

Language and Social Networks

SECOND EDITION

语言和社会网络 [英]

Lesley Milroy

Basil Blackwell
World Publishing Corp

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First published 1980

Second edition 1987. Reprinted 1989

Basil Blackwell Ltd

108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

Basil Blackwell Inc.

432 Park Avenue South, Suite 1503

New York, NY 10016, USA

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Milroy, Lesley

Language and social networks.—2nd ed.

1. Sociolinguistics

I. Title

401'.9 P40

ISBN 0-631-15314-4

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Milroy, Lesley

Language and social networks

(Language in society; 2)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Sociolinguistics I. Title. II. Series:

Language in society (Oxford, Oxfordshire); 2.

P40.M54 . 1987 401'.9 87-10370

ISBN 0-631-15314-4 (pbk.)

Reprint authorized by Basil Blackwell

Reprinted by World Publishing Corporation, Beijing, 1991

Licensed for sale in China only

(excluding Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan)

ISBN 7-5062-1051-7

LANGUAGE IN SOCIETY 2

Language and Social Networks

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A Critical Account of Sociolinguistic Method
Lesley Milroy

Editor's Preface to the Second Edition

The first edition of Lesley Milroy's *Language and Social Networks* arose to a considerable extent out of work performed by the team (led by Lesley Milroy and James Milroy) which carried out the important and exciting sociolinguistic research in Belfast in the 1970s that has been so influential in the sociolinguistics of the 1980s. The book was based partly on the Belfast research itself and partly on work performed by other scholars working in sociolinguistics and anthropological linguistics in many different areas of the world. It represented a novel and exciting synthesis of Labov-type work in social dialectology and Gumperz-type work in the social anthropology of language, as well as work in the social psychology of language.

This synthesis proved to be of such interest that it is no exaggeration to say that it has provided a stimulus for considerable amounts of the best research in the area of language and society which has appeared in subsequent years, especially perhaps in Britain. This second edition has been updated to include discussions of some of the research which the first edition helped to stimulate in this way and which has been carried out by workers in the field in the intervening period; but it also includes new research from Lesley Milroy herself and the Belfast team and, crucially, some new thinking on the topic as well. It also takes account of additional sociological theories, in keeping with the interdisciplinary stance that Lesley Milroy has typically adopted in her work, while always remaining a linguist.

The second edition of the book, as the first, uncovers and

discusses linguistic differences between different areas of Belfast, between different social and cultural groups, and between men and women, as well as differences between the characteristics of particular linguistic variables; furthermore, it explains these in terms of social network structure. It also shows that an ethnographic approach to sociolinguistic fieldwork and a close statistical study of social networks and their linguistic correlates are invaluable for a deeper understanding of linguistic behaviour, language change, linguistic variation, and the maintenance and development of vernacular language varieties. Those familiar with the first edition will recall that the adoption of an ethnographic approach to the Belfast fieldwork was initially dictated by the constraints imposed by the political and social situation in that city in the 1970s. It emerges, however, that—particularly in the hands of the brilliant (and courageous) fieldworker that this author proved herself to be—this methodology produces explanations for the nature of language variation in a complex urban community of a type that could not have been revealed in any other way.

I wrote in the preface to the first edition of this important book that the focus on Belfast would provide a fascinating account of language behaviour in that troubled but important city, while the more general points developed in the work would be of considerable theoretical interest to linguists, social psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists. This remains true of the second edition, but it must be acknowledged that most of the book's considerable impact has been in the field of linguistics itself. Interestingly, this impact has been apparent not only in sociolinguistics, as one would expect, but in historical linguistics also. Perhaps other disciplines will now also take note, but even if they don't there is every reason to believe that the second edition of *Language and Social Networks* will now extend the influence of this pioneering work into the linguistics of the 1990s.

Peter Trudgill

Preface to the Second Edition

The main substantive changes to the first edition of *Language and Social Networks* are to the last section of Chapter 6 and to Chapter 7, which have been updated and extended. I have made very few changes to the earlier part of the text, except to correct errors and inconsistencies. However, the field has advanced considerably since 1980 when the first edition was published; in particular, John Gumperz and Bob Le Page, whose work was quoted extensively there, have now collected and published in more accessible form much of the cited material. Since, however, their views have remained essentially unchanged, I have not attempted to change citations of material published in mimeographed or working paper form at every point in the text. Readers are referred to Gumperz (1982) and Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) for more recent formulations of their ideas.

