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## CONSTRUCTING MEANING IN SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIATION

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It's February of sixth grade. Trudy and Ricky have just come back from a week's suspension for beating up Tina. Many of the girls in their class have turned against them, some even saying that Trudy is a red rag and is unduly influencing Ricky. Trudy says "fuck them" because the boys are on her side. It's a volatile issue. Since neither Trudy's best friend Katya nor I was present when the fight happened, Trudy tells us the whole story in minute detail after school:

"I went up to her and I'm all 'whassup?!' and she's all 'whassup?!' And then I'm all like – she's all 'what'd I do?' I'm all – I'm all – 'Bitch I heard you were talking shit!'"

The salient linguistic features of this bit of the re-enactment of the fight include a falsetto rise-fall on *whassup*, fronting of /U/ in *whassup*, a highly reduced form of *I'm all*, [ʔmO:] and a raised /I/ in *bitch*. Any one of these might be studied as a sociolinguistic variable. The fronting of /uh/ is part of the Northern California Vowel Shift, in which /u/, /U/ and /U / all move forward. And it occurs elsewhere in the narrative – e.g. "and I slipped back because it was in the mud [mEd]...". Norma Mendoza-Denton has correlated the raising of /I/ in Northern California Chicano English with gang status. In fact, Chicano gangs are central to the controversy that's swirling around Trudy and Ricky's fight – but I won't go into that here.

Trudy and her cohort are embarking on the transition from childhood to adolescence – and the transition, like other transitions, is a location in itself. Trudy's performance (both beating up Tina and her recounting of it) is part of that transition, and as such combines

the child and the adolescent. It is not an adolescent event, but a sixth grade event. The entire performance combines a childish style with a tough adolescent style, as Trudy goes back and forth between speech like that quoted above, and "kid talk" which doesn't include any of the extreme features of her fighting style and includes delighted laughter – definitely not a tough thing. Katya says, "She landed in the mud?" and Trudy responds with laughter and a rise-and-fall intonation, " Yeah! So did I!"

Trudy is moving towards adolescence – indeed, she's consciously leading her cohort in the transition and this lead is a salient aspect of her identity. But in performing this narrative she isn't "doing" teenager – she's "doing" precocious sixth grader. And she's doing it well. Similarly, her clothing style moves forward slowly – as she showed me her sexy bikini underpants one day, she pointed out that she'd worn kid pants the day before.

In this process, she represents – for the rest of her cohort – a stylistic icon. She is at the forefront of her sixth grade class in moving away from adult domination and engaging in the mysteries of an adolescent peer culture, with daring forays into the sexual, the sartorial, and relations with adults. Katya looks to her with admiration and amazement, as Trudy's narrative offers her a front row seat to her adventures on the edge. At the same time, it offers up the edge of the linguistic envelope.

This fight narrative is a key event. It takes place in public, with Katya and me as her immediate audience, but Trudy is talking loud enough for others to hear. She pronounces defiance against the girls who are dissing her and Ricky, but mostly she describes the fight in great (and exaggerated) detail:

“‘boom’ I hit her in the face – right here because I felt her jaw – then I hit her again in the face and then I started kicking her and then she moved and then I went like that and ...Ricky came in she – she grabbed her by the hair and all ‘boom’ kicked her in the face or in the stomach or somewhere – she kept doing that – and I went up to her and started kicking her in the butt.”

Down the street at a predominantly white working and middle class school, Lillian sits on a prominent wall behind the school during recess, surrounded by a group of boys who insist that she's going to the sixth grade dance with Brad. The issue of Lillian and Brad is a central phenomenon in the school – they are a highlighted item on the class's emerging heterosexual market, and all eyes are on the market, on them, and ultimately on interactions like this one in which a completely new kind of behavior (going to a dance with a boy) is being negotiated. In keeping with the Northern California Vowel Shift, each

time Lillian pronounces *Brad*, the /æ/ in his name backs – and on these occasions, almost all the way to [A]. Along with a break in her voice, which highlights the fact that there's call for anger and emotion with Brad, this backed /æ/ draws attention to a heightened adolescent style: "I'm **not** going with **Bra:d**."

These are key moments in the construction of meaning in and for phonological variation. Trudy displays her actions in the fight, her quirkiness and daring, and her leadership in the developmental scheme – her ability to go out where none of her peers have gone before. And this display is based both in her actions and in the verbal style in which she recounts them. At the same time, she's a kid and still enjoys a lot of kid things – in fact, her pleasure in the fight is related to its excitement value and its contrast with kid things. Her fight narrative uses features of tough Chicano English, (although she herself is not Chicana but hangs out with a largely Chicano crowd) and she combines that with elements of "kid talk" when she shows her excitement and wonderment at what she did. This is a complex performance for a complex point in a complex life.

Lillian, meanwhile, is involved in a similar yet different performance. She also is a developmental leader – an early and highly visible participant in the sixth grade heterosexual market. Just as Trudy is a pioneer in tough stuff, Lillian is a pioneer in heterosexual drama. And her use of a style that falls into a category that one might call "California white girl speech" is part of this pioneering – and inseparable from her petulance. That is, she is constructing a particular persona that both allies her with her peers in the heterosexual market and sets her off as a particular character – as a bit of a drama princess. She stands out as someone who gets annoyed at certain boys, and who has sufficiently meaningful relationships with those boys to call for annoyance and drama. Some of her peers are still talking kid talk – indeed, some of them sound like little kids. But bursting out into the heterosexual market requires a linguistic maturity to go with the social maturity.

Both Trudy and Lillian are crafting selves – and prominent selves in their local social orders. In these highlighted performances, they are simultaneously crafting selves and providing signposts for their peers. And in doing so they are making sense both of and for their social and linguistic environment. Their performances lay down the relation between linguistic styles – and the features that make up those styles – and personae, or styles of being. The individual variables that we variationists study one by one take on life only in the context of such styles and of the performances that give meaning to the styles.

## **How do variables mean?**

Variationists traditionally seek social meanings for individual variables or variants – meanings that are supposed to be enduring and transportable. The questions and the analytical practice in the study of sociolinguistic variation have traditionally been built on an effort to extend linguistic features outward towards an external, and pre-existing, social world. The model views variation as reflecting membership in predetermined social categories, and restricts social agency to the use of variation to make ('true' or 'false') claims of membership in such categories. And since the study of sociolinguistic variation has had a focus on the spread of linguistic change, the variables have been chosen for their interest to the study of regional dialectology, linguistic change, or the wider grammatical enterprise. And the interpretation of variation has been based within the analysts' constructions of fixed and bounded speech communities located in dialect-geographic space. This first wave of work in variation accomplished a great deal. It provided the big picture of the distribution of variables across the socioeconomic hierarchy, and demonstrated the relevance of standard norms across the community. At the same time, it yielded a more confused picture of gender, and said little about ethnicity aside from constructing AAVE as a separate and non-spatialized dialect, reserving the ownership of US geography for the white folks. Most important, while this tradition has laid the foundation for studying the social meaning of variation, its assumptions severely limit that study.

In what I call the second wave of variation studies, an ethnographic trend shifted the focus from broad demographic categories to more local categories and dynamics, to a closer consideration of the nature of local social meaning, and to the relation of this local meaning to larger social structures such as those reflected in survey studies. The focus in these studies is still on individual variables, selected for their dialectological interest, and to a great extent on variables as deriving their meaning from social categories.

What I call the third wave of variation studies takes a different perspective, according to which the use of variation does not simply reflect, but constructs, social categories and social meaning. The meaning of variables is located not in the categories of people who employ them, but in the performance of identities that populate categories. This performance is a stylistic enterprise that employs linguistic variables as resources for constructing styles that come to be associated with individual or group personae. Following John Clarke and Dick Hebdige, we view stylistic practice as a process of

*bricolage*, in which ways of being are transformed through the strategic re-use of meaningful resources. For the variationist, the problem is to define those resources – where do variables come from? How do they take on meaning? What is the nature of their meaning?

We cannot understand how variation contributes to meaning unless we look at all variables – all linguistic features whose variability has non-referential significance, not just the popular sound changes in progress and well-known stable variables. I argue that variables come to be associated with fairly abstract meanings, derived from large-scale patterns in layered and overlapping communities (imagined or otherwise). They then take on more local and precise meanings as they are vivified in locally-recognized styles which are, in turn, built on recognizable combinations of shared resources. The construction of social distinctiveness, then, takes place from the most abstract to the most concrete level.

Viewing variables from the “top down” like this requires considerable de-centering. Meanings for variables have traditionally been located in the perspective of the linguist – the standard speaker. The dominant, “standard” variable is generally treated as unmarked, and it is the “non-standard” variable that is marked with social meaning. If meaning is constructed locally, however, markedness is as fluid as the communities that use the language. Thus the social meaning of, for example, American /r/, is located in its presence, its absence (or one kind of absence), its phonetic quality, depending on whose picture of the sociolinguistic world the linguist is attending to.

Let me give some examples:

- I imagine that highly retroflexed /r/ is associated with an interesting American stereotype in Britain, based on the comparison of American /r/-fulness with British /r/-lessness. In the African American community in the US, highly retroflexed /r/ is associated with white speakers – based on the comparison of white /r/-fulness with black /r/-lessness. Jacquelyn Rahman (2002) has noted that black standup comics routinely use this variant in their imitations of white people, and in doing so associate it with such characteristics as corniness, pomposity and stupidity. At the same time, for easterners, extreme retroflexion is associated with white speech of the midwest. And when it's syllabic (sure), it's Valley Girl. In other words, there is not one single /r/-lessness or one single /r/-fulness, and the meaning of either depends on the shared ideology of the community in which it is being invoked.

- In the US, released final stops are associated with British speakers. And ultimately by virtue of this association, they have considerable stylistic potential in the US. Mary Bucholtz (1996) has found it used by girls in constructing an intelligent nerdy style, Sarah Benor (in press) has found it used by orthodox Jews in constructing talmudic masculinity, Rob Podesva, Sarah Roberts and Kathryn Campbell-Kibler (2002) have found it used to convey preciseness by a gay activist lawyer, and Rob Podesva (2003) is in the process of showing that in other settings it can add prissiness to a gay style. The variable has, for the entire US English speaking world, a potential to evoke stereotypes based on the opposition between US and British speech – and these stereotypes tend to involve articulateness, intelligence, educatedness, snootiness. I do not intend here to ignore the fact that released stops can also emerge in an emphatic style and can show anger as well – indeed, the effectiveness of this phonological strategy for such purposes may not be completely independent of its association with discourses of cultural superiority. But someone would have to study angry events to establish whether people use generalized or selected hyperarticulation for this purpose.
- I believe that throughout the English speaking world, reduced *-ing* is associated with informality. But this informality can be associated with anything from friendliness to not giving a damn – depending on what else it appears with.
- Most important, though, the retroflexed /r/, released stops, reduced *-ing* never have to be interpreted on their own, because they live with other features that disambiguate them, and in the eyes and ears of particular audiences.
- Some other variables – in fact, those that variationists tend to focus on – are interpreted more locally:
- In the Detroit area, the raising of the nucleus of (ay) is associated with urban white speakers, and among suburban adolescents it signals an urban orientation. Bill Labov (1972) has found that on Martha's Vineyard it is associated with the local fishing culture and has been vivified in the opposition between local groups according to their orientation to the mainland. In the same vein, Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes (1995) have found it to be associated with traditional island culture on Okracoke, and most locally with a poker-playing good-old-boy network.

That local meaning is constructed in very local interactions, but against a background of wider contrasts. The British-American opposition is available for most speakers in the US, and creates a wider discourse of stop release within which the linguistic feature becomes available for local refinement. This refinement is accomplished through the deployment of stop release with other linguistic features and by speakers in situations and speech acts that support a particular reading. Rob Podesva (2003), for example, has argued that the release of word-final stops takes on meanings associated with "gayness" when combined with other features such as falsetto. The accumulation of such deployment within a community and over time will effect a gradual reification of meaning. Indeed, as Niloofar Haeri (1997) has pointed out, variables that have been in use for centuries – such as *-ing* reduction – may reach such a reification over a large speech community.

For their immediate communities, Trudy and Lillian's momentary performances described above constitute small social moves for them and their communities. They are small steps in the establishment of their continually transforming personae, and the continually transforming styles that make these personae visible and manipulable. And they are small steps in the establishment of these personae and styles in the wider frame of community social and stylistic practice. I use examples of kids who are bursting onto the adolescent scene, and as a result the distinction between "kid" and "adolescent" styles is salient. But I would argue that this is not qualitatively different from adult stylistic practice. We are all tweaking our styles in one way or another as we proceed through life and from situation to situation, and it is precisely the flux of identity, persona, community and the times that keeps stylistic practice – hence the construction of meaning in and for variation – an ongoing process.

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