Reviews of Barbara Johnstone, The Linguistic Individual

Barbara Johnstone

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/barbara_johnstone/143/

Reviewed by Sue Harris Russell
SIL—Malaysia Branch and LaTrobe University

In the study of language use within a community there has been much discussion of the relationship between language use patterns within the community and individual language choice. These studies include the relationship between the external setting (e.g. political setting, religious setting, education setting) and the choice of language and style of the individual. Other studies have focused on the impact of the social network on individual language choice. Many sociolinguists argue that individual language represents the intersection of the language of the various groups to which that individual belongs.

In The linguistic individual, Johnstone argues for a less deterministic view of individual language use. She argues that a ‘linguistics of the community’ without ‘linguistics of the individual’ cannot explain language use. She points out that sociolinguistics has shown a great deal about how linguistic choices reflect social status, class, gender, ethnicity, and group identity, but little about how language differentiates individuals from other individuals (181). Quantitative sociolinguistics, she notes, focuses on the linguistic system rather than the individual speaker and generally has little to say about individual idiosyncrasy, except to consider it either deviant language behavior or the result of speaker immaturity.

Drawing upon the work of her mentors, A. L. Becker and Deborah Tannen, J sets out to explore the creative language of the individual. She argues that formal syntax abstracts away from the self altogether—that analysis tends to pin down the forces that limit creativity in language. J seeks to explore variation in individual language through three intersecting lines of thought—about language, about artistry, and about individuality (178). He recasts questions about the social as questions about the individual, questions about language as questions about speaking, and questions about rules and constraints as questions about strategies and resources (4).

J chooses narrative discourse as her focus of analysis for three reasons. First, the grammar of language, the medium, the topic, the genre, the interactions, the background of silence all interact to shape language within a discourse providing the context of variation. Second, discourse is well suited for uncovering linguistic newness since rarely do individuals tell the same story the same way. Finally, discourse analysis is also well suited to study the individual; people tell different stories about themselves and they tell them in different ways. Through discourse people select and combine available linguistic resources to create a voice, not just a voice with which they refer to the world or relate to others, but a voice with which to be human (58).

The linguistic individual first explores variations in individual speech where there is typically accommodation. Chapter 3 discusses academic discourse and chapter 4, scripted speech. In chapters 5 and 6 J explores linguistic consistency in the individual speaker and tells why individuals do the same things in different linguistic situations. J then explains how to interpret inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies of individual speakers. Her thesis is that part of a person’s identity is the way she or he uses these inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies in consistent ways across linguistic settings.

The linguistic individual brings attention to an area that field linguists sometimes avoid in language study. J’s book provides a different framework in which to interpret these idiosyncrasies and variations, not as problems in analysis but as a way of appreciating individual creativity in language use. This appreciation may force us away from one analysis to a range of analyses, in which we discuss idiosyncrasies and variations of individual speakers as part of the creative process of language use in a community.

Languages of the world, No. 10. 1996. LINCOM EUROPA, P. O. Box 1316, D-85703, Unterschleissheim/München, Germany. 72 pp.

George Huttar
SIL—Africa Area

Over the last several years LINCOM EUROPA has published an impressive quantity and variety of materials on languages and linguistics. Besides providing 'an outlet for high-quality studies in language typology, comparative linguistics, language policy and related topics' (2), the journal-like series Languages of the World (LW) has a regular feature, Linguistic News Lines, giving 'information on the infrastructure of linguistics, on linguistic projects, on new publication [sic] and on new approaches to linguistic theory' (2).

1 Information on the full range of present and projected publications is available at http://home.t-online.de/home/LINCOM.EUROPA, or by email inquiry to LINCOM.EUROPA @t-online.de. A review of one of their Language Materials series is given in Huttar 1995.
Volume 3  Number 1  February 1999

EDITORS
NIKOLAS COUPLAND  ALLAN BELL
University of Wales Cardiff, U.K.  Auckland, New Zealand

REVIEWS EDITOR
ADAM JAWORSKI
University of Wales Cardiff

EDITORIAL ASSOCIATE
VIRPI YLÄNNE-MEWEN
University of Wales Cardiff

EDTORIAL

ARTICLES
CARMEN FOUTH
A majority sound change in a minority community: /u/-fronting in Ch.cano English 5

ALISON SEALEY
'Don't be cheeky': Requests, directives and being a child 24

IAN HITCHBY
Prime attunement and footing in the organisation of talk radio openings 41

RESEARCH NOTE
JENNIFER COATES
Women behaving badly: Female speakers backstage 65

REVIEW ARTICLE
TERRY CROWLEY.
Linguistic diversity in the Pacific

PETER MÜHLHÄUSLER. Linguistic Ecology: Language Change and Linguistic Imperialism in the Pacific Region. 81

© Published by Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1999
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA.
ize the importance of both cultural and disciplinary influences on linguistic variation in even this 'most unified' of international genres; consequently, I believe the book to be an interesting addition to the library of anyone interested in style variation in written discourse.

REFERENCES


Reviewed by Muriel Saville-Troike

Generations of linguists have dealt with the tensions among describing and accounting for language as a universal human phenomenon essentially governed by innate principles and predispositions, language as patterned and conventional group or community knowledge and behavior, and language as the product of individual creativity in the process of self-expression. Emphasis along a continuum which encompasses these three perspectives has varied according to what aspect of language was most relevant to subdisciplinary interests of the time: universals and abstract linguistic phenomena for logicians and linguistic theorists; patterning of linguistic phenomena in relation to social/cultural identity and conventions for ethnographers and sociologists; and individual style and variability for literary analysts and clinical psychologists. Sociolinguists have typically focused on the middle range, or language variation which correlates with social groups and conventions.

In The Linguistic Individual, Johnstone joins some other noted sociolinguists in arguing for the necessary inclusion of individual variability (choice/style) as a major component in all analyses of language. Her argument rests on the claim that...
1. social phenomena have only an indirect influence on discourse;
2. individual choice mediates what influence social factors do have;
3. 'a speaker's linguistic system is a repertoire of resources rather than the cause of his or her linguistic behavior' (p. x).

Chapters 1, 6 and 7 discuss the theoretical framework from which these claims are derived, and its implications for methods of language study. Essential to this point of view is the study of language as creative performance by individuals rather than as the aggregate competence/performance of social groups or as an abstract linguistic system. From this perspective, careful examination of the dynamics of individual choices and strategies for production and interpretation of spoken or written discourse must be a precursor to any adequate explanation of commonality as well as variability in language use.

Chapters 2 through 5 provide good models for close analysis of limited texts representing several genres, including narrative, academic discussion, telephone survey and interview. I plan to make these chapters required readings for my graduate-level students who are learning to conduct discourse analysis, and I highly recommend them to others. Johnstone provides excellent examples of both similarity and variability for the same individual in different speech situations, and even variability for the same individual performing in a single speech situation that is supposed to be rigidly controlled. All of these texts are drawn from the same 'speech community' in its usual sense, and the variability can be attributed as much to personality and individual experiential factors as to such traditional social categories as gender and ethnicity.

Chapter 2, for instance, includes detailed analyses of two stories: one from a woman dying of brain cancer concerning experiences with two of the men in her life, and one from a man concerning experiences with a somewhat defective car. Elements of comparison and contrast include the context of story telling; strategies for claiming the floor and establishing the setting/scene; transitions from scene to scene; devices for developing characters, highlighting key happenings, and creating suspense; and mechanisms for resolution. Some of the variables discussed here can be attributed to different linguistic resources available to a black southerner (the woman) and a white northerner (the man), but Johnstone argues that such differences are not deterministic. Other factors influencing selection include specific audience consideration and individual personal history, but again these are not causative. While the story tellers have different language repertoires to draw on in constructing narrative, a crucial element for Johnstone is individual creativity and choice.

Similar discussions are presented in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, although each illustrates different methods for analysis, similar conclusions are drawn. While selecting all examples from speakers of American English does effectively illustrate variability within a speech community – and raises questions about the validity of that construct – it perhaps unduly backgrounds consideration of the limits on variability which are indeed imposed by 'out of awareness' social/
cultural conventions and norms. An important contribution to theory-building would be application of the methods for close analysis of individual speech which are proposed here to comparative studies of individuals across languages and cultures. Given Johnstone's earlier significant contributions to the field of Contrastive Rhetoric (especially on Arabic argumentation and discourse structure), we may hope this will be on her future publication agenda.

Readers of this book are still left with the dilemma that has long plagued linguists and other social scientists: the locus of all social reality is in the heads of individuals, and yet people behave and act as if such constructs as family, government, religion – and language – have a 'real' existence outside the mind. The pendulum has swung between Supraindividual and Deconstructionist camps, but recognizing and retaining the tension between them may in fact be a productive as well as a practical response; attempted resolution toward one pole or the other may not. Johnstone's message that analysis of individual linguistic choice is important to hear and to heed. There should be caution against an extreme position which might follow this line of reasoning; however: the discovery of patterns of use which correlate with social and cultural factors is of no interest or value, or that the abstractions of 'autonomous linguistics' contribute nothing of significance to understanding the nature of language and its processes.

Analysis of situated individual linguistic performance provides a 'social description' which can cumulatively enrich our understanding of all aspects of language, but to achieve significance it must acknowledge and incorporate the constraints endogenous to the culture and the language system itself.

Muriel Saville-Troike
Department of English
University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona 85721
USA
msaville@u.arizona.edu


Reviewed by Peter Mühlhäusler

The two textbooks, written by a linguist and an anthropologist respectively, fill a gap in both disciplines, or perhaps, better, serve to bridge the gap between these disciplines. For a number of historical reasons, the disciplines of linguistics...
common knowledge eight years later. On the other hand, the intellectual “edge” of the volume and of the individual studies remains as sharp as ever. Untying the Knot is a significant contribution to the scholarship of riddles and related enigmas.


Reviewed by Neal R. Norrick, Universität des Saarlandes

Barbara Johnstone has written the sort of book I suspect many of us would like to write. She has woven various strands of her work of the last ten years into a monograph that not only represents her own personal approach to linguistics, but also might legitimately be said to present a fresh perspective on language—or better, on the ways we express ourselves to each other in talk. Those of us already engaged in discourse analysis will profit from Johnstone’s focus on the “individual voice” and on the way it informs her analyses, while linguists of other stripes should read this book as an introduction to the new humanistic tendencies in the study of language.

Let us begin with a brief outline of the book as a whole. After an introductory chapter, in which Johnstone describes her focus on the individual speaker and talk rather than on some abstract system, the argument proceeds naturally from texts where we expect great variation for personal reasons—namely, in narrative—to texts where we do not expect so much variation but find it anyway—namely, academic conference talk—to texts where variation is positively discouraged to the point of endangering one’s continued employment—namely, in conducting telephone interviews. Johnstone convincingly shows the positive necessity of individual variation for successful communication in all three cases. She then explores how two individuals respectively maintain and eschew a consistent style across different genres, and she considers the problem of how hearers deal with idiosyncracies. Finally, she sketches a revised view of the data, methodology, and goals of an emerging humanistic linguistics, suggested by her investigation of individual voice.

Let us now look at the individual chapters in more detail. Johnstone invokes in the first chapter stylistic studies by both literary critics and rhetoricians, though she declares “My purpose in writing about individual voices is not critical. It is linguistic . . . my purpose is to show how paying attention to individual voice helps us to understand language” (p. 22). She asks not how region, gender, age, profession, and so on determine how a person speaks, but rather how speakers draw on the various repertoires at their disposal to express their distinctive personalities. The perspective shift may initially seem subtle, but it has important consequences for the way we view language and talk.

In chapter 2, Johnstone argues that speakers select and merge linguistic resources available to them in the creation of a distinctive voice, that this voice is a part of their self, and that possessing such a voice is part of their humanity. Still, it often seems that her analyses would or could have been much the same even without making her particular assumptions, so long as one recognizes the interconnectedness of articulateness, power, and societal norms. In her examination of two stories by separate speakers, she argues that successful narration depends on the development of an articulate persona, and that articulateness is really successful self-expression, given the resources available in appropriate communicative situations.

Chapter 3 goes on to relate individual voice with the traditional rhetorical notion of ethos, as a principal determinant of discourse force, alongside logos and pathos. Johnstone explores linguistic productions of two speakers during an interdisciplinary
academic conference. Through her study of grammatical structures, parallelism, and style of argument in the speeches of these two speakers, she reaches some interesting conclusions about how we create individual voices for ourselves, even as we compose contributions recognizable as appropriate academic discourse. Here, as in later chapters, the author often leaves the reader wishing she would develop her analyses at somewhat greater length in order to demonstrate the strength of her approach, rather than spending just enough time to make her immediate point.

Johnstone devotes chapter 4 to her investigation of variation in scripted telephone polls. Her case for the communicative necessity of individual variation in creating a personal voice is particularly strong here, because the pollsters have been trained to follow scripts and to believe that inconsistency can ruin the data they collect, so that failure to adhere to the prescribed format can cost them their jobs. Nevertheless, she finds that the most effective pollisters are those who manage to create a personal voice and to establish personal rapport with their interviewees. Apparently, the peculiarly American notion that an individual should possess the virtues of self-reliance and creative self-expression requires that effective interviewers avoid sounding like a recording on a machine, and similarly that respondents also establish a particular identity in order to avoid sounding like faceless automatons.

The exploration, in chapter 5, of two speaking styles across different text types, shows that both consistency and strategic inconsistency are alternate resources for expressing a self—conveying either a morally consistent persona or a pragmatic flexibility—enabling appropriate contributions to diverse discourses. Johnstone chose as her subjects two speakers—one known for her consistency of voice across different genres, the other exemplifying a command of different genres through control of the linguistic resources characteristic of each. Contrasting these two sets of discourses, Johnstone raises interesting issues concerning the recognition of personal image and the analysis of individual style across genres. A speaker may resist or accept situational variation in speech and writing patterns. Linguistic consistency can stand for moral consistency in the various productions of a public servant, while linguistic inconsistency can signal an equally admirable pragmatism in the productions of a professional writer and entertainer.

Chapter 6 attempts to get at the ways we interpret neologisms and idiosyncratic habits of speech, based on an investigation of discourse markers used to segment conversational narratives. Johnstone stresses the negotiated character of syntax—an observation not as obvious or as regularly noted as the negotiated nature of meaning. And she emphasizes the role of repetition, both within the individual speech act and across texts, in picking out a feature for attention and interpretation, and hence as the basis for our recognition of a feature’s meaning potential.

The last chapter draws out the consequences of the foregoing analyses for the direction of future linguistic studies. Johnstone pleads for a humanistic linguistics, which recognizes the artistry in language, and the centrality of self-expression and rhetorical force in discourse. Here her own personal voice resonates particularly clearly, a style that meshes nicely with the humanistic approach she espouses. Moreover, both the style and the approach go hand in hand with the author’s palpable commitment to her materials and her honesty about the methodology she advocates.
versified across age & representing 11 major Hispanic cities of Latin America & the Iberian peninsula. It was found that (1) excluding figurative use, morir prevails over morirse, & the latter has a higher frequency only in Caracas, Madrid, & Mexico City; (2) the use of morirse does not increase in references to violent & unnatural death; (3) the use of morir is not higher with uneducated speakers; (4) affectivity does not influence the use of morirse, except with a reference to one’s own death; (5) morirse is used obligatorily with other clitic pronouns; (6) morir is preferred for the meaning ‘to approach death’; & (7) morirse is preferred in figurative meanings. 9 Tables, 38 References. Z. Dubiel (Copyright 1997, Sociological Abstracts, Inc., all rights reserved.)

9703841 1996

It is argued that life on an American college campus provides a fertile setting for the development of slang; a definition of slang, along with a review of linguistic studies of slang, is provided. Slang’s tendency to appear in marginal groups is linked to the university lifestyle, & the influence of childhood slang on later usage is discussed. Code-switching in different environments is addressed, & it is argued that the primary purpose of slang is to assert an identity, but the reinforcement of peer solidarity, Slang specific to individual colleges is noted. Focus is on slang pertaining to alcohol & sex, & such aspects of slang as its judgmental character, its reliance on popular culture, & its use of allusion. 5 References. D. Weinbel (Copyright 1997, Sociological Abstracts, Inc., all rights reserved.)

9703842 1996

A psychologist’s perspectives on relationships of language, thought, culture, & politics are presented; changes in language usage in German are interpreted to reflect political & social changes, & references are made to the collapse of communism in former East Germany. It is argued that thinking without language is possible but language use without thought is “almost impossible.” The function of language as a window on thought is compared with its function as the Procrustean bed of thought. Contemporary political discourse in Germany is analyzed for ideological vocabulary that represents dogmas rather than democratic thinking & tolerance rather than liberty. Z. Dubiel (Copyright 1997, Sociological Abstracts, Inc., all rights reserved.)

9703843 1996

A dictionary of English usage (1989) is utilized to illustrate some controversial language uses in American & British English. It is recommended that English as a second language instruction in German schools show students that the who & whom & sentence-final prepositions are not the only disputed uses in Modern English. Z. Dubiel (Copyright 1997, Sociological Abstracts, Inc., all rights reserved.)

9703844 1996

Systematic bias toward the male gender in dictionary definitions is examined by comparing definitions of man & woman in the corpora-based COBUILD Dictionary. Analysis focuses on definitions based on language use within colony texts, i.e., texts whose components can be switched without meaning loss or change because adjacent components do not normally form continuous prose, e.g., a shopping list or bus schedule. It is found that matched pairs of definition subentries do not form compatibility relations, but other kinds of matching relations that are discrimination against women & additionally, that English treats man as unmarked & woman as marked as in woman driver. The effort made to exclude gender bias in the dictionary is affirmed & the conclusion drawn that no corpus is value-neutral. The need to expand corpora to include more voices, e.g., female, oral, & unpublished ones, is expressed. 1 Figure, 8 References. E. Emery (Copyright 1997, Sociological Abstracts, Inc., all rights reserved.)

