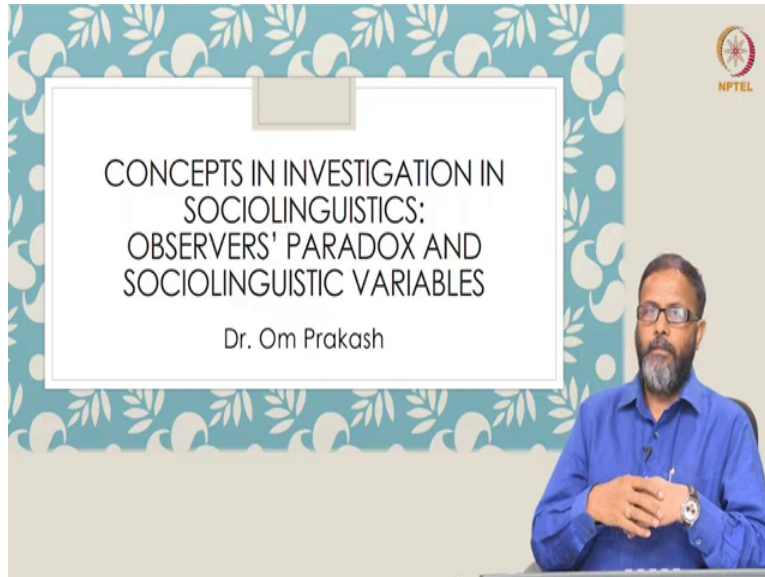


Fundamental Concepts in Sociolinguistics
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Observer's Paradox and Sociolinguistic Variable

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Welcome to class. During discussion about William Labov's two case studies, one conducted in Martha's Vineyard Island and the other, the New York City Stratification of English study, we came across two frequently used terms: one was 'observers' paradox' and the other was 'sociolinguistic variables'.

These two terms are very important and significant in order to carry out research in sociolinguistics. Because if you are working in the field or if you try to understand the sociolinguistic phenomena of language in action, language in use in a sociocultural space, we need to understand these two terms: observer's paradox and sociolinguistic variables.

Observer's Paradox refers to the steps and the cautions taken by sociolinguists in their field work and as a common person we should also understand sociolinguistic variables as a term. These two phrases or these two concepts are central in entire language and variation study. These two concepts are central and that is why I decided to talk about these central themes and concepts called observer's paradox and sociolinguistic variables in this class.

You remember the centralized diphthongs in Martha's Vineyard Island that we talked about in case study one by William Labov in one of our video lectures and we saw that a particular sound becomes the marker of identity. And the age group of 31 and 45 that believes to be custodian of the language, culture and lifestyle of the Martha's Vineyard Island, was so particular about using it and asserting their identity in contrast with the identity of the outside visitors.

Not only that, we also saw that in three departmental stores of three different socioeconomic strata in terms of visitors and salespersons working there, a particular sound becomes the marker of identity and Labov concludes that the ranking of the occurrence of this sound can be compared with the social ranking stratification.

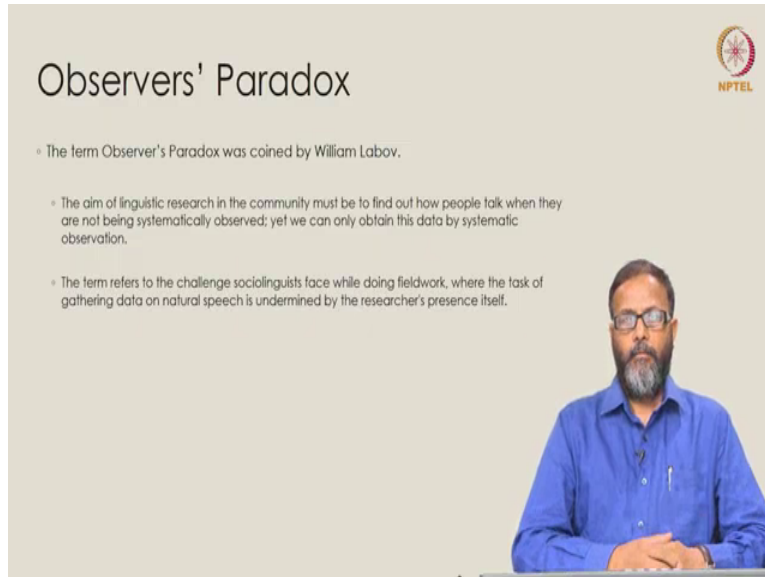
So, how come a single small sound becomes such a vigorous marker of identity in both the cases and how it becomes a sociolinguistic variable? But the question is that, is it easy to go and record and witness the real regular unmarked natural speech that too when the researcher is present around. And those days tape recorders were used.

