

Off the cuff and from the heart: The inside story of variationist sociolinguistics

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I've spent the last four years interviewing famous sociolinguists and writing a book about the history of variationist sociolinguistics (VSLX). Many people ask me why I have done this.

It is not uncommon for the history of a discipline to be documented in a monograph or edited volume. Take, for example, *Inside the Economist's Mind* (Samuelson & Barnette, 2006) or *The Early Days of Sociolinguistics*, which is intended to document the history of the field (Pauston & Tucker, 1997). The latter is a compendium of thirty-six articles written by leading researchers, including Fishman, Gumperz, Ferguson, Hymes, etc. However, the volume does not cover the meteoric rise of 'Labovian' sociolinguistics. Moreover, although the editors claim to offer "an insider's perspective on the issues", the result is really a collection of learned papers, which are interesting but relatively intellectual and formal. A recent book devoted entirely to the work of William Labov (Gordon, 2013) is also written in a scholastic style. Even the new *Lives in Linguistics* project that videotapes linguists is quite stilted and does not immediately captivate the imagination.¹ My book is different. It is written like a novel, and it begins like this:

William Labov stopped being an industrial chemist in 1960. He went back to school, to a graduate program in New York City at Columbia University. He was thirty-three. Bill had been working in the world of industry making dyes for a myriad of different clients. The work was laboratory based, but it also involved interacting with all kinds of people from factory workers to businessmen. Bill had a knack for listening. He discovered that you can learn a great deal about people when you notice how they talk. Indeed, he observed something quite intriguing — people sometimes speak one way and sometimes another. Even more curious is that the same person in the same conversation can pronounce a word differently from one time to the next. Often Bill is quizzically pondering why people are doing this rather than attending to what they are saying.

My book not intended as a learned work, but rather a true 'inside story' that taps the wellspring of thoughts of the people who built VSLX. To my knowledge, no one has ever written an account of any field in this way – certainly not VSLX. No history I know of has been written using the reminiscences of the major players of the field as the information base for reconstructing its evolution and development.

VSLX is approximately 50 years old, making it a relatively new discipline within linguistics and one that has undergone a virtual revolution in the course of its short history — from inception to full-blown development. Yet many people have no idea how it came to be or why. Perhaps people think it has always existed, but that's not the case. To tell the story, my book is interspersed with four hundred choice quotes taken directly from the conversations. In the

¹ <http://linguistica.uchicago.edu/lives/>

book, they are text; but on the companion website at Wiley-Blackwell, readers will be able to actually listen to the voices.

I began the interviews in September 2010, driven by what I can only describe as an overwhelming desire to talk to the founders of my discipline. The book itself describes the beginning of it all:

So, I wrote to Peter Trudgill and I said, "Can I come and visit you?" Peter said, "Sure." So, I booked a flight to England and went to Norwich. Peter met me on the platform at the train station. I remember the huge smile on his face as he stood there waiting for me to notice him. Peter, his wife Jean Hannah and I spent a couple of days together wandering around the markets, pubs and streets of Norwich. We also drank wine and did a lot of talking and reminiscing. Those few days kicked off the adventure of a lifetime.

'Interviews' are actually a misnomer; the conversations are vivid life stories filled with the same type of language interactions that can be found in the sociolinguistic fieldwork I've been doing throughout my career. The conversations are between one and four hours long. They represent over 150 hours of material, making this an extraordinary archive of information.

The scholars I talked to are first- and second-generation practitioners, with William Labov and his contemporaries being the first and their students the second. I focused on individuals who had published in major journals of the field (e.g. *Language Variation and Change* or *Journal of Sociolinguistics*) and who were regular attendees of the major annual VSLX conference, NWAV (New Ways of Analyzing Variation). At first, I referred to the first-generation scholars as 'the founders', but each interviewee denied being such a thing!

I was just doing something that was fun and interesting and meaningful to me. (Ralph Fasold, Georgetown University)

To round out my discussion, I made sure to include historical linguists, phoneticians, syntacticians, discourse analysts, and creolists who had all worked in the variationist paradigm. Consider this explanation:

What I am is a variationist and a syntactician, and the methods that have been developed for sociolinguistics, including Varbrul,² are perfect for any kind of variation as long as you can define the kind of variation that you're looking at. (Susan Pintzuk, University of York, UK)

VSLX arose from a particular history at a particular time and place – and through the vision and innovation of a key set of individuals who embraced the idea of language having a 'social life' and inherent variable structure. Moreover, they discovered something quite extraordinary:

² 'Varbrul' is one of the names for the variable rule program (Sankoff, 1988).

