

Three Waves of Variation Study: The emergence of meaning in the study of variation

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Abstract

The treatment of social meaning in variation has come in three waves of analytic practice. The first wave of variation studies established broad correlations between linguistic variables and the macro-sociological categories of socioeconomic class, sex class, ethnicity and age. The second wave employed ethnographic methods to explore the local categories and configurations that inhabit, or constitute, these broader categories. In both waves, variation was seen as marking social categories. This paper sets out a theoretical foundation for the third wave, arguing that (1) variation constitutes a robust social semiotic system, expressing the full range of social concerns in a given community; (2) variation does not simply reflect, but constructs, social meaning, hence is a force in social change and (3) the meanings of variables are basic and underspecified, gaining more specific meanings in the context of styles (personae).

1. The fate of social meaning in the study of variation

The first quantitative community study of variation was all about social meaning. Based on ethnographic observations and interviews on Martha's Vineyard, William Labov (Labov 1963) established that the pronunciation of /ay/ had been recruited as an indexical resource in a local ideological struggle. This diphthong had a centralized nucleus in the Vineyard dialect, but for some years, island speakers had been following the mainland trend to lower the nucleus to [a]. Labov found that some speakers were reversing this lowering trend, in an apparent move to recapture one of the most salient features of the distinctive island dialect. Led by the English ethnic fishing community whose control over the local economy was under threat from the mainland-controlled tourist industry, this revival of a 'traditional' local pronunciation constituted a claim to island authenticity. This move was a textbook example of the workings of what Michael Silverstein (Silverstein 2003) has termed indexical order. A feature that had simply marked a speaker as a Vineyarder came to be used stylistically within the island to index a particular kind of Vineyarder, making salient a particular aspect of island identity.

This study established without question that groups of speakers can exploit subphonemic space in a systematic way to add a layer of social meaning to the denotational meaning that is most linguists' primary focus. And in doing so, it raised a congeries of questions about both the linguistic and the social embedding of variation. In the decades that followed, though, the social

study of variation moved away from the study of social meaning, to focus on macro-sociological categories as they reveal (and structure) the spread of linguistic change through social space. This direction was consonant with the main concern for the role of variation in linguistic structure and change. In forty years, however, our understanding of variation has progressed sufficiently that we can – and need to – take the meaning of variation seriously once again.

A new focus on meaning is particularly important as the study of variation is now spreading well beyond the sociolinguistics community (Anttila and Cho 1998; Pierrehumbert 2001; Bresnan 2006). As these studies deepen our understanding of the linguistic and processing constraints on variation, the possibilities for examining the social constraints – and the interactions among different kinds of constraints – will become increasingly exciting. The current popularity of exemplar theory (Bod, Hay et al. 2003; Bybee 2006) has raised the possibility that social information is completely integrated with grammatical information, potentially breaking down the apparent distinction between the cognitive and the social. And as people in areas beyond sociolinguistics begin to explore this interaction (Pierrehumbert, Bent et al. 2004; Munson 2007) they should not be re-inventing the sociolinguistic wheel. It becomes increasingly important, then, to consider what exactly that social information is, and how it interacts with other information in processing (Staum 2008). There are some very big questions, such as how the system of social meaning is structured, what kinds of social meanings are expressed in variation, how local meanings such as those found on Martha's Vineyard articulate with broad demographic patterns, and how the relation between variants and social meanings becomes conventionalized. In what follows, I will outline an approach to the study of variation that centers on social meaning. This is not a proposal to replace, but to refine and supplement, current approaches to variation. I will begin by tracing the progress of the social study of variation over the past forty-five years, in order to illuminate the main issues.