Today, we have very sophisticated devices for recording. But imagine those 60s and 70s when we had primitive, old style equipment. So, the presence of the researcher or the investigator, for example, if you are taking an interview, the whole setup makes the speaker conscious. And in the purpose of getting the natural data, natural speech is defeated, because the interviewee or the person who is giving you data or the person who is interacting with you becomes conscious and then you find a different register altogether. So, it is a very tricky situation. And Labov categorically mentions observers' paradox.

So, we work in a paradox, where we want to have natural speech. At the same time, our presence or the setting that we create for this recording makes the respondent conscious and he comes up with a more formalized register. So, that is the paradox. How to collect data then and how to identify sociolinguistic variables for which we are looking for data?

So, these two are technique-related concepts in the variation studies and that is why they are so crucial and central to this whole enterprise. And today, we are going to talk about these two concepts: observers' paradox and sociolinguistic variables.

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The slide is titled "Observers' Paradox" and features the NPTEL logo in the top right corner. It contains three bullet points: "The term Observer's Paradox was coined by William Labov.", "The aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain this data by systematic observation.", and "The term refers to the challenge sociolinguists face while doing fieldwork, where the task of gathering data on natural speech is undermined by the researcher's presence itself." A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue shirt, is shown in a video inset at the bottom right of the slide.

The term observers' paradox was coined by William Labov himself, because during his visit to Martha's Vineyard Island, he faced the same thing, experienced the same thing. And then he sought a variety of ways for getting the natural speech from respondents. And he coined this term observers' paradox. How the sociolinguist or the researcher or the person in the field works in this paradox and how to resolve this paradox. He also gives some solutions and suggestions.

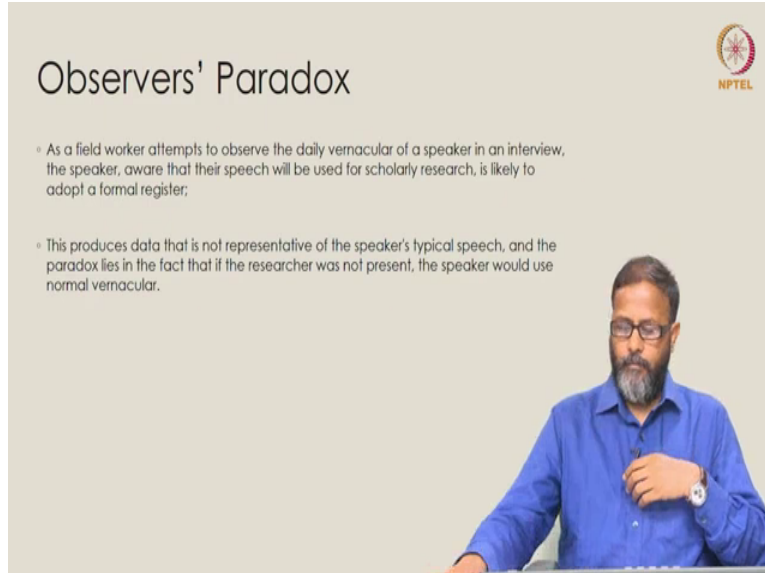
The aim, he says, of linguistic research in the community, must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed. Yet, we can only obtain this data by systematic observation. This is the paradox that you can get the real data only when you are able to observe people in their verbal exchanges and dwellings when they are not aware that they are being observed. At the same time, if you do not observe them systematically, you cannot get the real data. So, that is the paradox he is talking about. How is it possible?

And the term refers to the challenge sociolinguists face while doing field work, where the task of gathering data on natural speech is undermined by the researcher's presence itself. So, it is interesting. Your presence makes the other person conscious and here you are to collect natural speech and data without making the respondent conscious.

