

**Frans Gregersen & Inge Lise Pedersen** (eds.): *The Copenhagen Study in Urban Sociolinguistics*, (= Institut for dansk Dialektforsknings publikationer, Serie A, nr.30). Copenhagen 1991 (446 p).

**Kjell Lars Berge & Ulla-Britt Kotsinas** (eds.): *Storstadsspråk och storstadskultur i Norden*, (= Meddelanden från Institutionen för nordiska språk vid Stockholms universitet, MINS 34). Stockholm 1991 (234 p).

When Frans Gregersen published his doctoral thesis on Ferdinand de Saussure, Louis Hjelmslev, and the Copenhagen Linguistic Circle in 1991, it had the somewhat mystifying title *The (im)possibility of sociolinguistics*. The reasons for choosing this title is given in the abstract, where Gregersen writes: "This book is about sociolinguistic theory but it goes a roundabout way. The author argues that the structuralist tradition has relegated current sociolinguistics to the supplementary status of a linguistics of variation. Instead he envisions a sociolinguistics that treats the social in language by looking at everyday language use as embedded in social praxis."<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, Gregersen says very little about *how* this "utopian" sociolinguistics should come into existence. The final chapter not so much sketches out a praxis-orientated sociolinguistics as it tries to collect the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, without putting them together. Thus we never get the chance to see, if all the pieces have indeed been found.

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<sup>1</sup> Frans Gregersen: Sociolingvistikkens (u)mulighed 1-2, Tiderne Skifter, Cph. 1991, vol. II, p 313.

For the last five years, Gregersen has participated in a project on urban sociolinguistics at the University of Copenhagen, financed by the Danish Research Council for the Humanities. Although it is not really fair to the other researchers responsible for each their part in the now published report, one cannot help but to compare the "utopian" sociolinguistics of Gregersen's thesis with the present, "actual" report on urban sociolinguistics. This is done not so much as to "test" whether or not the authors live up to this very demanding *manifesto*, as it is an attempt at discussing what sociolinguistics is or could be. Another reason for confronting the two books is the fact that they are major, and ambitious, contributions to Danish linguistic theory and praxis. The present report focuses on four aspects of spoken Copenhagen Danish: Style (by Jon Albris), Sociophonetics (Henrik Holmberg), Narratives (Erik Møller), and Grammar (Ole Nedergaard Thomsen), all of this headed by an introduction to the Data and Design of the Copenhagen Study (by Albris and the editors).

In the introduction, we are given a short outline of the history of Copenhagen, focussing on the variety of communities which exist in the area. Copenhagen includes various communities, each with its own characteristics, but with the increased mobility and the intensified communication between communities there is a fragmentation of the speaker's sense of belonging to *one* specific community. Instead of belonging to and spending the greater part of his life inside one physically restricted community, the speaker moves through different communities with different norms, both in the short perspective (i.e. daily contact with a larger number of different communities), and in the long (as social mobility increases through education, institutionalization of social welfare, etc). As a result, the notion of "physical" community is no longer valid, and one must instead focus on the speech community "not as those speaking the same language but as a group of speakers who share a set of norms and rules for the use of language." (p 7) During his lifetime, the speaker moves through different speech communities - family, kindergarten, primary school, work, etc - and the consequences of this are at least two, seen from the linguist's point of view:

First, "style becomes a central concept for the investigation of urban speech communities. Style may be conceived of as distinct parts of the speaker's repertoire. Which style is selected depends on the perception of

what norm is valid for the social situation the speakers are participating in or want to create. As such, style may therefore be thought of as the linguistic reflection of the differentiation of social norms that takes place with the establishment of the modern city structure and modern socialization practices." (p 7)

Secondly, the individual speaker's repertoire of styles must be seen as the sum total of his way through different speech communities, which means that the overall general statements about "who speaks how" must be differentiated and disintegrated. Instead, we get a very complex combination of personal history, actual context, expectations, and aspirations.

When put down programmatically like this, it becomes clear that this is an attempt to move linguistics in the same direction which sociology and anthropology has taken after the structuralist era. The stress is not on the spoken language as signals of underlying "real" relations, and the speakers are not seen as representatives of class, age, gender, etc. Instead, speech is seen as an interactive process, where the participants aim at building up a relationship, using their knowledge of and suppositions about each other and the situation. The best method for obtaining data suitable for this sort of analysis is taken from social anthropology, and is called the "sociolinguistic interview" (which, in fact, can be seen as a linguistic variant of Clifford Geertz's "thick description"). The point is to become an integral part of the community, or for want of that, at least to become an intimate stranger who constitutes no obstacle to everyday communication. As the researcher cannot be the "fly on the wall", who hears everything but influences nothing, this is as close as he can get to "the real thing".

In the Copenhagen study, these methodological reflections were materialized in a series of long interviews with informants, who were born and raised in the area called *Nyboder*. Owned by the Navy, Nyboder enjoys a special and widely recognised status throughout the metropol as an area where upbringing reaches its prime. The variables used to classify speakers were age, sex, and social class, and in the class distinction, only two classes were used: "Working Class" and "Middle Class". Subjects are classified according to 3 objective indicators of social class: level of education, occupational category and occupational position in the authority structure. Furthermore, the informants have been classified by their family social position." (p 19) Apparently, the interviewees were given a certain amount of freedom from

the objective indications when classifying informants, thus leaving room for individual "aberrations". I shall not further discuss these methods (and their related problems), but only point out that the motive for doing so was rooted in a wish to find the relations between the vernacular and social class, sex and style-shifting. The project is first and foremost a style analysis of vernacular Copenhagen Danish. Therefore, the results do very much rely on the interpretation of the data by the interviewer.<sup>2</sup>

That this be the case becomes clear in the chapter on style analysis. Here, two clearly defined styles, casual and non-casual, are isolated in the interviews on the basis of conversational structure, topic, and phonetic performance. Non-casual style is when the interviewer without doubt controls the dialogue, when topics of a non-emotional character are treated in a non-emotional way, and when the speed is standard and there are audible signs of control. Casual style, on the other hand, is when no single person is in full control of the dialogue, emotional topics are treated in an emotional way, and when the informant deviates from standard speed or shows other signs of focussing on the content of conversation instead of focussing on expression. The results of this analysis show, as was expected, that the longer the interviews, the more variation and shifts of styles. The same can be seen for age; the older informants (i.e. post teen-age) have a larger degree of variation, which was expected as teen-agers mostly interact with peers and family.

The study in sociophonetics focusses on a set of Danish vowel variables, especially a-variables and vowels in combination with r's. As I am no specialist in phonology, I shall not venture into the details of this study, but jump to the conclusions, which are quite interesting. The most interesting fact is the absence of social differences in the pronunciation of the "flat" a. Contrary to what most Danes believe, it is not possible to tell which social class a person belongs to from the way he pronounces the "a". Instead, the author finds a stylistic variant, where the "flat" a is used to indicate casual rather than non-casual style. Some of the other variables do have social significance, but what I find more interesting is their differences related to

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<sup>2</sup> This is not mentioned as an attempt to undermine the results of the Copenhagen study. On the contrary, I believe that this problem is in fact *always* present, although on another level in more "straightforward" statistics.

gender. In fact, gender turns out to be the most influential background variable. Furthermore, the study underlines the frequent use of stylistic shifts through pronunciation. A speaker signals his identity and his view of the situation by using variants in different proportions; it is not so that certain groups *always* use a certain vowel quality.

In his chapter on narratives, Erik Møller gives a short presentation of Labov's theories and criticizes his way of obtaining narratives in the sociolinguistic interview. To Labov, narratives must be provoked by the interviewer to ensure that the total number of narratives in the interview be as high as possible. Instead, Møller argues (with reference to Nessa Wolfson), narratives must be unprovoked to make sure they are "real" narratives, having the same features as narratives employed in natural conversations. Narratives are culturally bound, and thus they must be analyzed not only according to their linguistic context but according to the general, cultural and functional context. Narratives, and the informant's choice of genre(s) in general, are based on the speaker's interpretation of the situation, not on his linguistic capabilities: the fact that some of the informants do not produce narratives does not prove that they are not able to do so, only that they did not find it suitable to use narratives in this situation.

Taking the overall view of the chapters shortly summarized above, some general problems arise. First of all, I fully agree with the authors on the fact that sociolinguistics must base its conclusions on a broader, cultural analysis, seeing style as a variation used by the speaker according to his interpretation of the contextual situation. The problem is that this statement is so general and vague that nearly anybody would agree. The debate really starts when we must try to define more clearly what we actually *mean* when we talk about culture. What are the cultural conditions for choosing style, how does culture condition the fact that we recognize such features as style at all? I do not blame the authors for not having a grand theory of culture (in fact, I would be very sceptic if they claimed to have such a theory), but looking back at Gregersen's attack on sociolinguistics for being a mere linguistics of variation, this more individual-oriented cultural sociolinguistics runs the risk of falling prey to another weakness, viz. the vagueness of the basic variable, culture. This weakness may lead to a lack of specificity in the conclusions, which is a pity, considering the great amount of work put into the "footwork" of this study. What I miss, in other words, is a final chapter trying to sum up

the results of the different chapters, seriously trying to construct a theory of *how* and *why* style is so important in a cultural perspective. As it is now, this study leaves the impression that it is in fact not *a* study, but a series of studies, held together by the fact that they are all concerned with style, and the fact that they work on the same corpus.

The Copenhagen Study is a clear indication of a renewed interest in sociolinguistics and of a growing interest in the city as an object for cultural studies. The city, its language and culture, is no longer treated as second rate. This *trend* can be seen as the driving force behind a symposium held in Stockholm in 1990. The papers from this conference are now available in print. They deal with various aspects of especially Scandinavian languages in an urban/rural perspective. Many of the papers are for specialists only, and this is not the place to try to sum up all 16 papers. One paper worth drawing attention to is Ulla-Britt Kotsinas' study in the attitude towards Stockholm Swedish spoken by youngsters. She has searched through newspapers to find articles in the recurring debate on the degradation and incomprehensibility of the language of Stockholm's youngsters. The result is striking in several ways, especially when seen in the light of what can be seen in the Copenhagen Study. Kotsinas shows how the "slanguage" is considered impure, and how the purification of language is seen as a part of a larger hygienic project. However, some of the groups speaking this language find their position in society and become accepted, which leads to a change in attitude towards their language. What was seen as low class language becomes accepted as everyday language, and some of the words survive not as social markers but as stylistic markers. This has happened to a large extent with what was originally Stockholmian slang, and proves, as far as I can see, two things: a living language is a language capable of assimilating influence from (more or less) marginal groups; and speakers use different styles to add some spice to what they are saying. In fact, monostylistic everyday language is quite boring!