MILROY's SOCIAL NETWORK THEORY - A CRITICAL ACCOUNT

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Introduction

The main concern of this paper is a presentation and criticism of Social Network theory which has been widely used by James and especially Lesley Milroy in linguistic variation studies. Before explaining Social Network theory, I would like to give some background information about the theory which emerged from previous works. In order to do that we should refer first to Labov's studies. After this outline, I will explain what Social Network theory is and how it is put to use by James and Lesley Milroy in their Belfast research. Furthermore I will give examples of other applications of Social Network theory such as Bortoni-Ricardo's (1985) study of language shift in a migrant group in Brasil and my own research on second generation immigrant Turkish in Norway. A critique of this theory's adequacy and inadequacy in explaining the facts of language change and/or maintenance will be given in the final part of this paper. Therefore, main questions which I will try to answer in this paper are; firstly, what is Social Network and from what kind of studies it is derived? Secondly, how can it be applied to sociolinguistic studies? Thirdly, to what extent does it have an explanatory or a descriptive function in linguistic change or maintenance? Finally, what are the Social Network theory's advantages and inadequacies in explaining linguistic matters?

On Labov

As J. and L. Milroy (1993) assert the study of language in society benefited much from Labov's (1972) 'quantitative paradigm'. His paradigm lead researchers to examine the relationships between language variation and 'speaker' variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, social network and social class in a systematic way. It has been revealed that language variation in cities was socially regular not chaotic. This issue became crucial in understanding mechanisms of linguistic change.

Labov's another key sociolinguistic notion of speech community is "social class". Shared values of community is reflected to the evaluation of their linguistic norms and this is a way to show the variety or divisions between the speakers

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themselves. Researchers who investigated both urban and rural dialects revealed communities that have sharp divisions in society.

Explanation of the theory

As Mæhlum (1991) asserts, introduction of the term *Social Network* as an analytic term to sociolinguistics can be seen as an implicit critic of the traditional group based and often very statistical correlation studies. According to Lesley Milroy "... the term social network refers quite simply to the informal social relationships contracted by an individual" (L. Milroy, 1980: 174). Therefore, the main interest is in each individual's belonging to groups like family, friends, neighbours, school or work mates, i.e. a community's primary groups. Briefly, this concept is used to examine individual, mainly informal relationships between people. It offers a set of procedures for looking at the vague but important notion of 'integration into community'. The character of the network of social interactions the speaker has is important in this approach, therefore, it does not require large surveys.

Network analysis is also useful for examining unstable social situations of the kind found in cities, where mobility is the norm. Further, according to Milroy and Margrain (1980), some researchers think that it has a powerful capacity to *explain* social behaviour, rather than simply to describe correlations between network type and behaviour. Sociolinguists who use this theory are usually focused on the extent to which an individual's personal network structure may be said to explain the informant's linguistic behaviour.

Density and *multiplexity* aspects of social networks are particularly important. L. Milroy defines density in network as in the following, "A network is said to be relatively dense if a large number of the persons to whom ego is linked are also linked to each other" (Milroy, 1980: 50). In the network, the individual is considered as the core of his/her network, who has several informal relationships to different groups and people, and when these people also have relationships with each other then the network becomes multiplex (high density), as shown in figure 1a. Since those people know each other and use the same language the concentration will be on a specific language which affects the informant's own language use and competence. In low density networks, as in figure 1b, the individual has again several people in her/his network but these people have no connection with each other; the only connection is through this individual.
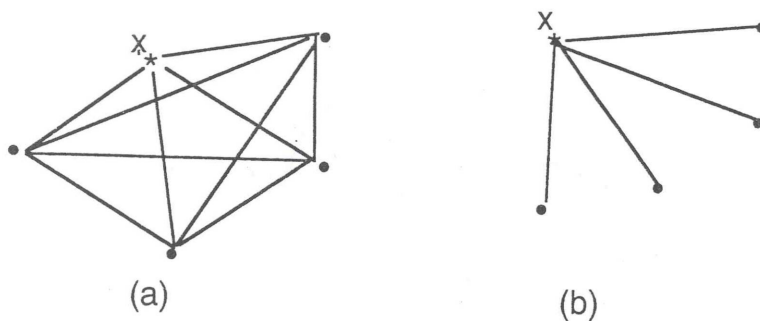
(a)   (b)

Figure 1 (a) High density and (b) low-density social network structures where X is focal point of the network. (source adapted from L. Milroy ,1980:20)

Therefore, multiplexity refers to more than one basis for a tie among individuals. For example if a man who works for a company with his cousin and both attend the same tennis club, their network tie would be three-ways multiplex; via their family relationship, their being colleagues and shared tennis club membership. As Fasold (1990: 236) states, "L. Milroy was able to develop a means of measuring *network strength*, designed to reflect the degree to which a speaker has a dense and multiplex network structure. The method was applied in major sociolinguistic variation analysis research in Belfast, Northern Ireland, with the hypothesis that: 'even when variables of age, sex and social class are held constant, the closer an individual's network ties are with his local community, the closer his language approximates to localized vernacular norms' (L. Milroy 1980:175)". Therefore, strong network ties reinforces the norms of that community, including speech norms.

