

4 Variation in Language and Gender

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1 Introduction

This chapter addresses some of the main research methods, trends, and findings concerning variation in language and gender. Most of the studies examined here have employed what can be referred to as quantitative variationist methodology (sometimes also called the quantitative paradigm or variation theory) to reveal and analyze sociolinguistic patterns, that is, correlations between variable features of the kind usually examined in sociolinguistic studies of urban speech communities (e.g. postvocalic /r/ in New York City, glottalization in Glasgow, initial /h/ in Norwich, etc.), and external social factors such as social class, age, sex, network, and style (see Labov 1972a).

When such large-scale systematic research into sociolinguistic variation began in the 1960s, its main focus was to illuminate the relationship between language and social structure more generally, rather than the relationship between language and gender specifically. However, the category of sex (understood simply as a binary division between males and females) was often included as a major social variable and instances of gender variation (or sex differentiation, as it was generally called) were noted in relation to other sociolinguistic patterns, particularly, social class and stylistic differentiation.

Because the way in which research questions are formed has a bearing on the findings, some of the basic methodological assumptions and the historical context in which the variationist approach emerged are discussed briefly in section 2. The general findings are the focus of section 3, with special reference to connections between sex differentiation, social class stratification, and style shifting. Section 4 discusses some of the explanations for sociolinguistic patterns involving sex differentiation. The final section examines some of these explanations in the context of some of the problematic methodological assumptions made in variation studies which may be responsible for the limited explanatory power of some of the findings.

2 Research Methods

Variationist methodology came into prominence in the late 1960s not to address the issue of language and gender, but primarily to fill perceived gaps in traditional studies of variability which for the most part were concerned with regional variation. Dialectologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries concentrated their efforts on documenting the rural dialects which they believed would soon disappear. A primary concern was to map the geographical distribution of forms between one region and another. These forms were most often different words for the same thing, such as *dragon fly* versus *darning needle*, although phonological and grammatical features were also included. The results often took many years to appear in print and were most often displayed in linguistic atlases of maps showing the geographical boundaries between users of different forms (see e.g. Kurath 1949).

Many dialectologists based their surveys almost entirely on the speech of men, on the assumption that men better preserved the “real” and “purest” forms of the regional dialects they were interested in collecting. Dialect geographers usually chose one older man as representative of a particular area, a man whose social characteristics have been summed up in the acronym NORM, i.e. non-mobile, older, rural, male (see Chambers and Trudgill 1980). The extent to which social variables could be or were built into mapping was thus limited. In addition, most of the linguistic items whose geographical distribution was mapped were associated with men’s rather than women’s lifestyles and roles, for example terms for farming implements.

By contrast, sociolinguists turned their attention to the language of cities, where an increasing proportion of the world’s population lives in modern times. Labov’s (1966) sociolinguistic study of the speech of New York (and subsequent ones modeled after it) abandoned the idea that any one person could be representative of a complex urban area; it relied on speech samples collected from a random sample of 103 men and women representative of different social class backgrounds, ethnicities, and age groups. The method used in New York City to study the linguistic features was to select easily quantifiable items, especially phonological variables such as postvocalic /r/ in words such as *cart*, *barn*, etc., which was either present or absent. Most of the variables studied in detail have tended to be phonological, and to a lesser extent grammatical, although in principle any instance of variation amenable to quantitative study can be analyzed in similar fashion (see, however, Romaine 1984a, for discussion of some of the problems posed by syntactic variation). By counting variants of different kinds in tape-recorded interviews and comparing their incidence across different groups of speakers, the replication of a number of sociolinguistic patterns across many communities permits some generalizations about the relationship between linguistic variables and society.

Analysis of certain key variable speech forms showed that when variation in the speech of and between individuals was viewed against the background of

the community as a whole, it was not random, but rather conditioned by social factors such as social class, age, sex, and style in predictable ways. Thus, while idiolects (or the speech of individuals) considered in isolation might seem randomly variable, the speech community as a whole behaved regularly. Using these methods, one could predict, for example, that a person of a particular social class, age, sex, etc. would pronounce postvocalic /r/ a certain percentage of the time in certain situations.

3 Findings: Examination of Some Sociolinguistic Patterns of Social Class, Style, and Sex Differentiation

Of the principal social dimensions sociolinguists have been concerned with (i.e. social class, age, sex, style, and network) social class has probably been the most researched. Moreover, social class differentiation is often assumed to be fundamental and other patterns of variation, such as stylistic and gender variation, are regarded as derivative of it. Many sociolinguistic studies have started by grouping individuals into social classes on the basis of factors such as education, occupation, income, and so on, and then looked to see how certain linguistic features were used by each group.

Through the introduction of these new quantitative methods for investigating social dialects by correlating sociolinguistic variables with social factors, sociolinguists have been able to build up a comprehensive picture of social dialect differentiation in the United States and Britain in particular, as well as in other places, where these studies have since been replicated. The view of language which emerges from the sociolinguistic study of urban dialects is that of a structured but variable system, whose use is conditioned by both internal and external factors. A major finding of urban sociolinguistic work is that differences among social dialects are quantitative and not qualitative. Thus, variants are not usually associated exclusively with one group or another; all speakers tend to make use of the same linguistic features to a greater or lesser degree.

3.1 *Language, social class, style, and sex*

Some of the same linguistic features figure in patterns of both regional and social dialect differentiation, with working-class varieties being more localized, and they also display correlations with other social factors. The intersection of social and stylistic continua is one of the most important findings of quantitative sociolinguistics: namely, if a feature occurs more frequently in working-class speech, then it will occur more frequently in the informal speech of all speakers.

Table 4.1 Social class, style, and sex differentiation in (ing) in Norwich (percentage of non-standard forms used) (from Trudgill 1974: 94, table 7.2)

	Word-list	Reading	Formal speech	Casual speech
Middle-middle				
m	0	0	4	31
f	0	0	0	0
Lower-middle				
m	0	20	27	17
f	0	0	3	67
Upper-working				
m	0	18	81	95
f	11	13	68	77
Middle-working				
m	24	43	91	97
f	20	46	81	88
Lower-working				
m	66	100	100	100
f	17	54	97	100

There are also strong correlations between patterns of social stratification and gender, with a number of now classic findings emerging repeatedly. One of these sociolinguistic patterns is that women, regardless of other social characteristics such as class, age, etc., tended to use more standard forms than men.

Table 4.1 shows the results of Trudgill's (1974) study in Norwich of the variable (ing), that is, alternation between alveolar /n/ and a velar nasal /ng/ in words with *-ing* endings such as *reading*, *singing*, in relation to the variables of social class, style, and sex. The scores represent the percentage of non-standard forms used by men and women in each social group in four contextual styles: when reading a word-list, reading a short text, in formal speech, and in casual speech.

Generally speaking, the use of non-standard forms increases the less formal the style and the lower one's social status, with men's scores higher than women's. This variable is often referred to popularly as "dropping one's g's." It is a well-known marker of social status over most of the English-speaking world, found in varieties of American English too. Although each class has different average scores in each style, generally speaking all groups style-shift in the same direction in their more formal speech style, that is, in the direction of the standard language. This similar behavior can be taken as an indication of membership in a speech community sharing norms for social evaluation of the relative prestige of variables. All groups recognize the overt greater prestige of standard speech and shift toward it in more formal styles.

Summing up these sociolinguistic patterns involving social class, gender, and style, sociolinguists would reply to the question of who is likely to speak

most non-standardly in a community: working-class men speaking in casual conversation. Conversely, middle-class women speaking in more formal conversation are closest to the standard. In table 4.1, for instance, we can see that middle-middle-class women never use the non-standard form, while lower-working-class men use it almost all of the time. Note, however, that the differences between men and women are not equal throughout the social hierarchy. For this variable they are greatest in the lower middle and upper working class. Such patterns reveal basic linguistic faultlines in a community, and are indicative of the uneven spread of the standard and its associated prescriptive ideology in a speech community.

Similar results have been found in other places, such as Sweden and the Netherlands. In fact, Nordberg (1971) proposed that this pattern of sex differentiation is so ubiquitous in Western societies today that it could almost serve as a criterion for determining which speech forms are stigmatized and which carry prestige in a community. Similarly, Trudgill (1983: 162) emphasized the same point when he claimed that the association between women and standard speech was “the single most consistent finding to have emerged from social dialect studies over the past twenty years.”

Women also tend to hypercorrect more than men, especially in the lower middle class. “Hypercorrection” refers to a deviation in the expected pattern of stylistic stratification of the kind shown in table 4.1 for (ing) in Norwich, for example. Here all speakers, regardless of social class, tend to shift more toward the standard forms in their more formal speaking styles. In some cases, however, where hypercorrection occurs, as with postvocalic /r/ in New York City, the lower middle class shows the most radical style shifting, exceeding even the highest-status group in their use of the standard forms in the most formal style. The behavior of the lower middle class is governed by their recognition of an exterior standard of correctness and their insecurity about their own speech. They see the use of postvocalic /r/ as a prestige marker of the highest social group. In their attempt to adopt the norm of this group, they manifest their aspirations of upward social mobility, but they overshoot the mark. The clearest cases of hypercorrection occur when a feature is undergoing change in response to social pressure from above, that is, a prestige norm used by the upper class. In New York City the new /r/-pronouncing norm is being imported into previously non-rhotic areas of the eastern United States. Hypercorrection by the lower middle class accelerates the introduction of this new norm. The variable (ing), on the other hand, has been a stable marker of social and stylistic variation for a very long time and does not appear to be involved in change, and hence does not display hypercorrection.

3.2 *Sociolinguistic patterns and language change*

Because variability is a prerequisite for change, synchronic variation may represent a stage in long-term change. Armed with the knowledge of how variability is embedded in a social and linguistic context in speech communities today,

sociolinguists have tried to revitalize the study of historical change by incorporating within it an understanding of these sociolinguistic patterns (see Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog 1968). By examining the way in which variation is embedded into the social structure of a community, we can chart the spread of innovations just as dialect geographers mapped variation and change through geographical space.

Sociolinguists have distinguished between “change from above” and “change from below” to refer to the differing points of departure for the diffusion of linguistic innovations through the social hierarchy. Change from above is conscious change originating in more formal styles and in the upper end of the social hierarchy; change from below is below the level of conscious awareness, originating in the lower end of the social hierarchy. Gender is critical here too. Women, particularly in the lower middle class, lead in the introduction of new standard forms of many of the phonological variables studied in the United States, the UK, and other industrialized societies such as Sweden, while men tend to lead in instances of change from below (see Labov 1990). Moreover, there is evidence from studies of language shift in bilingual communities for women being in the vanguard of change to a more prestigious language. In the case of Oberwart, Austria, for instance, it was women who were ahead of men, in shifting from Hungarian to German (Gal 1979).

4 Explanations for the Connection Between Women and Standard Speech

Although many reasons have been put forward to try to explain these results, they have never been satisfactorily accounted for. After all, it is in some respects paradoxical that women should tend to use the more prestigious variants when most societies accord higher status and power to men. Moreover, as has often been the case with other patterns of gender differentiation, it is women’s behavior that has been problematized and seen to be deviant and thus in need of explanation. We could just as easily ask instead why men tend to use the standard less often than women of the same status. Indeed, Labov (1966: 249–63) commented on a striking case where an upper-middle-class male, Nathan B., used a high level of non-standard variants for certain variables comparable to lower-middle- or working-class speakers. After receiving his PhD in political science, Nathan B. was being considered for a university teaching appointment, but was denied it when he refused to take corrective courses to improve his speech.

4.1 *Language, sex, and gender*

One explanation that can be dismissed relatively easily is Chambers’ (1995: 132–3) view that women’s greater verbal abilities are responsible for the differences.

For Chambers then, the differences are sex-based or biological rather than culturally derived or gender-based. Although there was little recognition or critical discussion of the notion of gender as a social and cultural construct in most of the early sociolinguistic literature (see McElhinny, this volume), sociolinguists often invoked explanations based on women's supposed greater status-consciousness, greater awareness of the social significance of variants, and concern for politeness. When asked to say which forms they used themselves, Norwich women, for instance, tended to "over-report" their usage and claimed that they used more standard forms than they actually did. Men, however, were likely to under-report their use of standard forms. This led Trudgill (1972) to argue that for men, speaking non-standardly has "covert" prestige, while the "overt" prestige associated with speaking the standard variety is more important to women (see James 1996; Kiesling, this volume).

Thus, women may be using linguistic means as a way to achieve status denied to them through other outlets. Since women have long been denied equality with men as far as educational and employment opportunities are concerned, these are not reliable indicators of a woman's status or the status she aspires to. Although the marketplace establishes the value of men in economic terms, the only kind of capital a woman can accumulate is symbolic. She can be a "good" housewife, a "good" mother, a "good" wife, and so on, with respect to the community's norms and stereotypes for appropriate female behavior.

In this sense, the use of the standard might be seen as yet another reflection of women's powerlessness in the public sphere. This interpretation accorded well with one of the assumptions made by early gender scholars such as Lakoff (1975), who saw women's language as the "language of powerlessness," a reflection of their subordinate place in relation to men. The importance of power rather than gender *per se* emerged in O'Barr and Atkins's (1980) finding that some of the features thought to be part of "women's language" were also used by males when in a subordinate position (see Lakoff, this volume, for discussion of women and power).

Further examination of the historical context provides ample support for the association between perceived femininity and the use of standard English. In the Victorian era "speaking properly" became associated with being female, and with being a lady, in particular (see Mugglestone 1995). That is why Sweet (1890), for instance, considered it far worse for a woman to drop initial /h/ in words such as *house* or *heart*.

Because a woman aspirant to the status of lady could not attain it independently, but only through marriage, it was incumbent on her to behave and speak like a lady. George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1916) and the popular musical made from it, *My Fair Lady*, illustrate the power of accent in social transformation. Cockney flower seller Eliza Doolittle is trained by a phonetics professor, Henry Higgins (based on Henry Sweet), to speak like a "lady." As long as she pronounces her vowels and consonants correctly, Doolittle does not betray her working-class East London origins and is indeed received in the best of society.

Doolittle's transformation is enabled partly through changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution in nineteenth-century Britain which opened up new avenues for the accumulation of wealth, prestige, and power other than those based on hereditary landed titles. Thanks to the Universal Education Act of 1872, there were greater educational opportunities for a wider portion of the social spectrum. This facilitated the spread of what Wyld (1920) called the "newfangled English," that is, the newly codified standard. Yet it was not the highest-ranking social groups of the day but instead the *nouveau riche* or bourgeoisie who eagerly sought the refinements the grammarians had to offer, as signs of their emergent status as educated persons. Good grammar and the right accent became social capital in an age in which the definitions of "gentleman" and "lady" were no longer based entirely on hereditary titles and land. Anyone with money, ambition, and the right connections or education could aspire to be a gentleman or a lady – even Eliza Doolittle.

The changing times brought about a semantic shift in the meanings of the terms *gentleman* and *lady*. Titles once associated with the aristocracy became terms of social approval and moral approbation. In a letter to his sister Hannah in 1833, historian Thomas Macaulay wrote that "the curse of England is the obstinate determination of the middle classes to make their sons what they call gentlemen" (cited in Trevelyan 1878: 338). Likewise, Sarah Ellis (1839: 107), a contemporary of Macaulay, commented on the metamorphosis in the meaning of the social label *lady* brought about by modern schools:

Amongst the changes introduced by modern taste, it is not the least striking, that all daughters of tradespeople, when sent to school, are no longer girls, but young ladies. The linen-draper whose worthy consort occupies her daily post behind the counter, receives her child from Mrs. Montagu's establishment – a young lady. At the same elegant and expensive seminary, music and Italian are taught to Hannah Smith, whose father deals in Yarmouth herrings; and there is the butcher's daughter, too, perhaps the most ladylike of them all.

It is striking that the daughters of the butcher, the herring seller, and other categories of tradespeople mentioned would all belong to the upper working class and lower middle class, precisely those levels within the social hierarchy where modern sociolinguistics finds the greatest differentiation in male and female speech (see Romaine 1996).

4.2 *Sex-based versus class-based differentiation*

Despite this historical support for the view that speaking properly became social capital, we may question how relevant it is for women today, given women's great strides in achieving educational and economic parity with men, partly as a result of the modern women's movement. If women are using the standard to achieve status denied to them through conventional outlets, we

Table 4.2 Gender differentiation in six morphological variables in 1967 and 1996 (percentage of standard forms; from Nordberg and Sundgren 1999: 7, table 3)

	1967		1996		Extent of gap	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	1967	1996
Neuter sg. def. art	52	60	52	68	8	16
Neuter pl. def. art.	30	47	54	69	17	15
Past part. V, classes 1 and 4	21	30	20	30	9	10
Past part. V, class 2	88	88	88	98	0	10
Preterite, V, class 1	16	15	12	17	-1	5
<i>Blev/vart</i>	26	58	28	66	32	38

might expect that this need should diminish once women have more access to high-status and high-paying jobs, for example. Furthermore, if a related assumption made by sociolinguists is also true, namely, that social structure is reflected in patterns of linguistic variation, we might expect more recent sociolinguistic studies to reveal less gender variation in some of the classic linguistic variables examined in early studies of the 1960s and 1970s.

However, Nordberg and Sundgren's (1998, 1999) comparison of sociolinguistic surveys done in Eskilstuna, a medium-sized town in central Sweden 110 kilometers west of Stockholm, in 1967 and a generation later in 1996 reveals that gender differentiation in most of the variables has been maintained, or even increased rather than decreased. Table 4.2 shows gender differentiation for six morphological variables in 1967 and 1996. For each variable, with only very minor exceptions, the women use the standard forms more frequently than men, in both 1967 and 1996. The final column shows the extent of the gap measured in terms of percentage points between the men's and women's scores at the two time periods.

The first variable is the neuter singular definite article ending in *-t* in standard Swedish, as in *huset* "the house," and without it, in non-standard usage. Although male usage has remained at the same level over time, the women have moved closer to the standard. The second variable is the neuter plural definite article, which in standard Swedish is expressed by the suffix *-en* as in *husen* "the houses"; the local dialect variant is *-ena/-a*, as in *husena* or *barna* "the children." Both men and women have shifted more toward the standard in 1996, but the gap between the sexes remains roughly the same. The third variable is the past participle forms of verbs in conjugation classes 1 and 4, whose standard forms end in *-t* in standard Swedish, e.g. *dansat* "danced," *sjungit* "sung." There has been virtually no change in this variable over time. It shows roughly the same amount of sex differentiation in both time periods. The fourth variable is the past participle of verbs in conjugation class 2. Here too there is an increase over time in the gap between men and women, with

women, but not men, moving toward the standard. In fact, there was no gender differentiation in 1967, with both men and women conforming very closely to the standard norm. In 1996, however, the women have shifted almost completely to the standard.

The fifth variable, preterite forms for verbs in conjugation class 1, also shows almost no gender differentiation in 1967, but women have shifted in the direction of the standard in 1996, and men have increased their use of the non-standard forms. In the case of the sixth variable, the use of the non-standard preterite forms for the highly frequent verbs *vara* "to be" and *bli* "to become," men have hardly changed their usage between the two time periods, while women have moved closer to the standard, resulting in an increase in the gap between male and female scores.

The results are striking, all the more so for their occurrence in Sweden, a country renowned for gender equality. In Sweden as well as in other Nordic countries the position of women is more nearly equal to that of men than in most other parts of the world, thanks to legislation comparable to the proposed but eventually doomed US Equal Rights Amendment.

Another surprising finding in Nordberg and Sundgren's results is the decrease in social class differentiation between 1967 and 1996. At first glance, this too flies in the face of global trends showing an increase in the gap between rich and poor, both between developed and developing nations as well as within nations. Economists such as Sen (1999) report stark contrasts between income per person (and related measures of well-being such as life expectancy, rate of infant mortality, etc.) in developed countries, most of them in the temperate zone of the Northern hemisphere, and developing countries in the tropics and semi-tropics, particularly in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. The richest 20 per cent of the world's people have 150 times the income of the poorest 20 per cent.

Even within developed countries such as the USA, there are similarly extreme contrasts, despite the fact that at the turn of the twenty-first century the country had enjoyed eighteen years of almost uninterrupted growth and the longest-running economic expansion in history (Economic Policy Institute 2000). Although the gap between the poor and the middle class is shrinking, the gap between the poor and everyone else is increasing. Incomes have gone up each year since 1995 without narrowing the inequality gap: the poorest fifth of the population saw a fall of 8.9 per cent in after-tax income from 1979 to 1999, but the richest 1 per cent realized a gain of 93.4 per cent.

Eskilstuna too has undergone a number of social transformations since the late 1960s. In 1967 it was primarily a prospering industrial town engaged in steel manufacturing, with a growing population and a low rate of unemployment. Since the beginning of the 1970s, however, the population has been stagnating or diminishing, with an over-representation of older age groups. As in many other countries, the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial economy has occasioned a number of economic crises such as factory closings and high unemployment, as well as witnessing an increase in the number of

immigrants from abroad. The 1996 population in Eskilstuna, in comparison both to Sweden as a whole as well as to towns of a similar size, has lower levels of education, as well as lower levels of income, along with higher social benefits per person.

These socio-economic developments make somewhat contradictory predictions about the influence of social factors on language use, based on the kinds of assumptions sociolinguists have made about the relationship between language and social structure. We might expect, for example, that the global change from an economy based on manufacturing to one based on information management and services would lead to an increase in the use of the standard. Indeed, Nordberg and Sundgren found evidence of greater use of the standard overall.

Global trends, however, tell us little about individuals and how they have behaved. A rising tide of global capital does not lift all boats. Socially mobile persons ought to increase their use of the standard more than others. For the neuter singular definite article, for instance, the highest social group (group I) did not change its usage from 1967 to 1996, while the speakers in the other social groups now use a higher number of standard forms. The other variables concerning verb forms, however, showed little or no movement toward the standard over time for this group. The biggest change occurred in the neuter plural definite article: in 1967 there was an average of 38 per cent standard forms, which increased to 61 per cent in 1996.

As part of the 1996 survey Nordberg and Sundgren (1998) also interviewed thirteen of the Eskilstuna residents who participated in the 1967 study. This enabled them to look more closely at the individual dimension of change toward the standard. For the neuter singular definite article, for example, they found that all speakers used on average more standard forms in 1996 (52 per cent) than in 1967 (42 per cent). Although members of all social groups as a whole moved toward the standard, this movement was rather small in the highest and lowest groups (I and III), and not all speakers within these groups used more standard variants. The two speakers in group II, however, more than doubled their use of standard forms, from 24 per cent in 1967 to 54 per cent in 1996. Moreover, the four speakers who belonged to the youngest age group in 1967 (16–30 years) doubled their use of the standard form from 28 per cent in 1967 to 57 per cent in 1996. Thus, change in real time toward the standard has occurred both cross-generationally and within individuals.

Both social class and gender differentiation in Eskilstuna were more pronounced, however, in the case of the definite plural of neuter nouns. The two speakers in social group II behaved in a hypercorrect fashion in that they used more standard forms than the highest social group both in 1967 (50 per cent, versus 33 per cent for group I) and in 1996 (72 per cent standard forms for group II versus 51 per cent for group III). Socially mobile speakers and women generally have changed more toward the standard (Nordberg and Sundgren 1998: 18–19). The change toward the standard since the early 1970s has been much faster for the plural than singular forms of definite neuter

nouns. Overall, however, the pattern of change for all the Swedish variables followed the generally established pattern for change from above, although each was in a different phase of change toward the standard.

5 Criticisms and Limitations of Variation Studies

Over the past few decades sociolinguistic studies have been heavily criticized for their simplistic operationalization of social variables such as social class and sex. The standard sociolinguistic account of the relationship between language and society often seems to suggest, even if only implicitly, that language reflects already existing social identities rather than constructs them. This approach has limited explanatory power since it starts with the categories of male and female and social class as fixed and stable givens rather than as varying constructs themselves in need of explanation.

5.1 *The roles of men and women and the functions of prestige varieties*

The part played by women or men *per se* in linguistic innovation as well as their relation to the standard seems, however, to depend very much on their roles and the symbolic functions of prestige varieties in the community concerned. Just as scholars may have erred in assuming sex-based differences to be derived from social class differences, some may have misinterpreted gender differences as sex differences. A critical variable is whether women have access to education, or other institutions and contexts, where standard or prestigious forms of speech can be acquired and used.

In many contemporary non-Western cultures women are further away from the prestige norms of society. This is true, for example, in parts of the Middle East and Africa today, just as it was also true historically in Britain, where even high-ranking women did not often have as much education as men and were therefore further away from the norms of the written language. In a study I carried out of letters written by men and women to Mary Queen of Scots in sixteenth-century Scotland, I found a higher incidence among women of non-standard features of the kind which in other texts were associated with persons of low social status (Romaine 1982).

Nordberg and Sundgren (1998: 17) also found some interesting patterns of sex differentiation in relation to age in Eskilstuna. When they looked at the youngest age group in 1996, they found that the men used slightly more standard forms than the women, and many more than men in other age groups. In 1967, it was the oldest men in social groups II and III who used more standard forms than women. While they comment that the more recent pattern is difficult to explain, they see the earlier pattern as a reflection of the fact that

the oldest women in 1967 were less active outside the home, and thus retained more local features in their speech.

Nichols's (1983) study of the Gullah Creole spoken in parts of the southeastern United States also revealed that older women were the heaviest users of Gullah because they worked in domestic and agricultural positions. Older men worked mostly in construction. Younger people of both sexes had more access to white-collar jobs and service positions which brought them into contact with standard English. Younger women were ahead of the younger men in their adoption of a more standard form of English.

A more sophisticated understanding of the different functions standard speech plays for men and women in different contexts has likewise illuminated our understanding of language change, as well as the connections between race, class, and sex in the distribution of linguistic variables. Milroy, Milroy, and Hartley (1994) have found, for example, that glottalization, a long stigmatized feature of urban varieties of British English with origins in working-class London speech, is on the increase in middle-class speech in Cardiff. They believe that the greater presence of glottal stops in female speech has led to a reversal of the stigma attached to it. Similarly, Holmes's (1995a) study of New Zealand English reveals that young working-class speakers are leading the introduction of glottalized variants of word-final /t/, e.g. *pat*. They use more of these variants than do middle-class speakers, but young women in both the working and middle classes are ahead of men. Here we have a case where a once vernacular feature has changed its status, first by losing stigma, then gaining prestige as a feature of the new variety. Milroy et al. (1994) suggest that it is the fact that women adopt a variant which gives it prestige rather than the fact that females favor prestige forms. In other words, women create prestige norms rather than follow them. Thus, they are norm-makers, whatever social connotations the forms may originally have had.

Others have proposed that it may not be so much the supposed prestige connotations of the standard that attracts women, but the stigma of non-standard speech that women are avoiding. Although this explanation would not account for why women would adopt a highly stigmatized feature such as glottalization, when we look at cases where women have led in shifts to more prestigious languages, we can see how those aspiring to be ladies had to escape both literally and figuratively from their status as rural peasants by leaving the land and their language behind. Modern European languages such as Norwegian, French, and English became symbols of modernity, in particular of the newly emergent European nation-states, at the same time as they were associated with urbanity, finery, and higher social status (see Romaine 1998).

In a study where listeners were asked to identify the sex of children from tape-recordings of their speech, Edwards (1979) found that boys who were misidentified as girls tended to be middle-class, whereas girls who sounded like boys tended to be working-class. Gordon (1994) showed how the clothes and accent associated with working-class females elicited stereotypical judgments about their morality. One ten-year-old girl in Edinburgh told me, in

answer to the question of why her mother did not like her to speak “rough,” that is, to use local Scots vernacular outside the home (Romaine 1984b): “Well, if I speak rough, she doesn’t like it when other people are in because they think that we’re rough tatties in the stair.” I found clear sex differentiation in the use of certain variables in children as young as six years in this community.

The standard may also function differently for men and women. In some communities women use standard speech to gain respect and exert influence on others. Larson’s (1982) study of two villages in Norway revealed that while women’s speech was on the whole more standard than that of men, women produced more features of standard speech when they were trying to get someone to do something or to persuade someone to believe something. Men rarely used speech in this way.

This suggests that linguistic choices need to be seen in the light of multiple roles available to women and men and in terms of the communicative functions expressed by certain forms used in particular contexts by specific speakers (see the chapters by Kendall, Thimm, and Wodak, this volume). Naive counting of variants reveals only a superficial understanding of the relationship between language and gender. A case in point is the use of tag questions, the subject of numerous studies sparked by Lakoff’s (1975) belief that women used more of them than men. Because many researchers simply counted the number of tag questions used by men and women without paying attention to either the function or the context in which they were used, the results were inconclusive on the issue of whether tags showed gender-differentiated usage (see, however, Holmes 1986). The same linguistic features can, when used by different persons in different contexts and cultures, often mean very different things. On closer examination, there are few, if any, context-independent gender differences in language.

Another methodological bias may derive from the fact that most of the early sociolinguistic studies were carried out by men and many of the questions asked of both men and women reflected a masculine bias. For example, in the New York City study, Labov (1966) asked both men and women to read a passage ending with a very unflattering comparison between dogs and a boy’s first girlfriend: “I suppose it’s the same thing with most of us: your first dog is like your first girl. She’s more trouble than she’s worth, but you can’t seem to forget her.” In other parts of the interview men and women were asked about their words for different things. Women were asked about childhood games, while men, among other things, were asked about terms for girls and even on occasion, terms for female sex organs. Naturally, researchers have since questioned the nature of the relationship established between male sociolinguists and the women they interviewed. It is not likely that a discussion of hopscotch would establish the same kind of rapport between the male interviewer and a female interviewee as talk about obscene language would between two men. Holmes’s (1995b) research on the amount of talk in single-sex and mixed-sex interviews has suggested that at least in more formal interaction, members of each sex speak least in situations they find most uncomfortable.

5.2 *Men and women in relation to social class*

The Eskilstuna study demonstrates that language is not simply a passive reflector of society, it also creates it. There is a constant interaction between society and language. To expect that language will come to reflect whatever changes take place in society oversimplifies the complexity of the interface between language and society. (Note that a similar simplification is behind one common argument against linguistic reform. We should leave language alone because once more women become doctors, business managers, etc., linguistic discrimination will disappear as language comes to reflect the improved status of women.) In this scenario society has to change first, and that is what triggers language change.

In trying to account for the increase in sex differentiation and decrease in social class stratification in Eskilstuna, it would also be a mistake to concentrate only on women and their changing relation to the standard and the socio-economic structure, while assuming that the relationship of men to the socio-economic structure has remained the same. Masculinity is no less a historically and socially constructed script than femininity. As post-industrial economies have shifted from being societies organized around industry to ones organized around electronic technology, they have been characterized by increasing rates of female employment and male unemployment. Although most western European countries have experienced far higher rates of unemployment than the USA, even with the lowest unemployment figures accompanying unprecedented prosperity for some in the new US economy, millions of men were left behind as old-economy industries such as shipbuilding and aerospace engineering "downsized." Massive corporate restructurings led to the lay-off of millions of white- and blue-collar workers. The deindustrialization and restructuring of the final decades of the twentieth century affected huge sectors of industrial America, including not only the defense industry, but also steel and auto plants in the mid-West, and eliminated millions of workers in corporate giants such as IBM, AT & T, and General Motors. Between 1995 and 1997, for instance, about eight million people were laid off (Faludi 1999: 52, 60, 153).

Loss of income caused by unemployment has serious and far-reaching effects, including loss of self-esteem, disruption of family life leading to social exclusion, as well as accentuation of racial tensions and gender asymmetries. If sociolinguists are right that male identity is vested more in occupation, once status and income in the marketplace lose their capacity to define traditional masculinity, we might expect men to compensate linguistically for the loss of authority derived from the family breadwinner role. Masculinity in the old economy organized around industry was defined more generally in terms of providing for a family, and specifically, with the production of manufactured goods such as airplanes, ships, and automobiles. Interestingly, Faludi (1999) characterizes the economic shift from industry to service as one leading from "heavy-lifting" masculine labor to "feminine" aid and assistance. She stresses

also (1999: 298) that participation in the Second World War and the Vietnam War were defining events of different kinds of masculinity for their respective male generations. Those who fought in the Second World War had a common mission with a clearly identifiable enemy as well as endorsement by society at large. While Second World War veterans returned home victorious, those who went to Vietnam not only did not enjoy broad support at home, but were also tainted by the stigma of defeat. Those who avoided serving in Vietnam, either legally or illegally, were branded with the stigma of not having done their duty.

Class-based approaches to variation have often taken for granted that individuals can be grouped into social classes based on the prestige and status associated with occupation, income, and so on, on the assumption that those in the same group will behave similarly. The case of Nathan B. noted above, however, shows the need for a closer look at individuals, as do the results of Nordberg and Sundgren's (1998) research in Eskilstuna. Members of the same sex or social class can have quite different outlooks and orientations toward language and different degrees of integration into the local setting. The concept of "social network," adopted from anthropology into sociolinguistics, takes into account different socializing habits of individuals and their degree of involvement in the local community.

Milroy (1980) applied network analysis to the study of three working-class communities in Belfast, Northern Ireland. She examined the different types of networks within which individuals socialized and correlated network strength with linguistic variables. She devised a measure of network strength which took into account the density and multiplexity of different network types. For example, a dense network is one in which the people whom a given speaker knows and interacts with also know each other. A multiplex network is one in which the individuals who interact are tied to one another in other ways. Thus, if two men in a network interact both as workmates at the same factory and as cousins, there is more than one basis to their relationship with one another.

The results in table 4.3 show how two working-class women, Hannah and Paula, who live in the same type of housing in the same area of Belfast and have similar employment, nevertheless behave quite differently from one another linguistically. Hannah is much more standard in her speech than Paula. Scores for only two of the eight variables of the study are given here: (th) refers to the absence of intervocalic *th* in words such as *mother*, and (e) refers to the frequency of a low vowel in words such as *peck*, which then merges with *pack*. Higher scores indicate a more localized or non-standard usage.

The explanation of the difference lies in their differing socialization patterns. Paula, whose speech is more non-standard, is a member of a local bingo-playing group and has extensive kin ties in the area. Hannah has no kin in the area and does not associate with local people. In fact, she stays at home a lot watching TV. In general, those with high network scores indicating the strength of association with the local community used more local, non-standard forms

Table 4.3 Two Belfast women compared (percentage of non-standard usage)
(from Milroy 1980)

	(th)	(e)
Hannah	0	66.7
Paula	58.34	100

of speech. Those whose networks were more open and less locally constrained used more standard speech. Networks in which individuals interact locally within a well-defined territory and whose members are linked to each other in several capacities, for example as kin, neighbor, workmate, and so on, act as a powerful influence on the maintenance of local norms. If these networks are disrupted, then people will be more open to the influence of standard speech. Speakers use their local accents as a means of affirming identity and loyalty to local groups.

Some patterns of social class stratification are actually better accounted for as gender differences. In the Belfast study there was in fact one group of working-class women, who had tighter and denser networks than all the other men and who also used more non-standard forms than men. Thus, gender differentiation may be prior to class difference, with some variants being primarily gender- rather than class-marked.

There is, however, a broad link between network and social class to the extent that middle-class speakers tend to have looser networks than the working class. Nevertheless, dense networks may also be found at the upper levels of society, as in Britain, where the so-called "old boy network," whose members have usually been educated at English public schools (i.e. private schools) and at Oxford or Cambridge University, gives rise to an equally distinctive speech variety, RP (received pronunciation). More men than women had dense networks in Belfast, which suggests an explanation for some of the patterns of sex differentiation other sociolinguists have found. The network approach has also been applied in non-Western settings such as Africa and Brazil. Bortoni-Ricardo (1985) used it in Brazil, for example, to study the extent to which rural migrants to urban areas assimilated to urban standard speech norms. Change has been slower for migrant women, who have fewer social contacts than men.

The notion of network is thus more useful than that of social class and it applies equally well to multilingual and monolingual settings. At a more general level, we can say that the same kinds of processes must operate on speakers of different cultures. Dense networks can be found at any level of society, whether it is among working-class speakers in Belfast, upper-class British RP speakers, or teenagers in Harlem (see Labov 1972b), to produce a focused set of linguistic norms. Speakers whose norms are more diffuse participate in networks whose members are geographically and socially more mobile, for example women in Oberwart and Belfast. In the village of Oberwart,

where young women with social aspirations have been fueling a shift away from Hungarian toward German, the fewer peasant contacts a person has, the greater the likelihood that German will be used (Gal 1979).

In non-Western cultures, however, the relationship between gender, modernity, and mobility may be such that women's departures from traditional community norms are devalued and stigmatized. Keenan (1974) reported such a case in Madagascar, where it is women who are norm-breakers (see the papers by Besnier, and Leap, this volume).

The relationship between female speech and social dialects also needs critical re-examination from a new non-class-based standpoint because men's and women's relations to the class structure are unequal. Despite the gains made in the women's movement, women are still concentrated in specific occupations, particularly in poorly paid white-collar work, and of course housework, generally unpaid and unrecognized as related to the prevailing economic structure.

It is only within the last few decades since the modern feminist movement that government departments and academic disciplines such as sociology have come to see women's relationship to social classes as a political issue and a technical problem for official statistics. Censuses and other surveys rely on a patriarchal concept of social class, where the family is the basic unit of analysis, the man is regarded as the head of a household, and his occupation determines the family's social class. Women disappear in the analysis since their own achievements are not taken into account and their status is defined by their husband's job.

According to the 1971 British census, however, more than half of all couples had discrepant social classes. The concept of the traditional nuclear family of man, woman, and children is also outdated. Studies in both the UK and the USA have shown that even by the late 1960s the majority of families in both countries were not of this type, and over the past few years government inquiries have been mounted expressing concern that the break-up of this family structure has serious consequences for society.

In a large-scale survey of around 200 married couples from the upper working and lower middle class in the Netherlands, most of the women in the sample were actually better educated than their husbands (Brouwer and Van Hout 1992). Nevertheless, more of these Dutch women who worked were in lower-status part-time jobs. Since level of education correlates well with degree of use of standard language, if there were similar discrepancies in the other surveys I mentioned, then this could easily account for the finding that women are closer to the standard than men.

Another factor seldom considered is the effect of children, with respect to both employment patterns as well as language use in families. The Dutch study found that when a couple had children, both parents used more standard language. One of the reasons why women may adopt a more prestigious variety of language is to increase their children's social and educational prospects. Similar findings have emerged from studies of language shift, such as Bull's (1991) in northern Norway, where Sami-speaking women tried to raise their

children in Norwegian to enhance their children's success in school at a time when all education was in Norwegian. Interactions between gender, age, and taking care of children require more detailed study. Older women with no responsibilities for children may also not be concerned with using prestige varieties.

6 Conclusion

Eckert (1989: 245) reminds us that "the correlations of sex with linguistic variables are only a reflection of the effects on linguistic behavior of gender – the complex social construction of sex – and it is in this construction that one must seek explanations for such correlations." Faced with seemingly contradictory findings and much *ad hoc* speculation about the relation of women to prestige varieties and the role of women in language change, investigators have moved on from simplistic correlations between language use and sex to focus on the symbolic and ideological dimensions of language. While most of this traditional sociolinguistic literature has expressed the symbolic value of dominant languages and prestige varieties in terms of their supposed economic value in a linguistic marketplace, more recent work has paid attention to ideologies of femininity and masculinity (see Romaine 1998). The way in which gender gets mapped onto language choice is not straightforward but mediated through other identities and ideologies. This is simply to admit that as variables both gender and language comprise rather complex social practices and performances.

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