

Sociolinguistics, variation and change: interview with Lesley Milroy and Peter Trudgill

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Jan Chromý: In his pioneering work in the 1960s, William Labov thought of sociolinguistics as a part of general linguistics. What is, in your opinion, the status of sociolinguistics as a discipline nowadays? And does it still make sense to count sociolinguistics as one discipline when there are many different approaches to study the interaction between linguistic and social aspects of reality?

Lesley Milroy: Well, as far as I can see sociolinguistics has effectively been treated as multidisciplinary since its earliest days. Works of scholars like William Bright, John Gumperz, Dell Hymes, Joshua Fishman and Erving Goffman (anthropologists and sociologists) were included in early collections of readings, along with that of Labov. When I started teaching sociolinguistics in the late 1970s, these scholars were already influential and their work was required reading for my students. Many apparently more recent developments, for example in various branches of discourse and conversational analysis, the role of language in personal management, language ideology, bilingualism, politeness theory are rooted in the work of these earlier scholars.

I have always interpreted Labov's comments as an insistence that while sociolinguistics is about the interplay between language and society, its focus must be on language rather than on a more general account of language and society. One of the impulses behind this assertion was the perceived need to acknowledge the leading role of generative linguistics in the sociology of the discipline of linguistics. Hence the development of the concept of variable rules, in response to Chomsky's early focus on categorical rules.

More substantively however, Labov has always sought as part of this enterprise to develop an understanding of the mechanisms of linguistic change; recall that his mentor was the distinguished dialectologist Uriel Weinreich. One of Weinreich's major interests was in developing not only a theory of linguistic change, but also a clear account of its mechanisms. Labov followed him in making an account of linguistic change central to his endeavour. Moreover, he wanted to incorporate the insights of dialectology into sociolinguistics. Crucially, he developed quantitative methods to allow us to get a purchase on the gradual and non-categorical character of linguistic change and its association with natural language variation — particularly socially motivated variation.

Because of its characteristic focus, Labov's quantitative work continues to be of great interest to historical linguists and those in the related area of language contact (such as Sarah Thomason). A new field of historical sociolinguistics has even been developed, notably by the Helsinki group, which closely follows Labov's methods and principles. By way of contrast, some work by anthropologists and sociologists is a little short on detailed linguistic analysis and lacks historical depth or a focus on mechanisms of change. Conversely, Labov's approach to the so-called social variables, such

as gender, ethnicity and social class, has been subjected to a good deal of criticism, not only by scholars with a primarily sociological/anthropological focus, but also by those who are sympathetic to Labov's methods and principles.

Labov has responded to the emergence of sometimes linguistically unsophisticated work, which describes itself as sociolinguistics, by effectively initiating a new field which follows the principles of his early quantitative work: *Language Variation and Change*. The journal of this name restricts itself to publications which follow his principles. It often contains contributions from a subfield, developed mainly in the UK, which describes itself as sociophonetics and is characteristic of a phonetically very detailed account of variation. But as far as I can see, LVC, with or without sociophonetics, is not, nor ever has been, the whole of sociolinguistics.

Peter Trudgill: People work in the field of language-and-society with different objectives. Many have goals, objectives, which are no different from the goals of any other linguist — to gain a better understanding of the human language faculty, of the nature of linguistic change etc. This is what I call sociolinguistics, and it is indeed simply, as Labov says, a way of doing linguistics.

Other people work in the field of language-and-society because they want to gain a better understanding of society. I suppose Bernstein might be an example of this. I do not call this sociolinguistics because it is not linguistics.

And yet other people work in the field of language-and-society because they want to gain a better understanding of both language *and* society and of the interaction between them. I am happy to call this sociolinguistics if people want to.

I think it does not matter too much what we call disciplines, as long as everybody understands the different goals researchers have, and what the goals of different research programmes are.

JC: Your research career is associated with variationist sociolinguistics and you both contributed a great deal to the development of its theory and methodology. What do you consider the most interesting findings of this discipline and what would you see as the biggest limitations in this field?

LM: My response to this is relatively short as it is partly subsumed above.

The most interesting contribution of variationist sociolinguistics is I think the nuanced account of the process of linguistic change, and the way change is embedded in both linguistic and social variability. We have got better at understanding the details of how change spreads through time and social space, and across linguistic contexts. We have also learnt a good deal about the cyclic nature of some changes. Thus, so called *th* fronting (*thin* realized as [fɪn], for example) is a much studied contemporary change in British English, and Peter traced its emergence in Norwich. But since the "same" process was around in the 16th century, this so-called change appears to be a redistribution across social and geographical space. This conceptualization of change is entirely consistent with the methods and principles of variationist sociolinguistics.

Perhaps the biggest limitation in the field is a rather general lack of sophistication in approaching social variables. As mentioned above, Penny Eckert's work is an

exception to this criticism; she has pointed out that the relevant variables need to be discovered rather than assumed in advance. Her work on the social categories associated with change in Detroit high schools illustrated the point fairly clearly.

