Sociolinguistic Theory

Linguistic Variation and its Social Significance

Second Edition

J. K. Chambers

Blackwell Publishers

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consuetudo loquendi est in motu
"the vernacular is always in motion"
(Varro, ca. 24 BC)

Series Editor's Preface

During the last 40 years, inspired by the pioneering research of William Labov, work in secular linguistics and variation theory – the most central and theoretically important area of sociolinguistics – has made enormous progress. In particular, it has furthered our understanding of the nature of variation in language, and added numerous insights into the study of linguistic change through empirical studies of language in its social context. Established scholars in this field have always been able to keep in touch with the latest developments through journal papers, notably those in *Language Variation and Change*, and through attendance at conferences, especially the North American *New Ways of Analyzing Variation* series, now in its 30th year.

It has been a source of some frustration to teachers and students, however, that there has until now been no single book which could be used to introduce beginners to the subject as a whole. This long period of frustration is now over. The present volume distils the most important descriptive and theoretical findings concerning linguistic variation to date from around the world, and synthesizes them into a very exciting whole.

Although very accessible to beginning students, this book is no simple, uncritical rehearsal of the work of others. Professor Chambers is himself one of the foremost scholars in the world in the field of variation studies and, in addition to considerable amounts of data from his own studies, he provides here highly original and insightful interpretations, suggestions, and proposals that all interested researchers will be concerned to take note of. In particular, his discussion in the final chapter of the origins and functions of linguistic variation is one of the most challenging and exciting pieces of work ever to emerge from the field of sociolinguistics. Linguistic variation theory has, in these pages, truly come of age.

Peter Trudgill

Preface

Data without generalization is just gossip.

Robert Pirsig (1991: 55)

The correlation of dependent linguistic variables with independent social variables, the subject matter of this book, has been at the heart of sociolinguistics since its inception almost four decades ago. By a strange quirk, there has never before been a book-length appraisal of the way we have treated that covariation – about our terms of reference, our strengths and omissions, our results. Or perhaps it is not so strange. Sociolinguistics is young even compared to the other social sciences, and our emphasis, quite properly, has been on amassing case studies, refining our methods, seeking new evidence, testing recent results, and defining our boundaries.

The general books about sociolinguistics, apart from Trudgill's non-technical introduction (2000), have been mainly textbooks (for instance, Fasold 1990, Holmes 1992, Romaine 1994) and they have followed a tradition of unknown origin whereby covariation gets allotted exactly one chapter, the same as diglossia, ethnography and ethnomethodology, dialect geography, and any number of other topics. Instead of being the heart of the matter, covariation has been treated as one appendage among many.

It is a situation that, as a lecturer in courses using those books, I frequently deplored. As an author, I must say that I have come to revel in it. Many of the finest accomplishments in modern linguistics have come from the study of covariation, and in writing this first critical synthesis of it I had all of them to choose from. I would like to think that the most striking, most enlightening, most crucial research of the four decades (and beyond) has found its proper place in the pages of this book. Of course there is already too much of it for one person to know, too much for one synthesis of manageable length. Failing thoroughness in that sense I have tried to

attain it in another, by identifying key issues and marshalling the best research I knew about on each of them.

I have tried to make the material in this book accessible to readers who know no more than the rudiments of linguistic analysis. The book's obvious classroom use is in a second-level course after a general introduction along the lines of the textbooks mentioned above, but it could also be used at the first level if the instructor preferred a concentration on linguistic variation. Perhaps there it would need to be used judiciously. I have not avoided controversies when they arise either in sociolinguistics or in linguistic theory and history. The book was not written solely for students, and I hope it will find some readers curious about the intricate interrelationships of language and society.

More than once it came to my mind while writing the book that the lecture hall and the students who filled it have served me well. My own researches have taken me into the middle of several issues and forced me to sort out their critical dimensions. Those issues and some of my own contributions to them are represented in this book. But there is so much else, and it was my lecture notes and seminar handouts that gave me a semi-draft, a chronicle of my orientation on many issues. In my urban dialectology seminar at the University of Toronto, the students' research projects stretched my mind as well as my interests. After several students had stretched me in the same direction I sometimes began to think that I was not only keeping up but running ahead. The breadth of this book is largely thanks to those students.

