On Dialect

Social and Geographical Perspectives

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Basil Blackwell

First published 1983
First published in paperback 1984
Reprinted 1984

Basil Blackwell Publisher Limited
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, England

Basil Blackwell Inc.
432 Park Avenue South, Suite 1505
New York, NY 10016, USA

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Trudgill, Peter
On dialect.
1. English language—Dialects
I. Title
427 PE1711
ISBN 0-631-13151-5
0-631-13686 X Pbk

Typesetting in 11 on 12½ pt Monophoto Times
by Santype International Limited, Salisbury
Printed in Great Britain by T. J. Press, Padstow

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For Arthur, Mike and Paul

Acknowledgements

The introduction is a revised and extended version of 'Where does sociolinguistics stop?', from W. Dressler (ed.), *Proceedings of the 12th International Congress of Linguistics* (Innsbruck University, 1978). *Chapter 1* is a modified version of 'On the limits of passive competence: sociolinguistics and the polylectal grammar controversy', from D. Crystal (ed.), *Linguistic Controversies* (Edward Arnold, 1982). *Chapter 2* is a modified version of 'The contribution of sociolinguistics to dialectology', first presented at the International Conference on Sociolinguistics, International Christian University, Tokyo, 1981. *Chapter 3* is a revision of 'Linguistic change and diffusion: description and explanation in sociolinguistic dialect geography', in *Language in Society*, **3**, 1974. *Chapter 4* is co-authored with Tina Foxcroft and first appeared in P. Trudgill (ed.), *Sociolinguistic Patterns in British English* (Edward Arnold, 1978) as 'On the sociolinguistics of vocalic mergers: transfer and approximation in East Anglia'. I am grateful to Tina Foxcroft for permission to reprint this paper here. *Chapter 5* was first presented at the International Conference of Historical Linguistics, Stanford, 1979. *Chapter 6* was originally entitled 'Creolisation in reverse: reduction and simplification in the Albanian dialects of Greece', and appeared in *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 1976–7. *Chapter 7* is co-authored with George A. Tzavaras and first appeared in H. Giles (ed.), *Language, Ethnicity and Intergroup Relations* (Academic Press, 1977) as 'Why Albanian-Greeks are not Albanians: language shift and ethnicity in Attica and Biotia'. I am most grateful to George Tzavaras for permission to reprint this paper here. *Chapter 8* is

from *York Papers in Linguistics*, **9**; M. W. de Silva (ed.), *Festschrift for R. B. Le Page* (1980), originally entitled 'Acts of conflicting identity: a sociolinguistic look at British pop songs'. *Chapter 9* is derived in part from 'Språk og kjønn i det engelske språket', in E. Ryen (ed.), *Språk og kjønn* (Novus, Oslo, 1976). *Chapter 10* is a revised version of 'Sex, covert prestige and linguistic change in the urban British English of Norwich', from *Language in Society*, **1**, 1972. *Chapter 11* is from *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, **21**, 1979, originally entitled 'Standard and non-standard dialects of English in the United Kingdom: problems and policies'. *Chapter 12* is co-authored with Howard Giles, and is from F. Coppieters and D. Goyvaerts (eds), *Functional Studies in Language and Literature* (Story-Scientia, 1978). I am grateful to Howard Giles for permission to reprint this paper here.

Contents

Introduction

On the study of language variation

This book consists of studies of different aspects of language variation.[1] They are studies of dialect in its widest sense – of social and regional varieties of language, together with their development, diffusion and evaluation. Many of them are studies in what I, and others, have come to call geolinguistics – sociolinguistic dialect geography. The rest are studies in other aspects of sociolinguistics – which leads me to acknowledge that there is a problem with the term *sociolinguistics*. It has become apparent that it is a term which means many different things to many different people. (In particular, it appears to have different implications in Britain and North America than those it has in Europe.) I want to suggest, however, that this multiplicity of interpretations may be due to the fact that, while everybody would agree that sociolinguistics has *something* to do with language and society, it is equally clearly not concerned with *everything* that could be considered under the heading of 'language and society'. The problem, that is, lies in the drawing of the line between *language and society*, on the one hand, and *sociolinguistics*, on the other. And what confusion there is results from the fact that different scholars draw the line in different places.