PT: The most important and exciting findings of variationist linguistics can be found summarised in William Labov's three-volume work *Principles of Linguistic Change* which, as well as being the summation of forty years of pioneering work in the field, is the most significant work on language change to have appeared for many decades. It shows the extent to which detailed and quantitative sociolinguistic and phonetic work can shed light on what would otherwise have been intractable problems. It also shows the importance of the variationist mind-set: language is not appropriately investigated by thinking in terms of discrete generativist-style boxes, modules and either-or rules but rather in terms of continua and variability.

I think there are very few limitations, but one thing I would say is that, because quantitative methodologies have proved so fruitful and insightful, there has perhaps developed a tendency amongst some practitioners to "count things" even when this is neither beneficial nor necessary. Others might also be tempted to say that there are certain "big questions" — typological questions, for example — which variationist linguistics is not capable of addressing, which may to some extent be true. But I would suggest that a perusal of Labov's three-volume masterpiece will demonstrate that there are many awfully big questions which only variationist linguistics is capable of answering.

JC: Variationist sociolinguistics is inseparably associated with quantification. Peter already pointed out the tendency shown by some researchers to "count things" when it is not necessary and with no benefit. Some sociolinguists are even more sceptical in that they cast doubt on the employment of quantitative methods in sociolinguistics and instead they advocate an approach which they call qualitative or interpretative. What is your opinion on that matter? Do you think it might be reasonable to do sociolinguistic research solely "qualitatively"?

LM: Well, there is quite a large literature on the limitations of quantitative method as well as on its benefits. As Labov himself has pointed out, the best work in the LVC tradition comprises a judicious mixture of quantitative and qualitative reasoning. Moreover, the results of quantitative analysis are meaningless without well-informed interpretation which usually requires a good deal of contextual (historical, social, political, geographical, stylistic etc.) information. But the idea of abandoning quantitative analysis seems odd. If we did so, we would lose the characteristic Labovian means of modelling linguistic change, which as discussed above has proved so fruitful.

A purely practical comment might also be in order here. Setting up and carrying out a quantitative study is generally an expensive and time consuming enterprise, and typically now requires the input of several researchers with different kinds of expertise. Not everyone likes the organizational challenges this poses, or the rather laborious and time-consuming process of analysis and interpretation. Nor is funding always forthcoming, and sometimes researchers on the career ladder need to get their results into print sooner rather than later.

PT: No. We most certainly cannot ditch quantitative work.

I have great respect for anthropological and ethnographic work, but I have never been impressed by certain types of work of the “qualitative” sort. The kind of discourse research which relies on “interpretation” is part of a paradigm in which you can, as Labov once said, “do what you like”. We would never have made any of the great strides in our understanding of linguistic change that Lesley refers to if we had relied on subjectivity.

JC: So far, we have discussed the theoretical aspects of sociolinguistic research. However, many sociolinguistic works have emphasized practical aspects intending to help the society (for example Labov’s studies on African American English Vernacular). Should the sociolinguist be sort of an “activist” (in the positive sense of that word)?

LM: Well, I don’t feel particularly comfortable making judgements on what sociolinguists or any other researchers “should” be doing. Modelling linguistic change seems to me to be quite an achievement already. But one of the valuable outcomes of sociolinguistic research, particularly quantitative research, is that it gives us a realistic and liberal concept of what is “normal” human language. Thus, it does not make sense from the sociolinguist’s point of view to say that language varieties such as AAVE or British urban dialects are an inferior form of the relevant national spoken standard. For this reason, sociolinguists are often inclined to point out the relevance of their work to language-based discrimination, to education, and also to areas like language pathology. Peter and I have both worked in these areas, along with many of our colleagues; some very big issues are involved. I personally spent a lot of time in the last-mentioned field when I was involved in teaching linguistics to language pathologists. It was very important that they learnt to distinguish between variants which were shared with others in the local community and those which were personal to themselves. Only the latter type is relevant to assessing whether the speaker needs treatment for a language problem. Similarly, we need to understand normal bilingual behaviour, where language mixing is routinely observed, if we are to assess whether or not immigrant children in Britain show language problems relevant to their educational progress. But to answer the question more bluntly, some researchers are more inclined than others to look for the practical implications of their work. Yet, surely the most valuable applied work follows fairly naturally from the basic findings of the discipline, as is the case with the natural sciences.

PT: I would hesitate to use the word “should” here, but I think most of us do feel not so much an obligation as a genuine desire to “do something” where something can be done. My 1975 book *Accent Dialect and the School* was written out of a sense of outrage more than anything else, based on the dismay I had felt in 1968 when working with informants for my Norwich study and realising that very many of them quite sincerely believed that their own spoken English was “wrong” and “inferior”.

There is nevertheless an obligation, in my view. This was very clearly expressed by Labov in his “Principle of debt incurred”, where he argued that we have a duty to use our linguistic knowledge for the benefit of the community and to expose misconceptions

about language. Wolfram's "Principle of linguistic gratuity" is very similar. He believes that linguists have an obligation to "return linguistic favours" to any community from which we have obtained our data. I think Labov and Wolfram are both right.