In Chapter 7 I have discussed only a small proportion of the work carried out since 1980 on language variation and change in Belfast. Many of the publications arising from this later work are cited in the text; but readers are referred particularly to J. Milroy (1981); Harris (1985); Milroy and Milroy (1985b); L. Milroy (1987) and J. Milroy (forthcoming). It is better that this associated material is consulted in conjunction with this extended second edition, than that any attempt be made to summarize it within a single book.

Lesley Milroy

Acknowledgements

The data on which the study of three inner city communities reported in this book is based were collected for a Social Science Research Council project (no. HR3771) carried out between October 1975 and July 1977 as an investigation into the urban vernacular of Belfast. Responsibility for directing that project and working out the ideas presented in this book was shared equally between myself and James Milroy, and it was he who developed the phonological analyses of Belfast vernacular which were an essential prerequisite to any investigation into sociolinguistic structure. Much of the work of transcription and analysis was handled by Rose Maclaren and Domini O'Kane, and I am indebted to the late Sue Margrain for valuable advice and help with the statistical analysis which forms the basis of Chapters 5 and 6.

The second edition of this book makes use in Chapter 7 of some of the data collected during a second Social Science Research Council project in Belfast (no. HR5777), and I am glad to acknowledge here this financial support. James Milroy shared the responsibility of directing this project also, and John Harris helped in the analysis of material discussed in Chapter 7. I am grateful to Susan Gal for introducing me to the work of Mark Granovetter, which provided a useful basis for the extended analysis of the relationship between personal network structure and language variation presented in this second edition.

Several people commented and advised on different parts or earlier drafts of the manuscript, and I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Fred Boal, John Braidwood, Dick Hudson, John Laver and Mike McTear in this capacity. It

will be obvious that this study, like many others, owes much to the example of William Labov. Although it does not always reflect his views, I would like to thank him for helpful comments on a number of preliminary papers in the course of which the ideas embodied here were developed. The ideas of a number of other scholars have also proved relevant and stimulating, and my debt to them will be apparent at a number of points in the text. I would also like to record here my appreciation of the assistance given by Peter Trudgill, the general editor of this series. This assistance took the form both of helpful comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript and (crucially) of much needed encouragement during the long process of writing and rewriting the book. Grateful thanks are also due to Andrina Reid who typed the greater part of the manuscript and to those of her colleagues who completed the remainder.

The warmest thanks however are due to those anonymous informants (for whom pseudonyms are used where convenient) whose language patterns are analysed in this book. Despite the grim conditions in which circumstances obliged them to live, the people of Ballymacarrett, the Hammer and the Clonard areas of Belfast welcomed me warmly and hospitably into their homes and allowed me, over a period of several weeks, to tape record many hours of lively and entertaining conversation to which justice cannot be done in a study of sociolinguistic structure such as this one. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity of meeting these delightful people, whose kindness I will never forget, and for the insights their hospitality enabled me to receive into the complexities of informal social organization in their communities.

Finally, for moral support during the many hours (some of which were inevitably tedious) I spent in writing this book thanks are due to my husband Jim and our three young sons, David, Andrew and Richard. Without this support, the work could not have been completed.

Lesley Milroy

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1

Language, Class and Community

This book concerns itself principally with the study of language in the community; that is, the observation and analysis of language in its social context as it is used in everyday situations. It is taken as axiomatic that social significance of various kinds underlies much variability in language use. The perspective we are adopting here is thus distinct from that of the theoretical or descriptive linguist whose analysis is not necessarily based on data collected from live speakers in everyday situations; a great many linguistic observations are made, and conclusions drawn, on the basis of constructed data. The approach in this book is also distinct from the work of those social psychologists whose main object of study also is language behaviour. Characteristically, rather than working in the community, they investigate attitudes to language, or patterns of language use, under controlled experimental conditions. (See the first volume in this series (Giles and St Clair, 1979) for a number of recent studies in the social psychological tradition.)

