Language is an integral part of human behavior. It is the primary means of interaction between people. Speakers use language to convey their thoughts, feelings, intentions, and desires to others. Language links interlocutors in a dynamic, reflexive process. We learn about people through what they say and how they say it, we learn about ourselves through the ways that other people react to what we say, and we learn about our relationships with others through the give and take of communicative interactions.

Language is enriched by the different ways that people use it. These uses, and the meanings transmitted, are situational, social, and cultural. *Situational* meanings are conveyed through forms of language that occur or are excluded in various contexts. For example, in formal encounters, speakers pronounce sounds clearly, avoid slang or profanity, and employ elaborate grammatical constructions. *Social* meanings are signaled by linguistic alternatives chosen by different groups of people within a community. For example, women and men may pronounce sounds differently; workers in particular occupations employ special terminology or jargon; members of diverse social classes typically use more or less complex sentence patterns. Finally, *cultural* meanings are expressed both in the symbolic senses of words and by the ways that interlocutors evaluate communicative behavior.

When situational, social, and cultural factors are considered, the apparent variation in speaking actually becomes quite systematic. Consistent patterns of speech emerge in given situations, and consistent cultural norms are used to interpret communicative behavior.

Speaking is an action through which meaning is contextually created. Its complex functions are best studied ethnographically. An *ethnography of communication* (Hymes 1974) includes analysis of speech, situational contexts, and cultural norms used in evaluating talk. An ethnographic perspective that emphasizes the vital links between language and culture is important in the fields of linguistics, anthropology, and sociology. It enables linguists to appreciate the range of social and cultural meanings conveyed by words and grammatical constructions. It enables anthropologists and sociologists to appreciate the contribution that communication makes to all human activity. For social scientists to understand how people organize their lives, carry out work, practice religions, and the like, they need to be aware of how people talk to each other. Studying behavior within one’s own or another culture is limited if it ignores a critical aspect of behavior—namely, speech—just as studying language is limited if it ignores the cultural contexts in which language is produced.

In subsequent chapters of this book, we will explore the many interconnections among language, culture, and communicative meaning. We will stress interactional, situational, and social
functions of language as they take place and are actively created within cultural contexts. The notion of cultural models will be relevant to much of the ensuing discussion. A cultural model is a construction of reality that is created, shared, and transmitted by members of a group. It may not be explicitly stated by participants but it is, nevertheless, used to guide and evaluate behavior. For example, people in all cultures construct models expressing their views of the dimensions of the physical universe, the structure and functioning of their society, and proper ways for people to live and to treat each other. Because cultural models are shared and accepted, they are assumed by members to be natural, logical, necessary, and legitimate. As they become a background for behavior, they are not recognized as culturally constructed but rather are considered the natural order of life. According to Naomi Quinn and Dorothy Holland, “Largely tacit and unexamined, [cultural] models embed a view of ‘what is’ and ‘what it means’ that seems wholly natural—a matter of course. Alternative views are not even recognized, let alone considered” (1987:11). As we shall see, language and language use express, reinforce, and thus perpetuate underlying cultural models.

Although people within a given culture share many assumptions about the world, they are not a completely homogeneous group. People are differentiated on the basis of gender, age, and status in all societies. In addition, distinctions of class, race, and ethnicity are used to segment populations in most modern nations. All these factors contribute to diversity in communicative behavior and to disparities in evaluations given to the behavior of different groups of people. Interrelationships between social differentiation and communication are relevant to many topics pursued in subsequent chapters and will be discussed accordingly.

### SPEECH COMMUNITIES

Talk takes place within a speech community consisting of people who, although heterogeneous, are united in numerous ways. Several researchers have taken pains to define such a community. Leonard Bloomfield described it as “a group of people who interact by means of speech” (1933:42). Bloomfield recognized that, in addition to speaking the same language, these people also agree about what is considered “proper” or “improper” uses of language (ibid.:155). Dell Hymes stressed the fact that members of a speech community are unified by norms about uses of language: “A speech community is defined as a community sharing knowledge of rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech. Such sharing comprises knowledge of at least one form of speech, and knowledge also of its patterns of use” (1974:51). And “a person who is a member of a speech community knows not only a language but also what to say...sharing of grammatical knowledge of a form of speech is not sufficient. There may be persons whose English I could grammatically identify, but whose messages escape me. I may be ignorant of what counts as a coherent sequence, request, statement requiring an answer, situation requiring a greeting, requisite or forbidden topic” (ibid.:49, 123).

