

Original Paper

Compare Approaches to the Study of the Effects of Social Class on Variation and Change: Focusing on Labov's New York Experiment, Lesley Milroy and James Milroy's Belfast Experiment, and Eckert's Detroit Secondary School Experiment

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Abstract

One of the most popular research topics in sociolinguistics is the effect of social class on variations and change, the collection and analysis of variation are significant. Sociolinguists often use different research methods to collect and process data. This paper selects three experiments to study the approaches to the study of the effects of social class on variation and change, including Labov's New York experiment, the Belfast experiment of Lesley Milroy and James Milroy, and Eckert's Detroit middle school experiment. This paper compares and analyzes the experimental approaches, research and analytical approaches of these three experiments.

Keywords

social class, variation, sociolinguistics

1. Introduction

Sociolinguistics explores the relationship between language and society and reveals the nature of language. Sociolinguists realize that the use of variations is linked to social class. This paper selects Labov's New York experiment, the Belfast experiment of Lesley Milroy and James Milroy, and Eckert's Detroit middle school experiment, compares and contrasts the experimental and analytical approaches they employ.

2 Experimental Approach

The experimental approaches used by sociolinguists to study social classes and variations are constantly being innovated and improved. Different experimental approaches vary in their ability to collect speech material.

2.1 Rapid and Anonymous Surveys

The experimental approach used in Labov's New York experiment is rapid and anonymous surveys. Rapid anonymous surveys refer to the use of ingenious methods by the researcher to induce the speaker to say the variation that the researcher wants.

Labov selected three shopping stores in different social classes for investigation. These three shopping stores belonged to the highest ranking (Saks Fifth Avenue), middle ranking (Macy's), and lowest ranking (S.Klein) respectively, mainly facing consumer groups of different social classes. To cater to consumers, we assume that employees in the store use the /r/ variation similarly to the target consumer group. So we assume that employees in highest ranking stores use variations /r/ most, followed by middle ranking and lowest ranking the least. Labov went to the stores as a customer and asked the employees for the goods located on the fourth floor. The specific process is to ask the employees where an item on the fourth floor is, and then ask again pretending not to hear clearly. It is worth noting that through twice inquiries, we got two styles, the first is casual speech and the second is emphatic speech. Labov was collecting data on multiple floors, and on the fourth floor, the question became asking what floor it was.

The advantage of this approach is that the material needed by the investigator can be obtained quickly. It is obtained without the subject's awareness, so it is more natural. But the rapid and anonymous surveys also have limitations. The premise of using this method is that the researcher knows the variation they need because with this approach we always get specific variations. In addition, the private information collected by this approach is limited, it is difficult to confirm information such as income, family environment, and social class. Labov also mentioned that we can't guarantee that a second repetition from an employee is the style we need.

2.2 Participant Observation

The participant observation approach was used in the experiment by Milroys and Eckert. This is a traditional research approach in anthropology, which mainly refers to going deep into the community to directly participate in community activities and collect information.

The advantage of this experimental approach is that researchers can collect various information by experiencing the daily life of the community, such as social class background, cultural customs, interpersonal relationships, etc. This allows researchers to effectively synthesize information to reveal the social nature of variation.

We mentioned above the different styles that Labov tried to collect through the rapid and anonymous surveys. Sociolinguists always need a lot of material in various styles. The difficulty lies in getting the subjects to speak in the style that the experimenter wants. When the researcher tries to record, the

environment will give the subject a formal feeling, it is difficult to receive a casual style in this environment. This is the “Observer’s paradox”, and the participant observation approach effectively circumvents this paradox.

The disadvantage of this approach is obvious, it takes a very long time, and researchers also need to carefully set up and arrange how to effectively enter the local community.

2.3 Sociolinguistic Interview

The interview approach is widely used in these experiments and is a common approach used by sociolinguists to collect data. The interview approach refers to the way of face-to-face communication between the inspector and the object of investigation, the content of the conversation is recorded with a recording device. The interview approach in sociolinguistics is sometimes somewhat different from other fields, the main purpose is to obtain the required variation material. Labov asked his subjects about their experiences of death while conducting interviews in New York, this approach effectively helped him acquire a casual style of speech. The disadvantage of this experimental approach is the “observer’s paradox” mentioned above. How to avoid this paradox in the interview is also a problem that experimental linguists are very concerned about.

3. Research and Analytical Approaches

The analysis and research approaches used in sociolinguistic experiments on social class also vary with the emphasis of the experiments, and the approaches used in experiments at different stages are different.

Quantitative analysis used by Labov in New York City laid the groundwork. Quantitative analysis reveals the correlation between linguistic variables and social factors including social class. Taking Labov’s experiment as an example, the quantitative analysis explores the use of variations across social classes from a macro perspective. This analysis approach requires us to make a reasonable explanation of variation and it considers that these variations are constrained by various social and linguistic factors. The advantage of this approach is that all the social factors that affect the variation are discussed in one model, and the magnitude of their influence on the variation is studied. Through data analysis, Labov found that the frequency of use /r/ of Sakes employees is relatively high, and as the level of department stores declines, the frequency of using /r/ continues to decrease, 80% of S.Klein employees never use it. The result shows that there are distinct differences in the use of the variation /r/ of New Yorkers in different social classes.

