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## LINGUIST List 27.3402

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### Review: Discipline of Ling; Socioling: Tagliamonte (2015)

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**Date:** 24-May-2016

**From:** William Cotter <williamcotter@email.arizona.edu>

**Subject:** Making Waves



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**AUTHOR:** Sali A Tagliamonte

**TITLE:** Making Waves

**SUBTITLE:** The Story of Variationist Sociolinguistics

**PUBLISHER:** Wiley-Blackwell

**YEAR:** 2015

**REVIEWER:** William M Cotter, University of Arizona

Reviews Editor: Helen Aristar-Dry

#### SUMMARY

In “Making Waves: The story of variationist sociolinguistics”, Tagliamonte sets out to tell the story of sociolinguistics from its inception roughly fifty years ago. To get the story of the discipline from the major scholars of the field, Tagliamonte employs the very methodology that practitioners of sociolinguistics have used for five decades. The book

is the outcome of over 150 hours of audio recordings conducted between 2012-2014 by the author with 43 key figures in the discipline. Beyond tracing the trajectory and development of the field, Tagliamonte notes that what comes out of these interviews are the researchers' personal philosophies and outlooks.

Chapter One represents the beginning of the story, with William Labov, the founder of the discipline. The chapter traces Labov's transition from the world of industrial chemistry to his graduate program at Columbia University, the result of his fascination with the way that people spoke when he would meet with clients. The chapter then goes on to discuss Labov's pioneering work in Martha's Vineyard (1963) and New York City (1966). Although Labov's story opens the chapter, it quickly transitions to discuss Bob Le Page's influence in developing sociolinguistics in the United Kingdom, crucial meetings of the Linguistic Society of America in the 1960s, the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington D.C., and soon-to-be leading figures in the field such as Gillian Sankoff, Roger Shuy, Peter Trudgill, Ralph Fasold, Henrietta Cedergren, and Lesley & James Milroy. The chapter concludes with mention of the very first NAWAV meeting, and the development of the Montreal French Project in the 1970s.

After the stage is set for the initial development of the discipline, Chapter Two sketches how scholars who were not part of the initial core group of researchers found their way to sociolinguistics. The list of voices that emerge in this chapter is long, but Tagliamonte intricately weaves their experiences into an evolving story of how sociolinguistics began to expand and grow. The chapter begins by providing a window into how a number of soon-to-be sociolinguistics found their way to Labov and his early research. Later in the chapter, the reader is provided with a view of how a number of these scholars came to be Labov's students and the environment in Labov's linguistics laboratory in the 1970s. Throughout these sections, Tagliamonte includes regular excerpts from her interviews that underscore the personal nature of each individual's experience with the development of the field. The chapter closes with a lengthy section on how sociolinguistics developed in other areas of the United States and, crucially, its expansion outside of America to areas further afield in Europe and Australia.

Chapter Three focuses on some of the major early areas of research interest within sociolinguistics. Namely, the chapter discusses early studies on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) conducted by Labov, as well as other scholars such as John Baugh. In addition, the chapter discusses the intersections between AAVE and Southern varieties of American English by weaving in narratives from Crawford Feagin. At the same time, the chapter taps into some of the early theoretical debates of the field, including whether or not sociolinguistics can profitably study syntactic change. The chapter ends by providing an overview of some of the other major conferences that feature sociolinguistic research, including UKLVC and the Sociolinguistics Symposium, along with the development and proliferation of one of the field's major publishing venues: the Journal of Sociolinguistics.

Chapter Four lays out major viewpoints from variationist sociolinguistics, and it does so through the lens of Weinreich, Labov, & Herzog's (1968) influential paper. Tagliamonte touches on two key tenets of the field in this chapter: orderly heterogeneity and inherent variability, discussing the ways in which these principles differ from other prevailing schools of linguistic thought at the time of Weinreich et al's paper. The chapter then turns to discussing the intellectual roots that underpin sociolinguistics; dialectology, sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines. Each of these disciplines are covered in turn, highlighting their role in the development of sociolinguistics. Chapter Four ends with a discussion on how to teach the discipline, along with scholars reminiscing about William Labov's influence on the field.

Chapter Five treats on one of the most important aspects of sociolinguistic research: fieldwork. Tagliamonte provides an illuminating account of what fieldwork entails, how it is experienced, and why it is such an integral part of the sociolinguistic enterprise. The chapter paints this picture through narrative excerpts from scholars such as Penelope Eckert and Walt Wolfram, who provide insight into some of their most memorable fieldwork experiences. Tagliamonte highlights not only what fieldwork provides to the researcher, but additionally what we learn about humanity in the process. The chapter then covers the differences between the sociolinguistic interview and other research methodologies, while discussing the challenge that fieldworkers face in walking what Tagliamonte refers to as a fine line "between quantity and quality in sociolinguistic research" (p. 95).

What Tagliamonte points to is a common dilemma in sociolinguistics, the reality that analysts need a great deal of casual speech data to tap into and analyze variation. However, at the same time, what we are able to collect is what we have. This reality is especially poignant as sociolinguistics has spread into communities that lie outside of the

largely Western and English or French speaking contexts common in much of the early sociolinguistic research. Chapter Five also provides insight into how major researchers in the field came to study the communities that they study, and how they select their field sites and gain access to the community.

