

Sali A. Tagliamonte



Variationist Sociolinguistics

Change, Observation,
Interpretation



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Variationist Sociolinguistics

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For
Anna Blanche Lawson
1930–2001

Love you forever Mum,
Sali

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My past has also woven its way through the chapters, as I have returned to my early research to integrate the present state of the field with its foundations. I am blessed by having been mentored by some of the greatest contributors to the field. Shana Poplack, David Sankoff, Jack Chambers, Peter Trudgill, and Jenny Cheshire: this book exists only because I have been able to stand on your shoulders. I am also lucky to have had a knowledgeable and attentive set of critics who scoured the draft manuscript and offered their insights, including four anonymous Wiley–Blackwell reviewers, a savvy team of Wiley editors, my new neighbour Victor Kuperman, my pal Paul Foulkes, and even the General Editor, Peter Trudgill, himself.

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Since my last book, three of my children have become teenagers, the youngest one has started primary school, and I have gained a stepson in the early years of his professional life. This is a great learning ground for a sociolinguist. Dazzian, Freya, Shaman, Tara, and Adrian have taught me much of what I know about age grading, innovation, and incrementation. I am so very thankful to be part of the perpetual state of variation and change, love and commotion we live in. And to Duncan, who is the bedrock of my life, I am eternally grateful to have found in one man, husband, lover, gardener, and friend.

Finally, I would like to thank my mom. What I have been able to accomplish in my life was fostered in the love and support and many other intangible gifts she gave me.

Foreword

My grandparents lived in a small town in Southern Ontario. It was a farming hamlet in one of the oldest settled areas of Ontario, Canada, called Maple Station. They owned the general store, gas station, and post office. The store was always filled with locals. When I visited as a child, I would race to the store every time someone came in, trailing behind the adults to eavesdrop on the conversations. In the evenings, my great-aunts and -uncles would visit. Coming from farming stock, the families were huge. My grandfather had eight brothers and sisters and my grandmother had nine. There were people around all the time. They often talked long into the evening, playing Euchre or Crib. I can still hear the lilting cadence of those voices in my mind. This was a world of regularized past participles, double negation, all kinds of variation in vowels and diphthongs, and strange words and expressions. Little did I know of all that then! At the time, I only listened and marveled at how different they sounded.

My mother, who had grown up in that world, became a teacher, a specialist in early childhood education. Yet there were always aspects of her speech that were very different from the Canadian norms in my surroundings. When she talked to my grandparents or my aunts and uncles (her brother and sisters) on the phone, her voice would shift back toward the speech patterns I heard in Maple Station. Sometimes, when telling stories, I would even hear her use the occasional *I says* or *He come*. And when she quoted anyone in her family, her voice always changed.

While I sound just like any other Canadian, there are still parts of my speech that reflect my mother's vernacular, words like "wee" for "small", expressions like "it's a good job" for "it's a good thing". Even today, when my children make fun of some of the words I use and my pronunciations ("tiger" [tægr], "Saturday" [sɛrde:], "southern" [sʌwðɹn]) I blame my old-line Southern Ontario roots.

These are the realities of language variation and change. Our life histories are a study of continuities and changes, of ancestry and origins, of time and space, of uncommon similarities across time and remarkable differences across generation gaps. Our heritage follows us wherever we go and throughout our lives. For me, the world came alive when I discovered sociolinguistics because it made my experience make sense. The linguistic difference and variety around me had regularity and meaning, system and explanation. May this book make sociolinguistics – and the world of variation around you – more comprehensible to you.