The treatment of social meaning in variation has come in three waves of analytic practice. No wave supersedes the previous, but each represents a quite distinct way of thinking about variation, and a distinct methodological and analytic practice, each of which grew out of the findings of the previous wave. The first wave of variation studies, launched by William Labov's New York City study (Labov, 1966), laid a solid foundation for the study of variation by establishing broad correlations between linguistic variables and the macro-sociological categories of socioeconomic class, sex class, ethnicity and age. These patterns pointed to questions about what underlies these categories, giving rise to a second wave, characterized by ethnographic studies of more locally-defined categories. The third wave, the focus of this paper, is still in an early stage. While the first two waves related the meaning of variables quite directly to the social categories with which they correlate, this wave of studies sees variables as having more basic meanings that combine stylistically to construct the kinds of personae that populate social categories. This does not retreat from the examination of the relation between variation and social structure, but follows the power relations that constitute the political economy down to their realizations in everyday local dynamics of meaning-making. This approach reverses the perspective from variation as a reflection of social place, to variation as a resource for the construction of social meaning. In what follows, I will sketch the progress through the first two waves of variation study, and then introduce the exploration of meaning that constitutes the third wave.

2. The first wave of variation studies: The survey era

The first wave of urban survey studies was foundational to work on variation, beginning with Labov's (Labov 1966) study of the Social Stratification of English in New York City. Labov's main results were replicated in a series of urban studies during the late sixties and the seventies, providing a big picture of the distribution of variables across large urban populations not only in North America and Great Britain (Trudgill 1974; Macaulay 1977), but elsewhere such as Panama (Cedergren 1973) and Iran (Modaressi 1978). These studies established a regular and replicable pattern of socioeconomic stratification of variables, in which the use of 'non-standard' variants correlates inversely with speakers' socioeconomic statusⁱ. The term standard has been used to refer to speech that lacks clear regional and/or socially stigmatized features – the variety legitimized by, and required for meaningful participation in, institutions of education and economic and political power. This is the variety typical of the educated upper middle class. The assumption from the start has been that language varieties carry the social status of their speakers, making the class stratification of language a continuum of linguistic prestige.

The first wave studies also showed that speech throughout the socioeconomic hierarchy varies stylistically, so that the individual's speech range occupies a subset of the total range within the sociolinguistic continuum. Each speaker's formal and read speech is closer to the standard, while their casual speech is farther from the standard. A classic example of a stratified variable is the alternation of velar and apical variants of (ING), which occurs throughout the English-speaking world. The pairing of class and style correlations shown in Figure 1 locates intra-speaker variation seamlessly in the broader patterns of variation across large communities, quite explicitly locating stylistic variation in the class hierarchy and in the speaker's class position. The uniformity of stylistic patterns across the class hierarchy suggests a consensual view of the socioeconomic hierarchy, and of the social significance of linguistic variation within that hierarchy. Subjective evaluation measures (e.g. Labov 1966) further established that speakers recognize the relation between linguistic variables and social status.

The fit of linguistic data with a socioeconomic continuum has led to an orientation to the linguistic poles – the standard at the top, and the vernacular at the bottom. The term vernacular has been occasionally problematic because it has been used to refer to two quite distinct things: (1) the non-standard speech of the locally-based working class (what I will call the 'community vernacular'), and (2) every speaker's most natural speech (or 'personal vernacular'). The latter definition plays an important role in theories of variation, and particularly of sound change, as the vernacular is considered the source of systematic change. Labov (1972) defines the vernacular as the speaker's most automatic linguistic production free of conscious interference, which is to be witnessed in the most unreflective, spontaneous, speech. He links formality of speech to self-monitoring, which disturbs the otherwise regular workings of the vernacular. The implication that the two definitions of vernacular are related follows from the socioeconomic embedding of stylistic variation, but also occasionally surfaces more explicitly, as in Labov's characterizations (Labov 1972) of middle class speech as more self-conscious and contrived than working class speech, and in Tony Kroch's hypothesis (Kroch 1978) that the socioeconomic stratification of language is a result of stratified resistance to innovation resulting from a differential need for standard language in one's daily life – or engagement in the standard language market (Bourdieu and Boltanski 1975; Bourdieu 1977).

