
The four elephants of sociolinguistics inspect a ping-pong ball

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Sociolinguists (the elephants) are pretty much in agreement about the object of their investigation: variability in the individual and community that is sensitive to linguistic and nonlinguistic facts (the ping pong ball). So differences among sociolinguists must lie in their approaches, and I will describe those that focus on 1) production, 2) perception, 3) comprehension, or 4) regard. I will argue that a full (and explanatory) model of research requires the inclusion of all four. Production research, for example, although it focuses on the synchronic influence of social and linguistic factors on the realization of a variable, will also want to show how things got that way, and the other three approaches may provide explanations of both the origin of variants and their embedding in social and linguistic systems. In particular, the contributions of language regard (i.e., attitudes, folk beliefs and theories, and ideologies) to the other three research approaches will be highlighted in this presentation, and I will evaluate recent work that shows how regard types (e.g., implicit versus explicit) may correlate with patterns of language variation and change.