I am also pleased to thank Philip Carpenter, Paul Kerswill, William Labov, and Peter Trudgill for their comments on drafts of some chapters. Gloria Cernivivo provided a cheerful conduit for the cover art.

In my reading for this book I came upon Haver C. Currie's "A projection of socio-linguistics" (1952), the very first article to speak of "sociolinguistics" by that name. The article has not aged very well (for reasons discussed in §1.2.2.1), but I could not help but admire Currie's optimism that the newly named field would thrive. He wrote:

> The present purpose is to suggest, by the citing of selected and salient studies, that social functions and significations of speech factors offer a prolific field for research. It is the intention in this connection to project, partly by means of identification, a field that may well be given the attentions of consciously directed research. This field is here designated *sociolinguistics*. Attention will be called to certain relevant research done or under way. Possibilities for further socio-linguistic research are, in fact, beyond estimation. (Currie 1952: 28)

Currie guessed right about the possibilities, even in the absence of any genuine examples of how sociolinguistics would work. It took a few years more for the studies to begin accumulating, but he rightly described their potential as "beyond estimation."

Of course we are still learning to see language, in Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog's resonant phrase, "as an object possessing orderly heterogeneity" (1968: 100). Looking at language that way is, as I show in §1.3 below, a revolutionary departure from the venerable traditions of language study. This book should make it abundantly clear – not only from the accomplishments it describes but also from the number of open questions, questionable answers, and unasked questions that remain – that the possibilities for sociolinguistic research, no less now than in 1952, are beyond estimation.

Jack Chambers
Toronto, Canada

Preface to the Second Edition

From its first appearance seven years ago, *Sociolinguistic Theory* was intended to serve two complementary purposes. First, it synopsizes several decades of research into a more or less coherent theory. In this respect, one reviewer commented that the book gives quantitative sociolinguistics "an almost classic form" (Nekvapil 2000). Second, it tries to capture the momentum of sociolinguistics in its short history by pointing out opportunities for learning more, based on what we have already discovered. In this second edition, I have done what I could to enhance both the coherence of the theory and the stimulus for pushing ahead. The outline remains the same as the first edition, but the revised version improves on it in countless details. Most obviously, §1.3 on communicative competence as a component of the language faculty is greatly expanded; §2.9, about individuals at odds with the aggregate (formerly "Individuations," now "Oddballs and Insiders"), is reorganized and better balanced; § 4.2, on developmental sociolinguistics, is recast, not only to accommodate new findings but also to give it the focus that became clearer in retrospect. Numerous sections were similarly clarified in minor ways. Throughout, I cleaned up terminology, cut back digressions, clarified stylistic muddles, and updated references as well as incorporating new research. In all this, I profited from the keen editorial eye of Jenny Roberts. The most gratifying comment on the first edition came from a student at Göteborg University, in an essay for Dr. Mats Mobärg, who wrote, "Never does this book lose the human aspect, in spite of all the diagrams and tables and hard facts; never do you lose the idea of the individual behind the numbers, . . . Give the writer my love if you happen to meet him!" I hope that the second edition enhances this aspect of the book as well.

JKC

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Correlations

> It is precisely because language is as strictly socialized a type of behavior as anything else in culture and yet betrays in its outlines such regularities as only the natural scientist is in the habit of formulating, that linguistics is of strategic importance for the methodology of social science. Behind the apparent lawlessness of social phenomena there is a regularity of configuration and tendency which is just as real as the regularity of physical processes in a mechanical world . . . Language is primarily a cultural or social product and must be understood as such . . . It is peculiarly important that linguists, who are often accused, and accused justly, of failure to look beyond the pretty patterns of their subject matter, should become aware of what their science may mean for the interpretation of human conduct in general.
>
> *Edward Sapir (1929: 76–7)*

This book is about language variation and its social significance. By now, the research literature on this topic, from the first breakthroughs almost 40 years ago to the most recent refinements, amounts to a formidable accumulation. It includes, by any reasonable yardstick, some of the most incisive discoveries in the long history of humanity's inquiries into the structure and function of language. My purpose is to make a critical synthesis of as much of that research, great and small, as I can handle within the covers of one book.