Sali A. Tagliamonte
Toronto, Ontario

Series Editor's Preface

It is not often that one looks at a book and says “this is *it*.” That, however, is precisely what I found myself thinking when I first received the text of Sali Tagliamonte’s *Sociolinguistics: Variation, Change and Interpretation*. This *really is it* – this is the book that linguistic variation theory has been waiting for. It has not, however, been waiting too long. Now is exactly the right time for this book to appear; and, I like to think, the Blackwell’s *Language in Society* series is exactly the right place for it to appear. The study of “Language Variation and Change” (LVC) has been with us now, as Professor Tagliamonte says, for about 40 years. My own first encounter with the field, at that time still without a name, was at what I believe to be the first ever academic meeting devoted to the topic, the Colloquium on New Ways of Analysing Variation in English held at Georgetown University in the USA in October 1972. This turned out to be the first of a series of annual NWAV conferences which continue to be held to this day – though without the word “English” in the title now – and indeed at the time of this writing, the next meeting is going to be the fortieth. I don’t know what Sali was doing in October 1972, but she was certainly not nearly old enough to be at the meeting. In spite of her comparative youth, however, we are very grateful that it has fallen to her to produce in this book a distillation of all the advances that have been made and all the wisdom that has accrued in our now mature field over the last four decades. She is perhaps uniquely qualified – in terms of her erudition, her field-work experience, her analytical innovations, and the large amounts of data and the wide range of language varieties she has worked on – to write the first book which is truly an introduction to LVC, a summary of its main goals and achievements, and a springboard for future progress. She has done this, moreover, in a masterly fashion: not only will the reader of this volume learn how work in LVC is done, they will also learn why we do it, and what the benefits are. All languages are variable – variability is an essential component of human language. But it is only in the last 40 years that we have fully understood the degree to which this is so, have investigated the patterning in which variation is involved, and have developed the concepts and techniques for dealing with it – developments which Sali herself has played a very major role in advancing. As this book shows, any linguistic work which attempts to shed light on the nature of the human language faculty and on the nature of linguistic change, without taking account of language’s inherent variability, will inevitably fall short.

Peter Trudgill

Preface

What this Book is About

This is a book about the fascinating, intricate and remarkable relationship between language and society, a field that is typically called sociolinguistics. However, this is not a book about everything in sociolinguistics because sociolinguistics is a very diverse and wide-ranging discipline. Taken broadly, sociolinguistics involves studying the interaction of language, culture, and society. This book cannot do all that. Instead, I focus on the type of sociolinguistics that has come to be known as Variationist Sociolinguistics, or “Language Variation and Change” (LVC). This is the type of sociolinguistics I have been practicing in my own research since 1981. This branch of the sociolinguistics tree is known for its focus on language change as well as its quantitative methods and its concern for accountable methodology. It is the study of linguistic variation and change through observation and interpretation.

Variationist Sociolinguistics deals with systematic and inherent variation in language, both in the present (synchrony) and in the past (diachrony). The goal of LVC studies is to understand the mechanisms which link extra linguistic phenomena (the social and cultural) with patterned linguistic heterogeneity (the internal, variable, system of language) (Sankoff 1988a: 157).

Here is the definition from the leading journal, aptly entitled *Language Variation and Change*:

Language Variation and Change is the only journal dedicated exclusively to the study of linguistic variation and the capacity to deal with systematic and inherent variation in synchronic and diachronic linguistics. Sociolinguistics involves analysing the interaction of language, culture and society; the more specific study of variation is concerned with the impact of this interaction on the structures and processes of traditional linguistics. *Language Variation and Change* concentrates on the details of linguistic structure in actual speech production and processing (or writing), including contemporary or historical sources.

This book is written in this spirit, taking the details of variable linguistic structures of language in use and demonstrating how quantitative analysis can tell us something interesting about what we find, i.e. how variation patterns, why it exists, what explains it.

However, this textbook cannot even cover everything within the quantitative sociolinguistic enterprise. A number of subdisciplines have developed which involve specialized

methodological and data-specific practices. Some of these require very specific knowledge that extends beyond what can be covered in a single book. Therefore, I will confine myself to the area of sociolinguistics upon whose foundations these approaches to variation rest and with which I am most familiar. In so doing, I will leave to other experts certain subdisciplines in the field, including sociophonetics with its detailed methods of acoustic measurement and experimentation, discourse analysis with its elaborate qualitative component, aspects of historical linguistics which include variationist techniques, corpus linguistics, and the broad field of sociocultural linguistics. Nevertheless, I hope to demonstrate that variationist sociolinguistic principles and practices, the identification and study of patterns, and all the aspects of the methodology laid out here can be applied in virtually any study of language.

