



SECOND EDITION

# What Is Sociolinguistics?

Gerard Van Herk



LINGUISTICS IN THE WORLD

WILEY Blackwell



# What Is Sociolinguistics?

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**Second Edition**

Gerard Van Herk

**WILEY** Blackwell

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# About the Companion Website

Don't forget to visit the companion website for this book:

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# 1

## Introduction

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### In this chapter:

- Types of sociolinguistics
- The background of the discipline
- Personalizing sociolinguistics
- Getting the most out of this book

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 Québeckers 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 (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 or sign, 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

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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), ethnicity (Chapter 6), and gender and sexuality (Chapter 7), whether we perceive those categories as relatively fixed or open to active performance and construction (Chapter 8, style). 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 (see the interlude after Chapter 7 and the epilogue at the end of the book). 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 sub-disciplines 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.

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## 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 school-children 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 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: 192–193). 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.)

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 ground-breaking 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.

This work was interesting enough that 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.)

## 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 local identity and how it is set apart from standard (mainland) speech, 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

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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 than to some of what we will cover here. 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.



## Getting the most out of this book

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 language policy) be enriched by considering some other topic (say, gender and identity)?"

Each chapter will introduce some of the main theoretical positions and assumptions, research traditions, and findings in that area. The chapters may also include:

- "Where to next?" sections, 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.
- Many chapters include 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. If you're reading this book many years after its original publication, hello, people of the future! You may find that some of the readings that seemed important at the time of publication have faded in esteem over time.
- Sometimes, there's a description of research methods, because different areas often involve different ways of doing research.

The book is also written in a very personal style (the text section of the book starts with the word "I" and end 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?



In my own classes, we have a strategy for personalizing sociolinguistics called “sociolinguistic angels.” You’ve probably seen cartoons in which a character has a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other, representing our negative and positive motivations. A sociolinguistic angel is a little sociolinguist who sits on your shoulder and points out all the socially interesting language things that happen during your day: Do you hear a new expression? Does somebody use a dialect form that’s not common where you are? Do some of your friends and family use language forms that others don’t? Why? When our classes meet, we talk about what our angels have noticed since last time, and discuss possible explanations. You might want to try this yourself. If you’re lucky, you may notice something that could turn into a research paper, or at least an interesting discussion. At worst, you’ll develop a mindset that is always open to sociolinguistic ideas, which might help you get more out of this book. (And if you hear any really interesting stuff, email me about it!)

## exercises

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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 do those descriptions 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.)

4. Using the author's introduction above as a rough model, write your own sociolinguistic autobiography. How does the way you speak differ from other people you know? What might account for this? What are your research interests? What social forces might influence them? Don't worry about technical terms. To spark some ideas, ask people around you about the way you speak; or, if necessary, define yourself negatively (e.g., "In my speech community, upper-class people do X and recent immigrants do Y. I don't do either.").
5. Get two (or more) of the sociolinguistics textbooks mentioned in *Other Resources*. Look over their tables of contents and compare the chapter titles in each book. Which topics deserve a chapter in one book, but not another? What do you think accounts for the differences? Can you see where particular material might be covered in different chapters in different books?
6. As you read through this book and any other assigned readings, keep track of places where sociolinguists' claims are different from what *you* think about how language and society work. Consider how you feel about each mismatch: is it "Wow, I never thought of it like that!" or is it "These people are clearly deluded, because they disagree with me"?

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## discussion

1. Where you live, are there language features (pronunciation, grammatical constructions, particular words or word meanings) that people associate with particular groups (women, young people, people from a particular neighborhood, non-native speakers)? What are they? (And when you read the previous sentence, did you think, "Hey! Why is he asking about language associated with women or young people, rather than men, or old people?" What does that tell you about who we tend to see as the default setting, or **unmarked** group?)
2. What would *you* expect a course (and a textbook) about sociolinguistics to cover? You might find it useful to write notes about this, put them away, and consult them at the end of your course or reading.
3. Early in the chapter, I refer to the fact that I'm writing this book and you're reading it as an "interaction." How is this like other interactions? How is it different?
4. Have a look at the table of contents for this book. Which of the chapters do you expect to find the most (or least) interesting? Why?

## other resources

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There are many sociolinguistic textbooks out there, many of them very good.

Almost all treat particular studies (e.g., Labov in Martha's Vineyard) in greater detail than I do here. Most of them require some knowledge of linguistic terminology, but if you can get past your understandable anxiety over reading something where you don't understand every word, you should be fine.

I've tried to list some from roughly the most linguistic to the most social:

Chambers, J.K., and Natalie Schilling. *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change* (2013).

Walker, James A. *Variation in Linguistic Systems* (2010).

Milroy, Lesley, and Matthew Gordon. *Sociolinguistics: Method and Interpretation* (2003).

Chambers, J.K. *Sociolinguistic Theory: Linguistic Variation and its Social Significance* (1995, 2009).

Meyerhoff, Miriam. *Introducing Sociolinguistics* (2006, 2015).

Holmes, Janet. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (1992).

Mesthrie, Rajend, Joan Swann, Ana Deumert, and William L. Leap. *Introducing Sociolinguistics* (2009).

Trudgill, Peter. *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society* (1983).

Coulmas, Florian. *Sociolinguistics: The Study of Speakers' Choices* (2005).

Romaine, Suzanne. *Language in Society: An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (2000).

Wardhaugh, Ronald. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (2010).

Coulmas, Florian (ed.). *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics* (1997).

There are also some collections of major readings in sociolinguistics:

Coupland, Nik, and Jaworski, Adam (eds.). *The New Sociolinguistics Reader* (2009).

Meyerhoff, Miriam, and Schlee, Erik (eds.). *The Routledge Sociolinguistics Reader* (2010).

Paulston, Christina Bratt, and Tucker, G. Richard (eds.). *Sociolinguistics: The Essential Readings* (2003).

Trudgill, Peter, and Cheshire, Jenny (eds.). *The Sociolinguistics Reader: Multilingualism and Variation* (1998).

Scholarly journals include:



*Language Variation and Change*, <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=LVC> (accessed 25 April 2017).



*Journal of Sociolinguistics*, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291467-9841> (accessed 25 April 2017).



*Language in Society*, <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=LSY> (accessed 25 April 2017).



For an accessible (autobiographical!) introduction to Bill Labov and his work, try "How I got into linguistics" (<http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~wlabov/Papers/HowIgot.html>, accessed 25 April 2017).

Sali Tagliamonte's *Making Waves: The Story of Variationist Sociolinguistics* (2015) is a recent oral history of the subfield.

Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats' *Rocket 88* (1951) is available in reissue.

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# 2

## Language and Society

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### In this chapter:

- Defining “language” in sociolinguistics
- Language vs. dialect
- Dialect, slang, accent, variety
- Social organization and language
- Doing variationist sociolinguistics

Years ago, my family was walking the narrow roads of Thorpe, a village in northern England, and a car nearly clipped us. We joked that that would be one way to lose weight. Ever since, we’ve referred to cars passing too close to us as the “Thorpe Diet.” Nobody else knows what we’re talking about, of course.

You may also have “inside jokes” like this, turns of phrase, or odd meanings for words that only make sense to close friends or family, the people who have shared particular experiences with you. This is kind of how sociolinguists think about language use – within any group, shared experiences or understandings of the world lead us to use language in a particular way, and to define or reinforce our place in the group by drawing on those possible ways of using language.

In Chapter 1, I proposed that we define sociolinguistics as the study of the relationship between language and society. In this chapter, I’d like to expand on that by looking at how sociolinguists define “language” and “society.” As you’ll see, doing that will bring back another definition from the first chapter – “it depends on who you ask.” Or, better yet, “It depends on what you want to find out.”

