

Rethinking the Speech Community: Theoretical Debates and Alternative Models in Sociolinguistics

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Abstract

This paper investigates the sociolinguistic concept of 'speech community' and highlights its controversial nature with reference to various scholarly interests in the field. It reviews the history of the term and the seminal sociolinguists' takes on it. It provides an overview of key perspectives and highlights the debates surrounding the theoretical underpinnings of the concept and its various applications as a unit of analysis in the field. It then discusses further controversies in relation to the Labovian model of speech communities, primarily those of Hudson and Bucholtz, both of whom reject the speech community model and offer their own alternatives: social networks and communities of practice. The paper concludes that speech communities remain theoretical constructs that are not as real as clearly defined smaller communities such as Hudson's social networks or Bucholtz's communities of practice. Speech communities remain abstract conceptions in the sociolinguist's mind, even if the research undertaken is empirical.

1. INTRODUCTION

Across all sociolinguistic approaches, the term 'speech community' has always been central to the enterprise. Sociolinguistic studies that require real language users or language varieties assign particular importance to the term, simply because of the fundamental relationship between language and society, which is defined in terms of nation or nation-ness (Anderson, 2008; Muru, 2024). Sociolinguistic studies often ignore the notion of a speech community or take it for granted, without either defining it or outlining its paradigm (Patrick, 2004). Definitions of the term display a wide degree of disagreement and are designed to suit the different study interests of researchers. Some sociolinguists do not regard the term as scientifically disciplined; rather, they opt for alternative notions, such as “communities of practice” (Bucholtz, 1999) and 'social networks' (Hudson, 1996).

This paper aims to study the term '*speech community*' in sociolinguistics and highlights its controversial nature with reference to the current literature. The paper is structured as follows. The first section reviews the historical background of the term and its controversies at the level of theory, and the second reviews some influential sociolinguists' ideas on what criterion/criteria should be used to define the speech community concept. This section explores the primary controversies that arise as a result of their scholarly interests. The third section outlines the most influential model of speech community, the Labovian model, and sketches Labov's speech community. The fourth section discusses briefly some controversies that afflict the Labovian model itself and presents two alternative models. Finally, a conclusion is provided.

2. THE HISTORY OF THE TERM 'SPEECH COMMUNITY'

Language varieties, which themselves constitute a field of sociolinguistic research, are used by communities in diverse societies. People form permanent or temporary groups for social, political and religious reasons (Wardhaugh, 2010). However, the grouping with which sociolinguists are primarily concerned is the *speech community*. Historically, studies of speech communities appeared in the 1950s in studies investigating the dialectal variation in some European languages. Some of these studies observed the distribution of certain language varieties, while others worked on national languages (Gumperz, 2009, pp. 67–68).

Since then, the sociological expression 'community' has been used to imply a group sharing linguistic knowledge and behaviour (Mesthrie et al., 2009). Within modern sociolinguistics, the term usually presumes that speakers in a speech community communicate and interact in the social space according to a shared set of norms and beliefs (Morgan, 2001). Consequently, a speech community constructed in accordance with shared knowledge assumes the construction of a shared identity and ideology (ibid).

Understandably, the employment of the linguistic term 'speech community' is an attempt to avoid limiting a grouping based on geography and class. The term might seem easily intelligible, but any attempt to define it is fraught with many social and linguistic factors that intersect each other. This dilemma is inherited from the two basic ingredients of which it is composed: *language* and *society*. Language itself is difficult to define because it is based on notions of diversity, variation and different styles (Morgan, 2001). Likewise, in sociology, the term 'society' is difficult to define and there is little agreement among theorists about what constitutes human societies (ibid). However, the existence of such inherited difficulty or controversy does not invalidate the speech community concept as a workable analytic tool in sociolinguistic studies.

Thus, for sociolinguistics, the community of speakers of a linguistic variety or varieties is at the core of the enterprise (Duranti, 2009). This sociolinguistic approach departs from the core linguistic approach of Chomskian and formal grammarians, whose linguistic theory is interested in an ideal speaker and listener interacting in an ideal homogeneous society speaking the language under analysis (Duranti, 2009; Patrick, 2004). In this approach, linguistic variation is put aside as insignificant or as an exception to the ideal rule. For Chomsky in particular, the basic property of language cannot, and indeed should not, be correlated with what is in the minds of the totality of the community. Chomsky (2016) rather resists the notion of speech community and disregards the corpus of language use. Instead, his approach to language is concerned with the internal computational procedures in the mind of the individual (i.e., syntax).

