Review of Sali Tagliamonte, Making Waves: The Story of Variationist Sociolinguistics

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The anthropology of intentions is a very welcome and important work. For those unfamiliar with the debate over personalism and intentionalism, the book can function as a useful primer, especially (at least for this philosophically illiterate anthropologist) for its lucid accounts of the positions of various philosophical traditions on these questions. But it is also a remarkably rich source of ideas, not only on the largest scale, such as the proposal of the ‘intentional continuum’, but in the innumerable stimulating mini-proposals, nuggets of insights, and questions that should stimulate new work. While Duranti himself is agnostic about the possibility for genuinely interdisciplinary work on intentions (he deplores the existence of disciplinary silos within which only certain kinds of work can be read and cited), his work goes a good distance toward clarifying the differences, and thereby opening new opportunities for collaboration, between more interpretively oriented anthropologists and their more cognitively grounded colleagues in linguistics and the cognitive sciences.

REFERENCES


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Tagliamonte has woven together the voices of more than forty other linguists with her own in an informal, accessible account of the development and spread of the
methods of quantitative variationist sociolinguistics (VSLX) in the Labovian tradition. The book begins by describing a set of events during the 1960s and 1970s that laid the foundations for VSLX, including, of course, William Labov’s own early work on Martha’s Vineyard and in New York. Other key events include the well-known 1964 conference organized by William Bright at which anthropologists, linguists, and sociologists came together to talk about language in society, the 1964 LSA Summer Institute at which Labov introduced VSLX to its first adherents, the founding of the linguistics department at York University in England (Robert B. LePage) and the sociolinguistics program at Georgetown University in the US (Roger Shuy, who hired variationists Ralph Fasold, Walt Wolfram, and C. J. Bailey, as well as Deborah Tannen and Deborah Shiffrin), and new research projects in Belfast (James and Lesley Milroy) and Montreal (Gillian Sankoff, Henrietta Cedergreen, David Sankoff).

The next two chapters proceed in roughly chronological order to sketch out how VSLX developed and spread, alternating short narratives by Tagliamonte with transcribed extracts from her interviews with forty-three sociolinguists. (Readers can listen to the extracts used in the book on a companion website.) The interviewees are, as Tagliamonte describes it, the ‘first two generations’ of variationists: Labov, his contemporaries, and their students. The list includes most of the major figures in the quantitative study of variation and a few other leading figures in sociolinguistics more generally (Nikolas Coupland, Deborah Tannen, Allan Bell). We learn how people like Penelope Eckert, Guy Bailey, Gunnel Tottie, and Barbara Horvath were introduced to VSLX, about the origins of the conferences and journals that circulated research in VSLX and gave its practitioners spaces to gather, and about how the methods came to be used in new settings and for new aspects of language.

Subsequent chapters, multi-voiced in the same way, explore particular aspects of VSLX. Tagliamonte’s interviewees talk about the relationship of VSLX with approaches to linguistic variation and change from dialectology, historical linguistics, syntax, anthropology, and sociology; about what it is like to do fieldwork; and about using the variable rule program. There is a chapter about applications of the findings of VSLX in reading programs for African-American children, in expert testimony in the courtroom, and in community outreach more generally, and a chapter about the development of new explanatory variables such as identity, agency, and perceptual factors and new ways of conceptualizing old ones such as sex and social class. Tagliamonte also describes the sometimes acrimonious debate among variationists about the origins of African-American English.

In the book’s final chapters, Tagliamonte asks her interviewees to talk about why they are drawn to the study of variation (some are primarily interested in language change, some more interested in how language is implicated in social dynamics), where they think VSLX is headed, and what advice they would give to newcomers to the field.
In his back-cover blurb, William Labov refers to *Making waves* as a ‘history of our field’. But while there are elements of historiography here, this is not a history of science in any but the loosest sense. Tagliamonte calls her account a ‘story’, not a ‘history’, and she does not pretend to have used the rigorous, systematic methods of a historian. The sample of variationists she interviewed is neither comprehensive nor representative: it is a convenience sample, albeit a large one. (Tagliamonte is clearly well-connected and well-liked in the field.) She adduces little evidence other than what her interviewees say and never interrogates why they might be saying what they do. As a student of Shana Poplack’s, Tagliamonte is a member of the ‘second generation’ herself, and her tone is deferential. There are no hardball questions or defensive answers here. Tagliamonte encourages her interviewees to celebrate the kind of work they do, as she celebrates it herself. The genre is encomium, not critical analysis. In keeping with the retirement-dinner-speech tone of the story Tagliamonte tells, her writing style is informal, often spoken-like. Despite some jarring shifts of tense and a fair number of typographical errors, the book is a fast, pleasant read.

Neither has Tagliamonte tried to write a textbook. She has already done that (Tagliamonte 2012). A person could not learn to do VSLX, or even what kinds of questions variationists ask, from reading *Making waves*. Tagliamonte intermittently attempts to explain VSLX methods and findings in ways an outsider could understand, but for the most part a reader needs to be familiar with the field in advance.

Variationist sociolinguists will certainly want to read this book, as will scholars whose work overlaps with theirs. It should also be required reading for graduate students learning to do VSLX. What is most interesting about the story Tagliamonte tells is that it reminds us of the deeply contingent nature of scientific schools. As Tagliamonte puts it (p. ix), ‘It comes down to a series of chance meetings, mutual interests and—according to many of the early researchers—serendipity’. Labov’s original insight about the relationship between variation and change occurred because he was in a particular place at a particular time, with a particular penchant for replicable mathematical analyses of relatively large amounts of data. The insight spread and was applied and further developed because particular libraries subscribed to particular journals and because particular people happened to find themselves teaching at the same universities or attending the same conferences. In the text of the book and in appended ‘family trees’, Tagliamonte sketches lines of influence from teachers to students to their students. We are also reminded of the importance of funding bodies like the Ford Foundation, the National Science Foundation in the United States, and the European Science Foundation. By giving it a more or less coherent, bounded story, *Making waves* helps reify and legitimize VSLX. At the same time, however, Tagliamonte’s work demystifies the field, and research in general, in a way students need to understand, highlighting the deep social embeddedness of even the most positivistic of subfields of linguistics.
The focus of this book is to see how old and new technologies can be combined in a practical manner for endangered language maintenance and research. It is aimed at a wide readership including computational linguists, linguists, language documentation experts, language educators, digital curators, those who work with endangered languages, and the generally curious.

Jones has combined papers by researchers from Europe, Asia, Africa, and North and South America. Part 1 looks at creating new technologies for endangered languages, while part 2 looks at how new technologies are applied to endangered languages.

Jones outlines the precarious position of many of the world’s languages. She reports that the availability of new technologies has the potential to improve many tasks in the field of endangered languages, including documentation, analysis, and revitalisation. She sounds a cautionary note, however, saying ‘easier’ does not automatically imply that things are better. If the native speaker becomes more invisible by the use of new technologies, then surely something is being lost in the process.

In the introduction, Nicholas Ostler provides an interesting overview of the world’s languages and states that there are four areas where technology will have an impact on language: theoretical studies, support for recorded media, mechanisms for improved language access for speakers, and mechanisms for improved language access for nonspeakers. He speculates that perhaps in the future new technologies, particularly machine translation (MT), may facilitate interlinguistic communication, and thus make ‘smaller’ languages less threatened.

In part 1, Aimée Lahaussois describes the design and development of a prototype corpus of three endangered languages in eastern Nepal, namely Khaling, Thulung, and Koyi. The approach is to include material from a similar story in