What people thought was chaos turned out to be regular. (William Labov, University of Pennsylvania)

A pivotal event that jump-started variationist sociolinguistics as a discipline was the first NWAV conference, held at Georgetown University in October 1972. It set in motion a wave of intense, groundbreaking research. Whose idea was it? Who was there? Why did it begin when it did?

It was C-J³'s idea. And it was an acronym – first of all for 'New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English'. From the beginning, we were embarrassed by English, you know because it shouldn't be only about English. We tried New Ways of Analyzing Variation Everywhere. That sounded a little stupid so finally the 'e' got lopped off. (Ralph Fasold, Georgetown University)

NWAV was the beginning of a new way of thinking about language: variation was not aberrant or unsystematic, but part of the very fabric of the grammar. In variation, the first sociolinguists saw the means to embrace difference, to dismiss intolerance. In the ability to connect linguistic, social, historical and cultural life, they saw a way to affect societal change.

The conversations I recorded are quite informal, with many personal narratives. Topics include: research; fieldwork and teaching experiences; challenges and joys; trials and tribulations. I am especially gratified by the many discussions about people's philosophy of life in relation to their academic discipline, and by their candid answers to my many curious questions about why they liked studying language variation:

It's very rich and surprising. It's got a lot of surprises in it. You know, if you're not a linguist, you don't know this stuff is so highly structured, and you know, has its own life. (David Sankoff, Canada Research Chair in Mathematics, University of Ottawa)

In many cases, the sociolinguists explain things in their own words – making this book also an accessible introduction to many of the key concepts and theoretical ideas that make up the foundation of the field. For instance, many people struggle to understand Tony Kroch's Constant Rate Effect. In this excerpt, Tony explains it:

So there's a parametric setting. You either have verb raising or you don't. Okay, that defines a grammar, okay. So, now imagine that there's a certain period when both grammars exist and people are basically diglossic,⁴ right? They know both grammars and they use both and they're code-switching between the two. And what happens over time is that one of the grammars wins out over the other. (Anthony Kroch, University of Pennsylvania)

³ C-J Bailey, the author of *Variation and Linguistic Theory* (Bailey, 1973).

⁴ Diglossia refers to a situation in which two dialects or closely-related languages are used interchangeably in a single speech community.

Together, these types of snippets from forty-three sociolinguists tell the story of the field. However, although hours and hours of conversation are comprehensive, they are not easily digested. One of my biggest challenges was to figure out which were the most important bits and how to best assemble them. I began by choosing between five and fifteen quotes from each interview that struck me as interesting and relevant. I also organized the book in advance according to the main themes that had arisen in the interviews. For example, Chapter 1 tells the story of how variationist sociolinguistics came into being. Chapter 5 is about fieldwork. Chapter 6 covers the quantitative paradigm and the creation of the variable rule program, the key analytic tool of the field. In the appendix, I even provide a VSLX family tree of academic lineage.

A compelling attribute of variationist sociolinguistics as a field is that it is inextricable from society and from life in general. Linguistic variation matters. Everyone judges others by the way they speak. For example, when Peter Trudgill embraced Labov's methodology and went into the streets of his home town, Norwich, what he found horrified him.

You know, there's a very widespread assumption that the way they spoke was not right and not good and sort of full of self-denigration about the way they spoke English, and being horrified by that and I wanted to do something about that. (Peter Trudgill, University of Agder)

The ideas at the core of VSLX underwent considerable expansion and revision from the beginning of the 1960s to the present day. Penny Eckert and Lesley Milroy were leaders in the retreat from the foundational categories of age, sex, and social class. Gillian Sankoff and Jenny Cheshire extended the variationist research on vowels and chain-shifts into syntax and discourse-pragmatics. Jim Milroy and Anthony Warner incorporated historical linguistics. Roger Shuy, Dennis Preston, and Peter Trudgill brought in dialectology. Don Winford and John Singler brought pidgins and creoles into the picture. Indeed, one of the unique qualities of VSLX work is that it brings together diachrony and synchrony, regional dialects and language-contact. Indeed, 'sociolinguistics' is probably a misnomer. In reality, variationist approaches as a methodology permit the analysis of all types of linguistic phenomena.