L. Milroy (1980: 46) states that "The idea of social network as an analytic concept was originally introduced by Barnes, a social anthropologist, (in 1954) to describe an order of social relationship which he felt was important in understanding the behaviour of the inhabitants of the Norwegian village of Bremnes".

However, Glyn Williams (1992), in his book Sociolinguistics, claims that Milroy's assertion that the study of social networks derives from the work of social anthropologists during the1950s is not correct. Williams criticises this and says that the study of social networks derives from the psychometric work of psychologists. He continues by saying that it is there that we encounter the weak perspective of social groups as the amalgam of social interaction, therefore, it is not a conception that removed from Durkheim's idea of the social as involving a *collective concious.*

Belfast study

In her book called <u>Language and Social Networks</u> (1980) Lesley Milroy presents her long term study in Belfast, that was carried out among different social and cultural groups and the characteristics of particular linguistic variables. L. Milroy's Belfast methodology was an attempt to use quantification in a community in which the phonetic distribution of variants between social groups was divergent. For example, it was discovered that lower class people had a tendency towards using back values of /a/ (as in *man*), whereas among higher class people in the community the tendency was towards fronting, i.e. 'Received Pronounciation' was practiced in lower social levels and avoided at higher ones. Belfast study was motivated by these divergent patterns in the community.

The difference between the Belfast work and the Labov paradigm is that socio-economic class (the New York social paradigm) was not used in Belfast research. a series of community studies and random sampling of households throughout the city was the method carried out. Firstly, a study of three poor inner-city communities was pursued, then researchers attempted to find out how the stable patterns of non-standard usage are maintained. Milroy used the notion of social network (adapted from anthropological researches of Bott 1971 and Boisevain 1974) in order to explain this issue by predicting that strong social ties function as norm enforcement mechanisms. It has also been argued that speech community (on the basis of social network) is organized on interaction between the dimensions of *solidarity* and *status*, not only on socio-economic class or *status*. Social network theory is a theory of linguistic change which does not accept Labov's definition of speech community that takes socio-economic class as its core.

Even tough Labov's quantitative methods contributed a lot to our understanding of linguistic change, other social motivations for this change remains controversial.

Example studies

Quite a few linguists, sociolinguists and anthropologists have employed the Social Network theory in their studies. Anthropologist Elizabeth Bott (1957) did a detailed investigation on London families. Cubitt (1973) has dealt with the networks of working- and middle-class Edinburgh families. Gumperz (1971) is another important researcher who has referred to qualitative network analysis in his studies of language use in various communities. One of the important projects concerning language shift is done by Susan Gal (1979) in Oberwärt. This study is about the Hungarian peasants who live in a small village in Austria; it shows us the process of language shift from Hungarian to German as the result of many social reasons.

Evidence from Caipira

Another research using a social network approach has been carried out successfully by Bortoni Ricardo (1985) in Brasil. As Milroy (1987) explains, her study of language shift that took place in a migrant group in Brasil is quite similar to Gal's study (1979) in Oberwärt. In this case a rural group meets with a strong urbanized structure of society that represents the social and cultural background of the change process. All the informants were poor, so there were no distinction between these individuals' economical state. She examined the extent to which speakers had moved away from their stigmatized Caipira dialect by taking the group's own linguistic norms as a starting point. Bortoni-Ricardo's main hypothesis about change in *social structure* is that shifting from rural to urban life involves a move from an *insulated* network (with close social networks) to an *integrated* urban network where the relationships among people are less multiplex and associated loose.

Bortoni-Ricardo demonstrates clearly how both siblings and close friends could choose radically different linguistic strategies within their new urban environments. These differences come up due to their different individual network structures.

As Mæhlum comments, in order to understand these immigrant social conditions and also their psychological motivation to assimilate such new values, it is necessary to operate with the individual as a central analytical phenomena.

Evidence from Turkish

Last example will be about how I used Social Network theory and did a qualitative study in my master's thesis (Türker: 1993). My concern was to investigate and describe the Norwegian influence on Turkish spoken by 11 second generation immigrant Turks living in Norway. After describing the oral data and showing instances of Norwegian influence in their Turkish, I used social networks in order to give an explanation of this kind of influence through their networks, i.e. their informal relationships in society. Density of their networks would also show their maintenance of Turkish.

I used the participant observation method to collect data and conducted interviews in order to find out their social relationships and use of Norwegian and Turkish in different situations, with different people, on different occasions, etc.. That saved time in constructing their social networks. Relationship between their linguistic behaviours and social networks are supposed to give the direct correlation of the linguistic influence and the language choice according to the interlocutors. As a result, I compared informants with similar social backgrounds with similar networks and found out that in some cases there were deviations from the

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hypothesis. Figures 2 and 3 gives the social networks of two informants. I called them A10 and A11.
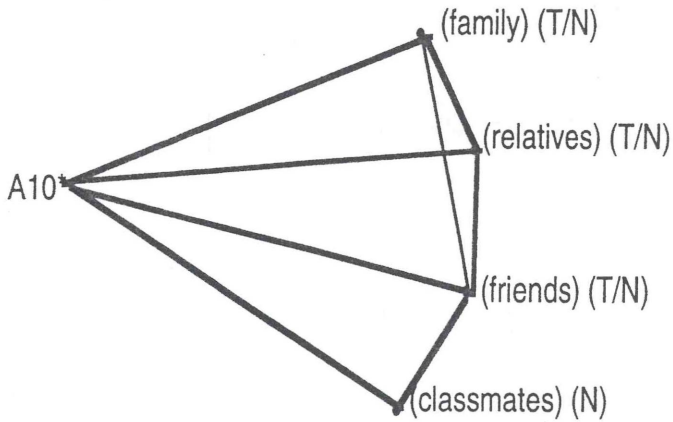

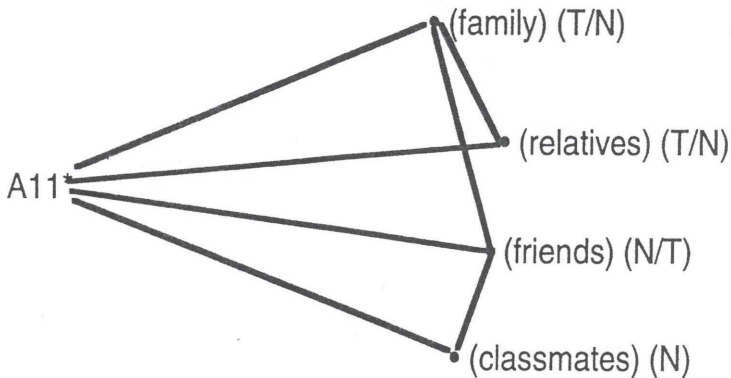**Figure 2** Informant A10 and her social network

Figure 3 Informant A11 and her social network.

Here thick lines show a close relationship and thin lines show a loose one.

These two informants have almost the same networks and sociological background. Both were brought to Norway as babies and went to Norwegian schools, they are at the same age and they are relatives who came from the same

region in Turkey, etc. We expect them to talk similar as well but they do not. This fact will be discussed below, in my critic of the theory.

Criticism of the theory

So far I explained what social network is and how it is used in different kinds of sociolinguistic studies. Social Network theory is applied to many different sudies in order to show the reasons of variation in linguistic behavior. It takes the individual as the basic element and shows his/her informal relationships in a certain community. Through individual's network the researcher tries to explain the ways his/her network modifies or changes his/her linguistic behavior. Therefore, this method is useful for community studies such as immigrant groups, various communities in big societies, etc. Then not only monolingual but also bilingual circumstances come into question, so this theory may fall short in explaining some cases. In order to construct a general theory of Social Network we should modify it from different aspects. This will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

I would first like to give an account of social network's explanatory value and refer critics made by Mæhlum and Williams and finally present my own evaluation.

As Mæhlum (1990) asserts, by moving the analytical perspective both to another abstraction level and in principle to a horizontal social dimension one could have a larger access to data. This data is the expression of the individual's experience of belonging and integration to a definite social solidarity. By this way we have the possibility to understand the relationship between such a sociocultural identification and language choice. Then we should ask this question: Does Social Network theory have an explicit explanatory value as Milroy and Margrain (1980:47) say? Suzanne Romaine's critique of this concept not only draws attention to the essential differences between natural sciences and humanities, but also questions definition criteria in relation to a theory's explanatory power. Romaine (1981: 114) says that "Phenomena like social networks and social groups as such are not given to us as definite, observable objects or natural units. They refer to certain structures on relationships between some of the many things we observe within spatio-temporal limits.". It is difficult to differentiate between the concepts of understanding and explaining as two clearly distinct forms of analysis. In interpretation of social speech, there will be little intention to try to differentiate between understanding from an hermeneutic perspective, and explaining in its intentional, non-causal sense, says Mæhlum (1990). Romaine criticises the explanatory power of social network and has doubts whether an individual's social network can directly influence that person's language use or not. Mæhlum criticises Social Network theory from the perspective of her research in Svalbard and says that diachronic side of the variation is important especially in communities like Svalbard where there is a high frequency

of social change. Therefore in such situations it is difficult to find out the value of such formal analysis without introducing the diacronic aspect into the study.

Another fact pointed out by Mæhlum is that the way we can use the information about the social contacts is given by the informants themselves. The problem is to have reliable data to reconstruct networks correctly. I think asking for information and observing the informants' social activities will be sufficient in such a reconstruction.

Glyn Williams (1992), a sociologist, criticises L. Milroy's use of social network concept and says that "It is (Milroy's work in Belfast) a piece of work which has received attention far in excess of its theoretical merits largely I suspect, for its attempt to introduce methodological novelty into sociolinguistic research" (my explanation in paranthesis). Williams bases his harsh criticism on the following: He first criticises Milroy's community concept. He asserts that Milroy seeks to remove the definition of community from the sociolinguistic tendency to a common agreement about speech norms. At the same time Milroy emphasises the spatial interactional and psychological dimensions involving a cohesive group to which its members feel a sense of attachment. It is a small scale community involving face to face interaction within a defined territory. Another critique is about Milroy's use of class society. In her study in Belfast she concentrated on working class community. Here Williams says that Milroy fails to pursue the issue of class fractioning in a systematic way. Therefore according to Williams, Milroy abandons the class analysis in favour of an emphasis upon the social networks of individuals. So this means that the social group is an amalgam of individuals, a rejection of the fundamental basis of sociological analysis. Therefore social structures become a network of relationships. James and Lesley Milroy (1993) reply to this criticism in their article "Mechanisms of Change in Urban Dialects: The Role of Class, Social Network and Gender" by saying that "Williams (1992) offers an extended critique of this and other issues, from a sociological rather than a sociolinguistic perspective. His general proposals are unfortunately of limited value, as they do not take account of the sociolinguist's primary (and indeed non-negotiable) focus on *language*" (J. Milroy and L. Milroy 1993: 58-59). I take this as a sign of cold war between these scholars.

I think that Social Network theory needs to be modified by some other methods and tools in order to become more efficient in explaining and understanding linguistic variation and change in different situations like migration, linguistic variation in stable communities, bilingual and monolingual communities etc.. Milroy's Belfast study is one of the pioneering works in applying social networks to sociolinguistic studies. However, it did not look at the dynamics of conversation and it was rather a quantitative study. Her latest articles and studies attached more importance to the use of social network in codeswitching and language choice, for

e.g.; hers and Li Wei's (1991) study on the Tyneside Chinese community or James and Lesley Milroy's latest article on the role of class, social network and gender in explaining mechanisms of change in urban dialects. Studies conducted by Gal, Bortoni-Ricardo, Gumperz, Mæhlum and others show the development of this theory by applying it to different sociolinguistic situations. However, these studies also show this theory's inadequacies.

The first point is that Social Network theory has a synchronic point of view. In some cases such as Belfast, the application of a synchronic study was enough to explain and describe the linguistic variation. However, as Mæhlum also mentions, a diachronic perspective is necessary to do that in certain communities, such as immigrant groups. Therefore, we need a dynamic as well as a static model. In relation to this point, we should not forget that norms which influence an individual's network can easily change, and these norms can even change the network itself.

In cases like migration, or like marriage etc. For example even by staying in the same community but by getting married one may easily change his/her network. This may cause change in the use of language or languages. Social networks cannot account for individual's language development and his/her socialisation process which can also be influential in individual's language use, acquisition of a language, language choice etc.

These facts are also important in answering the reasons behind phenomena where Social Network theory falls short in explaining. This takes us to another point, that is *individual variation*. As I mentioned before, Bortoni-Ricardo tries to explain why siblings, close friends etc. speak so differently from each other and then she looks at their network which are quite different from each other. However, if we refer back to figures 2 and 3, we find out that these two close friends and at the same time relatives who have similar networks and very similar sociolinguistic backgrounds speak differently. Here we should seek the answer in their individual differences and probably in their cognitive processes. From the interviews that I conducted in my master's thesis and from personal observations, I found out that these two informants actually have different kinds of interests towards language in general. One of them is very much interested in learning languages and gets good marks from such subjects at school, whereas the other one is not so much interested in learning languages and is not successful in such subjects. I should also mention that both of them speak fluent Norwegian since they came to Norway as babies. Therefore individual variations, personality, cognitive processes, etc. should also be taken into consideration when Social Network analysis falls short in explaining situations like this.

I should refer to Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985: 248) who take individual as the central point in order to reach linguistic behaviour of the communities. They

assert that "Human language expresses views of the universe and each individual has a different set of views." So individual variations cause different language behaviours and that is as important as their social networks.

Finally, J. and L. Milroy (1993: 74) also say that "Sociolinguistics urgently requires a more accountable and integrated approach to the social variables which provide a means of understanding patterns of linguistic variation and the mechanisms of linguistic change."

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