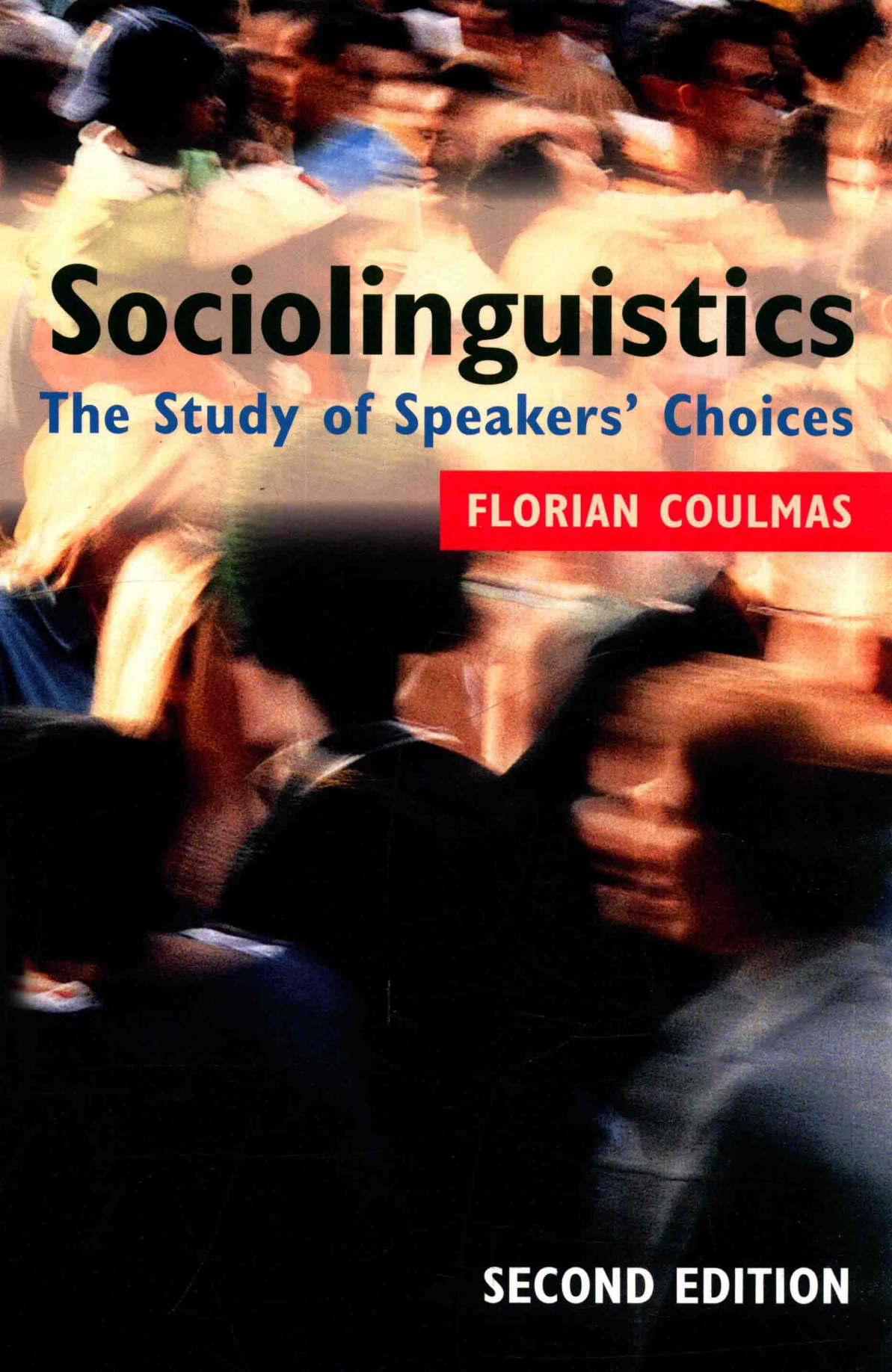
Sociolinguistics
The Study of Speakers' Choices
FLORIAN COULMAS
SECOND EDITION

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**SOCIOLINGUISTICS**

*The Study of Speakers' Choices*

Second edition

Why do we speak the way we do? What are the social factors that influence our choices of expression? This best-selling introduction to the study of language and society encourages students to think about these fundamental questions, asking how and why we select from the vast range of different words, accents, varieties and languages available to us.

