

Studying Language Variation: An Informal Epistemology

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Sociolinguistics is the study of the social uses of language, and the most productive studies in the four decades of sociolinguistic research have emanated from determining the social evaluation of linguistic variants. These are also the areas most susceptible to scientific methods such as hypothesis-formulation, logical inference, and statistical testing. Studying language variation proceeds mainly by observing language use in natural social settings and categorizing the linguistic variants according to their social distribution.

In this chapter, I sketch an informal epistemology of sociolinguistics by outlining its development as a social science (see section 2), its place among the linguistic sciences (section 3) and its basis in cognition (section 4). I begin by showing that the social evaluation of linguistically equivalent variants belongs to the common experience of all of us. Notwithstanding the pervasive effects of the social milieu on the accents and dialects which are its medium of communication, the study of socially-conditioned variation in language is relatively recent.

1 The Social Basis for Linguistic Variation

The foundations of variationist sociolinguistics come from the rudimentary observation that the variants that occur in everyday speech are linguistically insignificant but socially significant. The linguistic equivalence of the variants of a linguistic variable is evident in a comparison of any paired variants, as, for instance:

Adonis saw himself in the mirror.

Adonis seen hisself in the mirror.

These utterances differ with respect to two morphological variables: (1) the verb *see* is represented in the first sentence by *saw*, the strong form of the past

tense, and in the second by *seen*, and (2) the reflexive pronoun takes the form *himself* in the first and *hissself* in the second. Notwithstanding these differences, the two sentences convey exactly the same grammatical meaning and everyone who speaks English with even minimal competence recognizes their semantic identity.

The sentences do, however, convey very different social meanings as a direct result of their morphological variants. That is, they carry *sociolinguistic* significance. The first, with its standard forms, is emblematic of middle-class, educated, or relatively formal speech, while the second is emblematic of working-class, uneducated, or highly colloquial (vernacular) speech. These differences will also be readily recognized by virtually every speaker of the language.

The social evaluations associated with these two sentences are conventional, and they appear to have no deeper sources than other types of social conventions, such as the convention in western nations that women precede men when they enter a room together on formal occasions, or that people clasp one another's right hands on being introduced to one another. In fact, the analogy with etiquette can be taken further, because standard speech as exemplified by the first sentence is associated with 'good manners' in many settings, such as schools, white-collar work environments, and cultural institutions, whereas the second sentence conveys 'bad manners' in those same settings. Someone uttering the second sentence in response to a teacher's question might be regarded as boorish, as would a man preceding his female partner into a banquet hall. Someone uttering the second sentence at the intermission of a play might be regarded as rough and unschooled, as would a man who failed to extend his right hand on being introduced to another man.

These evaluations are evoked without any regard for the linguistic content of the sentences. In answer to the teacher's question, the second sentence is correct if the first one is. As an observation about on-stage action, the second sentence would be no less true than the first one. From this, it follows that the variants come into being and are sustained not for their linguistic content but for their social function.

So deeply ingrained are these evaluations that there exists a venerable history of attempts to put them on some kind of rational ground. Language arbiters have promulgated claims that vernaculars are illogical, inconsistent, sloppy, and inferior in other ways. In most cultures, the arbiters are self-appointed, typically teachers, parents, editors, and other authority figures (Milroy and Milroy 1985). In several continental European nations, they are government appointees and members of prestigious academies. The arbiters wield authority, and so it often comes as a surprise when sociolinguists and others point out that their pronouncements have no linguistic basis but are merely arbitrary social conventions.

Recognizing the pronouncements as arbitrary and conventional does not entail that they are superficial. On the contrary, people whose speech is judged adversely can suffer socially, occupationally and educationally (as discussed by Preston in this volume). All developed societies seem to tolerate social

judgments of linguistic performance, and typically promote those judgments as part of the institutional mandate of schools, government offices, and professional societies. So pervasive are they in social behavior that they must be embedded in human nature, perhaps as an irrepressible adjunct of human communicative competence (as in §4 below). They have been documented from the beginning of the written record. Thus Sirach, the Old Testament moralist, declared: “When a sieve is shaken, the rubbish is left behind; so too the defects of a person appear in speech. As the kiln tests the work of the potter, so the test of a person is conversation” (Ecclesiasticus 27: 4–5). And Cicero, in 55 BC, enjoins his readers to “learn to avoid not only the asperity of rustic pronunciation but the strangeness of outlandish pronunciation” (*De Oratore* III, 12).

With such a continuous and intimate relation to the human condition, it would be natural to expect a fairly long history of human inquiry into the sources, functions, and significations of language in its social context, but, as we shall see, the history is relatively recent.

