

Social Theory from the Perspective of Sociolinguistic Variation

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In keeping with the tenet that sociolinguistics and the multiple strands of social theory carry potential for advancing one another, this workshop aims to familiarize participants with classic and contemporary social theory from a specifically sociolinguistic perspective. We examine influential currents of social theory via their application (both implicit and explicit) in past and present analyses of sociolinguistic variation. We then explore the potential of these theories as tools for, and as objects of, sociolinguistic investigation with the intent to open avenues of inquiry amenable to both variationist sociolinguistics and social theory.

We begin with a brief overview of social theory centered around two main currents of debate: the relationship between the individual and society and the interplay of structure versus agency. These questions reach across disciplines and are thus used as a framework for discerning the relevance of social theory for sociolinguistics. Subsequently, we critically examine some influential social-theoretic approaches to linguistic variation, including practice theory, social network analysis, communication accommodation theory, and approaches to class, in each case situating sociolinguistic theory within broader currents of social theory. Finally, we point to several major currents of contemporary social theory that, on one hand, have not yet impacted sociolinguistic theory, but on the other hand, may lead to innovative thinking in sociolinguistics. We give particular attention to theories that have clear roots in "classical" 19th- and 20th-century sociology and are thus likely to link to participants' existing knowledge of social theory. For example, we briefly examine recent developments in the Giddens-derived Structuration Theory, neo-Marxist theory, multiracial feminist theory, and social network theory. We thus explore the potential for bridging the disciplinary gap between linguistics and other social science fields.