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## defining “language” in sociolinguistics

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When sociolinguists talk about “language,” we mean language as it is actually used. That doesn’t sound very profound, but it actually sets us apart from both normal people and from some other branches of linguistics.

## sociolinguists vs. other linguists

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If you work in mainstream (“theoretical”) linguistics, you may take issue with the previous sentence, with its implication that other linguists don’t necessarily look at language as it’s actually used. You may say, “Wait a minute. Theoretical linguists look at real language all the time. We do fieldwork, learning from native speakers of a language.” Fair enough. What I’m really talking about here is the object of study, the actual data that each discipline uses to build theoretical claims.

Mainstream linguists usually elicit translations (“How would you say this in your language?”) and grammaticality judgments (“Can you say this in your language?”) from native speakers of a language. Then they develop a set of rules or constraints that together make up the grammar of that language. They’re interested in describing how language is represented in the mind – a **mentalist** approach. This requires some abstraction – the producer of language in this framework is the “ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community” (Chomsky 1965:3). It also involves a distinction between **competence** – what speakers know *about* language – and **performance** – what they actually come out with (which might be full of false starts, errors, hesitations, and other such “noise,” as well as switches between dialects). In this theoretical framework, it wouldn’t make sense to just record people talking and use that to explain linguistic structure. For one thing, you’d need to filter out all the “noise” to get at people’s underlying competence; for another, some of the linguistic constructions that would let you decide between theoretical models are so infrequent in daily speech that you’d need to record forever. (If you’re a linguistics student, you may have noticed the oddness of some theoretically-important sentence constructions when you tried running them past your friends.)

The sociolinguistic approach, on the other hand, is **empiricist** – we only trust evidence that we find out there in the real world. We assume that it’s our job to describe and explain what we hear people saying (ideally, by recording them). Sure, there will be some noise, some *ums* and *uhs* and sentences that just peter out, but on the whole, we find that everyday speech is far more structured than people think. (In fact, the idea that real speech is hesitant and meandering originally came partly from studies of the language of professors. Hmmm.)

Of course, this means that we end up studying different linguistic features from our mainstream linguist friends, and we study them using different techniques. Most of the time, we record people (especially nowadays). We develop tools to represent what we’ve recorded in ways that work for us. Many sociolinguists undertake detailed analysis of relatively short stretches of

interaction to investigate how participants are constructing their places in the relationship (see Chapter 9). In my subfield, on the other hand, we look at frequently occurring language features in long stretches of speech, we count stuff and look for correlations, and we describe our findings in terms of tendencies, or probabilities, rather than absolute rules. In all this, we see ourselves as falling somewhere between other branches of linguistics and other areas of the social sciences.

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## sociolinguists vs. normal people

Many normal people (that is, non-linguists) reserve the term *language* for what we linguists usually call the **standard** variety – the language taught in school, used in formal writing, and often heard from newscasters and other media figures who are trying to project authority or ability. Other varieties of the language – the ones which linguists would call **non-standard** – are often described by non-linguists as “dialects.” There are almost always value judgments attached to this practice. Many people see the standard as good, pure, clear, and rule-governed – a “real language” – while “dialects” are broken, chaotic, limited, or impermanent. Linguists (of all stripes) try to avoid these kinds of value judgments. Our approach is **descriptive** (how people actually talk), rather than **prescriptive** (how people “should” talk).

Claiming that there’s no “right” way to talk can be an unpopular idea, especially, ironically, among people taking their first sociolinguistics course. If you’ve made it this far in the educational system, then you, like all of us, have been steeped in the ideology of the standard language for years. You’re probably pretty skilled at using Standard English (and when you’re not, you feel bad about it). You may have had to change your way of speaking to succeed, or to avoid discrimination. You’ve been rewarded (I imagine) for following the rules of spelling and grammar and punctuation, and for knowing what type of language is appropriate in a particular context. Your career path might involve passing on that knowledge, to children or non-native or disfluent speakers. And now here come the sociolinguists, telling you that there’s no such thing as a mistake? You may be thinking, “It’s going to be a long semester...”