2 Sociolinguistics as a Discipline

Leaving aside a few maverick precursors, variationist sociolinguistics had its effective beginnings only in 1963, the year in which William Labov presented the first sociolinguistic research report at the annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America and also the year in which he published “The social motivation of a sound change” (Labov 1963). Those events mark the inception of linguistic studies imbued by the identification of linguistic variants correlated with social factors, by the incorporation of style as an independent variable, and by the apparent-time apprehension of linguistic changes in progress – all hallmarks of the sociolinguistic enterprise to this day (as discussed below, especially in the chapters by Ash, Schilling-Estes and Bailey).

The time was ripe for these initiatives. Labov recalls feeling some trepidation as he prepared to present his results in public for the first time. “In those days . . . , you practically addressed the entire profession when you advanced to the podium,” he recalled (in 1997). “I had imagined a long and bitter struggle for my ideas, where I would push the social conditioning of language against hopeless odds, and finally win belated recognition as my hair was turning gray. But my romantic imagination was cut short. They ate it up!” The easy reception may have obscured the revolutionary turn that sociolinguistics represents in the history of language study, as discussed in §3.

The term sociolinguistics had been coined a decade before Labov’s inaugural presentation, in 1952, by one Haver C. Currie, in a programmatic commentary on the notion that “social functions and significations of speech factors offer a prolific field for research.” With baptismal zeal, Currie (1952: 28) proclaimed, “This field is here designated *socio-linguistics*.”

Before that, of course, there existed the long tradition of dialectology, with its studies of regional speech variation, dating from 1876 and thus antedating modern linguistics, let alone sociolinguistics. The relationship between traditional dialectology and sociolinguistics is oblique rather than direct, but both are in the broadest sense dialectologies (studies of language variation). In terms of intellectual history it is plausible to view sociolinguistics as a refocusing of traditional dialectology in response to cataclysmic technological and social changes that required (and facilitated) freer data-gathering methods using larger and more representative population samples (Chambers 2002). Traditional dialect studies with genuine sociolinguistic bearings are not nonexistent (for example, Gauchat 1905, McDavid 1948), nor are neighboring social science studies with authentic sociolinguistic insights (for example, Fischer 1958), but they are rare. The emergence of an international movement for socially perspicacious linguistic studies belongs incontrovertibly to the last 40 years.

3 Studying Language as a Social Phenomenon

The brevity of this history appears paradoxical in view of the obvious social role of language. Perhaps its social role is too obvious, or perhaps it is so integral in language as to escape notice. The classical Greeks missed it entirely. Plato and Aristotle were mainly concerned with categorizing linguistic forms, that is, with grammar in the sense discussed in the next section. Neither of them noticed linguistic variation of any kind, and their overwhelming influence on Western thought undoubtedly contributed to the antisocial bias of Western linguistic tradition. The Sanskrit grammarian Pāṇini (ca. 600 BC) did recognize systematic variability, which he called *anyatarasyām*, but his distinction was trivialized by his successors as meaning ‘marginal’ or ‘unacceptable’, for which Pāṇini had actually used different terms (Kiparsky 1979). Pāṇini’s followers missed the distinction, and as a result Pāṇini’s insight had no impact on tradition.

The classical scholar with the best claim as patriarch of sociolinguistics is the Roman polymath Varro (116–27 BC), who not only recognized linguistic variation (*anomalía*) but also linked it to vernacular language use (*consuetudo*; see Taylor 1975). Varro observed, among other things, that “the usage of speech is always shifting its position: this is why words of the better sort [i.e. morphologically regular forms] are wont to become worse, and worse words better; words spoken wrongly by some of the old-timers are . . . now spoken correctly, and some that were then spoken according to logical theory are now spoken wrongly” (IX, 17; Kent 1938: 453). Varro’s maxim – *consuetudo loquendi est in motu* – could be emblazoned as the motto of sociolinguistics: “the vernacular is always in motion.” Unfortunately, Varro’s linguistic treatise, which survives only as a fragment, gave rise to no school of thought. He remains an isolated figure in the history of language study.