Following the establishment of variationist sociolinguistics, the 'new wave' was meant as a paradigm-shift toward an empirically-based, socially sensitive form of linguistics. Then additional waves started rolling in. In my interviews, Penny Eckert was the sociolinguist who pointed out the sequential evolution of the field – from social categories to social meaning, and then to the construction of identity through language:

Penny and her students continue to question VSLX research that focuses on language behaviour as the result of a person's age, sex, social class, etc. Instead, they focus on what speakers do with variants that makes them have particular meanings in context – this is called 'speaker agency' (Eckert, 2000). When the research lens focuses on the individual, variants that are typically associated with macro-level attributes suddenly take on a whole new meaning. Imagine (in 2015) a grandmother saying, "That's sick!" or a gay hairdresser saying "I'm like, 'super happy'!" or a white teenager saying, "Ima be".

There is instantly a recognizable add-on interpretation. If you take meaning seriously, this requires explanation.

The later chapters of the book complement the discussion by looking forwards. From the standpoint of where we are now, what can we do with what we've discovered? For many, the answer to this question begins and ends with variation itself:

"I think our ability to identify things like identities at whatever level – regional identity, sexual identity, community of practice identity – and the ramifications of that for the kinds of linguistic delivery and comprehension that people end up doing is so sensitive to change that we'll always be in the forefront." (Dennis Preston, University of Oregon)

Another question people often ask me is: who will read this book? First, sociolinguists will. VSLX is a prominent and growing area of linguistics. A remarkable number of universities in the world teach sociolinguistics at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Universities that offer sociolinguistics virtually always offer an introductory course in the field, and while its focus may be something else – pidgins and creoles, bilingualism, dialectology – it typically also touches on the 'Labovian' approach to sociolinguistics, i.e. VSLX. The study of linguistic variation is relevant across the board. Thus, this book will provide an informative complement to every course in sociolinguistics. It will encapsulate sociolinguistics as told by the people who essentially 'wrote the book'.

More generally, this book is suitable for sociolinguists and students of sociolinguistics who are attracted to the discipline because they like hands-on, practical, real-world materials. This book embraces this penchant for the real 'grassroots' and is written as creative non-fiction. It contains minimal in-group terminology; any jargon present in the interview selections is explained in the text or in footnotes. The book is meant to be the human story of an academic field. For these reasons, the book may appeal to a wide array of educated people who are interested in language, the history of science, or historical non-fiction in general. Consider this vignette in the book taken from Greg Guy's life story:

Greg's earliest memory is walking with his mother in Philadelphia and noticing another family with several children and two parents. They are all talking together and Greg watches them curiously. He asks his mother, "Why can't I understand them?" Greg's mom says, "They're speaking another language." Another language? Up to that point Greg had not realized there was more than one. Greg figures this was the beginning of his fascination with language. Either that or watching Zorro.

The combined recollections of the sociolinguists create a composite picture of not only an academic discipline but also the human lives behind it. All the textbooks in the world cannot tell students about the actual people behind the research, how they worked together, and what they were thinking – unless they have asked these questions of the people themselves and heard about their *modus operandi*.

I've spent much less time sort of taking stock and getting it put together than I have pursuing new stuff, taking new trails. I've never in my life sat down and wondered what I should work on next. (J.K. Chambers, University of Toronto)

I have had the privilege of asking the questions and hearing the answers. Sociolinguistics textbooks never record the context, or the spirit, or the stories of how it all began. Most students of sociolinguistics probably wonder what people like Bill Labov or Peter Trudgill are really like and what makes them so utterly fascinated by linguistic variation. This book is the next best thing to sitting at the knee of the master sociolinguists. Out of the raw materials of memories, stories and descriptions as recounted in relaxed sociolinguistic interviews between colleagues, a remarkable story emerges.

You have to be able to put together the insights of various people to see how they fit together; it's like a jigsaw puzzle. (William Labov, University of Pennsylvania)

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An authentic, inside story about the origins of Sociolinguistics as Language Variation and Change, recording the context and spirit of sociolinguistics. Gives students access to the views on language variation of major sociolinguists such as Bill Labov and Peter Trudgill. Offers a human story of an academic field, and is written in the style of a novel, offering complete accessibility with minimal in-group terminology. Provides a timely audio archive of the reminiscences of the major Sociolinguists, including Labov, Fasold, Milroy, Trudgill, and Wolfram, with a companion website featuring 400 ...

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An authentic, inside story about the origins of Sociolinguistics as Language Variation and Change, Making Waves tells the human story of an academic field based on one-to-one interviews with 43 of the most famous scholars in Variationist Sociolinguistics. Explanations of concepts, ideas, good practice and sage advice come directly from the progenitors of the discipline. An authentic, inside story about the origins of Sociolinguistics as Language Variation and Change, recording the context and spirit of sociolinguistics Gives students access to the views on language variation of major socioling...