INTRODUCTION: EVOLUTION OF LINGUISTICS, AND SOCIOLINGUISTICS A SUBFIELD OF LINGUISTICS

1. EVOLUTION OF THE FIELD OF LINGUISTICS
Below is a brief account of the evolution of linguistics as a field of study.

PRE-SAUSSSURE PERIOD
Three approaches to language study ushered in the field of linguistics, namely the prescriptive approach, philological criticism, and diachronic approach. (Each of these represents an evolutionary stage of the field.)

(i) The Prescriptive approach/period: Their primary goal was to give rules for distinguishing between correct and incorrect forms. That is, language study was a normative discipline.

(ii) The period of philological criticism: This was in the late 18th to early 19th century. The main goal was to compare texts of different periods with the aim of determining the historical development of languages and the language peculiar to each author.

(iii) Diachronic approach (or the period of diachronic studies): The emphasis, this period, was on establishing genetic relatedness of languages, language change (in real time) and language families. (Franz Bopp (1816) was one of the pioneers on this issue.)

(iv) Their shortcomings: Their approaches to language study was not scientific: they followed the written text slavishly, and did not focus on language as a living organism. “It is certainly the business of a grammarian to find out, and not to make, the laws of a language.” (Fell 1784).

2. Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky
Saussure is the father of Modern Linguistics and Noam Chomsky is said to have shaped it.

Saussure
-- Structuralism originated in the structural linguistics of Saussure.
-- Structuralism claims that language is a system of structures (and that there is no meaning without structure). Saussure made the following distinctions in (and claims about) the field of Linguistics that are still important today.
-- He distinguished between LANGUE – i.e. knowledge of language which is believed to be shared, and PAROLE – i.e. use of language by individuals, and said that linguistics should be concerned with langue.
-- He also stressed the need to study language descriptively, synchronically, and by focusing on the spoken language.

Chomsky
-- Chomsky In his Review of Verbal Behavior (1959), Chomsky argues that “[l]anguage is a complex cognitive system that could not be acquired by behaviorist principles.” According to him, “[w]e are designed to walk …. That we are taught to walk is impossible. And pretty much the same is true of language. Nobody is taught language. In fact you can’t prevent a child from learning it.” (Cited in Fromkin et al 2007: 318).
-- Two of his contributions to the field of Linguistics are: The notion of Generative Grammar, and the Innateness Hypothesis (or the concept of Universal Grammar, or Language Acquisition Device (LAD))

(A) The Innateness Hypothesis (UG):
Children are equipped with an innate template or blueprint for language – i.e. Universal Grammar – this blueprint aids the child in the task of constructing a grammar for her language.

Evidence/Manifestations of UG:
-- (i) Children acquire a complex grammar quickly and easily without any particular help beyond exposure to the language because they do not start from scratch.
(ii) UG helps them to extract the rules of their language and to avoid many grammatical errors.

(iii) Because the child constructs his grammar according to an innate blueprint, all children proceed through similar developmental stages [e.g. babbling, 6mths – uncovering the sounds of his/her language; holophrastic – one-word utterance, a word as a sentence; telegraphic – containing only required words for basic understanding – open-class or content words, function words may be missing]. [[That is, observations of children acquiring different language under different cultural and social circumstances reveal that the developmental stages are similar, possibly universal.]]

-- (iii) Because of the UG children come to know aspects of the grammar about which they receive no information. (That is, the grammar a person ends up with is vastly underdetermined by linguistic experience = the poverty of the stimulus.)

((That is: What accounts for the ease, rapidity, and uniformity of language acquisition in the face of impoverished data? = the logical problem. The UG – i.e. its functioning as described above – makes this possible.)

(B) Generative Grammar:

(i) The prevailing viewpoint prior to the publication of his Syntactic Structures in 1957: American linguists regarded the aim of their discipline as being the classification of the elements of human languages (what we call Taxonomic Linguistics). As Hockett wrote in 1942, "Linguistics is a classificatory science."

