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The Links Between Social and Linguistic Change

1.1 The research themes studied in this book

The principal research theme examined in this book is variation, and to some extent change, in the pronunciation of contemporary European French, considered from the viewpoint of how language change has reflected and continues to reflect social changes in the principal French-speaking countries of Europe. It is of course axiomatic that variation can indicate change, and the study of language variation and change implies consideration of accounts of past linguistic behaviour and the sociolinguistic functions that speakers exercise in their present variable pronunciation. This further connected theme has therefore to do with differences between the processes of social change that have occurred in these countries. We leave detailed consideration of this issue until Chapter 3, but briefly, this latter purpose focusses on whether we can legitimately talk of an ‘exception culturelle’ that sets the francophone countries apart in their linguistic behaviour from the rather notable increase of informality observable in most Western liberal countries, manifested in what is sometimes referred to as social levelling.

For the most part we will examine here quantitative evidence of sociolinguistic functioning of the kind that derives from the variationist or Labovian method, summarised below. We adopt a comparative approach by looking at the sociolinguistic situations in France, Belgium and Switzerland, including the Dutch- and German-speaking areas. We glance at English too, partly because results are copious and examples will be familiar to many readers, and partly because the way in which social levelling is working out in the UK contrasts interestingly with the continental European situations.
We recognise that any cross-linguistic or cross-cultural comparison is to a large extent arbitrary. As Kerswill and Williams remark (2002: 81): 'Because of the uniqueness of every case of language change and the problem of finding controls, it is extremely difficult to predict, for a particular constellation of factors, exactly what the outcome will be.' Certainly no benchmark language is available, since no language can be taken as the default with regard to language change or indeed in any other perspective, but although it appears plausible on a superficial view that recent social change has proceeded in essentially similar ways in Western post-industrial liberal democracies having standard languages, the different social, cultural and political traditions in these countries seem to make comparisons worthwhile.

Indeed, against the contention of Kerswill and Williams may be cited Auer (2005: 7), who suggests that ‘on a sufficient level of generalisation there is a systematicity behind the superficial heterogeneity [of standard–dialect situations in European languages] which unfolds from a historical perspective’. A comparison of the French, Belgian and Swiss situations is therefore motivated in that they have in common a standard language, however that term applies to the various other languages spoken within their borders and however their dialects differ in relation to it. Thus the essential similarities between the countries mean that a comparison is more motivated than would be a study comparing two languages having very different structures, as well as being situated within markedly different cultural and socio-economic modes of organisation.

As stated above, the Labovian programme is central to the present work, because its main concern is to understand how linguistic change is actuated and diffused by studying patterns of, and interactions between, synchronic linguistic variation along the social and stylistic dimensions of language use. The Labovian emphasis on the mechanisms rather than the social motivations of language change reflects the agenda set by Labov in the early 1960s. Although a few early studies foreshadowed his pioneering work on linguistic variation, Labov was the first to show the structured nature of linguistic variation and change, and to bring to light systematic correlations between speakers’ demographic attributes (principally social class, age, sex and ethnicity) and their orientation to the standard language. He did this by developing a methodology that enabled him to study linguistic change and how it penetrates linguistic contexts, as well as spreading socially.

The present work is concerned similarly with the examination of these patterns of variation, and has as its principal aim the relation between variation and change; but we claim a fresh approach because we reflect