My own feeling is that whether you call something 'sociolinguistics' or not may not, in the very last analysis, matter very much, but that the drawing of this line is nevertheless a matter which deserves some discussion. My reason for arguing in this way is that it seems to me important to give overt recognition to

[1] I am very grateful to Aaron Cicourel, Paul Fletcher and Torben Vestergaard for their helpful comments on the earlier version of this chapter.

the fact that people working in the field of language and society are often doing so with very different aims, and that failure to acknowledge this fact, whether by restricting the scope of the term *sociolinguistics* – as I would prefer to do – or not, can lead to serious misapprehensions and misunderstandings.

If we examine objectives, in the area of study we have called 'language and society' – that is, if we look at why or to what purpose workers are carrying out studies in this field – we can see that it is possible to divide studies of language and society into three groups: first, those where the objectives are purely linguistic; second, those where they are partly linguistic and partly sociological or social scientific; and third, those where the objectives are wholly sociological. Like most such divisions, this classification is somewhat arbitrary and not easy to apply in practice, but it may be helpful in dealing with the problem of what sociolinguistics is and is not, and of clarifying exactly what is going on in this area.

The first category of study we can look at consists of studies in the field of language and society which are purely linguistic in intent. Studies of this type are based on empirical work on language as it is spoken in its social context, and are intended to answer questions and deal with topics of central interest to linguistics. In this case the term *sociolinguistics* is uncontroversial, but it should be clear that here it is being used principally to refer to a methodology: sociolinguistics as a way of doing linguistics.

Much work of this type falls within the framework established first and foremost by William Labov and consists of work which Labov himself has sometimes referred to as *secular linguistics*. Labov, as is well known, has addressed himself to issues such as the relationship between language and social class. However, his main objective in this has *not* been to learn more about a particular society, nor to examine co-variation between linguistic and social phenomena for its own sake – this, I think, is an important misunderstanding. Indeed, Labov has said that he actually resisted the term *sociolinguistics* for some time, as this seemed to him to be in danger of opening up the way to a series of correlational studies of little theoretical interest. He would have preferred, that is, to refer to his work simply as *linguistics*. Nor is work of this type particularly concerned with the social conditioning of speech. Rather, it is concerned to learn more about language, and to investigate topics such as the mechanisms of linguistic change; the

nature of linguistic variability; and the structure of linguistic systems. All work in this category, in fact, is aimed ultimately at improving linguistic theory and at developing our understanding of the nature of language, and in recent years, for instance, has led to the development of 'variation theory' – the recognition of 'fuzziness' in linguistic systems, and the problems of incorporating variability into linguistic descriptions. Work of this sort, that is to say, is very definitely *not* 'linguistics as a social science'.

This does not mean to say, of course, that workers in this area are not interested in more sociological issues. One cannot easily work from tape-recorded interviews without being interested in the social psychology of conversational interaction; nor ignore the influence of social networks in urban dialectology; nor neglect socio-psychological factors such as social ambition and linguistic accommodation to others. The overall aim of such studies, however, remains linguistic.

The second category consists of studies of language and society which are, in varying degrees, both sociological and linguistic in intent. This, of course, is where the main problem with the term *sociolinguistics* lies. The problem is that some workers would include the whole of this category within sociolinguistics; others would exclude it totally; yet others would include some areas but not all.

