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## **Norms and Sociolinguistic Description<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

This article considers the status of norms in sociolinguistic description, more precisely variationist research. The discussion in this paper is structured around Labov's definition of *speech community*. The definition not only aroused intense discussion within the paradigm on the nature of norms but also steered the subsequent research theoretically and methodologically. By briefly reviewing the theoretical debate concerning norms and studying some of the central concepts in empirical sociolinguistics, this article examines what kind of picture the theoretical and methodological background of the variationist paradigm depicts on language norms.

### **1. Introduction**

Social life, including language use, is governed by norms—socially shared concepts of appropriate and expected behavior. The most basic of these concepts are acquired in early childhood through socialization. In the case of language norms this means that the first language norms adopted are the ones of everyday spoken language. Compared to the prescriptive norms of the standardized language, these uncodified norms are perhaps less conscious yet more natural (Karlsson 1995: 170) in every sense of the word: they are more numerous, acquired earlier in life and mastered by all native speakers. They also historically precede the norms of the standard language and in communities without a written language they are the only norms available. Fred Karlsson (1995) has stressed the importance of these naturally occurring norms for linguistic description. He both encourages to take the norms of the vernacular as the basis of grammatical description as well as to discuss more thoroughly the nature of language norms.

Norms are inherently social. Therefore it is especially interesting to ask, whether these principles are realized in sociolinguistic description.

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Within the broad field of sociolinguistics this article focuses on the variationist paradigm.<sup>2</sup> As an approach that studies everyday spoken language in its social context, it provides a fruitful starting point for these considerations. The central questions in this article are: in general, what kind of status norms have in the theoretical basis of variation studies and, more particularly, what is the role of spoken language norms in these discussions.

Beneath the empirical orientation the notion of language use as norm-governed is clearly recognizable in empirical sociolinguistics. The nature of norms is explicitly discussed in connection to the notion of speech community. Especially William Labov's definition that describes the speech community as a group of people with a set of shared norms has stirred the research community into a debate. In the next section this debate is reviewed with the aim of elucidating the way in which norms are conceptualized. The third section discusses the more implicit aspects of this conceptualization (or the lack of it) by focusing on the notion of prestige. In the fourth section the theoretical antecedents and their contribution to this state of affairs is examined briefly. The fifth section points out some questions regarding language norms that need to be examined further, and introduces Renate Bartsch's norm theory as a starting point for these discussions.

The reason why this article is structured around Labov's definition on speech community is not just because it set in motion the theoretical debate concerning norms. The definition also presents a model for studying language norms empirically: norms can be observed not only in the actual language use but also in the evaluations concerning it, i.e. the perceptions of and attitudes towards language. With varying emphasis both these strands have been present in the methodology of empirical sociolinguistics throughout its existence. Although theorizing concerning the social basis has at times been less than explicit, a clear theoretical change can be detected in the fact that in the recent years the emphasis on the evaluative dimension has increased considerably. The last section concludes the

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<sup>2</sup> The research tradition that originates from William Labov's (1966) study *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* is called by various names: Labovian sociolinguistics, empirical sociolinguistics, variationist research, social dialectology, correlational paradigm, etc. Nowadays, the paradigm is a methodologically and topic-wise diverse field, yet unified by the common focus on understanding the mechanisms of variation and change.

theoretical discussion by linking it to the current, more perceptually oriented research in variationist studies.

## 2. The norms of a speech community

The notion of *speech community* is central to empirical sociolinguistics: it is the locus of linguistic change. Although variation and change is examined in relation to linguistic systems, these phenomena occur on the level of speech community rather than the level of language (see e.g. Milroy & Milroy 1997: 50–51). Defining language has proved notoriously difficult and the same seems to apply to the notion of speech community. Although Labov's definition is only one of the many proposed for a speech community (see Patrick 2002), it is worth discussing in more detail for several reasons. First of all, its influence within the variationist paradigm is undeniable. Second, the definition set off a debate considering the nature of language norms. And third, Labov's approach is very practical: he not only defines the speech community as a group that shares a certain orientation to a set of norms but also puts forward a model for studying language norms empirically.

The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by *participation in a set of shared norms*; these norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behavior, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage (Labov 1972: 120–121, italics added).

Labov's model has been harshly criticized as being based on consensus. The criticism was not only evoked by the definition itself but also by remarks indicating that the standard language is the sole model for language use.

Children of upper-middle-class families (...) show *a more complete response to sociolinguistic norms* than lower-middle-class children. (Labov 1972: 139, italics added.)

