1 Definitions of Terms: Aims of Sociolinguistic Gender Research

1.1 Introduction

Sociolinguistic research on gender and sex started in the early 1970s. Specifically, two domains of language behavior were investigated: speech behavior of men and women on the phonological level, and the interaction behavior (conversational styles) between women and men in discourse. In this paper we will concentrate on studies in sociophonology (variation studies). Nevertheless we would like to combine both approaches to trace the theoretical development of gender studies in linguistics, combining both approaches and thus providing a general framework for our paper.

Studies of gender-specific variation are often contradictory, depending on the author’s implicit assumptions about sex and gender, the methodology, the samples used, etc. Thus, as Eckert and McConnell–Ginet (1992: 90) state, “women’s language has been said to reflect their [our] conservativism, prestige consciousness, upward mobility, insecurity, deference, nurture, emotional expressivity, connectedness, sensitivity to others, solidarity. And men’s language is heard as evincing their toughness, lack of affect, competitiveness, independence, competence, hierarchy, control.”

Studies published so far have also made a lot of different claims, some of which are contradictory. For example, on the one hand standard language and prestige variants are associated with the elites, i.e., middle–class males; on the other hand, standard language is related to women, and the vernacular to men. Thus it is necessary to develop a critical approach to this vast literature. All the claims made about women and men at different times, in different circumstances, and with totally different samples, on the basis of different implicit ideologies about gender, have to be analyzed carefully and viewed in relation to the development of gender studies in the social sciences.

In our view, many studies have neglected the context of language behavior and have often analyzed gender by merely looking at the speakers’ biological sex (see the arguments in Nichols, 1983; Eckert, 1989; Coates, 1990). Instead, we would like to propose that a context–sensitive approach which regards gender as a social construct would lead to more fruitful results.

In our overview of the different paradigms of variation studies (section 2) and in our discussion of some specific alternative approaches (section 3), we will focus on the following questions, based on theoretical and taxonomical considerations:

1. How are sex and gender related to each other? How is gender investigated empirically? Is there a notion of gender at all?
2. How is the context of language behavior analyzed, and which other variables are relevant?
Which methodologies are used? What kind of samples are collected and analyzed?

What are the underlying theoretical assumptions? Which social theory, which gender theory, which linguistic theory are implicitly or explicitly drawn upon?

### 1.2 Definitions

#### Gender and sex

The British sociologist Anthony Giddens defines “sex” as “biological or anatomical differences between men and women,” whereas “gender” “concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between males and females” (1989: 158). On the basis of these definitions, it seems relatively easy to distinguish between the two categories, although Giddens does mention some syndromes of “abnormal” development: the testicular feminization syndrome, and the androgenital syndrome. In these cases infants, designated as “female” at birth, even if chromosomally male, tend to develop female gender identity, and vice versa.

The important question in studying language behavior and gender empirically at this point concerns the connection (correlation, relationship) of sex and gender. Thus we need more differentiated definitions. Several questions have to be addressed; for example: Do all biologically female persons develop female gender? How are differences between women to be explained? Which other social categories intervene? In a social construction perspective, however, both sex and gender are seen as socially developed statuses (Lorber and Farrell, 1991: 7). Sex is then understood more as a continuum made up of chromosomal sex, gonadal sex, and hormonal sex, all of which “work in the presence and under the influence of a set of environments” (Fausto-Sterling, 1985: 71). It makes no sense therefore to assume that there is just one set of traits that characterize men in general and thus define masculinity; or likewise, that there is one set of traits for women, which define femininity. Such a unitary model of sexual character is a familiar part of sexual ideology and serves to reify inequality between men and women in our society. It also paves the way for all kinds of sociobiological explanations relating neurological facts to linguistic behavior (Chambers, 1992; see 2.5 below).

Connell (1993: 170ff.) therefore proposes a non–unitary model of gender; both femininity and masculinity vary, and understanding their context–dependent variety is regarded as central to the psychology of gender. Furthermore, he argues that since masculinity and femininity coexist in the same person, they should not be seen as polar opposites, but as separate dimensions: “Femininity and masculinity are not essences: they are ways of living certain relationships. It follows that static typologies of sexual character have to be replaced by histories, analyses of the joint production of sets of psychological forms” (Connell, 1993: 179).

Moreover, Lewontin (1982: 142), whose definition we would like to follow, stresses the relevance of the socialization process: the development of gender identity “depends on what label was attached to him or her as a child … Thus biological differences became a signal for, rather than a cause of, differentiation in social roles. “This definition connects in an excellent way the impact of societal norms and evaluations, power structures, and the role of socialization. Thus it makes much more sense to talk of genders in the plural, because what it means to be a woman or to be a man changes from one generation to the next and is different for different racial, ethnic, and religious groups, as well as for members of different social classes (see Gal, 1989: 178; Stolcke, 1993: 20; Lorber and Farrell, 1991: 1ff.). Gender categories are social constructs, they institutionalize cultural and social statuses, and they have served to make male dominance over women appear natural: “gender inequality in class society results from a historically specific tendency to ideologically ‘naturalize’ prevailing socio-economic inequalities” (Stolcke, 1993: 19).

A further aspect has to be included: the negotiation of gender in actual interaction. This leads us to the understanding of gender “as a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment … ‘doing gender’[emphasis by the authors] is undertaken by men and women, doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine natures” (West and Zimmerman, 1991: 13–14).