Duranti (2009, pp. 17–20) seriously critiques Chomsky's focus on competence and unitary language, which postulates that homogeneity is a necessary precondition for linguistic analysis and that if people in a community speak two languages, it is not sufficiently pure to be studied by theoretical linguistics. Such a view might exclude most speech communities of world languages since all display some degree of linguistic, sociological and cultural differentiation (Hymes, 2013). Instead of sentences, Hymes (1972) argues, that the object of inquiry should be directed towards real acts, situations, and events. Therefore, Wardhaugh (2010) emphasises that the sociolinguist interested in real speech communities and authentic language use cannot adopt such an abstract theoretical construct.

In this historical vein, we can see that this disagreement is based on the philosophical background from which each party comes: the Chomskian approach with its ideal speaker-listener homogeneous speech community, and, conversely, the sociolinguistic approach with

its model of the real heterogeneous speech community. However, further disagreements arise, even within the latter domain, as will be highlighted in the subsequent discussion.

3. REVIEWING THE DEFINITIONS IN THE LITERATURE

It is important to first posit that the speech community concept has never been posed as a research question for empirical studies to try to answer (Patrick, 2004). Rather, it seems to be a part of the sociolinguist's apparatus that has a pre-conceived, taken-for-granted definition, which is used by researchers while they address other sociolinguistic questions. Within sociolinguistics, definitions of speech community – if any – do not appear to agree about what constitutes its quality and structure. Patrick (2004, p. 574) argues that the term has been ignored in the seminal textbooks of principal theorists such as Trudgill, Chambers and Downes, and points out that it has been used to refer to different communities. For instance, it can refer to geographically bounded communities, including national entities, urban communities and neighbourhoods, as well as to groups of immigrants. It is also used to refer to very general assemblages that cut across geographic and class lines (such as children, women and jury members).

The first striking disagreement in definitions in the literature is the degree of specificity and preciseness of the term as a technical one. While Lyons (1970, p. 326) views it as 'all the people who use a given language', others, such as Le Page (cited in Hudson, 1996) take it to the other extreme and equate the speech community with the individual. Le Page argues that every individual has his or her own linguistic system. Here, we confront two definitions that appear to be at opposite ends of a continuum along which is located a wide range of definitions (including those reviewed below).

Nevertheless, limiting the speech community to a shared language is suggested by Lyons' definition, which – apart from its oversimplification – overlooks the sub-communities within it. Other definitions emphasise shared interaction rather than a shared language. Bloomfield (1933, p. 29), whose definition dominated the field until the 1960s, defines the speech community as a group of people who use the same speech signals and further maintains that 'the value of language depends upon people's using it in the same way'. Although this classical definition highlights interaction, it does not shift the emphasis away from the single language criterion. In this vein, Labov's conception of the speech community gives much credit to the single language criterion because it emphasises speakers' shared attitudes, values and norms regarding language form and language use (see section 3 below).

It is Gumperz (1968, 2009), who has been concerned primarily with language choice in multilingual communities since the 1960s, who has been reformulating the notion of the linguistic community, which has become, in his view, 'any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction utilizing a shared body of linguistic signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage' (Gumperz, 2009, p. 66). Here, he rules out the shared language criterion and refers to the speech community in the first place as a social group, which can be monolingual or multilingual.

However, Dorian (1982) criticises Bloomfield's and Labov's emphasis on shared language, which often excludes marginal individuals and groups in the community. She rightly remarks that such definitions assume homogeneity in linguistic behaviour and disregards the complexities of language use in real communities. She also admits that Gumperz's account of the speech community allows recognition of monolingual and bilingual groups but goes on to introduce the concept of *working marginals* to account for speech community participants such as Scottish semi-speakers of Gaelic. Such marginal groups, she argues, may not have full

linguistic competence and fluency in the language of the community but they still engage with the community in a meaningful fashion.