Looked at that way, my topic perhaps looks grand. But there is a sense in which it is narrow. The social significance of language variation is only one aspect of the discipline of sociolinguistics, broadly conceived. I will be dealing only with what might be called urban dialectology, that is, with accent or dialect as an emblem of an individual's class, sex, age, ethnicity, ambition, or some other social attribute. When we consider the enormous

number of uses that language serves in our daily interactions with other people, its social significance does really not cover much of the territory. In §1.1 below, I sketch the various social uses of language in order to put into a larger perspective the area to be covered in detail in this book.

The rest of this chapter is also devoted to providing perspectives on the subject matter of the chapters that follow. In §1.2, I explore the main theoretical construct of sociolinguistics, the linguistic variable, and look at its historical development, methodological premises, and theoretical basis. In §1.3 I compare and contrast categorical theories, especially Chomskyan linguistics, with sociolinguistics, a variationist theory, emphasizing the essential difference between them.

1.1 The Domain of Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics, as the study of the social uses of language, encompasses a multitude of possible inquiries. Ordinarily, we simply take for granted the numerous ways we use language in our social interactions because they are so deeply embedded in our daily affairs. It is sometimes hard for people to understand that a brief telephone conversation could possibly be of interest as an object of serious linguistic study. It is also hard for them to understand how much we reveal about ourselves – our backgrounds, our predilections, our characters – in the simplest verbal exchange.

What we need is a degree of objectivity – the willingness to step back and take a fresh look at our mundane activities in order to see them as the fascinating and exotic and often very complex events that they really are. We must reflect upon, for instance, the multitude of inferences individuals make when they are engaged in a conversation. The best kind of conversational exchange for reflecting upon is one in which the information is almost exclusively linguistic, as when you overhear a conversation between strangers sitting behind you in a bus or when you receive a telephone call from a total stranger. On those occasions, you begin the exchange with the minimum of knowledge and presupposition. And yet, after hearing only a few sentences, you find yourself in possession of a great deal of information of various kinds about people whom you have never seen.

The kinds of inferences you tacitly make fit into five general categories. In the following sections I call them personal, stylistic, social, sociocultural, and sociological.

1.1.1 Personal characteristics

One level of information is *personal.* Is the voice high-pitched or low? Nasal or open? Does the pitch move up and down the scale or is it relatively monotonal? Does the speaker lisp?

Like all the other linguistic observations we make, even those at much more sophisticated levels, these take place spontaneously, with very little consciousness on our part. And they are very often accompanied by spontaneous judgements, partly culture-driven and partly experience-driven. One obvious one is that monotonal speech is monotonous. Indeed, those two words – monotonal and monotonous – are etymologically almost identical as adjectives derived (by different Latinate suffixes *-al* and *-ous*) from a complex noun meaning "one tone."

Also at the personal level are inferences about the *speaking ability* of the individuals you are listening to. Is their speech fluent or hesitant? Is it articulate or vague? These are among the simplest, most superficial observations we make but, even at this level, the observations interact to give strong (though not necessarily accurate) impressions of character. A speaker who is fluent but vague will seem to us to be evasive, perhaps deceitful, and one who is articulate but hesitant will seem pensive and thoughtful. And there are of course many other possible judgements at this level. Is the person's vocabulary current and slang-inflected or ornate and careful?

Observations like these at the personal linguistic level have attracted relatively little serious linguistic study. Traditionally, they were considered too idiosyncratic or individualistic for framing hypotheses about language in general. With the insurgence of studies of the social use of language, including sociolinguistics (as discussed in §1.3 below), research into personal characteristics has increased.

Still, it is probably true that most personal linguistic characteristics offer little of interest to sociolinguists. If some aspect of a person's voice quality comes to be thought of as pathological, as are some kinds of lisp or stuttering, that person might be referred to a speech therapist, and speech therapists naturally classify the kinds of conditions referred to them in order to develop treatments for them, but their studies are outside the domain of sociolinguistics. By the same token, if some aspect of the person's speaking ability is deemed an impediment for cosmetic or occupational reasons, that person might seek the help of an elocutionist in hopes of learning how to speak more "attractively" (whatever that might mean) or more convention-

ally. The elocutionists' manual of speaking aids is irrelevant to sociolinguistics, except perhaps in the way that a manual of etiquette might be of interest in sociology, as an indicator of the social values attached to particular mannerisms at a particular time.

Observations about personal speech characteristics could perhaps be better integrated into sociolinguistic research than they are. Sapir (1927) made an attempt at considering speech as a "personality trait" but his fascinating study has not inspired productive research by others. One avenue that would surely be interesting and possibly productive would be studying how (if at all) personal speech characteristics differ from society to society or, conversely, how they remain constant across social and cultural boundaries. It would also be of considerable sociolinguistic interest to discover how consistently these varied personal characteristics are used by listeners to form judgements about the speakers. For the time being, however, considerations like these are at the fringe of sociolinguistic research.

1.1.2 Linguistic styles

Another level of observation is *stylistic*. Here again listeners are capable of considerable discrimination, spontaneously and almost instantaneously, concerning the degree of familiarity between the participants in a conversation, their relative ages and ranks, the function of their conversation, and many other aspects. The main determinant is the speech styles they are using. The range of possibilities encompasses, on the one hand, the casualness of utterly familiar, long-time friends who share a wealth of common experience and, on the other hand, the formality of unequal participants who have no common ground but are forced to interact for some reason or other – perhaps one is hiring the other to mow the lawn, or instructing the other to serve the tea – with numerous possibilities in between.

Unlike the personal traits discussed above, speech styles fall squarely into the domain of sociolinguistics. Stylistic differences have a simple social correlate: *formality tends to increase in direct proportion to the number of social differences between the participants*. The most relevant social factors are the topic of the next heading (§1.1.3), but for now it is enough to know that age is one of them, and to think of the effect that age differences often impose upon a discussion. Imagine a conversation between two women from the same neighborhood who unexpectedly meet in the waiting room of a dentist's office; imagine first that both women were, say, 30, and then imagine the difference in the conversation if one was 30 and the other 70.

The sociolinguistic relevance comes about because our ability to judge the formality of a conversation is largely determined by linguistic cues. Casual conversations tend to be more rapid, with more syntactic ellipses and contractions, and more phonological assimilations and coalescences. Highly formal conversations can also be very rapid if a participant is very nervous, but in that instance the syntax is usually stilted and somewhat breathless and the phonology articulated unnaturally. In English, one stereotype of hyper-formality is the pronunciation of the indefinite article "a," which is ordinarily pronounced [ə], as hyper-correct [eɪ]. There is also a middle ground between casual style and formal style, typically found in linguistic interactions between peers, that is, people who share many social characteristics, called careful style.

Clearly, if the relative formality of a conversation can cause speakers to adjust their phonology and other aspects of dialect and accent, then style is an independent variable that affects the dependent speech variables. The importance of style was recognized in a study that proved to be the most important precursor of modern sociolinguistics, when Fischer (1958: 49) noted that the choice of the suffix [ɪn] for [ɪŋ] in participles like *walkin'*, *talkin'* and *thinkin'* in the speech of Boston schoolchildren "changed from an almost exclusive use of *-ing* in the [formal] situation to a predominance of *-in* in the informal interviews." (Fischer's study is discussed further in §2.9.4.1 and §3.2.1.)

Style was firmly established as an independent variable in sociolinguistics, as were so many other factors, when Labov made it an integral part of his interview protocols in his ground-breaking survey of New York City (1966a: 90–135 and passim; see §1.2.2.5 below). Labov asked his subjects to talk about topics such as street games and life-threatening experiences. He also asked them to read passages of connected prose and lists of words into the tape recorder. These tasks elicit a range of styles from the speakers. The essential difference between speech styles is the amount of self-monitoring people do when they are speaking. When people are asked to read lists of words, they obviously concentrate on their pronunciation almost completely, especially when the reading is being recorded by someone who is admittedly studying the way they speak. The care and attention is even greater than usual if the words are arranged as minimal pairs – "cot" and "caught," or "poor" and "pour" or (from Labov's list) "God" and "guard" (§1.2.2.6 below).

The reading of connected prose is also highly monitored – so much so that most people are well aware of sounding different when they read – but the requirement of maintaining coherence when reading a passage aloud

deflects some attention away from speech and on to the content of the passage.

In a free discussion, the content becomes even more important. Though self-monitoring is normal as an interviewee frames answers to the interviewer's questions, it must obviously be less than when reading a passage because the content of the answer must be foremost.

The unmonitored style – casual speech – is the one that sociolinguists want most to study, and it is the one that cannot be elicited by any foolproof devices. After the interviews have been going on for several minutes, the subjects normally become accustomed to the recording apparatus and more relaxed with the interviewer. When they are asked to tell the interviewer about near-fatal car accidents or fires in the toaster or other events that involved them, they are likely to get caught up in the recollected urgency of the situation and forget their self-consciousness. As interviewers, we can work at developing good rapport in the course of the interview, and at finding some topic that will touch a nerve. Apart from that, the best prospect of eliciting casual speech comes about when some intimate third person interrupts the interview, by telephone or in person, while the recording is taking place. (The elicitation of a range of styles is further exemplified in the summary of Labov's New York interview protocol in the next section.)

Elicitation of a range of styles is routinely included in sociolinguistic interviews. In the discussion of results throughout this book, style is often included as an independent variable. I refer to the styles in the conventional way by using self-explanatory terms (and their abbreviations): word list style (WL) is elicited by the reading of a list of words; the more self-conscious variant elicited by arranging the words based on their phonological similarities is called, simply, minimal pairs (MP); reading passage style (RP) is elicited by recording a prepared text; interview style (IS) is the free discussion of topics with perhaps some direction by the interviewer; and casual style (CS) is the unmonitored natural vernacular.

Throughout the book, style is an important independent variable but it is never the focal point. (For fuller discussions of sociolinguistic style, see Bell 1984, Schilling-Estes 2002.) The focal point in this book will be social variables of the type to which we now turn.

1.1.3 Social characteristics

Whenever we speak we reveal not only some personality traits and a certain sensitivity to the contextual style, but also a whole configuration of

characteristics that we by and large share with everyone who resembles us socially. Usually without any conscious effort on our part, we embody in our speech, as in our dress, manners, and material possessions, the hallmarks of our social background. Our speech, from this perspective, is emblematic in the same sense as is the car we drive or the way we dress for work but, obviously, our speech is much less manipulable, much harder to control consciously, and for that reason much more revealing.

The *social class* to which we belong imposes certain norms of behavior on us and reinforces them by the strength of the example of the people with whom we associate most closely. The sub-elements of social class include education, occupation, income and type of housing, all of which play a role in determining the people with whom we will have daily contacts and more permanent relationships. They tend to be similar to those of our parents, so that the class trappings that most adults surround themselves with are to some degree an updated replication of those they grew up with. In all of this, of course, there is some latitude and, in relatively free societies, some mobility. The effects of social class on speech are the subject of chapter 2.

The other major social factors that exert a tacit and largely irrepressible effect on our behavior, including the way we speak, are *sex* and *age*. Their effects on our speech are the subjects of chapter 3 and chapter 4, respectively.

In modern industrial societies, these three social characteristics – class, sex, and age – are the primary determinants of social roles. They are, of course, enormously complex, subsuming a host of social factors. The chapters on the primary characteristics break them down into their molecular elements in so far as those elements have a demonstrable effect on the way people speak.

For social class, the essential distinction separates non-manual and manual workers (§2.1). The effect of occupational mobility blurs the class lines not only socially but also linguistically (§2.4). In close-knit social clusters of the kind often (but not exclusively) found in manual workers' communities, the degree to which individuals are integrated into their local networks may affect their uses of regional markers (§2.6–§2.8). Even with class distinctions and network pressures impinging upon the individual, linguistic behavior is by no means rigidly defined but can vary within certain limits (§2.9).

For sex, the essential distinction separates sex roles, which are biological, and gender roles, which are sociological (§3.1). In various communities, men and women divide the social labor in different ways, with