# CONTRASTIVE SOCIOLINGUISTICS —
## SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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The existence of sociolinguistics presupposes recognition of language variation. Language variation, in turn, may be conceived of basically in terms of:

1) the ideal speaker-hearer's knowledge of communicative rules and his potential application of these rules, and

2) the actual performance as investigated on a group of speakers strictly defined by social and geographical parameters.

The two views on variation bring to light the fundamental question of sociolinguistics, namely, what is it that the sociolinguist studies, or should study? The choice of (1) or (2) does not necessarily answer the question posed, but it definitely imposes on the linguist methodological requirements and constraints pertaining to the collection of data. Whether (1) or (2) will be the focus of the sociolinguist is a matter of individual preference and philosophical standpoint. In some authors' opinion both aspects of language variation should be investigated as "the interaction of competence and performance... is essential for the understanding of everyday activities" (Cicourel 1974 : 44). It follows that sociolinguistics may create models of both communicative competence and situated usage, i.e., performance.

Adherence to the first alternative necessitates accepting the view that neither linguistics nor sociolinguistics should go beyond investigating the ideal speaker-hearer's linguistic competence and communicative competence, respectively. Within this perspective the sociolinguist's task would be to expand the theory of linguistic competence to that of communicative competence, by supplementing a set of formation rules with a set of rules of use. Viewing communicative competence as an expansion of iinguistic competence, as understood by Chomsky (1965), entails a corollary as for the way data

should be obtained. In such a framework mainly the sociolinguist himself would serve as an informant and his intuitive judgments would be arrived at largely through introspection.

The type of sociolinguistics adumbrated above is justly exposed to wide criticism. It should be opposed basically on the same grounds that the 'orthodox' linguistics (i.e., mainly the transformational-generative approach) is objected to. The main objections relevant to our subsequent discussion include:

1) disregarding the heterogenous nature of the speech community, and
2) generalizing descriptive statements to larger groups of speakers on the basis of the individual linguist's intuitive judgments.

Numerous authors have objected to the transformational methodology. Dittmar points out that "it is not possible to determine the correctness of descriptions to the extent that linguists describe solely their linguistic intuitions" (1976 : 188) and "the grammaticality and acceptability of utterances cannot be satisfactorily ascertained by questioning" (1976 : 188). By administering self-evaluation tests to groups of informants Labov (1972) indicated clearly that speakers' judgments are often just reports on what they think they say. The actual data collected differs significantly from the data reported on. It follows that the data collected within the transformational methodology is unreliable, and it does not allow generalizations relative to a strictly defined speech community. Thus any theory of communicative competence (understood as an extension of Chomsky's linguistic competence) must fall short of the goal of offering reliable descriptions of language varieties other than the idiolect.

The sociolinguist whose interest is directed to language performance must make use of entirely different methodological tools. By attending to empirical data, and by correlating these data with isolated social parameters, the "performance sociolinguist" has access to categories that the transformational linguist is barred from. Hence the availability to the sociolinguist of more reliable data and legitimate generalizations to strictly defined groups of speakers and language varieties *other* than the idiolect.

We now wish to relate the foregoing considerations to the operation of Contrastive Sociolinguistics (CS) which seems to be best understood in terms of an approach toward sociolinguistics. The underlying objective of CS is twofold:

1) provide a systematic juxtaposition of equivalent and non-equivalent sociolinguistic patterns, and
2) provide an analytical framework for the formation of theories of language use, i.e., performance theories.

(1) implies supplying information for applied sociolinguistic purposes, e.g.,

foreign language teaching. Below we want to indicate that CS analyses will bear most fruit if they are performed within the "performance alternative" commented on at the beginning of this paper.

Non-sociolinguistic contrastive studies carried out in different countries, and reported on in journals like PSiCL have clearly exhibited the methodological confines of transformational grammar. Logically, the contrastive sociolinguist oriented toward performance analysis will question some of the methodological assumptions that the 'orthodox' contrastive linguist will accept (cf. p. 2).