You will find me discussing the same old variable (ing) again. One of my students asked me once in exasperation: *Why do we have to keep talking about variable (ing)?* Why? It provides a familiar model and a good example of how to approach variation, interpret it, and understand it. Besides, there may be some things about variable (ing) we have not discovered yet. I will be sure to find some new variables to talk about too. To support creative thinking I have sprinkled “notes,” “tips,” and “mini quizzes” throughout the text. Tips provide advice for what the student might encounter in her own research and how to get around it. Notes are elaborations, often my own inner thoughts about research mentioned within the text. Mini quizzes embed learning by questioning the reader on some key point under discussion. I believe that teaching can best be accomplished by “doing.” My approach will be to use the findings and observations arising from a series of case studies of “the linguistic variable,” the key construct of the discipline, to demonstrate how Variationist Sociolinguistic theory is put into practice. I will embed these studies in the general research trends in the field over the past 40 years. The underlying goal is to show you the links between language and society as they arise from observation and interpretation of variable phenomena.

The book takes as a foundation the major findings of sociolinguistics as put forward in broad-based introductory level textbooks (Wardough 2002), with a focus on “Variationist Sociolinguistics” in particular, as synthesized in Chambers (2003). I define “classic” research in sociolinguistics as that conducted by William Labov, Peter Trudgill, Walt Wolfram, Ralph Fasold, and Lesley Milroy. This early research exposed persistent, regular sociolinguistic patterns that have given rise to “sociolinguistic principles.” This will be my departure point.

The discoveries of this early body of knowledge is already consolidated in the leading introductory sociolinguistic textbooks in the field. Each chapter ends with a reading list of the major sources I have drawn from. My goal for this book is to put the cumulative findings of the last 30–40 years into context with this foundational work. The findings I will report are meant to broaden and enrich classic sociolinguistic research by bringing the latest evidence to bear on fundamental sociolinguistic observations. Therefore I will focus more on developments to sociolinguistics as put forward in Labov’s most recent research as synthesized in his important *Principles of Linguistic Change* volumes (Labov 1994, 2001a, 2010). This work will be brought to the forefront, in the context of, and with reference to, other major research advances in the field, particularly those arising from the journal *Language Variation and Change*. Then, to make practical exactly how this research is done, I will turn to a series of choice linguistic variables. This research encompasses analyses of multiple levels of grammar – phonology, morpho-syntax-semantics, and discourse-pragmatics. Each case study presents findings and observations about how different types of variants are used and how they pattern at the community level and within the systems of grammar of which they

are a part. Each case study interprets the findings within the context of sociolinguistic inquiry as I have defined it above.

The textbook is organized as follows. Chapter 1 introduces “sociolinguistic variation theory” (Sankoff 1988a: 140) as Language Variation and Change (LVC). Chapters 2 and 3 synthesize the observations and findings of LVC research that have led to sociolinguistic principles and sociolinguistic theory. These chapters present a synthesis of the pervasive “patterns” both sociolinguistic and linguistic, as, for example, elucidated in Chambers (2003) or Trudgill (2000), from which LVC has developed. Chapter 4 considers issues relating to data collection, field work, and the key methodological issues of how to deal with the effect of individuals and lexical items. Chapter 5 summarizes the state of the art in quantitative methods and statistical practice. Chapter 6 outlines the comparative sociolinguistic approach. Chapters 7–11 present case studies of linguistic variables from phonology to discourse. Each chapter introduces the variable(s), issues arising from studying them, solutions, and findings. Observations are evaluated both from the perspective of sociolinguistic principles as well as in the context of the prevailing knowledge of the variables in the field. Chapter 12 synthesizes the observations so as to provide explanations for both internal and external patterns of language variation and puts them into the perspective of their social and historical context.

Mini Quiz

Q1 Variation Sociolinguistics is the study of systematic and inherent variation in language, past and present.

- (a) True
- (b) False

Answer = TRUE

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1

Sociolinguistics as Language Variation and Change

Not all variability and heterogeneity in language structure involves change; but all change involves variability and heterogeneity. (Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog 1968: 188)

In this chapter I introduce fundamental concepts and key constructs of the study of Variationist Sociolinguistics that will be detailed in later chapters. Why approach the study of language from this perspective? What can be learned from this method that cannot be learned from other sociolinguistic methods? A major component of this approach to language is that it is linguistic, but also social and statistical. Why is a combined socioquantitative method useful and desirable?

Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics has its roots in dialectology, historical linguistics, and language contact with considerable influence from sociology and psychology (Koerner 1991: 65). This is why it has evolved into an exceptionally broad field. An all-encompassing definition would be that the domain of inquiry of sociolinguistics is the interaction between language, culture, and society. Depending on the focus, virtually any study of language implicates a social connection because without this human component language itself would not exist. However, the scope of sociolinguistics in this expansive interpretation is vast. Sociolinguistics has as many different facets as its roots. Some areas of the discipline put more emphasis on one area (culture); some disciplines put more emphasis on another (education). There is no one sociolinguistics other than the overarching unity of language in use. Depending on which aspect of language in use comes to the fore, sociolinguistics diverges into innumerable subdisciplines.

Every day we speak and write and use a complex, structured system to communicate but at the same time that system is evolving. The fundamental LVC (Language Variation and

Change) question is, *How does this happen?* Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968: 100–101) answered the question by saying, “the key to a rational conception of language change is the possibility of describing orderly differentiation.” This order, yet differentiation, as the normal state of affairs (Labov 1982: 17), the idea that variation is an inherent part of language (Labov 1969: 728), is the foundational maxim of the LVC approach. Differentiation, anomalies, and nonstandard features are easy to spot. In fact, just about everyone likes to talk about the wacky, weird, and/or reprehensible bits of language.

The normal condition of the speech community is a heterogeneous one ... Moreover this heterogeneity is an integral part of the linguistic economy of the community, necessary to satisfy the linguistic demands of every-day life. (Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog 1968: 17)

Variability [is] not.. a nuisance but is a universal and functional design feature of language. (Foulkes, 2006)

Variation in language is most readily observed in the vernacular of everyday life. For example, a teenager says: “that were like sick”; an elderly man recounting a story to his granddaughter says: “you was always workin’ in them days.” Are these utterances mistakes? Are they slang? Are they instances of dialect? An LVC-oriented sociolinguist views such instances of language in use as an indication of the variable but rule-governed behavior typical of all natural speech varieties. The vernacular was first defined as “the style in which the minimum attention is given to the monitoring of speech” (Labov 1972c: 208). Later discussions affirmed that the ideal target of sociolinguistic investigation is “everyday speech” (Sankoff 1974, 1980b: 54), “real language in use” (Milroy 1992: 66). Variation in language can be observed just about everywhere from a conversation you overhear on the street to a story you read in the newspaper. Sociolinguists notice such variations too. In undertaking sustained analysis, what they discover is that people will use one form and then another for more or less the same meaning all the time the language varies. The harder part is to find the order, or the system, in the variation chaos. The way LVC undertakes this is by means of the “linguistic variable.” A linguistic variable is the alternation of forms, or “layering” of forms, in language. A basic definition is “two or more ways of saying the same thing.” A more nuanced, early, definition also mentions that linguistic variables should be structural and “integrated into a larger system of functioning units” (Labov 1972: 8).

Linguistic variables in a given speech community, whether morphosyntactic, phonological, lexical, or discursive, do not vary haphazardly, but systematically. Because it is systematic, this behavior can be quantitatively modeled (Labov 1963, 1969). Analyses of heterogeneous structures within the speech community rest on the assumption that whenever a choice exists among two (or more) alternatives in the course of linguistic performance, and where that choice may have been influenced by any number of factors, then it is appropriate to invoke statistical techniques (Sankoff 1988a: 2). The statistical tools used in the study of variation will be discussed in Chapter 5.

The combination of methods employed in Variationist Sociolinguistics forms part of the “descriptive-interpretative” strand of modern linguistic research (Sankoff 1988a: 142–143). Large-scale studies of variation in speech communities from New York to Norwich have produced extensive bodies of data. The descriptive component requires detailed, critical observation of variation and change. The patterns that have emerged from these undertakings have demonstrated that linguistic change is not only the result

of universal principles but is also shaped by the social context in which it occurs (Labov 1963: 74). This is where the interpretive component of LVC has proven critical. Descriptions of variation can only be understood in context. While sociolinguistic principles prevail wherever you go, each situation provides a unique interpretation. In the case studies in Chapters 7–11 I will demonstrate how the study of different types of linguistic variables must take into account historical, contemporary, and social facts to explain language use.