Such an understanding and definition of gender marks the importance of context–oriented research (Wodak, 1994; Duranti and Goodwin, 1992); language behavior is always situated in certain contexts...
Sociolinguistic variables

Bearing traditional methodologies in sociolinguistics in mind, it does not surprise us that Wardhaugh’s (1992: 139–40) definition (which is used widely in introductory courses) of a “linguistic variable” does not mention the importance of context orientation at all: “A linguistic variable is a linguistic item which has identifiable variants.” He distinguishes between two kinds of linguistic variables, variants (features) which are distinct, like [Ø] and [ŋ] in *singin’* [Ø] and *singing* [ŋ], and quantitative variants, whose differences are measured on a continuum, like [ɛ] … [e].2 Traditionally, such linguistic variables are then correlated with social categories, like sex (gender), age, social class, ethnicity, etc., taken out of their respective contexts and without problematizing the meaning of these social categories (see Dittmar et al., 1988: 115; Guy, 1991: 5ff.; 1988, 40ff.; Santa Ana, 1992: 278ff.; Rickford, 1991: 61ff.). We will discuss the notion of context more extensively in section 3.

1.3 Theories in linguistic gender research

Early studies on language and gender usually considered the language or speech behavior of women in terms of a deficiency model, that is, they considered the speech behavior of men as stronger, more prestigious, and more desirable (Lakoff, 1975). The female style, seen as a sign of subordination and self–denial, was to be rejected. Then, in a second phase, the strengths of the styles more commonly used by women were observed and sometimes overgeneralized. Concepts arose such as WOMEN’S STYLE (= good) and MEN’S STYLE (= bad) (Trömel–Plötz, 1984). For example, the “female” style was described as being cooperative, the male in contrast as being competitive. Differences within one gender were neglected, the sexes were equated with the respective gender, and a unitary model served as the basis for investigation (see above). Lakoff’s intuitive hypotheses were adhered to in many studies. As a result, a variety of methodological approaches were pursued (see Cameron, 1985; Wodak et al., 1987; Henley and Kramer, 1991; Coates and Cameron, 1990; Trudgill, 1972, for examples). Not all of the earlier claims could be universally proven; some had to be differentiated (Dubois and Crouch, 1975; Crosby and Nyquist, 1977; Holmes, 1986; Gräsel, 1991).

In the second decade of linguistic gender studies, research in linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and communication sciences investigated subtle differences in the speech behavior of men and women, resulting in a situational ranking of the sexes. The category of gender played an important role in conversation and was different in every situational context (Wodak and Andraschko, 1994; Ochs, 1992; Henley and Kramer, 1991). But once again these context specificities were inadequately discussed in many studies. Issues of power and dominance were of great relevance. The deficit theory was thus replaced by the dominance theory. Although these studies were still based on a unitary model of gender, they were more context–sensitive and took the power structures of society into consideration.

In the next phase, emphasis was put on research on gender socialization. There is an extensive literature showing that boys and girls learn different verbal and nonverbal skills in their mainly same–sex children’s and peer groups (summarized in Wodak and Schulz, 1986; Günther and Kotthoff, 1991; Eckert, 1989). These skills remain relevant for adults in many situations (Wodak 1984, 1986; Maltz and Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1991). The differences in subcultures and socialization processes were emphasized, yet the power aspect seems to have been neglected. These approaches were summarized as “difference theory.” The debate within gender studies was more and more mistakenly reduced to rather simple questions: Do men interrupt women more often than vice versa? Do men dominate topics of conversation? Are women hypercorrect?3 Do all women use more standard language than men? Since the contexts in which men more often distinctly interrupted women were hardly specified, for example (West and Zimmerman 1991), the debate was and is reduced to general pro or con questions, instead of being concerned with tracing context–specific power relations.

Most recently, social constructivist approaches (see pp. 128–30; Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman, 1991: 303) have been taken into account. In this approach, gender is understood as an indirectly developed identity category, integrated into the formation of other identity categories. This
depiction implies a non-unitary approach to gender. In general, gender roles in institutions and the communicative behavior of men and women are not separated from one another. Gender roles are produced, reproduced, and actualized through context-specific gender-distinct activities in communication.

Finally, Uchida (1992: 564) argues very consistently for a compromise between the dominance and difference approaches through a social-constructivist concept which we would like to take up:

The issue at hand is not whether we should take the dominance/power-based approach or the difference/cultural approach or both approaches to analyze sex differences in discourse. Rather, it is how we can come up with a framework that allows us to see gender as a holistic and dynamic concept regarding language use – a framework that allows us to see how we, in the social context, are doing gender through the use of language.

Naturally, this also relates to the level of sociolinguistic variation.

2 The Main Paradigms

2.1 History

The investigation of gender-specific language variation started in the 1960s with the sociophonological surveys of William Labov, especially his study on Martha's Vineyard and his New York study (Labov, 1966b). In these studies Labov considered sex as one factor among many influencing the variation of language behavior. To explain sociophonological variation he used the sociological concept of “prestige,” emphasizing language attitudes as a causal factor in choosing a certain lect right from the beginning.

In the following decades most work within sociophonology employed the Labovian framework; deviating and critical approaches remained unnoticed. One example of such an early critical approach is that of Nichols (1976), who anticipated both methodological (participant observation) and theoretical developments. She opposed the unitary model of women (see p. 129) – "They [women] make choices in the contexts of particular social networks rather than as some generalized response to the universal conditions of women" (Nichols, 1983: 54) and criticized the presumption of classifying women's socioeconomic status (SES) according to their husbands'.

A qualitatively new approach was presented in 1980 by Lesley Milroy and in the works of Lesley and James Milroy (L. Milroy, 1980; J. Milroy, 1981; L. Milroy, 1992; L. and J. Milroy, 1992). Their orientation towards the microsociology of language usage, concentrating on social networks, paralleled new developments in other branches of linguistic interest – in discourse analysis, the ethnography of speaking, etc. – and pointed to the importance of context sensitivity.