In this new and updated edition, students are taken step-by-step through the analysis of linguistic expressions, speech varieties and languages in complex settings. Enriched with recent findings from different languages and speech communities around the world, this comprehensive textbook equips students with knowledge of the main concepts and gives them a coherent view of the complex interaction of language and society.

- 'Questions for discussion' help students understand how speakers' choices are conditioned by the society in which they live.
- New to this edition are lists of further reading and a repertoire of online resources, including 100 flashcards, enabling students to investigate more deeply and advance their learning.
- Includes a topical new chapter on research ethics, guiding students on the ethical questions involved in sociolinguistic research.

FLORIAN COULMAS is Director of the German Institute for Japanese Studies, Tokyo. His previous books include *Literacy and Linguistic Minorities* (1984), *Language Adaptation* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), *Language and Economy* (1992), *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics* (1997), *Writing Systems* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Writing and Society (Cambridge University Press 2013).

# Preface to the second edition

Preparing the second edition of a textbook is a great pleasure. While making new mistakes is perhaps more exciting than correcting past ones, being given the chance to revise, augment, update and, hopefully, improve a text written several years ago is a great privilege. Not only does it imply that the original edition has found its readers, which is, of course, a matter of satisfaction; it also shows that the field continues to thrive and evolve. I have been intrigued by the multifarious interconnections between language and society for many years. Knowing that they are subject to coordinated and ever more sophisticated research that has a place in university curricula makes it a rewarding task to introduce new generations of students to sociolinguistics.

Revisiting one's own writing is an interesting experience that makes you reflect not just on the book at hand, but on the accumulation of knowledge, the many factors that have an influence on how an academic field develops and on progress of scholarship in general. A critical view that takes nothing for granted and tries to look beyond the confines of our own preconceptions is essential for the scientific enterprise. Every research paper and every book could always be better, but many never will be. We all have erudite friends who took the notion that further improvement is still possible too seriously – and thus never finished their PhD theses. Lest excessive perfectionism forever stops us in our tracks, we publish despite some uncertainties and shortcomings and, therefore, happily seize upon the opportunity to make up for some of the inadequacies.

Working on the second edition of *Sociolinguistics* was pleasant enough. It allowed me to take stock and assess new research that has been undertaken since I first planned this textbook. I reworked it cover to cover and in the process weeded out some misprints and other minor mistakes; not many though, thanks to Jo Breeze who was the Production Editor for the original edition. There were no big blunders that called for correction, and in the meantime no major discovery or theoretical breakthrough has fundamentally changed the way research about language and society is done. Hence, the substance of the book is unchanged; but I brought it up to date by incorporating many references to recent research, adding examples and reinforcing arguments by supplying latest data. Sociolinguistics is an empirical science, and data are accordingly very important. Data collection,

processing and storage is, perhaps, what has changed most in sociolinguistic research these past couple of decades. This is largely due to advances in technology. Recording devices have been miniaturized, and specialized computer software has been developed to create digital transcriptions from digital audio or video recordings. Large corpora of print, speech data and transcriptions can be shared easily and subjected to statistical analyses on a scale that was hard to imagine just a few years ago. The exponential growth of the Internet has also changed our reading behaviour and the way we come by the information we need for our research. This edition does justice to these developments by including a new list of useful online resources at the end of each chapter.

Rather than objectifying languages, dialects and other varieties by treating them as closed and in that sense invariant systems, sociolinguistics should take a speaker-centred approach focusing on communities and their linguistic resources. The pivotal question uniting the chapters of this book, in this edition as in the original one, is what it is that speakers do with their language(s); how they pass them on to following generations; how they allow them to be influenced by other languages; how they adjust their speech to that of their interlocutors; and how they interact with speakers of other idioms. Empirical research adopting such an approach necessarily has to do with people and, like other research involving human subjects, must conform to certain widely accepted principles. Although sociolinguistic investigations are usually of low risk to informants and research partners, more attention has been paid in recent years to problems of research ethics. I have therefore added a chapter at the end of the book discussing the conditions that must be met for planning and executing ethically sound research that does not exploit informants or in other ways violate their rights. This new chapter not only takes into account evolving sensitivities in the social sciences, but is also a logical consequence of the central position assigned to speakers in sociolinguistics.