(ii) Chomsky attempted to apply the conventional methods of structural linguistics to the study of syntax, but found that the methods that had apparently worked so well with phonemes [in phonology] and morphemes [in morphology] did not work very well with sentences.

(iii) Each language has a finite number of phonemes and a finite though quite large number of morphemes. It is possible to get a list of each; but the number of sentences in any natural language like French or English is, strictly speaking, infinite. There is no limit to the number of new sentences that can be produced in any language which then makes the task of collecting all possible sentences of a language impossible.

(iv) That is, within structuralist assumptions it is not easy to account for the fact that languages have an infinite number of sentences. Chomsky argued that the goal of linguistic description should instead be to construct a theory that would account for the infinite number of sentences of a natural language.

(v) In other words, his goal was to come up with a generative grammar - a mathematical model in terms of which sentences are generated – a device that would generate all and only the sentences of a language.

(vi) In other words, Chomsky distinguishes between I(nternal)-language (competence/languageshared) and E(xternal)-language (performance/parole/individual); in his own terms, what he describes is the speaker’s underlying competence, as opposed to the performance of the actual utterances – he is after the hidden laws of language and performance is simply a means, not an end.

3. LINGUISTICS (DEFINED)

(a) – Linguistics is the scientific study of language (Crystal 1992).

(b) “Linguistics shares with other sciences a concern to be objective, systematic, consistent, and explicit in its account of language. Like other sciences, it aims to collect data, test hypotheses, devise models, and construct theories. It subject matter, however, is unique: at one extreme it overlaps with such “hard” sciences as physics and anatomy; at the other, it involves such traditional “arts” subjects as philosophy and literary criticism. The field of linguistics includes both science and humanities, and offers a breath of coverage that, for many aspiring students of the subject, is the primary source of its appeal.” (Crystal 1987)

(c) “It is very closely related to other sciences that sometimes borrow from its data, sometimes supply it with data. The lines of demarcation do not always show up clearly. This discipline is very important to every field of study – [(this importance
stems from the important role speech the object of its study plays in the lives of individuals and societies. Everyone is concerned with it in one way or another, which is why it is unthinkable for the field to be the prerogative of a few specialists. (Translated from French by Wade Baskin). 1959:7. *Course in General Linguistics* Ferdinand de Saussure. New York: Philosophical Library.

4. **THE THREE DICHOTOMIES – OPPOSING PAIRS – OF LINGUISTICS**
   (a) Synchronic/Descriptive (language as it is at a given time) vs. Diachronic/Historical Linguistics (historical development of a language and the structural changes that have taken place in it)

   (b) Theoretical (the construction of a general theory of the structure of language) vs. Applied Linguistics (the application of the findings and techniques of the scientific study of language to practical tasks, especially to the teaching of language)

   (c) Autonomous Linguistics/Micro-linguistics (language not as a social phenomenon/langue/linguistic competence) vs. Contextual Linguistic/Macro-Linguistics (how language fits into the world: its social function or its use in the broader context of human behavior)

5. **AGENDA OF THEORETICAL/MODERN LINGUISTICS**
   (A) The goal of theoretical/modern linguistics is to discover what speakers know about a language and to describe that knowledge objectively

   (B) When you know a language, you know the sounds, the words and the rules for their combination. This means you have the capacity to produce sounds that signify certain meanings and to understand or interpret the sounds produced by others. You can speak and be understood by others who know that language.

   (C) We “… take the spoken language as our primary source of data. The idea is that our competence knowledge underlies this linguistic behavior (i.e. performance) and that by studying performance we can reach this linguistic knowledge which allows us to create infinite number of sentences, etc. We believe that competence and performance knowledge are inseparable; and also believe that performance is not always an exact copy of our competence knowledge -- we therefore try as much as possible to disregard performance errors (the inevitable speech errors, incomplete utterances, and so on) and focus on consistent patterns so that we can get to this mental grammar which we believe include: (Some of the levels of theoretical linguistics), namely: phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, etc.

   (D) The goal of modern linguistics, as defined by Chomsky, should be to describe the linguistic knowledge – grammar – of an idealized speaker-listener in a homogeneous speech community with complete knowledge of his/her language.

