

David Levey 2008: *Language Change and Variation in Gibraltar*. Amsterdam /Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. xxii + 192 pp. ISBN 978 90 272 1862 9

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Model-building linguistic inquiry into language variation and change began with three seminal works, among several others, which contributed to the birth of a new linguistic paradigm in the late sixties and early seventies of the 20th century: one is Weinreich, Labov and Herzog's 'Empirical Foundations for a Theory of Language Change' (1968), further developed by Labov's, "Building on Empirical Foundations" (1982), and the other is Labov's *What is a Linguistic Fact?* published in 1975. In my view, they all set the foundations for the development of what linguistic historiography now refers to as the *Theory of Language Variation and Change*, but also for the development of several other linguistic models, probably impressionistically referred to as *functionalist*, in the context of which the then outstanding generativist paradigm that identified form and referential meaning gave way to the consideration of the interplay of other types of meanings (social, stylistic) and functions to explain language behaviour, as Hymes pointed out as early as 1970 in the introduction to the first issue of *Language in Society*.

The proposal of this new paradigm, geographically centred in North-American linguistics and further developed in Europe during the seventies and eighties, was motivated by intricate epistemological and methodological criteria. Up until then linguists had been engaged in the understanding of the human capacity to construct a linguistic system, rather than the external evidence behind that system. There was a general consensus on the nature of linguistic facts in order to optimize the Saussurian paradox and the study of the social aspect of language (*langue*) from the intuitions of one or two individual speakers within a homogeneous speech community, which allowed data collection from a great variety of languages.

Thus, it could be said that it is the uniformity of the analysed linguistic facts and phenomena that forced a general agreement on the linguistic method used and the scarce interest for empirical phenomena. In their approach to what constitutes a linguistic fact there was controversy among linguists over the existence of variable versus invariant phenomena. On the one hand, Bloomfield's disciples gradually develop the notion of the *idiolect* in order to exclude variable phenomena, so that each scholar would end up with a different set of linguistic facts and phenomena, which was an obvious attack on the Saussurean notion of *langue* as a general property of the speech community; on the other hand, the generative school ignored the problems raised by the existence of linguistic variation and excluded from their analysis any data which would compete with the linguists' own idiolect, and this again represented an attack on Chomsky's attempt to develop a theory of language from the clear cases.

This new linguistic paradigm was proposed as an alternative to 50 years (between 1925 and 1975) of language description based on the native speaker's intuitions, which at the time turned out to be more and more limited and erroneous, to back up the linguists' theoretical constructs, in order to be able to consider new perspectives in the relation between language and speech. The new paradigm proponents argued that linguistic explanations and analysis have to be correct since, as Labov (1975) affirms, no linguist should be interested in a universal grammar which is incorrect. As an illustration of the kind of debate that was taking place at the time, it is relevant to remember that the studies conducted by introspective generalizations demonstrated that language variation was extensive, uncontrollable and chaotic, whereas results derived from social and geographical dialects confirmed the opposite patterns, in the sense that all members of a speech community have access to the same interpretative norms even if they do not all use the same forms, and that language variation is less chaotic and more systematic than what idiolectal analysis has shown.

Almost 40 years later, the results obtained through the application of this new paradigm can be integrated in a body of generalisations and principles which developed into what is nowadays known as the *Theory of Language Variation and Change*, which incorporates: (1) *a set of premises* on approach to a) language and language structure, as configured by universals of cognition, memory and human logic, and also by its social use; b) language function, understood as the social effect involved in certain forms and usages, and c) language variety, that is, the vernacular, the most spontaneous variety of an individual which he/she shares with other members of his/her heterogeneous speech community, a linguistic construct proposed by Labov (1972) - further commented on by this scholar in Turell (1990) - which is not without its flaws (Romaine 1982) and further interpretations (Santa Ana and Parodi 1998); (2) *a set of theoretical and methodological principles* (the principle of structured heterogeneity, the principle of the grammar of the speech community (that is, the communication system used in social interaction) and the principle of uniformity in language behaviour, with elements of systematic linguistic variation, and social and stylistic stratification; (3) *clear objectives to attain* (the description of language variation); (4) *discrete data to analyse* (the vernacular) and (5) *scientific methods of observation and description*.

From this conceptual and analytical context, it became clear that it was no longer possible to understand language change from homogeneous structures and that linguistic heterogeneity had to come into play; as a result, this new paradigm was born to view linguistics as an empirical science and its method as data-oriented. It set forth to ask and answer questions related to the mechanisms that cause linguistic variation and the routes taken by linguistic change, and it showed that although it is possible that certain linguistic facts are constrained only by internal linguistic factors, the majority of linguistic units, facts and phenomena are sociolinguistically based and so both internal and external factors have to be taken into account.