One should give much credit to authors such as Ervin—Tripp (1973), Slobin (1963), and others for their sociolinguistic findings. Carried out within the "communicative competence alternative" as they are, they do contribute a great deal to our understanding of the functional aspect of language. However, if valid *contrastive* studies of this sort are to develop a switch to the "performance alternative" seems inevitable. The few contrastive sociolinguistic studies available as well as the bulk of nonsociolinguistic contrastive analyses carried out to date have purported to provide facts pertaining to two languages, which in fact have been some nonspecified varieties of either of the languages compared. The sociolinguist who is not only aware of the existence of language variation (we believe that all linguists are), but also in a principled manner attends to this fact in his academic endeavors, can hardly approve of comparing aspects of for example Polish and English, without explicit specifying what varieties of the languages in question are being investigated. It follows that contrastive sociolinguistic analyses carried out within the "communicative competence perspective" would not offer valid information for at least two reasons:

1) such information would refer to a nonspecified speech community, and hence nonspecified language variety, and
2) even if the language varieties of reference were defined intuitively, it would not be possible to state that the two varieties compared are comparable in sociolinguistic terms. The foregoing considerations lead us to say that in order to bring out statements valid sociolinguistically CS has to resort to analyses of performance.

In view of the fact discussed above we want to concede that contrastive sociolinguistic analyses cannot be undertaken until the necessary *levels of comparability* have been established and clearly defined. While the 'orthodox' linguist has been forced to study the competence forms underlying mainly *standard* and relatively *formal* performance patterns the sociolinguist is free to take an account of *any* variety of a language. However, prior to an attempt of a contrastive analysis the sociolinguist has to make sure that the varieties, each of a different language, are eligible for mutual comparison.

In order to establish the levels of comparability one has to take recourse to the distinction between:

1) language variety according to user, and
2) language variety according to use.

The interaction between the two involves the necessity to make choices and establish comparability with respect to *both* (1) and (2).

The first decision will concern the national varieties the linguist wishes to study. This step is inevitable in the case of languages like English or German where a number of national varieties exist side by side. Since language varies from social group to social group, upon analyzing a language the sociolinguist then ought to make his choice as to the social group he wishes to study. In a contrastive analysis the language variety of an equivalent social groups of the other culture should be juxtaposed. In order words, choices must be made with respect to the sociolectal variety which may in practice be narrowed down to such small group varieties as those of professional groups.

Language variation according to user includes also the regional dimension which, although most relevant to monocultural sociolinguistic research, turns out to be of little use for contrastive purposes. As regional equivalence across two languages cannot be established the student of CS should primarily be concerned with the sociolectal level of comparability, i.e., he should make sure that the varieties of the two languages compared are equivalent in the social functions that they can play. Graphically, the relationship between sociolectal variation in $L_1$ and $L_2$ is very likely to take the following form:
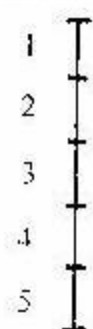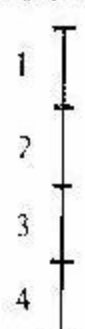


In both $L_1$ and $L_2$, 1 will differ from 2 (likewise 2 from 3, etc.) in formal linguistic features as well as rules of usage. It must be remembered that any pair of languages may differ in the number of functional sociolectal categories each language contains. Such a lack of one-to-one correspondence hinders the validity of findings pertaining to our sociolects $L_1 3$ and $L_2 3$ for example, since $L_1 3$ and $L_2 3$ do not occupy the same place in the sociolectal structures of the respective languages. In view of these facts it seems relatively easy and plausible in practice to compare the sociolects exhibiting the highest

and the lowest social prestige, the "in-between sociolects" being a fuzzy area where equivalence can hardly be established. While the top point in the scale usually refers to the standard variety of a given language the lowest ones may pertain to a variety of lects some of which are, and others of which hardly seem to be, comparable with sociolects of another language. There is no doubt that Black English Vernacular for instance, which has very low social prestige, is not comparable with any sociolect of Polish. There are other low prestige sociolects, however, which are eligible for comparison.

For epistemological reasons a comparison of *any* equivalent sociolects may be attempted. With a pragmatic goal in mind, however, (foreign language teaching) the only choice fully justifiable is the sociolects ranking high on the social prestige scale. In foreign language teaching the standard variety (intuitively described) has always been the model variety. Also, from the point of view of the social roles that the foreign learner is likely to play in the target culture learning a standard variety seems the only choice justifiable for him. This refers exclusively to *foreign* language learning and teaching. It does not relate to *second* language learning and teaching where sociolectal choices might be different depending on the social groups concerned (e.g. immigrants).

