

Language and Society, the notion of language, Dialect and Accent

What is social context in BSL?

In linguistics we sometimes might seem to treat language as though it was nothing to do with people. It is seen as a sealed system, subject to its own rules.

Social context recognizes that people use language and that language is a part of society. Social context tries to describe, and account for, the different ways that different people use language.

Social context looks at relationships between language and society and looks at language as people use it. It considers the relationship between a person's language and their social identity.

We observe the way that people use language differently and try to explain why this is. This explaining is not always easy.

Social context asks

- (a) what variations are there in a language and
- (b) why do they come about?

Social context is, interesting, exciting and fraught with difficulties. There are very few definite neat answers to things. What we need to do is try to become aware of the way language varies according to who people are, what they are doing, and the attitudes they have to their language. We need to remember that there has been very little research into the Social context of BSL. This course may well raise more questions than it can answer, but at least we can become aware of the issues involved, even if we cannot come up with a simple answer.

Social context will think about variety within a language. Everybody who speaks a language has a very wide linguistic repertoire unless they have very severe learning difficulties, or are learning the language as a foreign language. This means, they can use language in many different ways, depending on the situation they are in. The sort of language that they use also depends on their social background and social identity.

We have said that Social context looks at the way relationship between society and people and language.

What is the relationship between language and people?

There are 4 possibilities:

- a) language influences society and people
1. b); people and society influence language

- b) there is interaction as language influences people and society *and* people and society influence language;
- c) there is no influence of either so language is just a tool used by people and there is no social effect.

Dialect vs. Accent

The good news is that the difference between accents and dialects is much less murky than that between dialects and language. The bad news is that there are some disagreements on what those differences are.

In most uses, “accent” and “dialect” are used interchangeably. Accent seems to be used far more than dialect, as “dialect” sounds slightly more scientific. Both words are used pretty liberally in our series *The United States Of Accents*, as well as in a number of other publications, but they are not the same.

The definition of accents and dialects used most often by people who work with language is that accents are just one part of a dialect. An accent refers to how people pronounce words, whereas a dialect is all-encompassing. A dialect includes the pronunciations, grammar and vocabulary that people use within a group. Thus our series would be more aptly named *The United States Of Dialects*, but that doesn’t have the same ring to it.

Another definition that has been used to explain the difference is that dialects refer to the way people speak their mother tongue, and accents refer to how someone speaks another language. A person speaking English with an Italian accent, for example. This doesn’t really capture all of the ways “accent” is used, however, because having a New York accent doesn’t mean you ever spoke another language. Closer to the the first definition, some people use “accent” for pronunciation and “dialect” for the words people use. This can be useful for writers to talk about these two aspects differently. Unless otherwise specified, however, the first definition is likely the one that’s being used.

In order to avoid the messy connotations of “dialect” and “language,” linguists now use the word “variety” instead. The word refers to variation in the language, and it is used to group together linguistic clusters in a more exacting way.

There are geographic varieties (Southern English, Boston English), social varieties (upper-class Spanish, middle-class English), standard varieties (Standard English, Standard French) and much more. You also have your own personal variety, called an idiolect, which is a way of talking that's specific to you. It hasn't been used among non-linguists very often, but it's the most useful term if you really want to break down how language works.