

Sociolinguistics: An international handbook of the science of language and society (Project announcement)

ULRICH AMMON (*Duisburg*)
NORBERT DITTMAR (*Berlin*)
KLAUS J. MATTHEIER (*Heidelberg*)

This article is intended to inform the public about a rather large and representative publishing project in sociolinguistics, and at the same time to ask the readers to send in their critical comments. This handbook of sociolinguistics will be published by Walter de Gruyter (Berlin, New York). The publication date will be some time in 1987. The editors will try to find competent contributors for all the 192 articles of the Handbook. The editors would be grateful for any points of criticism. Critical comments should be sent to: Prof. D. Ulrich Ammon, Universität Duisburg Gesamthochschule, Fachbereich 3 – Germanistik, Lotharstrasse 65, 4100 Duisburg 1, Federal Republic of Germany.

MOTIVATION AND OUTLINE OF CONTENTS

As an independent discipline, sociolinguistics is still relatively new. A few isolated initial probes at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s were followed by the spectacular and widely publicized development of sociolinguistics, a development which occurred more or less simultaneously in various countries. This was the result not only of educational and social policy but also of reasons intrinsic to the discipline itself. In the Federal Republic of Germany, economic stagnation gave rise to demands that more effective benefits should be reaped from the ‘reserves of talent’ and greater mobility created between the social classes. This meant, of course, that class-specific language differences were brought into focus: If the demands were to be realized, these differences had to be investigated. In the United States, the problem of the city ghettos was a major concern: Plans to integrate the ghetto inhabitants without studying their specific use of language were hardly likely to succeed. From here, some parallels can be drawn to the problems of the immigrant ghettos which were emerging in West German cities. Once given closer consideration, these social and educational problems proved to be extremely complex, and it became evident that practical solutions were urgently required. This was the motivation for various kinds of research in sociolinguistics.

On the other hand, a number of other academic disciplines could also logically

expect the new science of sociolinguistics to contribute to the resolution of important, intrinsically academic problems. In its scientifically most stringent form of generative transformational grammar, linguistics had, to a large extent, lost any relation to empirical research. This formalized theory was then confronted with the unavoidable fact of extremely diverse language variation for which it had no explanation to offer. Sociolinguistics promised to fill this vacuum and adjust the imbalance without threatening to compromise the high standards of theoretical development which had once been established. At the same time, sociolinguistics appeared to be a potential link between theory-conscious formal linguistics and the traditional disciplines of linguistics such as dialectology, which dealt largely with empirical material. The new discipline also raised expectations in the field of sociology where the significance of language for virtually all social processes had often been pointed out. Up to this point, sociology had received little support from linguistics as previously practiced. Within the structuralist paradigm, either the social aspects of language had been assiduously abstracted away or else the relation to theory was all too distant. Finally, educational theory set its hopes on sociolinguistics; the decisive initiators of sociolinguistics were themselves educational theoreticians (e.g., Bernstein, Roeder), and it was logical that teaching methods would be more successful if they took the learners' language into the closest possible consideration, that is, also in its social variation. The detailed description of teaching aims and of proficiency assessment could again not simply abstract from the language of the learners. For reasons such as these, sociolinguistics was, and still is, also of direct concern to educational theory in general and not merely to the theory of language teaching.

Admittedly, the initial euphoria over sociolinguistics has now largely dissipated; inflated and over-optimistic expectations have been toned down to reasonable hopes (in fact, some expectations have been unjustly and far too hastily dismissed). However, the scope and intensity of research activities has continued to increase, particularly on an international scale. This confirms the practical and academic relevance of sociolinguistics in various areas in the past and the present. Correspondingly, there are good reasons for sociolinguistics now being well established as a university discipline in various countries. Publications in sociolinguistics are now so numerous and thematically so diverse that even specialists have difficulty keeping track of them.

In light of this situation, it is highly surprising that no systematic and comprehensive overview has yet been published. Some – now largely outdated – attempts at an overview (e.g., Hertzler 1965) and various introductions (e.g., Dittmar 1973; Marcellesi & Gardin 1973; Trudgill 1974; Fishman 1972) do exist. There is also a whole series of anthologies, but these either document a state of research which has now been updated (e.g., Steger 1982; Fishman 1968), or they are limited in theme, in some cases influenced by the incidental nature of conferences. Given this situation, a comprehensive overview is

urgently required. The Handbook has been designed to fulfill this need. With this overall objective, the Handbook intends to realize the following functions:

1. To give a representative documentation of the present state of research. Since the aim of the Handbook is to provide an all-round overview of the discipline, theories, methods, and empirical findings will be presented as comprehensively as possible. Historical forerunners and research going on outside the discipline itself, but nevertheless relevant to sociolinguistics, will be included. Parallels and duplications in research will only be sketched as briefly as possible.

2. To provide an inventory of the most advanced state of research. The Handbook is to be as topical as possible. For this reason, interesting but recently conceived theories and methods will also be presented, even if it has not yet been possible to test them empirically.

3. To serve as a stimulation and guide for further research. The Handbook plans to point out those perspectives in research which hold the greatest potential. In addition, it will show which concepts require further clarification; further, it will show how much explanatory power particular hypotheses (theories) have and how well-tested (verified) and relevant they are; above all, the methods of sociolinguistics will be explained in the greatest possible detail and examples presented, while particular difficulties will be highlighted. The Handbook should be useful as a direct guide to method application.

4. To show the relevance of practice. The hypotheses (theories) will be evaluated with respect to their validity and their capacity for solving practical problems, for example, in the theory of language teaching, language planning, and so forth. Beyond this, the practice and relevance of sociolinguistics will not be merely indicated: The relationship between sociolinguistics and established professions will be elucidated.

The chosen term "sociolinguistics" appears to be more appropriate for the comprehensive perspective of the Handbook than the possible alternative term, "sociology of language." First, "sociolinguistics" is the more commonly used name for the discipline. Besides, the term "sociolinguistics" seems to have a more extensive field of meaning. Although there is no generally recognized distinction in meaning between the two rival notions, "sociolinguistics," in contrast to "sociology of language," refers more directly to the microlevel of language variation without, however, excluding the macrolevel. So, if it is possible to make any distinction between the meaning of the two terms at all, "sociolinguistics" seems to be the more comprehensive.

The Handbook is designed to be international, both in its content and its reception. As far as the content is concerned, this objective can only be realized (since some limits have to be imposed on the Handbook) by leaving out some of the generally less important details from various associated disciplines (in all their international diversity). This makes a number of selective decisions on the part of the editors and the authors necessary.

In anticipation of an international reception, it is important to choose the most suitable language. The editors have decided in favour of English as the main language of the Handbook and, in general, the authors have been advised to use English. However – in line with the aim of the series “Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft” – in order to encourage the use of German as an academic language, particularly in the area of sociolinguistics, articles written in German will also be accepted. In the long run, it will be left to the authors themselves to choose either English or German. Articles which were originally written in another language apart from German or English will be translated into English or, if especially requested by the author, into German.

The Handbook is clearly primarily designed for use by teachers and students of linguistics, media studies, the social sciences, and education studies, but we hope it will also be relevant for practitioners in the fields of education and the social services, media, publishing, and psychotherapy, to mention but a few. The Handbook is most important for institutes of further education, especially for inservice teacher-training, where it is essential to communicate an overview of the most recent academic developments.

We plan to publish a condensed edition in paperback form later so that at least the most important information is available at a reasonable price.

The Handbook comprises 192 articles in all. These articles have been sorted into nine chapters. Ten experts in sociolinguistics from seven different countries have assisted the editors in planning the present table of contents.

Under the main heading “Basics,” the first chapter (I) deals both with basic questions of the development of theory and also with basic concepts of sociolinguistics. The latter have been divided into sociological and socio-psychological concepts on the one hand and specifically sociolinguistic concepts on the other. The idea of eventually including an additional section on basic linguistic concepts was rejected, since this subject matter is either presented in later chapters of the Handbook – particularly in chapter VI – or is already available in a clear and more complete form in other lexica or handbooks, for example, the *Lexikon der germanistischen Linguistik*.

The second chapter (II) presents the history of the discipline (and its prehistory) and the organisation of the discipline, including organs of publication and career possibilities. The theme of the third chapter (III) is the relation between sociolinguistics and its neighbouring and auxiliary disciplines, although not yet including sociology and linguistics themselves.

The fourth chapter (IV) is especially comprehensive. This chapter presents previous theories and theoretical approaches, the related empirical research results, and the particular social problems with which they are connected. The case being discussed will decide whether more space is allotted to the theory or the empirical work or, alternatively, the social problems involved.

The fifth chapter (V) is also relatively extensive. Here, both the methods of

empirical research and the associated problems will be described. The chapter is subdivided into three parts:

- A. A general part where the basis for the choice of certain methods is explicated;
- B. Methods of data elicitation;
- C. Methods of recording, describing, or analysing data.

The sixth chapter (VI) pursues a line which has so far been quite rare in sociolinguistics. It raises the question of the social significance and relevance of levels of linguistic analysis. This question will be of primary concern to linguists.

In the seventh chapter (VII), the sociolinguistic characteristics of twenty-two "Problem areas" in all will be described in short, separate articles.

The eighth chapter (VIII) is perhaps particularly innovatory because it devotes a relatively large amount of space to the treatment of research problems within the framework of historical sociolinguistics. After being neglected for a long time, interest in the historical questions of sociolinguistics has recently been growing.

In the ninth and concluding chapter (IX), the practical possibilities for application will be discussed in detail. While most people here seem to be only aware of the possibility of applying sociolinguistics in the area of language teaching, it is easy to show that the range of possibilities is, in fact, far more extensive.

The nine chapters are followed by an appendix with a detailed subject and terminology index and a bibliographical index ordered according to the authors.

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- I *Basics*
 - A. Theoretical aspects
 - B. Basic sociological and sociopsychological concepts
 - C. Basic sociolinguistic concepts
- II *History and organisation of sociolinguistics as a discipline*
 - A. History of the discipline
 - B. The organisation of the discipline
- III *Neighbouring and auxiliary disciplines*
- IV *Social problems, theoretical approaches, and research results*
- V *Problems of method*
 - A. General
 - B. Elicitation methods
 - C. Recording and describing data
- VI *The social relevance of levels of linguistic analysis*
- VII *Problem areas*
- VIII *Historical sociolinguistics*
- IX *Application*

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 - 2. The subject matter of sociolinguistics (4)
 - 3. Definition (4)

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5. Formalization (4)
6. Theory – Empirics (4)
7. Theory – Practice (8)
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- B. Basic sociological and sociopsychological concepts
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- II *The history and organisation of sociolinguistics as a discipline* (92, total)
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