiming that an **asocial** linguistics is “essentially incomplete” (Hudson, 1980:19). Butler (2005) notes that “[...] linguistic system is not self-contained, and so autonomous from external factors, but is shaped by them”. The essence for this is that language is the basic means of human communication and social relationships. As such, it is essential to study language in relation to its social context. Since it is agreed among linguists, including theoretical formal linguists, that language is composed of two facets (e.g. competence and performance), one would readily agree with Wardhaugh (1996:6), among many others, that, besides knowledge about language (i.e., competence), “an adequate theory of language must have something to say about the use of language” (i.e., performance)

It should be made clear that formal linguists do not deny language **use**; they only **neglect** it. Chomsky himself recognizes language use under the label ‘performance’. “For Chomsky, the existence of variation in language simply confuses,

diverting the linguists' attention from the wonderful abstract system that separate human language from other communication systems. For the sociolinguists, however, the most important verity is that language-any language- is full of systematic variation, variation that can only be accounted for by appealing, outside language, to socially relevant factors" (Spolsky, 1998:4). Hudson (1996:3) elegantly comments 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 another." Likewise, Spolsky (1998:4) confirms that "the search of the formal linguists [...] for an autonomous linguistics, with the goal of describing the idealized competence of an idealized monolingual in an idealized mono-variety speech community, is doomed to failure as was the earlier effort of structural linguists to account for structure without taking meaning into account"

Interest in the social dimension of language has given rise to sociolinguistics and subsequently pragmatics². In sum, sociolinguists identify language as an open system. In his comeback to Chomsky's linguistic theory, Hymes (1971:278) observes that "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless". For Hymes, a theory of **communicative competence** should describe the rules of use resulting from the interplay of social/regional, stylistic and contextual factors.

Fishman (1972) summarizes the purpose of sociolinguistics in the formula "Who Speaks What Language to Whom and When". This suggests that the core of research in sociolinguistics revolves around language use, variation and change:

- ✓ Investigates why people speak differently in different social contexts
- ✓ The social functions of language
- ✓ Examining the ways language is used to convey social meaning

² Yule (1996:3) defines pragmatics as "the study of **contextual** meaning communicated by a speaker or writer, and interpreted by a listener or reader." While pragmatics is concerned with meaning in context, semantics studies decontextualized meaning, or simply the literal meaning of words (denotation) . Interest in Pragmatics only began in the 1970s