



# What Is Sociolinguistics?

Gerard Van Herk



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# What Is Sociolinguistics?

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*What Is Sociolinguistics?* by Gerard Van Herk



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 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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# Companion Website

This text has a comprehensive companion website which features a number of useful resources for instructors and students alike.

## For instructors

- PowerPoint slides to accompany each chapter
- Description and notes for each set of chapter slides
- A list of useful links to relevant online material

## For students

- A list of useful links to relevant online material
- The book's extensive glossary in full

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# 1

## Introduction



### In this chapter:

- Types of sociolinguistics
- The background of the discipline
- Personalizing sociolinguistics
- How this book works

I'm sitting here in Newfoundland, in Canada, writing a book about sociolinguistics, and you're out there somewhere, starting to read it. If you were here and could hear me talk – especially if you were Canadian, especially if you had some training – you could tell a lot about me. For example, you'd know which **speech community** I originally came from. When I speak English, most people can tell I'm North American (I pronounce *schedule* with a [sk] sound), Canadian (I rhyme *shone* with *gone*, not *bone*), and probably from Québec (I drink *soft drinks* and keep my socks in a *bureau*). When I speak French, it's clear that I'm from Québec (I pronounce *tu* like *tsu*), from the southwest (I pronounce *garage* like *garawge*), and definitely English (I say *so* a lot, and I have a particular pronunciation of the letter *r* that English Québécois use to avoid sounding “too English”).

You could also tell where I fit into my speech community. I'm the child of immigrants – if you were really good, you'd know that one of them was from the north of England

### speech community

A group of people who are in habitual contact with one another, who share a language variety and social conventions, or sociolinguistic norms, about language use.



(I have an unusual r when I speak English, almost like a w). I'm probably under 80 (I pronounce *whale* and *wail* the same), but I'm definitely not young (I almost never end sentences with a question-like rising intonation). Once you knew I was middle-aged, you could tell I was male, and either straight or straight-sounding (I don't use a lot of *so* to mean *very*, I pitch my voice fairly deep and don't often have "swoopy" pitch patterns). Those are just some of the obvious things – there are more specific but hard-to-hear distinctions, like the exact way I pronounce my vowels, that could tell you even more. And if I was wherever you are, I could probably tell a lot about *your* speech community and where you fit into it. The fact that we can do this is one of the things that interest sociolinguists.

But there's more. I'm writing a textbook, and you're probably reading it because you have to (for a university course, most likely). So you have certain expectations, given your past experiences with higher education and previous textbooks that you've read, and I have certain obligations to you (and to my publisher). If I want to appear competent, I should use academic language, but if I don't want to discourage you, I shouldn't go overboard with linguistic terminology. Maybe I should work hard to make this book more accessible than other textbooks. At the same time, I have to get all this past your prof, who knows your school and its students far better than I do, and who at some point had to read this book and decide if it was suitable for your course, and who might not have much patience for my attempts at accessibility. The fact that we're aware of what's expected (linguistically) from this particular interaction is also the kind of thing that interests sociolinguists.

And all of this – the way we talk, the writing and reading of textbooks – happens in a broader social context, the result of decisions made by societies and those who govern them. I grew up going to an English-language school because earlier Canadian governments decided to protect English language rights in Québec (sometimes to a greater degree than French language rights elsewhere in Canada). Maybe I use my "not too English" r when I speak French because my generation doesn't want to be associated with the English speakers before us, the ones who didn't try too hard to speak French-sounding French. As for the textbook, somebody more powerful than either of us decided that you needed a particular kind of education for whatever it is you're doing, and that it involved a course in sociolinguistics, and maybe that it would happen in English, whether that's convenient for you or not. So here we are. And all that, too, is the kind of thing that interests sociolinguists.

## types of sociolinguistics

---

So, what is sociolinguistics? The usual answer is something like "The scientific study of the relationship(s) between language and society." Which is true enough. A more useful answer for someone new to the field, though, might be "It depends who you ask." As in any hyphenated or blended field, the umbrella term *sociolinguistics* covers

researchers working all across the spectrum, from very linguistic to very socio. Sociolinguists can study how the language practices of one community differ from those of the next, as described in chapters 2 (communities), 3 (place), and 6 (ethnicity). We can study the relationship in a particular community between language use and **social categories** like class and status (chapter 4), gender and sexuality (chapter 7), and ethnicity (chapter 6), whether we perceive those categories as relatively fixed or open to active performance and construction (chapter 7, identity). We can study the relationship between social and linguistic forces and language change (chapter 5, time). We can also choose to study how language can reveal **social relationships**, such as how each of us, as social beings, adapts our language to suit the situation and the audience (chapters 8, style, and 9, interaction). We can study the relationships between different languages within and across communities (chapters 10, multilingualism, and 11, language contact). We can study how people feel about language and language diversity (chapter 12, attitudes), and how their societies manifest those attitudes through language planning and policy (chapter 13), especially in the domain of education (chapter 14).