So, this is observers' paradox and this is what anyone and everyone working in the field of sociolinguistics with the communities and social groups need to resolve. So, observer's paradox,

what is this observer paradox? Now, I think you are able to understand and how to resolve this paradox in order to get the real data.

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The slide is titled "Observers' Paradox" and features the NPTEL logo in the top right corner. It contains two bullet points explaining the paradox. In the bottom right corner, there is a photograph of a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue shirt, sitting at a desk.

Observers' Paradox

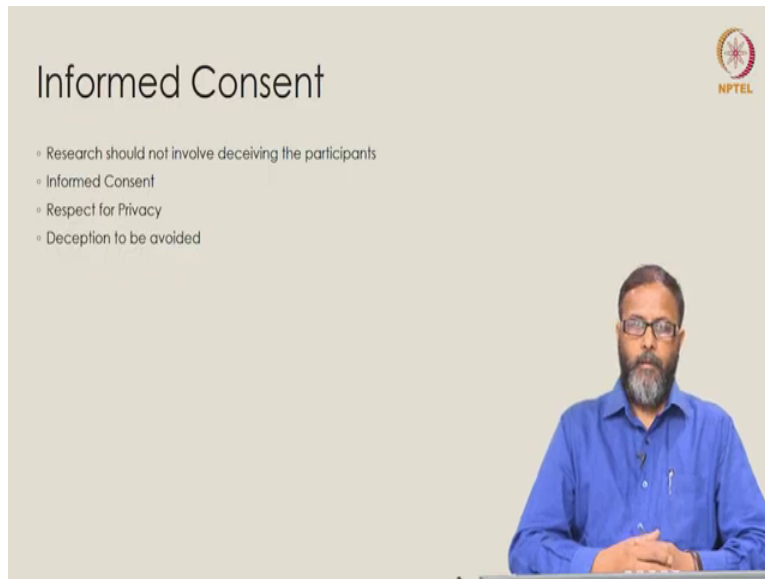
- As a field worker attempts to observe the daily vernacular of a speaker in an interview, the speaker, aware that their speech will be used for scholarly research, is likely to adopt a formal register;
- This produces data that is not representative of the speaker's typical speech, and the paradox lies in the fact that if the researcher was not present, the speaker would use normal vernacular.

So, as a field worker attempts to observe the daily vernacular of a speaker in an interview, the speaker is aware that their speech is being used for only scholarly and research purposes, and thus he or she is likely to adopt a formal register. So, as a researcher or as a sociolinguist when you approach a respondent, or group of respondents, you brief them your intent, you brief them about the purpose of the study and you get the consent from them. So, no ethical dilemma here.

You give them, you get the consent and you give the details of your purpose and intent. But one thing is for sure that despite knowing the fact that their speech is being systematically observed only for academic and research purposes they will still be suspicious and conscious. And the whole purpose of collecting natural speech and natural samples is defeated.

This produces data that is not representative of the speaker's typical speech and the paradox lies in the fact that if the researcher was not present, if the researcher would use normal vernacular, the speaker would use normal vernacular. So, the reason, the object for what we are looking for gets lost in the process. This is observers' paradox. So, how to resolve it?

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If you look at the 60s and 70s, we are talking in the 21st century, 2021. The codes, conducts and practices have changed. Today, we have an elaborate ethical guideline to carry out research with the community. And we cannot afford to follow the techniques the way even William Labov followed in New York City, where the speakers were not informed, where the respondents were not informed that their speech is being recorded.

