

SOCIOLINGUISTICS

The branch of linguistics which studies the relation between language and society. Though the social aspect of language attracted early attention, notably from the great Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was perhaps only in the 1950s that serious investigation began.

Pioneers like Uriel Weinreich, Charles Ferguson and Joshua Fishman drew attention to a range of fascinating phenomena, such as diglossia and the effects of language contact. But the key figure here is arguably the American William Labov, who in 1960s began a series of investigations of variation in language, investigations which have revolutionized our understanding of **how speakers use their languages** and which have finally resolved the Saussurean paradox.

Sociolinguistics may be usefully defined as the **study of variation** in language, or more precisely of variation within speech communities, since the purely geographical aspects of variation had been studied for generations by the students of dialect geography, the study of regional dialects. In a speech community of any size, there is considerable variation among individuals: stockbrokers do not speak like plumbers, women do not speak like men, young people do not speak like old people, and so on. Moreover, even a single individual is not confined to a single variety of the language: you do not use the language in the same way when you are chatting to friends in a bar, when you are being interviewed for a job, when you are writing an essay, and when you are being introduced to the Dean.

Earlier linguists had, of course, noticed this variation, but they were inclined to dismiss it as peripheral, as inconsequential, even as a nuisance getting the way of good descriptions. Today, however, we recognize that variation is an integral and essential part of language, and that absence of variation is almost pathological.