We begin with a review of the two most important strands of sociophonological research: the Labovian tradition, with a brief discussion of the works of Labov and Trudgill, and the network approach with a short discussion of the studies of the Milroys (2.2). This will be followed by a more general discussion of the impact of these traditions on today’s sociophonological research (2.3) which will be contrasted with approaches deriving from other traditions (2.4). Finally we will present a synopsis of the most important propositions explaining language variation due to gender and a brief summary of the feminist critique of research on gender and sociophonological variation.

2.2 The Labovian tradition

Labov

Labov was the first to notice the important role of sex/gender as a sociolinguistic variable. As a method of collecting the reliable, authentic data needed for sociolinguistic research, Labov (1966b) introduced the sociolinguistic interview, carefully designed to elicit different speech styles within a single interview. His studies show a stratification of phonological variables according to sex/gender, age, socioeconomic status (SES), and situational context. In order to integrate the observed
intrapersonal variation (in different contexts) and interpersonal variation into approved linguistic
theories, Labov formulated “variable rules.” Like phonological context variables (e.g., assimilation)
situational and personal features work as varying factors in a rule-governed process of speech
production resulting in a specifically realized sociophonological variable.

Focusing primarily on language change, Labov emphasized two features of human language behavior:
(a) Women of all classes and ages use more standard variants than their equivalent men. As the
standard is usually regarded as the language of the elite, for the rest of the population an
approximation to this standard implies a deviation from the language of one’s own group. (b) The
lower middle class (LMC) “hypercovers” its language; it copies features of the middle class (MC),
whose language behavior is more standard, in order to gain social prestige. But the LMC extends this
copied usage to other phonological contexts as well (overgeneralization) and thus stimulates
language change. Here again (following (a)) women in particular are in the lead. Through child-rearing
they transmit their hypercorrect language behavior to their children, for whom it becomes the
perceived language. (Nevertheless women do not always introduce and lead in language change, as
Labov’s study of Martha’s Vineyard (1963) demonstrates.) Figure 8.1 (Labov, 1990: 224) demonstrates
the role of class and gender in hypercorrection.

In his early studies (1963, 1966b) Labov was already trying to go beyond mere description and
explain language variation between different classes. To that end he made use of sociological
concepts. A particularly important concept is that of group identification (or projection) which, in
conjunction with language attitudes (that is, the prestige of a certain language variety), has a major
impact on choosing a certain language variety over another. The status of a group and its particular
language is thus a central sociolinguistic question.

The LMC (especially women) imitates the prestigious language of the MC in order to gain a better
social position, to become MC itself. The concept of linguistic insecurity, which is connected with the
LMC, plays a significant role. “The index of linguistic insecurity involves the proportion of cases in
which people distinguish between the way they speak and another way of speaking that is
Regarding gender, Labov restricted himself in his early studies to determining the influence of gender/sex on language variation but did not try to solve the puzzle of the underlying causes of this influence: "Why do women do this? It cannot be only their sensitivity to prestige forms, since that explains only half of the pattern. We can say that they are more sensitive to prestige patterns, but why do they move forward faster in the first place? Our answers at the moment are no better than speculations" (Labov, 1991: 302). Furthermore Labov (1991: 181) claimed that the observed higher prestige-consciousness of women is dependent on their specific position within a certain society. In parts of India and Iran, for instance, where women do not participate in public discourse, they were less inclined to use (more) standard language (than men).

Labov (1990) tries to reconcile two slightly inconsistent questions: (1) Why is it that men use more non-standard varieties, and (2) why do women lead in language change? In a specific domain of conceived language norms, the deviation of women as opposed to that of men influences language change. As he did before, Labov (1990) stressed the child-rearing function of women, which leads to an imbalance in the enforcement of gender–specific language varieties. He specially emphasizes the observed correlation between “occupational roles” and sex/gender. While there might be no interaction at all at the beginning of a language change, in the course of time interaction evolves and the relationship between the sociophonological variable and0gender differentiates the different classes. Thus Labov demonstrates that only a cross-tabulation of sex/gender and class reveals interesting propositions about the nature of the relation between sex/gender and a certain sociophonological variable (see also Cravens and Gianelli, 1993).

So once again this study stresses the role of gender as an important factor in sociophonological variation. But Labov does not explain why it is that women use more standard forms. His literature survey gives us the following very general reasons: "Women … are said to be more expressive than men or use expressive symbols more than men or rely more on such symbols to assert their position" and "Women are said to rely more on symbolic capital than men because they possess less material power" (Labov, 1990: 214).

Trudgill

Peter Trudgill (1972, 1983b) works within a framework similar to that of Labov, but he has a stronger emphasis on sociological reasons to account for the observed gender–specific difference in language variation. His study of Norwich (1972) includes first of all the already mentioned observation that men use more nonstandard forms than women. The question is why working–class (WC) men (and in this study young women as well) stick to their low–prestige nonstandard variety. To explain this Trudgill has adopted Labov’s (1966b) notion of “covert prestige”: for men nonstandard variants fulfill the function of solidarity markers which highlight certain group values like “masculinity.” In other words, the notion of covert prestige captures the hidden sociological function of vernaculars.

In explaining why, on the other hand, women in general use more standard forms than men, Trudgill (1972: 91) states: “The social position of women in our society is less secure than that of men … It may be … that it is more necessary for women to secure and signal their social status linguistically.” Furthermore men are judged according to their work, yet women are assessed according to their appearance, which includes language.

It is specifically this self-representation in a language that Trudgill examined closely in his study. In self–evaluation tests he analyzes the gendered misperception in self–perception. Women tend to exaggerate their actual usage of standard forms; men on the contrary tend to underreport their standard usage.

