
UNIT 2 SPEECH COMMUNITY AND MULTILINGUALISM

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In the previous unit we made you aware of the importance of social factors in any linguistic analysis. In this unit we will explain the concept of speech community in a multilingual framework. You will, therefore,

- understand the notion 'speech community'
- appreciate some of the problems that the notion entails
- be able to problematize the notion and look at its different dimensions
- understand the possible ways of characterizing speech communities
- get an insight into the ways in which individuals locate and identify themselves in relation to their speech community.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Social scientists tend to categorize human groups into convenient discrete units such as 'community'. Community implies certain shared characteristics observable to the outsider, as well as, tacitly acceptable to the members of the community. Human groups or communities may, thus, share cultural traits such as customs, manners, food-habits, dress, belief-systems, etc., and the members of such groups may perceive themselves as belonging to one community as distinct from another community. Traditionally, religion and occupation have provided two universally acceptable bases of demarcation of communities. Thus, one may talk in terms of the Christian or the Hindu community, an agrarian or shepherd community or the business community, etc. For the linguist, another major bases for the demarcation of communities is language (or speech). Hence the notion of "speech community", or a human group whose members share among other things a language. In the following sections we shall examine this notion in some detail and discuss some of the problems that this apparently simple notion leads us into.

2.2 ON DEFINING A SPEECH COMMUNITY

The terms 'speech community' is probably derived from The German *Sprachgemeinschaft* and refers to a group of individuals who share, *inter alia*,

certain linguistic features and who might be said to speak the same language (or dialect or variety). While theoretical linguists like to use this term to denote a completely homogeneous group in which all members speak the same language (with perhaps the same degree of competence and fluency) with hardly any individual differences, for the sociolinguist the term denotes a 'real' group of people living in a 'real' world. Such a 'real' group would obviously consist of individuals who are different from one another in several respects such as age, sex, education, social class, etc. All these impinge on language and, hence, these individuals would differ from one another in the matter of language too. And yet, despite all these differences, all these individuals like to identify themselves with this or that speech community. Such a group or community may be simply defined as "all the people who use a given language (or dialect)" according to John Lyons (1970). Earlier Charles Hockett (1958) had provided another definition of speech community. According to him "each language defines a speech community: the whole set of people who communicate with each other, either directly or indirectly, via the common language". The two definitions given above focus on **common language and communication**.

A further dimension is added by another definition according to which a speech community is "any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs (language/dialect/variety) and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language use" (Gumperz, 1968). From the foregoing it is clear that the three major components for any definition of a speech community are:

- a) a common language
- b) frequent interaction and communication
- c) distinguishable from other communities/groups.

Thus, any group of people who perceive themselves as belonging to one community on the basis of some shared values, customs, manners, etc. may qualify to be called a speech community if they also share a common language and see themselves as being different from speakers of other languages. Hence, one may talk about the English speech community, the Spanish speech community, the Hindi speech community, the Telugu community, the Bangla speech community and so on.

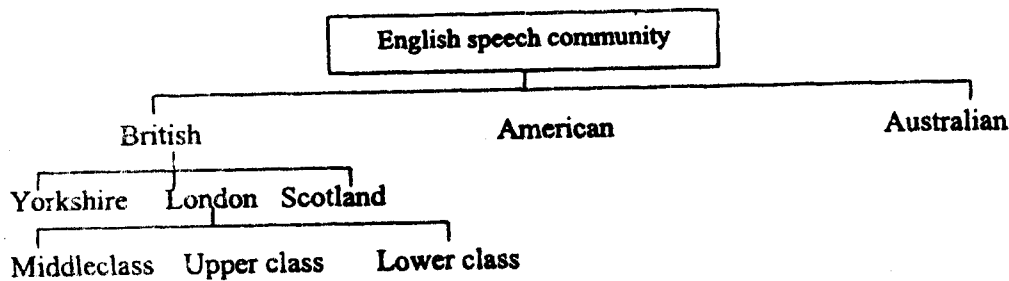
2.3 SOME PROBLEMS RELATING TO THE DEFINITIONS

While the notion of speech community may appear to be rather simple from the definition given in 2.2 above, on closer examination we find that these, and several other definitions, give rise to several problems and leave many questions unanswered. In the following pages we shall discuss some of these problems and questions.

