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## LINGUIST List 17.206

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### Review: Textbooks/Socioling: Coulmas (2005)

Editor for this issue: Lindsay Butler <lindsay @ linguistlist.org>

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What follows is a review or discussion note contributed to our Book Discussion Forum. We expect discussions to be informal and interactive; and the author of the book discussed is cordially invited to join in. If you are interested in leading a book discussion, look for books announced on LINGUIST as "available for review." Then contact Sheila Dooley at dooley @ linguistlist.org.

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1. Simo Määttä, *Sociolinguistics: The Study of Speakers' Choices*
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#### Message 1: Sociolinguistics: The Study of Speakers' Choices

**Date:** 20-Jan-2006

**From:** Simo Määttä <Simo.Maatta @ uta.fi>

**Subject:** Sociolinguistics: The Study of Speakers' Choices

AUTHOR: Coulmas, Florian

TITLE: Sociolinguistics

SUBTITLE: The Study of Speakers' Choices

PUBLISHER: Cambridge University Press

YEAR: 2005

Announced at <http://linguistlist.org/issues/16/16-1719.html>

Simo K. Määttä, School of Modern Languages and Translation Studies, University of Tampere, Finland.

This textbook provides a comprehensive overview of the main issues with which sociolinguistics is engaged. It is particularly suitable for undergraduate education: while some of the concepts might be difficult to grasp, they are presented in an easily accessible form and combined with numerous concrete examples, which makes understanding them easier. Besides, SOCIOLINGUISTICS is a valuable reference book for anyone interested in the social life of language.

The introductory chapter examines theories of language and

language variation within different traditions of linguistic. Language has a biological basis, on the one hand, it lives in society, on the other. Both aspects need to be studied. However, (theoretical) linguistics cannot explain linguistic diversity: only an exploration of the social side of language can. Starting with Saussure's mention of language being a social fact, i.e., a code shared within a language community, the chapter discusses differences between sociolinguistics ('language as a social fact') and autonomous linguistics ('language as a natural fact'). These two approaches should be regarded as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Indeed, while 'biolinguistics' disregards the historical dimension of language, this aspect is crucial in approaches stressing the social side of language. As the subtitle of the textbook suggests, choice is a key notion in sociolinguistics. Thus, its aim is to study individual choices affecting speech behaviour insofar as these choices build up collective choices. Since cooperative behaviour within a speech community requires appropriate usage of unmarked choices, linguistic socialization consists primarily of learning to master the difference between marked and unmarked choices.

Chapter Two examines the social stratification of language and the often uneasy distinction between standard and dialect. While language variation is universal and has been the subject of inquiry in several cultures, variationist sociolinguistics is essentially a Western science. Thus, concepts developed within this paradigm should be applied with caution to other societies and other times, for there are diverging patterns of assigning prestige to particular speech behaviour. Numerous examples are used to illustrate the culture-specific nature of dialectal fragmentation based on geographical or social stratification. Special emphasis is placed on the fact that not only social class and geographical location but also factors such as gender, ethnicity, race, occupation, etc. should be taken into account within the variationist paradigm. On the other hand, while sociolinguists need a model of social stratification for their studies, such abstractions are always artificial and arbitrary. Indeed, rather than concentrating on social indexing through isolated dialects, today's sociolinguistics is more interested in dialects and populations in contact, as well as the ways in which speakers accommodate their speech in each particular situation.

While there is a difference between the ways in which men and women speak in all language communities which have been studied, these differences are not always consistent. Chapter Three, which examines the relation between language and gender, provides various intriguing examples of lexical, phonological, and discourse-related studies about gender as a discrete sociolinguistic variable, yet contingent upon other factors, such as age, culture, situation, education, etc. A good part of the chapter is dedicated to the political dimension of language and gender: no other area of (socio) linguistic inquiry has been more politicized.

Chapter Four scrutinizes age as a factor of sociolinguistic variation. Not only the particularities of 'deviant' age cohorts, such as infancy and old age, but also those of adulthood, i.e., the norm, are examined. The presentation of studies of Japanese 'high-school-girl' talk

provides a particularly interesting example for classroom discussion. This chapter also considers the relation between old age and language attrition, as well as beliefs and attitudes related to age.

The topic of Chapter Five is language change over time. Language, within this chapter, is understood as an event rather than a thing; indeed, language per se, for instance a sound segment, does not change. Rather, people change the way they pronounce sounds, i.e., they CHOOSE differently. From this speaker-centred perspective, language change is best understood in terms of apparent time (as opposed to real time) -- since the age gap between different generations corresponds to a certain amount of time, linguistic variation between these generations indicates linguistic change in time. Thus, the concept of apparent time allows combining synchronic and diachronic linguistics. The chapter presents fascinating longitudinal studies of linguistic change over generations. It also discusses the increased prestige and dissemination of non-standard varieties spoken in big cities and discusses different points of view concerning the origins of linguistic change.