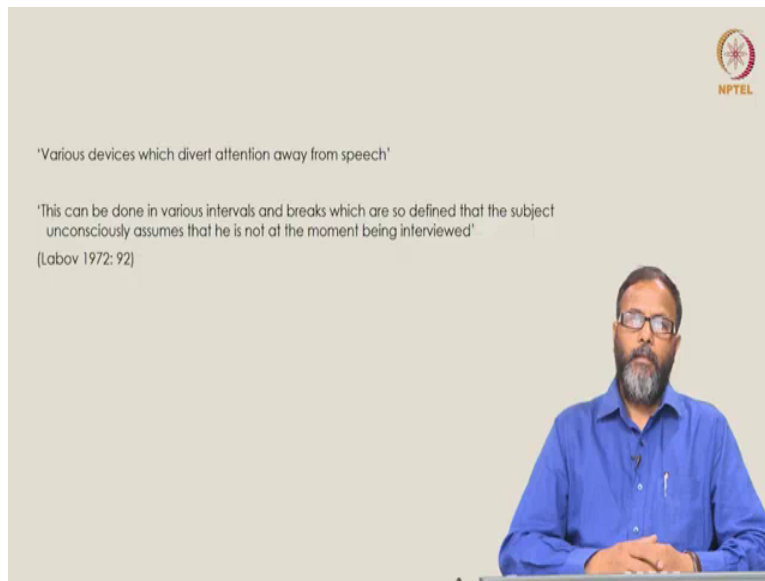
You remember that whole gimmick where I know William Labov will disguise as a customer, as a visitor to this departmental store and he would say, where can I find a lady's shoe. And he would get a response. And if he wanted them to repeat, emphasize, he would say, excuse me, that means you repeat, and then he would record it.

Now, in such cases, the informants were not informed, the respondents were not informed, but today, we cannot afford to do that. Without informed consent, we cannot afford to carry out the work. So, as a researcher, it is always a challenge for you, how do you resolve it and what kind of situation you create with your presence and the presence of all such equipment and how a formal setting is avoided and it becomes normal natural speech.

So, you have to engage your informants in multiple ways, where they are emotionally charged, where they are filled with emotions. And once they become less aware of the fact that it is being observed, natural speech starts coming. But informed consent is a must. You have to respect the


privacy of the respondent and no deceptive behavior should be displayed with them. So, the formal ethical guideline today mandates that you need to be open, transparent, and that you need to have informed consent, respect the privacy of the respondent and no deceptive behavior on part of the researcher.

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So, keeping this in mind, Labov suggests various devices which divert attention away from speech. This can be done in various intervals and breaks, which are so defined that the subject unconsciously assumes that he is not at the moment being interviewed. So, you have to make the respondent less conscious. And Labov suggests a number of devices to be used, like distractions, like receiving calls, meanwhile, like distracting the subject of the respondent in some other direction, to some other theme and topics. And when it becomes natural, you can get a natural speech sample.

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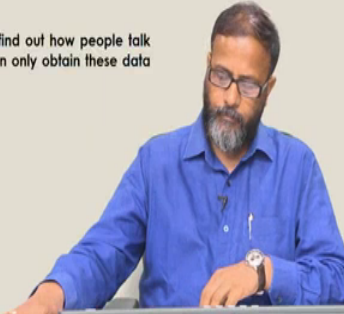


Emotional, Casual, Regular and Unmarked Expressions

- The 'danger of death' question: 'Have you ever been in a situation in which you were in serious danger of being killed?'
- 'Often he becomes involved in the narration to the extent that...signs of emotional tension appear' (1972: 92)

'the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation.'

- Labov (1972:209)



What is important is that as a researcher, we had to be in the field to collect casual, regular, unmarked expressions. Unmarked expression denotes that expression which, out of all possible choices, is the most frequent and natural choice that the respondent makes. Because if the respondent tries to make another choice, which is not normally a choice for regular speech, then that is a marked expression. Unmarked means which is natural, spontaneous and a regular choice in terms of any word, sentences, possession, any idiomatic expressions, whatever.

So, during his Martha's Vineyard Island survey, Labov tried to influence and charge the respondents with emotions, so, for example, danger of death questions. So, he would ask, have you ever been in a situation in which you were in a serious danger of being killed? And this question would make the respondent nostalgic and get lost in his own ideas, remembering and narrating any such event where he or she felt the danger of death.


Possibly one of the examples of Martha's Vineyard Island story or research, there was a person who remembered how he was almost killed by his brother. And interestingly, the wife was not even aware of it after so many years of their marriage.

So, he would push them to this emotional area, where they will be emotionally charged and talk about the issue or the event. They would recount those moments. And they are so emotionally charged that they will forget that they are being observed, that they are being recorded, that their

speech is being systematically observed. In questions like these, often he becomes involved in the narration to the extent that signs of emotional tension appear; Labov recounts in his 1972 work.


He frames the objective of such initiatives and works in his '72 account. He says the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed, yet we can only obtain this data by systematic observation. So, he continuously talks about this paradox and the ways you devise and invent to remove this paradox that is important.

