

1 Introduction: Sociolinguistic theory and the practice of sociolinguistics

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Theory and practice

Theory and practice are terms that are often set in opposition to each other, but not for very good reasons. This is a book about theory, but it is not a book that is, one might say, ‘couched in abstractions with little relevance to the real world of language use’. Who needs theory, if that’s what theory is? On the contrary, theory is about what we see and experience in the social world of language, and about how we impute meaning to actions. As language users, we are all theorists, although the discipline of sociolinguistics has particular responsibilities in fostering, through its theory, awareness of what happens at the interface between language and society, and in reviewing what we know and what we have not yet adequately explained. So this is actually a book about practice too – practices of using language and practices of interpreting language in society.

My main task in the chapter is to set the scene for the nineteen chapters that follow; I introduce the chapters and the structure of the volume in the second half of this chapter. Before that it may be useful to comment in quite general terms on ‘theory’, and then on ‘sociolinguistic theory’, the object of debate in this volume, and its historical status in the field. That will lead to an overview of the types of theory that sociolinguistics has aligned with to date, and might profitably align with in the future. This is a necessary debate in itself, especially if it is right to observe that sociolinguistics has entered a phase where ‘theory is everywhere’ and that this is radically influencing what sociolinguistics is and what it does. But we are also arguably in a phase where discussion of what counts as theory, and why it matters in so many practical regards, is still generally lacking. In other words, we need to keep revisiting some basic *metatheoretical* questions about sociolinguistics, following a line of reflexive commentary started by Figueroa over twenty years ago. Figueroa (1994) set out the different principles and assumptions that supported the research of three of the ‘founding fathers’ of sociolinguistics, Labov, Gumperz, and Hymes. She wanted to explain (or theorise, if you like) the theoretical stances that underpinned early sociolinguistics. That reassessment was particularly

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useful in helping us to appreciate points of similarity and difference across these sociolinguistic ‘traditions’, and greater awareness is a prerequisite for innovation. That idea is a key motivation for the present book.

As sociolinguistics has expanded and indeed innovated, the need for this sort of reflexive reassessment has become more urgent. This book has been designed to bring many influential researchers and perspectives more closely into focus with one another. The book is framed as a series of ‘debates’ about sociolinguistics and theory – debates in the sense that contributors reflect on their own and others’ research, asking fundamental questions about the concepts and assumptions that underlie sociolinguistic analysis and interpretation. The overall picture that emerges is one of rapid change and increasing theoretical ambition in sociolinguistics – quite contrary, then, to the older suggestion that sociolinguistics was deficient in the area of theory. But we also get a picture of sociolinguistics as a contested field, being pulled in different directions and subscribing not only to different theories (which is a fairly normal condition for any academic discipline) but also to different types of theory. So these are dynamic and exciting times. New theoretical stances (even if they are sometimes reassertions of older ideas, though more commonly reinterpretations of them) have the potential to radically strengthen the field, but they also come with some risks attached, which I touch on below.

Contemplating sociolinguistic theory

In its sporadic existence so far, ‘sociolinguistic theory’ has referred to several different kinds of endeavour. Not surprisingly, then, people have made very different judgements of how sociolinguistics has stood at different times in its history, and how it stands now, in relation to theory. There was an early period when sociolinguistics was linked to descriptivism, and when descriptivism was apparently a ‘good thing’ (at least in its oppositional relationship to prescriptivism). This, however, left the possibility hanging in the air that ‘descriptive’ might imply ‘atheoretical’, which was presumably *not* such a good thing. Rampton notes that novice linguists were regularly indoctrinated into the view that ‘linguistics [as a whole] is descriptive not prescriptive’ and that this view fed into a dominant ideological commitment in sociolinguistics to study ‘tacit, unself-conscious language use’ in the ambition to find ‘the regularity, system and consistency that defines their professional interest’ (Rampton 2006: 16).