The Linguistic Variable

LVC research begins with the observation that language is inherently variable. Speakers make choices when they speak and they alternate among these choices. Take, for example, the use of forms which strikes the ear as nonstandard, unusual, dialectal, or new, as in the examples in Example 1.1.¹

Example 1.1

- (a) And then next *mornin'* [In] they were all brought back again. (YRK/002)
- (b) Our car was *like* seven miles from where the entrance was. (TOR/021)
- (c) There was a supply boat *Ø* came down to our cottage everyday. (TOR/036)
- (d) He was like *so* funny and *so* nice. (TOR/054)

These features can only be fully understood if they are examined alongside the relatively unremarkable alternates with which they vary, as in Example 1.2.

Example 1.2

- (a) And I started work on an *evening* [ɪ]. (YRK/012)
- (b) We were oh probably *about* six miles from it. (TOR/054)
- (c) The people *that* did it were brainwashed. (TOR/069)
- (d) She's *really* funny, and I think she's *really* pretty too. (TOR/021)

Some variables may even have three or more alternates, as in Example 1.3.

Example 1.3

- (a) I can't remember what that *building* [in] is called. (TOR/008)
- (b) I was on vacation for *approximately* six weeks. (TOR/038)
- (c) I'm only exposed to the people *who* speak the same way that I do. (TOR/016)
- (d) He's *very* funny; he's *very* generous. (TOR/023)

In other words, speakers may vary among various pronunciations of “ing” at the end of words. They may signal approximation with *like* or *about* or *approximately*. They may choose among relative pronouns *that* or *who* or leave it out entirely. They may select *so* or *really* or *very* to intensify an adjective. These choices are potential “linguistic variables.”

NOTE Linguistic variables are typically referred to by inserting the phoneme or morpheme or word that is variable inside parenthesis, i.e. variable (ing), (ly), (that), (so), etc. Phonetic realizations are represented inside square brackets, e.g. [n]. Phonemes are represented inside forward slashes, e.g. /n/.

A linguistic variable in its most basic definition is two or more ways of saying the same thing. An important question is, What does it mean to say two things mean the same thing? One time a student asked this question: what is the difference between a synonym and a linguistic variable? Let us explore this distinction. Synonyms are different lexemes with the same referential meaning as in Example 1.4:

Example 1.4

- (a) *car, automobile, vehicle, wheels*
- (b) *girl, lass, chick, sheila, babe, doll, skirt*

A more restrictive definition of synonymy would require that two synonyms are completely interchangeable in every possible context. In reality, most are not. For example, *lass* is primarily used in Scotland and northern England, *chick* is used in North America, *sheila* in Australia, whereas *girl* is not confined to a particular variety of English. For many practical purposes, such as with the production of dictionaries, it is customary to adopt a looser kind of definition for synonym. Near synonyms are lexemes that share an essential part of their sense, as in Example 1.5:

Example 1.5

- (a) *interesting, intriguing, fascinating, absorbing, spellbinding, engrossing*
- (b) *striking, arresting, unusual, out of the ordinary, remarkable, salient*

But this is not the whole story. Linguistic variables must also be alternatives (i.e. options) within the same grammatical system which have the same referential value (meaning) in running discourse (Sankoff 1988a: 142–143). Although some variants may differ subtly in meaning and distribution, if they are part of a linguistic variable they will be members of a structured set in the grammar. Moreover, the choice of one variant or the other must vary in a systematic way – this is what is meant by structured heterogeneity. There is difference, but there is structure to it. Different ways of saying more or less the same thing may occur at every level of grammar in a language, in every variety of a language, in every style, dialect, and register of a language, in every speaker, often even in the same discourse in the same sentence. In fact, variation is everywhere, all the time. This is why it is referred to as “inherent” variation (Labov 1969: 728). Now, consider a more in-depth definition of the linguistic variable:

- two different ways of saying the same thing;
- an abstraction;

- made up of variants;
- comprising a linguistically defined set of some type:
 - a phoneme
 - a lexical item
 - a structural category
 - a natural class of units
 - a syntactic relationship
 - the permutation or placement of items
- although its delineation can be at any level of the grammar, the variants of the variable must have a structurally defined relationship in the grammar;
- they must also co-vary, correlating with patterns of social and/or linguistic phenomena.