While the statement "all the people who use the same language" may appear very attractive, it can only account for very small, localized communities, like some small tribal groups living in relative isolation from the rest of the world, and using a language that does not have any variation on the basis of geographical area (dialect) or social class (sociolect). The members of this small, isolated, relatively uniform and geographically restricted community may truly be said to use **the same language**. However, when we come to some of the major languages of the world we find not only that the speakers of these languages are infinitely larger in number but also that they are distributed in different geographical areas (even different nations) and also there is great deal of social differentiation among them. To illustrate this point, perhaps the best example one can cite is that of the English speech community. Now English is spoken and used by billions of people world-wide. Even if one were

to say that only native speakers of English are to be counted as members of the English speech community, we are still left with a huge population spread over America, Canada, The United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand which taken collectively constitutes the English speech community. Within this extremely large speech community one can immediately see divisions which are universally acknowledged and often asserted by the members of this community. Thus we often hear people talk about the American or Canadian or British or Australian English speech communities.

Furthermore, within the British English speech community, we often hear of distinctions made between Yorkshire English, Scottish English, Irish English, Welsh English and so on, plus, of course, Standard British English. And since all large societies tend to have rather well-defined social class distinctions, within American or British or Australian English speech community, one would naturally find varieties of English associated with the upper class, the middle and the lower classes as shown in Labov's study. Thus, the fact that major languages (spoken by large populations) tend to have regional and social varieties and that speakers of these varieties are often identified, recognised and evaluated in terms of the variety they speak, makes the notion of a **common language** or **the same language** rather problematic. One can cite more examples (such as the example of the French or the Hindi speech community) to further support this position. French spoken in Canada or in France is quite different from each other. Similarly, Awadhi is different from Bhojpuri and Khari Bholi. So, while to the outside world or the social scientist there is one English speech community, to the insiders i.e. to the members of the community, there are perceptible differences between different sub-groups, and the speakers often invoke and highlight these differences in order to assert their distinct identity. A look at the following diagram should make this more clear.



The second component of the definition of speech community viz. frequent interaction and communication, also poses a problem. Again, given small and localized speech communities where everyone knows everyone else and there is almost daily interaction among the members, it may be reasonable to set up the criterion of frequent interaction and mutual communication; in the case of large speech communities spread over different parts of the globe, it may be rather unrealistic to talk of frequent or regular interaction. If we take the example of the Hindi speech community, we shall immediately see the point being made here. Now Hindi is spoken by several million people who live in different parts of India extending from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. Members of the Hindi speech community, though concentrated in the so-called Hindi-belt, are to be found settled in non-Hindi areas such as Manipur, Kerala, Tamilnadu, etc. Moreover, Hindi speakers have also gone and settled in other parts of the world such as the West Indies, Mauritius, the U.S.A., the U.K. etc. While one can reasonably assume a fair degree of interaction among people living in the same or adjoining areas, it is hard to imagine any degree of frequency of interaction among groups settled in non-Hindi areas of India or in countries other than India. Not only is there an absence of frequency of interaction, let us say, between Hindi speakers settled in Trivandrum and other Hindi speakers in the Hindi-belt or between Hindi speakers settled in Trinidad and Tobago and those Hindi speakers who have settled in Mauritius or Fiji, these groups who migrate and settle in non-Hindi areas or in countries abroad also develop forms of Hindi which

may be substantially different from the forms of Hindi used in the Hindi heartland (Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, etc.) It may thus be said that whereas within sub-groups (e.g. Trinidadian Hindi speakers, Mauritian Hindi Speakers, Kerala-based Hindi speakers) i.e. at the level of small groups, there may be frequent interaction, communication and shared linguistic features, at the level of the huge Hindi-speaking population, clubbed together under the label "Hindi Speech Community" not only in one likely to encounter a great deal of linguistic diversity and variation, but also an absence of regular or frequent interaction. That being so, how is it and why is it that members of such large groups (vastly dispersed and with no regular communication links or interaction) identify with a particular language and assert their 'belongingness' to a speech community. We shall try to tackle these questions in another section of this Unit. But before we do that, there is a third component of the definition of a speech community and the problems related thereto.

The third component of the definition of speech community refers to 'distinctiveness' or the perception that one is a member of a speech community and that his/her speech community has a language distinct from that of another speech community. Within the English speech community itself, as we have seen earlier, there are major divisions such as American English, British English and Australian English. Thus, while to the world at large, the three together with Canadian and New Zealand English speech communities, constitute a single speech community, the members of these communities may perceive themselves as belonging to distinct separate speech communities - the American speech community, the British speech community and the Australian or Canadian speech community. So much so that their scholars and linguists write separate grammars of their Englishes, and the speakers pride themselves on being different from the others. Do they then constitute three or four different speech communities or a single, large speech community - the English speech community.