   (E) Until the fifties, it was typical for linguistics to be studied either within language/literature departments or within anthropology and to many anthropologists linguistics was part of their field.

6. **WHAT IS LANGUAGE?**

   **LANGUAGE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT**

   “Terms such as language and dialect are social constructs, not linguistic constructs” (Romainne 2000)\(^1\) [She said this to highlight the importance of social factors in deciding what counts as a language or dialect – structural relatedness – shared cognates – and mutual intelligibility are the two main linguistic criteria for classifying any two varieties as same or different languages]

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\(^1\) -- Generally, a **dialect** is often described as “a subordinate variety of a language” (Romainne 2000).

-- Fromkin et al (2007: 409) define **dialects** as “… mutually intelligible forms of a language that differ in systematic ways.

--Note: A dialect is not an inferior or degraded form a language, and logically could not be so because a language is a collection of dialect.”
In support of Romainne:

(i) Dialects of Yoruba (NIGERIA) -- varieties at the periphery of the continuum are said to be mutually unintelligible and yet are considered members of a single language?;

(ii) Manderin and Cantonese = mutually unintelligible when spoken = dialects of Chinese because they are spoken within a single country and have a common writing system (Fromkin et al 2007: 410);

(iii) Is American English a dialect of British English or British English a dialect of American English, or separate languages?

(iv) In Southern Africa, languages such as Sotho (Lesotho), Swazi (Swaziland), and Tswana (Botswana) = said to be mutually intelligible = considered separate languages = Is it because they are associated with politically independent states;

(v) In Europe, Danish (Danes/Denmark), Norwegian (Norwegians/Norway) and Swedish (Swedes/Sweden) are said to be very close, linguistically -- very close enough from a linguistic point of view to be considered dialects of one language -- however, they are considered separate languages each with its own name.

(vi) Pakistan and India: Hindi and Urdu are mutually intelligible languages spoken in Pakistan and India, although the differences between them are not much greater than those between the English spoken in America and Australia

The above point to the importance of social factors (and the arbitrariness of linguistic criteria) in deciding what counts as a language or dialect. There is a sociological, a political dimension as to what counts as language hence Weinrich’s (1945) often quoted saying that a language is “a dialect with an army and a navy.”

**LANGUAGE AS A LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCT**

Language defined: the accepted linguistic definition of language [[Sturtevant, Edgar. 1947]]: “A system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which members of a social group cooperate and interact.” (Gaeng 1971: 14-19)

What language is not linguistically:

(i) writing – not a particular arrangement of letters;
(ii) nationality/national-identity – language does not represent an expression of a distinct nationality -- English, German, Russian and Arabic are spoken by no less heterogenous groups;
(iii) culture – no intrinsic association between language and culture -- a community of language does not make for a community of culture

7. **EMERGENCE OF THE FIELD OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS**

**IMPLICATIONS OF CHOMSKYAN LINGUISTICS**

(i) Chomskyan theory appeared to sweep away all concern with variation in language by focusing exclusively on “competence” (i.e. linguistic competence) in a language. To him linguistics is an aspect of the science of the mind (Ervin-Tripp 1997: 63).

(ii) That is his aim is to make the characterization of what he calls ‘competence’, or knowledge of rules of grammar the central concern of linguistic theory. He is insistent that in order to make any progress in linguistic theory, the study of grammatical competence must take precedence over that of pragmatic competence, or knowledge of the rules of social interaction. Once we have an explicit theory of both these kinds of underlying knowledge, we can attempt to devise what Chomsky calls a ‘performance model’ to show how this knowledge is put to use in actual situations (see Chomsky 1980: 224—6).

(iii) Chomskyan linguistics thus abstracted language from the socio-cultural matrix (Bright 1997:56).
8. COINAGE

Haver C. Currie (1952), a poet and philosopher, is said to have coined the term ‘socio-linguistics,’ noted that linguists’ definition of language conventionally included a clause about its social function but actual research usually ignored its social functions. He writes: “… social functions and significations of speech factors offer a prolific field for research. It is the intention in this connection to project, partly by means of identification, a field that may well be given the attentions of consciously directed research. This field is here designated socio-linguistics” (Curries 1952: 28).