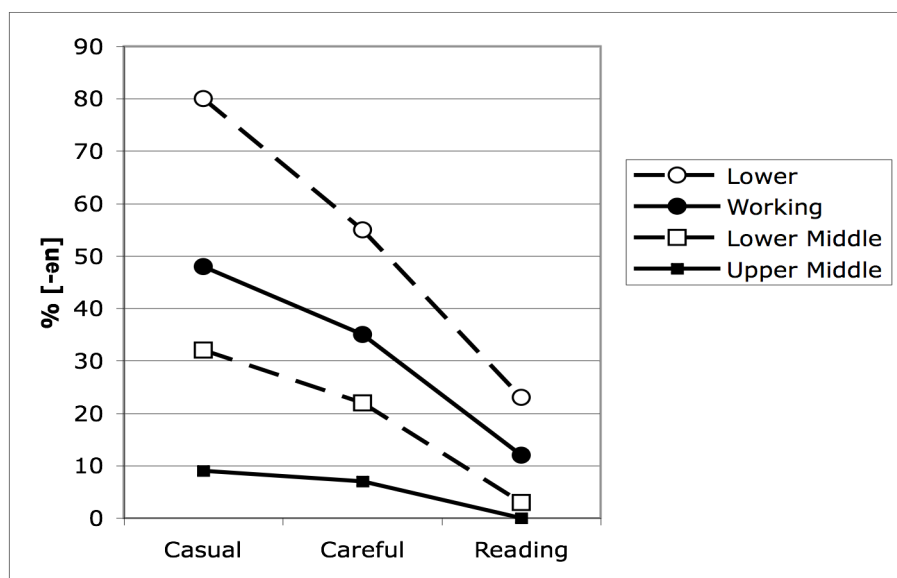


Figure 1. Percent Apical variants for (ING) in three styles and four socioeconomic strata. (from Labov 1966)

2.1 Some questions raised by the results of the first wave.

If the survey era revealed a regular socioeconomic stratification of linguistic variables, it also pointed out interesting exceptions to the apparent structure of the primary categories – exceptions that partially motivated the studies of the second wave. Above all, discontinuities in the expected smooth variation along the class and age continua, and continuous effects across the gender binary, have raised questions about the social forces behind correlations with these categories.

The greatest users of vernacular variants appear to be not those at the lowest rung of the socioeconomic hierarchy, but members of the upper working and lower middle classes (Labov, 2001). If Kroch's hypothesis that social stratification is the result of stratified resistance to change were the whole story, one would expect those who have the least to gain from participation in the standard language market, i.e. the chronically unemployed of the lower class, to use the most non-standard forms. But Labov has shown that it is people whose employment is reasonably secure – who lead in the use of vernacular forms. This is the segment of society that is the most locally-based, suggesting that vernacular variants are not simply the most natural way of speaking, but have some kind of symbolic value related to locally-based life while the standard is associated with the more global reach of large institutions. The use of vernacular variants, in other words, does not reflect a lack of concern with the standard linguistic market, but an abundance of concern with the (opposing) vernacular linguistic market. This observation is an important outcome of the first wave studies, and as I will show below, the exploration of local engagement and identity was foregrounded in the studies of the second wave.

Labov's New York City study also found that in a few cases, the lower middle class has a wider range of variation than adjacent groups (Labov, 1972; 2001), particularly crossing over the upper middle class in their formal speech. This suggests that this segment of society, which is at the vulnerable cusp between the working class and the middle class (Mayer 1975), is caught between standard and vernacular norms. Labov's subjective evaluation tests also showed this segment of society to be the most sensitive to the social evaluation of variables, leading him to argue that the crossover pattern is a sign of linguistic insecurity. However, it is not clear what actually lies beneath this pattern – it is possible, for instance, that the greater variability and sensitivity stem from the fact that these speakers, between home and work, have the most heterogeneous social contacts, hence the greatest need to develop a broad stylistic competence. This crossover pattern has only been found in a handful of studies, but it suggests nonetheless that while the global evaluation of linguistic norms may be shared throughout social space, the details of sociolinguistic dynamics are not. The actual dynamics of this pattern, at any rate, cannot be determined on the basis of survey data, but call for a closer focus on the categories of speakers that have been taken to represent this segment of society.