This stance prioritised descriptive adequacy over theoretical adequacy. Burke (2005: 101) traces the slogan ‘who says what to whom, and with what effects’ to political scientist Lasswell (1935). He also notes Fishman’s (1965) influential re-rendering of it – ‘the study of who speaks what language to whom, when’ – as an agenda-setting dictum for the sociology of language,

which was another descriptively oriented ‘wing’ of early sociolinguistics (cf. García et al. 2012). This emphasis on the distributional patterning of languages (also on attitudes to languages) mirrored Labov’s structuralist emphasis on the distribution of (dialectal) sociolinguistic variables. While important principles could be induced from both initiatives, the descriptive endeavour (in Labov’s case inherited in part from the systematicity of early dialectological fieldwork) was viewed as a credentialising characteristic in its own right.

At one point I dared to ask the question ‘What is sociolinguistic theory?’ (Coupland 1998) in a context where sociolinguistics had been criticised for having a theoretical deficit, and for perhaps not knowing what sort of theory it could aspire to. Williams (1992), Romaine (1994), and Coulmas (1997) had all commented on the status of sociolinguistic theory, mainly in support of the view that, up to those dates of publication, sociolinguistics needed *much more theoretical impetus* than it had achieved. In an introduction (Coupland 2001b) to a book on sociolinguistics and social theory (Coupland et al. 2001),¹ I had tried to take the edge off this criticism. Several fields of sociolinguistic research were mentioned that were theoretically rich in their ambitions and achievements. They included some obvious examples, such as Hymes’s (1972) theorising of the social and cultural contexts of language use, elaborated, for example, in Duranti and Goodwin’s (1992) constructionist approach to social context. Gumperz’s (1982) inferential perspective on intercultural encounters was another clear instance, as were Bauman’s (1977) theorising of performance and Milroy and Milroy’s (1992) reinterpretation of social class-based linguistic variation in terms of social networks. Many other contributions deserved to be mentioned. But it is worth noting that sociolinguistic theory, as illustrated by these instances, was eclectic and that particular theoretical contributions made very little effort to speak to each other. It certainly was not the data-based inductive theorising that ‘scientific theory’ classically demanded either. Labov’s theoretical contribution, from its earliest phases (1963, 1966), was indeed based in induction, inducing general principles from extensive empirical research. But in this case the challenge related to how variationism constructed its *social* theory, and therefore its theorising of language–society relations. In an early and unfair critique, Halliday (1978) had suggested that variation research was providing sets of answers to questions that hadn’t been adequately formulated.

In any event, the accusation of theoretical deficit was not so easily countered. Hudson (1980/1996) had lamented the absence of a *unifying* sociolinguistic theory; he seemed to be looking for sociolinguistic theory that

¹ The book considered relationships between sociolinguistics and the ideas of several social theorists, mainly Bourdieu, Foucault, Habermas, and Bakhtin.

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was more inclusive and entertained on a larger scale. He wrote that ‘we badly need a general framework of ideas to integrate the facts into a whole that makes some sort of intellectual sense’ (1996: 228). Romaine’s (1994) point had been similar, arguing that we needed theory that oriented more to social conflict and discrimination than implying social consensus (which was also one of Williams’s points). What was sociolinguistics contributing to the pressing sociological problems and debates of the day? Similarly, Coupland (1997) saw an un-self-critical sociolinguistics that was lost between linguistic theory and social theory, managing only to formulate its own local ‘mini-theories’, with little impact on either mainstream linguistics or the social sciences. Did sociolinguistics lack theoretical ambition of this grander sort? Did sociolinguists lack appreciation of where their own distinctive contributions to the human and social sciences could be made, and were they/we generally ignoring social theory as it was being articulated in the social sciences, and critical theory in the humanities? Maybe yes, quite possibly.

Yet ‘theory’ is a troublesome concept for all disciplines. Aristotle’s *theoria* refers to ‘contemplation’, ‘looking at’ or ‘becoming aware of’ – minimally, then, the idea of being a spectator at the events of one’s own research and having a commitment to scrutinising what research is achieving, relative to other instances and types of research. Are we doing something useful? What are the principles that we agree should be defended? Are we headed in the best direction? Theory is (still in that minimal interpretation of it) reflexive engagement with research, something beyond the techniques and apparatuses that enact particular research projects and deliver research findings. Of course, no research project will be totally devoid of theory in this sense, and the criterion of theoretical adequacy therefore needs to be entertained both qualitatively and quantitatively: Are we reflexively ‘contemplating’ our field of research and its social contribution in the right way, and to an adequate extent? Greek *theoria* had assumed a moral character, and later became a religious imperative (MacIntyre 2007), and this is partly reflected in the above questions.

If we look at some of the particular sociolinguistic initiatives that have branded themselves as contributions to sociolinguistic theory, we immediately see a wide range of interpretations of what theory might mean. Chambers has used the title *Sociolinguistic Theory* for his comprehensive overview of variationist sociolinguistic research (Chambers 1995/2009). He has interpreted his title to mean something like ‘foundational concepts in the quantitative study of language variation and change’ plus ‘generalisations supported by this sort of research’. Chambers’s book is contemplative and reflexive about research, but specifically about research conducted in the Labovian paradigm of variationism, in its quest to generalise about language (dialect) variation and change. Chambers does not substantially engage with the much wider project of sociolinguistics, which, for the purposes of the present volume, refers to the

broad inter- and multidisciplinary terrain where ‘language’, or ‘the linguistic’, meaningfully interacts with ‘society’, or ‘the social’. Nor does Chambers comment on what sort of social theory underlies the variationist paradigm. Yet Labov’s orientation to social class came to be considered ‘Parsonian’ (Parsons 1952), and, as above, it has been critiqued for being overly structuralist and consensus oriented (Kerswill 2007; Block 2014).

Other sociolinguistic paradigms have been referred to as ‘theories’ too. Politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987) identified the relational principles according to which speakers orient to considerations of ‘face’: positive face, a speaker’s desire for his or her public image to be well regarded by others, and negative face, a speaker’s desire to avoid intrusions on her or his personal autonomy. The fact that Brown and Levinson saw face-work as a universal pragmatic dimension of social interaction, whose general principles could (they argued) be induced from comparative observations across different language communities, was probably important in politeness research being able to claim its status as ‘a theory’. This was in some ways paralleled by accommodation theory (Giles and Powesland 1975; Giles et al. 1991), even though in this case principles were induced (and stated as axioms) from extensive experimental studies of how speakers showed different degrees of convergence or divergence in interaction, or how observers associated convergence and divergence with particular sociopsychological motivations.

So these are two examples of theories, developed in specific corners of sociolinguistics, that submit (at least to some extent) to classical conceptions of theorising in the scientific tradition – theory that initially finds its principles and axioms inductively, from regular patterns observed in extensive data. In this classical mode, theoretical generalisations could then stand as hypotheses, generalising statements which might provide a basis for predicting as-yet unobserved outcomes. Another trait that united politeness theory and accommodation theory is that they can be considered ‘rational choice’ (or ‘rational action’) theories, presuming that speakers make ongoing assessments of their speaking environments (and specifically their speaking partners) and are then able to make strategic choices from known sets of discursive options in the service of particular motivations and goals. Rational choice theories have, however, come under criticism in several disciplines (e.g. Schram and Caterino 2006) for overinvesting in people’s capacity to navigate their social worlds on the basis of knowable choices.

The immediately relevant point here is that the examples of ‘sociolinguistic theorising’ we have considered so far do not have application across the whole of sociolinguistics. Nothing that we can call ‘a unified sociolinguistic theory’ has emerged from any of them. We need not go into further detail about classical ‘scientific method and theory’ as a basis for sociolinguistics, from Popper to Hawking or beyond, because it is already obvious that, overall,

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it bears limited relevance to sociolinguistics in most of its current manifestations. Sociolinguistic research has always incorporated a wide range of different methods, from quantitative surveys, through ethnographic observational studies and interviews, to in-depth single-case analyses (Milroy and Gordon 2003; Holmes and Hazen 2014). Sociolinguists continue to pride themselves on the level of detail with which language data are scrutinised in empirical studies. But (for better or worse) there has been a general (by no means exception-less) retreat from large-scale survey-type designs, as sociolinguistic investigations have increasingly favoured theory-heavy, empirically smaller-scale, qualitative investigations that mainly claim the status of ethnographies. Under these circumstances we need to ask what types of theory can be in question.