9. HYMES IN RESPONSE TO CHOMSKY

Hymes and his anthropologist/ethnographer colleagues reacted by requiring linguistics to complete its scope by describing the “communicative competence” a speaker/listener needed to operate as a full member of a language community — a knowledge of all the appropriate ways of using the language. Communicative competence, just like linguistic competence, is a component of our language faculty.

10. WEINREICH, LABOV, AND HERZOG REACTION TO CHOMSKY

While Chomsky assumes that grammatical competence is invariant, the sociolinguist has to deal with problems of inequality in language use; and that suggests that after all competence is not invariant. Language to Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog is “an object possessing orderly heterogeneity” (1968: 100) (as opposed to homogeneity as proposed by Chomsky).

11. LANDMARK EVENTS/DEVELOPMENTS FOR THE BEGINNING OF MODEM SOCIOLINGUISTICS

(A) It all began with the formation of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) Committee on Sociolinguistics by Charles Ferguson; Ferguson because of his field work and foreign-service was aware of the political aspects of language use and language planning; He knew that policy decisions regarding language were being made by many governments with an inadequate research basis. His goal was collaboration between linguists and sociologists on these issues when he proposed a Sociolinguistics Committee to the SSRC in 1963. The committee was heterogeneous in its interests.

(B) Opposing Voices: Ferguson (1997:78) had this to say about the various meetings that gave birth to the field called sociolinguistics:

“… one thing that struck me at the time was the attitudes that different people at the seminar had toward the whole deal. It was quite clear that for some people there, any sociolinguistic study was only to improve linguistics and to make linguistics more realistic Labov certainly had that point of view.

On the other hand, there were people like Joshua Fishman who wanted something that would improve sociology. That is, something that would put a whole new subject matter before sociologists that wasn’t there before.

And then you had people like Dell Hymes, who felt that what was going to evolve was some new kind of field—language in society—which would perhaps replace fields such as linguistics and anthropology and provide a new way of looking at human behavior.

And then there was John Gumperz who felt that there was already a new discipline called sociolinguistics, the study of language in society. And I always thought that one characteristic of him was the way he started many sentences by “In sociolinguistics, we…” And so there was already a field there, which I could not feel myself. For me, sociolinguistics was just a loose label for phenomena relating language to society. (Charles Ferguson 1997:78)

12. SUMMARY

(We will end the introduction with this quotation from Halliday 1978. Halliday said this to stress the importance of the new field):

“We shall not come to understand the nature of language if we pursue only the kinds of questions about language that are formulated by linguists. For linguists, language is object—linguistics is defined, as Saussure and his contemporaries so often felt the need to affirm, by the fact that it has language as its object of study; whereas for others, language is an instrument, a means of illuminating questions about something else. This is a valid and important distinction. But it is a distinction of goals, not one of scope. In the walled gardens in which the disciplines
have been sheltered since the early years of this century, each has claimed the right to determine not only what questions it is asking but also what it will take into account in answering them; and in linguistics, this leads to the construction of /elegant self-contained systems that are of only limited application to any real issues—since the objects themselves have no such boundary walls. We have to take account of the questions that are raised by others; not simply out of a sense of the social accountability of the discipline (though that would be reason enough), but also out of sheer self-interest—we shall better understand language as an object if we interpret it in the light of the findings and seekings of those for whom language is an instrument, a means towards inquiries of a quite different kind.” (Halliday 1978:3).
WHAT DO SOCIOLINGUISTS STUDY? (HOLMES)

1. INTRODUCTION
Sociolinguists study the relationship between language and society.\(^2\) We want to look at language in its social context; we want to know and understand how objective social characteristics influence linguistic behavior, etc.

-- Division of sociolinguistics into macro- and micro-: Macro-Sociolinguistics (Sociology of language, i.e. the study of large social units, and often political categories, Joshua Fishman) vs. Micro-sociolinguistics/interactional socio-linguistics (which focuses on processes in face-to-face interaction/ethnography of speaking Hymes 1962).

