



## RESEÑA / REVIEW

**Sali A. Tagliamonte:**  
***Variationist Sociolinguistics.***  
***Change, Observation, Interpretation***

(Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. 402 pages)

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Our purpose in this review is to outline the core tenets of Tagliamonte's book titled *Variationist Sociolinguistics. Change, Observation, Interpretation*. Then we will discuss those issues germane to variationism which whetted many linguists curiosity and which, of course, sparked Tagliamonte's interest.

It is important to recognize that the preparing of this book would not have been possible if the author had not assumed a previous number of influences on conceptualizing and analyzing sociolinguistic problems. This work is on some variationism theoretical issues with their practical implications as they were assumed by many researchers. Indeed, the view of Tagliamonte's research is typical of the variationist school, which has dominated the last decades, through the work of scholars like Labov (1963, 1969, 1972, 1983, 1994, 2001, 2010), Dittmar (1976, 1989), Nordberg (1980), Romaine (1982, 1996), Moreno Fernández (1988, 1990, 1997, 1998), López Morales (1989), Blas Arroyo (2005), Fought (2004), Kiesling (2011), Tagliamonte (2006), Silva Corvalán (1989, 2001), Serrano (2011a), etc. They proposed universal laws of linguistic change and variation.

Like so many other studies, this book explores some of the ways language variation works. It tries to give a new comprehensive overview of variationism, adding new knowledge and new insights to this fruitful methodological proposal. It can be regarded as a key to the conception of linguistic variation, delving deeply into many approaches to variation and complementing them. But most captivating—and most interesting—is that it is a research that questions some sociolinguistics concepts, in particular those which for far too long promoted twilight situations in this field. It is also an accessible textbook which offers to the students hands-on practical experience through some activities.

The interest in sociolinguistics has always occupied a central place in Professor Tagliamonte's scientific preoccupations and had a great impact on her professional interests (see,

for example, Tagliamonte, 1999-2001, 2002, 2003-2006, 2006). By and large, this book owes a great deal to these previous studies. However, over the years the author's interest has grown for this discipline; she has enriched her research as this work is therefore, first and foremost, an extremely successful attempt to write a variationism textbook, which may be a useful route for students and researchers to a better understanding of language variation, in particular thanks to its way of laying out the most important problems of this sociolinguistic approach.

The linguist mapped out the gestation of this research by focussing on 12 empirically well grounded chapters meshed with previous ideas carried out by other scholars. The first chapter provides an essential background for a "sociolinguistic variation theory." Chapters 2 & 3 deal with the social and linguistic constraints. Together with the fourth chapter, the fifth one attempts to explain the sociolinguistic methodology. The following chapter is concerned with comparative sociolinguistics, while the application of various linguistic methods in the study of phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics is further illuminated by the findings of the chapters 7-11. Finally, the last chapter examines how linguistic variation is influenced by underlying linguistic abilities and also by social factors and socio-cultural background of the interlocutors. Each chapter of this book offers fairly lengthy discussions about some problematic aspects related to the variationist sociolinguistic research and various stimulating exercises relevant to the topics discussed.

As a point of departure, the fundamental questions, with which the opening chapter faces up, are about the genesis and the development of linguistic change and variation. Dr. Tagliamonte reviews variationism in its various guises and raises some of the underlying questions and ideas the readers should bear in their minds throughout the book. In addition, she focuses in particular on a variationist theory of sociolin-

guistics, limiting it to fundamental concepts like *the linguistic variable*, *the principle of accountability*, and she examines the impact of each of them on linguistic variation (see Labov, 1969, 1972; Romaine, 1994; Cedergren & Sankoff, 1974, for more detailed information).

Firstly, we may well observe that the author provides helpful clues in defining sociolinguistics as “the interaction between language, culture and society” (p. 1). As beneficiary of several years rich in variationism studies, Tagliamonte has infinitely larger sources to draw upon. It is worth noting that, for instance, in a work of 1980 (1980: 83), Hudson made some shrewd criticism of sociolinguistics and demonstrated that there was a very strong connection between language, society and culture. This view is similar to that of Newmeyer (1988), who considers this discipline as the relation between “language and sociocultural context” and it is closely associated with the one which argues that sociolinguistics studies the “relation between language and society” (see, for example, Labov, 1972), a definition which sheds less light on the nature of the discipline.