Let me clarify. When I say that our approach is not prescriptive, I don’t mean that we’re hopelessly idealistic, or deliberately confrontational. We know that certain ways of talking will limit the opportunities of their speakers. In fact, the attitudes toward some language varieties and the social limitations imposed on their speakers, as well as the linguistic consequences of those forces, are the things that we describe and try to explain. They’re social or linguistic fact. But to study language and society, we need to be clear that certain language features are not objectively wrong; they’re just, as I said above, different ways of saying the same thing. It would be bad science to assume otherwise, and other fields don’t do it. Presumably, geologists don’t worry about whether (say) feldspar is worse than diamonds; it’s just different. Of course, feldspar has a lower *social* evaluation, as a geologist might discover after buying a feldspar engagement ring.

## language vs. dialect

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When I tell normal people that I study local language use, they have a lot of terms for the language I look at: dialect, slang, accent, bad language, and so on. Sociolinguists use most of the same terms (okay, not “bad”). But for us, each of these terms has a distinct meaning. Linguists (and not just sociolinguists) usually use the criterion of **mutual intelligibility** to determine whether people are speaking “the same language” or not. If people from two different places – say, Derby, Australia and Derby, England – can understand each other, then they’re speaking the same language, and the systematic differences in their speech reflect different **dialects**, or (regional) subsets of the same language.

In practice, though, things are messier than this. First off, what does it mean to “understand” somebody who speaks a different language variety? If you’ve traveled much, or lived somewhere with a lot of visitors, you’ve almost certainly been in a situation where you couldn’t always understand your **interlocutor** (the person you were speaking with). I remember a few years back, soon after Hurricane Katrina, being in a restaurant in Columbus, Ohio, full of Gulf Coast expatriates. An elderly woman at the next table struck up a conversation with me about her time in Columbus, and how expensive she found the city. We spoke for about ten minutes, until her daughter came back and told her to stop talking to strangers. After they left, my table-mate (a fellow Canadian) confessed that he hadn’t been able to understand her side of the conversation at all. This may have been partly because he hadn’t spent much time in the south, or because he didn’t expect to understand somebody of a different age, sex, ethnicity, and nationality. If that were the case, we might say that intelligibility was affected by **social distance** between the speaker and the overhearer.

I’ve also been the one who didn’t understand another English speaker. In fact, since moving to Newfoundland, I’ve been in several situations where I’ve had a hard time understanding somebody from the island, especially older men. And I study Newfoundland English for a living! Usually this happens during sudden topic shifts, or when I have no context to work from. One of my old profs tells a story about an extreme version of this. He was waiting for a train in London late one night when the man sitting next to him leaned over and said, with great emotion, something like “Medooksdid.” My prof asked him to repeat this, and the man did, several times, getting more upset each time. Finally he opened his suitcase, pointed to a dead duck inside, and said, very slowly, “Me dook’s did!” If my prof had been confronted with the evidence in the first place, he almost certainly would have understood “My duck’s dead.”

A second problem with using mutual intelligibility to decide whether something is a language or a dialect is that this is simply not how things work in the real world. For example, speakers of Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish can (more or less) understand each other’s languages. Non-linguists think of these as three different languages because they’re found in three different countries (and perhaps also because they’re found in European countries, and tied up with issues of nineteenth-century nationalism). The variously-attributed relevant saying here is, “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.”



In other words, a way of speaking is seen as a separate language when various subgroups of speakers have the political power to convince people that they're distinct. The same naming practices happen in other situations where speakers of similar varieties see themselves as distinct for social reasons. For example, the language varieties spoken by Serbs and Croats in the former Yugoslavia are mutually intelligible, although each has some distinct vocabulary. Since the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Serbian and Croatian (and, more recently, Bosnian) have been considered distinct languages by many of their speakers – helped along in this case by the fact that they have different writing systems, reflecting different religious and educational histories. A similar state of affairs is found with Hindi and Urdu on the Indian subcontinent.