A further disagreement emerges as the exposition of the differing definitions proceeds, as to whether the speech community is a social object or a linguistic one. Gumperz's definition considers explicitly the speech community as a social group. Moreover, Patrick's (2004) definition regards it as a unit of linguistic analysis that is socially based. Conversely, Bucholtz (1999), who is interested in the relationship between gender and identity, considers it to be a language-based community for social analysis.

Regardless of the disagreement over the defining criterion of the speech community, the principal sociolinguists, Labov and Gumperz, do advocate the need to employ the speech community concept. As his aforementioned definition suggests, Gumperz (2009) argues that the shared communicative system constitutes the speech community, which is not necessarily linguistically homogenous. In other words, different languages or variations thereof may exist in one linguistic community to form one communicative system, because its speakers share their own social forms.

4. THE LABOVIAN MODEL AND THE ENGLISH SPEECH COMMUNITY

Of all sociolinguists, Labov's definition has proved the most influential (Hudson, 1996). His empirically rooted work on language variation and change is premised on a conception of the linguistic community as any assemblage of speakers who share the norms of interpreting their language. He postulates that,

The English language is a property of the English speech community, which is in turn composed of many nested communities. There is no doubt that Philadelphia speakers of English are members the larger community of American English speakers, and the even larger community of all speakers of English. It might also be that Philadelphia is in turn composed of many smaller sub-communities.
(Labov, 1989, p. 2)

Thus, the Labovian single-language model of the speech community is a multi-layered, geographically bound paradigm. In this respect, Labov (1989) saw Philadelphia as a speech community that could be determined empirically, rather than through generalised theorizing. Linguistic variables serve as the defining criteria across class lines, ethnic groups or any other smaller affiliations.

The core meaning of the Labovian definition is that a speech community is a group of people who share a common linguistic knowledge. This knowledge is manifested in the interpretation of linguistic variations. The quote with which this section begins presents an account of a nested-communities model. Starting from Philadelphia as a speech community, which is an empirically evidenced community whose members share a linguistic variant (short *a*) that differentiates them from other speech communities, the grouping can be extended downwards to smaller speech communities and upwards to larger ones, thereby culminating in the larger English-language speech community.

As with any other language, English displays regional and social variations. However, of all other world languages and as a result of its colonial legacy, many localised varieties are spoken globally, with Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific all being English-speaking post-

colonial societies (Hickey, 2004). This raises questions about the English speech community in the Labovian paradigm since it has been suggested (Kochru, 2005, cited in Seba, 2009) that there are three types of English language speech community. Firstly, there are the inner-circle communities, which are those with native speakers. This circle provides other English-language speech communities with the norms of Standard English. Second, there are the outer-circle communities of the British and US colonies where English is not the native language but is nevertheless an important language in education and administration. These communities develop local standards of English that contain their own phonological, lexical, grammatical and discursal features (Evans, 2014). The third type is the norm-dependent expanding-circle community, in which English – which as the current international lingua franca fulfils a global function that other languages do not (Trousdale, 2010) – is becoming increasingly important in different aspects of life.

Having accepted Kochru's classification, which gives an insightful description of world Englishes, it is still not sufficiently clear how the Labovian model of the 'larger English speech community' will account for these communities, particularly the communities in the outer-circle and the norm-dependent circle, each of which, in Labovian words, have shared attitudes, values and norms regarding language form and use. Such a complicated situation makes extending the speech community upwards to the macro-level fraught with more serious questions about social cohesion and the ability to identify precisely the all-important 'common knowledge' amongst speakers. Here also arises the question of the central versus the marginal in Trousdale's (2010:20) words. According to the Labovian model, marginal members would be excluded from the analysis. At the macro-level, the marginal members are the outer and the expanding circle communities. Only the inner-circle communities would be central to the Labovian model. At the micro-level, any given community would have central members who share some sort of norms, as opposed to marginal ones (such as immigrants and members of different communities) who do not. The issue here is that the speech community model primes heterogeneity as an acceptable characteristic of groups of speakers; rather, it counters and focuses only on what speakers share (ibid).

At a theoretical level, the Labovian model makes room for smaller speech communities within a geographically bounded community, such as Philadelphia. Here too, more serious questions loom regarding the linguistic uniformity, size and boundaries of the potential speech sub-communities. In other words, the Labovian model overlooks the fact that the linguistic uniformity criterion seems too powerful, in the sense that it can generate too many sub-communities and end up with a community parallel to small communities of practice (as we shall see below) or even the individual. Moreover, it is not sufficiently clear to delimit these sub-communities and how they cut across geographical and class lines. It also overlooks bilinguals who belong to disparate communities.