While the perspective adopted in this book in no way implies any adverse criticism of these traditions of linguistic work (rather they should be viewed as complementing other approaches) I would argue, with Ferguson (1977), that direct and careful observation of the manner in which people use language in its social context is capable of yielding many interesting and surprising results. This is because most systematic linguistic knowledge of the kind which influences social and educational policies is still confined to careful styles or standardized varieties; we still know very little about the *total* linguistic repertoires of individuals or communities. In recent years, such knowledge has begun to shed light on a number of old problems which have

concerned investigators in many disciplines. We may quote particularly the connections revealed by Labov's work (1972b) between nonstandard language use (as opposed to some kind of cultural deficit) and general social and educational disadvantage, or by Gumperz's recent work (1977a) which reveals in great detail how misunderstandings of communicative intent, in everyday situations, can fuel hostility between Englishmen and immigrants in London. Recent work in Belfast has suggested that similar communicative breakdowns might arise between subgroups of the same ethnic affiliation more often than is commonly supposed (see Chapter 4 below).

We begin by giving some account of the main methods and findings of those who have studied language 'live' in the sense that they have recorded and analysed real speech events in contemporary communities. It is important, at this point, to consider as fully as possible various methods of obtaining on tape linguistic data which realistically reflect everyday language use; many readers will be aware that the investigator faces a difficult problem here. In fact, fieldwork methods have been the focus of much interest in recent years, and have become considerably refined. It is unwise to underestimate the importance of a careful choice of fieldwork method; for as we shall see, this choice has considerable influence both on the kind of language available for analysis, and on the ultimate analytic procedure.

THE DIALECTOLOGICAL APPROACH

It is convenient to distinguish two somewhat different approaches to the study of language in the community; the *dialectological* and the *sociolinguistic*. However, these two traditions should not necessarily be seen as opposed to each other. On the contrary, most sociolinguistic work has been heavily dependent on linguistic information supplied by the large-scale studies of the dialectologists, and in fact much work carried out on the general principles explained by Labov (1972a) may be seen as an explicit modification of dialectological methods.

Conversely, much recent work in the dialectological tradition has been modified in the direction of modern sociolinguistics.

The main features of the older traditional dialectological approach in its unmodified form are well known and have been discussed critically in recent years by Labov (1972a) and Trudgill (1974). The general aim is a *geographical* account of linguistic differences, and the end product of a dialect survey is a map or series of maps showing the broad areal limits of the linguistic features (usually lexical or phonological) chosen for study. An example of this is the recently published *Linguistic Atlas of England* (Orton, Sanderson and Widdowson, 1978) which is the product of thirty years work and reflects the traditional dialectological approach. Boundaries (known as isoglosses) are plotted on the map which mark out the point where form A gives way to form B. A dialect boundary is said to exist where a number of isoglosses more or less coincide. For example, Wakelin (1972:102) illustrates the boundary between the Northern and the north-Midland dialect areas of England by showing eight isoglosses which mark the southern limit of eight phonological features characteristic of northern English dialect speech. We should note that in order to draw isoglosses in this manner, a pronunciation such as Northern [ku:] *cow*, as opposed to north-Midland [kaʊ] must be said categorically either to exist or not exist in a given area, although in practice, dialectologists know that this is an oversimplification of the linguistic facts. In general, the methods of traditional dialectology are not designed to deal with the fact that the same speaker may use several different pronunciations, or that different speakers in the same area may use a very wide range of different pronunciations. This is not to say that dialectologists are unaware either of intralectal variability, or of the fact that such variability can usually be linked to a number of social factors. In his account of field methods used by the *Survey of English Dialects*, Orton notes:

Great care was taken in choosing the informants. Very rarely were they below the age of sixty. They were mostly

men: in this country men speak the vernacular more frequently, more consistently and more genuinely than women. Bilingual speakers could not be shunned: as a result of our educational system the inhabitants of the English countryside can readily adjust their natural speech to the social situation in which they may find themselves. (1962:15)

Although a number of social factors affecting variability are pinpointed here—age, sex and situational context—the SED does not set out to analyse systematically their relationship to language. In general, any reference in the dialectological literature to the social significance of variability is anecdotal.

