

When language met society: sociolinguistics in the twenty-first century

Bayley, R., Cameron, R. and Lucas, C. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp 884. Hardback, £95, ISBN 9780199744084

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Languages, like their speakers, are socially situated. They exist in specific contexts, which they help shape and which, in turn, are shaped by them. Looking at the ways in which these interactions occur can tell us a lot about language users as well as languages (and language) themselves. Broadly speaking, it is this social aspect of language that is the object of study of sociolinguistics. I may be biased (after all, it was after being exposed to Cheshire's (2009) study of language use by a group of adolescents in Reading, England, that I decided to choose it as a field of study), but it is indeed a fascinating branch of linguistics, for it has the potential to appeal to those with an interest in language – either as an entity *per se* or as an instrument – but also to those who are more attracted by the sociological implications of it.

There are currently several introductory texts on sociolinguistics on the market. Many, such as Wardaugh (2009) are indeed excellent and have now gone through several editions. Although the volume under review is not, strictly speaking, an *introduction* to sociolinguistics, it can – at least in this reviewer's opinion, introduce readers to this fascinating field, with sections on the history of sociolinguistic studies, as well as to its current state. For this reason, this *handbook* has a potentially vast readership: undergraduate and graduate students of language(s) and linguistics, language and sociology scholars, and – more generally – anyone with an interest in how language and society influence each other.

As the volume's editors point out (p. 1), from its inception in the 1960s sociolinguistics has developed enormously; what has expanded is not only the depth of its analysis but, crucially, also its breadth. There is therefore, the editors argue, 'a need for a handbook that will survey the main areas of the field, point out

the lacunae in [the] existing knowledge base, and provide directions for future research' (p. 1). The stated principles that, in the editors' words (p. 2), make this volume different from the existing ones are: (1) its emphasis on new methodological developments; (2) the inclusion of chapters on sociolinguistic developments in areas of the world relatively neglected in the major journals; (3) a balance between contributions from English contexts, as well as bi- and multilingual ones; (4) substantial material on the sociolinguistics of sign language.

The handbook is divided into six parts, which are grouped under the following headings: (i) disciplinary perspectives; (ii) methodology and approaches; (iii) bilingualism and language contact; (iv) variation; (v) language policy, language ideology, and language attitudes; (vi) sociolinguistics, the professions, and the public interest.

Part one opens with Robert Bayley's contribution on variationist sociolinguistics. This is an excellent introduction to the history of the sociological study of language variation, whose central idea was (and still is) that the variation that occurs in language is not random. Bayley provides a useful overview of the pioneering studies in the field. As well as including 'classics', such as Labov's work on variation in New York City from the sixties, he also introduces the reader to earlier work conducted in the early twentieth century and more recent research. This briefly but successfully illustrates how both the object and methodology of variationist sociolinguistics has evolved over time. In the remainder of this section, the other contributors explain how different disciplinary orientations gave rise to differences in focus and methodologies but can be seen as different strands that constitute the same rope (the 'rope' being the study of variation in language and the reasons



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behind it). Or, to use a different metaphor, how the different streams constituted by the various disciplinary orientations are all tributaries to the same river.

Thus Shibamoto-Smith and Chand (p. 31) present the developments of linguistic anthropology and illustrate how this relates to sociolinguistics. The use of ethnographic fieldwork, for example, is one of the fruits of this meeting of disciplines. McCall (p. 48) clearly tells the story of the sociology, as a field that developed in the nineteenth century, and the study of language, in a chapter that will assist sociologists and (socio)linguists to better appreciate each other's intellectual trajectories. Reisigl (p. 67) and Seedhouse (p. 91) introduce the reader to relative newcomers among the linguistic disciplines: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Conversation Analysis (CA) respectively. These two sections are very clear introductions to focuses and methodologies whose impact is felt well beyond linguistics. Watson Greco and Bronson (p. 111), Loudermilk (p. 132), and Mallinson and Kendall (p. 153) present the disciplinary perspectives of those coming from, respectively, Language Socialization, psycholinguistics, and interdisciplinary perspectives. Sociolinguistics, it can be argued, has always been an eminently interdisciplinary field and these sections help the reader to appreciate how this has been, and should be, so.

Part two (methodologies and approaches) opens with an essay by Walker and Meyerhoff (p. 175) on what we might term the 'division of labour' between society, on one side, and the individual on the other as the 'owners' of language and, therefore language change. The concrete examples used make this chapter eminently readable. Gookens (p. 195) illustrates some of the experimental methods for measuring and assessing the mutual intelligibility of closely related language varieties. Gorman and Johnson (p. 214) clearly explain the functioning and rationale behind a much used tool of sociolinguistics: quantitative analysis. In the process, they demystify it, something that the arithmophobic among us will certainly appreciate and thank them for. The other important tool used by sociolinguists is qualitative analysis which, with clear, concrete examples Langman tackles in his section (p. 261). Gillian Sankoff, a true giant of sociolinguistic research, masterfully illustrates how longitudinal studies illuminate issues such as, among others, change, and post-L1 acquisition in speakers' grammars. The last essay in this section, by Lucas (p. 280) discusses methods for studying sign languages. As noted in more detail later, one of the strengths of this handbook is the full inclusion of, and full attention to, sign languages. Importantly, Lucas says that the dissemination of research on sign language 'has to do with giving back to the community' (p. 294). This is a very important

point, which adds an unavoidable ethical dimension to the work that sociolinguists do.

