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Sali A. Tagliamonte, *Making waves: The story of variationist sociolinguistics*. Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2015. Pp. xi + 208. ISBN: 9781118455166.

Reviewed by [Laurel Mackenzie](#), New York University

Sali A. Tagliamonte's *Making Waves: The Story of Variationist Sociolinguistics* is a detailed account of the origins and development of variationist sociolinguistics, told in part by the founders of the field in their own words. The book, each chapter of which takes the form of a thematically arranged assemblage of anecdotes, is based on over 150 hours' worth of interviews carried out by the author with forty-three prominent researchers, chosen to represent the first and second generations of variationists. Tagliamonte explains that her goal in putting together the book was to find out how 'the most famous people in the field ... had gotten into Sociolinguistics, why they had done the research they did, and how it had all happened' (p. ix). The end result tells a roughly chronological story, with Tagliamonte providing the narrative glue to connect dozens of verbatim quotes from her interview subjects (all of which are available for listening on a companion website).

Each chapter focuses on a particular theme in the development of variationist sociolinguistics, and the first few chapters, which cover the events that led the major players to start doing what they do, shine with their subjects' early enthusiasm. The book begins with William Labov noticing variation in language, carrying out his famous study of diphthongs on Martha's Vineyard and publishing the results in *Word* (Labov, 1963). The first chapter then proceeds more or less chronologically, with scholars around the world progressively discovering Labov's publications. Their stories are engrossing, and Nycz (2015) is spot-on when she compares the chapter to the 'opening montage of a heist movie, showing what each member was up to as they got asked to be part of the job'. By the end of the chapter, which spans the period from 1960 to 1972, speech community studies in the mold of Labov's survey of the Lower East Side (Labov, 1966) have been carried out in Detroit, Norwich, Belfast and Montreal; programs in sociolinguistics have been founded at the University of York and at Georgetown; and the first meeting of the New Ways of Analyzing Variation conference has been held.

In the following chapters, we learn how the founders from chapter 1, and their first generation of students in the 1960s and 1970s, discovered linguistics and embarked on their research programs. Chapter 2 is organized by person; chapter 3 goes topic by topic, surveying areas of research that received considerable attention as the field was starting out: the origins of African American English (a topic which is returned to later in the book), code-switching, audience design, and the interdisciplinary connections between variationist sociolinguistics and other subdisciplines of linguistics. Interdisciplinarity is the topic of chapter 4, as well, which explores the roots of variationist sociolinguistics in fields and traditions such as dialectology, historical linguistics, ethnography and anthropology.

Subsequent chapters focus more coherently on particular themes. Chapter 5 describes researchers' experiences with fieldwork, data collection and corpus-building. Chapter 6 discusses the evolution of statistical methods in the field, from the early days of VARBRUL software – when logistic regression necessitated punch cards and multi-day waits – to more modern quantitative developments. Chapter 7 highlights the various outreach and social engagement projects many sociolinguists have been involved with, including reading programs, forensic linguistics and dialect awareness.

Not every chapter is so tightly organized. Chapter 8, which surveys challenges to and expansions of traditional variationist notions, has a somewhat desultory feel, jumping from criticism of commonly used macro-social categories (sex, class) to an extensive summary of the debate over the origins of African American English and the various sources of historical data that were brought to bear on it, to identity, to social meaning, to Eckert's 'waves' of variation study, to perceptual dialectology, to grammaticalization. Chapter 9 returns to the technique employed earlier, of taking each researcher in turn; this time, we are treated to participants' responses to the question 'Why do you like variation?' alongside biographical sketches. Finally, chapter 10 takes a critical and somewhat uneasy look at the future of variationist sociolinguistics, but ends optimistically with advice for future students and the promise of problems still to be solved.

The book is full of tidbits that will delight both those who know the main characters personally and those who know them only as names on journal articles and textbooks. We learn, for instance, that, somewhere around 1972, William Labov dropped in on Peter Trudgill's parents to read Trudgill's PhD thesis 'over tea and cake' (p. 15); and that, when Suzanne Romaine taught a controversial Language and Gender course at Oxford in the 1980s, the departmental secretary secretly passed out her lecture handouts to an underground network of feminists (p. 48). I wonder, however, whether readers who don't know the main characters – readers with no familiarity with variationist work at all – will be interested in the book. And while one may argue that they are not the intended audience, that is in fact not entirely clear. At several spots, particularly early on, Tagliamonte provides the kind of simplified explanations of linguistic phenomena that one commonly finds in works for a lay audience. Thus she tells us, for instance, that 'language has many different parts and levels – sound, word, sentence, expression – and it all can vary'; she eschews a term like *discourse particle* in order to describe words like 'you know, well, gosh, by golly' as 'the funny little words that

most people think don't mean anything' (p. 1). At the same time, the opposite criticism could equally well be made: there are spots where Tagliamonte references arcane linguistic ideas without further explanation. Occasional inconsistencies in register aside, the book will certainly be a valuable read for those who have familiarity with and interest in the field; I would expect that beginning graduate students, in particular, would benefit from its concise summaries of foundational concepts and research traditions.

Making Waves is not a traditional history. It is rather a multi-voiced memoir, and an appendix containing a 'Variationist sociolinguistics family tree' further adds to the 'family history' feel. For the most part, Tagliamonte takes a back seat to her interview subjects. This is their story to tell, and while she summarizes their words and provides background and biography, she does not argue with or fact-check them. Indeed, there is little substantive criticism of the field or of anyone's work. At times one wishes there were. For instance, Tagliamonte drops occasional vague and ominous references to the present state of variationist sociolinguistic research, as on p. 170, where she observes that 'many practitioners think that the field has gotten internally weaker, broken down in three areas: the focus of investigation, the methodology, and the extent to which explanation is the goal of analysis, with a lessening of rigor across all three'. These opinions don't come through in the book's quotes, though, so one wonders what went on behind the scenes: whether Tagliamonte has omitted certain aspects of her conversations due to their potential to ruffle feathers, or whether she is simply sneaking in some of her own opinions edgewise.

Tagliamonte's removal of herself from the foreground of the work also comes through in the book's structure. Rather than necessarily having come into the work with a particular organizational scheme in mind, Tagliamonte appears to have conducted her interviews, extracted choice quotes and compiled them together, despite occasionally flimsy connections. As I read the book, I kept thinking of Labov's (1984) 'Principle of Tangential Shifting', by which the sociolinguistic interviewer must follow the interviewee wherever, conversationally, he or she goes. Though no one interview is reproduced entirely at any point, the compilation of quotes still has the same discursive feel that a complete interview would, giving us the impression of listening in on an engaging, well-referenced, and at times rambling conversation. (Tagliamonte admits that the book is 'a rather meandering tale' (p. x).) At times the reader gets the feeling that a quote was so great that Tagliamonte knew she had to include it, but never quite found the right place, so ended up sticking it a bit randomly into an only tenuously related passage. This is easily forgivable, though. After all, she's right; the quotes are great.

Indeed, one of the best things about *Making Waves* is the way the personalities of the researchers interviewed for the book are allowed to show through in their own words. Thanks to the many instances in which interview subjects mention one another, the frequent references to collaborative research, and the humor present in the quotes and the narration, the reader is left with the sense that the variationist community is a close-knit and friendly one. This is helped along by Tagliamonte's casual and conversational writing style. Researchers are referred to by their first names, and the supporting text frequently switches between the past and historical present tenses, just like a narrative

would. To be fair, though I found this to give the book an entertainingly breathless style, it also gives the sense that it hasn't been edited too closely. (This latter suspicion is supported by several typos.)

Given its focus on only the first and second generations of variationists (Tagliamonte's motivation: 'I simply had to stop somewhere' (p. x)), *Making Waves* provides a comprehensive account of variationist sociolinguistics' past, but spends little time on its present or future. Current research developments are mentioned only in passing, if at all; the term 'sociophonetics', for instance, never appears. This is understandable: the future of variationist sociolinguistics will be a new generation's story to tell. The challenge for those of us in subsequent generations will be to strike out in new directions without losing sight of the foundations of the field. Thanks to the great service Tagliamonte has done by collecting and assembling the reflections in this book, this is now easier than it once was.

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