An important token of this new paradigm has been the notion of *integration*: a) integration of internal and external sociolinguistically constrained variation, by searching who the innovators of language variation and change are through the analysis of six of the most relevant independent social variables: gender, age, social class, ethnicity, race and community size, and also the speaker's status within the speech community and his/her

relations with members of other communities, together with supplementary information on the patterns of language behaviour, the homogenising effects of social networks and the transmission of variable elements from generation to generation and throughout historical periods; b) integration within the matrix of linguistic forms, in the sense that variation and change would be restricted, redirected and accelerated by their relations with other linguistic forms; c) integration within the speech community structure to know more about the social innovators of variation and change, how this variation and change extends to other groups and which groups are more resistant to these phenomena, in order to understand the causes of variation and change; and finally, d) integration in a multivariate framework - because language variation and change are constrained by a variety of internal and external factors - which has allowed scholars to come up with interesting results and a new body of generalisations.

These results and generalisations are both conceptual and methodological and have been poured into a number of specialised linguistic journals, in particular, *Language Variation and Change*, which was founded in 1989 and in the Proceedings of NWAVE (*New Ways of Analysing Variation in English and Other Languages*), before the setting of the journal just mentioned, and in the Proceedings of ICLaVE (*International Conference on Language Variation in Europe*) since its establishment in 2000, in addition to the seminal literature that these 40 years of model and theory-building have foreseen: Labov (1972a), Labov (1972b), Bayley (1973), Chambers and Trudgill (1980), Sankoff (1980), Romaine (1982, 1994), Trudgill (1983), Sankoff (1986), Silva-Corvalán (1989), and in particular the three masterpiece volumes on internal (volume 1), social (volume 2) and cognitive and cultural (volume 3) factors that Labov has published during the last two decades: Labov (1994), Labov (2001) and Labov (forthcoming).

Among several, the most important generalisations proposed by this paradigm have to do with a) the observation of structured linguistic variation in all languages, b) the nature of factors, that is, that internal factors are independent among them, while external factors are interactive, and that the consequences of cognitive factors in linguistic change cannot be disregarded any longer; c) the relations between synchrony and diachrony and d) the nature of linguistic change (its beginnings, stabilisation and consolidation; who the leaders and innovators are, with the observation and description of the *curvilinear pattern* and the routes taken by change itself; furthermore, one of the main strengths of this paradigm is the body of conceptual and epistemological principles developed (*changes from above, changes from below*) and methodological approaches and techniques (*aparent/real time* data collection contexts, *panel/survey* studies, a *multivariate framework* of analysis with the use of probabilities and not mere percentages). These premises, principles and methods corroborate that it is a theory and model-building paradigm and that substantial developments in the discipline will occur, in particular through the more recent understanding of the effects of cognitive and cultural factors (how individuals evaluate variation and change, the status of variable rules in synchronic grammar, the study of dialectal inter-comprehension, the acquisition of variation patterns by children, and the study of syntactic variation in long periods and also of syntactic variation in progress, detected in emerging creoles).

David Levey's *Language Change and Variation in Gibraltar* offers a useful overall view of several aspects that characterise the sociolinguistic situation in the British

colony, particularly in relation to language shift and “language contact in Gibraltar” (Anderson 2008), useful as well because the territory and population chosen “are so small that it is easy to carry out detailed research” (Nuessel 2009). Anderson (2008) and Nuessel (2009) reviewed this monograph – the former both descriptively and critically; the latter merely descriptively – and detailed its contents by chapters. My review of Levey’s volume is preceded by a long summary of the theoretical and methodological principles of the *Theory of Language Variation and Change* because, although in the introduction to *Language Change and Variation in Gibraltar* the author anticipates that the “study adopts a variationist sociolinguistic approach” (2008: 8) and the title indeed includes the terms *change* and *variation*, I hope to be able to show that this book has to do with the variationist sociolinguistic model only very partially.

The book title misleads the reader in three ways. The title is misleading in *scope*, since in order to be able to account for whatever the object or objects of study are, it would have been necessary to consider the impact of Spanish on the English of the whole population of Gibraltar, stratified by other age groups, and not only on the English usage of the adolescents and pre-adolescents living in the British colony; it is also misleading *vis-à-vis* the real *content* of the book. There is a terminological inadequacy between the title and the contents. Levey refers to *language change* when he supposedly means to refer to *language shift*, that is, the steady substitution of one language, or variety of language, by another, as the usual means of communication. By the analysis of the first four chapters the real content of the book seems to deal with language contact, language choice, language shift (wrongly named as *language change*, hence the title) and language attitudes, rather than with language variation and change in the variationist sense; finally, the title is also misleading in terms of *focus* since, if its contents really had to do with a variationist view of the sociolinguistic situation in Gibraltar, one would have expected a different word order in the title key words, that is, *language variation* should have been phrased before *language change* since, as Labov says, there is no change without variation; variation precedes linguistic change and not the other way round; in fact, variation is an index of change, even if many changes never make it through the linguistic system.