And, of course, we understand that all these forces interact, and that the distinct research traditions that we've developed to deal with them can all be brought to bear on a single sociolinguistic situation (as in chapter 15). You'll see as we work our way through the book that those research traditions can be quite distinct. Sociolinguists looking at the status of different languages in a country might never mention the actual linguistic details of the languages in question. Sociolinguists working on change in the vowel system of a language might never mention the changing status of the language. Different subdisciplines have different ideas, not only about what's worth studying, but also about what would count as valid evidence in that study. This, in turn, drives their choice of research methods. So in the chapters that follow, we'll look at some of those research traditions and methods – where possible, under the chapter headings where they're most relevant.

---

## background: the history of sociolinguistics

Deciding exactly when sociolinguistics began is like arguing about when the first rock “n” roll record was made. It's entertaining for the participants, but it gives you only a slight understanding of how things got to where they are today. For many people, the first systematic study of the relationship between language variation and social organization is described in a 1958 article by the sociologist John L. Fischer. Fischer was studying how New England schoolchildren used “g-dropping,” alternating between *running* and *runnin'*. He found statistically significant correlations between each linguistic form and a student's sex and social class. In other words, rather than **free variation**, in which the choice between forms is completely arbitrary and unpredictable, he found **structured variation**, in which the choice between forms is linked to other factors. In fact, it's possible to push the birth of sociolinguistics back ever further – Louis Gauchat's work on

### social category

A way of grouping people by traits that are relatively fixed, such as class, gender, or ethnicity, or open to active performance and construction, like identity.

### social relationships

How each of us, as social beings, adapt our language to suit the situation and the audience. Often contrasted with social characteristics, the socially relevant traits that we are seen to possess.

### free variation

A term used when the speaker's choice between forms (or variants) is completely arbitrary and unpredictable. Opposite of structured variation.

### structured variation

A term used when the speaker's choice between forms (or variants) is linked to other factors. Opposite of free variation.



the French dialects of Charney, Switzerland (1905!), correlates language variation with the age and sex of the people he spoke to.

If you're not committed to the idea that you need lots of numbers to do sociolinguistics, you can see that people have spent centuries observing the relationship between some linguistic forms and the kind of people who use them. For example, over 200 years ago, the grammarian James Beattie observed that extending where you could use an *-s* on the end of verbs (as in *the birds pecks*) was found "in the vernacular writings of Scotch men prior to the last century, and in the vulgar dialect of North Britain to this day: and, even in England, the common people frequently speak in this manner, without being misunderstood" (Beattie 1788/1968: 192–3). So here we see awareness of language variation ("people frequently speak in this manner"), as well as the regional and social correlates (the north, "common people"). Generally, though, earlier linguistic work assumes **categoricity** (that linguistic rules always apply), and assumes that all variation is free variation. Writing aimed at a broader public, like grammars and usage manuals, often just assumes that all variation is, well, wrong. Jackson (1830), for example, categorizes a variety of non-standard language features as "low," "very low," "exceedingly low," "vilely low," or "low cockney," as well as "ungentlemanly," "filthy," "ridiculous," "disrespectful," "blackguard-like," "very flippant," or "abominable." (More on this kind of thing in chapter 12 on language attitudes.)

### categorical

The opposite of probabilistic, categorical rules are absolute, that is, they apply every time that they can apply.

But in the same way that there's a difference between Jackie Brenston's *Rocket 88* and an actual genre that people called rock 'n' roll, there's a difference between using sociolinguistic-like methods and the organized research tradition called sociolinguistics. Many of us would trace the birth of modern sociolinguistics as a subdiscipline to the work of William Labov, starting in the early 1960s. In several groundbreaking studies in Martha's Vineyard (off the coast of Massachusetts) and in New York's Lower East Side and Harlem, Labov (1963, 1966) used recordings of natural (or natural-like) speech, correlated with sociologically derived speaker characteristics, to examine in detail the relationship between how people spoke and how they fit into their sociolinguistic community.

### variationist

A researcher who focuses on variationist sociolinguistics.