For example, let's follow Labov and assume there is a Geordie¹ English speech community whose members display linguistic uniformity across geographical and class lines. Now, what are the potential sub-communities within the larger Geordie speech community? What significance do they have, if any, for a Labovian sociolinguist; that is, a sociolinguist concerned with understanding the social distribution of linguistic forms in a certain geographically bounded space (Patrick, 2004)? In this vein, Geordie sub-communities can only be the product of an analytic and interpretive study of the linguistic forms within the larger Geordie community. Rather than the fact that the practicality of such a study is questionable, the

¹ A variety of English spoken in the Tyneside region in the UK.

potentially abstract outcome (the sub-communities) would be expected to prove subsidiaries for sociolinguistic studies concerned with interaction, gender, multilingualism, etc.

Again, this brief overview of the Labovian model demonstrates that the notion of abstractness that has been taken as an argument against the Chomskian ideal of the listener-speaker community can be applied to so-called real speech communities. This model of nested communities appears prone to such criticism. This is because speech communities, which the Labovian paradigm claims as real, remain abstract constructs in sociolinguists' minds. And as Duranti (2009) rightly remarks, the speech community seems to be an entity that cannot be observed as a unitary historical and social system but only as a set of practices that scholars assume to be socially shared.

Furthermore, as much of social life in today's world is internet-mediated, traditional speech community concepts are challenged by online social networks that the massive connectivity and digital communication can afford. Blommaert (2010) calls for a new sociolinguistics based on the mobility of participants rather than the distribution of an assumed speech community. As a result, outdated notions of speech community and ideal informants cannot grasp contemporary communication. In this vein, Rymes & Leone (2014) rightly argue that the varied communicative forms available online provide a rich resource for data concerning people's impressions of language and its social value.

5. FURTHER CONTROVERSIES AND ALTERNATIVE MODELS

Apart from the question of what constitutes the community, the fundamental question remains: where is the language? Is it in the community or in the individual? Labov (1989, p. 52) believes that the individual speaker cannot be considered the object of linguistic description and states that 'individual behaviour can be understood only as a reflection of the grammar of the speech community'. He also postulates unequivocally that,

[I]language is not a property of the individual, but of the community. Any description of a language must take the speech community as its object if it is to do justice to the elegance and regularity of linguistic structure. (1989, p. 52)

Such a model demotes the role played by the individual and his/her linguistic choices. It provides a view of the individual as an object motivated solely by the social structure of the larger community (Hudson 1996; Bucholtz 1999).

Hudson (1996) criticises Labov's remarks for their implication that although individuals in Philadelphia are similar with regard to one feature 'the short a variable', we cannot assume that they agree universally on other features of the English variety they speak. He goes on to add that agreement among speakers on one feature does not demonstrate that 'language is not the property of the individual' (p. 22). Similarly, Trousdale (2010) argues that Labov's construction of the speech community on the basis that its members share some sort of linguistic knowledge or linguistic norms is problematic because such norms are arbitrary and vary radically within a single community. This promotes the group over the individual and assumes that the members of a particular speech community share a set of norms upon which all of them agree.

6. HUDSON'S SOCIAL NETWORKS

Some sociolinguists doubt whether the idea of the speech community is at all useful, based on its abstract and complicated nature, which is revealed by the wildly diverging definitions. Hudson (1996, pp. 25–28) surveys the definitions of 'speech community' and concludes that all are potentially correct as each defines a group of speakers sharing some linguistic system: a

language variety(ies), a range of norms for interacting or using a given linguistic variety or a shared range of attitudes to it. However, Hudson also argues plausibly that although they all work on the same thing, there is no need to reconcile these definitions, which in fact reflect different phenomena. He therefore concludes that the sociolinguistic world cannot be viewed as one composed of objective speech communities, but rather as one made up of subjective prototypes that exist in the sociolinguist's mind. Consequently, the search for true definitions of prototypes, such as Londoner or American, 'is just a wild goose chase' (1996, p. 29).