The sixth chapter focuses on one of the major methodological and theoretical anchor points of variationist sociolinguistic research, quantitative methodologies and the importance of statistics for studying language variation and change. The bulk of Chapter Six discusses the variable rule program, with excerpts from David Sankoff, Henrietta Cedergren, Gregory Guy, and others who were influential in developing Varbrul and putting it to work. This chapter also details how the concept of the variable rule has been refined, along with newer developments in quantitative sociolinguistic methods, including the development and growth of Rbrul (Johnson 2009). By discussing quantitative methods, Tagliamonte shows how the field has debated, refined, and advanced its own quantitative outlook over the past five decades. However, Tagliamonte is right to point out that quantitative methods alone will not bring sociolinguists to their answers. At the end of the day, Tagliamonte notes, sociolinguists are obligated to “trust your data, know your data, and tell a linguistically informed story.” (p. 118).

Chapter Seven focuses on the ways in which sociolinguistics has an effect on the world outside of the fairly narrow scope of our linguistic analyses. Inequality, stigma, and prejudice are major points of focus in this chapter. Through discussions around these topics, the chapter covers what leading sociolinguists feel the impact of sociolinguistic research can be outside of the discipline. One of the major foci of the chapter is Labov's The Reading Road program, which was developed and implemented in Philadelphia along with Labov's influential testimony on behalf of the Oakland School Board. The chapter then goes on to discuss Roger Shuy's influential work in the court system, and ends by focusing on Walt Wolfram's outreach and preservation work with Ocracoke, along with a 'call to arms' of sorts from the author that encourages sociolinguists to step outside of their comfort zone to engage more directly with these areas.

In the eighth chapter of the book, Tagliamonte traces the trajectory of variationist sociolinguistics from the 1970s up to the present day. One of the major thrusts of this chapter is the way in which it highlights how social categories like class, gender, and social network structure were refined and reexamined through more recent research. In particular, this chapter highlights work conducted by Lesley Milroy (1980) in Belfast during this period, which influenced our understanding of language variation in relation to social class and social network structure. The chapter also draws on a lengthy interview excerpt with Penelope Eckert that highlights the need to re-examine our understanding of gender in relation to language variation, as she discusses her major work on the topic (Eckert 1989).

A great deal of Chapter Eight also covers the lengthy debate over the origins of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Tagliamonte weaves the narratives of some of the major scholars who have investigated the issue into the chapter, covering the major theories surrounding the origins and development of AAVE. This portion of the chapter touches not only on a critical debate, but provides an example of how sociolinguistics has approached the question from a variety of different perspectives. The chapter also provides an important discussion of social meaning, grounded in Penelope Eckert's narrative on what sound changes actually mean. The importance of social meaning has been one of the main axes of the Third Wave of sociolinguistic research, and the chapter goes on to cover the trajectory of the three waves of research within sociolinguistics. Chapter Eight concludes by covering additional topics, including Perceptual Dialectology and the contributions of scholars like Dennis Preston, as well as grammaticalization and the work of Shana Poplack.

Chapter Nine of Making Waves consists of a brief “where are they now” account of a number of key scholars from the field. The chapter details the circumstances under which Tagliamonte was able to track down and interview each of these scholars. This chapter also focuses on one of the key questions in Tagliamonte's interviews, the question of why these leading sociolinguistics chose to study variation.

The tenth and final chapter of the book focuses on where variationist sociolinguistics seems to be heading from the perspective of those scholars that are featured in the book. One key point in the chapter is how far the technology employed in the study of language variation and change has come in recent years, as well as the new ways in which statistical analyses can be carried out. This final chapter also discusses the evolution and development of NWAV as a professional conference and community. One interesting point from this closing chapter is the sense that the reader

gets from the scholars that the field has become polarized, particularly in the split between more “socially” minded researchers, and those more directly focused on the linguistic side of sociolinguistics. The chapter concludes with a final look towards the horizons of the discipline and the potential for researchers to make a broad impact on both scholarly work and the world that we live in.

## EVALUATION

Overall, Tagliamonte’s account of the history and development of sociolinguistics provides a succinct and easily accessible avenue through which to learn about the intellectual history of the discipline. The author certainly achieves her stated goal of telling the story of the discipline, and the inclusion of narrative excerpts from figures in the field provides a unique way to learn about how sociolinguistics has grown since its inception. However, the book’s structure and the fact that it is written in an almost novelistic style represents one of the major obstacles in working through the text. While the book reads very easily, the novelistic style can also prove to be somewhat cumbersome and at times the text feels disjointed. In the end though, this does not ultimately detract from the value of the book. One other unique feature of *Making Waves* is the audio clips of narrative excerpts from the book that are available online through the book’s Wiley companion site (<http://www.wiley.com//legacy/wileychi/tagliamonte/>).

*Making Waves* serves as a useful introduction to some of the major theoretical tenets of the field. This text would prove to be useful for undergraduates just beginning to wade into sociolinguistics who are looking for an accessible path towards some of the discipline’s theoretical underpinnings. At the same time, graduate students interested in sociolinguistics will find the book useful because it allows them to hear from the founders of the discipline, providing insights about conducting research and the scientific enterprise more generally. In addition, more senior scholars of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, or related disciplines will find the book insightful as a fairly broad overview of how the field developed. *Making Waves* provides an important and useful form of documentation for how sociolinguistics has grown so rapidly over the past five decades and where variationist sociolinguistics in particular seems to be heading in the years to come.

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## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

William Cotter is a joint PhD student in Anthropology and Linguistics at the University of Arizona. His research focuses on contact between dialects of Palestinian Arabic in the Gaza Strip and in particular the sociophonetic outcomes of these forms of contact. More broadly, his work asks how protracted political conflict and forced migration influence language change in this community.

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