The Chinese situation, on the other hand, is the opposite – spoken Cantonese and Mandarin are *not* mutually intelligible, but they are usually described as Chinese “dialects” because they are spoken in the same country, and because words of similar meaning in each language are usually written using similar characters (see table 2.1). Here, political and social forces work to encourage a focus on similarities, rather than differences.

**Table 2.1** A comparison of some language features in two “dialects” of Chinese.

<i>English</i>	<i>Mandarin</i>	<i>Cantonese</i>	<i>Written the same?</i>
‘Hong Kong’	<i>xianglgang3</i>	<i>hoenglgong2</i>	yes
‘A is taller than B’	<i>A bi3 B gaol</i> A than B tall	<i>A goul gwo3 B</i> A tall more B	partly
‘umbrella’	<i>yu3san3</i>	<i>ze1</i>	no

Adapted from Zhang (n.d.).

And sometimes, languages are “invisible.” Kachru and Bhatia (1978) describe a situation in parts of India where the local variety (distinct enough for linguists to consider it as a separate language) might not be considered a language at all. So when census takers come around and ask what language they speak, people instead name the language that they occasionally use in formal situations: Hindi. This was especially true just after Indian independence, when nationalist feeling was at its strongest; in that census, reported Hindi use spiked.

## Other naming issues: Dialect, slang, accent, variety...

This might be a good place to clear up a couple of other naming problems related to dialects. Non-linguists often call non-standard varieties **slang**. To us linguists, however, “slang” refers only to *words* – either words that are new to the language, or old words or phrases with new meanings. Slang is usually associated with younger speakers – in fact, a good indicator that a slang term is finished is when middle-aged university professors like me start using it. Most slang is “faddish” or short-lived – you don’t hear many people saying *far out* or *the bee’s knees* any more, and if I put any

current slang in the book, it'll be outdated by the time you read it. Not all slang dies out, though. *Mob*, *freshman*, and *glib* all started out as slang, but have become part of the standard language, and only a generation ago mainstream news media used to give a definition whenever they used the then-obscure slang term *ripoff*. Unlike slang, a dialect is usually distinct in multiple linguistic domains – **lexicon** (word choice), **morphology** (word structure), **syntax** (sentence structure), and **phonology/phonetics** (pronunciation).

A second term sometimes used by non-linguists to describe dialects is **accent**, a word that linguists reserve to describe pronunciation. Although dialects usually include distinct accent features, dialect and accent boundaries don't have to match. For example, many people speak Standard English (in terms of grammar and lexicon), but with an accent reflecting their social or regional background – think of Martin Luther King, Jr., BBC regional newsreaders, or CBC editorialist Rex Murphy. The reverse situation (standard accent, non-standard grammatical features) is much less common, and often sounds strange to us. This was used to comedic effect a few years back in a popular online video, which featured a Standard English accented Gilbert and Sullivan version of "Baby Got Back."

Many sociolinguists avoid the naming problem by using the value-neutral term **variety** for any subset of a language. They'll talk about the standard variety, as well as regional, class, or ethnic varieties. Others reclaim the term *dialect*, and speak of the standard dialect, as well as regional dialects, sociolects, or ethnolects. They'll often say, "Everybody has a dialect."

Another way that sociolinguists differ from linguists (and many normal people) is that we think of language as existing at the level of the group. Sure, we understand that each human learns language individually and stores it in an individual brain, but we stress that our language gets its meaning through interaction with others, as we negotiate understanding, decide how to present ourselves to others, and express belonging (or not-belonging!). In its strongest form, some sociolinguists lay out our theoretical viewpoint by saying that, linguistically, there's no such thing as the individual – the way we talk comes from our membership in a group or groups. (Although sometimes I think that when we express it that strongly, we do it just to goad people from other research traditions.) As a result, we tend to study language from as many people as it takes to figure out what's going on, generally focusing on individual speakers only when their behavior lets us better understand the boundaries of a group or its linguistic norms.

