

What is sociolinguistics? The most obvious definition of 'sociolinguistics' is that it is the study of language in society. However, if it was as easy as that, then almost every language event would form part of the field of sociolinguistics. After all, there is a social and contextual dimension to every naturally occurring use of language, and it is always these social factors that determine the choice and form of what is written or said or understood. If sociolinguistics is not to encompass all linguistics, psychology and social theory, then we need a more precise and complex definition. So, sociolinguistics is the study of the linguistic indicators of culture and power. This is much more specific. This allows us to focus on language but also allows us to emphasize the social force of language events in the world. It allows us to use the tools of linguistics as outlined in the first part of this book (grammar, vocabulary, corpus linguistics, discourse analysis and pragmatics), as well as phonology, but it also encourages us to see the influences of ethnicity, gender, ideology and social rank on language events. Above all, this definition allows sociolinguists to be descriptive of pieces of language in the world, whilst encouraging us to recognize that we are all included in that world too. It could even be argued that sociolinguists have a special responsibility to use their privileged knowledge to influence the direction of, for example, government language policies, educational practices, media representations and so on. Many sociolinguists have argued strongly for this ethically-involved position. However, we must recognize that the majority of sociolinguistic studies are primarily descriptive and aim towards a scientific objectivity, even when dealing with very complex social influences on language. That is, most studies focus on giving an account of social aspects of language in the real world that is as precise and systematic an account as possible within the current state of knowledge. Sociolinguistics is thus progressive as a discipline in the sense that new studies and new thinking are continually testing and developing our understanding of the way language and society work in relation to each other. This means we need a definition of sociolinguistics that covers the central concerns of the majority of the discipline. So, finally and centrally, sociolinguistics is the study of language variation and language change. This definition foregrounds the essential features of language: societies differ from each other and change over time, and language is bound up with these processes. The two dimensions can be seen as complementary axes, an historical or diachronic axis which is concerned with the ways in which language use has changed