“BIG BRIGHT LIGHTS” VERSUS “GREEN AND PLEASANT LAND”?: THE UNHELPFUL DICHOTOMY OF ‘URBAN’ VERSUS ‘RURAL’ IN DIALECTOLOGY

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1. Introduction

In the 1960s, there was an ‘urban turn’ in dialectology.1 It began in the very important sociolinguistic studies carried out in Anglophone western cities, but soon spread to encompass urban communities outside English-speaking countries, both in developed and developing countries. Today ‘urban dialectology’ using sociolinguistic methodologies is, by some distance, the dominant and most influential approach to analysing contemporary language variation and change.

The ‘urban turn’ began, despite a few smaller earlier works in social dialectology (on which more later), with the publication of The Social Stratification of English in New York City by William Labov in 1966, in which he lays out not just his proposals for a dialectology of urban centres, but also a number of key theoretical constructs in sociolinguistics which have survived to this day—the linguistic variable, the speech community, inherent variability, style-shifting, change from above and below—critiqued and adapted over time by scholars working on different communities and within different sociological paradigms, but nevertheless still some of the principal concepts of our discipline today. So influential was Labov’s work in shaping the emerging field that many see ‘sociolinguistics’ as being the study of

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1 This chapter has developed from ideas first presented, rather sketchily and incoherently, it has to be admitted, at the “Conference on the Evolution of Arabic Urban Vernaculars: the effects of Migration and Social Change” in Aix-en-Provence in 2004, where I first met Clive. It was his encouragement at that meeting that persuaded me to think about these ideas further, and so I am honoured to have the opportunity to present them to him in a hopefully somewhat better developed form in this Festschrift to celebrate his 60th birthday. Thanks also to Enam Al-Wer and Rudolf de Jong, both for their invitation to contribute and for their patience, and to David Hornsby for some vital help along the way.
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dialect variation and change in social contexts (see, for example, the coverage of the subject in Chambers’ (2003) *Sociolinguistic Theory* and Hudson’s (1996) *Sociolinguistics*). And because most of the early influential sociolinguistic work was carried out in cities—New York, Detroit, Montreal, Panama City, Norwich, etc, urban settings almost became synonymous with studies of variation and change, to the extent that variationist methods—sampling from right across the resident community, assumptions of inherent variability, use of the linguistic variable as an analytical construct) are, wherever they are conducted, often labelled “urban dialectology” or ‘urban sociolinguistics’.

But what is “urban” about variationist sociolinguistics? Can it only be conducted in urban areas? In this paper, I want to argue that there is nothing at all that is essentially urban about variationist social dialectology. I will claim not only that its theoretical assumptions, methodological approaches and analytical techniques can all be applied successfully to rural areas, but also that there is no a priori reason why we would expect to find patterns of variation and change in rural areas to fundamentally differ from those in urban areas. More important, I will argue (following Trudgill 1997, 2002), is the nature of dialect contact and isolation (wherever that may occur, in urban or rural settings), which, in combination with the difference (that lies at the heart of dialect contact approaches to variation and change) between child and adult language acquisition, is the crucial factor in determining distinct typologies of linguistic change. Important to the argument here is the fact that contact is blind to urban or rural location—it may happen more often and more intensively in urban areas but is not restricted to such areas.

I begin by looking at the reasons why dialectology, which once shunned cities altogether, abandoned rural areas and turned to examine urban centres. Then, by drawing on the work of urban and rural geographers, I show that while urban and rural areas certainly trigger very distinct images and attitudes in our minds, there are in fact no absolute differences between them—*there are no causal social processes which affect urban areas but not rural, or vice versa*. Indeed such geographers quite openly admit that ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ are extremely difficult terms to define robustly. I end by exemplifying the fact that one factor which is crucial in determining variation and change—dialect contact—although often associated with research in cities—produces typologically the same outcomes in both urban and