## what is "society"?

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So sociolinguists think of language as a social object, that gets its meaning and power through speakers' participation in language-using groups. But what do we really mean by "social" in this context? More specifically, what exactly are the social groups that matter in determining what people are doing with language at any particular time?

For sociolinguists who study language policy (Chapter 13), this question is often already answered in some kind of official sense. There are specific social and political entities that are responsible for different domains of language. In Canada, for example, most decisions about language – official languages, language in education – are made at the provincial level, and there might be specific agencies responsible for some aspect of language (for example, the *Office québécois de la langue française* in Québec).

It's a different kind of question for sociolinguists like me, who look at language structure. Let's take my last social interaction as an example – I've just been down the hall talking to my colleague Paul about some research he's working on. Why did we talk the way we did – our accents, our grammar, our word choices? Did we sound the same because we're both Canadian, male, native English speakers, professors? A little different because we're from different provinces in Canada, our parents are from different countries, and he's younger than I am? Were we adapting our speech to each other, or the topic or setting? A researcher studying specific interactions, maybe from an **ethnographic** viewpoint, would say that all those variables can be considered in a single framework – they're all things that could affect the form of the conversation, and we can investigate the relative influence of each component (see Chapter 9). A scholar of language variation, though, would probably assume that a lot of the language that Paul and I brought to our conversation is fairly consistent, reflecting our cumulative past linguistic experiences. For example, I probably don't change my vowels when I talk about sociolinguistics, or when I'm in Paul's office.

So, how do we want to think about our similarities and differences? We could say that Paul and I are both from the same group, speakers of Canadian English, and the way we talk reflects our shared understanding of how that group uses English (and what kind of language is appropriate for that kind of interaction between our kind of people). In other words, we're from the same **speech community**. Or, we could say that the different groups of people that each of us has interacted with over the years – our **social networks** – have reinforced particular sociolinguistic norms. Or we could drill down to a more local level, and say that because all the people in our lab get together regularly to talk about sociolinguistic methods, our language (and other stuff we do) ends up taking on particular social meanings related to that group, our **community of practice**.

This gives us three different (although possibly complementary) models for thinking about how our social surroundings influence our linguistic choices. Social networks and communities of practice are both ideas from other disciplines that sociolinguists have adapted. Speech community, on the other hand, is much more of a discipline-specific concept, which traces its origins to the early days of modern sociolinguistics, especially the work done by Bill Labov in the 1960s in New York City's Lower East Side.

In fact, speech community is so much a part of my theoretical understanding of how language is socially organized that I find it hard to define (perhaps because the term's been used in linguistics, even outside sociolinguistics, for at least 80 years, and with slightly different intent by different researchers).

A common definition is that a speech community is a group of people who share social conventions, or **sociolinguistic norms**, about language use. These norms (a combination of expressed attitudes and variable linguistic behavior) are shared by all members of a speech community, which is why sociolinguists study the language of the community, not the speech (or perceptions of the speech) of a single speaker. This broad definition lets us talk about speech communities of very different sizes. English Montreal is a speech community – its members share norms about what to call sweet fizzy drinks and whether *marry* and *merry* are pronounced the same (they're not). But in a sense, “all speakers of English” are a (very big) speech community – we share norms about putting adjectives before nouns, for example (*red car*, not *car red*).

