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Author

Bucholtz, Mary

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Sociolinguistics and Political Economy

M Bucholtz, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, USA

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Since the beginnings of sociolinguistics, it has been well established that language and economic structures are interrelated. Other social sciences concerned with political economy have been largely dismissive of language, viewing it as an entirely symbolic rather than material phenomenon. By contrast, sociolinguists – including both those who describe and those who critique capitalist systems – have repeatedly and conclusively demonstrated that language is intimately tied to speakers' material economic position.

The earliest work examining this relationship concentrated on the linguistic dimensions of social class, particularly the social and economic reflexes of the standard and the vernacular forms of a language. The robust correlations that variationist sociolinguists found between socioeconomic status and language use were cited as powerful evidence of the social organization of linguistic variation. Variationist sociolinguistics was also instrumental in redirecting scholarship on speakers living in poverty from a framework centering on language deficiencies to one focused on linguistic difference.

Whereas the first studies of language and social class were largely framed within a structural-functionalist paradigm in which social classes orient to the same social norms, and in which class organization is consensual, scholars informed by Marxist theory have argued that a conflict-based model of class would improve the fit between sociolinguistic findings and the social theories used to account for them, insofar as language is used not only in parallel fashion across classes but also to carve out social differences between classes. The difficulties of objectively determining class led other researchers to focus on social networks, in which occupation figured heavily, as a way of arriving at locally meaningful social groupings for linguistic analysis.

Social class has been at the center of a longstanding debate in sociolinguistics: how to account for the widespread pattern in which women are frequently found to surpass men in the use of standard variables. One early explanation for this pattern was that women, lacking equal access to real-world power, use language as a symbolic resource to claim social prestige by projecting through their speech a class position above their actual material circumstances. A revised version of this argument posits that women more than men are socially evaluated not on their accomplishments

but on their personhood, and that language is a crucial component of self-presentation. This account allows for the possibility (which has been empirically demonstrated in variationist-sociolinguistic research) that some female speakers might seek to project a working-class rather than middle-class persona and hence will outpace their male counterparts in the use of vernacular rather than standard variables.

This analysis of the semiotic power of language relies heavily on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, a central theorist in sociolinguistic discussions of political economy. For Bourdieu, language is a form of capital, a term that for him includes not only economic power but also social, cultural, and symbolic power. Bourdieu argues that when a linguistic market is constituted in a society, the distribution of linguistic capital – that is, the form of the language imbued with the most power within the market – is uneven across speakers. The economic analogy is not wholly metaphorical, for Bourdieu notes that power in the linguistic marketplace tends to extend to power in the economic marketplace as well. However, language can function as a primarily symbolic form of capital that enables speakers to accrue local prestige, such as popularity among high school students in the United States, although even in this situation speakers' choice of linguistic variables tends to correlate with their orientation to socioeconomically divergent pathways after high school: jobs versus college.

The relationship between language and work, which has long informed variationist sociolinguistic research, has also been explored within other paradigms. Ethnographic sociolinguists have documented the ways in which opportunities in the labor market are tied to language, demonstrating not only that lack of access to linguistic capital prevents economic mobility, but also that even within a limited field of options speakers may make agentive and strategic linguistic choices to promote their own social goals, whether these involve economic advancement or participation within a local linguistic and economic market. Although scholarship on standardization, language shift and loss, and the international spread of English has shown that broad political-economic forces such as nationalism, colonialism, industrialization, and globalization have dramatic and often catastrophic consequences for language, such research also demonstrates that these forces cannot fully determine speakers' linguistic practices.

In contrast to much of the work on language and economic systems discussed above, which considers the linguistic consequences of broad economic structures and processes, research within discourse analysis

considers the details of language use within specific economic contexts. A body of literature in several subfields has examined a wealth of issues regarding language in the workplace. Interactional sociolinguists, concerned with how cultural differences in interactional style may lead to misunderstandings and conflicts between interlocutors in culturally diverse work settings, seek to document the pragmatics of talk among coworkers and between service providers and customers or clients. Scholars working in the traditions of interactional sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, and other approaches have also given extensive attention to language use in institutional settings such as medical contexts, the legal system, the educational system, and the media, in which issues of power and economic access are centrally relevant. And as both multilingual linguistic competence and friendly, facilitative interactional practices have emerged as marketable skills within the postindustrial service economy, scholars have begun to document the ways in which the linguistic abilities of a diverse workforce come to be shaped to the needs of late capitalism.

Although socioeconomic structures and institutional contexts have been the aspects of economic systems most central to sociolinguistic research, another crucial element of economic processes, consumption, has begun to gain ground. The relationship between language and consumer culture has been of deep interest particularly within critical discourse analysis and other politically oriented sociolinguistic frameworks. Focusing on advertising discourse, popular media textual products such as mass-market fiction and television shows, and other commodified forms of discourse, this body of work offers a critical perspective on how members of the public are transformed into consumers. However, research is still greatly needed on how people both at the center and on the periphery of consumer culture use language to make sense of such texts and of other aspects of consumption in their daily lives.

Related to this issue is the phenomenon of commodified language – language that functions not only as labor but as a product for consumption. Such commodification is most vividly seen in the appropriation of symbolically laden languages and dialects in advertising, mass media, and popular culture to enhance corporate profits, but it is also evident in the promotion of talk as a valued object in its own right in all aspects of late capitalist society, as seen in the marketing of verbal intimacy from psychotherapy to phone sex to coffeehouse conversations.

Many other arenas of language and political economy are only recently being explored by sociolinguists, particularly within newly industrializing

societies and those most dramatically reshaped by globalization. Indeed, it is not an overstatement to assert that every aspect of sociolinguistics touches on political-economic issues. As those working in the many branches of the field continue to pursue their diverse research agendas, scholarship will benefit greatly from deeper and more extensive attention to this powerful and pervasive aspect of sociolinguistic life.

See also: Conversation Analysis; Critical Discourse Analysis; Gender and Language; Institutional Talk; Interactional Sociolinguistics; Language in the Workplace: Different Approaches; Multilingualism; Pragmatic Aspects; Standardization; Variation and Language: Overview.

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Sociophonetics

P Foulkes, University of York, York, UK

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Sociophonetics, as is evident from its morphology, describes work at the intersection of sociolinguistics and phonetics.

The term has had its widest currency among phoneticians, referring especially to descriptive accounts of phonetic and phonological variation in particular dialects, speech styles, or speaker groups. The results of such investigations are often used to address issues in phonetic and/or phonological theory. One such issue is the relationship between phonetics and phonology (e.g., Ohala, 1990), although many

sociophoneticians appear to make no distinction between them, using 'phonetics' and 'phonology' interchangeably. Sociophonetics is also used to refer to phonetically oriented research in variationist sociolinguistics. Such work again focuses on the interrelationships between phonetic/phonological form and social factors such as speaking style and the background of the speaker, but with a particular interest in explaining the origins and transmission of linguistic change.

Among the first to define her work as 'sociophonetic' was Deshaies-Lafontaine (1974), in a study of Canadian French. Dressler and Wodak (1982) used the near-synonymous label 'sociophonological' for their study of Vienna German. Although the