Primarily, no doubt, because of the interest in change in progress, age stratification has been a major concern in the study of variation, because of its potential to reflect apparent time. The apparent time hypothesis assumes that speakers' linguistic systems do not change substantially beyond the critical period, so that a speaker's linguistic system reflects the state of the language at the time of his or her critical period. There is evidence that children who move to new dialect areas can still modify their phonological systems at least until the age of eight (Payne 1980; Chambers 1995). And in the US at least, adolescents lead both children and adults in phonetic change and in the use of community vernacular features more generally (Eckert 1997). This adds certainty to the supposition that the use of these features is not simply a matter of exposure and attention to speech, but involves some kind of social agency. The idea that age represents the smooth passage of linguistic time has been further interrupted by increasing evidence (Sankoff 2006) that speakers' patterns of phonetic variation can continue to change throughout their lifetime – both becoming more conservative and more innovative. The life span is increasingly seen as involving life stages with their own sociolinguistic dynamics. Balancing these observations with the obvious validity of some form of the apparent time hypothesis requires examination of language dynamics with a focus on the social significance of age and life stages in different segments of society.

Survey studies treat gender as a binary, in the expectation that there will be uniform male-female differences throughout society. Wolfram's (1969) study of African American speakers in Detroit showed women's speech to be consistently more standard (i.e. in most cases to use fewer variables considered diagnostic of AAVE) than men's across the socioeconomic hierarchy. British studies showed similar results (Trudgill 1974, Macaulay 1977). Other studies in the US, though, have shown quite mixed gender patterns. While women as a group tend to use more standard variants than men for stable variables, and for morphosyntactic variables, women overwhelmingly lead in sound changes in progress. While Wolfram's study of AAVE in Detroit (Wolfram 1969) separated out gender within each socioeconomic stratum, most studies examined gender as an across-the-board effect, combining speakers from all socioeconomic strata. This no doubt masks more interesting phenomena. For example, Labov's later work (Labov 2001), which separated out gender from class, has shown a complete gender crossover for some variables, whereby upper middle class women's speech is more standard than upper

middle class men's, but working class women's speech is less standard than working class men's. These results show that gender is not a simple independent variable, but that the significance of gender for variation has to do with how gender structures people's lives at different places in society. They also confirm that not all variables that show the same socioeconomic stratification have the same social significance.

2.2 Social meaning in the first wave

The first wave established a set of encompassing facts that lay the ground for all subsequent work on variation. It also pointed to areas that complicate the categorization schemes, and that suggest that explanations for variation are to be found in local cultures of class, age and gender, and that the avoidance of stigma is not the only form of agency in variation.

In all these cases, the perspective that the first wave gave us on the social meaning of variation was based in the socioeconomic hierarchy. Variables were taken to mark socioeconomic status, and stylistic, age and gender dynamics were seen as resulting from the effects of these categories on speakers' orientation to their place in that hierarchyⁱⁱ. Where earlier dialectological work (including the Martha's Vineyard study) viewed local forms as signaling 'local identity', the backbone of meaning in the study of social stratification has been the polar pair, prestige and stigma, throwing stigma and local identity into an awkward relation. And because of the regular class and stylistic stratification of both sound change in progress and more stable features, the similarity of demographic patterns among variables has led to an implicit assumption that the social mechanisms and significance of all variables are similar. Thus, some authors (e.g. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998) have referred to the apical variant of (ING) as stigmatized, even though probably no one would argue that the informal use of this variant is stigmatized – on the contrary, consistent informal use of the velar variant is likely to sound strange. I would argue that while non-normative frequency of [-ən] in the speech of a middle class person may strike the hearer as situationally inappropriate, just a few occurrences of extremely raised (ɔ) in New York or a single occurrence of negative concord are likely to cause the hearer to re-assess the speaker's social origins. This assumption of social equivalence, which stems from the similarity of macro-sociological patterns, will give way as sociolinguists come to focus not simply on how variables stratify, but on how they are deployed at a more local level.