All in all, it is clear that Tagliamonte’s preference is therefore for the first view, pointing out that one should take account and be aware of the cultural dimension, too. What is evident is that the definition of sociolinguistics covered here seems more relevant than the other since the study of society in relation to language defines what is generally known as the sociology of language. To obtain some idea of the extent to which such a term may be defined, Dr. Tagliamonte, in addition to these views, delves into a little more to argue that the target of sociolinguistics might be “everyday speech” (Sankoff, 1980: 54) or “real language in use” (Milroy, 1992: 66). The manner in which the author defines sociolinguistics may seem very satisfactory, since she presents various definitions of this discipline and unifies them all in a single one.

Having established the definition of socio-

linguistics, in the second half of this chapter, the scholar attempts to carefully document us about some core concepts. Tagliamonte’s idea of linguistic variables meaning has a manifestly previous origin. In this sense, first of all, the conceptual dimension of it can be grasped in the words of Sapir (1921: 147), who has made similar discoveries adding his own penetrating insight: “Everyone knows that language is variable” and, secondly, it is important to notice that Tagliamonte’s definition of *linguistic variables* follows a very clearly marked path, being quite similar to Cedergren’s one, who describes them as “un conjunto de equivalencia de realizaciones o expresiones de un mismo elemento o principio subyacente” (1983: 150). Indeed, Tagliamonte’s definition turns out to be as clear-cut as Cedergren’s one: “A linguistic variable is the alternation of forms, or ‘layering’ of forms, in language” (p. 2).

The linguist spends the rest of this chapter looking in detail at *the principle of accountability*. Developing the work of earlier scholars, the author leaves us not only with a general view of this principle, but also with a general discussion about a set of items in relation to this topic (the difficulties of using quantitative methodology, the set up of variables and interpretative criteria, etc.) using some examples, a discussion which can be helpful for the readers.

The notion of some kind of social patterns (class, education, style, sex) is covered in the second chapter. Professor Tagliamonte explores them in a new and more dynamic way in the sense they are envisioned through a series of previous studies. We note that some of the ideas drawn by the author in the discussion of these factors serve to guide the readers since she criticizes some studies in the wake of the general interest and approaches which these factors have received. The great advantage in operating with such a complete picture of different previous perspectives is that it allows readers to get in touch with a solid foundation for the

linguistic variation study. What perhaps is most interesting about this approach is the extended amount of examples to emphasize the importance of each social factor which might almost be a direct response to the difficulties which may betoken the language variation.

Some features of the linguistic patterns are presented in the third chapter. In particular, the author stresses how the language production is influenced not only by linguistic variables, but also by the cognitive abilities. She considers language from the perspective of language use (Bybee, 2002; see, also, Bybee, 2006 & 2010). The consideration of speakers' cognitive abilities may be very important for appreciating the language variation and change (see Preston, 1989, 1992, 1993; Thomas, 2002) not just in order to understand the nature of the variation, but also in order to see to which extent it is influenced by these factors. She continues the Labov's lines of thought developed in the third volume of *Principles of Linguistic Change*.

These considerations point to the possibility to study the cognitive constraints too, but they do not provide precise and articulated statements of a cognitive approach; they only offer some summary discussions about some cognitive aspects related to language variation and change. Much of the recent literature on the linguistic variation implies a deeper study of them. To mention an example, Moreno Fernández (2012) not only emphasizes the importance of these factors, but, through the way of describing them, he openly applies for a change in the sociolinguistic field (see, also, Janicky, 2006). Then, in this context, it is interesting to mention that the cognitive factors become the starting point for a new sociolinguistic frame which questions the previous studies by paying particular attention to the cognitive approach and by considering that the linguistic and social factors must be on an equal footing with the cognitive ones.

In the chapters 4-6, the author considers a

variety of topics that have fallen under the field of sociolinguistic methodology (see Colatoni, 2011, for the use of methodology in sociolinguistics; Bailey & Tillery, 2004, for the difficulties that variationist methodology can present), from speech community, specific methods of gathering and analysing data (chapter 4) to the discussion of quantitative analysis (chapter 5) and of comparative method in sociolinguistics (chapter 6). She views the interpretation of data in terms of a number of issues which arise when attempting to study a speech community.

Becoming extremely familiar with the corpora gathering methods through her various investigations, the author tries to reflect a specific understanding of this world, explanations fuelled by her own examples. She makes the effort to find, through these systematic viewings, those solutions that could be emblematic. Indeed, throughout the chapter 4, Tagliamonte is alert to the possibility of presenting the difficulties which a sociolinguist can affront when he decides to gather some data for a study. Such a work is of course limited, and confined to the corpus which is collected. Indeed, one can hardly argue with the conclusion which draws the linguist since the speakers, circumstances, and linguistic and social variables can be problematic as they involve some extremely important decisions:

It is tough to create a sociolinguistic corpus. There will be considerable water under the bridge between the time of the slammed doors and tense stories to the time when a savvy website sports the fancy graphs and tables. When you are face to face with someone you have never seen before and you have to talk to them for at least an hour, you need to have a question that will rouse a story. When confronted with the data, you have to know what to do with it, how, and why (p. 101).

