

Introduction

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The study of language variation and change, the core of the sociolinguistic enterprise, has a relatively short history, but it is a burgeoning history, as might be expected of an idea whose time had truly come or, indeed, was overdue. This *Handbook* reflects the vitality and growth, representing the discipline in its multifaceted pursuits. The chapters that follow are not retrospective, apart from Chambers' "informal epistemology," which immediately follows. Instead, we have invited the authors of the chapters to discuss the ideas – hypotheses, axioms, lemmata, premises, probabilities – that drive their branch of the discipline, and to illustrate them with empirical studies, their own or others, that not only demonstrate their applications but also their shortcomings and strengths. The historical sequence will be implicit, we trust, if and when it has a bearing on the ideas.

Our emphasis on empirical issues and applications is intended to make the *Handbook* serviceable to the third generation of sociolinguists, now being trained, and beyond. The contributors to the *Handbook* have been chosen partly to strike a balance between the first two academic generations, the founders, so to speak, and their intellectual offspring. The topics we enlisted them to write about are likewise balanced between the relatively mature and the relatively recent. Within each topic, the ideas naturally find a balance between the tried-and-probably-true and the potentially productive. We expect that the next generation will perpetuate all of these fields of study and, indeed, explore them with the kind of depth unimaginable to their predecessors.

Thinking about the contributors as members of one or another academic generation makes sense in terms of the symbolic genealogy of one-time mentors and their sometime students, but realistically there has been and continues to be a sense of community without any noticeable generation gap. This was almost certainly brought about by the novelty of sociolinguistics. The first professors and their first graduate students were united by the fact that they all, in effect, had everything to learn. They were inventing their discipline, and doing it together. Important ideas issued from dissertations and conference

presentations as well as from professorial publications, and their provenance was less important than their potential.

Until sometime in the 1980s, it was possible for an enterprising graduate student facing comprehensive examinations to read virtually everything in the field of sociolinguistics. That is no longer true, of course, because of the cumulative growth of research from one generation to the next, the spread of variationist methods into neighboring subject areas or brand-new ones, and the international spread of the discipline, first through the emigration of trained sociolinguists to virgin territories and then through the rise of native sociolinguists in those countries.

This exponential growth in the discipline gives the *Handbook* a kind of utility that was previously not needed. We see it as a convenient, hand-held repository of the essential knowledge about the study of language variation and change. Although it cannot cover everything in the field, as might have been possible twenty years ago, it can aspire to being a resource for readers to turn to for garnering basic information about any of the subfields and for getting directions on where to go to learn more.

We have partitioned the *Handbook* into five major parts. Each part begins with its own introduction by the editors, setting out the boundaries of the field and putting each of the chapters into perspective. Part I examines the methodologies employed by linguists working in the field of linguistic variation and change, both in terms of the forms of fieldwork and data collection that characterize our science, and in terms of the various types of data analysis employed by our colleagues. Part II deals with the levels of linguistic structure that have been the main foci of work in linguistic variation and change studies: phonology, syntax, and discourse. In Part III we present views of linguistic variation in the diverse contexts that give it meaning and significance, across the generations and the social strata and the domains of interaction. Part IV covers variation through geographical space, and language and dialect contact from a variationist perspective; while Part V is concerned with the implications that research in different types of societies may have for work in our field.

The contributors of the chapters make a distinguished international roster. Our invitations went to scholars with recognized expertise, either established or potential, with no thought to anything but expertise. The final reckoning gives an accidental profile of the culture in which sociolinguistics has developed and keeps growing. Thirty chapters by 29 linguists, 12 women and 17 men, from eight nations – these numbers are striking, but the reality is even more striking, because more than one-third of the contributors live and work in countries far removed from their native lands. Good ideas are irrepressible, and it takes people to spread them. This book is about those good ideas. In bringing them together in one book, as many of them as we could accommodate, it is our hope that they will spread even further in settings where they will continue to be keenly tested and critically refined.