Theory for the humanities and social sciences

If sociolinguistics wants to maintain its ‘reflexive contemplation’, as it must, how should this sort (or these sorts) of theory be formulated? Taking a lead from social scientific perspectives on theory (Schutt 2014), we would expect sociolinguistic theory to be formulated as sets of statements, generalising where possible, about social reality, couched in concepts whose definitions and interrelationships would be made explicit. Preferred theoretical contributions – ‘good theories’ – would, as in classical scientific theory, have wide reach and applicability, but not necessarily ‘wide reach’ in relation to empirical data. (A key justification for establishing a narrower empirical focus is that social situations and the discursive events transacted within them are unique.) We might maintain the hope that theories should be expressed simply and parsimoniously, but once again, the social world is generally too complex to hold simplicity as a high priority. Like all theory, theory in the social sciences and sociolinguistic theory should still involve abstracting away from particular data contexts and instances. But distinctively from classical scientific theory, it might also be conceived as providing a guide to social action (the moral agenda of ‘theory’ returning to prominence), so that explanation may be insufficient in itself as a priority.

There would be a recognition that social phenomena (including linguistic/discursive phenomena) are not amenable to very reliable categorisation, and to this extent generalisations will be unlikely to be reliably predictive, which presents a challenge over what ‘generalisation’ can actually mean. Because meaning is always at issue in language-related research, generalisation might, for example, mean generalising about how meanings *can* be made under particular conditions, rather than about *how they are* (always or typically) made. There have been metatheoretical initiatives to explain and justify the value of small-scale social investigations, including case studies. One of these

is MacIntyre's (e.g. 2007) lobbying for a phronetic social science (see also Flyvbjerg 2002; Flyvbjerg et al. 2012).

Phronesis is another Aristotelian term, referring to intellectual thought that attends to values and 'value-rationality', in ways that go beyond analytic ('scientific') knowledge (*episteme*) and technical knowledge (*techne*). In Flyvbjerg et al.'s conception, 'From a phronetic perspective, social science works best not when it tries to give us the unrealizable perfection of expert knowledge, such as that which comes from abstract models, but instead when it strives for the 'adequation' of what works for any collective as it struggles to decide things for itself' (Flyvbjerg et al. 2012: 2). The quotation makes it clear that there are political and demotic nuances to this view of social research that are strongly echoed in 'critical' conceptions of theory (see below). There is also explicit recognition that value-linked meanings are only ever detectable in close and context-rich forms of analysis, which echoes ethnographic priorities (Hammersley 1992) and what is sometimes called 'ethnographic theory' (cf. Wilson and Chadda 2009). Without being so-named, a lot of sociolinguistics is showing signs of being reoriented around phronetic-type approaches to theory. This raises further interesting questions about the scale and weight of sociolinguistic theorising. Phronetic social science accepts a relatively humble role for itself – any one of its theoretical interpretations is 'just one voice among many'. It eschews theory as authoritative generalisation.

What then of 'social theory'? This is an ambiguous term that sometimes refers to the full range of social scientific efforts at reflexive 'contemplation' and generalisation, including 'scientifically oriented' theories (cf. Harrington 2005), while at other times referring to efforts to generalise in profound ways about 'how society is now' – that is, in its historical context, prioritising aspects of social change. Turner says that '[s]ocial theory broadly encompasses the general concern with the nature of the social in modern society' (1996: 2). A prominent example is Giddens's treatise on 'living in a post-traditional society' where, for example, he theorises processes of de-traditionalisation, and then how globalisation entails the 'evacuation of tradition' (Giddens 1996: chapter 2). Social theory of this sort addresses the 'big questions' of social change, and these have steadily moved to the forefront of sociolinguistic research.

Many chapters in the present volume illustrate this movement, in reference to change-related concepts such as globalisation, mediatisation, individualisation, reflexivisation, conversationalisation, and so on (cf. Coupland 2010b). There is a striking disjunction between the theoretical 'scaling up' of social theory in this sense and the empirical 'scaling down' of phronesis, and this is paralleled in contemporary sociolinguistics. The fate of sociolinguistic theory is increasingly tightly entwined with the (sociologically) theorised transition from modernity into late modernity. It would be wrong to claim that what

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sociolinguistic theory is and what it does have changed *exclusively* as effects of social change or in the desire to model language-related social change, and there is the familiar query (which surfaces in several later chapters) about the extent to which theory reflects real social change versus changes in intellectual fashion, and then how those two sorts of shift relate to each other. Also, social changes labelled by ‘-isation’ nominals are far from clear-cut and conclusive. As we also see in several later chapters, theorists commonly refer to late modernity as an epoch of nonlinear transition out of modernist priorities into other priorities, with considerable contestation over priorities and normativities (including many that centre on language). But social change cannot be avoided in sociolinguistic theory, if only because we need to review earlier theoretical stances (and possibly theoretical deficits) as possibly being ‘products of their epoch’. (I will come back to these issues in Chapter 20.)

Social theory in its sociological life also tends to disconnect theorising from the large-scale, wide-reach empirical approaches that might be expected to be its basis. At least, theory often tends to have a viable existence prior to large-scale empirical investigation. Do big questions require big data? On the other hand, are the big questions of social theory simply impossible to address according to the classical principle that generalisations should emerge from extensive data? Whatever line we take on this, we end up with difficulties in defining theoretical adequacy. ‘Good theory’ whose reach is broad enough to capture the radical social changes we are currently experiencing may necessarily have to ‘go beyond the data’; theory that tentatively and self-critically explains accumulated observations of human and social experience may not be ‘grand’ enough. In the context of critical theory in the humanities, other important priorities come into play too. Critical theory, or theory through critique, is supported by a metatheory in which ‘elaborate existential judgement’ by individuals or groups (Therborn 1996: 57) has come to be accepted as an alternative to theory based in direct processes of induction and deduction. The ‘judgement’ in question is of course the judgement of critical theorists themselves. But theory that is *not* tied closely to inductive generalisation, speculative though it might be, is able to open up new research perspectives which can then become foci for empirical projects. Recent sociolinguistic work on heteroglossia (e.g. Blackledge and Creese 2014), stylisation and authenticity (e.g. Eckert 2003; Rampton 2006; Coupland 2010a, 2014) are examples of theoretical projects that have arisen in large part from literary traditions of critical research.

Critical theory has found it legitimate, and necessary (because of the political urgency of many of its themes), to provide something close to free-floating critique, particularly when it moves away from its literary origins in the critical examination of texts. Its emphasis is not simply on understanding social and cultural processes, but also on interrogating those processes in

order to point up and *challenge* the systems of dominance and hegemony that they can be shown to espouse. ‘Critical’ in this context therefore implies a critique of ‘interested-ness’, and ‘theory’ implies a cogency and social progressiveness on the part of theorists, viewed from their own perspectives. Those perspectives may be neo-Marxist, and critical theory is quite widely based in opposition to late-capitalist processes and systems, which it often opposes under the banner of postmodernism. Although critical theory was associated with the Frankfurt School from as early as the 1920s, it has strongly influenced the nature of disciplinary theory across the humanities and social sciences for many decades. The recent upsurge in sociolinguistic theory is to a large extent a reorientation towards sociocultural critique via the analysis of language and discourse. This has made it possible to construe (and to critique) a *critical sociolinguistics* (e.g. Singh 1996; Gregersen 1998; Muysken 1998; Blommaert 2005, 2010; Mesthrie and Deumert 2009).

In this short overview of theory in the social sciences and the humanities I have been struggling to *exclude* theoretical perspectives that have had language, discourse, meaning, symbolic action, or semiotics close to their centres. To exclude them is ultimately impossible, of course, because ‘language’ has been a key consideration in many of them and certainly in any approach to theory that can be called ‘critical’. Some of these are briefly mentioned below. My main intention, so far, has been to ask an open-ended question. If it is true that sociolinguistics is moving away from classically ‘scientific’ conceptions of theory, then which of the conceptions adopted in neighbouring fields are sociolinguists aligning themselves with, and why? Many clues (and some direct metatheoretical assessments) emerge in the main chapters of the book. When we look at the character and foci of theories that have emerged from within the field of sociolinguistics (again broadly conceived) relatively recently, we can reflect on whether and to what extent sociolinguistics in fact *needs* to align itself with one or several ‘outside’ approaches to theory (cf. Wodak’s [2000] question: ‘does sociolinguistics need social theory?’), as opposed to generating its own distinctive body (or bodies) of theory.

Sociolinguistic theory ‘from within’ rather than ‘from without’

There is no doubt that many of the most influential theoretical innovations in the area of language and society have come from linguistic anthropology. In his review of the scope of linguistic anthropology, Duranti identifies ‘three major theoretical areas that . . . [had] been developed within linguistic anthropology in the . . . [previous] few decades’; they are performance, indexicality, and participation (in the sense of what it means, culturally speaking, to participate as a speaker in communicative interaction) (Duranti 1997:

14–21). As we shall see in later chapters, each of these themes has maintained its status as an important and evolving focus of sociolinguistic theory. This is particularly true in the case of indexicality, which is shared as the main topic of the four chapters in Part I. But performance too has also expanded its theoretical range in sociolinguistics in connection with the concepts of style and stylisation, voicing and quotativity, ritual, language display, and so on, not least in relation to mediated language and interaction. Participation is a less eye-catching construct, but it has been receiving attention in a wide array of sociolinguistic contexts, for example in relation to linguistic landscape research, minority languages, and media discourse analysis.

Sociolinguistics (in the name of linguistic anthropology) is undoubtedly the ‘home territory’ for the three theoretical ‘nuggets’ that Duranti discusses, even though many other disciplines will lay legitimate claim to them – for example, performance will certainly be claimed by literary, media, and theatre studies, but also by sociology (see Alexander et al. 2006 on ‘social performance’). The question then arises of whether sociolinguistic theory might be further enhanced by developing its ‘nuggets’ in ways that map more closely onto neighbouring theoretical tendencies elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences. Would it be productive, for example, to incorporate more critical perspectives into the theorising of indexical relations, or more social-theoretic (e.g. globalisation-linked) perspectives into performance theory (which might indeed be productive for the sociolinguistic account of mediation and mediation – see Chapter 20)?

There is no shortage of home-sourced sociolinguistic theory and theories, and only a few obvious others can be mentioned here. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) developed out of critical linguistics to be the major interdisciplinary orientation to linguistically and textually mediated power relations (see, e.g., Fairclough 1992, 1995; Blommaert 2005; Wodak 2012). Its prevalence has been one of the main stimuli for sociolinguistics as a whole to ‘go critical’. Similarly, and although sociologists will assert that he ‘belongs to them’ rather than to something called sociolinguistics, Bourdieu has been remarkably influential within recent decades of sociolinguistic research. In fact Bourdieu is the prime example of how permeable the boundary between sociolinguistics and the social sciences can be. Blommaert (2015) provides a critical review of the impact of Bourdieu’s research (and one which goes well beyond Bourdieu’s now-familiar concept of symbolic capital; Bourdieu 1991) on different thematic areas of sociolinguistics, including linguistic ethnography and language-ideological theory.

Language ideology research itself (e.g. Silverstein 1979; Irvine and Gal 2000) shares CDA’s critical perspective, but it originated at the intersection of linguistic anthropology and semiotics. Language ideology, a concept that is so heavily represented in later chapters, has become a major paradigm (while