Making Waves
The Story of Variationist Sociolinguistics

Sali A. Tagliamonte

WILEY Blackwell
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For
Shana Poplack
Thank you
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Please visit the companion website at www.wiley.com/go/tagliamonte/makingwaves to hear sound clips of the interview quotes throughout the book.
This book recounts the history and development of a prominent area of Sociolinguistics, the area of the discipline that has come to be referred to as Variationist Sociolinguistics. How did it come to be?

In the preface of my synthesizing textbook *Variationist Sociolinguistics: Change, Observation, Interpretation* (Tagliamonte, 2012) Peter Trudgill, the General Editor of the series Language in Society, writes: “I don’t know what Sali was doing in October 1972, but she was certainly not nearly old enough to be at the meeting.” The meeting Peter is referring to is the first meeting of New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English, the conference that has come to be known as NWAV 1. Where was I in October 1972? I was probably visiting my grandparents in Swords, a small town in Muskoka, Ontario, Canada. It is an Alice Munro kind of place where migrants from all over the British Isles settled in the farmlands of Southern Ontario. As a child, it was my favorite place in the world and it is the place where I first realized I was a sociolinguist, although I did not know that then.

Canadian Thanksgiving takes place on the second weekend of October, around the time of the NWAV meeting, just as the leaves are in full color, yellow, orange, and red. It is a time of family gatherings and in my family there were innumerable cousins, second cousins, great aunts and uncles, and relatives aplenty. I used to eavesdrop at the Swords General Store, Post Office, and Gas Bar, listening to the peculiar ways the people coming in and out were speaking. I marveled at the way people spoke and puzzled over their expressions. I did not know that a field of intellectual inquiry was dawning that would enrich my adult life and take me down a long path of research into Language Variation and Change. The key concepts, methods, and explanations of this discipline would eventually answer many of my questions about the oddities of language I overhead at my grandparents’ country store.

NWAV 1 in October 1972 was a pivotal event. It inaugurated an approach to language that focused on variation and change and set in motion waves of intense, groundbreaking research in the study of language and its relationship to society. Whose idea was it? Who was at that first meeting in October 1972? Why did it begin then?

Sociolinguistics more broadly is not much more than 50 years old itself, 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. Yet
most people in the world at large do not know what Sociolinguistics is and even if they do, they may have no idea how steeped in Sociolinguistics life in general happens to be. Those who notice the incredible changing kaleidoscope of language may be natural sociolinguists without even knowing it. Sociolinguistics pervades the human world. You might think, therefore, that the study of the language/society interface has a long history, but that is not the case. Sociolinguistics arose from a particular time and place and cultural climate in the United States in the post-World War II decades. Indeed, the dawn of Variationist Sociolinguistics can be pinpointed to a very specific time and place: 1969–1978. It comes down to a series of chance meetings, mutual interests and – according to many of the early researchers – serendipity. It must be said, however, that it could only have happened 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.

I have been privileged to know many sociolinguists, professionally and often personally, over the course of my career. In the summer of 2012 as I was finishing the first draft of my book *Variationist Sociolinguistics: Change, Observation, Interpretation*, I began to fantasize about asking the most famous people in the field questions about how they had gotten into Sociolinguistics, why they had done the research they did, and how it had all happened. I thought I might ask people like Bill Labov, Peter Trudgill, Walt Wolfram, and Gillian Sankoff for their advice. Suddenly, it came to me in a flash, “I am a sociolinguist. Why don’t I just interview them?” This is my usual approach to fieldwork in the communities I have studied. Why not simply apply the same method to my own intellectual community? The next question was how to begin? At the time, I had never been to Norwich, the site of the first sociolinguistic study in the United Kingdom. It was a kind of “Mecca” to me. So I wrote to Peter Trudgill, who did the original Norwich study and who lives in Norwich, 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.

Between September 2012 and January 2014, I sought out famous sociolinguists wherever I could find them, in the big cities of the United States (New York, Philadelphia, Portland), and Canada (Montreal, Toronto), often in places where the NWAV conferences were held. Over that period one person or another would receive an email from me entitled “A Sociolinguistic Favor” and a request for a get together. Whenever I traveled to locations around the world – England, Germany, Australia – I packed my trusty audio-recorder and lavalier microphone and employed my much beloved research tool, the “Sociolinguistic Interview.” The twist from my usual research modus operandi, however, is that my teachers, mentors, colleagues, and in many cases friends – all major contributors to Variationist Sociolinguistics – were my research subjects. The series of interviews, which I will call the Corpus of Sociolinguists, comprises over 150 hours of in-depth, candid discussions (see list of interviewees in Appendix A). The story in this book touches
on the highlights that struck me as relevant, interesting, and that cohered across
time. It also gives just about everyone a chance to speak.