Questions and suggestions by students of Chuo University and Tokyo University where I occasionally taught this book as well as critical comments by colleagues helped me to improve it for its present edition. Andrew Winnard of Cambridge University Press suggested the revision and encouraged me to see it through. My gratitude is due to him, Jo Breeze and other members of the editorial department.

# Contents

# Figures

# Tables

# 1 Introduction: notions of language

> Reality does not speak to us objectively, and no scientist can be free from constraints of psyche and society.
>
> Stephen Jay Gould (2000)

**Outline of the chapter**

After considering the twofold nature of language as a natural and a social object of study, this introductory chapter explains the position of sociolinguistics in the language sciences. It then discusses some general implications of the fact that languages are the collaborative products of their speech communities, how they spread and affect each other, and that every utterance and every language could be different from what they actually are. Languages are constantly recreated by being used and handed down from one generation to the next. In order to do this, speakers have to make choices from the structural possibilities of language in general and the expressive potential that their linguistic environment offers in particular. The notion of choice is introduced as the most basic concept of sociolinguistics which studies how social factors affect these choices.

*Key terms:* natural language, language as a social fact, language change, choice, collaboration

## Natural language and social language

As human beings we are able to change our behaviour. The idea that we act as free agents is fundamental to our self-conception. Every word we say reinforces this conviction, for whenever we speak we make choices. The ability to consider alternatives and opt for one is basic to intelligent life. It is restricted by our physical nature, the many things we cannot choose, such as the colour of our eyes, our IQ, or whether we are beautiful or ugly. All this may change soon, as the human species gets ready to do with itself what it has done with other species for a long time: interfere with nature's course, select, breed, grow and artificially manipulate their genetic makeup. The life sciences have made spectacular progress over the past several decades, constantly expanding the realm of culture – that which we control – at the expense of nature – that which controls us. No longer confined to science fiction novels, anthropotechnology has crossed the threshold into the real

world and become a vital concern of legislation, the paradigm of deliberate regulation of behaviour. The prospects are tempting. Before long, we are told, we will be able to safeguard our offspring against congenital diseases, if not secure immortality for ourselves. At the same time, we are confronted with new challenges, which will be a lot more serious than how to retrain all those undertakers. We will have to decide whether to go down every pathway science opens up or to erect occasional warning signs, STOP HERE, at critical junctures. In short, at the present time, we are forced to rethink our place in the universe, the confines of nature and our own nature.

## Language, the inborn

Language plays a peculiar role in this regard. People are born to speak, though they are not born speaking. It is no coincidence that the scientific study of language has been thoroughly impressed by, and, some would claim, has contributed to, the revolutionary changes in the life sciences. For language is seen as an evolutionary adaptation to communicate information. It is what most distinguishes us from other beasts, chatty chimps and brainy dolphins notwithstanding. The exploration of language, therefore, is indispensable if we want to understand our own nature. For language, as cognitive scientist Steven Pinker put it, 'is a distinct piece of the biological makeup of our brains'. 'It is not something that parents teach their children or something that must be elaborated in school' (Pinker 1994: 18f.). Yet, parents around the globe do teach their children language, and only a few would willingly dispense with grammar school because they think their children's language is in no need of elaboration, and not just because they have misgivings about the school's effectiveness in this regard.

Pinker could of course be right. He would not be the first scientist who gets the better of popular ideas. Language has been known for a long time to have a physical base in our brain, and of late the race is on among biologists to track down the language gene. Given the overwhelming importance of language to the survival of our species, it is more than a remote possibility that it is genetically determined. Assuming that it is, we are or aren't equipped with it, and in the latter case no amount of schooling will make up for the deficit. All babies acquire language quickly because they have the ability to do so and because all societies use language. The ability to acquire language is universal and unrelated to intelligence. With the exception of some pathological cases, humans grow up to speak, the dumbest and the brightest. Evidence for that is all around us. What this suggests is that language is innate and common to the species. Those who are chasing the language gene may be on the right track, then. Language helps us survive. But does Italian, or Dutch, or Bengali? Such a proposition would be hard to defend, and no one – except for the authors of 'Survival Italian', etc. – really does.