Sociolinguists will agree that the political economy is fundamental to variation, and it is important to recall that Labov's focus on social class was a significant political-academic move (as was his later focus on race). But the abstracted socioeconomic hierarchy provides only a general roadmap to the sites of linguistic production. The survey method's primary virtues are coverage and replicability, both of which depend on the use of pre-determined social categories and fairly fleeting social contact with the speakers chosen to represent those categories. As a result, the social significance of variation can be surmised only on the basis of a general understanding of the categories that serve to select and classify speakers. There is no question that the broad demographic patterns of variation are important. But just as a map of New York City does not tell you what the streets are like, or what it's like to walk on them, the macro-sociological patterns of variation do not reveal what speakers at different places in the socioeconomic hierarchy are doing socially with those variables. The second wave of variation studies used ethnographic methods to get closer to the local dynamics of variation. These studies

sought out local categories that could shed light on the relevance of macro-sociological categories for life in the local setting, drawing a direct relation between the social dynamics giving rise to these categories and the use of linguistic variables. This also shifted the focus to the local significance of the vernacular. While there had been a tacit but fairly widely-held view from the start of variation studies that the vernacular had positive symbolic value, the centrality of attention-to-speech had kept this from being a focus in first wave studies. If the vernacular has positive social value, one might expect it to be not always a product of inattention to speech, but to be quite intentionally intensified in some situations (e.g. Schilling-Estes 1998).

3. The Second Wave of variation studies: The ethnographic approach

Ethnographic studies focus on smaller communities for relatively long periods of time, and aim to discover, rather than to presuppose, locally salient social categories. These categories may be local instantiations of the categories that guide the survey studies, they may be different categories – but most important, the categories are discovered in virtue of their place in local social practice. As a result, the ethnographic studies have brought us a clearer view of how ways of speaking are imbued with local meaning.

This was made quite clear in the first quantitative ethnographic study of variation – William Labov’s study of Martha’s Vineyard (Labov, 1963). And here is the proof that these three waves are not purely chronological, because this study predates the first wave – indeed, it is the landmark study that established that the second and third waves could happen. When Labov landed on Martha’s Vineyard in the early sixties, he found a community in turmoil over its fate, as tourism and summer residency were increasingly threatening the local fishing economy of the island. There were those, particularly those engaged in the local fishing economy, who were opposed to the mainland incursion. And there were those who welcomed the participation in the mainland-based economy that it brought. Labov found that speakers were calling upon local phonological variables as symbolic capital in the ideological struggle over the island’s fate.

A centralized nucleus in /ay/ and /aw/ is a highly salient feature of Vineyard – and more generally Atlantic offshore island (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1997) – phonology. In recent generations, the nucleus of this diphthong had been lowering to [ɑ], presumably under influence from the mainland. In the struggle over the relation between the Vineyard and the mainland, the difference between the Vineyard and the mainland pronunciations took on symbolic value, as those who had most at stake in resisting mainland influence led a reversal of this lowering. Those engaged in the local fishing economy showed higher nuclei than farmers, or than people engaged in other kinds of work (see Figure 2). Particularly striking is the difference between two pairs of high school boys (Figure 3). The two who are from the fishing end of the island and plan to spend their adulthoods on the island show high rates of centralization, while those from the other end of the island, and who plan to leave the island to pursue their adulthoods, show practically none.

Local identity is not necessarily a simple consensual thing, and the height of the nucleus, originally marking a geographic difference, seems to have come to index a very local ideological struggle. Raised /ay/ meant not simply ‘Vineyard’, but a particular way of life on the Vineyard – one might say, a particular ideological package about what, and who, defines the Vineyard.

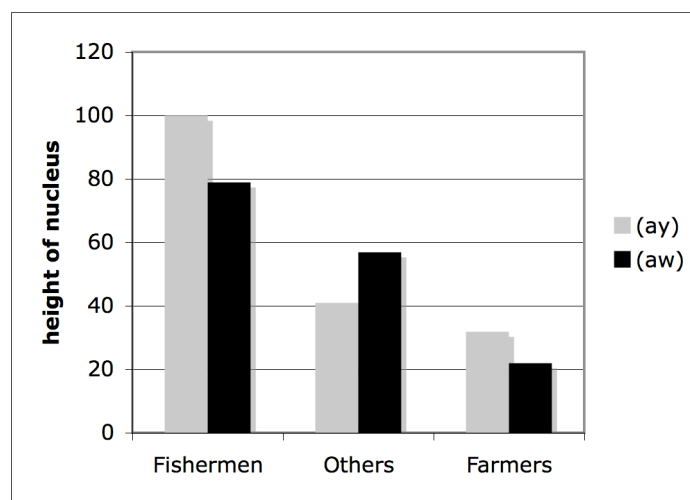


Figure 2. Raising of the nucleus of /ay/ and /aw/ in Martha's Vineyard. The values in this figure are an index of nucleus raising, ranging from [a]=0 to [ə]=3 and multiplied by 100.

