

SUMMARY

The book “Linguistic variation: confronting fact and theory”, edited by Rena Torres Cacoullous, Nathalie Dion and André Lapierre, presents various contributions of scholars working on language variation and change. The editors dedicated the book to Shana Poplack, and every author refers to her activity in Sociolinguistics through the years. The book consists of an introduction, and twenty chapters divided into five sections, each one consisting of five contributions addressing a specific topic.

In the introduction the editors add an evocative sentence “toward a science of grammar and a Critical Sociolinguistics”: this represents a summary of the main aim of the book, but it is also a strong statement on the theoretical direction of research in the field of language variation and change after more than 45 years from the first Labovian works. The editors also trace a short profile of Shana Poplack’s activity in both researching and teaching, especially during her years at the University of Ottawa.

The first section (The Variationist Comparative Method: Gauging Grammatical Relationships) addresses one of the points already evoked in the introduction, that is the founding of a science of grammar. James A. Walker (Contrasting Patterns of Agreement in Three Communities) focuses on the empirical comparison of competitive models of grammatical variation (see also Walker 2007), in particular where it concerns plural morphology. The data are taken from three corpora (i.e., Quebec English Corpus, the Bequia Corpus, and Contact in the City Corpus), and show a different distribution in the use of plural markers, with a hierarchy of conditioning related to different factor groups (see also Poplack & Tagliamonte 1999). Stephen Levey (A Comparative Variationist Perspective on Relative Clauses in Child and Adult Speech) analyzes children’s acquisition of relative clauses from a usage-based perspective (see Diesel 2004): he shows that strategies for marking restrictive relative clauses are acquired very well in later childhood too. Gunel Tottie (Uh and Uhm in British and American English: Are They Words? Evidence from Co-occurrence with Pauses) addresses the complex topic of discourse particles, basing her analysis on the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBC), but also comparing her findings with other English varieties and dialects collected in other corpora (e.g., the London-Lund Corpus of English, see Kendall 2013). In her conclusions, Tottie does not support the treatment of these linguistic items as interjections or words, but as pragmatic markers, similar to forms like *I mean, well, or you know*. Finally, John E. Rickford and Robin Melnick (A Variationist Approach to Subject-Aux Question Inversion in Bajan and Other Caribbean Creole Englishes, AAVE, and Appalachian) also adopt an inter-dialect perspective, by discussing syntactic variation in Barbadian Creole English (Bajan). In their analysis, they highlight how three factors significantly influence variation in Subject-Aux inversion, namely question type, subject length, and auxiliary type.

The second section (Identifying and Tracking Language Change) opens to diachrony and to languages other than English. Sandra Clarke (The Continuing Story of Verbal –s: Revisiting the Northern Subject Rule as a Diagnostic of Historical Relationship) traces the evolution of English non-standard present-tense verbal –s from Old English to Contemporary Regional Variety. She shows how this evolution is not a straight one in both time and space, by suggesting that Newfoundland English is highly conservative as is demonstrated by the maintenance of present-tense –s in all subject types in its vernacular regional roots. Frans Gregersen (Phonetic Variation across Centuries: On the Possible Reappearance of a Case of Stable Variation in Copenhagen Danish) addresses the ENG variable (i.e., the raising of central [ɛ] before the velar nasal [ŋ]) in Copenhagen Danish. The authors compares apparent-time and real-time evidences, thus offering an important reflection on a methodological and theoretical debate within the variationist framework. Mary A. Kato (Focus and WH-Questions in Brazilian Portuguese) follows a cartographic approach (see Rizzi 1997) in analyzing WH-Questions in Portuguese as they emerge from written corpora

collecting data from 14th century to the present. The analysis shows that in Brazilian Portuguese the so-called FOCUS head is a syncretic category, which checks both WH and focalized expressions. Finally, Joan Bybee and Rena Torres Cacoullos (Grammaticalization and Variation of WILL and SHALL in Shakespeare's Comedies) focus on modal categories in order to highlight new patterns of variation. In particular, the analysis emphasizes how the two future modals WILL and SHALL in Shakespeare's comedies are tied to both earlier lexical meaning and "a converging trajectory toward the purer future use for marking predictions" (p. 143), with intention as an intermediate stage in this development.

The third section (Language Ideology, Prescription, and Community Norms) discusses the notions of standard language, language attitudes, and linguistic bias. Anthony Julius Naro and Maria Marta Pereira Scherre (Drifting Toward the Standard Language: A Panel Study of Number Concord in Brazilian Portuguese) discusses the use of overt plural marking in third-person subject/verb number concord (S/VC) and in noun phrase number concord (NPC) in spoken Portuguese in Rio de Janeiro. By analyzing variation in individual speakers in real time diachrony (1980-2000), the authors point out that in S/VC variation linguistic and cognitive forces co-occur with social factors (e.g., education); on the other hand, social factors intensify their importance in NPC variation (p. 160). Raymond Mougeon and Katherine Rehner (The Neglected Topic of Variation in Teacher Classroom Speech: Investigating JE VAIS/JE VAS/M'AS in Ontario French-Medium High School) focus on sociolinguistic analysis of teachers' language variation in classrooms. The three variants under analysis (i.e., JE VAIS, JE VAS, M'AS) are differently marked in Ontario and Quebec French, and they reflect different social factors that may be used to predict variation. For instance, the two scholars argue that M'AS is the preferred variant when teachers want to express emotions, whereas JE VAIS is favored during teaching and organizing the work of the classroom. Katherine A. Collins and Richard Clément (Words We Use: Linguistic Bias and Prejudice) reflect on the ubiquity of linguistic bias, and its function in belief maintenance, thus including both prejudices and stereotypes. In particular, the authors point out how group membership plays the major role in impression formation, regardless of the level of linguistic abstraction (p. 189). Finally, Gerard Van Herk and Becky Childs (Active Retirees: The Persistence of Obsolescent Features) focus on language change, and on the preservation of outgoing variants. The authors claim that this preservation is, in fact, dependent on the rarity of the old variants itself, as has been observed in many studies on language variation and change in different areas of the world (e.g., the maintenance of non-standard present tense verb forms with -s in many English varieties, see Poplack & Tagliamonte 1991).

The fourth section (Evaluating the Effects of Language Contact on the Ground) opens to language acquisition and/or sociolinguistic variation in L2/LS contexts. In this respect, Gillian Sankoff, Henrietta J. Cedergren, Pierette Thibault, and Hélène Blondeau (Going through (L) in L2: Anglophone Montrealers Revisited) analyze the (L)-deletion among both French determiners and clitics in the speech of five young Anglophone Montrealers (i.e., English-French bilinguals). In their conclusions, the authors stress the importance of prosody as a crucial factor for explaining (L)-deletion in bilingual subjects. On a similar topic, Carmen Silva-Corvalán (Variable Patterns in Spanish-English Acquisition from Birth: Subject Pronouns beyond the Age of Three) observes the acquisition of Spanish and English pronominal systems in her two bilingual grandsons from 3;0 to 6;0 years old. The study points out how even non-balanced bilinguals show the acquisition of subjects in both a non-null subject (English) and a null-subject language (Spanish), and that they gain perfect control of the semantic and discourse-pragmatic factors related to personal pronoun use (p. 237). Pieter Muysken (Déjà Voodoo or New Trials Ahead? Re-Evaluating the Mixing Typology Model) presents an interesting theoretical (re-)consideration of language contact study and, in particular, of his code-mixing typology (see also Muysken 2000), by remarking the main distinction between alternation and insertion, and the presence of different bounds in different bilingual communities. Finally, Peter Auer and Christian Schwarz (Dialect-to-Standard Advergence: The

Relevance of Compound Borrowing) highlight how borrowing and code-switching work in Alemannic-speaking southwest Germany. The statistical analysis of complex and simplex words shows that borrowed words from standard language to dialect are often complex words, and especially compounds. Moreover, this kind of borrowing plays an important role in the process of dialect-to-standard advergence.

The fifth and final part of the book (Fresh Perspectives on Classic Problems) opens with the contribution of the “father” of sociolinguistics, William Labov (The Beginnings of the Southern Shift). Labov analyzes the two-stage model of dialect divergence as applied to the vowel shift in the south of England and in the colonial dialects of English. The author tries to establish when this shift started, and in the case of South America it is possible that the first stage took place near 1865, when Confederate veterans emigrated to Brazil after the Civil War. Sali A. Tagliamonte (A Comparative Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Dative Alternation) observed language variation in vernacular spoken data collected in the United Kingdom and Canada between 1997 and 2010. Her study focuses on dative alternation, which is influenced by many linguistic (e.g., animacy, definiteness, type of subject) and social factors (e.g., sex and level of education). Ricardo Otheguy (Variationists Sociolinguistics and Linguistic Theory in the Context of Pronominal Perseveration) argues against the view of sociolinguistic competence in generativist terms, thus following a famous brilliant polemic started by Guy (2005). Finally, David Sankoff, Nathalie Dion, Alex Brandts, Mayer Alvo, Sonia Balasch, and Jackie Adams (Comparing Variables in Different Corpora with Context-Based Model-Free Variant Probabilities) address a still problematic theoretical and methodological point in sociolinguistic research, i.e., the design of a collection of corpora of spontaneous speech, and the selection of tokens for analysis. The major problem to be considered is the differences in corpora constructions, which led to differences in the influence exerted by one social factor on a linguistic phenomenon from corpus to corpus (e.g., see Travis 2007 on subject expression in New Mexican and Colombian Spanish). The authors, thus, propose a new statistical method based only on the comparison of corresponding contexts in the corpora to be compared.

The book is closed by the biographies of the contributors.

EVALUATION

The book is very rich in both contents and theoretical approaches, which are presented and discussed by the authors of the single chapters. It is important to highlight how the different methodologies and perspectives proposed perfectly reflect the very complex topic of language variation and change. Another important addition is the importance given to both theoretical discussion and methodological considerations, two points variously addressed in almost every chapter. It is noteworthy how many authors adhere to the corpus linguistic theoretical perspective, and to quantitative methods. Moreover, the editors have managed to include contributions from different authors, both confirmed leaders of the field (e.g., Labov, Auer, Sankoff, Bybee, Muysken, Tagliamonte), and young scholars: this testifies to the interest in this field and the emergence of a new generation of researchers, who add fresh perspectives on the path drawn by the experts.

This considered, it is very difficult to find negative remarks on this extremely precise work of editing and collection of contributions, which admirably covers the vast field of research on language variation and change. However, it may be pointed out that the book lacks a final conclusion written by the editors, with a summary of the main topics addressed by the contributors, and a perspective on the future of variationist research.

Nevertheless, this book remains an excellent compendium of the different theories, methodologies, and data which are covered by the broad label of variationist research. In this sense, the book represents a useful manual for young scholars who want to open their perspectives on language

variation and change. For this reason, it is the perfect way to pay homage to Shana Poplack's work in this discipline.

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