Hudson provides some good reasons for his rejection of the existence of the speech community (pp. 28–30). First, he insists that the reality of speech communities is subjective and that linguists cannot have direct experience of how members of distant communities speak. He also proposes that it is impossible to recognise, objectively, dialect areas such as *Southern* or *Northern* English. Third, he rejects the notion of 'sameness' implied by almost all the definitions in the sense that all members of the community are the same. He illustrates that even within members of a small social group, such as the family, differences exist between generations. Finally, Hudson calls for sociolinguists to consider smaller groups rather than larger communities if they are concerned with groups that have a direct linguistic influence on a person's language.

Thus, Hudson (1996, p. 29) presents an alternative notion of speech community; the idea of social networks, which is an idea gleaned from social anthropology. He calls for a shift of emphasis towards studying smaller clusters of people around the individual who have greater linguistic influence, particularly on children. This approach distances itself from the generalised assumptions about the norms that define prototypical speech communities and focuses instead on the individual who possesses the language. This is influenced primarily by the norms and variables of the closer social networks.

Trousdale (2010, pp. 21–23) argues that a social networks model poses challenges for the speech community model and demonstrates its applicability in almost all communities. This model makes the community a realm of social relations in which members construct bonds, with varying degrees of strength, with each other. For instance, the bond between a mother and her child is far stronger than the one between the customer and shop assistant.

7. BUCHOLTZ'S COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

In a similar vein, in her gender-oriented research, Bucholtz (1999) invokes another issue with the speech community. She argues that this traditional sociolinguistic term was constructed to address macro-level phenomena in sociolinguistics, such as linguistic variation and change but this concept seems inappropriate or inadequate when considering questions such as gender and identity. Bucholtz therefore suggests that an alternative concept – *community of practice* – is more appropriate for answering such questions. Her approach is adopted from practice theory and perceives language as a social practice rather than merely as an abstract system of speech. This practice-based model holds the view that smaller communities of practice are sufficient for social analyses such as ideology, identity and norms of interaction.

This community of practice model, as proposed by Bucholtz, understands language as just one among other social practices that community members perform, rather than seeing it as a system within the community with a special analytical status. Defining the community in terms of a practice to which speakers are oriented, even though not necessarily in the same way, shifts the scope of analysis to difference and conflict rather than uniformity and consensus. In this model, all members of the community of practice are therefore brought equally to the forefront and no members of the community are marginal.

Bucholtz studied the role of language in the construction of identity in specific social groups, such as communities of nerd girls in California high schools. Her work highlights how linguistic practices construct identities that resist dominant social norms and contribute to the formation of alternative forms of femininity. Her study concludes that identities are not essential but rather dynamic, context-embedded and maintained through ongoing social interaction in these smaller communities, rather than in a larger, abstract speech community. These communities are social groups formed through mutual engagement, where language serves as a medium of expression for shared norms and the construction of group identity.

8. CONCLUSION

Communities of speakers of any linguistic variety are the field of any sociolinguistic study and comprise the basic unit of analysis, regardless of how this unit is viewed: whether as a linguistic unit or a social one. The prevailing term used to capture this unit has traditionally been that of the speech community. Although it has been employed widely within sociolinguistics since the inception of the field, the term becomes highly controversial once you try to review its definitions in the sociolinguistic literature. This paper has reviewed briefly the history of the term and the seminal sociolinguists' takes on the issue and examined a representative sample of definitions that highlight the disagreement between those who have advocated the concept, in opposition to the Chomskian theoretical linguists who argue against it.

The paper has also offered a more detailed account of the controversies afflicting the most influential model of speech community: the Labovian model. Further critiques have considered, as formulated by Hudson and Bucholtz, both of whom reject the speech community model and offer their own alternatives: social networks and communities of practice. Although Hudson and Bucholtz raise plausible questions about the concept of the speech community, neither promotes their own concept as an alternative to that of the speech community. Rather, both argue that the speech community model is inadequate for their own research interests (linguistic influence for Hudson and gender and identity for Bucholtz). On the basis of this review of the existing literature and controversies, the paper therefore concludes that speech communities are not as real as clearly defined smaller communities, such as Hudson's social networks or Bucholtz's communities of practice. Speech communities remain abstract conceptions in the sociolinguist's mind, even if the research undertaken is empirical.

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