

The Application of Sociolinguistic Theory in College English Teaching: A Brief Discussion

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Abstract. This article discusses the relationship between language and society, introduces the definition and scope of sociolinguistics, demonstrates the social variation of language, regional variation, as well as the relationship between language and ethnicity and culture, and ultimately proposes how to apply sociolinguistic theories to college English teaching activities.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the 1960s, with the rise and development of sociolinguistics, the linguistic field gradually broke free from the constraints of studying language from aspects such as phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary, and instead focused on the interaction and connection between language and various social elements, thus opening up a wider research space for linguistics. The emergence of this new theory is bound to bring significant and far-reaching impact on the teaching of English in universities in China.

As a unique social phenomenon of human society, language is the means and medium for communication and exchange between people, and without language there would be no human society. [7] Similarly, without the existence and development of human society and culture, language would lose its premise and foundation for production and development. Therefore, language research must be organically linked with the development of human society and culture.

2 THE BASIC THEORIES AND RESEARCH SCOPE OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS

2.1 Sociolinguistics focuses on the relationship between language and society, mainly studying language variations under various social conditions and exploring the "co-variation" relationship between society and language.

For example, the influence of social factors such as race or ethnicity, class or social strata, gender, and age on language use, the construction characteristics and social functions of various language varieties (including standard language, colloquial language and pidgin, regional dialects and social dialects, formal and informal

language styles, etc.), people's attitudes and evaluations towards various varieties, the relationship between conversation scenarios and code selection, the ways and rules of language variations, and the internal mechanisms that trigger various changes are described and explained from the perspective of sociolinguistics. [8]

The research achievements of sociolinguistics play a positive and promoting role in the development of language, demonstrating the social attributes of language, enriching research methods, promoting the standardized development of language, accelerating the language acquisition process, improving the level of language teaching, and enhancing language communication abilities, etc. The rise of sociolinguistics has also expanded the research field of English teaching, and researchers have made rich achievements in exploring the relationship between language and social politics, economy, culture, education and other fields. Many research fields related to sociolinguistics, such as language variations, speech communities, language communication, code-switching, multilingual education, discourse analysis, etc., have made significant progress and become hot topics in English teaching and theoretical research.

2.2 Sociolinguistics is the science that studies language as a social phenomenon.

It regards language as a part of society and culture and studies the relationship between language and society or studies language by studying society. Sociolinguistics mainly studies the relationship between social context and language use, that is, how language changes with factors such as social class, education level, age, gender, race, and region. Fishman^[1] (1972) pointed out that sociolinguistics examines "who speaks what language to whom, when, and why."

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2.3 Sociolinguistics can be divided into two types, macro sociolinguistics and micro sociolinguistics

The former focuses on overall issues such as language standardization, language policy and planning, creation of minority languages, character reform, and the interaction between various languages in multilingual societies. The latter mainly studies language variation under various social conditions, such as the influence of social factors such as race or ethnicity, class or stratum, gender, and age on language, the construction characteristics and social functions of various language variants, such as standard language, vernacular or mixed language, regional dialect or social dialect, formal or informal language, people's attitudes and evaluations of various variants, and so on. Macro and micro sociolinguistics are not clearly separated and independent of each other, but are interrelated and permeated with each other.

3 SOCIAL AND REGIONAL VARIATIONS OF LANGUAGE

Language variation is a common term in sociolinguistics. Hudson^[3] defines language variation as "a group of language items with the same social distribution," that is, the manifestation of a certain language form used by people with the same social characteristics in the same social environment. Language variation can refer to language, dialects, language registers, as well as individual languages, grammars, or vocabulary. They can overlap, and there can be other variations within a language variation.

Language variations are generally divided into two categories: regional variations and social variations. Language variations that arise due to geographical reasons are called regional variations or dialects, such as Shanghainese, Beijing dialect, Cantonese, etc. Language variations caused by social factors (mainly referring to the speaker's social attributes such as occupation, age, race, cultural level, religion, etc.) are called social variations or social dialects.

3.1 Social Variations of language

As we all know, language develops with the development of society. In the course of English development, there are Old English, Middle English, and Modern English. In terms of Chinese, there are also Classical Chinese and Modern Chinese. Below, we will discuss the specific impacts that social factors have on language.

Social Class: As an ancient saying goes, people of the same kind tend to associate with each other, and things tend to group together. Different groups have different uses of language. American linguist Labov found that people of different social classes have different pronunciations of the letter "r" through study. British linguist Trudgill also found, through surveys of various social classes based on Norwick different

professional, cultural, income, and housing conditions, that variations in language are closely related to social class and show a distribution by level.

Race: An example of language variation caused by race is African American English, which has significant differences in language and grammar from Standard English, such as not using the "-s" conjugation for verbs, and the use of multiple negations.

Gender: Sociolinguists have found that gender factors are manifested in many aspects of language differences through surveys in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and other English-speaking countries. In terms of pronunciation, females tend to use the locally recognized standard pronunciation more. In terms of vocabulary, females tend to use more adjectives, especially emotionally charged ones. In terms of syntactic choices, females tend to choose more standardized ones. In daily conversation, females tend to be more proficient in varying tones and softer in tone.

Age: Different ages also have significant differences in language, which is unquestionable. Language variations caused by age can be divided into two categories: generational differences, and age grading. Generational differences refer to differences between the language used by people from different eras. Age grading refers to differences in language use among people of the same generation.

3.2 Regional variants of language

Regional variants of language are also known as dialects, which refer to the variation of the same language in different regions. They are variants that have not reached standardization due to the limitation of communicative functions by geography. There are significant differences in language between various regional dialects, and sometimes they seem like two completely different languages, such as Beijing dialect, Shanghai dialect, Cantonese, and Suzhou dialect. In English usage, there are American English, British English, Australian English, Canadian English, etc. For example, in vocabulary, British English uses "lift," "sweet," and "autumn" to mean "elevator," "candy," and "fall," respectively, while American English uses "elevator," "candy," and "fall." "Center" and "honor" are American spellings, while British English spellings are "centre" and "honour." In terms of grammar, Americans often say "Do you have any brothers?" while British people often say "Have you any brothers?"

The difference between dialects and the common language mainly lies in the size of their geographical distribution. "Common language is purely a term that focuses on the range of communicative tools." (Chen Songcen, 1985) This atmosphere has no fixed standard and can be large or small, ranging from global to a specific region.^[5] The language commonly used throughout the country is called the national language, while the language commonly used within a nation is called the ethnic common language. The common language can be the native language based on a certain dialect, or it can be another language. Standard language

is not only a communicative tool between various dialects but also a standard of various dialects. It is a language variant that is applicable to various formal occasions. The standard language is the result of human intervention, and its formation process is the process of standardizing a certain dialect variant, such as Mandarin in Chinese.

4 LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND ETHNICITY

4.1 Language and Culture

Language and culture are closely connected. Kramsch (2000) describes the relationship between language and culture as follows: language expresses culture; language is embedded in culture; language symbolizes culture. Therefore, we can infer that language serves as a carrier of culture, reflecting the cultural background of a certain social group^[4] Hudson (2001:79) points out that language is a part of culture, and the relationship between language and culture is that of parts and the whole^[3] At the same time, language is influenced and constrained by culture in terms of phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar, and these constraints also manifest in language usage and acquisition.

4.2 Language and Ethnicity

Language and ethnicity are also closely related. A shared language and culture are two important characteristics of ethnic groups. The unique features of each ethnic group's language are not only reflected in the use of different sounds to refer to the same thing, but also in the differences in the way they divide the meanings of real-world objects. Language not only reflects the current cultural state of an ethnic group, but also records its history. The psychological and cultural characteristics of ethnic groups are often expressed through vocabulary.

5. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIOLINGUISTIC RESEARCH FOR ENGLISH TEACHING

5.1 The Significance and Application of Language Variation Studies

Firstly, we must acknowledge the existence of language variation. We know that language has social and regional variations, which means that language variation is objectively present. Variation theory has important implications for our daily English teaching. In our subconscious, the selection of English teaching materials should be original materials. However, so-called "China English" has always been ridiculed (note that "China English" is not the same as "Chinglish", which is a deformed language that is neither English nor Chinese). The linguist Ge Chuangui first proposed the concept of "China English", and then Mr. Li Wenzhong further

summarized and generalized the characteristics of "China English", pointing out that "China English" is based on standard English, and expresses unique phenomena and things in Chinese society and culture in various fields. It is not affected by the mother tongue, and enters English communication through transliteration, translation borrowing, and semantic regeneration, using English vocabulary, pronunciation, and discourse with Chinese characteristics. In short, "China English" is a language variation that is helpful in spreading Chinese culture and can be accepted by standard English.

Since "China English" is a language variation that exists and has been accepted by more and more people, it shows that it has its rationality for existence, so our English teaching should make corresponding adjustments. In addition to using English-speaking country's social and cultural materials, appropriate Chinese cultural materials should be added, instead of blindly pursuing the authenticity of language materials.

5.2 The Importance of English-Speaking Country's Cultural Input

Any language is a carrier of a certain culture and is a part of culture. Language cannot be separated from culture, and culture has an influence on language. Its impact mainly lies in the influence on the semantic structure of vocabulary and the organizational structure of discourse. Among them, language vocabulary is the most obvious tool for carrying cultural information and reflecting human life. Various languages, including English, have many words with specific cultural information, including political systems, religious beliefs, customs, etc. Therefore, in daily teaching activities, the more cultural knowledge related to the target language that students understand, the better they can understand the input of the target language. At the same time, in today's world where English has become a language of the world, cross-cultural communication is an issue that cannot be avoided. The use of language is not only about correctness but also appropriateness in a specific context. Paying attention to cultural input in teaching can cultivate cross-cultural awareness, enabling students to express themselves correctly in appropriate language in specific situations.

Language is one aspect of culture. The lack of penetration of language and cultural knowledge in English teaching will have an impact on the improvement of students' English communication ability. Considering that there is still room for improvement in cultivating students' cultural literacy and communication appropriateness in university English classes, teachers should implant cultural knowledge in language form teaching, and teach language communication principles in combination with social and cultural factors. Teachers can play more English native-born social communication video clips to students, allowing them to simulate social contexts and cultivate their language appropriateness and communication skills.

5.3 The Importance of Developing Communication Skills

In his book "On Communicative Competence," linguist Hymes (1972) proposed the view that "language must have a principle of use, otherwise the rules of grammar lose their meaning." [6]The so-called "principle of use" refers to the appropriateness of language use, or in simple terms, the ability to speak appropriately in different situations. "Situation" refers to the "context" as defined by linguists or functionalists. The theory of sociolinguistics calls the coherent discourse that produces certain meanings in a specific context as discourse. [2]

Foreign language teaching must focus on the development of social communicative skills. It is necessary to organize teaching activities from a macro to micro level, from discourse to language points and teaching models.

6 CONCLUSION

English teachers should strengthen the cultivation of students' language awareness. English teaching is based on cultivating students' language knowledge, and aims to cultivate their communication skills. People's language communication is influenced by many factors, such as specific occasions, conversational purposes, and the identities of both sides. In other words, the language communication of the conversants presents different linguistic styles according to different communication contexts. Therefore, cultivating students' communication skills cannot be divorced from specific language domains and communication situations. Teachers should provide students with simulated environments of real communication by various means in teaching, allowing them to gradually master language variants that conform to various language domains, rules, and strategies for various conversations, so as to continually improve their communication skills. It is particularly important to pay attention to the fact that with the increased demand for composite English talents in the market, teachers should strengthen the cultivation of students' language and communication skills in the workplace environment, and closely combine basic English with English communication skills related to their professions. Only in this way can we improve students' comprehensive English abilities and cultivate new English communication talents that meet the demands and requirements of the job market.

The theory of sociolinguistics provides us with a new way of thinking about daily English teaching. This requires English teachers to not only teach pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and other language knowledge in isolation, but also to combine these language knowledge with social factors to cultivate highly qualified and intercultural communicative talents.

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