

Variationist Sociolinguistics: Riding the Waves or Water Under the Bridge?

This presentation presents an overview of the field of Variationist Sociolinguistics based on the reminiscences of forty-three of the most illustrious practitioners of the field, including William Labov Peter Trudgill, Walt Wolfram and their early students, e.g. Penelope Eckert, John Rickford, Shana Poplack.

Sociolinguistics more broadly is not much more than 50 years old making it a relatively new discipline and one that has undergone a virtual revolution in the course of its short history — from inception to full blown development. One might think, therefore, that Sociolinguistics has always existed, but that is not the case. Sociolinguistics arose from a particular time, place and cultural climate in the United States in the post World War Two decades. The dawn of Variationist Sociolinguistics can be pinpointed to a later period, the years 1963-1978. Perhaps, surprisingly, it arose from series of chance meetings, symbiotic interests and — according to many of the early researchers — serendipity. Yet it could only have developed because a key set of individuals embraced the idea of the social life of language and its inherent variable structure and set out to study it. In the process, they jump-started a whole new way of analyzing and understanding language variation and change.

The value of this presentation comes from it highly personal insights that come directly from stories that tell the unique in-group, inside story of the researchers. The context in which variationist research emerged is documented chronologically in a compilation of events and developments that I will intersperse with personal reminiscences taken directly from the audio-recorded interviews, as in (1):

(1) What people thought was chaos turned out to be regular. (W. Labov)

Unfortunately, it is increasingly noted that students do not read the classic sociolinguistic or variationist texts which document the field, but instead rely on recent compilations, handbooks and other digests of earlier material. The roots of the field and its remarkable inception are slipping away just when the

foundations must be firm enough to support its continuing expansion. I will recount explanations of concepts, ideas, good practice, and sage advice directly from the progenitors. In (2) Anthony Kroch discusses the discovery of the Constant Rate Effect. In (3) Walt Wolfram offers his advice.

(2) It's like the discovery of Neptune or Pluto. There's a deviation in other measurements that tells you there must be something out there. And you would never look for it if you had no reason to think it was there. (A. Kroch)

(3) Find something you love to wake up Monday morning for and can't wait to get to. (W. Wolfram)

My presentation aims to tap the essence of the discipline, to expose its linguistic insights, its social motivations, and the inside story of how it came to be. The goal of the presentation will be to outline some of the issues surrounding the enterprise of variationist study and to offer the audience a greater understanding of the history of an academic field and to fortify its ongoing development.

Reference:

Tagliamonte, Sali A. (2016). *Making Waves: The History of Variationist Sociolinguistics*. Malden and New York: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers.