

Sociolinguistics: A Very Short Introduction

By John Edwards

Questions for Thought and Discussion

- How do we distinguish between “language” and “dialect”?
- What is “correct” language?
- Are some languages and dialects intrinsically better than others? If so, in what ways?
- Why do languages change over time?
- Why is it important to understand the “family” groupings in which most languages exist?
- Why isn’t “word-for-word” translation generally very useful? How much creative freedom should translators have?
- Why did the sociolinguist William Labov write that “to obtain the data most important for linguistic theory, we have to observe how people speak when they are not being observed”? And how could or should we make such observations...?
- How can we account for the persistence of dialects that have little social prestige or status?
- Why (and how) have academies and other formal bodies often tried to “protect” particular languages or dialects? Is this a good and/or reasonable thing to do?
- Does the particular language you speak determine the way you think?
- Can languages decline or “decay”?
- Is there such a thing as “linguistic imperialism”?
- Is the internet good or bad for “small” languages?
- Are the different languages of bilingual or multilingual individuals associated with different personalities?
- What is the implication of this remark made by the linguist Jack Chambers: “the underlying cause of sociolinguistic difference ... is the human instinct to establish and maintain social identity”?
- What sorts of differences exist between men and women when it comes to swearing and politeness? Why do they exist, and what do they reveal?
- Why – in addition to its most obvious role as a system of communication – does language have such powerful symbolic meaning? In what ways is this meaning made manifest?
- Are people who speak more than one language likely to be more intelligent than “monolinguals”?
- Is it reasonable to think of the communication systems of animals as “languages”? All of them? Some of them? Why or why not?
- What are some of the important consequences of personal and group names?

Other books by John Edwards

Multilingualism (Penguin, 1995)

Language and Identity (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Language Diversity in the Classroom (Multilingual Matters, 2010)

Minority Languages and Group Identity: Cases and Categories (John Benjamins, 2010)

Challenges in the Social Life of Language (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

Multilingualism: Understanding Linguistic Diversity (Continuum, 2012)