The main strength of this volume could have been the proposal phrased in the introduction (chapter 1) of an analysis in *real time* (that is, counting on the recent data included in the book (real time data) and similar evidence collected 10-15 years before in *apparent time* (apparent time data) of the three language varieties involved in Gibraltar: the varieties of the English and the Spanish spoken in the colony and the mixed variety known as Yanito, thoroughly described in the literature (Moyer 1993; Levey 2006); however, this anticipation is not pursued in the following chapters and the book is reduced to a partial description of language choice and language contact in two very specific segments of the population: adolescents and pre-adolescents. Chapter 2, with a description of the speech communities of Gibraltar, both diachronically and synchronically, is very useful and highly relevant as is chapter 3, where the fieldwork and the methodology, not without its own weaknesses, are described. This chapter will be commented on together with chapters 5 and 6. As to chapter 4, on language choice, competence and attitudes, I agree with Anderson (2008) that these three topics are very superficially considered; moreover, it is surprising that competence in particular is not

investigated by means of methods derived from census linguistics and other approaches within the tradition of socio-demography of language; in fact, the use of demolinguistic projections (Casesnoves, Sankoff and Turell 2006) could have shed some light on the prospects of English and Spanish in terms of competence and real use.

The comments that follow refer to chapters 5 and 6, by far the most interesting in terms of the aims stated in the book and the variationist standpoint anticipated by the author. These two chapters characterise the variable nature of the vocalic and consonant make up of Gibraltar English and investigate the areas of potential Spanish transfer by looking at several minimal pairs, mergers and other phonetic phenomena and by contrasting their behaviour with the one observed in *in situ* analyses of other British English varieties that are very well documented. One theoretical issue which this contrastive viewpoint raises but for which it still does not offer a clear answer is whether these variable contexts are solely motivated by language contact with Spanish or also by the evolution of the internal structure of English.

Both chapters reflect theoretical and methodological flaws, on which I will comment in the first place and then mention how one methodological decision may have affected the theoretical contribution that the results could have involved, since decisions on speech community sample, its stratification, its collection method and the methods and techniques used have a direct effect on the results obtained and thus on the evaluation and further confirmation of the hypotheses and premises that are at play in variationist sociolinguistic analyses of language variation and change.

The sample used to study the vocalic and consonant system of Gibraltar English is more than sociologically representative (72 Gibraltarians) within the margins of the two age groups considered (38 adolescents and 34 pre-adolescents), although I also agree with Anderson (2008) in that there was no need to introduce the social variable of ethnicity (Indian and Moroccan) given the scarce representation of their population in the sample chosen; however, if the author wished to say anything relevant in relation to who the leaders of linguistic change in Gibraltar are and to the real direction taken by language change in this speech community, then the notions of *apparent* and *real* time should have been considered in the studies conducted by Levey and one or both of the two types of experimental design studies usually applied in sociolinguistic variation should have been chosen: a) *trend studies*, where there is a choice of a very similar population sample several years (10-15) after the first data collection took place, the instruments and the same analytical techniques, and b) *panel studies*, in the context of which the same individuals are traced down also several years later (10-15) and the same instruments and techniques are used.

More importantly, in the present study this methodological decision should have also involved the consideration of other age groups which stratify present day Gibraltar population, and not only by comparing the results to previous studies (Cal Varela 2001) but rather, at least when the same sounds are being analysed, by collecting data from all age groups and not simply adolescents and pre-adolescents. In fact, what seems an innocuous methodological decision of not going back to the past sociolinguistic situation and the scenario observed 10-15 years ago, could involve that the distribution in use of a specific sound variable across different age groups would be reflecting a characteristic patterns of *age gradation* repeated in each generation rather than a

linguistic change in the variety of a particular speech community, as Labov (2001) illustrates in many of the communities observed throughout the years of consolidation of the variationist paradigm.

My second methodological objection has to do with the techniques used to analyse the data. It is more than surprising that given the fact that Levey pretends to adopt a variationist sociolinguistic viewpoint with four social variables under analysis (age, gender, ethnicity [really unnecessary] and class), he then uses quantitative methods that only yield percentage results and does not take advantage of the several techniques contained in multivariate statistical packages (Goldvarb for McIntosh, Varbrul 2 and 3, Goldvarb for Windows 2001, 2006) and in packages that analyse linguistic variance (Rietvelt and van Hout 2005), the long-run application of which has shown that in correlational sociolinguistic variation studies percentages can be misleading and that probabilities and cross-tabulation allow the researcher to come up with more refined and reliable results.

Levey's *Language Change and Variation in Gibraltar* shows strengths and weaknesses. It is hoped that the discussion on some of the weaknesses raised may have clarified why the author's anticipation that his study adopts a variationist sociolinguistic approach is unprincipled. One of the strengths of the book is that it considers a small speech community, which could have been highly relevant to the ongoing debate on language variation and change in progress in non-stable sociolinguistic communities such as Gibraltar; however, there are too many topics considered, none of these topics is fully addressed and some of them "are simply treated in cursory evaluation" (Anderson 2008); furthermore, there is some terminological confusion and no clear focus on the fundamental issues contained in a real variationist sociolinguistic approach. Finally, although the book makes an interesting contribution to a general characterisation of English usage by youth in Gibraltar, it seems that a variationist sociolinguistic study of the use of Spanish and Yanito, the mixed variety extensively used by Gibraltar society, should have also deserved some research scrutiny.

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