Again, there may be cases where one community considers itself as being distinct from another in respect of language e.g. the Konkani speakers consider themselves as a separate speech community while the Marathi speech community, by and large, considers Konkani only to be a dialect of Marathi and hence, denies Konkani speakers the status of a separate, distinct speech community. More all less similar was the case with Bangla and Assamese till a few decades ago - the Bangla speech community considered Assamese a dialect of Bangla, while the Assamese speakers thought of themselves as possessing a distinct language and hence constituting a separate speech community. Such examples can be multiplied; the point is that on close examination even the criterion of distinctiveness turns out to be rather problematic.

2.4 BI/MULTILINGUALISM AND THE NOTION OF SPEECH COMMUNITY

From the definitions of speech community that we have given so far it is clear that there is a general belief that each language defines and delimits a speech community. So the general equation that seems to be operative is "one language - one community". We have already seen some of the problems inherent in the notion of one language or a common language. Now we turn to another question: how do we determine and name a speech community that operates with and uses two or more languages? Canada is an excellent example. There most of the people learn, use and function with French and English. Do we then call a community of such people the French speech community or the English speech community (that is if we share the belief that each language defines and delimits a speech community)? Within the Indian context, widespread societal bilingualism (a state of things in which bilingualism is a feature of whole groups or societies rather than a matter of

individual accomplishment) is the norm rather than an exception. Large sections of populations in India operate with two or more languages/dialects. Thus, it is not uncommon to meet people in Delhi who know Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and English, or people in Tamilnadu who know Tamil, Kannada, Hindi and English and so on. While, obviously, such people cannot be said to constitute the English speech community, what name/label would be most appropriate for such groups or communities. One way of taking care of such a situation could be to variously name the Delhi population as Hindi speech community (which also knows and uses Punjabi, Urdu and English), Punjabi speech community (which also knows and uses Hindi, Urdu and English), and Urdu speech community (which also knows and uses Hindi, Punjabi and English). But this indeed would be a very tedious way of dealing with the notion of speech community. One would, in defence of such a labelling, invoke the notion of 'mother tongue' of 'native language' and say that it is the mother tongue or native language which defines a speech community. But even the notion of mother tongue is problematic since we know of many people within our Indian context who do not know how to speak, read or write their so-called mother tongue, while they are quite proficient in several other Indian languages including English (and, indeed, even proficient in some foreign languages). It is not rare to meet a Malayalee who does not know Malayalam, a Gujarati who doesn't know Gujarati and a Punjabi who doesn't know Punjabi. How can they then qualify to be members of the Malayalee, Gujarati or Punjabi speech communities. It might be more sensible then, to think in terms of bilingual or multilingual speech communities where two or more languages serve the communicative and interactional needs of large groups of people. For doing this, one would of course, have to suspend one's belief in the 'one-language: one community' equation. In the light of the foregoing it may be reasonable to suggest that speech communities may or may not be co-terminus with one or the other language. Each group of people, each social aggregate has to be viewed as operating not just with one language but with a verbal repertoire, and it is this notion of verbal repertoire that we shall discuss in the next section.

2.4.1 Verbal Repertoire

Even while considering so-called monolingual societies or communities, it has been widely acknowledged, that language manifests itself in different forms (varieties). These different forms may be determined and generated by such factors as age, education, sex, socio-economic class, regional location, etc. And it is the sum total of all these that, somehow, constitutes a given language. Thus, even while talking about monolingual communities, it is a good idea to think of different varieties, dialects, styles and registers (use based) varieties. A monolingual speech community, then, would have a verbal repertoire comprising different dialects, styles, registers, etc. with each of its members sharing in a varying degree the total verbal repertoire. It may be clarified here that it is only a rare individual (if at all) who would control the entire verbal repertoire of his/her community. By the same logic, bi/multilingual communities may be seen to have different languages with their styles, registers, etc. in their verbal repertoire, with each member having differential control over small or large parts of that repertoire. Recalling the earlier example we gave of a community of speakers using Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and English, the verbal repertoire of such a community may be represented as follows

Verbal Repertoire

| | | | |
|-------|------|---------|---------|
| Hindi | Urdu | Punjabi | English |
|-------|------|---------|---------|

(with their styles, registers, etc.)