JC: My last question concerns standard languages and the ideology of standardization. It seems quite clear that this ideology forces us to see the language use from a perspective which could be quite escalated. Language standardization could have negative consequences for many aspects of ordinary life; it may even constitute a basis for language-based discrimination which you already mentioned. In 2001 in his paper *Language ideologies and the consequences of standardization*, Jim Milroy argues that language standardization even "stands out as crucially important in defining what constitutes a language". Nevertheless, it is fundamentally impossible to look at language use from no perspective. One may say that every perspective has its strengths and weaknesses — something what it offers us to see and something what it hides. Do you think we could also see something positive on language standardization and its ideology — whether for linguistics as such or for the society as a whole?

LM: Well, this of course is a question with many ramifications and I struggle to keep my answer reasonably brief. You mention Jim's 2001 article. Since then we have written a new final chapter for the fourth edition of *Authority in Language* (2012). This incorporates the thinking of Jim's article with the conception of language ideology which we developed along with anthropological colleagues from the Universities of Michigan and Chicago. First, let's make the general point that what people understand by the term "standard language" varies according to national and social histories and contingencies. So for some, the term refers to the written language only, while for others it includes both written and spoken language. Your question seems to assume the latter (though I may be wrong).

I now find it helpful to avoid treating language ideologies purely as manifestations of false consciousness or misunderstandings about language which can be corrected by knowledge of the linguistic facts. Rather, language ideologies can be seen initially as attempts by social actors to make sense of the variation they observe characteristic of particular social groups. Thus, variants and whole language varieties may be associated with values such as masculinity, trendiness, social affectation, rurality, sophistication etc. This happens all the time and the perspectives manifested in these attitudes are ideological in this more neutral sense. There is no view from nowhere. Every view embodies an attitude.

But this of course is not the whole story. In addition to providing a means for social groups to make sense of the relation between language and society, ideologies are loaded with moral, political and other interests. And this brings us to the standard language ideology which is constructed in accordance with the interests of powerful groups who have the power to promote their own perspectives and interests and discriminate against those of others. Not only does a standard language ideology involve beliefs about language variation and users, but it delimits salient social groups and indeed whole nations. Lineages and histories are created for national standard languages and the standard language ideology typically selects a single variety which

is promoted and maintained as THE language of the nation. This process of course encourages language-based discrimination. I have difficulty conceiving of standard language ideologies as either positive or negative, but rather as the construction of a window on the social world which needs to be carefully analysed. It goes hand in hand with the creation of nation states and the ideas it constructs have become thoroughly naturalized, often over many centuries, so that they are widely seen as self evident or common-sensical. But I do see the language-based discrimination which arises from it as entirely deplorable.

PT: The conventional wisdom is of course that standardisation is a Good Thing. I can see that it can have benefits of certain sorts, practical and otherwise. But I feel that a variationist perspective shows us that there is standardisation and then there is standardisation. A monolithic ideologically imposed standardisation in which the standard variety is perceived as being THE language, and all other varieties are some kind of erroneous aberration, with any deviation from the standard — however linguistically insignificant — being a sign of abysmal ignorance and worthlessness, can have only unfortunate consequences. My own view is that standardisation is not nearly so necessary or so beneficial as is widely believed and that, if there must be standardisation, then a flexible written (only) standard with variants permitted and without any standard spoken variety at all — as with Norwegian — is the way to do it.

Lesley Milroy (born in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK) is a sociolinguist whose particular interests lie in various subfields, i.e. variation theory, language ideology and standardization, dialectology, bilingualism, historical linguistics and sociolinguistic methodology. She is world-famous for the utilization of the social network concept for studying language variation and change. She studied and began her professional work in the United Kingdom (University of Ulster, University of Manchester and University of Newcastle upon Tyne). In 1994, she moved to the United States, where she was appointed Professor at the University of Michigan. She retired in 2005. Her most notable works include *Language and Social Networks* (1987), *Sociolinguistics: Method and Interpretation* (2003; with M. Gordon), and *Authority in Language: Investigating Standard English* (2012; with J. Milroy).

Peter Trudgill (born in Norwich, UK) is a sociolinguist and dialectologist. His interests include variationist sociolinguistics, language change, dialects of English and (socio)linguistic typology. He is one of the key figures in the elaboration of variationist theory and methodology and he is renowned for his interconnection of sociolinguistics and linguistic typology. He began his professional career in the UK (University of Reading, University of Essex), in 1993 he moved to Switzerland where he initially worked as Professor at the University of Lausanne and subsequently at the University of Fribourg. He currently holds the position of part-time Professor of Sociolinguistics at the University of Agder in Kristiansand, Norway. His most notable works include *The Social Differentiation of English in Norwich* (1974), *Dialectology* (1980; with J. K. Chambers), *Sociolinguistic Variation and Change* (2002) and *Sociolinguistic Typology: Social Determinants of Linguistic Complexity* (2011).

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