Enlightenment authors presupposed the social basis of language. Locke, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690: 101), wrote: "God, having designed man for a sociable creature, made him not only with an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his kind, but furnished him also with language, which was to be the great instrument and common tie of society." But the social uses of the instrument, under the presumption that it was God-given, were apparently deemed to be beyond human scrutiny. Similarly, modern linguists dutifully enshrined the social function in their definitions. "Language is defined as the learned system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a society, interact and communicate in terms of their culture," according to one introductory textbook (Trager 1972: 7). Bloomfield (1933: 42) said, "All the so-called higher activities of man – our specifically human activities – spring from the close adjustment among individuals which we call society, and this adjustment, in turn, is based upon language; the speech-community, therefore, is the most important kind of social group." Firth (1937: 153) said, "speech is social 'magic'. You learn your languages in stages as conditions of gradual incorporation into your social organization. . . . The approach to speech must consequently be sociological."

Yet neither Bloomfield nor Firth nor any of the linguists who shared their structuralist concepts directly studied the social uses of language. Until the advent of sociolinguistics in the broadest sense, including studies of discourse, pragmatics, interaction rituals, and subjective evaluation tests which sprang into being around the same time, there were no concentrated attempts at discovering the social significance of linguistic variation. That may be partly explicable in terms of intellectual history. All the social sciences are relatively young. Psychology, sociology, economics, and anthropology had their effective beginnings around the turn of the twentieth century, whereas subject areas less intimately involved with the human condition such as algebra, physics, and zoology have ancient origins. Sociolinguistics, as the social science branch of linguistics (along with developmental psycholinguistics), is a newcomer compared to the branch known as theoretical linguistics, which descends from more venerable studies of grammar, rhetoric, and philology.

Nor was the shunting aside of the social significance of language an oversight or an accident. Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, noted that "speech has both an individual and a social side, and we cannot conceive of one without the other" (1916: 8). Inconceivable it may have been, but he nevertheless advocated the study of the former without the latter. His famous distinction between *langue*, the grammatical system, and *parole*, the social uses of language, came into being expressly to demarcate what he considered the proper domain of linguistic study:

But what is *langue*? It is not to be confused with human speech [*parole*], of which it is only a definite part, though certainly an essential one. It [*parole*] is both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions

that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty. Taken as a whole, speech is many-sided and heterogeneous; straddling several areas simultaneously – physical, physiological, and psychological – it belongs to both the individual and to society; we cannot put it into any category of human facts, for we cannot discover its unity.

Language [*langue*], on the contrary, is a self-contained whole and a principle of classification. As soon as we give language first place among the facts of speech, we introduce a natural order into a mass that lends itself to no other classification. (1916: 9)

Saussure's doubts about a possible science of *parole* seem curmudgeonly, with hindsight, but he was not alone. Before him, Humboldt had made a similar distinction between a formless *ergon* and a well-formed *energeia*, the former "divided up into an infinity as the sole language in one and the same nation," that is, speech (or *parole*), and the latter language in the abstract sense (or *langue*), with "these many variants . . . united into one language having a definite character" (1836: 129). After Saussure, Chomsky made a similar distinction between competence, "the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language," and performance, "the actual use of language in concrete situations," and he went on to say that "observed use of language . . . surely cannot constitute the actual subject matter of linguistics, if this is to be a serious discipline" (1965: 4).

Humboldt, Saussure, and Chomsky were obviously right in pointing out that speech, *parole*, is heterogeneous, but they have been proven wrong in dismissing heterogeneity as a possible object of study. From the beginning, the challenge facing sociolinguistics, the science of *parole*, has been to arrive at an understanding of language as, in Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog's phrase, "an object possessing orderly heterogeneity" (1968: 100).

4 Communicative Competence

Studying language as *langue* (or *energeia* or competence), as distinct from *parole* (or *ergon* or performance), requires abstracting linguistic data from the real-world variability in which it naturally occurs. Grammarians impose a hypothetical filter on natural language data to make it invariant, discrete, and qualitative. The filter, called the axiom of categoricity (Chambers 1995: 26–7), has been described in numerous ways. Here is Hjelmslev: "Linguistics must attempt to grasp language, not as a conglomerate of non-linguistic (e.g. physical, physiological, psychological, logical, sociological) phenomena, but as a self-sufficient totality, a structure *sui generis*" (1961: 5–6; for comparable statements by Humboldt, Saussure, Joos, and Chomsky, see Chambers 1995: 25–33). By contrast, sociolinguists attempt to grasp language as it is used in social situations, which is to say variant, continuous, and quantitative.

Langue and *parole* remain useful distinctions today for a reason that Saussure would undoubtedly have found unimaginable, because they now help to define

the different objects of inquiry of theoretical linguistics and sociolinguistics. They are separable in theory as natural partitions of the language faculty, or what might plausibly be considered distinct cognitive modules.