Now each member of such a community would have differential control over parts of this verbal repertoire. Some would know all the four languages (and their different styles etc.), while some others may know three or two or even one part of the community's verbal repertoire. However, since most members would know two or more parts, such a community can be best characterised as a multilingual or bilingual

community. Such communities, possessing multilingual verbal repertoires, also evolve tacit rules governing use of different languages in different spheres of life (known as domains) such as home, market place, office, school, place of worship, etc. just as monolingual communities evolve tacit rules governing use of different styles/registers/varieties in different domains.

2.5 THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE SPEECH COMMUNITY

In 2.3.2 we had raised a question: 'Given diversity and variation in a language and also given the fact that there may be absence of frequent interaction, how is it that all members of a social group claim to belong to a single speech community?' In this section we shall try to answer this and related issues which pertain to the individuals who constitute a speech community and the ways in which they see themselves in relation to the language or languages of their community. Going back to our example of the English speech community, let us take the case of a taxi-driver in London hailing from Yorkshire. Now this person would start out as a speaker of the Yorkshire dialect of British English and would learn and start using Cockney English (the variety used by working and lower classes in London). If he is ambitious and has the opportunity, he may learn standard British English too. Now, this gentleman will have membership of three communities - Yorkshire speech community, Cockney speech community and Standard British English speech community, and depending on where he is, with whom he is interacting and what kind of identity he wishes to project, he may invoke anyone of these memberships and also emphasize his distinctiveness from the American or the Australian speech communities. While operating with these multiple identities and maintaining his distinctiveness, he would also claim membership of the overall speech community known to the world as "the English speech community".

In a bi/multilingual setting, one can understand this kind of individual strategy by looking at the example of a tribal child. Let us say a Santhali speaker learn Santhali as his/her first language; then s/he learns a variety of Hindi (some regional dialect of Hindi) and through formal education s/he goes on to learn standard Hindi and English. Now for this tribal individual there are identity options. S/he can claim membership of the Santhali speech community or (when s/he has negative perceptions of his/her tribal language) s/he project himself/herself as a member of the Hindi speech community or of the speech community represented by the dialect of Hindi used in his/her region or the neighbouring region. Now imagine a day when this person goes to America and settles down there, using only English most or all of the time. This would add another dimension to his/her language identity. After twenty years or so in America s/he completely gives up his/her Santhali identity, partly uses his/her Hindi identity and operates most of the time with his/her English identity. It is a different matter that to the members of the English speech community s/he will always be an outsider - an Indian, a Hindi speaker or a tribal Santhali speaker. What is important to remember is that individuals are constantly redefining their linguistic identities and relocating themselves in relation to this or that speech community, as well as, in relation to different sub-groups within a large, diversified and widely dispersed speech community. Individuals within speech communities, thus, tend to have local, regional (supralocal) and national identities and locate themselves accordingly in relation to smaller or larger speech groups or speech communities.

2.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we introduced you to the notion of a speech community and the problems involved in defining it. We also tried to give you an insight into the ways in which

individual locate and identify themselves in relation to their speech community. These notions were explained in terms of the multilingual reality of India.

2.7 KEY WORDS

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| speech community | a group of people who form a community, e.g. a village, a region, a nation, and who have at least one speech variety in common. In bilingual and multilingual communities, people would usually have more than one speech variety in common. |
| dialect | a variety of a language, spoken in one part of a country (regional dialect), or by people belonging to a particular social class (social dialect), which is different in some words, grammar and/or pronunciation from other forms of the same language. |
| bilingualism | The use of at least two languages either by an individual or by a group of speakers, such as the inhabitants of a particular region or a nation. |
| multilingualism | the use of three or more languages by an individual or by a group of speakers such as the inhabitants of a particular region or a nation. |
| verbal repertoire | the speech varieties which an individual knows |
| monolingual | a person who knows and uses only one language |
| register | a speech variety used by a particular group of people, usually sharing the same occupation (eg. doctors, lawyers) or the same interests (stamp collectors, cricket fans) |

2.8 QUESTIONS

1. From the definitions of 'speech community' and the discussions thereon, try to construct your own definition of speech community.
2. Think about your own past and present life and try to describe your own speech community.
3. Having read the entire unit, discuss how 'real' and 'useful' is the notion of 'speech community'.

4. If you can't count upto 20 in a language, or don't know any nursery rhymes or small narratives in that language, or cannot hold simple day-to-day conversation on ordinary topics in that language, can you still claim membership of that language as your mother tongue and a membership of that speech community? Discuss.
5. Do you agree with the 'one language: one community' theory? What other factors, apart from language, may determine one's identification with a speech community?

2.9 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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