Network studies

The studies of James and Lesley Milroy (1980, 1981, 1987) represent a qualitatively new approach to language variation. As opposed to Labov, their research is more concerned with the internal variation within a certain group (the working class (WC)) and not with the language community as a whole: “Within working–class speech alone, this research has demonstrated that there are considerable differences between individuals, between different speech–styles, between men and women, and
between older and younger speakers" (J. Milroy, 1981: 89).

Like Trudgill (1972) they raise the question why members of the WC stick to their low-prestige vernacular. The Milroys' innovations are twofold: (a) On the methodological level, during data collection the researcher becomes part of the observed group, the social network under investigation. The researcher is introduced to the network as a friend or colleague of a member of it. (b) On the theoretical level, they employ the sociological concept of social networks: “networks generally have reference to a quantifiable set of relations individuals have to one another by reference to such facts as frequency of interaction, transactional (one-way) versus exchange (two-way) interactions, and so on" (Preston, 1987: 693).

These networks capture group structures, and the explanations of the observed sociophonological phenomena trace particular language behavior back to certain peculiarities of the obvious network structures, enabling a very fine-grained analysis, in complete contrast to the macrosociological approach of the former survey studies. Then networks themselves can be characterized by two parameters: density and multiplexity. Density signifies the number of people participating in a network and the number of relationships of a person to other members of this network. Multiplexity is an index for the polyfunctionality of network relations. For instance, a colleague from work can also be a friend. Within a single class the Milroys specially focus on age and sex/gender and the interrelationship of these two sociological variables.

The results of L. Milroy (1980) again confirm the tendencies mentioned above – women use more standard forms than men and men more nonstandard variables than women. But their ethnographic approach allows a more specific explanation of the language behavior observed; (young) men are subject to more rigid group pressure to speak in vernacular than women, and about women they state, “It would seem that female linguistic behavior is viewed more tolerantly by local peer–groups, so that women have, in a sense, more linguistic freedom than men” (J. Milroy, 1981: 37). The different language attitudes of men and women (J. Milroy, 1981; Trudgill, 1972; Smith, 1985) together with their different linguistic possibilities thus lead to antagonistic developments in language behavior.

J. Milroy (1992) connects the degree of differentiation of male and female language behavior while using stable variables (variables which show only a minor age gradation and which are therefore unlikely to be involved in an ongoing language change) with the stability of a social group. Social groups (or societies) which – as in Ballymacaert – have a very stable gender role differentiation show the greatest difference between male and female language behavior. Milroy analyzes these relations in a detailed study of language variation and its dependence on social networks. In general, dense and multiplex networks reinforce the linguistic norms of a certain group. But “agreement on norms … results not in uniformity of usage within a community, but in agreement on a pattern of stable differentiation” (J. Milroy, 1992: 90). The dense and multiplex network merely gives rise to the symbolic function of certain language variables, but it does not determine their actual use, which is still dependent on the actual situation, on the specific interacting persons, and so on. The relationship between gender, social network, and language is still a very complex one. On the one hand, linguistic variables may function as network markers for women or for men (not necessarily for both). In this case a certain gender is highly correlated with a dense, multiplex network. On the other hand, linguistic variables may function as gender markers independent of any social network. Table 8.1 (J. Milroy, 1992: 120) makes a further proposition: If a linguistic variable functions as a network marker, this variable has to be a static one for this group. Language change has to be introduced by another group.

Table 8.1 Contrasting patterns of distribution of two vowels involved in change, according to sex of speaker, relative frequency of innovatory variants and level of correlation with network strength (after L. Milroy, 1987a: 120).

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<th>Change led by High correlation with network strength</th>
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<td>/a/ Males Females</td>
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<td>/ɛ/ Females Males</td>
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In sociophonology, the research design using social networks has one major drawback, as the Milroys themselves point out: Explanations using the inner structure of a social network need the network to be dense and multiplex. Therefore language change stemming from the MC or UC with their loose-knit networks cannot yet be investigated in this way.  

2.3 Research deriving from Labov and the Milroys

The work of Labov and the Milroys constitutes the overall framework for sociophonological studies concerned with gender until now. This implies a concentration on phonological variables; only a few studies deal with gender-specific differences in intonation (McConnell-Ginet, 1983), the biological but culturally transformed difference in ground frequency (Smith, 1985; Ohara, 1992; Romaine, 1994) or differences in the application of phonological rules (Leodolter, 1975).

The sociological variables usually included are mostly those already mentioned: age, sex/gender, an operationalization of class (mostly based on SES), and contextual styles. Network studies add some indexes for multiplexity and density or a single index for both.

There is no differentiation of “sex” and “gender”, the classification usually employs an unproblematized notion of sex. Furthermore, most works do not dwell on the relationship between gender and other sociological variables; only a few studies beside Labov’s are concerned with linguistic (langue-based) restrictions on the sociophonological variation of the linguistic variables under investigation. Generally no further sociological concepts and theories are used. The studies either aim at the description and explanation of mechanisms of language change as such, or they want to describe an observed language variation and find sociological reasons for it. Gender/sex is treated as one factor of a set, among which class (and sometimes age) are the most prominent.

Most of these studies concentrate on urban varieties of English (Swales, 1990). Lately, minority languages and their relationship to standard English have also received some attention, especially Black English (Edwards, 1990, 1992; Nichols, 1983) and the language behavior of Chicanos (Galindo and Gonzales, 1992; Santa Ana, 1992). In addition to sociophonological research in the US, Great Britain, Ireland, and Central America, we would like to mention the research of Australian sociolinguists, who developed interesting context-sensitive refinements of research methods (Horvath, 1985; Clyne, 1991) in response to the complex multilingualism of the country.