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Language Variation

- We vary in our use of language/dialect/variety/code in terms of
 - pronunciation (accent)
 - choice of words
 - morphological differences
 - syntactic structures
 - style of speech
 - Conversation style etc.
- While the diversity of variation is huge, there are restrictions on variation
- Such variations have patterns and are consistent in a particular speech community. Such linguistic variations can be attributed to differences in the social characteristics of the speakers using the language.
- They are related to
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Class
 - Geographical location
 - Socio-cultural space
 - Identity
 - Solidarity etc.



Another important thing is that when we talk about language variation, it is not simply a different dialect or a different register or a different style of speaking, degree of formality, but it is more of a natural social phenomenon, because as a professor when I talk to you in a class my register is entirely different.

Same person who meets you in the corridor of the building or maybe in the marketplace or in the mall, my style of talking to you will be different. If I am talking to an organized crowd on a public platform, my style will be a little different. My registers will be different.

If I am talking about some technical area, like oceanic engineering for that matter, if I am talking about electronic engineering or computer science, my jargon or the technical words that I will be

using in my dispositions will be entirely different. So, we are not talking about that kind of variation, we are not talking about variation in registers. We are not talking about variation in style. And to know more about registers and style, you can watch the video that we did on registers and style.

I am not talking about different dialects, I am talking about those alternative ways of expressions which are socially and culturally grounded, which are class related. So, it is not about the degree of formality, it is about a variation or an alternative way. So, it is about the choice of this alternative way and how does this choice correlate with the background of the speaker: does it become the marker of identity, a group identity, a social identity of the speaker. So, we are talking about a correlation between linguistic structure and social structure.

So, we have to identify that variation and the factors which indicate such variations. It may be at the level of sound that you saw in Martha's Vineyard Island and fourth floor survey in New York City by Labov. It may be lexical variation. It may be structural variation, syntactic structures vary. So, this variation can be at all levels. It can be pronunciation, for example, accent, choice of words, morphological differences, syntactic structures, style of speech and conversational norms.

While the diversity of variation is huge, there are restrictions on variations. And what are the restrictions? Such variations have patterns and are consistent in a particular speech community. Such linguistic variations can be attributed to differences in social characteristics of speakers using the language and what the social determinants are.

And you have to see what the reason for this variation is, why there is a variation in the, let us say, pronunciation. A particular group of people have a different pronunciation style and another group has a different pronunciation style of the same linguistic structure, so accent varies, sound varies.

Is it the case that age becomes a factor? A particular age group uses the language with a different style and another age group uses the language with a different style, like recall Martha's Vineyard Island case where age group of 31 to 45 people had deliberate conscious attempt to raise the central vowel sounds in order to identify and express solidarity with the native inhabitants of Martha's Vineyard Island and also stand in opposition to the visitors, summer visitors and they wanted to show that they are different from the mainland speakers.

So, that was the identity restricted to the age group, where the younger generation would take over this change in style later on and the older generation did not pay any attention. So, age may be a factor. So, age group as a social indicator, it can be gender, possibly men talk differently and women talk differently in a cultural conversational style. It can be class and you can watch it in a diglossic situation also. It can be a particular location or geography. It can be social determinants like identity. And it can be showing solidarity and following the group norm.

So, you have to be a very keen observer of these variations. And also you have to find the social determinants of these variations. If you are able to identify these, then you can start working on these variables and such variables which have corresponding connection with the social variability are called sociolinguistic variables. So, they are linguistic variables, but they have deep-rooted connection with the social structure, social variables and that is why they are called sociolinguistic variables.

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The slide is titled "Sociolinguistic Variables" and features the NPTEL logo in the top right corner. The main content is a bulleted list of criteria for an ideal sociolinguistic variable, attributed to Labov. A video inset in the bottom right shows a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue shirt, speaking with his hands clasped.

Sociolinguistic Variables

NPTEL

- Labov specifies the ideal sociolinguistic variable to:
 - be high in frequency,
 - have a certain immunity from conscious suppression,
 - be an integral part of larger structures, and
 - be easily quantified on a linear scale.

