

SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIATION

Edited by Robert Bayley
and Ceil Lucas

THEORIES, METHODS, AND APPLICATIONS



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Sociolinguistic Variation

Theories, Methods, and Applications

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Sociolinguistic Variation

Why does human language vary from one person, or one group, to another? In what ways does it vary? How do linguists go about studying variation in, say, the sound system or the sentence structure of a particular language? Why is the study of language variation important outside the academic world, in say education, the law, employment, or housing? This book provides an overview of these questions, bringing together a team of experts to survey key areas within the study of language variation and language change. Covering both the range of methods used to research variation in language, and the applications of such research to a variety of social contexts, it is essential reading for advanced students and researchers in sociolinguistics, communication, linguistic anthropology, and applied linguistics.

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To Walt Wolfram

“And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche”

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Introduction

ROBERT BAYLEY AND CEIL LUCAS

Beginning with the pioneering work of Labov, Shuy, Fasold, and Wolfram in the mid and late 1960s, the study of variation has formed one of the key areas, if not the key area, of sociolinguistics. Alone among the various sociolinguistic subfields, the study of variation has been enriched by two regular conferences – New Ways of Analyzing Variation (NWAV), now in its 36th year, and, beginning in 2001, the International Conference on Language Variation in Europe (ICLaVE) – as well as by its own journal, *Language Variation and Change*. In recent years, conferences on language variation have also been held in England (VIEW 1998, VIEW 2000), and a sociolinguistics laboratory dedicated to the study of linguistic variation has been established at Nanjing University in China. Moreover, although the study of variation began with a focus on varieties of English, French, and Spanish, variationist studies now encompass many languages ranging from Guyanese and Jamaican Creoles to Brazilian Portuguese to Chinese to American Sign Language and Australian Sign Language. Variationist approaches have also met with considerable success in studies of second language acquisition. However, despite the prominence of variationist studies in North American sociolinguistics and, increasingly, in other areas of the world, most widely used textbooks in sociolinguistics devote only a chapter or two to the study of variation. Only one textbook in sociolinguistics, Chambers (2002), is devoted primarily to variation.

This volume brings together a group of contributors widely recognized for their contributions to variationist sociolinguistics with the purpose of providing accessible overviews of the major areas of concern for students of linguistic variation. And while the chapters in this volume make it very clear that we have come a very long way in over forty years of variationist studies, they also demonstrate that three fundamental facts about variationist studies remain constant: that the variation observed in real language use is systematic and its analysis can directly inform a number of theoretical frameworks about human language use; that the development of the study of real language use has been accompanied by the development of sophisticated methods of data collection and analysis tailored to the requirements of the study of variation; and that variationist studies have very frequently received their impetus from real human situations in the areas of education, employment, and the law, and that the results of variationist studies have had very tangible and important applications in all of these areas.

In the section of the volume on theory, variation is described as it has been studied in the areas of phonology (Guy), syntax (Green, Fasold and Preston), and

style (Bell). In addition, a historical perspective on the study of variation is provided (Hazen) and variation as it pertains to historical linguistics (Montgomery) and second language acquisition (Bayley) is also examined. Finally, the role of language modality in variation is considered, with a comparison of spoken and sign language studies (Lucas).

The chapters in the methods section provide clear and comprehensive introductions to fieldwork methods for the study of variation (Schilling-Estes), to methods of quantitative analysis (Tagliamonte), and to the study of sociophonetics (Thomas).

The chapters in the applications section provide a powerful demonstration of the kind of wide impact that variationist studies can have on education (Adger and Christian, Vaughn-Cooke, Rickford and Rickford), language acquisition (Stockman), the law (Butters), and linguistic profiling (Baugh). The volume concludes with an essay by Roger Shuy, one of the founding figures of sociolinguistics, on Walt Wolfram, a scholar who has contributed directly or indirectly to nearly all of the areas covered in this book.

The important connection in variationist studies between theory, methods, and applications reflected in this volume has consistently shaped and informed the work of Walt Wolfram, to whom the volume is dedicated. All of the contributors to this volume worked very enthusiastically to produce a fitting tribute to our excellent colleague, teacher, and friend.