In addition, Labov’s social class stratification method is also widely recognized. This method means that the usage of a variation can reflect the social class of speakers, that is, the speaker’s usage of a variation is consistent with his social class. The experience of Labov provides a reference method for later sociolinguists to study social class. However, when using this method, how to divide the social class and whether it interacts with other social factors is a key concern of sociolinguists.

In addition, Labov combined stylistic analysis with social factors including social class. He divides the speech styles that people often use. For example, the employee mentioned above used a casual style for the first time and a more formal style for the second repetition. A large number of casual styles are often required in language studies but are indeed the most difficult to obtain. Labov pointed out that the purpose of linguistic experiments is to find out how people speak when they are not systematically observed, but obtaining such data also requires consequential observations, the problem with such a situation is what we mentioned above about 'Observer's paradox'.

Some critics believe that Labov focuses on macro social variables and regards social identity such as social class, gender, and nationality as essential variables to distinguish variation use, ignoring individual differences and individual social significance.

Lesley Milroy and James Milroy were interested in language and social class. Based on such criticism, they tried to get rid of the more fixed social class model in Labov's experiment, they came up with the social network.

According to Lesley Milroy, each person in society is playing his exclusive role, 'there are social units to which people feel they belong and which are less abstract than social classes. For this smaller-scale, more concrete, unit we reserve the term community, used in a specific, technical sense'(Milroy,1987). Therefore, Lesley Milroy proposes to use 'social networks' to study the relationship between language behavior and various roles of people in daily life.

There are two important measures of the social network. One is density, if many people who are connected to the central character are also connected to each other, then this social network is high density. Another is multiplexity, for example, there are multiple relationships between two people, a teacher-student relationship and a relative relationship, and these two people also do exercise together. This is multiplex ties. A dense network based on many multiplex ties will generate strong cohesion, and the behaviors of members tend to be more consistent, including language behaviors, so it is more difficult to introduce new variations. Lesley Milroy and James Milroy surveyed three working areas in Belfast: Ballymacarrett, the Hammer, and the Clonard. These three regions are typical declining industrial areas, all the participants in the study belong to the working class. The economic development patterns of the three regions are quite different. The shipbuilding industry in the Ballymacarrett is developed, and the Hammer and the Clonard used to rely on the flax industry but because of the decline of the flax industry, they need to go out to seek work. Milroys studied eight variables, five of which had marker values that correlated with social network rank. The general pattern of change is that the higher the density and multiple of social networks, the more vernacular variations are used.

Milroys want to move away from some of the rigid and fixed patterns of social class that emerged in the experiments of Labov. Importantly, they sought to move from the notion of class producing linguistic behavior to a more fluid conception of class, with the class as a social marker, constituted by the everyday practices of individuals who allegedly occupy a particular class position in society (David

Block, 2014).

In recent years, linguistic variation about the social class has turned to the construction of individual identities. Linguistic variables affect speakers through style, and speakers construct identity through style. We take the Detroit experiment of Eckert as an example.

The experiment was conducted at a high school in suburban Detroit, where students were mainly from working-class and middle-class families. In addition to researching gender divisions, Eckert discussed the identity categories of 'Jocks' and 'Burnouts' She described in detail the characteristics of these two types of students in her book. They have different social practice activities and ideological consciousness. These two categories represent the division of culture and the division of the two adult social classes. 'Jocks' mainly represent the middle class, and 'Burnouts' mainly represent the working class. Eckert studied their different pronunciation patterns, one of which is the pronunciation of several vowels. In the Detroit area, there is a tendency for speakers to back off the vowels that appear in 'lunch' to make them sound more like the vowels in the 'launch'. 'Burnouts' back this vowel significantly more often than 'Jocks'. In general, different identity constructions led them to use different variations, different variations simultaneously helped them construct different identities.

4. Conclusion

Different sociolinguists use different methods to study the relationship between social class and variation. From a macro perspective, Labov focuses on social and linguistic variables. Milroys also employs quantitative analysis but differs from Labov's perspective by introducing social networks into the study of variations, thereby turning to fluid patterns of social class. Eckert is more inclined to the shaping of personal style and focuses more on social meaning. Different studies are not separated, the latter will inherit and improve the former, they are complementary to each other. The study of social class and variation by sociolinguists provides us with effective research approaches, and also further reveals the nature of variation. The study of the relationship between variation and social class is not independent, we always refer to other social and linguistic variables when discussing their relationship. In conclusion, the research approaches brought about by these studies play an important role in the study of sociolinguistics.

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