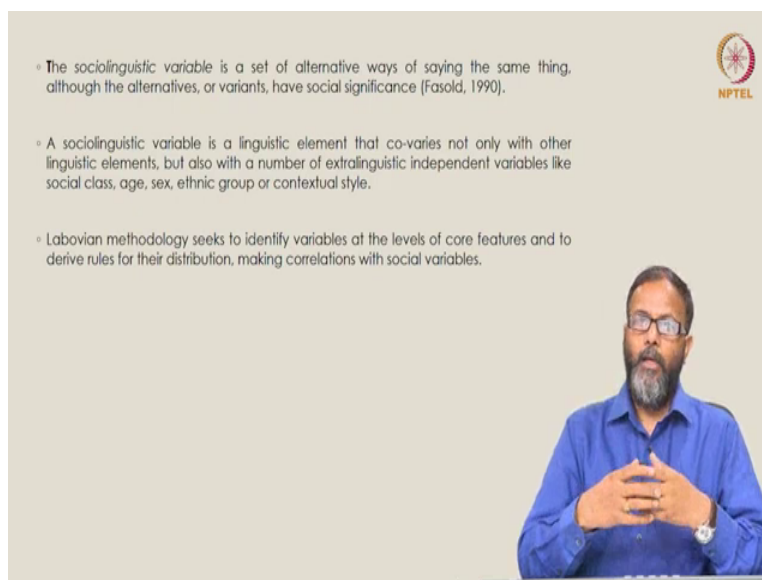
So, what are sociolinguistic variables? Labov specifies the idea of sociolinguistic variables. He says that, a variable which is very high in frequency in occurrence of natural speech of people, which has a certain immunity from conscious suppression, that means you do not do it deliberately it becomes part of your regular repertoire. It is an unmarked thing unless and until you are particular about it. So, if it is consciously suppressed, but it has to have, to become a

sociolinguistic variable, it has to have immunity from such suppressions that means you do not do it deliberately it occurs naturally.

It has to be an integral part of the larger structure. So, there has to be a pattern. And it is easily quantifiable on a linear scale. So, you are able to discover the context in which it occurs, you are able to correlate it with a group in terms of different social determinants. So, that becomes a sociolinguistic variable.

In case of /r/ sound, in occurrence of /r/, at word final positions in his fourth floor survey, stratification of English in New York City Labov study, or you can see that deliberately raised vowels or diphthongs in Martha's Vineyard Island that had immunity from conscious suppression. It was a conscious decision to use that.

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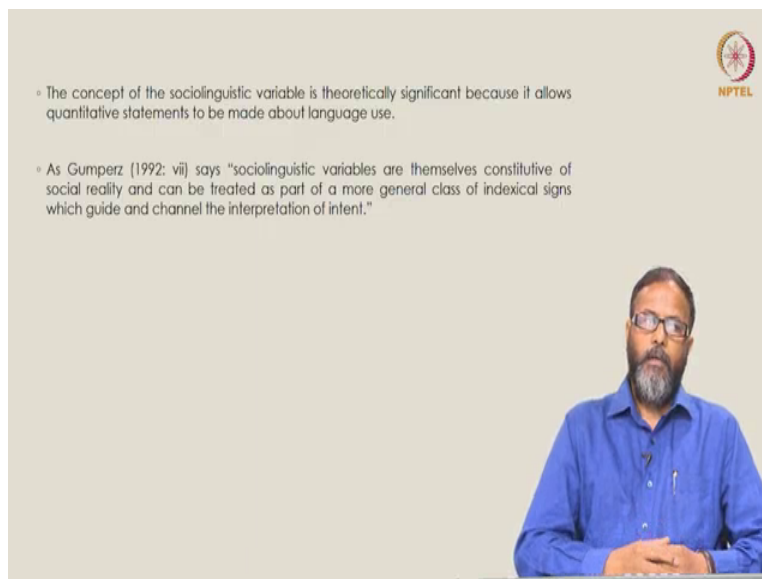
- The sociolinguistic variable is a set of alternative ways of saying the same thing, although the alternatives, or variants, have social significance (Fasold, 1990).
- A sociolinguistic variable is a linguistic element that co-varies not only with other linguistic elements, but also with a number of extralinguistic independent variables like social class, age, sex, ethnic group or contextual style.
- Labovian methodology seeks to identify variables at the levels of core features and to derive rules for their distribution, making correlations with social variables.