Contrastive Sociolinguistics will also have to take account of situations where members of sociolect 1 of $L_1$ communicate with members of 2 of $L_2$ (likewise members of 1 of $L_1$ with 2 of $L_2$). In such a case speakers of both 1 and 2 apply a number of adaptive rules which modify their speech with respect to the rules which are used when in-group members are addressed. CS will be interested in looking at those adaptive strategies as they function in a pair of languages.

In a contrastive sociolinguistic study social groups may have to be split into the female and the male categories. As is well known one of the dimensions of linguistic variation is that of sex. Depending on the individual language the differences may be more or less striking. When one looks at languages like Polish, English, German, or French one does not think that equivalence of sex has to be established as a level of comparability. While this is fundamentally true one should not forget, however, that other languages manifest more significant differences[1] whereupon setting sex equivalence as a level of comparability has to be at least taken into account.

It is of interest to students of CS to know what the distribution of lin-

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[1] For example, in Chiquito, and American Indian language of Bolivia, 'my brother' is *ičibausi* (when said by a female) and *tsaruki* (When said by a male), 'my father' is *ijali* (male speaker) and *isupu* (female speaker). In the American Indian language Koasati, a language of the Muskogean family, spoken in Louisiana, 'He is saying' is /kaːs/ (male speaker) and /kãː/ (female) (Trudgill 1974).

guistic forms is in *apparent time* — "that is, along the dimension formed by the age groups of the present population" (Labov 1972 : 163). This dimension refers to generation divergencies which when correlating with linguistic differences, which is usually the case, constitute another potential level of comparability at which equivalence must be established. Generation discrepancies within one society are often revealed not only at the linguistic level but also at the higher sociolinguistic and socio-interactional levels. Norms pertaining to social interaction seem to be changing very rapidly nowadays. Likewise, the linguistic and non-linguistic[2] behaviour that implements the various rights and obligations in actual interaction markedly differ across generations. Therefore the student of CS must explicitly state what age categories he is considering. It follows that, within the framework adumbrated above, three possibilities become available:

I. accounting for sociolinguistic behaviour pertaining to the language of generation 1[3] (functional sociolinguistically) of $L_1$, and accounting for sociolinguistic rules pertaining to the language of comparable and equivalent generation category 1 (functional sociolinguistically) of $L_2$

II. accounting for the sociolinguistic behavior of 2[4] of $L_1$ and the equivalent category 2 of $L_2$

III. accounting for the sociolinguistic behavior of both 1 and 2 of $L_1$ and $L_2$.[5]

The present discussion of the age factor should not be confused with the issue of age as a variable present in any speech situation. The point in question is that while age is always a variable in any speech situation in the languages the author has some knowledge of (e.g., German, English, Spanish), the status of this variable within the entire variable complex may significantly vary from one generation to another.

Once equivalence and the levels of comparability have been established with respect to the *user*, variation according to *use* must be taken into account. 'Variation according to use' is translatable into the individual speaker's, or a relatively homogeneous group of speakers' linguistic repertoire out of which the appropriate linguistic forms are selected in varying extralinguistic

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[2] Take as an example the younger and the older Polish generations and the way these two differ on the norms of dancing (both kinesics and proxemics).

[3] It seems that in most societies there are two generation categories functional sociolinguistically. If we consider 1 to be the younger generation in the first alternative the linguistic variation of the older generation would not be described.

[4] 2 refers to the older generation.

[5] This possibility is not meant to indicate separate studies of 1 of $L_1$ and 1 of $L_2$; 2 of $L_1$ and 2 of $L_2$, and postdescriptive matching. It is intended to indicate an approach resulting in generalizations bigger than in the case of the possibilities I and II. A sociolinguistic rule arrived at within III would be capable of generating instances of behavior generalizable to pertinent rules of I and II formulated separately for each category.

circumstances. The set of registers that speakers have at their disposal involves a large variation of linguistic forms which are subsumable under differentiated categories (cf. Janicki 1978). It is important therefore to state which of these categories of language use are being considered in a contrastive sociolinguistic study.