It would be jumping to conclusions if we were to instruct would-be parents that they must not waste their time teaching their children language, and teachers that they need not bother to elaborate it because the kids are born with it anyway. Thanks to the astonishing nature of language, both sides are right, the researchers who tell us that teaching children language is unnecessary and the parents and teachers who spend so much time and effort doing just that. The disagreement between them is only apparent. This is so because to acquire language both are indispensable, our brain's physical equipment and our society – represented perhaps by a single caregiver – talking to us. Brain damage or genetic deformation *and* social deprivation will both make language acquisition impossible. Thus, language has two sides, the biological and the social, each of which must be studied in its own right.

Geneticists and other life scientists interested in language are concerned with language in the singular, invariant in space and time. Like-minded linguists and cognitive scientists are devoted to the quest for the ground plan of language that is hard-wired in the brain. They speak of 'natural language' that is governed by universal grammar (UG), and some of them, therefore, call their field 'biolinguistics'. Its main task is to elucidate the 'faculty of language' which Noam Chomsky, the most influential linguist of this school of thought, has defined as follows:

> The faculty of language can reasonably be regarded as a 'language organ' in the sense in which scientists speak of the visual system, or immune system, or circulatory systems, as organs of the body. (2000: 4)

But compare the visual systems of the French and the Fulbe and the Fukienese, and you will find that they are virtually identical. If, however, we compare the French, Fulfulde and Fukienese languages the differences are striking. Even French French and Quebec French differ in many ways. Biolinguists take notice of this diversity only in so far as it may help to clarify aspects of the abstract system of rules and principles underlying all languages. Their focus is on UG, the general immutable properties of language. Disregarding the still remote chances of genetic engineering to design a better language, no choice is possible here. Linguistic diversity must be dealt with, but cannot be explained on biological grounds. If the faculty of language is part of our genetic heritage and an organ of the body, why does it come in so many vastly different guises? Why are languages so much more diverse than lungs and adrenal glands? The fact that linguistic change is much more rapid than genetic change has implications for how we should interpret the notion of a language organ. Assuming that language is a biological system, we have to work out how 'language', UG, in the singular relates to 'languages' and their particular grammars in the plural.[1] From the observable linguistic diversity, we have to conclude two things; one, that genetic hard-wiring determines a range of structural possibilities rather than

a fixed set of arrangements, and two, that language change continues, while we do not yet know whether this change is confined to the UG-defined range or potentially transcends it. In the latter case language change would be an aspect of the on-going evolution of the species. However this may be, there is no convincing answer to the question why languages differ unless we open our eyes to the uses of language in society.

## Language, the historical

Language has been defined by Ferdinand de Saussure, another great linguist of the twentieth century, as a 'social fact' (Saussure 1959: 6). This definition has many implications. For one, language comes into focus here as a means of communication, for social facts are those that can be studied only if we look at how people associate to form groups, how they communicate and how they act collectively. Investigating a single individual or the species at large cannot reveal the social disposition of humanity. Language is a social fact in that every language is a collective product, an artefact created by its speakers which, at the same time, enables higher forms of social planning and cooperation to evolve. Society is built on language. There is no human society that does not speak and use language as its central instrument of organization.

Social behaviour has instinctive components, too, but those that are learnt predominate. Being socialized means learning the ways of one's society, including its language. No one will ever learn Swahili just by following his or her instinct. Every language must be learnt, and it is the society that teaches its new members how to use it properly, how to conform with established conventions. Language, from a social point of view, is conventional, which is another way of saying that it could be different. Every language could be different from what it actually is. We know this because we know that today's languages were different in the past, that they have changed and will continue to change. For the conception of language as a social as opposed to a natural fact, this is of utmost importance. Social facts are historical facts. They have many contingent features. Biolinguistics ignores the historicity of language because it is interested in invariance, but to sociolinguistics the historical dimension of language is central. William Labov, one of the leading figures in this field, has identified as his primary goal 'to determine what happened in the history of language or language family' because 'the fact of language change is difficult to reconcile with the notion of a system adapted to communication' (Labov 1994: 9). We experience language as a stable system that works and tend to think of different languages as distinct systems. Adaptation and change happen largely unnoticed. Yet, the fact of language change forces us to look at instability, deviation and loss of comprehension across generations (see Chapter 4) and dialects (see Chapter 2). The existence of different languages is a historical fact, a result of language change.

The historical character of language and the fact that it must be learnt are closely related. It is true that all people learn to speak, as pointed out above; but it is also true that the general ability to learn does not imply that we all learn the same, and equally well. There are good learners and not so good learners, and what they learn is never an exact replica of the model. For instance, the Germans learnt from the French the word *baguette*, 'French bread'. They spell it like the French, and the pronunciation is very close, too. But they changed the gender. The French model is feminine, the German copy neuter. Why? Ignorance, perhaps. The Germans may have been unaware that a French *baguette* was feminine and simply given the new word the same gender as their own word for bread, *das Brot, n.* Perhaps more interesting structural reasons were involved, such as the asymmetry between the dual French gender system and the tripartite German one. Perhaps morphophonological rules make themselves felt here. There are many neuter nouns in German ending, like *baguette*, in [-et], such as *Bett*, *Fett*, *Brett*, *Kabinett*, *Skelett* and *Sonett*, but I couldn't find a single feminine one. However this may be, the gender change of *baguette* didn't happen naturally. Somebody performed the operation. What the example illustrates is that learning often implies change.

Since French and German are different languages, it is not surprising that elements of one adapted to the other will undergo modification. But the same also happens within what presumably is one language. In England, *sauce* and *source* are usually homonyms, but in some parts of the United States they are distinct, *source*, true to the French original, but not *sauce*, having an audible [r]. Differences of this sort may or may not be indicative of on-going change. The point here is the same as above, an explanation can be found. If both pronunciations coexist and continue to coexist for a long time, it is hard to argue that one is systematically more essential or sound than the other. It is also hard to argue that these differences are superficial and unimportant, because it is sets of variations of this kind that, if they pile up, can lead to linguistic divergence, mutual unintelligibility, and hence the emergence of a new language. This is so because the distribution of *source* with and without [r] is not random. It distinguishes not individuals but groups of speakers.

Every language is transmitted from one generation to the next by learning and has its unique history. These two facts go a long way to explaining linguistic diversity. Diversity means two things: the multiplicity of human languages – 6,000 is a conventional count – and the enormous variety of coexisting forms in every language. This diversity is the result of many contingent factors working on human speech behaviour. Being open to contingencies, language is neither deterministic nor random. Without such openness, not allowing for adaptation and innovation, it would be rapidly outdated. Luckily, in the process of learning, we do not just repeat what our elders said but recreate our languages anew, adapting them to our purposes, and hence bring about change that is, as pointed out above, much faster than genetic

change. If it were possible to delimit clearly one generation of speakers from the next, linguistic change could be observed in every generation. By contrast, DNA changes of humans are thought to occur at the rate of one mutation every 25 to 40 generations. This difference in adaptation rate suggests that genetic change and language change proceed independently of one another; yet, the possibility that culture affects human evolution and that some linguistic change may match genetic change cannot be excluded.

## Migration and diversity

If we want to appreciate the great diversity of human languages we need to consider another factor, migration. According to a famous dictum attributed to George Bernard Shaw, England and America are 'two countries separated by the same language'. Most speakers of English are aware of the hiatus between British and American speech, but find it quite unremarkable because the cause is so obvious: the Atlantic Ocean. English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch in the New World aren't quite what they are in the old. We take it for granted that over long periods of time geographic isolation brings about linguistic divergence. People living in different environments speak about different things; in the process they mispronounce words, create new ones, reinterpret morphological forms, borrow lexical items from others and put them together to form sentences in novel ways. This must have been so from the beginning (assuming that the beginning of humanity can ever be lifted out of the realm of speculation[2]). Where a substantial body of population moves out of one territory and into another, driven by demographic pressure, commerce or the incursion of invaders, it will take its language with it, but after some time this language ceases to be the same as that spoken in its original territory. From a theoretical point of view, this is remarkable because it means that social factors are involved in language change. If language change were deterministic, thrust towards a goal and governed entirely by quasi-natural laws inherent in the language system, as in the past historical linguists have claimed,[3] we should expect it to be unaffected by migration. In the event, English should continue to change along the same lines on both sides of the Atlantic. But as it turns out, once a group splits into two, language change is no longer synchronized. Since the two groups are stripped of the opportunity to adjust their speech to each other, the transmission and recreation of their language is propelled onto different trajectories.

## Desires and norms

Migration usually induces language change, but a speech community's spatial contiguity and temporal continuity are no guarantee for maintaining linguistic homogeneity nor a sufficient condition for bringing