9703845 1996
Hutton, Christopher (Dept English U Hong Kong, Hong Kong), The ‘Dictator of Taste’: Rules, Regularities and Responsibilities, W Language Sciences, 1997, 19, 1, Jan, 47-55.

The argument put forward by Roy Harris (eg, 1990) against overly formal linguistic views of language is considered. According to Harris, efforts to discern universal rules of language that function as something like laws of nature are misguided as they deny the fact that language is human-made & therefore dependent on the cultural context of its production. In their defense, linguists might claim that rule-like regularities that function below the level of individual consciousness are real linguistic entities that shape language use. However, in Harris’ view, these regularities are merely post hoc labels pinned on patterns that have their genesis in cultural contexts. This means that both individuals & cultures are ultimately responsible for the languages they make & that responsibility cannot lie in an abstract set of rules for language use. 14 References. D. M. Smith (Copyright 1997, Sociological Abstracts, Inc., all rights reserved.)

9703846 1996

The effects of exclusive vs inclusive language (using generic pronouns to describe both genders vs using more encompassing terminology, eg, she or he) on evaluations of a counselor were examined. After reading a counseling session transcript that manipulated language style & counselor gender, White, African American, Alaska Native, Asian American, & Hispanic college students (total N = 82 female & 44 male) completed instruments assessing their perceptions & expectations of the counselor, & their sex-role ideology. Results indicated that language style affected evaluations, with all participants expressing less willingness to see the counselors using exclusive language & rating them as more sexist. The impact of exclusive language was most evident with female & feminist participants; these participants expressed less confidence in counselors using exclusive language. Results also revealed that participants were more willing to see a same-gender counselor & rated such counselors as more expert. Given these results, counselors should be aware of their language style & the possible impact it may have on clients, particularly female & feminist clients, & make any needed changes to lessen the possibility of negatively affecting their clients. 3 Tables, 28 References. Adapted from the source document. (Copyright 1997, Sociological Abstracts, Inc., all rights reserved.)

9703847 1996

Paper, $24.95. This vol in the Oxford Studies in Sociolinguistics series contains a Preface & 7 Chpts exploring patterns of individual voice in speakers of English. Theoretical arguments, discourse analysis, & linguistic examination of various speakers & settings illustrate speakers' use of linguistic models connected to class, ethnicity, gender, & region to create idiolect. Individual style distinctions are attributed to psychological factors & moral viewpoints. Even such impersonal contexts as academic discourse & telephone surveys are shown to depend on the expression of individualized persons to achieve artfulness & successful communication. It is demonstrated that pragmatic strategies for discourse marking facilitate hearers' interpretation of idiosyncratic production. Noted are significant implications of individual speech data for the notion of speech as a means of self-expression, & for the analysis of variation & mechanisms of linguistic choice & change. 9 Tables, 5 Figures, Bibliog. L. Lucht (Copyright 1997, Sociological Abstracts, Inc., all rights reserved.)

9703848 1996
Kretzchmar, Heinz L (Instit Deutsch als Fremdsprache U München, D-80539 Federal Republic Germany), Über den sema-
The following review appeared in the November '96 issue of CHOICE:

34-1361 P123 95-21703 CIP

Postulating that social influences and linguistic results are mediated by individual choices, Johnstone supports her thesis with discourse analysis of speech from academic presentations, interview situations, and survey responses, and, in a compelling chapter entitled "Consistency and Individual Style," of utterances in settings of various levels of formality by the late congresswoman Barbara Jordan and Sunny Nash, a middle-aged African American. Johnstone's extensive and apt examples illustrate that language patterns result from individual choices speakers make. The author works from intimations made in such earlier works as Edward Sapir's Language (1921), William Labov's Sociolinguistic Patterns (CH, Oct'73), and Dell Hymes's Foundations in Sociolinguistics (CH, Mar'75). This book builds on and extends usefully many of the compelling theories promulgated by Muriel Saville-Troike in The Ethnography of Communication (1982) and advanced more recently by linguists like Derek Bickerton in Language and Species (CH, May'91) and James Milroy in Linguistic Variation and Change (CH, Nov'92). This volume complements well other volumes in the outstanding "Oxford Studies in Sociolinguistics" series. Recommended for college, university, and public libraries. - R. B. Shuman, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign