Basic Issues, Concepts, and Approaches to Sociolinguistics

There were many issues, concepts, and approaches discussed in chapter one of our book to help people better understand sociolinguistics. The observations in my paper will be taken from what stood out the most to me in the reading. Languages and how they play an active role in society have many factors that have to be examined before coming to any single conclusion. As I was reading chapter one, I noted and observed that many of the ideas discussed were prevalent in my family, culture, and the Southern part of the United States were I have lived my whole life.

The first part of the book reminded me of the old saying, “Children learn what they live”. I have a twelve-year-old cousin who talks like my sixty-three-year-old grandmother who only has a middle school education. Although she goes to school and is taught proper or prescriptive speech, the informal speech of my grandmother is what comes across most in her conversations and formal papers she writes for school. In other words, her writing is equivalent to her speech. Introducing Sociolinguistics states, “The child’s role in acquiring its first language is not a socially passive one, but one which is sensitive to certain ‘environmental’ conditions, including the social identity of the different people with whom the child interacts.” My cousin has no communicative competence, coined by sociolinguist Dell Hymes, which means the ability to use language appropriately in different settings. In addition to growing up in the South and acquiring a Southern dialect, it will probably be hard for my cousin to break this cycle because she grew up around my grandmother most of her life.

Prescriptivism, or linguistic etiquette as described in the text, was constantly discussed
throughout the book. I went to a predominantly black small town high school and formal speech was not usually spoken by the students, those in my community, and neither in my home. Everything always just seemed so casual. Prescriptive speech was not usually spoken unless it had to be, such as, at graduations or school ceremonies. The causes of this situation may have had something to do with poor funding for the school and that most of the students attending the school came from relatively poor families. This situation could be described as the concept norm from the chapter.

A norm is defined as a, “Specific guide to action which defines acceptable and appropriate behavior in particular situations.” Although this was acceptable at my school, in another part of the United States or bigger city it would probably not be seen as a norm. For example, I have family that lives one hour away from my family and I in Savannah, GA, and they comment all the time on the way my family and I talk. Sometimes they ask us what certain words or phrases mean, such as, ‘bo’. ‘Bo’ is another name for an individual, male or female.

Language and the way it is used vary from place to place. Although most people in the United States speak English, states and regions may have slang terms and different dialects that may make understanding the language difficult. The functionalist view of society states, “A society may be understood as a system made up of functioning parts. To understand any part of society, the part must be examined in relation to society as a whole.” Therefore, the way a person speaks should not be ridiculed until an understanding of all the reasons why that person’s language may seem different to us are analyzed. For example, when I am not at school or work, I find myself using the same type of language my cousin does over a twenty-four hour period because I experienced some of the situations she is experiencing now, but I learned when it is appropriate to use prescriptive rules. My cousin, on the other hand, has not.
455 Observation Grading Rubric

10 Awesome answer

– Wows the reader...
– Includes explicit, understandable & relevant examples AND
– Masterfully uses concepts and vocabulary from the text
– Synthesizes text & observations to bring new insights to the topic

9 Great answer

– Addresses assignment fully
– Includes understandable & relevant examples AND
– (mostly Appropriately) uses concepts and vocabulary from the text
– Some synthesis of observations & assigned reading

8 Good answer

– Includes examples but may be less than thorough
– May allude to concepts in the book without formalizing them
– May lack clear synthesis of text with personal experience/observation

7 An acceptable answer

– Indicates understanding of the concepts discussed
– May be based on generalizations rather than clear examples

6 An attempt to answer

– off target, perhaps even erroneous, BUT
– clearly attempts to incorporate information from the text or discussion
– clear effort to include Socio-Ling vocab, concepts, etc.

<6 A paragraph (or more) on the general topic

– has something to do with the topic AND
– implies "I don't really get it and don't have anything to say, but do want to participate, so I'm doing the best I can off the top of my head..."

Overlap in responses from week to week will negatively affect your scores.

Grade: 9

(Could be smoother, but a great effort to synthesize the text and your life... )