The majority of descriptive studies published so far confirms earlier results – there is not a single known language which shows no gender difference on the sociophonological level at all (although not every variable has to have a gender differentiation). Nevertheless this difference is only a gradual one: If women have access to the standard variety, they will generally use more standard forms than men, who will tend to use more nonstandard forms. Women are more sensitive to deviation from the standard variety (in reception tests) and women are more likely to lead in language change. Despite these often reported tendencies, some sociolinguistic studies provide clearly contradictory results which are not consistent with these claims: Men use more standard language and men are the innovators in linguistic change.

2.4 Other research traditions

New influences on the study of the relationship of language variation and gender stem from the European tradition of dialectology, bilingualism and multilingualism, and research on minorities and language contact (Zentella, 1987; Medicine, 1987; Hill, 1990). The multilingual situation enables a more detailed and focused approach to the study of social context and language choice. Results of multilingual studies show similar tendencies to those of monolingual studies: the standard variety of the latter can be equated with the prestigious, dominant language of the former. Women are usually initiators of the decreolization process (a critical analysis of the role of women in decreolization is provided by Escure, 1992).

Most of these research traditions, however, are still mainly interested in the study of language variation as such. Sex or sometimes gender as an empirically relevant social category is only seldom considered. (An exception is the more ethnographically oriented research on minorities.) Therefore some aspects influencing language variation have gained only minor attention and are mostly included in the overall framework of larger surveys. This is especially the case for research on
gendered language attitudes. Men and women judge standard and nonstandard language differently (Smith, 1985), they have different perception levels for linguistic variables (as shown in the self-evaluation tests of Trudgill, 1972) and they are judged differently when using the same language variety (Moosmüller, 1989, investigates this for Austrian German).

Parallel to these developments in sociophonology, the last two decades witnessed a growing interest in gender research in other linguistic areas, such as discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and the ethnography of speaking. Studies in these areas resulted in a variety of explanations for gender differences. In line with the growing importance of qualitative ethnographic approaches in sociophonology, these explanations are beginning to exercise an influence on sociophonology as well.

2.5 Theoretical grounding and feminist critique

At present we still find a discrepancy between sociophonological studies and the theoretical considerations and criticism inspired by feminist research regarding the studies and explanations provided so far. We would now like to present an overview of the most influential explanations and to list important criticisms.

The explanations put forth so far can be divided into three groups according to their concept of sex/gender: (a) biologically oriented explanations, (b) explanations which make use of the different social context of men and women without further questioning of these contexts (This approach can be subsumed under the two–culture approach presented below; (c) explanations which point directly to the unequal distribution of power between men and women (power and dominance approach).

The biological approach

No contemporary explanation assumes total biological determination. Explanations of the difference in sound frequencies using the difference in physiology (men have a longer vocal tract) nevertheless stress the importance of the cultural transformation (Ohara, 1992; Smith, 1985). Only a few researchers think that there is a biological cause of the observed language variation (e.g., Chambers, 1992, who thinks that women have a better ability to learn languages and will therefore show more variation).

The two–culture approach

Language is used as a signifying code to maintain group identity. Male peer groups exert strong pressure on their members to use the vernacular (Milroy, 1981). Their use of the vernacular is due to their tendency to delimit themselves from women (Trudgill, 1972; Lippi-Green, 1989).

The dominant role of women in child-rearing leads to their more status-conscious language behavior, as they would like to enhance the future chances of their children by teaching them the standard variety (Labov, 1966, 1990). This is especially the case in language contact situations (Engel-Wodak and Rindler-Schjerve, 1985).

The status of men is derived from their occupation. Women who mostly work at home have to use symbolic systems including language to demonstrate their status (Eckert, 1989). The different occupations of men and women lead to a different exposure to other language varieties. Females’ jobs are often further away from their own community and entail more contact with other people (e.g., salesperson, teacher) than do those of men, who share their workplace with members of the same speech community (factories, farming). This leads to the higher language proficiency of women, better control of more registers and styles, and an orientation to supra-regional language norms (Nichols, 1983).

The power and dominance approach

Female usage of the standard language is intended as a means of improving their own inferior position in a patriarchal society (Deuchar, 1990). The weaker a woman’s position, the more she is forced to be polite. Standard language is only one of many ways to show this deference (Deuchar, 1990; Kotthoff, 1992).

Most of the approaches reviewed here imply that there is a “difference in culture” between male and
female behavior (let us point out that the notion of “culture” in this context may be misleading).
Moreover, one specific criticism of feminist science is that explanations in sociophonology fail to do
justice to the power distribution within society and that they are not grounding their theories and
results in theories of society (Kotthoff, 1992; Cameron, 1990; McConnell–Ginet, 1988). Additional
criticism is directed at the quantitative methodology used. In general, critics stress the need to take
context into account. As in the work of the Milroys, one has to look for the peculiarities of the society
under investigation, the roles of women and men. Explanations should (at least at the present time)
be more local (especially regarding the contradicting claims raised by different studies). The following
list summarizes the most important points:

- There is a tendency for unwarranted generalizations of individual research findings from
  “some women” to “all women” (Eckert and McConnell–Ginet, 1992).
- Like all signs, a specific sociophonological variable can be polyfunctional. Hitherto most
  explanations seem to make use of a monofunctional concept of the social dimension of a
  linguistic variable.
- Language variation is a part of a more complex system of symbols. In explanations the
  signifying function of language variables has to be connected with the overall picture of
  societal structures.
- Using “sex” as a social variable reduces a complex social phenomenon in a misleading way.
  “Gender is always joined with real people's complex forms of participation in the communities
to which they belong” (Eckert and McConnell–Ginet, 1992:91).
- The methodology used is in itself sexist. On all the indexes, men usually have higher scores
  than women (Cameron, 1990). In quantitative studies, the factorial design is usually set up in
  such a way that men score higher than women on the observational measures taken.
- The male language is regarded as the language norm. Female language is treated as a
  deviation. Studies are often concerned with the particular deviating nature of women. Men’s
  language behavior remains underreported (Cameron, 1990).
- Survey studies in the Labovian tradition neglect contextual influences.
- Network studies and similar approaches are often based on too small a sample and therefore
do not allow for generalizations over the whole group under investigation, or for the language
  behavior of men and women as such.
- The distinction between gender and sex is often ignored.

