

A NOTE ON LINGUISTIC VARIATION*

The study of language stability is an indispensable requisite for the examination of language change. This is the perspective chosen in this book, and it distinguishes it from current works in sociolinguistics. The main question posed by Milroy is why dialectal divergencies remain when they are confronted with a supposedly stronger influence exerted by a standard variety. The answer to this question is searched for through a study of certain linguistic features of the dialect of Belfast.

Milroy's research is based primarily on the system-oriented theories of language change developed by Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog; hence, he applies the five aspects of their theoretical model (constraint, embedding, evaluation, transition and actuation) to his investigation. However, he introduces some modifications to this theoretical model, in the sense that the strict intra-linguistic character of aspects such as *constraints* or *actuation* becomes less clear-cut than in its original conception. Thus, he states that social motivations and speaker attitudes could also influence them. His approach is therefore inter-linguistic or speaker-oriented.

Milroy also rejects the structuralist conception of synchrony as a "uniform" state of language, and the common practice of presenting descriptive accounts of synchronic linguistic stages as unchanging periods in the history of a language. In addition to this, he places a great emphasis on the role speaker interaction plays in language change and language maintenance. He understands that the medium for language change is the *spoken mode*, as opposed to certain linguistic tendencies that focus on the written mode in the observation of language change. It can be inferred from his statements that he rejects the conception of the written mode as an independent state of language, which was so much defended by authors like McIntosh or Romaine.

He uses statistical charts and tables to establish the procedures to examine a language in the community. Maps are also included as a graphic representation of the data. These maps are subsequently interpreted focusing on the variational patterns recorded for the language of Belfast, mainly in relation to the variables of sex and network and their social implications. A historical perspective of linguistic change is also included, in which special attention is given to the influence of prestige and standard models upon the process of change in the English language.

Next, Milroy introduces a conceptual distinction between *innovation* and *language change*, in this sense an innovation will only be considered as a linguistic change once it *has assumed a social pattern in the community* and not before. His conception of language change is embedded in a model broader than the one commonly used; thus, rather than concepts such as social class or dialectal prestige, Milroy interprets language change as resulting from a whole set of motivations he

labels *social network*, which is conceived as formed by *individuals and the relationships that can be contracted between them, and not primarily based on pre-defined group structures*. Milroy's network model works on the assumption of two kinds of relationships between speakers and the community. On the one hand, communities that are closely-bound, that is, those in which the links between speakers and the community are strong (*strong ties*) tend to be linguistically conservative and resistant to change. On the other hand, groups in which the links among the members of the community are less strong (*weak ties*) are frequently more sensitive to external pressures for change. *Strong ties* are easily found in small isolated environs. *Weak ties*, on the contrary, are much more difficult to localise and to study.

The interest of *Linguistic Variation and Change* is not only due to the fact that it offers specific data about a particular process of change, but also because it suggests a new perspective for sociolinguistic studies. Even though it is certainly not a book for beginners, it offers a good and complete account of the most widely accepted sociolinguistic trends with a refreshingly clear and critical position.

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Notes

*JAMES MILROY. *Linguistic Variation and Change*. Blackwell Ltd, Oxford. 1992. 255 pp.