Introduction

“Sociolinguistic Variation: Critical Reflections” is a compilation of works written by leading and emerging scholars in sociolinguistic variation and presented as a tribute to Ronald Macaulay’s sociolinguistic career. It takes a critical look at assumptions that have been made in variationist research in order to strengthen research practice within the field and better engage with interdisciplinary themes present in other related fields of study. According to editor, Carmen Fought, “Taken together, the chapters in “Sociolinguistic Variation” are a kind of road map of the field: where we have been and where we hope to go” (Fought 7).

Content

This book begins with an introduction written by the editor that briefly describes the underlying themes that are present throughout the book, including topics such as language ideologies, defining dialects and speech communities, and identity construction. Fought also provides an overview of each of the eleven chapters that are divided into four sections: sociolinguistic methods, the exploration of “place,” influences on adult speech, and attitudes and ideologies.

Section One: Sociolinguistic Methods

Section one is comprised of three chapters that look at sociolinguistic interview methodology and ways that awareness of the community context and specific elements of the interview (especially narrative sections) are critical for understanding interview as a whole.

In chapter one, “Some Sources of Divergent Data in Sociolinguistics,” Guy Bailey and Jan Tillery argue that the field of quantitative sociolinguistics needs more rigorous methodology. In particular, they focus on identifying effects that individual fieldworkers and interviewers may have on data gathered during an interview (e.g. the Rutledge Effect) and ways that sampling and analytical strategies can impact the ability of a particular interview event to be representative of a larger population. They conclude with an appeal for better reporting of methodology in order to
understand the extent to which research findings actually reflect the target population and are not merely a result of research procedures.

Chapter two, William Labov’s “Ordinary Events,” is a detailed analysis of a single oral narrative from Macaulay’s Scotland fieldwork. Labov argues that narratives provide data that is less influenced by the effects of observation and recording than other interview elements. He focuses on the narrative’s structure and components, including the temporal organization of the story, the participants’ actions and casting of blame and praise, the need to establish the teller’s credibility and reportability of events, and the way in which suspense is built throughout the narrative chain of events and the juxtaposition of ordinary and extraordinary events.

In chapter three, “Exploring Intertextuality in the Sociolinguistic Interview,” Natalie Schilling-Estes encourages sociolinguists to avoid the assumption that the interviewee’s voice is always their own since memorization and summaries from other sources (e.g. idioms) can be heavily relied on in an interview. She does this by analyzing a single interview from a community in southeastern North Carolina, showing through it that intertextuality is pervasive in sociolinguistic interviews, just as it is in spontaneous conversation and written texts. Posing more questions than providing answers, Schilling-Estes argues that intertextuality in the sociolinguistic interview presents a serious dilemma in variation studies since it is difficult to determine at any given moment when an utterance is the speaker’s own or borrowed from another source.

Section Two: The Exploration of “Place”

Section two reexamines the idea of place and community and presents them as constantly changing physical and psychological settings rather than fixed spaces. Together, chapters four through six consider “the social context in which individual identities are created and against which they are evaluated” (Fought 5).

Barbara Johnstone, in chapter four’s “Place, Globalization, and Linguistic Variation,” discusses ‘place’ and ‘local’ as both psychological meaning and physical location and argues that they are important sociolinguistic concepts because of how closely they tie to people’s identities and language use. She frames her discussion in historical perspectives of physical and humanistic geography as well as in the postmodern perspective of ‘place’ and ‘local’, suggesting that both ethnography and discourse analysis can be used as initial research tools for understanding how variation processes happen.

In chapter five, Walt Wolfram looks at a place where individual identity and social context are both in motion, considering “The Sociolinguistic Construction of Remnant Dialects.” He defines a remnant dialect as a language variety that retains aspects of an earlier variety that is no longer in widespread use in the general population, and proceeds to consider their social and linguistic features in greater depth. Through consideration of remnant dialects in the eastern United States, Wolfram hypothesizes a set of seven principles that may apply to remnant dialect communities’ experiences of language variation and change and encourages testing of these principles in future research.
Penelope Eckert’s “Variation and a Sense of Place” in chapter six uses ethnographic and sociolinguistic study of adolescents in five Detroit high schools to highlight the need for embedding variation studies within sociogeographical contexts. Based on what she learned from scrutinizing her own preconceived expectations in research and how Detroit study participants actually expressed their local values through language and behavioral choices, Eckert argues that studies of variation should do a better job of examining how local and extralocal relate to each other.

Section Three: Influences on Adult Speech

The third section includes two chapters that use sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic lenses to investigate how language variation develops in individuals and may shift as they interact with their surrounding community.

In chapter seven, Gillian Sankoff’s “Adolescents, Young Adults, and the Critical Period: Two Case Studies from ‘Seven Up’” uses a longitudinal study through real-time interviews of a group of British speakers from different backgrounds to show that people’s phonetic and phonological constructions in speech can change after their formative years. Sankoff identifies three issues that she believes are involved in these changes: the degree to which different phonological or phonetic features carry social meaning, the level at which speakers are conscious of phonetic variation, and the extent to which speakers can control this type of variation in their language use.

Chapter eight, “Three Kinds of Sociolinguistics: A Psycholinguistic Perspective” by Dennis R. Preston, argues the importance of considering language development and grammatical construction well into adulthood. Preston breaks down variationist linguistics into three levels: level one correlates linguistic and social factors, level two looks at the influence of linguistic factors on each other, and level three considers patterns of ongoing linguistic change and related sociocultural and linguistic forces. For each level of variationist work, he proposes a psycholinguistic model of grammatical variation and ultimately argues that people exhibit grammatical variation because they have access to separate grammars, some of which may be acquired as postvernacular adult grammatical forms.

Section Four: Attitudes and Ideologies

The final section focuses on language attitudes and ideologies as central elements in the field of sociolinguistic variation and encourages researchers to better integrate attitude research into variationist studies.

Lesley Milroy’s primary goal in chapter nine’s “Language Ideologies and Linguistic Change” is to propose a framework that treats individual language attitudes and ideologies as a social process that are connected to their community’s language beliefs and ideologies. Using the idea of ‘standard’ in Standard English and previous researchers’ ideological analyses of sociolinguistic data, she shows how sociolinguistic variables can reveal ideological construction. She concludes by asserting that “local social factors, discussed here in terms of ideologically driven processes rather than as social categories, operate as constraints on language-internal change” (Milroy 173).
For Milroy, language ideologies must be considered in relation to a community’s structured and patterned language variation and are salient factors of variationist study.

Chapter ten, Ronald Macaulay’s “The Radical Conservatism of Scots,” presents evidence against previously established theories that Scotland does not have a unique linguistic form of speech distinct from England’s English or that Scottish people necessarily try to move toward prestige varieties of English. Using data from over 200 interviews in Scotland, Macaulay claims that, as compared to other social classes in Scotland, the working class exhibits the most marked features distinct from Standard English. He also shows that this directly correlates with their distinct Scottish social identity as displayed both in how they talk (the linguistic features of speech) and the language attitudes displayed in their talk.

The book concludes with Chapter 11, John R. Rickford’s “Spoken Soul: The Beloved, Belittled Language of Black America.” In this chapter, Rickford looks at how perceptions of Ebonics have shifted from being more positive in the 1960s to filled with divisions inside and outside the African American community in the 1980s. Using various data sources, he argues that people have sided with or against Ebonics for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to perceptions of Ebonics as a language of art or education, its use in informal or formal settings, and issues of racism. He argues that abandoning “Spoken Soul” (Ebonics/African American Vernacular English) would be unwise since it presents opportunities for those who can skillfully use it and represents a unique American social identity.

**Conclusion**

As a sociolinguistic fieldworker, I found this book to be very helpful in considering the various ways that I, as an interviewer and data collector, may influence the results of a research project through the methods I use for data gathering and analysis. I also believe that the chapters discussing how best to define ‘place’ are particularly salient as our world becomes increasingly globalized and people experience ever more complex social networks and diverse influences on their language use and identity construction.

As a compilation of individual works, the book remains engaging even when read straight through because of the inclusion of some chapters that offer detailed case studies and others that take a more philosophical and holistic perspective of the book’s themes. With the exception of chapter nine (which had too many long and complex sentence constructions to make it easily accessible), the articles are clearly written and include helpful charts, graphs, and figures. The references provided at the end of each chapter are a good resource for additional related readings.

I recommend “Sociolinguistic Variation” to any language worker who is involved in sociolinguistic and variationist research, especially those who rely heavily on interviews as a primary data source, work with people who live on the borders of more traditionally defined speech communities, or are interested in how language, social space, and identity interrelates. Together, the chapters of this book offer needed practical and philosophical insight into variation studies and are an excellent read for people interested in the field of sociolinguistics.