-- New Directions: The practical application of sociolinguistics in such areas as law, medicine, and education seem to be quite important, and they offer much room for further growth.

2. SCOPE
They are interested in the different types of linguistic variation used to express and reflect social factors.

-- In other words, they aim to describe sociolinguistic variation and, if possible, explain why it happens.

-- Linguistic variation occurs at other levels of linguistic analysis: sounds, morphology, syntax.

-- These levels provide us with different linguistic styles for use in different social contexts; the choices may even involve different dialects of a language, or quite different languages.

-- In some communities they will select different languages according to the situation in which they are speaking.

3. CONCEPTS
-- Variety is a sociolinguistic term referring to language in context.

-- Variety is therefore a broad term which includes different accents, different linguistic styles, different dialects and even different languages which contrast with each other for social reasons.

-- In any community the distinguishable varieties (or codes) which are available for use in different social contexts form a kind of repertoire of available options. In other words, the members of each community have their distinctive linguistic repertoires.

-- **Linguistic repertoire** is thus the set of distinguishable code varieties from which the speakers of certain speech community can choose to be used, in certain social context of speaking.

4. GOAL
The aim of sociolinguists is to describe sociolinguistic variation and, if possible, explain why it happens. They ask the question: What non-linguistic and social factors are likely to account for linguistic variation?

-- In any situation the linguistic choices will generally reflect the influence of one or more of the following components:

a. The participants: who is speaking and who are they speaking to?

b. The setting or social context of the interaction: where are they speaking?

c. The topic: what is being talked about?

d. The function: why are they speaking?

5. In addition to these components it is useful to take account of **four different dimensions for analysis** which relate to the factors above. These are:

(a) A social distance scale concerned with participant relationships (*the solidarity scale*: intimate/high solidarity vs. distant/low solidarity).

(b) A status scale concerned with participant relationships (*status scale*: superior/high status vs. subordinate/low status)

(c) A formality scale relating to the setting or type of interaction (*The formality scale*: formal/high formality vs. informal/low formality)\(^3\)

\(^2\) Sociolinguistics focuses on “the relations between language and society” (Coulmas 1997: 1).

\(^3\) This scale is useful in assessing the influence of the social setting type of interaction on language choice. The language used will be influenced by the formality of the setting.
(d) Two functional scales relating to the purposes or topic of interaction. (*The referential and affective function scales:*

**referential** – describes a situation, oriented towards a context or towards a referent, description of a situation vs.

**affective** – reveals speaker’s internal state, how speaker feels

6. **Analysis**
The steps which need to be taken in providing an explanation are:

(i) to identify clearly the linguistic variation involved (e.g. vocabulary, sounds, languages)

(ii) to identify clearly the different social or non-linguistic factor which lead speakers to use one form rather than another (i.e. features relating to participants, setting or function of the interaction).

7. **Analysis**
Then we can begin to look for patterns which will help to formulate an explanation of why people use one set of forms in some contexts, but different forms in others.

(i) First of all, ‘what are the linguistic forms used?’

(ii) Secondly, ‘what are the social factors which lead people to use one set of forms rather than the other?’

(iii) And finally ‘can we explain why particular social factors lead to the use of one set of forms rather than another?’

8. **Conclusion**
In other words the sociolinguist’s aim is to move towards a theory which provides a motivated account of the way language is used in a community, and of the choices people make when they use language. ⁴

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⁴ Amuzu (2009: vi) has the following to say about the field in his introduction to this course: “Sociolinguistics … is the study of language use as a social phenomenon, i.e. the study of the relationship between language use and social structure. Some sociolinguistics investigate how social structure influences the way people talk and how language varieties and patterns of use correlate with social attributes such as class, sex, and age. Other sociolinguists concern themselves with studying what societies do with their languages, that is, they investigate the attitudes and attachments that account for various language phenomena, including functional distribution of speech forms in society, language maintenance, language shift and language death, and the creation of new languages (pidgin and creole languages).”