

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Discovering the unexpected

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The major findings of North American sociolinguistics have been unexpected, and contrary to the common sense views that preceded them. It was thought that the dialects of big cities were chaotic and unpredictable; it has been found that they are systematic and highly structured. It was believed that women were always conservative in their linguistic behavior; it has been found that they are the leaders of most linguistic changes in progress. It was generally believed that the regional dialects of North America were disappearing; it is now found that their diversity is increasing.

This paper will examine some of the features of sociolinguistic research that will help us discover linguistic patterns that we did not expect to find. These include the quantitative study of what people actually say in contrast to what they think they say, and techniques for approaching a recording of the language of every-day life. To the extent that we are dealing with an open society, we can avoid the bias of relying on introductions and so construct a sample that is not defined by its relation to the investigator.

This approach to sociolinguistic research puts us some distance from a universal theory that would predict whatever is to be found. To expect new findings is equivalent to a search for the empirical limitations of our generalizations; as that empirical base becomes broader, our understanding of the intersection of these generalizations with social reality becomes deeper. These general considerations will be illustrated by a search for some anti-universals of language and gender.

SPECIAL PANEL DISCUSSION

Study of Speech Communities Asia-Pacific Speech Communities: Challenges

Research in multilingual speech communities: a comparative perspective

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The notion of a speech community that is united by a uniform structural base (Labov 1989) has allowed sociolinguists to make progress in understanding variation in communities united by a common language. It captures the empirical situation of urban agglomerations characteristic of countries where monolingualism is the norm, and where immigrants have tended toward rapid linguistic assimilation. However, multilingual speech communities like those more typical of the Asia-Pacific region pose a greater challenge. Where the common language is only one among several in a community repertoire, communal groups (Blanc 1964), differentiated by religion or ethnicity, may speak different varieties of that common language. But what about situations in which significant numbers of citizens do not share a common language? Are cities of this type not to be thought of as speech communities at all? How do people navigate across language barriers? In such communities, how may even the speech of monolinguals be influenced by languages they do not understand? This paper reviews a number of cases and explores the consequences of taking different positions on this question. It argues that sociolinguistics can only profit from the systematic study of multilingual communities, and that the comparative perspective may help scholars to contribute to solving communication problems that arise in multilingual situations. Lastly, it proposes that the study of linguistic competence cannot be complete without taking multilingualism seriously.

References

- Blanc, Haim. 1964. Communal dialects in Baghdad (Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs, X). Cambridge, Harvard University Press. 204 pp.
- Labov, William 1989. The exact description of the speech community: short a in Philadelphia. In R. Fasold & D. Schiffrin (eds.), *Language Change and Variation*. Washington, Georgetown U.P. Pp. 1-57.