

*Sociolinguistic variation: Theories, methods, and applications.* ROBERT BAYLEY AND CEIL LUCAS, Ed. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xvi, 405.

This volume of 17 papers is dedicated to Walt Wolfram. The three substantives in the subtitle name the three sections into which this volume is divided, but otherwise no particular theme suggests itself. The first several chapters attempt to apply theoretical perspectives to sociolinguistic variation data. The three articles that make up the second part discuss field work and analysis. The articles in the third section involve variation and its implications for education and other social institutions. This review will comment on highlights of articles in each section.

Kirk Hazen, in “The Study of Variation in Historical Perspective” (70 – 89), offers an excellent review of the development of variationist sociolinguistics. The old question of variable rules remains moot in this discussion; wherever one comes down on the spectrum of acceptance or rejection of variable rules, no consensus can be found. We can suggest that a real data based solution to the question of ‘rules’ in language variation, with its implications for a community of speakers and the variable lect of a given speaker, can be found in a theory of stylistic analysis, as offered in Nikolas Coupland, 2007. *Style: Language variation and identity*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.

The discussion in Ralph W. Fasold and Dennis R. Preston, “The Psycholinguistic Unity of Inherent Variation: Old Occam Whips out his Razor” (45 – 69), of the contrast between generative and sociolinguistic accounts of variation address the salient questions and offer perspectives that are well worth the reading. The comparison of incidence of *the hand* versus *my/your hand* results in the determination that this is an example of free choice variation; that is certainly the case from the perspective of the grammar. Probably the relevant observation would involve the degree of formality in the speech encounter, as the data given show the highest

incidence of *the hand* in the upper middle class, new patient context. The authors are correct when they point out that teenage slang items exemplify generational distribution and do not serve as harbingers of future developments in the language. Genrealists and sociolinguists may both stake out ground in this issue. The occurrence of *waddup* in the speech of upper middle class youth whose grammars otherwise do not include copula deletion, though, leads to the third leg in this issue, Construction Grammar, as it is difficult to come up with a ‘rule’ in the grammar of that community that would produce it..

Michael Montgomery, in “Variation and Historical Linguistic” (110 – 132), shows that synchronic variation studies may be aided to a great extent by learning about the geographic and social history of the speakers (and thus the features) in question by providing examples of written communications preserved from rural 19<sup>th</sup> Century Americans. These data demonstrate that what may mistakenly be taken for an innovation is in fact a feature that migrated with the population, and perhaps was diffused in the new environment.

Given the wealth of variationist studies available for rural districts in England, Scotland, and Ireland, from whence much of the settler population in extranational English speaking regions migrated, it is possible to identify, given the geographic history of settlers in any region and therefore the route of transmission, the origin of the features found in that region. This has extensive consequences for all varieties, including AAVE, and the recent fashion of attributing to every variety of English a characteristic set of “innovations,” which are in fact either transplanted features or the result of substrate / first language influence.

Gregory R. Guy, in “Variation and Phonological Theory” (5 – 23) asserts that constraints evident in phonological variation are consistent with Phonological Theory. This would seem to follow from the well-known observation that change processes (and hence variation) utilize

extant resources of the language. One surmises, though, that G does not have English in mind when he states that assimilation processes “typically occur” word internally rather than across word boundaries (6), where counterexamples to this notion are countless and ubiquitous, e.g., *aren't you* [arntfə], *would you* [wʊdʒə], *hand grenade* [hæŋgrəneɪd]. Erratum: The abbreviation “VR” is glossed finally on p. 20, after being used several times; if the gloss is necessary for the audience of this book, it would more useful that it appear the first time.

Lisa Green, who is well known for her contributions in AAVE, in “Syntactic Variation” (24 – 44) makes observations about the variety in hopes of applying them in the framework of Optimality Theory and the Minimalist Program. It is asserted that COP can delete where it can contract; one has no argument with this, but we would like to know how that is not *phonological*, as is claimed. Certainly in “What’s up?” [wətsəp], which also has currency in the Hip-Hop community in the form of [wədəp], can that claim be sustained; we still have the variant [səp]. Meanwhile in high frequency phrases like “Where are you at?” [wɛrjæt] it is hard to account for the absence of the second / /, which would realize copula in varieties with [ ], other than as a phonological reduction, especially given the strong influence of the New York subdialect, an r-less variety (where copula would be realized by long [ɛ:] in rapid speech in the r-less variety, confirming the phonological analysis). In another sample, the analysis of *will* → ‘*ll* → *a* ([ə]?) in *You a pour me some juice?* (33, #15c) is simply not plausible. Nor is the notion, based on the apparent variation in question strategies available in AAE and to code mixing speakers, that “African American children stay in the question developmental stage much longer than their MAE-speaking peers” (34), given what is known about language acquisition.

Allan W. Bell’s “Style in Dialogue: Bakhtin and Sociolinguistic Theory” (90 – 109) is a marvelous article which explicates elements of Bahtin’s thought, for example his notion of

heteroglossia, and applies it to a theory of language variation and thereby demonstrates the extent to which Bahtin anticipates developments in sociolinguistics.