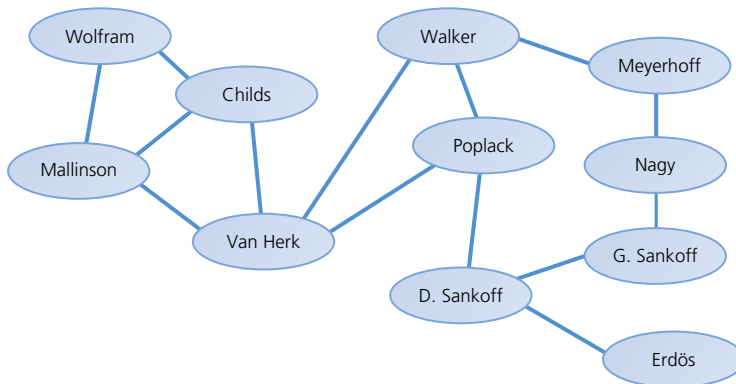
How do we know whether a particular bunch of language-using people are a speech community? It's important to note that a speech community is something that the researcher *discovers*, through an analysis of language use (and attitudes). Labov (1966) determined that New York City could be described as a speech community by showing that New Yorkers shared norms about particular language features. For example, they knew that r-lessness (pronouncing *car* as something like *cah*) was a local feature with very little prestige, and they avoided it (or at least tried to) in situations where they were paying more attention to their speech (such as when repeating an answer or reading word lists). Even rebelling against these perceptions, as some speakers did, qualified people as members of the speech community – you have to know the norms in order to resist them. Labov also determined, though, based on linguistic evidence, that African American New Yorkers did not share the same linguistic norms, and thus should be considered part of a different speech community. (Later work showed remarkable similarities in the vernacular speech of African Americans in different cities, suggesting that speakers of African American English formed a distinct national speech community... but see Chapter 6 for nuance.)

Of course, this means we're using language to define a social entity, and the concept of the speech community has been criticized on these grounds. In practical terms, though, the definition is not entirely language-determined and applied after the fact; when researchers first decide to study a group that might meet the definition of a speech community, we use non-language criteria (such as region) to decide who we'll talk to. I mean, there was such a thing as “New York City,” even before Labov determined its speech community status.

And even if we *did* use nothing but language norms to define a social group, that could be interesting as a concept. In fact, some early sociolinguistic studies suggested that our findings might help social scientists in other fields – that shared linguistic norms might reveal previously obscure connections or affiliations between people and groups. As far as I know, nobody's really followed up on this, which might be for the best – otherwise by now marketers would be targeting people based on their verb marking strategies.

There are, of course, some aspects of how society affects language that the speech community model isn't really set up to address. What if you don't have a consensus – if different subgroups in a community (e.g., different classes)

have different ideas about what counts as a prestigious form? And what's the actual mechanism by which language features (especially innovative ones) spread through a community? The idea of **social networks** was imported into sociolinguistics from social anthropology to address these issues. It's central to Lesley and James Milroy's description of patterns of language change in urban Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s. The term "social networks" is well known nowadays in the sense of social networking websites, but that's only marginally related to what we're talking about here. The term as used in the social sciences refers to the fact that we build networks (personal communities, in a sense) to deal with life, and as our everyday problems change, so do our personal networks. Each of us participates in multiple networks; our networks are connected through the members that they share, and some of our connections are stronger than others. If your background is in education, you've probably seen social network diagrams used to describe classroom interactions, with lines of varying thicknesses representing the frequency and strength of connections between students.



**Figure 2.1** A simple social network diagram. In this case, the links are between people who have co-authored papers.

Social network theory is often used to investigate why people who might share some social characteristic (such as class or region) nevertheless behave differently linguistically, especially with respect to participation in language change. What the Milroys found was that new language features are much slower to take root in **dense** and **multiplex** social networks – those where a few people interact with each other often (the “dense” part) and in multiple ways (the “multiplex” part). If your neighbors are also your friends, and your co-workers, and your in-laws, the intensity and frequency of your contacts with them will reinforce your traditional way of speaking. In this model, change is brought into the community by people with looser ties, those who work or go to school or hang out elsewhere.

Although originally developed to investigate how language changes (or doesn't) within a single language (and speech community), social network theory has been useful to investigate how and why people shift from one language to another, for example in immigrant situations, or when a local