Part three addresses issues of bilingualism and language contact. Despite the amount of attention that these areas have been receiving, they never stop to fascinate. The topics treated under these headings will prove of great interest not only to sociolinguists but, crucially, also to educators in any subject, especially those whose student body is increasingly multicultural, as is the case in the UK. Webb (p. 301) deals with pidgins and creoles; Potowsky (p. 321) with language maintenance and shift. Readers of this journal might find Howard *et al.*'s (p. 340) essay on sociolinguistics and L2 acquisition particularly interesting. As well as highlighting existing research, their section suggests possible avenues of investigation that any L2 teacher might wish to pursue. Codeswitching is another fascinating topic potentially relevant for teachers, and that's the topic of Wei's essay (p. 360). Quinto-Pozos and Adam (p. 379) conclude this section with a fascinating and informative essay on sign language contact.

Part four addresses what many would consider the 'core business' of sociolinguistic research: variation. Baranowski (p. 403) discusses sociophonetics, an area that has risen to prominence in recent years. The links between phonology and sociolinguistics are addressed by Nagy (p. 425), while King (p. 445) deals with morphosyntactic variation and Cameron and Schwenker (p. 464) explore the connections between pragmatics and variationist sociolinguistics. The fascinating topic of language variation and change is discussed by D'Arcy, in an essay which manages to be at once succinct and remarkably clear. Once again, the closing essay of this section is devoted to sign language. Schembri and Johnston (p. 506) provide a clear overview of research conducted in the past few decades on sociolinguistic variation in deaf communities and suggest avenues of future research, especially in view of the influx of immigrant communities.

In part five, what might be called 'macro factors' in the sociology of language – language policy, language ideology, and language attitudes – are addressed. Although these factors are clearly *extra* linguistic, they have an immense bearing on the life of languages and, crucially, on their speakers. In an increasingly globalised world, where the role of English as *lingua franca* shows no signs of abating, the first two essays by Ricento (p. 525) and Kamwangamalu (p. 545) discuss the role of language policy, ideology and attitudes and the role of English and ideologies in Africa respectively. Kamwangamalu's contribution is to be particularly welcomed for the non-Western perspective it introduces. The same can be said of Zhang's essay (p. 563) on language policy and ideology in Greater China, Chan's (p. 587) treatment of the situation in

South Asia, and Hamel's (p. 609) discussion of the same issues within the Latin American context. Of course Europe is not absent from the discussion: Grin (p. 629) addresses the key issues of language policy, ideology, and attitudes in Western Europe and Pavlenko (p. 651) provides a fascinating insight into language management in Russia and the post-Soviet countries. As expected, the concluding essay, by Hill (p. 680) provides a rigorous and extremely informative overview on language ideologies, policy and attitudes toward signed languages. Especially in view of recent and ongoing debates on the status of sign language in places like Italy, this essay is something that anyone interested in the topic should be familiar with.

Part six, the concluding one, is outward-looking, and if one were ever confronted with questions such as: 'and now that you know all this, what?' she or he could easily refer the questioner to this section on sociolinguistics, the profession, and the public interest. Matoesian (p. 701) opens it with a fascinating discussion on language and law. Frankel (p. 720) discusses how sociolinguistic knowledge can be used to effect a change of culture with an essay that bears the intriguing title: 'Our stories, ourselves: can the culture of a large medical school be changed without open heart surgery?' The essay on sign language, in this section, is by Metzger and Roy (p. 735) who, interestingly, shed light on the sociolinguistics of signed language interpreting. Wolfram (p. 757) discusses the challenges and opportunities of community-based sociolinguistic research which – as he rightly reminds us – 'is at the core of sociolinguistics' (p. 754). The important, and often debated issue, of linguistic and ecological diversity is aptly addressed by Romaine (p. 773), one of

the most prominent contemporary sociolinguists. Her contribution is logically followed by Grenoble's (p. 792) on language revitalisation. Finally, the concluding essay, by Charity Hudley (p. 813) is a timely examination of the role of activism in sociolinguistics, which also looks to the future.

The *Handbook* is an excellent volume, with content that nobody with an interest in the field can afford to ignore. Its structure is comprehensive and innovative, especially in the way it places sociolinguistic research in its historical context but also enables readers to make connections with the many disciplines that have a bearing upon it and to envisage future directions of enquiry. It is a what-how-to-why-and-where-do-we-go-from-here kind of volume which is both erudite and accessible. The breadth, as well as the depth, of what it covers makes it suitable, as noted earlier, for various audiences. My favourite feature of the handbook is its attention to signed languages. Although previous works, such as Mesthrie (2011) addressed the topic, none – to the best of my knowledge – does this so consistently and to the same extent. This handbook will, I believe, remain relevant for years to come and both the editors and Oxford University Press should be applauded for the endeavour.

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