The subsequent theoretical discussion on speech community more or less polarized into a consensus-versus-conflict approach (see e.g. Milroy & Milroy 1993: 59–60) The conflict models emphasize the existence of two competing norm systems, each of which functions as a model towards which the speakers can be oriented. The necessity of multiple systems was argued on the basis of language change: without social conflict between the

systems language change would hardly be possible. Also the fact that non-standard varieties resisted change was more easily explained by referring to two conflicting norm systems. Milroy and Milroy (1985: 56) outline a model of language maintenance based on social networks. The model acknowledges the overt and institutionally promulgated pressure to use standard language but also stresses the more covert, informal influence that dense and multiple networks have on the maintenance of non-standard varieties.

Patrick (2002: 584–585) notes that the above mentioned critique was based on the (mis)interpretation that Labov in his New York study (1966) determined not only the analytical and interpretive practices but also the outcomes of future studies. In other words, what was meant as an analysis of a particular speech community was taken as a general theoretical stance. In this respect, the ensuing theoretical discussion can be characterized as superficial.

One cannot help but notice that although norms are seen as constituting the social reality of language, the discussion has revolved around the notion of speech community, instead of norms. The notion of speech community is problematic at least in two respects. To start with, there is a difficulty that comes with the empirical emphasis of the definition: whether a group of people forms a speech community can only be determined by careful research. Further, even with careful research only a limited number of features can be studied at a time. With such a limited knowledge it is daring to argue anything more general about the community.

If norms are the basis on which language as a social phenomenon is constituted, should not norms be the hub of sociolinguistic research? Despite the fact that both consensus and conflict approaches are treated as theoretical models neither of the approaches conceptualizes norms further. Questions regarding the existence, adoption, development and change of norms remain mostly unanswered. Within the above mentioned framework of social networks Milroy and Gordon (2003: 132–133) have, nevertheless, discussed the way in which complex local norms are adopted and what makes them susceptible to change, stating that increased mobility breaks local networks and exposes local norm systems to change. Although the mechanism is presented in the framework of social networks the actual reason is that children in these communities lack the constant linguistic input from their environment necessary for acquiring the norms. Now that the focus of research is not primarily on the norms but on the community,

be it speech community or social network, the explanations lack generalizing power.

The problems concerning delineating a speech community are well recognized. Instead of a more theoretically inclined model on language norms, research within the variationist paradigm has recently concentrated on socially more meaningful and more easily definable communities. On the whole, the focus has shifted to smaller scale communities, often definable through face-to-face interaction. One of these alternative ways is the above mentioned notion of social networks—communities on personal level constituted by interpersonal ties. Another, a more recent addition to the conceptual repertoire is *community of practice* (Eckert 2000: 34–35; see also Myerhoff 2002). Instead of norms a community of practice is defined based on a mutual engagement in a jointly negotiated enterprise. The notion *community of practice* differs from both speech community and social network in a sense that it emphasizes the co-constructed nature of social meaning. Both approaches based on norms focus on the social structures with varying degrees of attention paid to the role of individual agency.

Despite its pitfalls Labov's definition put forward a clear model for studying language norms empirically: norms can be observed both in language use and in evaluations considering language. The next section considers the status of spoken language norms in variationist research by discussing the way in which the evaluative dimension has traditionally been conceptualized.

### **3. Prestige and the written language bias**

The aspects that are fore-grounded by conceptualizing them determine the framework for descriptions and explanations. For variationist research, Labov's study in New York established a methodology for studying the attitudinal plane and, inadvertently though, steered the way in which the evaluative dimension was conceptualized. Labov's perspective on evaluations concerning language has been criticized as being based on a one-dimensional model of prestige. The critique is unnecessary: a methodological choice is interpreted as a theoretical claim (cf. the discussion above about the consensual nature of the speech community).

Labov (1966: 412) explicitly states that the subjective reaction tests<sup>3</sup> used in the New York study were only designed to reveal the dimension of social status, one of the many possible evaluative dimensions.

Apart from recent years the other evaluative dimensions have received limited amount of attention. Although the word prestige is tightly connected to social status, in the literature it is often used as a term that refers to any kind of appeal that a certain language form has. This has led to concepts that are paradoxical to begin with. For example Trudgill (1972) introduced term *covert prestige* to describe favorable disposition towards non-standard speech forms. These positive evaluations were most clearly observable in the discrepancies between self-report tests and actual usage. In self report tests “most of the respondents seemed to perceive their own speech in terms of norms at which they were aiming rather than the sound actually pronounced” (Labov 1966: 480). Although among linguists inclined towards social psychology the positive evaluations of non-standard speech forms were discussed in terms of solidarity the terminological deficiencies regarding the evaluative dimension of the vernacular have persisted within the variationist paradigm.