Into this category come a number of fields of study, none of which is wholly distinct from all the others. The descriptive labels employed by scholars working in this area include terms such as: the sociology of language; the social psychology of language; anthropological linguistics; the ethnography of speaking; and discourse analysis. The social objectives of areas such as these are fairly clear. But they do also have linguistic benefits and objectives. For example, it is true that anthropologists who study kinship systems of linguistic taboo, through the study of a community's language, are concerned to learn more about the structure and values of that community than about the language itself. But there are also many studies, such as the componential analysis of kinship systems by semanticists, and investigations into linguistic relativity which, while they are often considered to be 'anthropological linguistics', are certainly of more interest to linguists than to anthropologists. Furthermore, the study of the structure of conversational discourse is as linguistic a concern as the study of

text grammar generally. And students of syntactic change will note the explanation made by Sankoff and Brown (1976) of the development of relative clauses in New Guinea Pidgin English through conversational interaction between speakers. Similarly, the sociology of language, in its studies of bilingualism, links up with the study of interference between linguistic systems. And the notions of verbal repertoire, from the sociology of language, and communicative competence, from the ethnography of speaking, concern those who are interested in how far it is legitimate to extend grammars and to expand Chomsky's notion of competence. As far as the social psychology of language is concerned, Labov, in his Martha's Vineyard study, is one of many who have demonstrated that attitudes to language can be a powerful force in the propagation of linguistic changes. And social psychological theories of linguistic accommodation between speakers can help to explain the role of face-to-face interaction in the dissemination of change.

Most of the scholars working in those areas, moreover, would refer to their own work as falling under the heading of *sociolinguistics*, and it seems to me that, particularly if one should decide to use *objectives* as a criterion, this is perfectly legitimate.

The third category consists of studies in the field of language and society which are social rather than linguistic in intent. An example is provided by some aspects of the field of *ethnomethodology*. It is not easy for an outsider to give an informed or accurate characterization of ethnomethodology, but ethnomethodologists might not object too strongly to a statement to the effect that it can be regarded as a way of doing ethnography or sociology which studies people's practical reasoning and common sense knowledge of their society and the way it works. One way in which studies of this type can be carried out is by investigating the use of language in social interaction. But note that this is the study, not of *speech*, but of *talk*. The analysis of talk makes it possible for the ethnomethodologist to locate, for example, those things which a member of a society takes for granted – his 'knowledge of his ordinary affairs'.

Now it may be felt that ethnomethodological studies of some types have a link with linguistic studies of topics such as presupposition, pragmatics, and speech acts. Generally speaking, however, it seems clear that ethnomethodology, while it may deal with

language and society, is fairly obviously not linguistics, and therefore not sociolinguistics. Language ('talk') is employed as data, but the objectives are wholly social scientific. The point is to use the linguistic data to get at the social knowledge that lies behind it, not to further our understanding about language.

Let me illustrate this in the following way. Some linguists have been concerned with an aspect of the analysis of conversational discourse which deals with what has been referred to as 'rules for discourse'. Studies of this kind are concerned with the problem of how it is possible to distinguish between meaningful, coherent conversations and those which are not coherent. Some workers resisted the inclusion of studies of this type within linguistics on the grounds that this would involve us in the impossible task of incorporating into descriptions or grammars everything that speakers know about the world. However, Labov, in his paper 'Rules for ritual insults' (1972b), has demonstrated that it is possible to develop rules of discourse which have the required explanatory power *without* doing this. In a now very well-known example, he says that we know that the following is a perfectly coherent piece of discourse:

A 'Are you going to work tomorrow?'
B 'I'm on jury duty.'

