18 Throughout the period of restricting the power of the transformational component, and ever since, Chomsky has insisted that elimination of the component is not a desideratum. Certainly it continues to play a key role in virtually every module of GB theory. The important point for my argument is simply the indisputable fact that this component has been greatly reduced in power and in work performed, and in this sense is relatively less significant within the overall model than it was in the mid-1960s. Beyond this, the considerable success of the transformation-free model of Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar can be taken as additional evidence of the component's diminishing appeal to the linguistic community at large. See further the contrastive studies in Droste and Joseph (1990).

4

Demythologizing sociolinguistics: why language does not reflect society

Deborah Cameron

1 INTRODUCTION

As Roy Harris, from whom I borrow the notion of 'demythologizing', has observed:

> A concept of a language involves, and is most often clearly manifest in, acceptance or rejection of what requires explanation about the ways in which languages work. This means that a concept of a language cannot stand isolated in an intellectual no-man's land. It is inevitably part of some more intricate complex of views about how certain verbal activities stand in relation to other human activities, and hence, ultimately, about man's place in society and in nature.
>
> (Harris 1980: 54)

Harris's own work represents an attempt to explore the 'intricate complex of views' that underpin the western tradition of language study. He identifies what he calls a 'language myth' (Harris 1981): a collection of taken-for-granted propositions about the nature and workings of language from which particular questions 'naturally' follow, and lead in turn to particular kinds of solutions. For example, if one accepts the Lockean idea of communication through language as 'telementation', the transference of messages from one mind to another, the obvious question is 'how can this be accomplished?' and the natural solution is to model language as a 'fixed code' located in the mind of every speaker.

Harris's project of 'demythologizing' linguistics consists essentially in making explicit the hidden assumptions which underlie linguists' models, showing that they are historical constructs (rather than immutable truths given by the nature of language itself) and subjecting

them to critical scrutiny. By adopting a different concept of a language, Harris points out, we would inevitably commit ourselves to asking quite different questions and proposing quite other solutions. In Harris's view this is exactly what linguistics ought to do; but I should perhaps add that we do not have to agree with Harris's outright rejection of current linguistic orthodoxy to accept his critical method as a valid and useful tool for reflecting on our practice.

In this chapter, I want to reflect on the practice of sociolinguistics (by which I mean, more or less, the 'variationist' or 'quantitative' paradigm associated with the work of Labov; whether this is an unreasonably narrow definition of the term 'sociolinguistics' is a question to which I shall return). In a demythologizing spirit I shall ask what assumptions about language and society underpin work in the quantitative paradigm, why sociolinguists have invested in these assumptions and whether they are useful, or even tenable. I shall argue that if sociolinguistics is to move forward, or indeed to realize fully its current objectives, it will need to shift its views 'about how certain verbal activities stand in relation to other human activities' – a move whose consequences for sociolinguistic methodology and theory may well prove quite radical.

Let me say immediately that I do not wish to deny the value of work in the quantitative paradigm. Indeed, there is an irony in my attempting to demythologize sociolinguistics, since sociolinguistics itself was conceived as a demythologizing exercise. The name Labov once gave it – 'secular linguistics' – implies a conscious desire to challenge sacred linguistic dogmas.

The doctrine Labov was most concerned to challenge was that of 'the ideal speaker-hearer in a homogeneous speech community' (I use the familiar Chomskyan formulation, but the central point that linguistics must idealize its object in order to describe it goes back through the structuralist paradigm and to Saussure). Labov debunked this as myth by showing that language is not homogeneous, either at the level of the speech community or the individual grammar. Rather, it possesses 'structured variability'. 'Structured' is important here: it means the variation found in language is not a matter of 'free' or random alterations (which mainstream linguists had recognized but excluded from consideration on the grounds that they were superficial, hence uninteresting, and difficult to model elegantly) but is, on the contrary, systematic and socially conditioned. Labov's work demonstrated that variation could be modelled, and that the analysis of variation provided insight into the mechanism of language change. In other

words, he argued convincingly that to accept the myth of the ideal speaker-hearer in the homogeneous speech community was not merely to screen out a few surface irregularities, but rather to miss a fundamental general property of language.

