

2 Linguistics and Sociolinguistics

William Labov

I have resisted the term *sociolinguistics* for many years, since it implies that there can be a successful linguistic theory or practice which is not social. When I first published the studies of Martha's Vineyard and New York City that form the basis of the first part of this book, it seemed necessary to make that point again and again. In spite of a considerable amount of sociolinguistic activity, a socially realistic linguistics seemed a remote prospect in the 1960s. The great majority of linguists had resolutely turned to the contemplation of their own idiolects. We have not yet emerged from the shadow of our intuitions, but it no longer seems necessary to argue about what is or is not linguistics. There is a growing realization that the basis of intersubjective knowledge in linguistics must be found in speech – language as it is used in everyday life by members of the social order, that vehicle of communication in which they argue with their wives, joke with their friends, and deceive their enemies.

When I first entered linguistics as a student, in 1961, it was my intention to gather data from the secular world. The early projects that I constructed were 'essays in experimental linguistics,' carried out in ordinary social settings. My aim was to avoid the inevitable obscurity of texts, the self-consciousness of formal elicitations, and the self-deception of introspection. A decade of work outside the university as an industrial chemist had convinced me that the everyday world was stubborn but consistently so, baffling at the outset but rewarding in the long run for those who held to its rational character. A simple review of the literature might have convinced me that such empirical principles had no place in linguistics: there were many ideological barriers to the study of language in everyday life. First, Saussure had enunciated the principle that structural systems of the present and historical changes of the past had to be studied in isolation (1962: 124). That principle had been consistently eroded by Martinet (1955) and others who found structure in past changes, but little progress had been made in locating change in present structures. The second ideological barrier

Source: Introduction to Labov, W. (1972) *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press) pp. xix–xxiv. Also published in 1978 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell).

explicitly asserted that sound change could not in principle be directly observed. Bloomfield defended the regularity of sound change against the irregular evidence of the present by declaring (1933: 364) that any fluctuations we might observe would only be cases of dialect borrowing. Next Hockett observed that while sound change was too slow to be observed, structural change was too fast (1958: 457). The empirical study of linguistic change was thus removed from the program of 20th-century linguistics.

A third restriction was perhaps the most important: free variation could not in principle be constrained. The basic postulate of linguistics (Bloomfield 1933: 76) declared that some utterances were the same. Conversely, these were in free variation, and whether or not one or the other occurred at a particular time was taken to be linguistically insignificant. Relations of *more* or *less* were therefore ruled out of linguistic thinking: a form or a rule could only occur always, optionally, or never. The internal structure of variation was therefore removed from linguistic studies and with it, the study of change in progress.

It was also held that feelings about language were inaccessible and outside of the linguist's scope (Bloch and Trager 1942). The social evaluation of linguistic variants was therefore excluded from consideration. This is merely one aspect of the more general claim that the linguist should not use nonlinguistic data to explain linguistic change. Throughout these discussions, we see many references to what the linguist can or cannot do *as a linguist*.

REFERENCES

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