Now there is no obvious *linguistic* connection between A's question and B's answer. So what is the connection? Labov states that this kind of coherence can be handled by a discourse rule which says that, if B's reply cannot be related linguistically (by rules of ellipsis and so on) to A's question, then the reply is heard as an assertion that there exists a proposition known to both A and B, which *is* related and from which the answer can be inferred. In this case, the proposition known to both A and B, which B's reply can be heard as asserting, is that people who are on jury duty are not allowed to go to work. It is not, however, necessary for linguists to build this information into any linguistic description or grammar which attempts to account for the acceptability of this dialogue. It is necessary for linguistics only to be concerned with the *form* of the discourse rule itself and with the *fact* of the proposition. The *content* of the proposition, while we may take note of it, is not our primary concern. Ethnomethodologists, on

the other hand, *are* interested in the study of the content of such propositions. It is precisely propositions of this type which are revealed as constituting shared knowledge through ethnomethodological studies of conversational interaction (although typically, of course, these propositions will be rather less obvious than the one discussed here). Ethnomethodology therefore provides us with a very good example of work in language and society which is not – I would suggest – sociolinguistics. It is clear, I think, that it is not the task of linguists to examine what members of a society know about how that society works (although this is of course useful background knowledge). And I think we can perhaps agree that when we come to the point where language data is being employed to tell us, not about language, but only about society, then this is the point where, while linguistic expertise might be useful to the sociologist, the student of language and society and the study of sociolinguistics have to recognize that they are doing different things.

Studies of an interdisciplinary nature are certainly of very considerable importance, and co-operation between scholars (such as linguistics and sociologists) is surely to be encouraged. Ultimately, moreover, the labelling of disciplines and the drawing of boundaries between them may well be unimportant, unnecessary, and unhelpful. As Dell Hymes (1974) has said: 'The parcelling out of the study of man among competing clans may serve petty interests, but not the supervening interests of mankind itself in self understanding and liberation.' In the case of sociolinguistics, however, we have to take care that a too widely extended umbrella term does not conceal differences of objectives to the point of misunderstanding: the many people working in the field of language and society are doing so for a number of different purposes.

The chapters in this book have been collected together under the title of *On Dialect*. It should therefore be clear that this book is located towards the linguistic end of the 'language in society' spectrum, and that a major emphasis is on dialect as dialect, and language as language. Sociolinguistics and geolinguistics are treated in this volume, for the most part, as methodologies for doing linguistics through the study of language variation. The chapters in the early part of the book are concerned mainly with linguistic theory and/or with theoretical and methodological prob-

lems associated with the empirical study of linguistic change. Towards the end of the book the studies become less linguistic and more social, and concern themselves not only with language as such, but also with issues such as personal, social and ethnic identity, and with the applications of the findings of sociolinguistics and dialectology to the solution of practical and educational problems.

Two of the twelve chapters are published here for the first time. Of the others, two have been radically revised, updated and edited so that the book can be read, if desired, as a coherent text.

CHAPTER 1

Sociolinguistics and Linguistic Theory

Polylectal grammars and cross-dialectal communication

As we have seen in the Introduction, one of the uses of the term *sociolinguistics* is as a label that refers to studies that are based on empirical work on language as it is spoken in its social context.[1] Sociolinguistics in this sense, we have said, is a methodology – a way of doing linguistics. It is intended to answer questions concerning linguistic theory and to deal with topics of central interest to linguists. In this chapter the theoretical issue on which we concentrate is the controversial topic of the polylectal grammar.

Following Weinreich's (1954) attempt to reconcile structural linguistics with dialectology, a number of linguists sought to incorporate more than one variety of the same language into a single description or grammar. Structural diasystems of the Weinreich type (e.g. Cochrane, 1959; Wölck, 1965) were followed by generative treatments which attempted to show that dialects may differ principally through the ordering or addition of rules (e.g. Newton, 1972). Most often, works of this type dealt with only a small number of varieties of a language; and they were justified by their authors on the grounds that they provided a good way of demonstrating and investigating the degree and nature of the relatedness of different dialects.

Subsequently, however, a rather stronger thesis was mooted – that of the *pandialectal* or *panlectal grammar*. A panlectal grammar was intended to incorporate not simply a few but all the varieties of a particular language; and it was justified, not as a descriptive device, but in terms of the model it was said to provide

[1] I am very grateful to the following for their comments on previous versions of this paper: F. R. Palmer, C.-J. Bailey, Jean Hannah, and William Labov.