Synonyms could be a linguistic variable. However a linguistic variable is more than simply a synonym. Deciding which forms co-vary meaningfully in language is actually a lot trickier than you would think.

Mini Quiz 1.1

- Q1 How would a variationist sociolinguist explain the following example?
 “There *was* two of us. Yeah, that’s right there *were* two of us.”
- (a) Alternation in styles.
 - (b) Free variation.
 - (c) Linguistic variation.
 - (d) Random differentiation.
 - (e) Bad grammar.
- Q2 Which of the following provides an example of two variants of a linguistic variable?
- (a) And we said, “if you join the club, you must go to church.”
 - (b) He’d light a furnace for to wash the clothes.
 - (c) He was awful homesick, you know, my Uncle Jim.
 - (d) To prove I could do it, I had to prove that I could do it.
 - (e) There’s two girls on my street who have pink hats.

To this point this discussion has focused on the technical description of the linguistic variable. However, there is an entirely different side to linguistic variation that does not come from the mechanics of the linguistic system but involves issues of stigma and salience that come from the external evaluation of language by its users – us humans. There is no reason for a velar sound to be superior to an alveolar sound. There is no reason for a synthetic construction to be better than an analytic one. There is no inherently terrible thing about a double negative. However, there is an absolutely insidious view that certain ways of saying things are better than others. This comes down to the social interpretation of language use.

Most people are convinced that linguistic features are good or bad. For example, here is Sara Kempt, aged 49, in Toronto, Canada (c. 2003), in Example 1.6.

Example 1.6

... and I think the natural inclination of anybody is to get lazy and sloppy and not think. So I th— there's more and more slang, and people dropping their Gs and things like that, just that ... frankly grates on me. I hate it! *Then again, I find myself doing it sometimes.* (TOR/027)

Another fascinating thing about linguistic variables is that people are often completely unaware that they use them, particularly when certain of the variants are not part of the standard language. For example, this is Gabrielle Prusskin, aged 55, in Toronto, Canada (c. 2003). The interviewer has just asked her what she thinks about the word *like*, as in Example 1.7.

Example 1.7

It's usually young females um when every other word is "like" and it drives me insane. I just *like* I hate it. (TOR/054)

TIP One way to find a linguistic variable is to look for the words that occur most frequently in data. Are there other ways of saying the same thing? If language is always in flux, then it is just a question of finding out what is on the move in a particular place and time.

Linguistic variables inevitably involve variants that have social meaning. These are typically called "sociolinguistic variables." Sociolinguistic variables are those which can be correlated with "some nonlinguistic variable of the social context: of the speaker, the addressee, the audience, the setting, etc." (Labov 1972c: 237). One variant might have overt social stigma, e.g. "I *ain't* got it", another might entail authority, e.g. "You *must* listen", or prestige, e.g. "I *shall* tell you a story." Yet another variant may be neutral, e.g. "I *have* it." These social evaluations may differ markedly from one community to the next, from one country to the next, from one variety to the next, from one social situation to the next. It may even be the case that one person's admired pronunciation will be another person's loathed one. The patterns of a linguistic variable in the speech community tell the story of how the speech community evaluates the variants of the variable and in so doing this reveals how society is organized and structured. Which groups talk to each other? Which groups do not? How a linguistic feature is socially evaluated often has to do with its history as well. Which groups have been in the community a long time? Which groups are new? Language use is a reflection of the society in which it is embedded and the time period in which it occurs.

NOTE One time I went to a conference in the United States with my then current group of British graduate students. One of them had a strong accent from a variety of somewhat modest prestige in the United Kingdom. She was shocked to be told, repeatedly, how lovely her accent was. Similarly, I was chagrined to discover that my own middle-class Canadian accent – unremarkable in Canada – was heard as an entirely unbecoming American accent in the United Kingdom.