



***Compass Interdisciplinary  
Virtual Conference***  
***-19-30 Oct 2009-***

**Richard Cameron**  
**(University of Illinois at Chicago)**

**COMMENTARY ON:**

**Sociolinguistics and Sociology: Current Directions, Future Partnerships**

Christine Mallinson  
University of Maryland, Baltimore County

---

Christine Mallinson has written a very useful article for those of us who think about sociolinguistics. What is it that we do and how can we improve this by getting involved in the research of other disciplines? In her case, this would include Sociology. I agree. Who would disagree? Indeed, Sociology, more than Anthropology, has influenced my research. I have already heeded her tips to go to the journal of Teaching Sociology and various websites. Thanks! Her basic message is this: Interdisciplinarity is good practice and may be achieved if we talk to or about one another in classrooms and conferences on topics of mutual interest like social stratification, educational inequality, and the circumstances of urbanity vs. rurality. Yet, there is the important caveat. In order to do interdisciplinary work, one must be informed of “disciplinary work” (pg. 2).

What ‘disciplinary work’ is Sociolinguistics? Though Mallinson focuses on Variationist Sociolinguistics, sociolinguistics is not one discipline. I have written elsewhere (Cameron 2007) that it is a growing multilingual collection of research methodologies with distinct linguistic objects, dissimilar agendas, and differing points of origin. Consider, for instance, the Ethnography of Speaking or Variationist Sociolinguistics or the Sociology of Language or Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) or Conversation Analysis (CA) or Linguistic Anthropology or Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS). I will suggest that some of these are of interest to sociologists simply because they originated within sociology departments where researchers pursued alternative ways of doing sociology in response to, say, Durkheim or Parsons.

Conference website: <http://compassconference.wordpress.com>

Ethnomethodology, CA, CDA, and IS are also rooted in issues prefigured in the early sociology of Simmel (Wolff. 1950:9-10) who wrote of what he termed, "sociation" or "kinds of interaction .... they alone produce society as we know it." In Collins' (1994) readable *Four Sociological Traditions* (Oxford University Press), one of the four is what he calls the Microinteractionist Tradition of Goffman, Garfinkel, Sacks, and Fairclough. In these cases, I would suggest that they are not really interested in language as a variationist would be. None study language change. They are interested in action, a key aspect of Weber's early definition (can't recall where) of sociology as "the comprehensive science of human action."

Variationist Sociolinguistics originated in a Linguistics department, at least that was where Bill Labov did his Ph.D. Ethnography of Speaking originated in the hands of anthropologists. Consider Hymes. Also consider that Penny Eckert worked in the Anthropology Department at the University of Michigan for 12 years. I might also suggest that Mallinson's interest in interdisciplinarity may partly be a function of having studied in an English Department where interdisciplinarity is important for cultural studies. Of course, working with Walt Wolfram helps as well. We are creatures of context and contact.

So, why don't sociologists pay attention to sociolinguistic findings or why don't sociolinguists incorporate more current research findings from sociology into their work? I am not actually sure that this is the case. Indeed, sociologists pay attention to their CA colleagues, though, in my experience, I find that privately they can be quite dismissive of them. With respect to Variationist Sociolinguistics, Mallinson is right. Yet, it is not only variationist work that is ignored. In an excellent article on identity – Brekhus, W. 2008. [Trends in the qualitative study of social identities](#). *Sociology Compass*. 2/3:1059-1078 – aside from brief reference to markedness in Trubetzkoy's work, no linguists are cited, despite the research of Bucholtz, M. & K. Hall. 2005. Identity and interaction: a sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse Studies*. 7: 585-614.

Mallinson's initial explanation makes sense. We are busy. It is difficult enough to find time to keep up with our own "disciplinary work" to then take on that of another. I will add a different, less optimistic answer. Since I first came to the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1994, I have attempted to initiate collaboration with individuals from anthropology, computer science, criminal justice, education, medicine, philosophy, psychology, and, yes, sociology. I have failed repeatedly. This may simply be the nature of my university or my own personal limitations. But, I believe that there two basic reasons for my failures. First, language is invisible if you are not trained to

look for it as a linguist is. Did I really write this out loud? Yes! Second, the hold of research traditions that characterize “disciplinary work” is very strong. Indeed, sometimes research within a field may involve contrasting the agenda and ‘facts’ of that field with those of others in order to establish the legitimacy of the field’s findings and projects. Consider the dismissal of generative linguistics in Gernsbacher’s (1994) introduction to *The Handbook of Psycholinguistics* (Academic Press). I will also suggest that within Variationist Sociolinguistics, there are divisions between those who research English and those who work primarily on other languages and between those who insist on ethnography and those who do not. Disciplinary divisions are not new. They exist within Variationist Sociolinguistics as well. So, what can we do?

I like Mallinson’s suggestions very much. Talk more across disciplines with human beings engaged in research and teaching. Also, explore common interests like the very difficult issue of social stratification. Aside from class theory, I will suggest also considering the Major Occupational Groupings (MOG) or the SOC Major Groups used by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. See: [http://www.bls.gov/soc/soc\\_majo.htm](http://www.bls.gov/soc/soc_majo.htm). Also, the work of the sociologist, John Goldthorpe, though not cited, is important. Yes, of course, there are problems in all of this. Finally, I propose one other strategy not mentioned by Mallinson. Explore theory in sociology with an eye for hypotheses or predictions that may be tested with variationist data. Then, put them to the test and attempt to publish the findings in those journals that sociologists read.

Cameron, R. 2007. Three approaches to finding the social in the linguistic. Holmquist, J., A. Lorenzino, & L. Sayahi (eds.) *Selected Proceedings of the Third Workshop on Spanish Sociolinguistics*. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press. Pp. 1-22. Electronic Version available at: <http://www.lingref.com/cpp/wss/3/index.html>

Wolff, K. (ed.) 1950. *The sociology of Georg Simmel*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.