By insisting on the importance of heterogeneity, and developing methods for analysing it, sociolinguistics clarified questions of real theoretical importance which were not addressed in any principled way by existing paradigms. Like all myths, the myth of idealized homogeneity had foregrounded some things, making them easier to 'see', while rendering other things (like variation and change) impenetrably obscure. Labov's work may with justice be called 'demythologizing' because it pointed this out, and began the task of bringing what was obscure into the light. But the approach he founded is not without myths and blindspots of its own. Quantitative sociolinguistics has certainly clarified some aspects of language in society. But other aspects remain mysterious, the crucial questions unanswered, or even unasked.

What are these crucial questions? Very briefly, they concern the reasons *why* people behave linguistically as they have been found to do in study after study. Sociolinguistics does not provide us with anything like a satisfactory explanation. The account which is usually given – or, worse, presupposed – in the quantitative paradigm is some version of the proposition that 'language reflects society'. Thus there exist social categories, structures, divisions, attitudes and identities which are marked or encoded or expressed in language use. By correlating patterns of linguistic variation with these social or demographic features, we have given a sufficient account of them. (The account may also be supplemented with crudely functionalist ideas – that speakers 'use' language to express their social identity, for instance – or with a slightly less crude model in terms of group 'norms' at both macro- and micro-levels.)[1]

Two things about this kind of account are particularly problematic. The first problem is its dependence on a naive and simplistic *social* theory. Concepts like 'norm', 'identity' and so on, and sociological models of structures/divisions like class, ethnicity and gender, are used as a 'bottom line' though they stand in need of explication themselves. Secondly, there is the problem of how to *relate* the social to the linguistic (however we conceive the social). The 'language reflects society' account implies that social structures somehow exist before language, which simply 'reflects' or 'expresses' the more fundamental categories of the social. Arguably however we need a far more

complex model that treats language as *part of* the social, interacting with other modes of behaviour and just as important as any of them.

Before I return to these problems in more detail, it is necessary to ask why sociolinguistics has become caught up in them – why has the quantitative paradigm invested in the whole notion of 'language reflecting society'? This takes us back to the question of what sociolinguistics is, and how the field has been defined.

2 'SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND SOCIOLINGUISTICS': THE RISE AND RISE OF THE QUANTITATIVE PARADIGM

As I pointed out above, to make sociolinguistics synonymous with the Labovian quantitative paradigm is to beg the question. There are other approaches to the study of language in society (such as ethnography of speaking, discourse analysis, sociology of language) which surely have some claim to the title 'sociolinguistics' so that my definition could be construed as unnecessarily narrow and restricted, not to say biased.

To the criticism of narrowness and bias, however, I would respond by asserting that my definition of sociolinguistics reflects a historical (and academic-political) reality: over the last fifteen years the quantitative paradigm has so successfully pressed its claims to the central and dominant position in language and society studies, that for most people in the field (and especially most *linguists* in the field) 'sociolinguistics' does indeed mean primarily if not exclusively 'Labovian quantitative sociolinguistics'. The effect of this shift, for as we shall see it *is* a shift, is to privilege and even to mythologize one kind of approach to linguistic variation.

It is instructive to look at what has happened to the discipline known as 'sociology of language'. Today it is sometimes assumed that this never existed as a separate enterprise – that it was merely a terminological variant of sociolinguistics, since discarded by common consent. But a look at the literature gives the lie to that idea. Joshua Fishman, for example, one of the leading practitioners of sociology of language in the 1960s and early 1970s, draws a distinction between the two approaches (Fishman 1968: 6). He conceives of sociolinguistics as a type of linguistics, a way of studying language; sociology of language by contrast need not be done by people trained in linguistics and will always take problems of society and social theory as a starting point.

In so far as any distinction has been maintained, it seems to have become one of content rather than theoretical orientation. Sociology of language concerns itself with macro-social language questions (language choice and planning, for instance) while sociolinguistics deals with the microanalysis of variation (for an explicit statement to this effect see Hudson 1980: 5; for a recent (and rare) example of a sociology of language text see Fasold 1984, which is however titled *The Sociolinguistics of Society* – perhaps the term 'sociology of language' no longer sells books to linguists?). Fishman regards this development with considerable disfavour. In a review of Fasold 1984 (Fishman 1986) he attacks the content-based distinction as inherently ill-founded and criticizes Fasold for paying insufficient attention to social theory *per se*. But what all this illustrates is that, apart from a few dissenting voices like Fishman's, there has been a shift in the consensus about what properly constitutes the study of language in society, and it is a shift away from the sociological towards the more purely linguistic.

