

« *Research Methods in Sociolinguistics* »

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Intitulé : *Research Methods in Sociolinguistics*

1. Introduction

This paper is intended primarily for students engaged in research into the complexities of language resulting not only from the linguistic system itself as characterized by Chomsky (1957, 1965, 1986) but also, at least in equally important ways, from the reality that language is used in various forms to convey information and thoughts, emotions and feelings, as well as speakers' regional origins and personal traits. Language is first and foremost a 'fait social' as defined by Saussure (1916), though he did not put any emphasis as Labov (1972:261) suggests when he says: "Every linguist recognizes that language is a social fact, but not everyone puts an equal emphasis on that fact." For Labov, linguistic theory must encompass not only formal linguistic structure but also every social function that is related to language in one way or another. In fact, he argues that *sociolinguistics* "is a somewhat misleading use of an oddly redundant term" (Labov 1972:183).

As a matter of fact, unlike mainstream linguistics, whose methodology only takes account of linguistic competence of an 'ideal' speaker to establish formal structural rules of grammar, sociolinguistics considers the relationship between social features and linguistic variables with the aim of constructing a general theory of language that covers both competence and performance, that is, language *and* its uses in the speech community.

In the light of this tight correlation between language structure and social structure, we attempt to review in this article some of the various methods of research put forward by sociolinguists. But before having an overall look at the methodology of investigation, we believe it is fruitful to say a word about the background against which sociolinguistic studies have emerged.

2. From Dialect Geography to Urban Dialectology

In order to gain a sound understanding of sociolinguistics, we have to look at some previous work in regional dialectology, or dialect geography as it is sometimes referred to. The aim of this discipline – which is primarily concerned with rural areas where it is thought there is little linguistic variation – was to collect data in different areas to describe the existing dialects of a particular language and to map the geographical distribution of linguistic items on a regional basis. The examination of how dialects change over time makes dialect geography tightly related to diachronic and historical linguistics. Indeed, the hypotheses and methods, which consisted of large surveys based on questionnaires and interviews, were drawn from diachronic studies, and remained for a long time unrelated to the study of language structure, until Weinreich¹ (1954) showed the necessity of taking account of the relationship between structuralism and dialectology.

By the early 1960s, however, a new generation of dialectologists, also referred to as sociolinguists, started looking, on social bases rather than on regional ones, at linguistic variation

in large urban centres where different varieties of a language were in constant contact and interference. It was the impact of Labov's work (e.g. 1963, 1966) which caused the objectives to shift definitely from the description of dialects to the analysis of the structure of linguistic systems, the nature of linguistic variation, and the mechanisms of linguistic change.

3. Core Linguistics and Sociolinguistics

Because of its complexities and its multi-faceted aspects, language has been studied from different angles, and therefore different methods of investigating

the phenomenon have been adopted in accordance with the object of inquiry. After the era of prescriptive traditional grammar and comparative philology which developed till the dawn of the 20th century, various linguistic schools, such as Saussure's descriptive linguistics, Bloomfield's American School of Linguistics, the Prague School of Linguistics and of course the 'structural' schools, have contributed to a better understanding of language in terms of structure and function. We will not go into the details concerning each trend and the debates resulting from some controversial positions, but any discussion today about the nature and role of language requires the mention of two essentially competing but also complementary approaches: the Chomskyan paradigm and the Labovian paradigm. As a matter of fact, in spite of the essential divergence we will consider in our article, the two contrasting views display a few points of agreement:

- Both Chomskyan linguistics and Labovian sociolinguistics show interest in the nature of language
- Labov's quantitative paradigm is relevant to theoretical linguistics as it also involves aspects of language regarded as basic by structural and generative linguists, that is, the complex system based on phonological, morphological and syntactic relations, though linguistic items are treated differently.
- Both approaches are based on methods that seek theoretical explanations and do not merely observe simple facts. Rather, they attempt to put forward general theories that may apply to all languages.

It seems thus to be evident that²the two viewpoints are complementary rather than conflicting. Indeed, though Labov gives importance to linguistic variation which he considers as heterogeneous but structured, he has never disagreed with Chomsky on a formal level. It is on the methodological level that the two scholars disagree. While Chomsky's first work was based on data drawn from "an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community", as he says (Chomsky 1965:3), Labov's investigations were carried out as a continuation of dialectologists' studies. In other words, whereas Chomskyan linguistics relies on individual intuitive knowledge of the language abstracted from real day-to-day interaction – often the linguist himself being the sole informant –, Labov and his followers have emphasized the importance of real-time data with the aim of obtaining natural samples that reveal linguistic variation and language change. That is, the dichotomy *langue/parole* in Saussurean terms, reworded as competence/performance by Chomsky, is split up into its two elements: the object of Chomskyan linguistics being competence, the intuitive knowledge of grammar rules that native speakers are endowed with, while sociolinguistics focuses on performance or language use and linguistic variation. However, it is worth mentioning that in a later work Chomsky introduced issues of variation to account for language diversity and changing grammar acquisition by children at various stages of their development. This may be seen as a good start for conciliation between core linguistics and sociolinguistics. The point is that many interesting observable facts would be

missed in the study of language abstracted from its context of use. Hudson (1996:3) says in this respect:

[...] speech has a social function, both as a means of communication and also as a way of identifying social groups, and to study speech without reference to the society which uses it is to exclude the possibility of finding social explanations for the structures that are used.

As a matter of fact, because of the complexities of society and the numerous social factors that are in constant relation with everyday speech interaction, a great deal of interest is shown among students of linguistics as well as researchers in psychology, anthropology, education, and other socially-oriented disciplines.

4. Research methods in sociolinguistics

Linguistics, as already mentioned, is a theory that has put aside social and sociocultural factors in its approach. Sociology, on the other hand, has tended to study society without taking account of language. But both disciplines needed an impetus to 'flourish' in order to capture the reality of language as one of the most important aspects of social behaviour. Sociolinguistics was born as a result of an acute necessity to examine language phenomena in relation to social features, trying, as Romaine (2000:ix) says

to bring together the perspectives of linguists and sociologists to bear on issues concerning the place of language in society, and to address, in particular, the social context of linguistic diversity.

However, sociolinguistics is by no means a simple amalgamation of linguistics and sociology using concepts from both disciplines. As Wardhaugh (1992:12) says,

Specific points of connection between language and society must be discovered, and these must be related within theories that throw light on how linguistic and social structures interact.

Studying precisely such relationship between language and society covers a wide range of issues involving different approaches and methods of investigation. Sociolinguists started working, as mentioned above, on the path of traditional dialectologists, though the goals were shifted from observing facts about geographically-distributed dialects in rural areas, to the analysis, particularly in urban centres, of the ways linguistic features correlate with social factors. Rural dialectology was only concerned with getting the most conservative data with the aim of diachronic comparisons, whereas sociolinguists, or modern urban dialectologists as they are sometimes referred to, seek correlations between linguistic variables and social variables: the survey methods used by dialect geographers were replaced by interview techniques, especially within the variationist paradigmⁱⁱ.

The complexity of the field has made sociolinguists subdivide it in various ways:

- first in terms of theoretical and applied, the former being concerned with formal models for analyzing the structure of the speech community and the speech varieties to provide an account of communicative competence; the latter dealing with the social and political implications of basic differences in language use in public life.

- second, the multifaceted field is also split into macro-sociolinguistics, for which the starting point is the society, and micro-sociolinguistics which begins with language.

Indeed, research into language use is so broad that it has to be split up into the various aspects including interpersonal interaction, linguistic variation and change, attitudes toward language, social dialects, multilingualism, code-switching and so on. In many instances, sociolinguistic research might be interdisciplinary and thus involves different techniques and methods of investigation.

Data Collection

Before generating data, the sociolinguist usually puts forward a number of research questions or hypotheses concerning the language variety in the community or group he or she sets out to investigate. The most important goal the researcher wants to reach is the elicitation of natural speech. Various techniques have been used to approach the community:

- anonymous observation
- participant observation
- sociolinguistic interview

All of these methods may have strengths and weaknesses. Observing people anonymously and without being observed may reveal natural speech data, but this does not allow the investigator to identify the speaker or the social group. Participant observation, in which the researcher takes part in a discussion, solves this problem of informants' identification but may prevent the natural vernacular to emerge. The sociolinguistic interview is considered as the corner-stone of sociolinguistic research. In spite of the effect that the interviewer has on the informant, it has been used to elicit linguistic data in different speech contexts, for according to Labov and others the 'observer's paradox' can be avoided. The sociolinguistic interview includes an informal part consisting of free conversation for eliciting the use of the vernacular, that is, the language variety that the informant uses in the most unconstrained situations, and a formal part which consists of reading passages, word lists and minimal pairs to obtain various degrees of formal or standard language use.

In conclusion we may say that by incorporating social variables, the methods developed in sociolinguistic work have proved to be essential for the study of language structure as it varies synchronically and changes diachronically.

References

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ⁱ Weinreich's article (1954) 'Is structural dialectology possible?'

ⁱⁱ The variationist paradigm is one of the main paradigms in sociolinguistics. It has been developed on the basis of recognizing that variability in language is systematic (Labov, 1966, 1972). Research within this paradigm focuses on the relationship between variation in language and social factors, and on language change.