The dialectologist is concerned then with the large-scale linguistic concept of dialect, and with mapping out in a broad way the areal distribution of linguistic forms. Furthermore, his interest is specifically in recording *traditional* features of dialect. Hence Orton's insistence on using as informants men over the age of sixty. Typically, towns and cities are avoided, and old members of a population living in an undisturbed rural community are sought out (Wakelin, 1972:1). Frequently this pre-occupation is seen in terms of the 'pure' dialectal form of the language as opposed to the form spoken by younger and more mobile speakers which is 'contaminated' by contact with the standard and so is not a proper object of study (Widdowson, 1972). Thus, although their research sites are usually 'communities' in the precise sense we shall define later in this chapter, dialectologists do not claim to be describing the speech of a community in a comprehensive or socially realistic manner. Wakelin (whose title *Patterns in the Folk Speech of the British Isles* reveals this antiquarian interest) notes that the interests of the original nineteenth-century dialectologists were often historical. Field methods were seen explicitly as a means of solving historical problems, the main object being to study reflexes of historical forms in their natural setting relatively free from external influence. Frequently, this interest in history and origins is expressed in the literature in terms of geological imagery. For

example, the argument of Mather's (1972) paper is based on a quotation from Schuchhardt who likens the discoveries of linguistic geography to geological stratification. The image is a telling one; for it reveals not only a primarily historical interest, but an underlying view of language as a natural deposit like coal or iron, whose traces can be unearthed without necessary reference to its use by a living community. Reference is seldom made in the literature to the position of the informants in the community, except to emphasize that they are old and locally based. The questionnaire used by the SED typically focuses on eliciting single lexical items; it is extremely lengthy, taking up to four days to record. SED data is therefore, of necessity, based on composite recordings of more than one speaker. As we shall see, all these characteristics of the dialectological approach contrast sharply with the aims and methods of modern sociolinguistics; for this more recent approach attempts to give as far as possible an accurate picture of contemporary language variation and use, taking account of the social identities of individual speakers.

It should be noted that many individual studies in the dialectological tradition modify the characteristically antiquarian approach. For example, recent work in France takes account of variability in an extremely sophisticated manner (Bouvier and Martel, 1973); Kurath's *Linguistic Atlas of New England* records speech from informants with different educational levels; current work in Ireland records the speech of different age groups; Gregg (1972) gives a substantial and clear synchronic account of Ulster dialect phonology, recording a very large number of speakers in a limited area in order to account for some of the facts of variability. However, in general dialectologists do not concern themselves with the interplay between social and linguistic behaviour which is the main interest of the sociolinguist. This difference in emphasis is demonstrated particularly clearly by Wright's (1972) study of the language of coalmining. Although Wright's research sites are two northern English industrial towns—the kind of area of considerable interest to a sociolinguist (see Petyt, 1978)—his concerns are quite different.

They are to document the peculiar and exotic lexicon of English collieries, and the study is seen as important because of the (apparently) imminent closure of the pits and the demise of the coal industry. Thus, the antiquarian interest in preserving a vanishing past is revealed as paramount. In passing, Wright makes a number of observations of considerable interest to any linguist studying a close-knit working-class community, but (and this is the important point) does not follow them up in any systematic way. The strongly vernacular speech of the inhabitants of two northern mining towns is contrasted with what Wright perceives as the more standardized speech characteristic of towns without this traditional and homogeneous form of employment. To illustrate his point, he quotes the *thee* and *thou* usage of grammar school children: [ða: did it] *thou did it*, [ði:l kɒp it] *thee'll cop it*, and remarks that they appear to alternate between this extremely nonstandard vernacular and a recognisably standard form of English spoken with a local accent. He further notes that miners characteristically use a more homogeneous vernacular than other occupational groups such as workers in the transport, catering or construction industries. As we shall see, relations between group structure (which may be affected by occupation) and language use are of great interest to us here. Indeed, one focus of interest in this book will be precisely on those points which Wright observed but did not study systematically—the relationship between heavy usage of vernacular speech and the internal structure of the group using that vernacular.

SOCIOLINGUISTICS—SOME GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Much work in this field is dominated by the influence of William Labov whose early research is rooted in the background provided by the dialectologists. In the famous studies both of Martha's Vineyard (carried out in 1961) and New York City (1966) he uses the background of earlier work to locate his own observations in real (or historical) time and to help him discover