

# Sociolinguistics 2.0

By Ingrid Piller | October 12, 2009 | Multilingual academics

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Seeing that Kraft's idea to brand their new Vegemite cheese spread as iSnack 2.0 [has just backfired badly on them](#), I'm not so sure about the wisdom of talking about Sociolinguistics 2.0 right now. But then a technology-based name for food was always going to be a long shot ... what were they thinking?! I imagine they were thinking "gee, we are old and they are young and they are using digital media and social networking sites so let's just tag along ..." – which brings me to Sociolinguistics 2.0. I take my cue from William Merrin and David Gauntlett, who base [their argument for upgrading Media Studies](#) inter alia on the observation that there is a rift between media studies lecturers and their students:

*Where once we expected students to move into our media world (into grown-up, serious media, taking a newspaper every day), today we're pouring into theirs, signing up to Facebook and dabbling with Second Life. Where once lecturers would expect to know more as their careers progressed, with Professors representing the apex of knowledge in their discipline, today that has been inverted: the older we are the more our qualifications and knowledge rest upon the past. Both students and lecturers, of course, vary in their technical competence and interest, but the general pattern is difficult to deny: new technologies, applications, content, activities, behaviours, modes of consumption and new relationships with older forms are reconfiguring our media worlds, and academics are having to work harder than their students to keep up. (Merrin, 2009, p. 25)*

Of course, this makes me want to sulk at the injustice of it all 😞 wouldn't you know it, no sooner do I become a professor, it turns out a professor is no longer the apex of knowledge ... just my luck! 😊

However, the argument that Merrin and Gauntlett make for Media Studies rings true for Sociolinguistics as well: the subject of Media Studies has transformed to such a degree that a transformation of the "broadcast-era discipline" – Media Studies 1.0 – is required as well. The observation that the advent of digital media has fundamentally changed the way people use media and that Media Studies needs to reinvent itself to stay with it, strikes me as a bit of a no-brainer. But does the argument also hold water for sociolinguistics? Are there too many (applied socio)linguistics students out there who thought they were studying language (teaching) when they enrolled and found they were studying linguistics? Has language in social life changed so fundamentally to shake the core of the discipline?

Here, I am offering some random arguments in favor of the need for Sociolinguistics 1.0 to be transformed into Sociolinguistics 2.0 (or call it [L.CoM](#) if you like 😊)

## # 1. Multilingualism is normal

When my 6-year-old child attends a birthday party of one of her classmates, they sing the “Happy Birthday” song in English (global practice of having birthday parties), German (the language of their school) and Arabic (the language of the UAE, the country in which they live). These kids have a multilingual consciousness – in their world the fact that different people speak multiple and different languages is as normal as the fact that people have different looks. I’m not sure this has ever been different for most of the world’s people. However, one of the foundational assumptions of sociolinguistics is of multilingualism as a special case that needs to be treated separately from the monolingual default. I’ve just gone through all the sociolinguistics textbooks on my shelves (and there are a few of them ...) and all of them have one or more chapters specifically devoted to “bilingualism/multilingualism/language contact/diglossia” – i.e. they treat multilingualism as a special sociolinguistic condition that is out there but the default is presumably monolingualism. Of course, the default doesn’t have a name, it’s just “language” and “multilingualism” is thus made to look special. Let’s make multilingualism the default of Sociolinguistic Enquiry 2.0 and treat monolingualism as the special case it is.

## # 2. Language is always embodied in communication

Have you ever come across disembodied language? Spoken language without an irritating accent, a charming timbre? Written language without a dreadful color scheme on a website, small print flickering quickly across the screen? It obviously matters who says something, how they say it, through which medium they express it, when and where they say it. However, linguistics has worked hard to abstract all those “incidentals” of “language use” away from the discipline to be able to make claims about the universal system. As a scientific discipline, linguistics has had its greatest triumphs in phonology and syntax. Sociolinguistics – just like semantics and pragmatics – have a much more tenuous claim to being a “hard science” and one way sociolinguistics has been trying to compensate is through abstracting away from real language as much as possible to be able to make general statements about “the system”. Sociolinguistics 2.0 will make communication in social life a more central facet of the discipline.

## # 3. The native speaker is dead

For the majority of students for postgraduate degrees in Applied Linguistics, TESOL or English (Socio)Linguistics at Australian and British universities English is an additional language. They are overseas students aspiring to a degree from a country in the “center” of the English-speaking world. Even so, these same programs for the most part continue to treat English in the “periphery” as marginal. A glance at module lists is instructive: electives such as “English beyond Britain” (treely ruly as [the Muddleheaded Wombat](#) would say! A citation would be unkind ...), “English as a Lingua Franca” or “English as a Global Language” again point to the default assumption: the default is the English of the “center countries”, which is assumed to be equivalent to native-speaker-English. However, most of what is interesting in English sociolinguistics is currently happening in the periphery: be it [the \*akogare\* \(=desire\) of some young Japanese women for English](#) Kimie and I have written about; or the role English language learning and teaching played in turning Beijing into an Olympic City as investigated by [our forum moderator](#) Jenny Zhang – to name just two examples from the work I am involved in. Although the native speaker was declared dead more than 20 years ago (Paikeday 1985), the native speaker – and, more recently, it’s assumed opposite, the non-native speaker, continue to flourish in (applied and/or socio)linguistics, ignoring the experience of the majority of the world’s English

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speakers for whom the notion has become a straight-jacket. Sociolinguistics 2.0 will need to get over its focus on the native speaker in the center.

#### # 4. A language with a name is an idea not a fact

Michael Billig (1995) coined the term “[banal nationalism](#)” to describe all those mundane forms of nationalism that produce and reproduce the nation – such as the daily weather forecast on TV, which even in the smallest landlocked nation is presented against the background of a national map as if the weather was tied to national boundaries. Irritatingly, for any critical sociolinguist, the ToC of many journals in the field reads like a list of textbook examples of banal nationalism: study after study of this, that and the other thing in this, that and the other national language. Bourdieu (1991, p. 45) says it all:

*To speak of the language, without further specification, as linguists do, is tacitly to accept the official definition of the official language of a political unit.*

Sociolinguistics 2.0 can and must do better! Let’s stop pretending that English, German, Japanese or any other language with a name have some kind of primordial existence and are not in need of further explanation. The interesting questions are around language as “a cause, a solution, a muse for the national self, and a technology of the state” (Ayres 2009, p. 3). Btw, Ayres’ study of the language-nation-culture link in Pakistan offers a great example of Sociolinguistics 2.0 research!

#### # 5. “All uses of language are equal” – Not!

The overseas students mentioned above flock to universities in “center” countries not only because the degree programs there are so great but because they also want to improve their English. However, their chosen course of study collectively negates that ambition by making the equality of all language use one of its foundational assumptions. While I’m not [as acidic as Mark Halpern about the refusal of many linguists to recognize that various ways of using language are rarely equally received in the real world](#), I cannot help wondering why so many linguists, and even sociolinguists, insist on defying common sense when it comes to the idea that all language is equally good. Our students know their writing needs improving, future employers know it, the whole world is talking about it, so Sociolinguistics 2.0 will have to engage with questions of standards and good (and bad) usage in order to remain relevant or regain relevance.

This blog post is too long already so I’ll keep some other arguments for a transformation of the discipline over for some other time (e.g., the disconnect between academic (socio)linguistics and the (English) language teaching enterprise which undergirds the discipline; the colonial roots and neo-colonial entanglements of the discipline). In the meantime, I’m looking forward to your feedback!

As with Gauntlet’s and Merrin’s proposal for Media Studies 2.0, the [L.CoM](#) challenge is not only about different content. It is also about different ways of creating and disseminating knowledge, it’s about open-sourcing the discipline. And so I’ll end with another quote from Merrin (2009, p. 31):

*Web-publishing allows more to be published, making it immediately available to everyone for free, instead of only to those who can afford the increasingly expensive books or ^ ɔ*

have access to subscribing libraries. We need to give up our desperate collusion in the academic evaluation of the worth of publication outlets, embrace the web and take our ideas out of the academy to a global audience.

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