This work was interesting enough that nearly 50 years later it's still a model and an inspiration for **variationist** researchers like me, who look at the correlations between language variation and social and linguistic characteristics. But it also benefited from being the right stuff in the right place at the right time. Technological advances like portable recording equipment and computers made this type of research feasible. Social activism raised interest in the language and status of cultural and class minority groups. And a modernist approach to social problems encouraged the application of findings from the social sciences to improving the school performance of children from marginalized groups.

Since that time, sociolinguistics has widened its geographic, methodological, and theoretical scope, in dialogue with such fields as linguistic anthropology, applied linguistics, gender and ethnic studies, dialectology, phonetics, and the sociology of language. At the boundaries, the dividing lines between these fields and sociolinguistics can be blurry. This is especially true of the relationship between sociolinguistics and the



**sociology of language**, most closely associated early on with the work of Joshua Fishman, which focuses on the role of language(s) in social organization. Rather than looking at how social forces can shape language, the sociology of language considers how society and language also interact at a strictly social level. In other words, society can treat language the same way it treats clothing, the arts, or business, as a thing to be debated and regulated. (Much more on this in chapter 13 on language as a social entity and chapter 14 on language and education.)

### **sociology of language**

The branch of sociology concerned with language. Unlike sociolinguistics, this approach studies the social contexts of language without recourse to analysis of linguistic structure.

## Personalizing sociolinguistics: Author's introduction

Hi, my name's Gerard.

I grew up in Québec, speaking English, just as that Canadian province's French-speaking majority was finally gaining control of the tools of linguistic power. I later lived in Toronto, a city with a large immigrant population, before moving to Newfoundland, where almost everybody speaks English, but the local dialect is highly distinct and diverse.

In each of those places, the relationship between language and society is central to public discourse. In fact, we sometimes joke that Québec has seven million linguists, but only a hundred of them get paid. In each of the places I've lived, a person's language variety is tightly linked to identity and ideology, to their perceived role in society, and to their access to education, work, and power. But in each place, those things play out differently, or involve different aspects of language and society.

Québec has in many ways been defined by the fluctuating relationship between French and English, going back to the conquest of New France by the British over 200 years ago. The dominant discourse there is about the perilous status of the French language. In Toronto, more than half the city's inhabitants were born in another country, and most residents speak at least two languages. The dominant sociolinguistic discourses are about multiculturalism and multilingualism, and about access to English and the benefits it may bring. In Newfoundland, which didn't join Canada until 1949, the dominant sociolinguistic discourse is about the relationship between standard (mainland) speech and local identity, played out in attitudes toward the local dialects and how people use them. I'll draw examples from these and other sociolinguistic situations as we work through the book, and we should all keep in mind that a change in a social situation (for example, economic improvements in a region) will lead to changes in the sociolinguistic situation (for example, the status of the dialect of that region).

In terms of my academic background, I've studied and taught in university departments devoted to education, applied linguistics, and theoretical linguistics. So in the same way that multilingual people are often very conscious of what's odd about each of their languages, I'm very aware of the specific strengths and interests of different approaches to language and society. That will probably reflect itself in how this book is written.

And, for what it's worth, I still remember how stressful it was to switch from one subdiscipline to another as a student. So I'll try to keep the jargon to a minimum. Linguists in particular will notice that I often simplify linguistic terminology (or mention it only briefly), in order to keep all the readers in the loop. I'll also try to pick examples that don't need a lot of terminology to start with. I don't think this will affect our discussions – usually, it's not the mechanics of (say) vowel height that we care about here. We're more interested in a community's *interpretation* of that vowel height.

My research interests and experiences are mostly in varieties of English – from the various places I've lived, as well as Caribbean creoles and early African American English. I'm also interested in how people use language to create identities, especially with respect to gender and local-ness. From a "meta" perspective, I'm interested in research methods, the educational implications of sociolinguistics, and making our work accessible to non-linguists. Luckily, lots of very talented people are interested in these topics, so the book will be full of examples, from my own work as well as that of students, colleagues, and friends. I hope my familiarity with the background to a piece of research will make it easier to discuss its strengths and weaknesses, as well as the methodological decisions that went into creating it.



## summing up

Sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society, but that study can take very different forms depending on who's doing it and what they're interested in finding. Modern sociolinguistics has been shaped by technological advances in recording and handling language data, theoretical interest in bridging disciplines, and researchers' interest in using our findings to address issues of social concern.

### Where to next?

We could argue that the label "sociolinguistics" makes more sense when applied to research closer to the socio (sociology) side. Some variationist work, such as that on changing vowel sounds, or my own work on earlier African American English, has very little social component, and even the people doing it are sometimes uncomfortable with the label. Variationists have suggested (only slightly facetiously) that their work would be better described simply as "linguistics." Some sociolinguistics books (by Labov and Fasold) are even divided into multiple volumes – one for the socio end of things, one for the linguistic end.

A younger generation of sociolinguists seems to be moving toward the middle of the spectrum. Even researchers who focus very much on linguistic content are bringing in new ideas from sociology and anthropology.

### How this book works

I assume that you, the reader, have limited experience with sociolinguistics. I mean, really, why else would you be reading a book called *What Is Sociolinguistics?* You might have a background in theoretical linguistics, or in applied linguistics, or in education; you might have a completely different background from other readers of the book. So I'm going to assume you're a smart, well-educated person, but I'll try to use examples that make sense even if you don't know much about the fine linguistic details.

The chapter topics will try to cover the major sub-areas of sociolinguistics. These seem to be the breakdowns that people in the field are most comfortable with, but obviously, they overlap, and some material can be covered from more than one perspective. In fact, several studies are mentioned more than once. When the connections between topics and chapters seem particularly important, I'll point them out. But you can safely assume that almost anything covered in one chapter has some connection to material from elsewhere. In fact, you might find it rewarding to frequently ask yourself, "How could my understanding of this topic (say, planning educational lan-

guage policy) be enriched by considering some other topic (say, gender and identity)?" After we've made it through all these sub-areas, the final chapter will consider a single language variety, African American English, and discuss how people from different areas might approach doing research on it.

Each chapter will introduce some of the main theoretical positions and assumptions, research traditions, and findings in that area.

- The chapters also include:
  - *Definitions* of common sociolinguistic terms. The terms are **in color** in the text and many are defined in the margin. The glossary at the back of the book provides a complete list of definitions, and includes some other important sociolinguistic terms.
  - "*Where to next?*" boxes, where I talk about where research in a particular field seems to be heading.
  - *Exercises* that you can do on your own or in groups. Many of these involve doing some research on your own.

- *Discussion* questions that are intended to help you elaborate or evaluate what you've read in relation to your own experiences and beliefs.
  - *Other resources* sections that list some books, websites, films, etc. that will tell you more about the topics covered in the chapter. Full information on print and online sources is found in the bibliography at the back of the book.
  - Many chapters expand on that with a *spotlight*, introducing a piece of writing that I think is especially relevant. These are a mix of classics and more recent buzz-worthy articles, and my discussion is intended to make it easier for people with a limited background in the area to read the original article.
  - Some chapters include a description of research *methods*, as different areas often involve different kinds of research.
- The book is also written in a very personal style (the text section of the book starts with the word “I” and ends with the word “Gerard”). I think you'll get more out of it if you *read* it in a personal style. Ask yourself: How does this topic or idea work where you live? Who do you know who's like this? Has something like this ever happened to you? Does the research coincide with your experiences? Are you going to have to re-think some of your beliefs? Do things work differently in your community? (If they do, let me know!)

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**exercises**

1. If you have access to online versions of scholarly journals, get an article or two (ideally about a similar topic or community) from the journals *Language Variation and Change* and either *Language in Society* or the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. Search the articles (electronically, if possible) for the relative frequency of words from each of these groups:
  - (a) *identity, culture, gender, performance, situate, problematize, social capital*
  - (b) *quantitative, variation, change, operationalize, results, correlation, statistical, significance, significant*
 Which journal included more of the words from (a)? From (b)? What does this suggest about the focus of each journal?
 

(For an easy and attractive version of this exercise, input each article into a software program that generates collages of the most frequently used words in a text, such as Wordle, <http://www.wordle.net/create>. Think about how the two collages differ.)
2. Using a source such as scholarly journals, the internet, or talking to somebody from one of the communities involved, seek out descriptions of (or opinions about) the sociolinguistic situation in one of the places I mentioned in the author introduction (Québec, Toronto, Newfoundland). How does their description differ from mine?
3. A discursively written textbook like this one can be intimidating for some students, as it's hard to tell which material is more important, and what might end up on a test. Read over the chapter and try to write test questions that could be answered by – and interesting to – an undergraduate student (with a C average, a B average, an A average, or an A+ average), or a graduate student in either linguistics, education, or language policy and planning. (You might find this to be a useful study tool for each chapter, especially if a bunch of you get together on it.)