

## BOOK REVIEW

Sali A. Tagliamonte (2016). *Making Waves. The Story of Variationist Sociolinguistics*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

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In the summer of 2014 one of the most interesting linguists of our time retired at the age of 86: William Labov. He gave linguistics an important empirical turn about fifty years ago — his dissertation on sound change in New York City appeared as a book in 1966 — by showing that it is not just the case that every person speaks slightly differently from every other person, or that every person speaks differently in one situation from the next, but also that there is order within this apparent chaos, and that one can show this order if one combines new fieldwork techniques with sufficiently sophisticated statistics.

The idea that linguistic variation is never random, but reflects social reality — an idea that is sometimes referred to as ‘structured heterogeneity’ — turned out to be the key to a fruitful research paradigm, not just for Labov himself, but for a large community around him: the field of *variational sociolinguistics*.

The fact that Labov is not very far from turning 90 now, means that also his first generation of students is approaching the age of retirement. And this in turn means that people start to look back, and historical views start appearing. One could say that it is about time: for some other branches of linguistics we already possess a wealth of historical sources, but for variational sociolinguistics interesting sources are still missing. The new book, *Making waves*, in which the well-known Canadian sociolinguist Sali Tagliamonte provides as it were an eye witness account of the developments in this field of the past 50 years.

The history of linguistics of the past half century has had a special focus on generative linguistics, originating with Labov’s contemporary Noam Chomsky (1928). This can be explained from the fact that Chomsky has become more famous outside of strictly linguistic circles — among other things because of his political work —, and because he made certain claims about language that led to more philosophical controversy (innateness, the autonomy of syntax from semantics). It may also be because Chomsky started his work earlier — Labov had had other careers before he entered graduate school — and Chomsky’s students made more noise, leading also sometimes to very loud wars *within* generativism. These ‘linguistic wars’ have made for interesting historiography.

This obviously does not mean that it would not be worthwhile to not describe the history of other subfields outside of formal grammar. To the contrary,

linguistics has obviously been flowering in many different shapes in the second half of the twentieth century. Sociolinguistics, for one thing, has been, and continues to be a living field full of talented researchers who implemented a professional form of doing scientific research into a scholarly discipline: collecting 'real' data and trying to find statistical patterns in those. This meant they were more involved in 'normal' science, and less of philosophy, but introducing methodologies from the social and natural sciences within an area that is traditionally the domain of the humanities was far from trivial. I believe there are very few graduate programmes in linguistics nowadays where students do not get at least some statistical and methodological training, but this was unthinkable 50 years ago.

Tagliamonte has interviewed many key figures in this development for her book. In doing so, she clearly concentrates on the first two generations — with Labov being the first generation all on his own, and the second generation consisting of Labov's students or those who were elsewhere directly inspired by his earlier work during their student years. Later generations — the students of these students — are hardly mentioned at all, and in particular do not have their own voice in this book.

Tagliamonte, who herself is a prominent member of this 'second generation' cites many literal quotations from many interviews in her book. It is always interesting to read the story of pioneers — the Nijmegen professor Roeland van Hout, for instance, explains how he was the first to get Labov's Varbrul software to run on a Dutch computer in order to be able to statistically analyse linguistic variation —, and at the same time the reader gets a readable introduction into the theory.

Tagliamonte discusses among other things how statistical techniques developed and became more sophisticated; how some sociolinguists actively worked for African-American children in America and other children that were usually categorized as having linguistic deficiencies; how ideas about doing good fieldwork developed over time; and how certain core ideas of the theory became more and more precisely articulated.

If early sociolinguistic work unproblematically posited differences between men and women ('women lead language change from above'), later on one recognized that such differences are primarily statistical in nature, and not necessarily linked to biological sex. The title of Tagliamonte's book, *Making waves*, refers to the most popular view on the developments in the field: Penelope Eckert's proposal that we distinguish three 'waves' of sociolinguistic theorizing, in which every 'wave' would see sociolinguistic variables less as predetermined givens (biological sex), and more as identity markers (gender).

The book is written in a clear and lively style, but it is also mostly anecdotal in nature. I find it remarkable that there is not more attention to empirical data

on for instance numbers of sociolinguistic publications, or the relative spread of this particular view on linguistics within linguistic departments across the world.

More than this, I regret that there has been not more attention to variation. I already mentioned that the book is mostly about one generation. Maybe this focus is due to the strong personality of Labov leaving such a strong mark that it is difficult for some people to imagine it happening in circles that are a bit more remote. But lack of diversity is also otherwise an ironic problem of the book. One gets the impression that variational sociolinguistics is not just an Western enterprise, but as a matter of fact mostly an Anglosaxon one, and predominantly American at that. Roeland van Hout is not just the only Dutch person who has been interviewed, but also one of the very few non-anglophone researchers. And only one of his students is mentioned, the Nijmegen professor Stefan Grondelaers (of Flemish origin), whose name is furthermore spelled wrongly.

This is a regrettable oversight, as the last few years have witnessed several attempts to do variational research also outside of the Anglosaxon world, which can only give us much better insight in the interaction between language and society. Not taking these developments into account can possibly be justified from a purely historical point of view if the book would have ended more explicitly, say, at the turn of the century.

However, altogether *Making waves* is an interesting first attempt at writing the history of those that were inspired by Labov's groundbreaking work. One can only hope that more studies in this interesting area will follow.