Urho Määttä (1999: 28) has noted that sociolinguistics is a culturally bound enterprise. In an empirically oriented tradition like variationist research these cultural bounds are often encountered when methodologies are transported from community to community. At these times the evaluative dimension becomes essential in understanding the cultural underpinnings of the research locality. In the above mentioned self-report test there were clear differences between Britain and United states indicating that the status of the vernacular was stronger in Norwich than in New York. However, the methodological apparatus of empirical sociolinguistics is more apt to study the quantitative relationship between the standard language and the vernacular than other aspects related to the dynamics of variation. Despite the acknowledged fact that communities do not exist in isolation, part of the Labovian methodology was to limit the informants to those that were natives to the research locality. These incompatibilities between Labovian sociolinguistics and dialect contact framework (Trudgill 1986) further directed the focus away from the dynamics of variation and change within or between non-standard varieties.

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<sup>3</sup> The informants were asked to rate the voices they heard on the tape according to their occupational suitability (for a more detailed description see Labov 1966: 405–412).

It seems that the descriptive model of variationist research as well as the conceptualizations connected to the evaluative dimension show symptoms of the written language bias (e.g. Linell 2001). Linell points out the origins of this bias to the fact that the descriptive apparatus of linguistics is modeled on the basis of written language. This also partly applies to empirical sociolinguistics, as I shall argue in the next section. An equally important factor, though, is the fact that for variationist research Labov's study in New York City provided a prototype on which subsequent research was modeled. At times the methods were applied without due theoretical discussion on their cultural preconceptions. Additionally, although the evaluative dimension has been present, the indirect methods used in most of the studies could not properly capture the values attached to the vernacular. On the basis of the previous discussion it can be stated that the norms of the vernacular are not the starting point for sociolinguistic description nor do they have an equal standing in relation to the norms of the standard. Due to this perspective there is a danger that the vernacular is described as a deviation from the prescribed standard (cf. folk theories of language in Preston 2002: 64): it has covert prestige and resists the more or less inevitable change towards the standard language. In the next section the reasons for this state of affairs are discussed by examining the theoretical background of variationist studies.

#### **4. Theoretical bearings**

Discussion of theory in sociolinguistics has been described (Coupland 2001: 1) as muted and uncritical. The previous sections have shown that the empirical emphasis of the approach is partly responsible for this fact. Probably also the interdisciplinary nature of the research has contributed to this state of affairs. The variationist paradigm inherited its theoretical basis from its linguistic and sociological antecedents. Later on, this theoretical background has been criticized both in linguistic and sociological terms mainly for being too static to capture the dynamic nature of language use in its social context.

From the linguistic point of view empirical sociolinguistics has been criticized for its formalist structural framework (see Linell 2001: 120). Describing social variation in a frame of linguistic systems poses certain, not only theoretical (see Nieminen 1999) but also practical problems. Without delving into these difficulties more deeply, for example the

familiar concepts relating to ‘lects’ are based on the assumption of stable structure and they are somewhat ill-equipped to handle variation: actual language use is in most cases impossible to delineate to discrete varieties, styles or registers.

Sociological critique (Williams 1992: 66–93), on the other hand, points to the Parsonian structural functionalism as the reason for the static, mechanical world view. The consensual attitude towards society that empirical sociolinguistics is accused of is explained to derive from the sociological theory on which Labovian sociolinguistics draws.

(...) the conflict (...) is missing as a consequence of the structural functionalist orientation. The emphasis on normative consensus as the guiding force of individual speech results in the legitimization of standard forms and the parallel marginalization of non-standard forms. (Williams 1992: 93)

The critique focuses on the fact that structuralism in its various forms emphasizes the constraints placed by the structure. In the case of linguistic systems it means that the inherently dynamic and varying language use is explained by resorting to abstractions based on systems. In the case of the social system the social structure is seen as restricting individual agency. Williams takes this critique a step further by pinpointing the problems to the inherently static nature of descriptions based on norms and values. However, sociolinguistic theorizing is tightly connected both to norms and structures. The best way to cope with the burden of structuralism is to be as clear as possible on the assumption deriving from the theoretical basis. A clearer stance considering the norms of language would promote this objective. The next section briefly presents a model that can provide a starting point for further discussions on language norms.

## **5. Towards a sociolinguistic theory of language norms**

Both the Milroys and Williams prefer theories that are based on social conflict rather than consensus. Renate Bartsch’s *Norms of language* (1987) provides a theoretical model that in many ways resembles the above mentioned conflict approach, i.e. it is based on multiple, conflicting norm-systems. In this sense the model fits well in the descriptive traditions of (socio)linguistics. It is true that also Bartsch’s outlook represents a form of theorizing that was criticized above: the dynamics of social reality are approached through abstract systems. However, I would argue that



structure and norms are inseparable and conceptual clarity requires structure.