Although we find Tagliamonte's explanations of great interest, it would be too ambitious to say that she clarifies all the ambiguities related to sociolinguistic corpora; it would be im-

possible. Moreover, the scholar did not come to any clear conclusion, let alone agreement, concerning what constitutes a corpus and how one works, recognizing the limitations that it can present since a corpus can be variously figured today.

The theme that runs through the fifth chapter is the exploration of the quantitative methods used by language variation researchers. In exploring them, the professor touches a variety of statistical programs. The author addresses diverse aspects of the sociolinguistic interpretation of the data. In describing these programs, Tagliamonte calls attention to crucial issues about the interpretation and the explanation of linguistic variation and change since, as she points out (p. 157), “the most important thing of all is to understand your data, to be accountable to your data, and to make every effort to explain the data.” This chapter helps readers to improve their capacity of understanding how these tools run since it presents a critical reappraisal of three programs (*R*, *Rbrul* and *Goldvarb*), suggesting new fruitful ways of exploring the sociolinguistic data. But there are now more spacious perspectives in which to work (see, for example, Moreno Fernández, 2012, for more detailed information). All in all, in some ways, the chapter 5 is an echo of a previous Tagliamonte’s study published in 2006.

Comparative sociolinguistic techniques become paramount in the light of the sixth chapter, where statistical significance, relative strength of factors and constraint ranking appear to be a sufficient condition for interpreting the results. These principles, which were introduced by Meyerhoff (2009), provide a highly applicability for this type of sociolinguistic methodology. Taken together, these three chapters seek to be a substantial contribution to our understanding of the interpretation of the sociolinguistic data; a large amount of concepts and problems has been addressed in these sections.

Chapters 7-11 are a very useful source of

bibliographical information. Using concrete examples, the author discusses phonological, morpho-syntactic, discursive and pragmatic variables. Under the heading of phonological variation, in chapter 7 Tagliamonte focuses on the implications of social class, social network, education and sex (see Medina-Rivera, 2011, for the difficulties that phonetic-phonology variation can raise; see, also, Moreno Fernández, 2011; Lipski, 2011; Samper Padilla, 2011, for phonological variation approaches in Hispanic countries) and she makes use of two examples, the *t/d* and *ing* variables, which illustrate the extent to which studies concerning the phonological variation have been published. Many of the facts about these variables can be found in a detailed and balanced treatment where the author points out that the results of these variables are not readily available in their entirety. Nevertheless, the seventh chapter can be seen as an introductory work (it is important both for the theoretical aspects and for the useful examples based on various studies) since the prosody has not been treated at any length and the gap could have been filled with reference to at least some works (Cepeda & Roldán, 1995; Cepeda, 1998; López Bobo & Cuevas-Alonso, forthcoming; Martín Butragueño, 2006 & 2011; Moreno Fernández, 1998).

Along chapters 8-11, Tagliamonte points out the difficulties to find methods and means of analyzing the morpho-syntactic, discursive and pragmatic variables. The observations made are only meant to provide some insights regarding the linguistic variation; they give expression to the feeling that although the insights of variationist sociolinguistic have long been applied to the description and analysis of these variables, they “tend to be multifaceted with implications for several areas of the grammar” (p. 235). However, lately a particular interest in such studies began to emerge highlighting the misunderstandings that can emerge from this kind of researches, with Schwenter (2011) and Torres Cacoullos (2011) works for the variationist approaches to

morpho-syntax; Bentivoglio & Sedano (2011) and Serrano (2011b) for morphosyntactic variation in Hispanic area, among many other scholars.

In the final part of the book, in chapter 12, Dr. Tagliamonte reiterates the main points made in the previous chapters, which explain how language variation and change can be studied in a variationism way. The author, armed to tackle the big questions of the field, tries to shed light on them, as well as to set the scene for further discussions that might lead to new advances in this field, being aware that the last word on the variationist sociolinguistics has not yet been told.

Through this volume, Tagliamonte makes a great attempt to mitigate the variationist anomalies by inserting explanations at points where they might mislead. She enlarges and enhances a lot of variationism aspects and concepts which could raise complex questions; this textbook approach is practical enough to be useful to beginners and captivating enough to keep the interest of more experienced researchers.

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