What is Sociolinguistic Competence? Why is it Important?

Sociolinguistic competence deals with issues of appropriateness. The process of learning sociolinguistic competence is challenging even in one's first language. Evidence of this can be found in the popularity of "Miss Manners" columns. If we all had perfect sociolinguistic competence, we wouldn't need advice about the proper way to send wedding invitations or give a dinner party. Having good sociolinguistic competence means knowing how to "give every person his or her due." It means knowing when to be quiet, and when to talk, when to give compliments to others, and when to apologize. It also means being able to read situations and know what is the right thing to say and then saying it appropriately. There are an infinite number of combinations of roles, tasks, contexts, and feelings that govern what is appropriate in any given encounter. For example, the job of persuading a friend to go with you to a concert will require completely different skills than trying to persuade the president of the company to begin selling a new product line.

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Good sociolinguistic skills in a second language are important because if you make serious mistakes in this type of competence, people will not simply think that you are ignorant (which they may think if you have poor grammar); rather, they will think that you are ill-mannered, dishonest, insincere, rude, pushy, etc. If your grammar is excellent, you will be judged all the more severely for sociolinguistic gaffes. Misunderstandings result in amusement, contempt, disappointment, shock, bewilderment, serious insult, or ethnic stereotypes.

Improving sociolinguistic competence needs to be a part of the language learning process from the beginning. Many language schools and language learning programs focus almost exclusively on language components such grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, and very little attention is paid to helping students understand how to be appropriate in a new cultural context. An assumption is often made that language learners will pick up sociolinguistic competence simply by being exposed to the culture. Unfortunately, this is not often the case.

Suggestions for Learning Sociolinguistic Competence

The following are some suggestions for increasing one's sociolinguistic competence. These suggestions are applicable not just for those living abroad, but also for those in their home country who need to interact and work with people from other cultural backgrounds:

1. Learners need to take individual responsibility for seeing that this dimension of the language learning process is included in their program of study from the beginning. When an individual takes responsibility for this part of the language learning process, he or she is in a good position to develop meaningful relationships with members of the target culture. These relationships can lay a foundation for meaningful language learning for years to come. By taking language learning into their own hands, language learners are assured that their learning will not end when their formal instruction comes to a close (often long before learners are fluent in their target languages).

2. Language learners need to remember that sociolinguistic competence is part of a larger system. When learning new grammatical structures, the learner should immediately try to practice the new structures with the goal of testing sociolinguistic appropriateness. Some learners have even gone so far as to deliberately say something wrong so that native speakers would correct them, and they would learn something new about what was appropriate.

3. As language learners become more proficient in a second language, they also need to be increasingly committed to becoming observers of the interactions of native speakers around them.

They should watch how people stand when talking to each other. They should watch for the kinds of physical touching people do (handshaking, kissing, gentle punches on the shoulder, etc.) Are such things influenced by the gender of the speakers? How does language change when someone important enters a room? By knowing what to look for, learners can discover a great deal through observation.

4. Another suggestion for developing sociolinguistic competence is to keep a language journal which records questions, problems, and discoveries. If there is some feature of the target language which is troubling or frustrating to a language learner, it may be the key to an insight about the communication process. For example, what led to Berry's (1994) study of backchannel behavior and turn-taking was an unsettling feeling that all Spanish speakers were rude to her, never letting her complete a sentence or express a thought without interruption. Her initial reaction was a judgment that Spanish speakers were rude, but because that was an unacceptable conclusion for her, she pursued the topic until she realized that Spanish speakers expect co-speakers to begin speaking before they finish, as a means of demonstrating interest. Far from being rude and pushy, the listeners were trying to show their engagement in the conversation.

It is, of course, possible that a few people intend to be rude, but when it seems like everyone, including friends, are acting rude, it is time to explore one's definition of rudeness to see if an underlying sociolinguistic expectation is not being met. In general, if it seems as though some characteristic of the way speakers of the target language are communicating is routinely offensive, one should begin looking for a sociolinguistic explanation. There is a good chance that the reverse is also true—what seems natural in the learner's first language may be offensive to speakers of the target language.

