A meteor exploded in the benighted sky, bursting apart like fireworks on one's national holiday. This happened early in the sixties. The greatest exclamations of delight were for what was called transformational-generative grammar, whose sparks spread across the sky, intermingling with two other explosions. One was variationism, and the other pidgin and creole studies. The oohs and the ahs resound to this day.

This book by Chambers is about variationism, a term of my coinage, innovative only by the use of -ism with variation, the key term in what is now by some people being called sociolinguistics. In the beginning, sociolinguistics used to refer to all study of the social significance of language, a fact acknowledged by the author with a nod (p. xvii). (For early surveys see Bright, 1966; Ervin-Tripp, 1971; Grimshaw, 1971.) But here it is identified with "the core area," which is "the study of the social significance of linguistic variation" (p. 33), or more specifically the quantitative analysis of phonological and grammatical variables in a speech community. Chambers started out with TG, specializing in syntax. It has been rumored that he became tired of syntax, but this book may reveal the real reason for his becoming disenamored with TG in a section devoted to "variation and the tradition of categoricity."1 Whereas this critique of contemporary formal linguistics is convincing, I found Guy's treatment of the same topic (1995) even more compelling.

Chambers' discussion of variation does not ignore creoles entirely. Variation has been one of the most talked about topics in the study of creoles. Even before the 1960s, Richard Allsopp had written on variation in the use of pronominal forms in Guyanese Creole (1958). All of the subsequent research and discussion on the alleged continuum between a creole basilect and its acrolect (and sometimes the standard language) is variationist. Here is but a sample: Bickerton (1973); papers in DeCamp and Hancock (1974); Highfield and Valdman (1981); Rickford (1987), which includes a rich review of the literature; and Byrne and Huebner (1991), with chapters on variation by Dennis Preston, Gillian Sankoff, and Albert Valdman. Chambers does not cite these works, and his only published references to the variation in creoles ("with their remarkable similarities" [p. 245]) are Taylor (1971), Bickerton (1981, pp. 43-135), and Romaine (1988, pp. 71-114). Furthermore, the only generalizations he makes about creoles are these: "There exists a cluster of linguistic variables, both phonological and grammatical, with certain privileges of occurrence in child language, creoles, traditional and mainstream vernaculars" (p. 250). This is in support of the claim that "[t]he way in which qualitative and quantitative linguistic variables are embedded in social dialects appears to be universal" (p. 242).

Perhaps Chambers' mistake is in restricting "sociolinguistics" to urban communities in modern industrial states. He does not say this explicitly, but it is implied in the research he reviews and the generalizations he makes (see, for example, pp. 7, 36, 41, 63, 82, 103, 128, 136, 155, 168, 229). This leads him, as it has all variationists before him, to correlate the occurrence of dependent linguistic variables with the following three independent variables, because they are "the primary determinants of social roles" (p. 7): class (determined by occupation [pp. 43, 47]), age, and gender. From this, one

1 I remember Martin Joos, the Director of the Center for Linguistic Studies (which eventually became the Department of Linguistics at the University of Toronto), being proud of having hired him. Besides being a syntactician, a dialectologist, and a variationist, Chambers is also a specialist in jazz; see, for example, his scholarly work on Miles Davis (Chambers, 1983-1985).
could conclude that in variationism one studies primarily the social stratification of linguistic variables (p. 48). This characterization of the study of variation (also called covariation in the book) — which, Chambers acknowledges, is sometimes a feature of language change, sometimes not — is neither justified nor explained. Surely, variation occurs in many different contexts, including societies not yet industrialized or "modernized." Even those fitting the canon have different subsocieties, as the author himself recognizes.

What characterizes the societies that have been subjected to variationist studies is, in my opinion, not so much that they are modern or industrialized, but that they are urbanized and, more importantly, recognize a standard language. Therefore the vernacular is always being compared to that variety of language legitimized by writing and over-reaching institutions: government, education, law, business, religion, and so forth. One would have appreciated having standardization discussed as the most important independent variable in certain kinds of societies. This topic is relevant to the study of creoles, and my critique is similar: generalizations about "creoles" are always based on those that have European lexifier languages. And this is more than a phylogenetic fact. These creoles coexist today, usually in an inferior position, with the European languages. "Creolistics," in my opinion, has no more universal applicability than does variationist sociolinguistics.

How, for example, does Sango fit? That is what I wanted to learn as I carefully read this book by my highly esteemed colleague and friend. First, how can I come to understand variation and change in this 100-year-old pidgin? Sociolinguistic Theory does not seem to relate to what is happening in Sango and, as far as I am able to determine, to creoles in other parts of the world. For example, Chambers argues well that differences between females and males are not merely one of gender (a product of sociocultural history) but also one of sex. That is, according to Chambers, females are neurologically different from males in the human species. But this finding can hardly have universal value since it is based exclusively on studies of urban females in a certain kind of society. In Bangui, it is not clear at all that females are in the vanguard of change (Samarin, 1995), and this appears true with respect to Tok Pisin as well (Romaine, 1992, p. 138). As for occupation (and, therefore, class), the only good jobs are in the government. And as regards age, it is only a factor because linguistic changes are rampant solely in the speech of children and adolescents.

Therefore, is Pidgin Sango, as a rapidly changing language, really a rare bird? It does not fit the paradigm of languages studied by variationists, nor does it fit the paradigm studied by creolists. All the more reason to take it seriously. Here is a language undergoing "cataclysmic change," at a rapid rate (pp. 197, 201).

Apart from these observations made from the perspective of one working in the field of pidgin and creole languages, I am happy to acknowledge that this book is in several ways a commendable introduction to the study of variation (and, according to the author, the first critical analysis of the topic [p. xvii]). There are five chapters: "Correlations," "Class, Network, and Mobility," "Expressing Sex and Gender," "Accents in Time," and "Adaptive Significance of Language Variation." As might be expected in a textbook, much of this one is devoted to summarizing published studies undertaken by the author and others. (Yes, we once again are told about social and stylistic stratification of [r] for three social classes in five styles in New York City!) The book is well-organized, the arguments are made clearly, and the language is rhetorically effective. For students, however, one of its weaknesses is the failure to define and explain a number of concepts and terms central to variationism: for example, marker versus indicator. Moreover, it might have been improved with a section on the emergence and sociolinguistic

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2 Elsewhere, she emphasizes the role of females (for example, Romaine, 1978, p. 156, and Romaine, 1984, p. 113).
significance of standard languages cross-culturally. (The only non-English-speaking and non-Western societies referred to are those where the standard languages are Arabic and Japanese.)

And what about the student who toward the end of the course might ask: Professor, we've learned a great deal about how speech varies in different communities, but what about the social significance of variation referred to in the subtitle of the book as well as within the text (for example, pp. 10, 15, 25, 27, 151,205)?

The student would be justified in asking that question because the topic was not central to the course. So the professor reminds the class that how a person speaks is an emblem of that person's social attributes (citing p. 1), like the car we drive or the way we habitually dress for work (citing p. 7). As Chambers makes clear, people speak in a certain way because they belong to a certain kind of social group or would like to be a member of some group. That is "significance."

It is this "significance" that ought to be central to sociolinguistics, not linguistic variables. I would like to have students understand the sociality of being human: we are creatures that belong, and this belonging, whether arrived at consciously or not, is signalled to other members of our group, as well as to those who are not members. Language is therefore paradoxically both a unifying and dividing phenomenon. This idea should be central to linguistics as humanistic scholarship. And it should at least be salient in the study of pidgins and creoles. Pidgins, for example, should no longer be seen only as a kind of pathological outcome of colonialist oppression. In the case of Sango, at least, this lingua franca came into being to create a sense of community between Africans who otherwise could not communicate with each other (Samarin, 1988).

Finally, if there is something interestingly significant about variation in urban contexts, whether they be in modern industrial states or not, we all need to address ourselves to understanding urban societies. Chambers might have led the way by sketching the histories of a number of the world's major standard languages. For the non-Western world, on the other hand, relevant literature is scarce or nonexistent (but see Richardson, 1961, and Owen, 1995), a situation that the new generation of creolists will, I hope, rectify.³

For Chambers, "significance" lies elsewhere. After having devoted four chapters and 82% of the book's content to "discovering the social meanings of linguistic variation" (p. 207), he occupies himself with what must be the "theoretical" part of the book in the last chapter.⁴ For him this lies in answering an "... ontogenetic question. Why ... does linguistic variation exist at all? What is its purpose or function? What is its adaptive significance for human beings?" (p. 207). It is understandable that he deals with what may be the first "theoretical" discussion of variation, Kroch's of 1978, in which he finds untenable ideas. Unfortunately, neither in his rebuttal nor anywhere else in the book does Chambers reflect on an equally ontogenetic question: Why does language change at all? And who are those who introduce the changes? Kroch, it seems to me, was trying to answer this question, one that all of us studying rapid change in a pidgin must be concerned with.

³ Owen shares my own chagrin at the parochialism of variationism (personal communication, November 14, 1995).

⁴ The notion of "theory" hardly figures in Chambers' book, but it does in Kroch's article. "Theory" is used, as almost everyone in linguistics does and as everyone speaking vernacular English does, as a synonym for hypothesis. In his overture he proposes a "hypothesis" (p. 17); in his climax (pp. 33-34) it has become "the theory" and "our theory."
References