Compared to discussion on norms reviewed in the previous sections Bartsch's theory gives a more detailed account on the nature of norms while staying at a more abstract level. To start with, the existence of norms is divided into several elements: existence as a practice, acceptance, validity and justification (Bartsch 1987: 177–178). Although the model is highly theoretical and somewhat abstract the basic idea is comparable to Labov's notion: norms not only exist in the actual practice but also in the evaluative behavior concerning language. Because the existence as a practice is more clearly separated from the evaluative aspects of existence, Bartsch's model is capable of explaining situations where a certain norm does not exist as a practice but seems to affect the attitudinal plane. For example, positive attitudes towards the standard language are expressed even in situations where it is not appropriate to use it. This can be explained by stating that standard languages are often valid on a much broader domain than they are actually used or justified to be used.

Bartsch describes the sphere of norms as domains that are definable in terms of certain sections of population or optionally certain situations. Compared to Labov's notion of speech community domains give a more fragmented yet more accurate picture of the social reality of language. As a notion domains are also rather easily adaptable to empirical research.

In variationist research the theoretical background and the methodology have at times been so closely intertwined that it has been difficult to separate the two. With a more abstract and more general theoretical model new methodological openings are easier. Bartsch's model is a more general account of norms also in the sense that it can be used to describe either norm-systems of a single language or situations where the codes belong to separate languages. It is acknowledged that the mechanisms of style-shifting and code-switching are partly similar (see e.g. Milroy & Gordon 2003: 198–222). A more elaborate theory on language norms can address both these fields.

Bartsch's work has received some attention in sociolinguistic literature but the boundaries between linguistics and philosophy are not easily crossed. The last section of this article discusses the recent, more perceptually oriented research within variationist paradigm. The aim is to conclude the discussion by showing that despite its structuralistic legacy the research on language norms does not have to be confined by the restrictions placed by the social structure.

## 6. Perceptual dimension

In the recent years the emphasis on the evaluative dimension within the variationist paradigm has increased considerably. This is a direct result of the need to understand the dynamics of variation through the indexicality inherent to language—how and why a certain language form indexes social meaning. In the quest for socially situated description—description that also takes the norms of the vernacular into account—the theoretical and methodological horizons have widened. The eclectic methodological background has enabled the variationist paradigm to tackle the shortcomings of the structuralistic background and quantitative methodology.

Attitude research modeled on methods used in social psychology has brought a more varied view on the different dimensions of evaluation. Not only has the number of dimensions increased but also the assortment of methodologies. In addition to subjective reaction tests and self-report tests various indirect and direct techniques have been introduced to variationist studies (for a methodological overview see Garret, Coupland & Williams 2003).

In addition to socially situating the analysis to the local context, focusing on the perceptual dimension enables descriptions from the speakers' perspective, thus helping to overcome some of the restrictions posed by the descriptive apparatus based on linguistic systems. Although the standard language and the vernacular are often used as points of reference, the way in which the 'varieties' are perceived by the community might differ considerably from the linguist's point of view.<sup>4</sup>

An especially interesting methodological opening in this respect is folk linguistics (see Niedzielski & Preston 2000)—an approach that focuses on the folk beliefs about language. Recently also the 'main stream' of variationist research has noted the possibilities of folk linguistics (see Milroy 2003). Compared to the traditional variationist research the methodological and theoretical change has been considerable: from mainly

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, in Arabic the speaker already moves to the realm of what is perceived as Standard Arabic by making some phonetic adjustments towards the standard and using loanwords from the literary language (Kauhanen Forthcoming). If language use is analysed by solely referring to the linguistic poles of reference the significance and appropriateness of variation is easily ignored.

indirect quantitative methods the paradigm has moved towards more ethnographically oriented research as well as qualitative approaches.

## 7. Conclusion

The status of norms in variationist paradigm is two-fold: norms have been a central part in the theoretical discussions but the actual focus of these discussions has been the question of what constitutes a community. Partly for this reason norms have not been conceptualized properly on a more abstract level.

Theory and methodology are closely intertwined in empirical sociolinguistics. This is clearly visible in the theoretical discussions: theoretical concepts and methodological choices are not always kept distinctly apart. This close relationship does not have to be an impediment; the empirical nature of sociolinguistic research presents an opportunity for theoretical discussions with empirical relevance.

Although conceptual clarity regarding norms is still much needed, the guidelines for studying language norms empirically were presented already in Labov's definition for speech community. Norms can be observed not only in the actual language use but also through evaluations concerning language.

Together with the above mentioned empirical approach a more abstract model of language norms could provide a piece to the theoretical jigsaw puzzle of current sociolinguistics. Although the theory needs to address the questions from a sociolinguistic perspective, Renate Bartsch's model of linguistic norms can serve as a starting point for further theoretical discussions.

In recent years variationist research has focused more emphatically on the evaluative dimension. The methodologically eclectic, often ethnographically oriented approach has made it possible to address the central question of indexicality. Understanding better how language indexes social meaning is a step towards understanding the norms of the vernacular.

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