In the following section some alternative studies, which try to avoid the shortcomings of traditional
research, will be presented.

3 Some Alternative Approaches to Variation

3.1 The ethnographic approach

Variation of adolescents

Eckert and McConnell–Ginet (1992: 92ff.), starting from Labov’s paradigm, propose to investigate
“communities of practice” as the units of sociolinguistic research. Communities of practice are defined
as “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common
endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practice –
emerge in the course of their joint activity around that endeavor” (p. 95).

Gender is produced and reproduced in differential membership in such communities of practice.
Gender itself is based, in the opinion of the two authors, on a non-unitary model: There is
differentiation between the sexes, women define themselves with respect to other women, men to
men; women and men differ in their routes of obtaining social status; and women are under constant
pressure to display their persona (Eckert, 1989: 247ff.,). Both Eckert and McConnell–Ginet argue very
convincingly and provide many examples to support their view that survey studies in variation are too
general and their level of abstractness too great. Many subtle and important intervening variables
have been neglected, including the context, that is, the communities of practice.

Furthermore, Eckert argues (1989: 245ff.), the variables of age, sex, etc. are used in a very superficial way. As she points out, it would be more relevant to look at life stages instead of chunks in an age continuum. Thus many results on language change in “traditional” studies, such as those by Labov and Trudgill, may be biased. In her own study of a community of practice, a high school in a Detroit suburb, two years of participant observation allowed Eckert to understand the pressures and self-definitions of boys and girls in two different peer groups: the Jocks, middle-class youth, whose lives are centered around school; and the Burnouts, working-class youth, whose lives are centered around adult life in the city in rebellion against school.

Boys and girls undergo different socialization processes in each group, but in both groups the pressure is greater for girls if they want to be accepted and to be “popular”:

A star varsity athlete, for instance, regardless of his character or appearance, can enjoy considerable status. There is virtually nothing, however, that a girl lacking in social or physical gifts can do that will accord her social status. In other words, whereas it’s enough for a boy to have accomplishments of the right sort, a girl must be a certain sort of person.

(Eckert, 1989: 256)

The two groups differ in the kind of self-image they want to project: The Jocks are friendly and All-American, the Burnouts are tough and experienced. In both groups, the girls have to invest more energy to accommodate to such an image. Eckert investigated two sets of linguistic changes in relation to gender and the peer groups, an older and a new change: fronting of low vowels, backing and lowering of mid vowels (see figure 8.2).

![Figure 8.2](http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/uid=532/tocnode?id=g9780631211938...)

Figure 8.2 The northern cities chain shift (after Eckert, 1989: 260).
As table 8.2 shows, the girls lead the boys, and the Burnouts lead the Jocks in realizing these sound changes. In both sets of changes, the girls show more variation than the boys. In the case of the newer set of changes, the girls' patterns of variation show a greater difference between the Jocks and the Burnouts than do those of the boys. Obviously, the newer changes are perceived as indicators of counter-adult behavior and thus fit the image of the Burnouts. In both cases – the girls' differentiation of the newer changes and their greater use of older changes – the girls' phonological behavior is consonant with their greater need to use social symbols for self-presentation. These results, Eckert argues, are very much in accordance with her theory about gender, women, and men. Group membership seems to be more salient for one sex than for the other; girls assert their category identities through language more than boys; the impact of group ideology on language behavior is considerable and correlates with gender as well. The ethnographic study of the community of practice led to very different results than a survey would have done. Eckert concludes that many more "communities of practice" have to be investigated before any general claims on the role of gender and sex in sound change can be made.

**Gender, minorities and code-switching**

Ana Celia Zentella (1987), who comes from the bilingualism research paradigm, studied female identities in the Puerto Rican community of "El Barrio" in East Harlem, New York, between 1978 and 1981. The pressures on the Puerto Rican minority are high: As the most disadvantaged group in the United States, it has the highest poverty level. Moreover, Puerto Ricans are prone to several identity conflicts: "What am I? Puerto Rican or American? What color am I? White or Black? Which language should I speak, Spanish or English? Which Spanish should I speak, Puerto Rican's or Spain's? Which English should I speak, Black or White?" (Zentella, 1987: 169–71). Thus culture, race and language are issues of great conflict, with different values attached to them by different age groups and networks. Participant observation in this community revealed several different networks with different linguistic repertoires: older women who speak Spanish; younger mothers for whom English is the dominant language; "young dudes" for whom English is also dominant; and children who grow up bidialectal and bilingual. As Zentella notes, the young children "are always subject to the supervision of one of the networks. As a result, the children are intermittently addressed by monolingual standard or nonstandard Spanish speakers, monolingual standard and nonstandard English speakers, and by
bilingual and bidialectal speakers of both languages” (p. 171). The standard Spanish of Puerto Rico varies with Puerto Rican English and/or Black English vernacular depending on the situational context and the interlocutors.