Chapter Six is dedicated to politeness studies, a major sub-field of sociolinguistics today. The chapter includes the discussion of the concepts of face, markedness, and cooperation, which form the general framework from which politeness arises, and presents a comprehensive overview of research on linguistic politeness in different languages, in particular Vietnamese, Japanese, Thai, and Japanese.

While the first part of the book deals with micro-level choices, Part Two presents sociolinguistic phenomena related to macro-level choices. Code-switching, the topic of Chapter Seven, is examined from the viewpoint of speakers engaging in this practice ('Who switches?'), the ways in which this is done ('How?'), and the reasons why code-switching occurs ('Why?'). The term 'code' is preferred instead of 'language' because switching can happen both between varieties of one language and different languages. The chapter also discusses the relation between code-switching and bilingualism. Examples of different types of bilingual behaviour, most of which cannot be classified as code-switching, provide particularly useful material for classroom discussion.

Diglossia and bilingualism, in Chapter Eight, are defined by using several examples from throughout the world. The chapter discusses issues such as writing and standardization, linguistic ideology, genetic relation between language varieties as an alleged prerequisite for diglossia, status and function, domains, accommodation, and the measurement of bilingualism.

The ways in which languages spread, disappear, and resist attrition is the topic of Chapter Nine. While the spread of today's major languages and their symbolic strength compared to their speaker populations is explained in detail in this chapter, the discussion of the languages of the Internet is particularly thought-provoking. The chapter also examines language loyalty and ethnolinguistic vitality and concludes with a discussion of the overwhelming presence of English.

Chapter Ten deals with individual, social, and national identity as related to language. The notion of a stable, uncontested identity is challenged: linguistic identities can be multiple and they can be constructed.

Chapter Eleven concentrates on language planning: it explains the reasons why language planning exists and the many measures it involves, again with numerous examples from different language communities. The chapter also includes a short discussion of the Western bias of language planning.

Writing, writing systems, and the passage from oral to written usage are themes of Chapter Twelve, comprising a discussion of the political implications of choosing a language, a variety, a writing system and a script, and spelling conventions.

Chapter Thirteen, 'The language of choice,' discusses the role of English as a linguistic super-power.

There is a concise glossary of key terms at the end of the book. Each chapter concludes with study questions and selected references for further reading, which can be quite useful in the sociolinguistics classroom. In addition, students will find summaries of main points at the end of each chapter particularly helpful. Due to abundant examples of sociolinguistic phenomena in different language communities, the text is accessible even to a newcomer in the field; references to both classic and contemporary sociolinguistic research make this textbook a useful resource for anyone. The division between micro-choices (Part One), related to variationist sociolinguistics, and macro-choices (Part Two), dealing with sociology of language, works relatively well even though the distinction is not always easy to make and can be quite arbitrary. In fact, this distinction could have been made explicit in the introduction rather than in Chapter Seven.

While a textbook is not the default forum for the discussion of epistemological or theoretical problems of a discipline, the criticism of the notion of language in theoretical linguistics and the Western bias of certain sub-fields of sociolinguistics, language planning in particular, can be used to stimulate a lively discussion in class. On the other hand, the book does not tackle the essentialist vein of the entire sociolinguistic enterprise. For example, while the constructed, free-floating nature of identities is elaborated to some extent, this is not taken into account when discussing, for instance, language and gender. To characterize 'sex' as 'a compulsory exercise, reproduction' and 'gender' as 'the fun of it, an art, a cultural achievement' is somewhat surprising indeed.

There is little discussion in this textbook and in sociolinguistics in general about the ways in which others interpret, acknowledge, and accept the choices people make when using language in order to be indexed in a particular way. While this reflects the fact that there are few studies of the topic, it also generates a few questions. Thus, if all language USE cannot be but a choice, the interpretation of linguistic,

social, and political meanings is a choice, too. Indeed, if sociolinguistics studies social identities constructed in and through language, would it be possible to study the linguistic construction of sociolinguistic categories as well? After all, these categories appear to be based on the assumption that it is possible to interpret why and how people make choices governing their language use. Finally, could there be a place for a sociolinguistics of LANGUAGE which does not take for granted the unity of the sociolinguistic ideal speaker with monolithic intentions, for a sociolinguistics concentrating on the ways in which language in use, once it is brought into being by the socially contingent speaking subject, does things?

#### ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Simo K. Määttä received his Ph.D. from the Department of French, University of California at Berkeley in May 2004. He teaches French Linguistics at the University of Tampere, Finland. Research interests: sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, translation studies, language ideologies.

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