Articulating ‘impact’ in sociolinguistic research

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Sociolinguistics has been relatively outward-facing since its inception, yet few could accuse the discipline of being particularly meddlesome in politics or overly preoccupied with issues of human well-being. Meanwhile, ‘impact’ has become a significant funding criterion in the humanities and social sciences, encouraging academics to demonstrate how their research extends beyond academia and addresses issues of wider social concern.

As such, sociolinguistics faces new challenges. How can the field adapt? What steps can be taken to make sociolinguistics more relevant beyond the groves of academe? And how can public engagement with sociolinguistic research be facilitated?

This paper presents a critical review of the concept of ‘impact’ within sociolinguistics, focusing on three main areas. First, we show how impact has in many ways been an under-sung tradition within sociolinguistics; very real impact has been realised, yet this has been inconsistently asserted. Second, we review a number of contemporary case studies of sociolinguistic research with practical applications, and we reframe these to foreground the impact they have achieved. These examples show how researchers at very different career stages, and with different levels of resources, can deliver palpable outcomes in highly diverse contexts. Third, we critically appraise the measurement and operationalisation of impact as a funding criterion – in this we aim to help sociolinguistics not only achieve impact but also contribute to its refinement as a research priority.

Ultimately, we show how impact is already being achieved in sociolinguistics – more than the current quietude suggests – and that this simply needs clearer articulation. We also emphasise how impact could be more consistently embedded in sociolinguistics with some fairly modest adaptations to conventional methodologies. Those clarified articulations and adapted methodologies could make sociolinguistics not only more appealing to funding bodies, but also a stronger positive force in the pursuit of human well-being.

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