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5. The process of building sociolinguistic competence will not go far without the language learners establishing relationships with a few people who are native speakers of the target language and have lived most if not all of their lives in the target culture. These people will be essential to discovery of the sociolinguistic dimensions of language. When language learners acquire new lexical items and grammatical forms. It is vital that they examine with their language helpers the kinds of changes which would be made to the new language data as a result of changes in the context. If they have learned something new, they can ask a language helper, "Could I say this to a man? to a woman? Would I say this to a teacher? to a neighbor?" etc. Or, if the language helper is also sensitive to the kinds of restrictions which might apply to a given utterance, a more general question might be sufficient: "Should I avoid saying this with any particular group of people or in any context?" Also, if language learners are able to find more than one helper, and if they are fairly confident in the appropriateness of an utterance, they might try out the utterance on a number of different individuals to see if there is any adverse reaction.

The importance of language helpers as a resource for building sociolinguistic competence cannot be overstressed. In many cases, the only way to understand what is happening sociolinguistically will be through the insights of language helpers. However, one should try to avoid being frustrated when it seems that language helpers offer contradictory advice on sociolinguistic issues. It is essential to test the language one is learning in different contexts with different kinds of people, and it is very helpful to get feedback from language helpers who can offer differing insights and interpretations, but it should not be surprising that in an enterprise as dynamic and human as using language, generalizations may be more complicated than they initially appear.

If contradictory explanations of appropriate behavior seem to be emerging, one explanation for it may be that the language learner has not recognized some higher-level generalization or framework which encompasses both contradictory statements. For example, if one helper says that an utterance is acceptable without qualifications and another finds what is said to be highly

offensive, then there must be a variable at work which explains the apparent contradiction. Perhaps the two helpers come from different regions of the same country, and in one region the utterance is acceptable, while in the other it is not. The helper who comes from the area in which the utterance is acceptable may be completely unaware that the utterance in question is offensive elsewhere.

Along similar lines, it is also important to recognize that within any society, even a society which shares only one language, there is always variation in the speech produced by individual speakers. This variation, in itself, can account for differences in the advice language helpers might give.

Another explanation for contradictory explanations may be found in the imaginations of different helpers. When a person is asked for a comment about the appropriateness of a given utterance, he or she usually tries to form a scenario in his or her mind in which the utterance would be used. If two (or more) helpers imagine a scenario for the same utterance, they will almost certainly come up with scenarios which are different, and the differences in their imagined scenarios will influence their perception of the appropriateness of the utterance. For example, if one takes a sentence like, "You're getting so skinny!", it is possible for one helper to imagine a case in which this sentence is spoken in an American context to a friend who is trying to lose weight, in which case it might be viewed as an appropriate comment. On the other hand, if a helper imagined the sentence being spoken to someone in an American context who had a serious problem with trying to gain weight (i.e., he or she was too thin already), this expression could be viewed as an insult. Because decisions of appropriateness are so contextually constrained, it is very easy to get contradictory advice from different language helpers.

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A fourth consideration in this vein is the possibility that the language helper may be lacking in sociolinguistic competence in his or her own first language. Native speakers of any language have different levels of sensitivity to sociolinguistic considerations. If it seems as though one language helper consistently gives different answers from the rest of a language learner's contacts, it is possible that the different language helper is either not as competent as the others or is simply not able to perceive such issues as accurately. Of course, it is possible that the one who differs is the only one with insight, but if one finds that the advice of one particular helper consistently results in awkward or painful situations, it is probably best to seek for help in other quarters.

6. As one way to bring together the suggestions made above, language learners should make a focused effort to learn the speech acts they need in order to function in the target language. (Speech acts are the things people do with language such as apologize, invite, accept and refuse invitations, compliment, sympathize, complain.) They should then assess the kinds of variables which will influence the performance of specific speech acts, and discuss the speech acts with their language helpers. Finally, working with their helpers, they can practice the language and skills they are learning.

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