In discussing speech communities, William Labov emphasized the social and evaluative norms shared by members: “A speech community cannot be conceived as a group of speakers who all use the same forms; it is best defined as a group who share the same norms in regard to language...who share a set of social attitudes toward language” (1972:158, 248). In Labov’s view, norms are revealed by the ways that members of a community evaluate their own and others’ speech.

Although the notion of speech community is useful in delineating a group of speakers, it is an abstraction in the sense that individuals do not interact with all other members. To focus on people who actually do interact, Lesley Milroy and James Milroy developed the concept of speech network (Milroy 1980; Milroy and Milroy 1978). People in a speech network have contact with
each other on a regular basis, although the frequency of their interactions and the strength of their association vary. Thus, people in “dense networks” have daily, or at least frequent, contact. They are likely to be linked by more than one type of bond—that is, they may be related, live in the same neighborhood, and work together. In addition, all of their associates also know each other. People in “weak networks” have less regular contact and do not know all of each other’s associates.

Dense networks exert pressure on members to conform because values are shared and individuals’ behavior can be readily known. Because linguistic usage is one type of behavior that is monitored and regulated within dense networks, members tend to maintain speech norms with little variation (Milroy and Milroy 1992:13). In contrast, members of weak networks do not share values as consistently. And weak networks do not have mechanisms that can apply social sanction against nonconformists on an individual basis, although the society as a whole does exert pressures for conformity through the transmission of cultural models on both conscious and nonconscious levels.

The concept of speech network is useful because it focuses on actual speakers and explains the mechanisms of control that lead to establishing and maintaining group norms in small-scale, daily interactions. Speech is constantly, although nonconsciously, evaluated. Therefore, speakers are always vulnerable to the judgments of their peers.

Throughout this book, we frequently return to issues of language use and evaluation of talk within speech communities and networks because they reveal social and cultural beliefs about how society is structured and the ways that people are expected to act and interact.

**Ethnolinguistics**

Studies in language, culture, and communication are based on two different, but compatible, methodologies. One, an ethnographic or ethnolinguistic approach, employs anthropological techniques of gathering data from observations of people’s daily lives and of attempting to understand behavior from the participants’ point of view. Ethnolinguists try to extract communicative rules by observing the behaviors that do or do not occur in various contexts and the reactions of members of a community to each other’s actions. They attempt to understand what one needs to know in order to function appropriately in a given culture—how to make requests, issue commands, and express opinions, for example.

Studying language use within speech communities from an ethnolinguistic approach includes analysis of contexts, norms of appropriateness, and knowledge of language and its uses. Analyses of these facets of communicative behavior reveal underlying cultural models and demonstrate the cognitive and conceptual bonds that unify people within their culture.

Ethnolinguists also use elicitation techniques for obtaining linguistic data. They work with individual native speakers to collect material dealing with specific categories of vocabulary or types of grammatical constructions.

**Sociolinguistics**

The second approach to studying communicative behavior is sociolinguistic. This method is concerned with discovering patterns of linguistic variation. Variation in language use is derived from differences in speech situations and from social distinctions within a community that are reflected in communicative performance. Although some speech differences are idiosyncratic, it is possible to study intracommunity variables by recording and analyzing the actual speech behavior of members of distinct sectors of a population.

A basic assumption in sociolinguistics is that two complementary processes operate in the dynamic connection between language and social factors. From one viewpoint, social
differentiation among people is correlated with differences in their speech; from the other viewpoint, divergence in the way language is used is a gauge of social segmentation. Factors such as gender, age, class, region, race, ethnicity, and occupation frequently account for linguistic differences. Interrelationships between societal factors and language use are extremely complex for several reasons. First, sociolinguistic behavior is inherently variable; that is, each speaker uses the full range of options available in the community, such as alternatives of pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence construction. However, options chosen in a particular instance of speech cannot be predicted. Sociolinguistic “rules” therefore are actually statements of probability rather than rules that can predict any single speech occurrence. Both individual and societal patterns are based on behavior exhibited over time and in diverse situations.

The second reason is that individuals are not isolates of sociological factors. A person is not simply female or male, child or adult, employer or worker. Rather, each person embodies an aggregate of factors, for example, a female adult worker with two children. Choices in speech style are motivated by many aspects of one’s identity. Sociolinguistic studies consider the ways that specific attributes influence a speaker’s selection in any given situation.

A third complication in sociolinguistic analysis is that of context itself. Components of speech contexts, such as setting, participants, topics, and goals, all influence speech. In some cultures, the styles of speech used in different contexts are sharply distinguished, whereas in others, linguistic styles are less differentiated. Even within a culture, some people are more sensitive than others to contextual cues and adjust their speech accordingly. Sensitivity to context may be related to social factors such as gender or class, or it may be related to an individual’s participation in many different types of situations.

Because sociolinguistic patterns are discoverable on the basis of frequencies of usage, research methodologies emphasize interviews, experimental and situational observations, and quantitative analysis. Sociolinguists ideally collect large samples of ongoing communicative behavior and then try to isolate determining factors that result in linguistic variation.

Discourse

An additional, overarching approach to the study of language use centers on discourse, the connected stretches of speech that occur in informal as well as formal contexts. A focus on discourse allows for analyses of multiple interrelated layers of communication. Discourse analysis examines the speech that speakers produce and the complex arrays of meaning produced and interpreted from perspectives of form, content, and interactional dynamics. That is, we need to understand what speakers say, what they intend to mean, what they intend to do, and how their speech is interpreted by other participants in the conversation. We need to analyze the cultural contexts in which speech occurs, the norms of production and interpretation that give it meaning, and the ways that social processes affect what is done and what is not done in communicative interactions. A field referred to as critical discourse analysis adds to this study an emphasis on the sociopolitical relations of power that inform both the production and interpretation of discourse. Not all members of society and not all participants in a given interaction have equal rights to contribute or equal power to determine or influence specific features of the interaction.

Language Ideologies

Finally, we will consider topics that reflect anthropological and linguistic interest in language ideologies. These are ideologies, or beliefs, about language, about what constitutes a language, and about what is acceptable or appropriate language use. Every society has systems of beliefs
about the world, including ideas about human beings, their abilities and rights, and the ways they interact with each other. These ideas are contextually created and serve specific social functions. As conditions change through historical processes, cultural beliefs change too—and so do the linguistic behaviors that reflect them.

Belief systems not only explain but also legitimate social orders and constructions of reality. Meaning is never divorced from the society that creates it. And once created, it becomes part of the consciousness of individuals. This consciousness is formed in a reflexive process, interacting with the view of reality that society constructs. This consciousness is formed in a reflexive process, interacting with the view of reality that society constructs. V.N. Volosinov believed that by the process of social interaction, organized groups create external and material signs that serve as a foundation for individual consciousness. Thus, consciousness can be defined as rooted in the sociological framework. The individual consciousness grows from and reflects a society’s belief system as evidenced in cultural norms. (1973:12–13).

Belief systems, or ideologies, are transmitted through many social modes, such as religious rituals, moral and aesthetic values, political displays, and the like. And they are expressed in and through language. Words in themselves are neutral, but their use gives them social and symbolic content. Words and the beliefs they express form a coherent cultural system, or, as Volosinov stated, “a unity of the verbally constituted consciousness” (ibid.:15).

Linguists and anthropologists have increasingly focused on the ways that social power and control are reflected in language, language use, and language ideologies. Speech communities, whether small, homogeneous villages or large, heterogeneous state societies, develop ideologies about language and language use that are transmitted through communicative behavior and through the ways in which people talk about language and linguistic activities.

As Kathryn Woolard points out, “ideologies of language are not about language alone.... Through linkages [to identity, to aesthetics, to morality], they underpin not only linguistic form and use but also the very notion of the person and the social group, as well as such fundamental social institutions as religious ritual, child socialization, gender relations, the nation-state, schooling, and law” (1998:3). In various sections throughout the text, we will investigate the ways in which these notions of language ideology relate to cultural meanings and worldview; speakers’ rights and obligations to co-participants; societal segmentation and issues of class, race, and gender; national language policies and attitudes; and institutional power and resistance.

**Plan of the Book**

We will review many studies of linguistic behavior that are based on a variety of methodological and analytic approaches. Each reveals a different aspect of the communicative process. Taken together, they allow us to understand the full range of interactional, social, and cultural meanings conveyed by talk.

Chapter 2 presents structural properties of language and nonverbal behavior, then analyses of cultural and social meanings, contexts, and uses of language. In Chapters 3 and 4, we focus on connections between language and cultural models. Rules of conversation and linguistic means for expressing politeness are discussed in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 discusses several specialized communicative practices, including those made possible by modern technologies (telephones and computers) and signing communication used by Deaf conversationalists. Topics related to acquisition of linguistic and communicative skills are treated in Chapters 7 and 8. The next two chapters present analyses of linguistic variation and societal segmentation: In Chapter 9 we
discuss factors of class and race; in Chapter 10, gender differences in language and speech are considered, with data from numerous societies throughout the world. Chapters 11 and 12 present reviews of language and its functions in multilingual communities. Finally, in Chapter 13, we discuss the ways that talk is managed in several institutional settings.

The diversity of topics dealt with in this book is an indication of the breadth of the field of language, culture, and communication, and a demonstration of the importance of language in human behavior.

References