The sociolinguistic variable is a set of alternative ways of saying the same thing, although the alternatives or variants have social significance as Fasold says in his 1999 work. So, in order to identify and zero in on a sociolinguistic variable, you have to see a linguistic variable which has a social relevance: does it correspond to the age group, does it correspond to the class, does it correspond to the, for example, in Indian case sometimes we have hierarchy in the society in terms of caste, region, religion, so any determinant. If any variable has some relationship with any of the social determinants that is a sociolinguistic variable.

A sociolinguistic variable is a linguistic element that co-varies not only with other linguistic elements, but also with a number of extra linguistic interdependent variables like social class, age, sex, ethnic group or contextual style. This is what we have been talking about. Labovian methodology seeks to identify variables at the level of core features and to derive rules for their distribution, making correlations with social variables.

So, once you are able to understand the sociolinguistic variables, we will be able to discover the pattern of distribution when it is used, by whom it is used, what is the context in which it is used, why it is used, does it correspond to the conscious construction of identity of the speaker, does it correspond to the speaker's urge to identify with a group, social class, or a group with the gender. So, these variables will correlate with other social determinants and that is why they become sociolinguistic variables.

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The slide contains two bullet points and an NPTEL logo in the top right corner. The speaker, a man with a beard and glasses wearing a blue shirt, is visible in the bottom right corner of the slide area.

- The concept of the sociolinguistic variable is theoretically significant because it allows quantitative statements to be made about language use.
- As Gumperz (1992: vii) says "sociolinguistic variables are themselves constitutive of social reality and can be treated as part of a more general class of indexical signs which guide and channel the interpretation of intent."

So, the concept of sociolinguistic variable is theoretically significant because it allows quantitative statements to be made about language use. However, there is a caveat, you cannot make a very precise judgment about it. It is probabilistic. It shows the probability. And when you predict, the degree of probability is very high. But it gives you an understanding of the distribution, it gives you an understanding of its correlations with social determinants.

Gumperz in 1992 says that sociolinguistic variables are themselves constitutive of social reality and can be treated as part of a more general class of indexical signs, which guide and channel the interpretation of the intent. So, today, we talked about two important central themes in sociolinguistics and specifically in variationist tradition pioneered by William Labov: number one, observers' paradox and number two, sociolinguistic variable.

It is a linguistic variable which has social significance and that is why it is called sociolinguistic variable. And the paradox is that we are always in this dilemma and our situation is so ironical that as a researcher you are looking for a natural, casual, unmarked, spontaneous expression and data from the respondent. But you yourself become a reason for a conscious changed formal register.

So, you are looking for natural speech and you become the cause. Because in your presence, in the presence of a formal setting or the fact that the respondent's speech is being recorded and systematically observed, it makes the respondent conscious. And when the respondent becomes conscious, the respondent gives you an alternative formal register. So, you do not get the natural speech.

At the same time, the ethical guideline tells you that you cannot deceive and you cannot have deceptive behavior. So, you have to have informed consent of your respondent and that is why you have to be very creative and thoughtful in removing such problems while collecting data in the field. So, you have to come out with categorically creative ideas to resolve this paradox where your presence becomes an obstacle in your intent of getting natural speech.

Labov has used multiple methods in his own work, and he cites those. You as a researcher and as an investigator can devise your own mechanism; and the tried and tested mechanism is to influence the speaker and make the speaker or the respondent emotionally charged, use some distraction techniques, receiving a call, walking around, moving from your position or making the respondent comfortable and making him or her forget that his or her speech is being recorded and systematically observed.

For collecting, for identifying sociolinguistic variables, it is a very scientific method of doing that. You have to have a larger sample, preliminary observation and almost some kind of pilot study before you figure out a sociolinguistic variable. So, you have to have multiple samples and

then you have to analyze them and see if a single variable or a set of variables appear to be frequent, evenly distributed and natural in the speech sample you have collected. And this is how we go about the research in variations, language variations, and this is the practice of variationist tradition pioneered by Labov.

So, remember these two concepts: observers' paradox, and sociolinguistic variables. We will continue our discussion on the impact of Labov's work and the emergence of variationist tradition in understanding language in society and how it influenced follow up works by a wide range of people, a wide range of scholars all across the world. We will talk about it in our next class. Tune in then, and this is it for now. Thank you very much.