The issue in question may be best illustrated with the example of style (a type of register). Joos (1959) arbitrarily distinguished five categories of style for English — frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate. Let us assume that the same number of categories has been isolated for some other language $L_2$. The following diagram illustrates the relationship between sociolectal (variation according to *user*) and stylistic (variation according to *use*) variation.
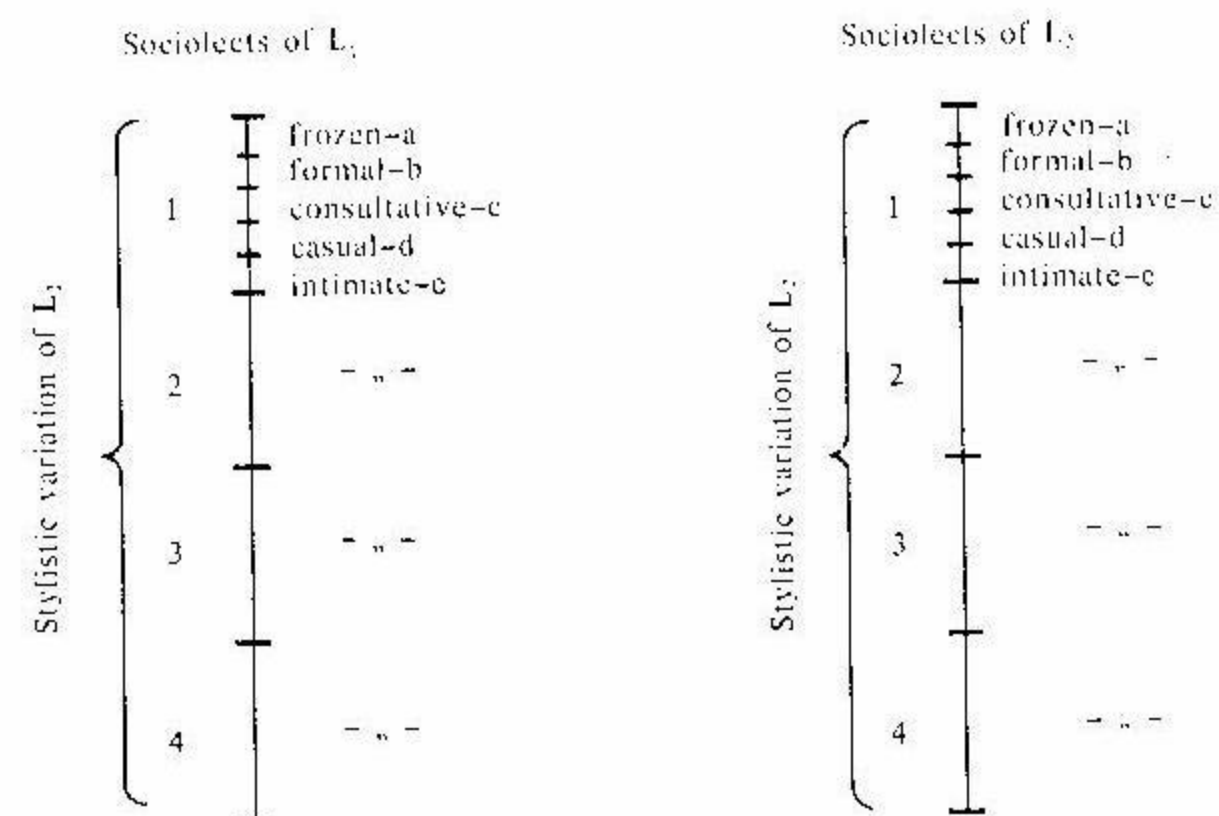


In $L_1$ there are four sociolects. Likewise $L_2$ includes four sociolects. Each of these four sociolects organizes its stylistic usage in a specific way. It follows that 1 of $L_1$ must be compared with 1 of $L_2$ (2 of $L_1$ with 2 of $L_2$, etc.).The sociolectal level having been established $a$ of $1L_1$ must be compared with $a$ of $1L_2$ (b of $1L_1$ with b of $1L_2$, etc.).

Having established the indispensable levels of comparability the contrastive sociolinguist may commence his analysis of the two selected varieties of $L_1$ and $L_2$. Thus it will become clear that each statement is made relative to a strictly defined social context which correlates with the individual linguistic variety under consideration. Whether the sociolinguist will then care to integrate findings pertaining to two or more varieties, or whether he will eschew such an attempt is an entirely different matter.

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