A persisting complaint about TESOL based theories of second language acquisition is that it posits essentially two types of languages in the world, English and non-English; it thus ignores the influence of substrate or first language processing, i.e., interlanguage, in its focus on methodologies for teaching English to NNS. Likewise, studies in SLA ignore the demographic (i.e., sociolinguistics) facts of the learners being studied, nor do they take into account the target variety. As Robert Bailey points out in “Second Language Acquisition: a Variationist Perspective” (133 – 144), research has tended to focus on the “underlying systematicity” of speech production (134). The data in tables (138, 139) demonstrate strong influence of interlanguage in the population surveyed, across proficiency levels, in producing or avoiding features of English that link to first language features. The article offers an excellent discussion of these issues.

In recent years sign languages have been the object of more of the attention they deserve as fully developed human languages. In “Variation and Modality” (145 – 161) Ceil Lucas provides a synopsis of variationist research applied to American Sign Language and comments on how the nature of the modality of linguistic signs in sign languages disposes them to phonological conditioning more according grammatical category than environment.

The papers in Part 2 offer an introduction to technical aspects of designing and performing fieldwork (Natalie Schilling-Estes, “Sociolinguistic Fieldwork,” 165 - 189), a discussion of quantitative analysis (Sali A. Tagliamonte, “Quantative Analysis,” 190 – 214), and a broad survey of the development and scope sociophonetics (Erik R. Thomas, Sociophonetics,” 214 – 233).

The papers in the Part 3 are a mixed and uneven bag. In “Sociolinguistic Variation and Education” (237 – 253), Carolyn Bishop Adger and Donna Christian offer a discussion of the very real problems of assessing language development among vernacular speakers and the role of sociolinguistics-based educational practices. One is reminded, though, that orthographic representation in all cases is a rough approximation and a matter of convention, and representing the vernacular in reading material generally amounts to substituting one orthography, an unconventional one, for another. If the speech variety remains disfavored and isolates its users, the methodology avails nothing. And it may lead to more problems than it solves when the instructional program eventually effects the shift to the standard written variety on the one hand, and standard orthography on the other, (depending on whether the goal of education is seen to be integrative or revolutionary).

“Lessons Learned from the Ebonics Controversy: Implications for Language Assessment” (254 – 275), by A. Fay Vaughn-Cooke, is a long rehash of the Oakland School District Ebonics debate during the middle 1990s in which great offense is taken to published commentary and even internet jokes. Even erstwhile voice of the radical left Bill Press is pilloried for his comments on the question. In essence, the article protests a central *human* social fact, the “ill-founded belief that some languages are better than others is deeply entrenched” (255). To make her points, she argues that the variety is easily understood by NNS (e.g., 259), which implies *mutual intelligibility*, while seeking NS status as a linguistic minority implies it is somehow essentially different from the other so-called nonstandard dialects with which it shares features. In the end, the question boils down to race, which question is essentially political, not linguistic.

Angela E. Rickford and John R. Rickford, in “Variation, Versatility, and Contrastive Analysis in the Classroom” (276 – 296) make the common sense suggestion that contrastive analysis be utilized as a tool to aid speakers of nonstandard varieties in gaining competence in the standard English of their locale. Mitigating the effectiveness of such a plan, though, is the reality that the degree of linguistics knowledge, i.e., phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, prosodics, along with discourse analysis and the sociology of language, far exceeds that which can realistically be injected into curricula for teachers in public school systems; experience teaches us that even those trained for teaching ESL and ELD typically lack the requisite preparation.

It is somewhat ironic that in Ida J. Stockman, “Examining Language Acquisition by African American Children” (297 – 317), the discussion of the social sciences vis-à-vis the physical sciences and the need for the inclusion of socio-political factors does not arrive at the observation that it was principles of *social Darwinism* that were responsible for the deficit perceptions and concomitant stigmatism of the culture of Africans, and by association, African Americans and the speech varieties associated with them. Finding guilty of racism earlier generations of researchers, and for that matter, funding agencies who not only had funded her research in the past but did so subsequently, seems to advance understanding little, and this reader, for one, regrets the time spent conscientiously reading these pages.

In “Language and the Law” (318 – 337), Ronald R. Butters discusses cases and reviews central issues in forensic linguistics, a field with increasing influence in tort and criminal law. Linguists are called to offer expert testimony in cases ranging from copyright and trademark law to suspect identification, yet it is a field which has enjoyed only limited understanding and acceptance among practitioners of law.

In “Attitudes toward Variation and Ear-Witness Testimony” (338 – 348), John Baugh. Discusses cases and issues in linguistic profiling. Central to these problems is the question of what the speech features involved actually index. The association of specific linguistic features with a geographical region has important consequences for suspect identification or elimination and thus can be a valuable tool. One recalls, though, that during the famous murder trial of Orenthal James Simpson, when a witness testified that the voice he heard calling out angrily on the night and place in question sounded “African American” (this evidence would have had the force of contradicting defense assertions that Simpson was on the way to the airport at the time of the crimes), the evidence did not come in because the judge sustained the defense’s objection, “That’s racist, judge!” We clearly have a long way to go.

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