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Speech-accommodation theories: a discussion in terms of second-language acquisition

LESLIE M. BEEBE / HOWARD GILES

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Speech-accommodation theories: a discussion in terms of second-language acquisition¹

LESLIE M. BEEBE and HOWARD GILES

The study of linguistic variation in social contexts has captured the imaginations of scholars in various social and language-related sciences. The desire to understand the relationship between linguistic and social variables gave rise to the multidisciplinary field of sociolinguistics, which, according to Hymes (1972), has at its heart the study of speech diversity in different social settings. While acknowledging the fact that sociolinguistics has in the last decade made great strides forward by informing us how, when, and where we modulate our speech, some social psychologists of language have nevertheless voiced dissatisfactions with the current state of the art. Reservations expressed by social psychologists have been primarily on theoretical grounds. First, they claim, traditional sociolinguistics has been more descriptive than explanatory, thus lacking power of prediction. Second, sociolinguistics has mainly highlighted correlations between linguistic and large-scale, objectively defined social variables (e.g. SES, age, and sex groupings), thereby downgrading empirically the idea that speakers' own subjective attitudes, perceptions of situations, cognitive and affective dispositions, and the like may interact to determine their speech outputs. Third, social psychologists of language assert that sociolinguistics, in line with its tendency to exclude language from definitions of social and structural variables, cannot entertain fully the idea that language can often assume the role of an independent variable by creating, defining, and negotiating social settings. Exceptions are acknowledged, e.g. Labov (1970), Sankoff (1971) and Scotton (1980). These sociolinguists have attempted to address some of the issues by employing social psychological phenomena such as attitudes, intentions, and motivations as determinants of verbal behavior and by considering some of the creative and negative functions of speech.

Some sociolinguists, for their part, acknowledge the contributions that social psychologists of language have made toward (1) predicting and explaining linguistic variation in social contexts, and (2) integrating speakers' feelings, values, attitudes, and perceptions into their research design. Most sociolinguists, however, have not incorporated the findings of the social psychologists

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