All of the interviews bring to the fore each individual’s personal narrative about
their journey into Variationist Sociolinguistics, their fieldwork, research, and teach-
ing experiences. A strong component of these conversations is also each person’s
philosophy of life in relationship to their discipline: facts but also experience and
stories. So, this book is written as a novel interspersed with direct quotes from the
interviews that are set apart from the main storyline in italics. When the quotes
contain alternations between myself (i.e., Sali) and the sociolinguists (e.g., Bill),
these are indicated by first names followed by a colon. The quotes in the book have
been edited for readability (at everyone’s express insistence) but not otherwise sub-
jected to copy-editing; however, the audio clips found on the Wiley-Blackwell web-
site for this book are, of course, verbatim.1 The audio transcripts are numbered
sequentially throughout the book by name of interviewee; these numbers corre-
spend with the audio clips listed on the website.

The story of Sociolinguistics as language variation and change recounted in this
book comes from the inside. I have crafted the story by weaving together the remi-
niscences as a rather meandering tale, but one that I hope does justice to the intel-
lectual substance of the field. The stories and people are not fictitious. They are
real. I have not used pseudonyms; I have not anonymized names or places. The
people, events and places are events that happened. I feel tremendously privileged
to have been given these glimpses into a field of intellectual inquiry and I have
forever imprinted in my mind the cornucopia of insights from these “movers
and shakers.”

Scholars who teach Sociolinguistics have recently noticed that undergraduates,
in particular, do not read the classic texts of the field, but instead rely on recent
compilations, handbooks, and other digests of earlier material. The roots of the
field and its unique inception are slipping away just when the foundations must be
firm enough to support the recent, burgeoning, expansion – for some people, frag-
mentation – of the field. This is why I have highlighted certain discoveries and
explanations straight from the proverbial “horse’s mouth.”

When my research for this book began, I used the word “founders” to describe
my target group. I restricted myself to what I will refer to as first and second gen-
eration sociolinguists, hoping to catch the major players in the initial phase of the
field. My definition of first generation comprises Labov and his contemporaries;
the second generation is the first generation’s students (more or less). Why did I do
this? I simply had to stop somewhere.

The individuals that I deemed to be the forefathers and foremothers did not nec-
essarily think of themselves in this way. After I contacted Walt Wolfram, he appar-
ently said to Ralph Fasold, “You know, we were just doing our work. We weren’t
founding shit!” As will become apparent, people who originate ideas have no idea
they are doing it when they’re doing it.

Each interview was structured according to a set of four or five core questions,
as in:

1 How did you get into Sociolinguistics?
2 Tell me a bit about your research on x, y, z.
3 What was it like doing fieldwork?
4 Why do you like variation?
5 What do you advise students for the future?

The comfortable social circumstances and open-ended nature of the discussions permitted considerable personal reflection. Many anecdotes and memories arose naturally from our conversations. According to best practice, I let the interviewee lead the topics of discussion wherever he or she wished, with minimal direction on my part, although I must admit to some cautious steering. This strategy has led to a singular body of materials about the dawn and development of the field.

Abraham Lincoln, well known as a magnificent speaker, refused to make public speeches unless he was given the opportunity to write them out first. He believed that people say the wrong thing when they simply extemporize. I disagree. The words and stories I recorded are so much more extraordinary than premeditated writing. They are infused with passion and the many human quirks of manner and expression that are the very fodder of the field itself.

What I am aiming to capture in this book is the essence of Variationist Sociolinguistics, to tap the socially embedded community of the field, to expose its linguistic insights but also its social motivations, perhaps even the private settings of its ideas and the meaning it holds for its practitioners.

William Labov 1
If you’re dealing with the social indexical meaning of something, yes. Great quotations from people, portraits of their lives and the way in which their language distinguishes them, yes, that would be good.

Note

1. Discourse markers have been left in the quotes. Reformations, restarts, and other breaks in the phrase structure are indicated by hyphens.
1

Where It Begins

“What people thought was chaos turned out to be regular.”

William Labov

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 33. 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.

Language has many different parts and levels – sound, word, sentence, expression – and it all can vary. In the course of conversation one person might say, “I came from town this morning,” whereas another might say “I come from town this mornin’.” Now, notice the different ways of speaking. The verb come is pronounced as came one time and come the next. Words with final ing can be pronounced at the back of the mouth, ing or at the front of the mouth, in. These alternations are called linguistic variables. A linguistic variable in its most basic definition is two or more ways of saying the same thing (Labov, 1964: 166). Pronunciations can vary, you say po-tay-to; I say pot-ta-to (phonology). Words can vary, potato, tatter, teeter, tatti (lexis). Parts of words can vary, I say; I says (morphology). Word order can vary, I do not know; I know not (syntax). Even the funny little words that most people think don’t mean anything vary, you know, well, gosh, by golly, and stuff like that. In Variationist Sociolinguistics (VSLX) all this difference is called “inherent variation” because it is an alternation of different forms (variation) and yet it is a core attribute of language (inherent).