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COMMENTARY ON:

Sociolinguistics and Sociology: Current Directions, Future Partnerships

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In “Sociolinguistics and Sociology: Current Directions, Future Partnerships”, Christine Mallinson examines the relationship between variationist sociolinguistic research and sociological theory and methods, focusing on race, gender, and class. The very fact that Mallinson is able to list individual studies embodying interdisciplinary theory or method, rather than having to summarize a decades-long outpouring of wide-ranging interdisciplinary scholarship, offers a sense of the tepid relationship between sociology and linguistics.

In the interest of addressing the causes and consequences of the gulf between the two fields, it is useful to reconsider the reason for desiring or even expecting theoretical and methodological engagement between variationist sociolinguistics and sociology. One of the central goals of sociolinguistics is to model language differences between and within social groups across time. The prediction and interpretation of language differences would seem to hinge on an informed conception of social structure, and to some extent, sociolinguists have looked to sociology for this. As Mallinson notes, some sociolinguists including Labov – Rickford (1986) being another clear example – have used specific sociological models in looking for class-based patterns of linguistic variation. Sex and gender theory from sociology and related fields has also, as Mallinson describes, contributed to sociolinguistic analysis, and a very few linguists, Mallinson included, have directly employed sociological research on race and ethnicity.

These connections notwithstanding, the purposeful incorporation of sociological theory remains the exception rather than the norm in sociolinguistics, and there exists no tradition of collaboration with sociologists. One reason, I suspect, is that sociology does not offer ready answers to our most burning questions about social structure, particularly where economic stratification is concerned. Just as a linguist's account of the mechanics of wh-movement or the nature of phonological features depends largely on his/her theoretical persuasion, the number and defining criteria of socioeconomic classes in Western (or any) society is a matter of theoretical preference rather than empirically supported certainty. Nor do most sociologists who study stratification have the central goal of constructing class models amenable to the type of quantitative analysis that variationist sociolinguists undertake. Yet the two fields' agendas bear close enough resemblance to have produced some groundbreaking interdisciplinary research in the past, and there is surely further potential.

Another major obstacle to interdisciplinary work is that, as Mallinson argues, few researchers have the time to achieve expertise in a second field. Beyond the sheer lack of interdisciplinary research, the consequence of this has been the importation of theoretical or methodological tools from sociology without the necessary conceptual or technical baggage. Social networks are a good example. The quantitative procedures used in sociolinguistic network analysis currently diverge significantly from those that are standard in sociology. Further, with a few exceptions such as the "strength of weak ties", sociolinguistic network analysis does not take advantage of the diverse types of conclusions drawn from network analysis in sociology.

If sociolinguists have not found our way very far into potentially relevant sociological research, the reverse is equally true, to the best of my knowledge. From a sociolinguistic perspective, language data offers nearly perfect empirical material for sociologists. Linguistic variables are eminently observable and quantifiable, and inextricably linked to race, class, sex, gender, age, geography, and local identity. Their failure to be taken up by sociologists is likely due to two factors, among others. First, linguistic variables carry their own technical and conceptual baggage and are perhaps not easily accessible to non-linguists. Second, linguists and sociologists simply do not communicate very consistently. Mallinson accurately observes that some recent sociolinguistics conferences have included panels and seminars dedicated to cross-disciplinary discussion of topics such as social science research in urban settings, but these have not made great strides in bolstering cross-disciplinary engagement. They are generally short, do not include mechanisms for subsequent reconnection between scholars, and tend to focus

on very general issues rather than concrete points for cross-disciplinary investigation.

I believe the potential benefits of developing the sociolinguistics/sociology interface should motivate scholars from both fields to look for ways around the obstacles laid out here. This effort should, I believe, target graduate-level sociolinguistics curricula, which could be extended to require courses in sociology. Doing so would obviously result in less time for other coursework, but many graduate students in sociolinguistics already take elective courses in sociology and related departments. There are few good substitutes for being guided through some part of a field's primary literature. In support of this effort, conferences such as NWAV could set aside sessions devoted to papers (not discussion panels or workshops) that employ specifically interdisciplinary theory or methods.

Another important step, I suspect, is for sociolinguists to simply spend more time talking to sociologists, learning basic information about the goals, frameworks, and methods used in their work. A single conversation can lead to insights that days of wading through unfamiliar literature would not necessarily yield. The obstacles to such conversations – time, convenience, the frustration of finding the right people to talk to and then finding the right things to talk about – are nothing we can't handle.