Chomsky has argued for the language faculty as comprised of interacting systems conceived as “‘mental organs’ analogous to the heart or the visual system or the system of motor coordination and planning” (1980: 39). Theoretical linguists who adopt the axiom of categoricity are primarily interested in discovering the properties of one of those systems of the language faculty, called GRAMMAR, conceived as a language-specific bioprogram (to use Bickerton’s incisive but apparently unloved term: 1984). The GRAMMAR is made up of, in Chomsky’s terms (1980: 55), “a system of ‘computational’ rules and representations.” Attempts at discovering its innate computational properties have led Chomsky and his followers into minute examinations of surface-structure puzzles involving linguistic coreference, scope, and other structural intricacies. They have produced insights into the grammatical processor as “structure-dependent” rather than strictly linear (cf. Crain and Nakayama 1987) and, crucially for Chomsky’s tenacious but disputed stance on the grammatical component’s language-specificity, not reducible to other, independently motivated, non-language-processing cognitive systems.

The GRAMMAR is presumably the module in the language faculty that accounts for the uniquely human attributes of creativity in language production and comprehension, and for the rapidity of language acquisition in infancy. However, it is obviously not autonomous. Linguistic production and comprehension require real-world orientation to express meanings, and the acquisition device requires the stimulus of social interaction to activate learning. Chomsky, of course, recognizes its interdependence with other systems, and he has isolated two of them as follows: “A fuller account of knowledge of language will consider the interactions of grammar and other systems, specifically the system of conceptual structures and pragmatic competence, and perhaps others” (1980: 92). The real-world orientation has its source in what Chomsky calls the CONCEPTUAL SYSTEM, and the social stimulus has its source in what Chomsky calls “pragmatic competence” but is generally called COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE.

By the CONCEPTUAL SYSTEM, Chomsky means “the system of object-reference and also such relations as ‘agent’, ‘goal’, ‘instrument’ and the like; what are sometimes called ‘thematic relations’” (1980: 54). It also includes vocabulary items, the most obvious intermediaries between grammar and the world. The conceptual system has received little attention from linguists of any stripe, but it too reveals uniquely human properties most easily discerned in acquisition. Children master fine semantic distinctions of the sort found in verbs such as *follow* and *chase* relatively early, certainly long before they can consciously define what they mean. They universally develop lexical distinctions in number and color categorization that are unmatched by, say, olfactory categories (Strozer 1994: 40–5). These fine vocabulary distinctions recur in all natural languages. One way of explaining this mastery, Chomsky (1988: 31) says, is by postulating

that words “enter into systematic structures based on certain elementary recurrent notions and principles of combination.” More generally, he says, “The rate of vocabulary acquisition is so high at certain stages of life, and the precision and delicacy of the concepts acquired so remarkable, that it seems necessary to conclude that in some manner the conceptual system with which lexical items are connected is already substantially in place” (1980: 139). These are stimulating ideas that invite empirical research.

Chomsky’s third cognitive module, “pragmatic competence,” takes in, in his words, “knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use, in conformity with various purposes. . . . We might say that pragmatic competence places language in the institutional setting of its use, relating intentions and purposes to the linguistic means at hand” (1980: 224–5). This notion has a familiar ring to sociolinguists. It was influentially described by Hymes as “sociolinguistic competence” or COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE, as follows:

Within the social matrix in which [a child] acquires a system of grammar, a child acquires also a system of its use, regarding persons, places, purposes, other modes of communication, etc. – all the components of communicative events, together with attitudes and beliefs regarding them. There also develop patterns of the sequential use of language in conversation, address, standard routines, and the like. In such acquisition resides the child’s sociolinguistic competence (or, more broadly, communicative competence), its ability to participate in its society as not only a speaking, but also a communicating member. (1974: 75)

Hymes adds, “What children so acquire, an integrated theory of sociolinguistic description must be able to describe.”

Like the other organs of the language faculty, COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE develops early and rapidly in normal children with little or no tutoring. Since most of the conventions governing communicative events are beneath consciousness, explicit teaching is impossible in any case. Evidence for COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE as an entity independent of GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE (and presumably the other organs of the language faculty) can be found in extreme social situations and in clinical settings in which people are forced to function with one in the absence of the other.

East Sutherland in the Scottish Highlands provides a striking case known from research by Nancy Dorian. Her subjects included bilingual Gaelic-English fisherfolk, younger English-speaking monolinguals, and a middle group of English speakers described as “low-proficiency semi-speakers of East Sutherland Gaelic and . . . near-passive bilinguals” (1982: 27). This third group, despite their lack of grammatical competence in Gaelic, interacted freely and comfortably with their Gaelic neighbors. They were fully integrated in the bilingual community, and their integration depended largely or perhaps solely upon their communicative competence. “They knew when it was appropriate to speak and when not,” Dorian says (1982: 29), “when a question would show interest and when it would constitute an interruption; when an offer of food

or drink was mere verbal routine and was meant to be refused, and when it was meant in earnest and should be accepted; how much verbal response was appropriate to express sympathy in response to a narrative of ill health or ill luck; and so forth."

Their communicative competence was so perfectly attuned, in fact, that neither the fluent bilinguals nor the semi-speakers themselves were aware of the extent of their grammatical shortcomings. In one instance, Dorian inadvertently exposed those shortcomings by testing the language proficiency of one of the semi-speakers in the presence of her bilingual friends, to the considerable embarrassment of everyone, including Dorian. In the East Sutherland speech community, they were all peers by dint not of their shared language but rather of their shared communicative competence.

The independence (or modularity) of COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE is also revealed by the fact that it can be disturbed and disrupted in neurological disorders. People suffering from what is called "semantic-pragmatic disorder" tend to interrupt the conversational flow with inappropriate or ill-timed assertions, fail to follow topics, introduce what appear to be digressions or non-sequiturs, and speak out of turn (Bishop and Adams 1989, Mogford-Bevan and Sadler 1991). Typically, their speech is phonologically and grammatically well-formed, and not infrequently their speech is remarkably fluent.

Clinical researchers usually rely on standardized tests as diagnostic tools, but people with semantic-pragmatic disorder tend to score within normal ranges on such tests. As a result, descriptions of semantic-pragmatic disorder in the psycholinguistic literature often appear to be cursory and vague. As a sociolinguistic disorder, it would undoubtedly benefit from sociolinguistic observation and analysis for its description. In any event, what malfunctions in the people who are afflicted with it is their communicative competence. Just as myxedema proves the existence of the thyroid gland in the endocrine system (if proof were needed), so semantic-pragmatic disorders prove the existence of communicative competence in the language faculty.

5 Communicative Competence in Performance

It must have been obvious since time began that normal human beings have unbounded capabilities for social intercourse, conversational interaction, repartee, self-expression, and communal expression, all governed by intricate sets of conventions normally beneath consciousness. For social interaction to work, both the content of speech and its form must be appropriate to the speakers and their interlocutors in the particular social context. Sociolinguistic analysis has revealed that our main resources come from modulating linguistic elements in subtle (and clearly unteachable) ways, selecting, so to speak, a particular vowel variant with a certain frequency in a particular situation or a past tense variant or other structural variant in various contexts.

Our repertoire of variants usually has a linguistic basis, as when a form like *hissself* arises to compete with the historically established form *himself* (Lightfoot 1999: 14–16), apparently because it is paradigmatically regular, formed with the possessive pronoun *his-* as its first element, as are *myself*, *yourself*, and *herself*. There is no linguistic principle, however, that can explain the recognition of one of the variants as standard and the other as nonstandard. It defies ‘logic’ or any conscious rationalization when it is the paradigmatically regular form, *hissself*, the one that Varro would have called “words of the better sort,” that is the socially stigmatized form. There is also no linguistic principle behind their distribution in the speech of different social groups in the community, or the relative frequency of their use from one generation to the next.

It is these aspects that underlie the age-old mystery of language change, which is irrepressible and inexorable in spite of the fact that it is, from a purely linguistic viewpoint, dysfunctional, in so far as it impedes communication in the long run, and otiose, in so far as it does not demonstrably improve or degrade the language. The root causes seem to be nothing more profound than fashion. As Hall (1964: 298) says: “Every human language . . . has been re-made in accordance with our whims since the confusion of the Tower of Babel . . . and since [humankind] is a most unstable and variable being, language cannot be long-lasting or stable; but like other human things, such as customs and dress, it has to vary in space or time.”

Four decades of sociolinguistic research show that the “whims” are socially motivated, though pinpointing the motivations and giving them empirical substance remains perhaps our greatest challenge. We are gaining an understanding of human communicative competence. Every chapter of this book provides evidence, in its own way, of how people respond to social evaluations of their speech, which are always shifting, usually tediously but sometimes rapidly, and almost always tacitly. *Consuetudo loquendi est in motu*.

The wonder of it is that it took place with virtually no conscious investigation for centuries and indeed millennia – much longer, for instance, than metaphysical speculations about free will or grammatical taxonomies of verb conjugations. It is surely a measure of how deeply ingrained our communicative competence is in all our activities that it could lay hidden so long from consciousness, and a measure as well of how deeply embedded it is in our human nature.

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