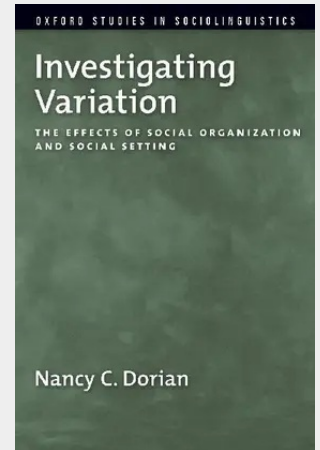


Investigating Variation

The Effects of Social Organization and Social Setting

Linguistic variation has most commonly been studied in communities that have the dominant social organization of our time: occupational and ethnic diversity, socioeconomic stratification, and a population size that precludes community-wide face-to-face interaction. In such communities literacy introduces overarching, extra-community linguistic norms, and linguistic variation correlates with socioeconomic class. Investigating Variation explores a different kind of social organization: small size, enclavement, common occupation, absence of social stratification, bilingualism with extremely weak extra-community norming for the local minority language, which shows a very high level of individual variation. Nancy C. Dorian's examination of the fisherfolk Gaelic spoken in a Highland Scottish village offers a number of explanations for delayed recognition of linguistic variation unrelated to social class or other social sub-groups. Reports of similar variation phenomena in locations with similar social-setting and social organization features (contemporary minority-language pockets in Ireland, Russia, Norway, Canada, and Cameroon) make it possible to recognize a particular set of factors that contribute to the emergence and persistence of socially neutral inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation. The documented existence of still other forms of social organization, rare now but once more widespread, suggests that additional forms of linguistic variation, as well as other facets of language use related to social organization, remain unexamined, calling for attention before the few communities that represent them disappear altogether.

Linguistic variation has been studied primarily in communities with the dominant social organization of our time: ethnic diversity, socioeconomic stratification, and a population size that precludes community-wide face-to-face interaction. In such communities variation correlates with ethnicity and class. Investigating Variation explores a different kind of social structure: small size, dense kinship ties, common occupation, and absence of social stratification. In the community investigated here, social homogeneity and constant face-to-face interaction made accommodation unnecessary, and extremely weak extra-community norming for the local minority language permitted a very high level of individual variation. Nancy C. Dorian's examination of the fisherfolk Gaelic spoken in a Highland Scottish village offers a number of explanations for delayed recognition of a linguistic variation unrelated to social class or other social sub-groupings. Reports of similar variation phenomena in locations with similar features (contemporary minority-language pockets in Ireland, Russia, Norway, Canada, and Cameroon) make it possible to identify a particular set of factors that contribute to the emergence and persistence of socially neutral inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation. Facets of language use related to social structure remain to be investigated in communities with still other forms of social organization before the few communities that represent them disappear altogether.



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