Review

The Guidebook to Sociolinguistics
Allan Bell (2014)

Reviewed by Hillary Waterman

The Guidebook to Sociolinguistics recounts the life story of a discipline, which is a tale of ideas. Allan Bell takes that historical structure, illustrates it with ethnographic details and linguistic facts, and wraps them up neatly within the didactic structure of a textbook. With a comprehensive bibliography, diverse case studies and numerous suggested exercises, class debates and resources, the guidebook constitutes the blueprint for an advanced course.

Bell is a respected researcher as well as co-founder and editor of the international quarterly Journal of Sociolinguistics. His personal investment and careful ruminations are evident in this contribution as he outlines the discipline’s domain and seminal theories, and illustrates the trajectory from the discipline’s roots in mid-twentieth-century Structuralism to the subsequent radiation of method and theory, concluding with his own eloquent argument for a ‘Sociolinguistics of Equity’. It’s a tight text at just 367 pages; however, the author manages to impart what sociolinguistics is and is not, what it does, who does it and how. The engaged style is a refreshing change from the pedantic tone of many overview-type books. Bell reflexively situates his voice throughout, addressing his ‘areas of partiality’, and indexing the overarching dual theme, ‘a delight in the profusion of language and a commitment to voices that are marginal’ (p. xvi).

Insofar as gender is ‘arguably the most significant factor affecting change’, (p. 212) and has long been a salient feature in variationist methodologies, it is not surprising that it claims a prominent place in this book. Bell cites the

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main critiques of gender as a sociolinguistic variable – Eckert, Gal, Lakoff and others – and some of the concepts and principles that have revealed it to be less than straightforward, lending itself to specious correlations. Like class, we see that gender is, as an analytic category, problematic at best. Thus, we find no chapter on gender, per se, but instead, from chapters 6 and 7 onward, the book gradually unpacks major paradigms and analytic frames (i.e. the interactional sociolinguistics of Gumperz and Tannen; Lakoff’s difference-deficit-dominance framework; notions of prestige and counter-prestige; and later models of social networks, communities of practice and the ‘linguistic marketplace’) that have aided researchers in accessing dimensions of marginal (in terms of gender, class and/or ethnicity) voices and have helped reframe presumed linguistic correlates of gender (and other marked categories) in terms of cross-cultural difference.

Chapter 6, ‘Situated Language’, touches on the pragmatics of language in social identity. Here, we encounter the work of Goffman, Lakoff, Tannen, Hymes, Gumperz and other influential figures in the grand tradition generally referred to as the ethnography of communication. It becomes evident that, in some sense, language is gender. Both act to prescribe and describe social life; both are strategies for cataloguing the world around us – sometimes arbitrarily, usually inequitably. One is part and parcel of the other, language being a performative tool for indexing nuances of gendered identity and identities.

Readers may be impressed with the balance between succinctness, on one hand, and the book’s ambitious arc on the other. This includes attention to rigorous field methods. In fact, a major portion of Chapter 7, ‘Variation’, is given over to instructions for conducting an on-the-ground inquiry – from design to data collection, processing, archiving and storage of data (interpretation, analysis and even writing up (!) are addressed later on in Chapter 10).

Chapters 10 and 11, ‘Valuing Language’ and ‘Styling Language and Identities’, are perhaps the densest. Nearing the end of the book, the author delves into discourses and ideologies of language and its use, invoking semiotic theory and Bakhtinian notions of heteroglossia and centripetal and centrifugal forces. This section focuses more on social processes and forces than linguistic ones. Bell emphasises a dynamic view of style, based on agency: ‘Style is what speakers do with language’ (p. 293). In Chapter 11 he expounds critically on his own (1984) theory of audience design in light of Bakhtin’s influential ‘stylisation’ concept, conceding in hindsight that his original model might have given short shrift to the more agentive referee design, adding, ‘We are always proactively positioning ourselves in relation to our own in-group, other groups, and our interlocutors’ (p. 305).
Although it is rich with material, the guidebook is accessible, and clearly designed with students in mind. Its twelve chapters are organised into self-contained subsections and cogent explanations aided by diagrams and charts. The kaleidoscopic dimensions of language, and speaking practices – temporal, spatial, evolutionary, social, individual, ethnic, sexual, gendered, classed, theoretical, practical, and (especially insofar as it encompasses all the aforementioned and then some) political – are thoroughly articulated and teased apart from each other in this un-tome. Unique strengths of The Guidebook to Sociolinguistics with respect to teaching include:

- copious visual aids (diagrams, charts, outlines); meticulous referencing, with a bibliography at the end of every chapter (at the top of my personal wish list for every such text!);
- at the end of each chapter Bell includes an annotated further reading section, in which he highlights classics and foundational texts on particular topics or theoretical perspectives; and
- an emphasis on the practice of sociolinguistics (i.e. multiple suggested exercises and research activities, projects, in addition to offering innovative and clever resources for data gathering, suggested questions and debates for classroom forums), as opposed to just the dominant ideas.

In an interview written up in the language magazine Babel’s November 2013 issue (Jeffries et al. 2013), William Labov, whose foundational body of work commands a good deal of consideration in this volume, talked about employing his own research on African American vernacular English in designing a tutoring programme for helping African American school-children learn to read. Labov says, ‘there is an obligation to pay back if you have made a profit from studying the human race’. In the same vein, Bell argues across the span of this book for a politics of voice. This is not just a textbook, but also a mission statement for a new sociolinguistics, in which the privilege of studying people and their language carries a reciprocal obligation. This book should prove to be a classic, as well as a valuable resource for linguists and other social scientists as a reference and resource on many levels, but especially for those engaged in teaching and modelling sociolinguistic inquiry for serious students.

Reference