Children speak the language which is normally directed at them; female children specifically accommodate and are more polite (Deuchar, 1990). The principal burden of maintaining the Spanish language lies on the shoulders of Puerto Rican women; a survey of language attitudes (Zentella, 1987) revealed that women do not regard English monolinguals as Puerto Rican anymore. On the one hand, women preserve older and more conservative forms, even if the language changes, yet on the other hand, women are also leading linguistic changes that correlate with the prestigious language variety. This aspect has not yet been studied thoroughly, and it is likely that this fact could also be dependent on networks or professions (Nichols, 1983).

Code-switching (see chapter 13) is an important strategy of communication in this community. In contrast to other opinions (Lakoff, 1975), which claim that code-switchers are not fluent in their codes, Zentella notes that the most prolific code-switchers are the most competent speakers of the language varieties and that these are mostly women:

But contrary to prevalent stereotypes, the reality is that most Puerto Rican women do succeed in raising their children to be healthy people, despite the triple jeopardy of gender, race, and class, and despite the conflicts about national origin and linguistic and cultural differences. When we seek out the wellsprings of the coping strength of these women, we find that bilingualism and code-switching are vital.

(Zentella, 1987: 177)

Puerto Rican female survivors turn what others see as deficiencies or liabilities into strengths. These women are not only responsible for language education, they are also, as Zentella states, the leaders “for equity and excellence in education via the bilingual model” (p. 177). Thus the context-sensitive approach in combination with methodologies developed in research on bilingualism thus provides us with more detailed and subtle explanations of language change than survey studies.

3.2 Sociopsychological variation (SPV)

Language attitudes

The sociopsychological approach to variation has been pursued in Vienna since 1975. Some studies concentrate on actual language behavior (see below), while others, such as those by Moosmüller (1987–8, 1994), focus on regional and gender–specific language attitudes towards Austrian German. Moosmüller analyzed the language use and evaluation of opinion leaders: politicians, schoolteachers, university professors, and radio and TV announcers. Negative attitudes towards dialect are greater when women use dialect in official contexts: “it is not surprising that being spoken to in dialect in certain contexts is perceived as a sign of disrespect” (Moosmüller, 1994: 273). In this study, the context–sensitive approach has allowed for a differentiation between regions, dialects, professions, and gender. The use of dialect is polyfunctional, both men and women use dialect for very specific occasions, for example, when responding aggressively to a politician in a parliamentary debate. Explanations stressing the notion of “covert prestige” (see p. 137) are barely scratching the surface in cases like these.

Situational parameters, social class and gender

In a study about the language of defendants in court (Leodolter, 1975 [= Wodak]) Ruth Wodak used audio recordings of a standardized setting (a courtroom) to study the sociophonological variation in Vienna, paying particular attention to social class, gender, topics, and certain situational factors. She developed a model (see also Wodak–Leodolter and Dressler, 1977; Dressler and Wodak, 1982; Moosmüller, 1989) which assumes a continuum of styles between the two poles of dialect and standard language in Viennese German. The linguistic model uses Stampe's natural phonology as a point of departure (Stampe, 1969).
In studying the interaction between one judge and 15 defendants (15 cases of examination, 2 women and 13 men), the style registers of each person and the frequencies of style-switching were uncovered, in connection with five situational parameters which were defined according to psychological factors, sociological factors based on role theory, and on discursive characteristics of the interaction between judge and defendant (see figure 8.3; Leodolter, 1975: 260).

![Flowchart](image)

**Figure 8.3 Interactions between a judge and defendants (after Leodolter, 1975: 260).**

Wodak was interested in trials about car accidents, as this violation is not linked with a specific social class. The analysis of the repertoire of MC speakers revealed that they applied only a few variable rules and almost no input switches. Their language behavior contained very few style shifts due to the polite and kind questioning by the judge, and they showed almost no emotional involvement. In contrast, UMC-speakers and the working-class women covered the whole range of the linguistic repertoire including hypercorrect speech. Most of the WC men formed a different group of defendants, for they had already been convicted several times before (up to 20 times) and knew the situation. They spoke in pure dialect (accommodating to the dialect of the judge, who switched according to his interlocutor), applying all the dialect rules without shifting to the standard.

Moreover, the interaction between gender and social class could be detected: UMC men and the two women (WC, UMC) showed the largest linguistic repertoires. They also formed the group that was treated most harshly, even more than WC male defendants. Variation was thus shown to be dependent upon sociological, situational, and psychological factors. The fact that the specific interaction had to be taken into account corresponds to more recent claims about “doing gender” in context (see section 1.3) and about the role of gender in the whole set of attributes that form an individual's identity.

**Mothers and daughters: Women and language change**

The relationship between mothers and daughters is extremely complex and different from the relationship of mothers and sons. In this short summary, we will focus on these variational aspects of Wodak’s study, which provide insights into the processes of language change between generations of females, and supply assumptions about the formation of gender identity in the process of socialization of the daughter through the mother (Kotthoff, 1992: 132ff.). Again, an interaction between psychological and sociological factors determining the sociophonological variation was revealed.

In–depth interviews were conducted with 30 mother–daughter pairs from all social classes. Topics were family problems, education, negative and positive sanctions, self-images, problems with female identity, etc. All the women interviewed were asked about their relationships with their own mothers and daughters respectively. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed with respect to the significant linguistic variables in Viennese German.