If further evidence is needed, one can point to any number of textbooks by influential authors in which the primacy of linguistic over social issues is vigorously asserted (Hudson 1980; Trudgill 1978 and 1983). In a rather bizarrely titled introductory essay called 'Sociolinguistics and sociolinguistics', Trudgill puts his notion of what he calls 'sociolinguistics proper' in the following terms: 'All work in this category . . . is aimed ultimately at improving linguistic theory and at developing our understanding of the nature of language . . . very definitely *not* "linguistics as a social science"' (1978: 3).

Now there is of course nothing wrong with trying to improve linguistic theory and our understanding of the nature of language; it is also quite true that sociolinguistics of the sort Trudgill advocates has enabled progress to be made (see pp. 80–1 above). But one might ask: why this assiduous policing of the disciplinary borders? What is at stake in the emphatic denial of 'linguistics as a social science'? Is Trudgill's stand well-motivated in terms of the overall aims of sociolinguistics, or is it determined by somewhat different considerations?

In my view, what Trudgill says (and he is typical enough) can be interpreted as part of an understandable concern about the academic prestige of sociolinguistics. Many sociolinguists would like to lay claim to the sort of prestige mainstream linguistics has achieved over the last twenty-five years; conversely, they would like to distance themselves from the more dubious reputation of contemporary sociology. Academic prestige is dependent on various factors, but one of them is *scientific status*:

a prestigious discipline will tend to possess qualities associated with science (however erroneously) such as theoretical and methodological rigour, 'objectivity', abstraction and so on. One achievement of the so-called Chomskyan revolution has been to appropriate this sort of status for linguistics more successfully than previous or alternative paradigms. Little wonder, then, that sociolinguistics should concentrate on the 'linguistics' to the virtual exclusion of the 'socio'.

It is also relevant, however, that mainstream linguists are sceptical of the sociolinguists' claim to share their glory. Sociolinguistics is in some respects a 'poor relation'; in the accepted university curriculum it is peripheral or optional where mainstream grammar is 'core' knowledge, while in terms of prestige it is frequently dismissed as mere 'butterfly collecting'.[2] Sociolinguists therefore find themselves in a position where they have to 'prove' the validity of what they do to their own academic colleagues in the mainstream; this again encourages them to be as 'rigorous' and 'objective' as possible (for instance, to make heavy use of statistical techniques) and, most importantly, to let linguistics set the agenda for research.

The trouble with concentrating on the purely linguistic and eschewing approaches tainted with the 'social science' tag is that sociolinguistics, however you try to define it, remains the study of language *in society*. Linguistic variation cannot be described sensibly without reference to its social conditioning; and if sociolinguistics is to progress from description to explanation (as it must unless it wants to be vulnerable to renewed charges of 'butterfly collecting') it is obviously in need of a theory linking the 'linguistic' to the 'socio'. Without a satisfactory social theory, therefore, and beyond that a satisfactory account of the relationship between social and linguistic spheres, sociolinguistics is bound to end up stranded in an explanatory void.

Faced with the problem of explaining variation, and in the absence of a well-thought-out theory of the relation of language and society, sociolinguists tend to fall back on a number of unsatisfactory positions: they may deny that anything other than statistical correlation is necessary to explain variation, they may introduce *ad hoc* social theories of one kind or another, or they may do both. Let us look more closely at the way these positions are taken up in practice and at their adequacy or otherwise as explanatory strategies.

3 EXPLANATION AND THE LIMITS OF QUANTIFICATION: THE CORRELATIONAL FALLACY

In the quantitative paradigm, statistical correlations are used to relate frequency scores on linguistic variables to nonlinguistic features both demographic (class, ethnicity, gender, age, locality, group structure) and contextual (topic, setting, level of formality). For instance, it is well known that rising frequencies of 'prestige' variants like postvocalic [r] in New York City correlate positively with rising social status and rising levels of formality. This kind of regularity is called a 'sociolinguistic pattern'.

Sociolinguistic patterns are essentially descriptive statements about the distribution of certain variables in the speech community. The question remains how to explain that distribution. As Brown and Levinson (1987) have noted, it is commonplace to take correlation as the terminal point of the account. Thus it could be claimed that my score for the variant [r] is explained by the fact that I belong to a particular social category – say, working-class women of Italian descent aged 50+ and living in New York City – and am speaking in a particular context, say a formal interview with a linguistic researcher. The variable (r) acts as what Scherer and Giles (1979) call a 'social marker'. This whole 'explanation' clearly rests on the perception that 'language reflects society': I shall refer to it as the 'correlational fallacy'.

Why is it a fallacy? Because the purported explanation does not in fact explain anything. Someone who subscribes to the sort of account given above has misunderstood what it means to explain something. One does not explain a descriptive generalization (such as 'older working-class female Italian New Yorkers in formal interviews have average (r) scores of n%') by simply stating it all over again. Rather, one is obliged to ask in virtue of what the correlation might hold. Any account which does not go on to take this further step has fallen into the correlational fallacy.

It is precisely at the point where the further step becomes necessary that *ad hoc* social theories are likely to be invoked. A sociolinguist might assert, for instance, that by using n% of (r), older working-class female Italian New Yorkers are expressing their identity as older working-class female Italian New Yorkers; or they are adhering to the norms of their peer group, or possibly (as in the case of a formal

interview) the norms of the larger society which dictate a more standardized speech on certain occasions.

There are various difficulties with these suggestions, not all of which can be gone into here in the detail they deserve, but certain problems can at least be sketched in. Take, for example, the notion of speakers expressing a social identity. It is common currency among sociolinguists, but a social theorist might pose some awkward questions about it: do people really 'have' such fixed and monolithic social identities which their behaviour consistently expresses? Furthermore, is it correct to see language use as expressing an identity which is separate from and prior to language? To put the point a little less obscurely, is it not the case that the way I use language is partly *constitutive* of my social identity? To paraphrase Harold Garfinkel, social actors are not sociolinguistic 'dopes'. The way in which they construct and negotiate identities needs to be examined in some depth before we can say much about the relation of language to identity.

The suggestion that people's use of language reflects group norms is a more useful one; it recognizes that human behaviour needs to be explained not in terms of invariant causes and effects but in terms of the existence of social meanings, in the light of which people act to reproduce or subvert the order of things. Unfortunately the account of normativity to be found in sociolinguistics is a curious and extremely deterministic one (a claim which will be illustrated below). There is also the question of where linguistic norms 'come from' and how they 'get into' individual speakers – a problem which becomes all the more acute when, as is often the case, the alleged norms are statistical regularities of such abstraction and complexity that no individual speaker could possibly articulate them either for herself or any other member of the speech community. So once again, the whole issue of norms requires a less *ad hoc* and more sophisticated treatment than it has on the whole received from sociolinguists.

Many of the problems to which I have referred here are also addressed by Suzanne Romaine in an article titled 'The status of sociological models and categories in explaining linguistic variation', which stands as an indictment of the correlational fallacy in sociolinguistics (Romaine 1984). In her article, Romaine adduces four typical studies in the quantitative paradigm (Labov 1963; Gal 1979; Milroy 1980; Russell 1982) and points out a link between them: they all explain linguistic variation and change in terms of group structure and membership. Tight-knit groups (technically, dense multiplex

networks) promote language maintenance whereas looser ties permit linguistic change.

An illustration may make this clearer. Lesley Milroy (1980) devised what she called a 'network strength scale' to measure the integration of her Belfast informants into their peer group. Points were scored for such things as having strong ties of kinship in the neighbourhood; working at the same place as your neighbours; spending leisure time with workmates; and so on. Individuals scored between 0 and 5 for network strength, and high scores were found to correlate positively with the use of certain vernacular variants. People who were less well integrated – for instance because they had been rehoused, were employed outside the neighbourhood where they lived or had no work at all – used fewer of these vernacular features. This led Milroy to conclude that people in her survey behaved linguistically as they did because of the normative influence of their peer group. Their scores on linguistic variants were determined by how strong or weak the peer group influence was. Tight-knit groups where people spend a lot of time with each other (and less with anyone else) are efficient norm-enforcing mechanisms – hence the finding that they promote the maintenance of traditional vernacular rather than permitting innovation to creep in.

All this may seem obvious enough, but as Romaine enquires, what kind of an *explanation* is it? The social network is a theoretical construct which cannot therefore 'make' any individual speaker do anything. Yet if we take away the idea of the network's ability to enforce linguistic norms, all we are left with is statistical correlations. Of these Romaine comments: 'the observed correlations between language and group membership tell us nothing unless fitted into some more general theory' (1984: 37).

What is this 'general theory' to be? Clearly, it needs to engage with the whole issue of how individuals relate to groups and their norms – in Romaine's words, it must make reference to 'rationality, intentionality and the function of social agents and human actors' (ibid.: 26). Is it then a theory of individual psychology, which seeks to explain how actors make rational decisions in the domain of linguistic behaviour? This kind of 'rational choice' line is the one often favoured by sociolinguists who do go beyond correlation (cf. Brown and Levinson's explanation (1987) of politeness phenomena in terms of strategies for satisfying universal psychological needs to maintain 'face'). But while an account of individual psychology may be necessary, I think Romaine recognizes it is not sufficient. There is another,

neglected area which properly belongs to the study of language in society but which cannot be addressed within the current assumptions of the quantitative paradigm.

Romaine hints at this when she makes the following observation:

> It is legitimate to recognise that an agent's social position and his relations with others may constrain his behavior on a particular occasion in specific ways. . . . People are constrained by the expressive resources available in the language(s) to which they have access and by the conventions which apply to their use. (1984: 37).

This can be interpreted as an argument for social or sociological levels of explanation as well as individual or psychological ones. For what Romaine alludes to here is the fact that speakers 'inherit' a certain system and can only choose from the options it makes available. Social agents are not *free* agents, but this does not mean we have to go back to the notion that they are sociolinguistic automata. Rather, we should ask ourselves such questions as 'what determines "the expressive resources available" in particular languages or to particular groups of speakers? Who or what *produces* "the conventions which apply to their use"? How – that is to say, through what actual, concrete practices – is this done?'

To address such issues seriously requires us to acknowledge that languages are regulated social institutions, and as such may have their own dynamic and become objects of social concern in their own right. With its emphasis on microanalysis and its suspicion of social theory, sociolinguistics tends to push this kind of perspective into the background. But if we seek to understand people's linguistic behaviour and attitudes – and, after all, changes in the linguistic system must at some level be brought about by the behaviour and attitudes of actual speakers – an approach to language in society which foregrounds questions like Romaine's is desperately needed. A demythologized sociolinguistics would incorporate such an approach as a necessary complement to quantification and microanalysis. It would deal with such matters as the production and reproduction of linguistic norms by institutions and socializing practices; how these norms are apprehended, accepted, resisted and subverted by individual actors and what their relation is to the construction of identity.

At this point it is helpful to consider in concrete terms how an approach like this would work and what its advantages might be. I shall therefore turn to a case in point: the changes in linguistic behaviour and

in certain language systems brought about by the reformist efforts of contemporary feminists. These developments exemplify a kind of linguistic change with which quantitative sociolinguists do not feel at ease, and in relation to which conventional accounts within the 'language reflects society' framework appear particularly lame.

4 A CASE IN POINT: SEXISM IN LANGUAGE

Over the last fifteen years the question of 'sexism in language' has been a hotly contested topic both inside and outside professional linguistic circles. What is at issue is the ways in which certain linguistic subsystems (conventional titles and forms of address, parts of the lexicon and even of grammar, for instance) represent gender. Feminists have pointed out that the tendency of these representations is to reinforce sexual divisions and inequalities. Salient facts about English include, for example, the morphological marking of many female-referring agent nouns (*actress, usherette*); the availability of more sexually pejorative terms for women than men (Lees 1980); the non-reciprocal use of endearment terms from men to women (Wolfson and Manes 1980); and, most notoriously, the generic use of masculine pronouns (Bodine 1975).

It should not surprise us that phenomena like these are widely understood as an instance of 'language reflecting society'. 'Society' holds certain beliefs about men and women and their relative status; language has 'evolved' to reflect those beliefs. Feminists have tried to argue that more is going on than passive reflection: sexist linguistic practice is an instance of sexism in its own right and actively reproduces specific beliefs. But nonfeminist sociolinguists have notably failed to take their point.

This becomes particularly evident in discussions of recent changes in English usage – changes which have occurred under pressure from feminist campaigns against sexism in language. For some time, the view of many linguists was that reforming sexist language was an unnecessary, trivial and timewasting objective, since language merely reflected social conditions. If feminists concentrated on removing more fundamental sex inequalities, the language would change of its own accord, automatically reflecting the new nonsexist reality.[3] (This, incidentally, suggests a view of language which might have been supposed to be obsolete in twentieth-century thought, and which we might label 'the organic fallacy': that language is like an

organism, with a life of its own, and evolves to meet the needs of its speakers. Exactly how language does this remains a mystery.)

More recently however it has become obvious that linguistic reform as proposed by feminists has enjoyed a measure of success. For instance, it is clear that generic masculine pronouns are no longer uniformly used by educated speakers and writers; even such authoritative sources as Quirk *et. al.* (1985) acknowledge the existence of alternatives such as singular *they* and *he or she*. What do sociolinguists make of this change in English pronominal usage? Astonishingly, they tell us it has happened 'naturally', as a reflection of the fact that women's social position has radically altered in the last two decades (cf. Cheshire 1984: 33–4 for a statement to this effect).

It is worth pointing out in detail what is wrong with this sort of claim. One immediate flaw in the argument is that it is patently untrue: without campaigns and debates specificially on the issue of sexism *in language*, linguistic usage would not have altered even though other feminist gains (such as equal pay and anti-discrimination legislation) were made. Historically speaking there is certainly a connection between feminist campaigns for equal opportunities and for nonsexist language, but the one has never entailed the other, nor did either just reflect the other. To repeat the crucial point once more: language-using is a social practice in its own right.

It should also be pointed out that a change in linguistic practice is not just a reflection of some more fundamental social change: it is, itself, a social change. Anti-feminists are fond of observing that eliminating generic masculine pronouns does not secure equal pay. Indeed it does not – whoever said it would? Eliminating generic masculine pronouns precisely eliminates generic masculine pronouns. And in so doing it changes the repertoire of social meanings and choices available to social actors. In the words of Trevor Pateman (1980: 15) it 'constitutes a restructuring of at least one aspect of one social relationship'.

Another problem with the 'language reflects society' argument in relation to changes in English usage is that it makes language change a mysterious, abstract process, apparently effected by the agency of no one at all (or perhaps by the language itself – the organic fallacy rides again). This overlooks the protracted struggle which individuals and groups have waged both for and against nonsexist language (and the struggle continues). It ignores, for instance, the activitity of every woman who ever fought to put 'Ms' on her cheque book, every publisher, university committee or trades union working party that

produced new institutional guidelines on the wording of documents, not to mention every vituperative writer to the newspapers who resisted, denounced or complained about nonsexist language.

The general point here is that there are instances – this is one – where we can locate the specific and concrete steps leading to an observable change in some people's linguistic behaviour and in the system itself. We can discover who took those steps and who opposed them. We can refer to a printed debate on the subject, examine the arguments put forward on both sides (and it is interesting that those arguments tended to be about language rather than gender: not 'should women be treated equally' but 'what do words mean and is it right to change them?'). The 'language reflects society' model obscures the mechanisms by which sexist language has become less acceptable, evacuating any notion of agency in language change. Crucially, too, the model glosses over the existence of social conflict and its implications for language use. Here as elsewhere in sociolinguistics the underlying assumption is of a consensual social formation where speakers acquiesce in the norms of their peer group or their culture, and agree about the social 'needs' which language exists to serve.

It would of course be wrong to claim that all linguistic change is of this kind – organized and politically motivated efforts to alter existing norms and conventions. But some linguistic changes *are* of this kind, and sociolinguistics should not espouse a concept of language which makes them impossible to account for.

5 TOWARDS A DEMYTHOLOGIZED SOCIOLINGUISTICS

The campaign against sexism in language is one instance of a type of metalinguistic practice which we might call 'verbal hygiene' (other examples might include Plain English movements or Artificial Language movements; systems regulating the use of obscenity and insults (cf. Garrioch 1987); and, of course, prescriptivism, standardization and associated activities). Such practices are referred to in sociolinguistic work in passing if at all: doubtless it is thought that they are unlikely to advance linguistic theory, and should therefore be left for sociologists to research.

Yet if the arguments put forward above have any force, it may not be so easy to prise apart the concerns of linguistic theory and those of the sociologist. We have seen that sociolinguists make casual but significant use of notions like 'norm' and 'social identity' in order to

explain the variation and the attitudes they observe. And I have argued that one of the problems with this is that we are left with no account of where norms 'come from' and how they 'get into' individual speakers – it is not good enough simply to situate them in some vague and ill-defined 'society', as though society were homogeneous, monolithic and transparent in its workings, and as if individual language users were pre-programmed automata. A detailed investigation of language-users' metalinguistic activities – for instance, forms of 'verbal hygiene' – might well tell us a good deal about the production of norms and their apprehension by individuals.

It is striking, for example, that sociolinguists very often refer to the (overt) 'prestige' of standard English and assume this is impressed on speakers by normative instruction carried out mainly in schools; yet I know of no study of how (or even whether) the norms of standard English are inculcated by teachers. Dannequin (1988) has researched this question in France, and the resulting paper is extremely informative – a model of demythologizing.

Metalinguistic activities and beliefs have received, at least in urban western societies, less attention than they merit. For it is surely a very significant fact about language in these societies that people hold passionate beliefs about it; that it generates social and political conflicts; that practices and movements grow up around it both for and against the *status quo*. We may consider the well-attested fact that many people, including those with minimal education, read a dictionary for pleasure; that there is a vast market for grammars, usage guides and general interest publications, radio and TV programmes about the English language; that many large-circulation newspapers and periodicals (such as the *Readers Digest*) have a regular column on linguistic matters.

Most researchers in the quantitative paradigm are of course well aware of these facts, and more generally of people's keen interest in linguistic minutiae. With some honourable exceptions, though, they tend to treat laypersons' views on usage as manifestations of ignorance to be dispelled, or of crankishness and prejudice to be despised. The axiom that linguistics is 'descriptive not prescriptive', together with the methodological principle that a researcher should influence informants as little as possible, prevent sociolinguists taking folk linguistics seriously. Arguably, though, practices like dictionary reading and writing to the papers on points of usage are striking enough to demand analysis: first, not unnaturally, they demand investigation.

And this is the task I would set for a demythologized sociolinguistics:

to examine the linguistic practices in which members of a culture regularly participate or to whose effects they are exposed. As well as being of interest in itself, this undertaking would help us to make sense of the process noted by Romaine: the constraining of linguistic behaviour by the social relations in which speakers are involved and the linguistic resources to which they have access. We might also discover how language change may come about through the efforts of individuals and groups to produce new resources and new social relations. For language is not an organism or a passive reflection, but a social institution, deeply implicated in culture, in society, in political relations at every level. What sociolinguistics needs is a concept of language in which this point is placed at the centre rather than on the margins.

NOTES

1 'Macro' norms would include the prestige of standard and the stigma of nonstandard variants, constructed at the level of the whole society (education, media and so on); 'micro' norms would be of the sort alluded to by Labov (1972) and Milroy (1980) whereby close-knit peer groups sanction deviations from local rules of language use.

2 In the UK sociolinguistics is also under-resourced in terms of grant support; Newmeyer 1986 claims this is not so in the US, but that (if true) reflects not the prestige accorded to the field by linguists but the potential state agencies see in it for social control. Cf. Turner 1988.

3 Although this view among linguists is difficult to document from published sources, the point has been made to me in conversation by innumerable professional colleagues, many of whom have also expressed misgivings about linguistic reform on the grounds that it is prescriptive and linguists should therefore eschew it.