Part II
Methods for Studying Language in Society

The expression 'language in society' implies a practical as well as a theoretical emphasis. It implies a place where language is to be found, and where it needs to be studied – essentially in social life. Society is of course a very general concept, and we have already considered the argument that all instances of language in use are necessarily situated in some specific social context. But sociolinguistics has been very interested in these specifics – in characterizing what is potentially significant about social contexts for understanding linguistic forms and meanings, in explaining how language bears the imprint of the social contexts in which it has been produced, and in explaining how people actively manipulate the character of social situations through their language.

When it comes to designing investigations of language in society, this emphasis on social context poses tantalizing problems. If we believe that language and context are so inextricably linked, how can we observe language in use without ourselves *influencing* that delicate balance? As observers, aren't we colouring the language behaviours that we have come to observe? Can we study social contexts without being *part of* those contexts? This is the problem of methods that Labov has labelled *the observer's paradox*: how can we observe *un*observed language in society? Many of the chapters in this section comment on this problem, either as a theoretical issue or as a practical problem to be overcome or at least minimized in designing and implementing studies.

But it is also important to appreciate the general assumptions that lie behind the observer's paradox and the view of scientific investigation that it is based on. For example, there is clearly a belief here in the value of *natural* behaviour, and in the importance of naturally occurring linguistic data. The phrase 'field methods' suggests that researchers need to leave the safe places where they plan and interpret their research (usually colleges and universities) and engage with the world of 'real' and 'natural' language use. Observation is considered to be a problem if it interferes with the naturalness of a communicative episode or event.

This in turn implies a belief in *objectivity*, with the researcher's goal being to observe or capture instances of language use which are not 'skewed' or 'tainted' by the observation process. The researcher, it is implied, should be

a dispassionate and independent observer, operating at a psychological distance from the events s/he is researching (see Wolfram and Fasold's Chapter 9). Even more strongly implied is a belief in research as an *empirical process* – a set of specific scientific techniques designed to engage with real-world activities such as conversations. Sociolinguists have typically been sceptical about ways of analysing language which don't have an empirical basis. This is one reason why they have been very critical of the 'introspective' (see Lesley Milroy's Chapter 8) or 'intuitive' approach favoured by some grammarians who have felt that their own internalized knowledge of language is an adequate source of knowledge or 'data'. For sociolinguists, 'data' means everyday uses of language observed in their normal social environments.

This set of linked assumptions – naturalism, objectivism, empiricism – is in fact being reappraised by sociolinguists, and by social scientists generally. Are we to accept these as universal principles of scientific research, or do they define only one version of what social research can be? Have we perhaps taken for granted the feasibility of objective sociolinguistic research, and been blinkered to the subjective aspects of how we have posed questions and interpreted results? Does language ever have the purity and uniformity that is implied in the assumption of naturalness? Are quantitative methods actually appropriate for the analysis of language, or do numerical summaries obscure the subtleties of meaning that language is designed to convey?

These are all elements of a grand debate about sociolinguistic methods which is far from resolved. Therefore, the texts in this part of the Reader do more than simply point to 'good' or 'adequate' practical means of collecting information about language in society. They debate the link between methods and theory. They defend rather different positions on what sociolinguistic research can and should achieve, and they therefore reach different conclusions about methods. While every sociolinguist will endorse the importance of some sort of empirical research procedure, different writers can disagree quite fundamentally about naturalism and objectivity.

Wolfram and Fasold introduce the most well-established research tradition in sociolinguistics – the *variationist* tradition, producing statistical information based on relatively large amounts of observed data. This is the technique associated with William Labov's research in New York City, extended and replicated in many urban communities around the world, including Trudgill's study in Norwich in the UK (see Trudgill's Chapter 14). Lesley Milroy's chapter outlines the historical background to modern variationist research. She shows how Labov's approach in fact has a substantial pedigree from research that pre-dates modern sociolinguistics.

Wolfram and Fasold clearly adopt *empiricist* principles. That is, they assume, as much American research has done, that the basic mode of sociolinguistic investigation is controlled and objective surveying. They

explain how a random sample of speakers is needed, to make sure that survey findings will be representative of the community being studied. The social characteristics of people in the survey are then described on some objective basis, and statistically correlated with counts of particular linguistic features.

This procedure implies that we accept social dimensions like social class, age or gender as factual and relatively fixed. The method treats linguistic values and social values as equivalent, and examines the degree of co-variation between them. The survey method places the researcher in the role of an orchestrator of research, and, in sociolinguistic survey interviews, as an elicitor of data rather than a *bona fide* conversationalist. If we take these observations together, we might criticize variationist sociolinguistics for being too static in its methods and too rigid in its assumptions. A more radical criticism would have it that language is far too active, creative and influential a phenomenon to be studied within an empiricist tradition. A *social constructivist* model would argue that it is only *through* language that our understanding of society and social categories such as class, gender and age have any meaningful existence. What sociolinguistics needs, by this account, is research methods which can uncover the social meanings that attach to linguistic categories, and how language shapes our social worlds. We should study the processes of linguistic construction rather than their products.

These questions have in fact been addressed within sociolinguistics, which is not limited to observing and analysing the distribution of language forms. Labov himself has made the point that we must also investigate people's subjective beliefs, judgements and reactions if we want to understand why patterns of usage are the way they are. Under the general heading of *language attitudes* research, this sort of sociolinguistics tends to be *experimental*, meaning (as Milroy comments) that studies are even more obviously and rigidly controlled by researchers than in the variationist tradition. As Wolfram and Fasold point out, methods have been developed in the social psychology of language by Lambert, Giles and others for this specific purpose. Ironically enough, we once again find very largely empiricist principles underpinning research which tries to answer questions about social construction! Language attitudes are usually studied quantitatively and in semi-laboratory conditions, by analysing trends in questionnaire-based responses to audio-recorded samples of speech. The so-called *matched-guise technique* uses imitated speech-styles ('guises') specifically to control the differences that always exist between different speakers speaking on different occasions, for example in speech-rate, pitch or voice quality.

The *ethnographic* tradition of sociolinguistic work, associated with Hymes's theoretical contribution (see Chapter 1), is quite different. It is summarized here in Saville-Troike's Chapter 11. Ethnographic research

finds strengths in *qualitative* as well as quantitative study, and stresses the importance of the insider's viewpoint, and therefore subjectivity. It will be important to find the areas of overlap and incompatibility between the variationist and the ethnographic programmes, because, despite their differences, both are unquestionably sociolinguistics! Both are empirically grounded approaches to the study of language in society.

As we pointed out earlier, an empirical programme of study bases its analyses on 'data' of some sort. When sociolinguists talk about data, they mean a more or less systematic collection of instances of language in use. Lesley Milroy's Chapter 8 traces the early American linguists' concern with *accountability to the data*, a principle that was given up in Chomsky's influential research on transformational grammar but re-established in sociolinguistics through Labov's work. A cornerstone of modern socio-linguistics was established when Labov and others found that they could only account for their data if they recognized linguistic *variation* within geographical communities, which also fundamentally challenged the idea that 'pure' or 'genuine' linguistic forms exist.

Labov, however, did defend what is in one sense a purist notion – the idea of *natural speech*. For Labov, natural speech was not any particular, describable linguistic variety but a category of situation in which a speaker speaks in his or her least monitored style, what he calls *the vernacular*. Wolfram and Fasold describe techniques that have been developed to try to produce this naturalness, even in semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews. They include the famous 'danger of death' question, which invites speakers to tell an involving personal narrative. But Wolfson's main goal, in Chapter 10, is to challenge this understanding of 'natural speech'. For Wolfson, spontaneous interviews of the sort that sociolinguists have developed to access 'natural speech' are not in fact a recognized type of speech event. For that reason, she argues that the speech that these interviews generate is anything *but* natural.

Wolfson's position is interesting because it introduces what we could call a consideration of 'ecological validity' into the evaluation of sociolinguistic research, in place of 'naturalness': how do informants subjectively orient to research settings, and do research procedures match their expectations? Wolfson asks us to consider the qualitative experience of research episodes, beyond their adequacy as objective data-gathering devices. She does not challenge the main assumptions of variationist sociolinguistics, but moves towards some of the priorities of ethnography.

In the ethnographic tradition of sociolinguistics we find the clearest alternative to empiricism. Saville-Troike argues that it is crucial that ethnographers do *not* approach their research with preconceived categories. The ethnographer's responsibility is to build interpretations of communica-tion in a natural environment, using a wide range of sources of information, open to unplanned as well as planned eventualities. A deeper understanding,

Saville-Troike argues, can be obtained if the researcher can function as a participant in the events being observed. So there is no claim to objectivity or independence, other than through 'keeping a mental distance'. Ethnographers, that is, can be cultural and behavioural *insiders* even though their research goals require them to be analytic outsiders. In ethnographic sociolinguistics, the categories of 'researcher' and 'researched' become less distinct, but this does not weaken the force of ethical considerations.

There is in fact a good deal of overlap between the ethical issues raised by Saville-Troike and those discussed by Wolfram and Fasold, although the intimacy of ethnographic accounts will often mean that findings cannot be generalised as widely as the quantitative results of sociolinguistic surveys. Saville-Troike feels that ethnographic research needs to achieve a balance of usefulness, being of value to the community being investigated as well as to the researcher. It is likely that this sort of consideration will be increasingly important in social science generally, as government-sponsored research agencies (such as the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK) evaluate research proposals more and more in relation to visible achievements for specific 'user groups'.

Here again, particular philosophies and ideologies of research come into play, and we find significantly different interpretations of what an *ethical* approach to sociolinguistics means. In the empiricist tradition, ethics is addressed as the need to observe a set of specific criteria – not betraying informants' confidences, avoiding deception, avoiding intrusiveness, and so on (again, see Wolfram and Fasold). Research is more ethical to the extent that the researcher is more open, respectful and honourable. But the term 'ethics' is given a more specific and technical sense in Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton and Richardson's account (Chapter 12). For them, an ethical stance in relation to research is a minimalist moral position, narrowly conceived as a policy of reducing imposition while allowing researchers to get on with fulfilling their personal agendas. Cameron *et al.* say that ethical research is the traditional pattern of *research on* subjects. They then challenge these traditional assumptions, suggesting that they are inadequate for sociolinguistics.

A second stance is what they call *advocacy* research, which is research both *on and for* researched populations. Many people embark on sociolinguistic research motivated by concerns about social inequalities, and research has often been designed to expose prejudice or discrimination in the hope of promoting tolerance and improving social circumstances. Labov's involvement in the 'Black English' trial in Ann Arbor, Michigan (discussed in Cameron *et al.*'s chapter) is an excellent example. Even so, Cameron *et al.* find some theoretical problems with the concept of advocacy research. They suggest, for example, that it can easily be paternalistic and that it confuses the principles of objectivity and personal commitment.

The third stance they consider is *empowerment*, and the possibility of doing research *on, for* and *with* social subjects. The concept of empowering communities through researching them is certainly idealistic and even utopian. But Cameron *et al.*'s closely argued rationale for it is perhaps the clearest instance to date of sociolinguists trying to overturn the discipline's dominant empiricist tradition. The stimulus to this debate is a moral rather than a methodological concern. But Cameron *et al.* find that their moral priorities do not allow them to accept the *practices* of empiricist sociolinguistic research. In fact, their chapter challenges us to rethink the definition of research itself, our place in it as an activity, our investment in research, and the politics of the institutions that sustain it.

PART II: FURTHER READING

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