Wodak was specifically interested in determining whether the daughters used their linguistic styles to distinguish themselves from their mothers (Wodak, 1984). Was the variation therefore dependent on the relationship between mothers and daughters, on the family structure and the self-image and desired gender identity of the girls? Wodak (1985: 204) summarized the results in the following way:

http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/uid=532/tocnode?id=g9780631211938... 28.12.2007
Family styles exist – “mother–daughter styles” – which sometimes contradict class-specific tendencies in variation. Professional women tended to speak more formally than nonprofessional mothers in all social classes. If the relationship between mother and daughter was ambivalent and in conflict, the daughter used a significantly different style from the mother, more formal or informal depending on the mother’s style – thus there was no significant tendency towards language change between the generations. The differences between mother and daughter were bigger than between mother and son, even in stable and friendly relationships. Accommodation to peer groups is an important intervening variable. The same is true for social mobility – upwardly mobile daughters spoke hypercorrectly, in obvious demarcation from their mothers and their social class. One of the most significant results was the fact that some UMC daughters used even more dialect than WC daughters to distance themselves from their mothers; thus their style was triggered by a bad relationship to their mothers and not by the class factor. This study suggests that whole clusters of very different variables have to be taken into account. Variation is context-dependent and is influenced by psychological as well as sociological factors. No simple general claims can be made regarding language change.

4 Conclusions

At this point, we would like to return to the questions we posed at the beginning of our paper and sum up our observations regarding studies on gender and variation. Most of the sociolinguistic studies we have summarized throughout this article do not apply an explicit notion of “gender.” Quite the contrary, they usually correlate phonological units (linguistic variables) with the sex of the participants; in other words, the linguistic behavior of men and women is investigated without trying to incorporate any theoretical implications of modern gender theories. Even in cases where such theories are considered, the empirical studies usually end up with a unitary model of gender (see p. 128) and with the simple division into the biological sexes (but see p. 129). Another important issue which becomes apparent in discussion of sociolinguistic research on gender and variation is the problematic nature of the integration of the context of the data. Except for studies using an ethnographic and/or interdisciplinary approach, context is reduced to the traditional sociological variables, such as age, social class, profession, and ethnicity, without any underlying sociological theory which would provide some explanatory power and justification. Other context phenomena are neglected. The interweaving of linguistic behavior with nonlinguistic behavior, the interdependence of language and context, the construction of context through language and the impact of context on language are not seriously considered in sociolinguistic theories on variation. We think that this is an aspect which should be discussed more thoroughly in future research, analogous to the developments in discourse studies (Duranti and Goodwin 1992).

Moreover, we would like to argue briefly that sociolinguistic studies would benefit from an inclusion of Pierre Bourdieu’s habitus theory (see Dittmar and Schlobinski, 1988). We think that promising network approaches (see pp. 135–7) could easily be integrated into this theory. On the one hand, the differentiation of samples into groups with specific dispositions and characteristics allows for better interpretations and explanations than the use of traditionally defined social classes; on the other hand, it allows a step towards macrosociological conceptions without reductionism.

Bourdieu (1987: 279) defines linguistic behavior as the symbolic capital of the speakers and as part of her/his general habitus. According to Bourdieu, in a specific context the linguistic market creates a ranking of different linguistic registers, some having more prestige than others, due to the social values and norms of the elites. Thus the notion of power has to be included in sociolinguistic research on variation, as well as the dynamics of group ideologies (see Kotthoff, 1992: 137).

Turning to the evaluation of different methodologies applied in studies on gender and variation, we would like to underscore the manifold feminist critique of research procedures. Quantitative studies tend to simplify many phenomena; qualitative analyses, on the other hand, often rely on samples which are too small to draw general conclusions. Many categories are defined in a male-oriented way, male linguistic behavior is seen as unmarked, female linguistic behavior as deviating from the male norm. Most studies are undertaken in English-speaking countries, thus general explanations suffer from Anglo-European ethnocentrism. We would like to suggest a combination of methods, a multimethod approach (see Wodak, 1986), in which different aspects of the object under investigation...
are grasped by different quantitative and qualitative methods which complement and do not exclude each other.

Furthermore languages other than English (see Gal, 1992b) should be investigated more thoroughly. We would also like to point out that many American researchers neglect European literature, especially studies which are not published in English (this is true for sociolinguistics in general, for example, Swales, 1990).

Finally, if sociological theories of context and of conceptualizations of gender, etc. continue to be ignored, contradictory explanations will not disappear. Labov’s statement (1991: 302) contains a more general truth: “Our answers at the moment are no better than speculations.” Nevertheless, a closer look at variation studies is promising; alternative and innovative approaches are gaining more and more attention (Hall et al., 1992).


2 Hudson (1990: 167) offers a much more extensive explanation and description of the “linguistic variable” and mentions context as an important factor for variation studies. But Hudson also restricts the context to the linguistic context and the speaker’s group membership. Interaction itself and the embedding of interaction in situations which would allow us to use our concept of “doing gender” are neglected. The same is true for Holmes (1992: 151ff.).

3 See Cheshire and Gardner-Chloros (1994), Coates (1990) for a strong feminist critique of the traditional variation studies and their interpretations and explanations of the assumed female skills.

4 J. Milroy (1992) concludes that thus language variation does not necessarily lead to language change (as Labov would imply). Language differentiation may have a stable symbolic value.

5 Therefore L. and J. Milroy (1992) try to reconcile the network approach with theories of class.

6 For an overview see Cameron and Coates (1990), Labov (1990), Klann-Delius (1987), Chambers (1992), Trudgill (1972).


10 For more information about accommodation theories see Burgoon (1990), Furnham (1990), Kramerae (1990), Sachdev and Bourhis (1990).

11 Ruth Wodak studied these relationships on the discursive level (Wodak, 1984, 1986), in a cross-cultural comparison between a Viennese and a Los Angeles sample (Wodak and Schulz, 1986, 1991) and on the level of phonological variation, to supplement and validate the discourse studies (Wodak, 1983, 1984).

12 The mothers also underwent a psychoanalytic projective personality test (the Gieszentest) which led to a typology of their personalities: “mother types.” These personality characteristics could also be correlated with the other variables.

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