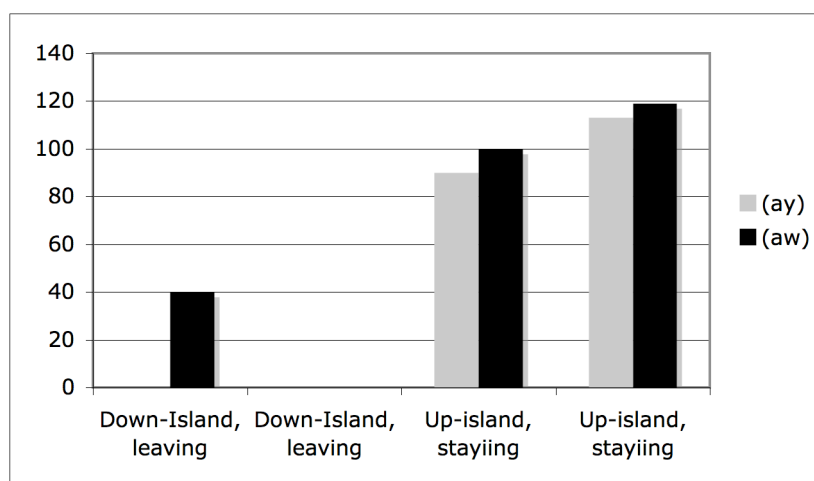


Figure 3. Raising of the nucleus of /ay and /aw/ by four high school boys on Martha's Vineyard

The Martha's Vineyard study focused on local identity, but obviously the Vineyarders' struggles over the future of their island and its relation to powerful off-island economic forces, were deeply embedded in the political economy. Other ethnographic studies of small communities have examined similar phenomena, in which language use articulates with individuals' relation to opportunity in the wider society. Susan Gal's work on language shift in a Hungarian speaking village in Austria (Gal 1979), documents the relation between language shift and individuals' move from the peasant (Hungarian) to the industrial (German) economy. Jonathan Holmquist,

working in Ucieda, a peasant village in the Spanish Pyrenees (Holmquist 1985), examined the same phenomenon, but in a monolingual situation. The traditional, but poorest, form of agriculture in Ucieda was the raising of mountain animals – animals such as goats and sheep that are particularly adapted to the mountain environment. This way of life, among other things, traditionally involves transhumance. Modernity had brought dairy farming to these mountain areas – a form of agriculture that is both more settled and more directly tied to the mainstream economy. And finally, young people began leaving agriculture altogether and moving off to the industrial sector in the nearby town.

The local dialect of Ucieda has posttonic [u] corresponding to Spanish [o] – e.g in the masculine endings of nouns (*trabajo, campo*):

Ucieda: el trabaju del campu no lo saben

Castilian: el trabajo del campo no lo saben

‘field work they don’t know it’

This vowel has been lowering in Ucieda toward the Castilian value along with the move to the mainstream economy. Holmquist found that the height of this vowel distinguished not only between those engaged in agriculture and those engaged in the industrial sector, but between those engaged in traditional mountain agriculture as opposed to the more modern dairy farming. (Figure 4). Note also that it is the women who lead in this change – a pattern that Sue Gal found as well – and a pattern that is no doubt due to the fact that in both communities, agricultural life is particularly unattractive to women, who share in the farm work and do all the housework as well, with little help of modern domestic technology. Women, therefore, are quicker than men to leave the farm and quicker to use language to distance themselves from their current way of life, and once they’re off the farm the gender difference disappears. The other side of this, of course, is that men, who have a greater stake in the peasant economy, lead in resistance to assimilation to the national norm.

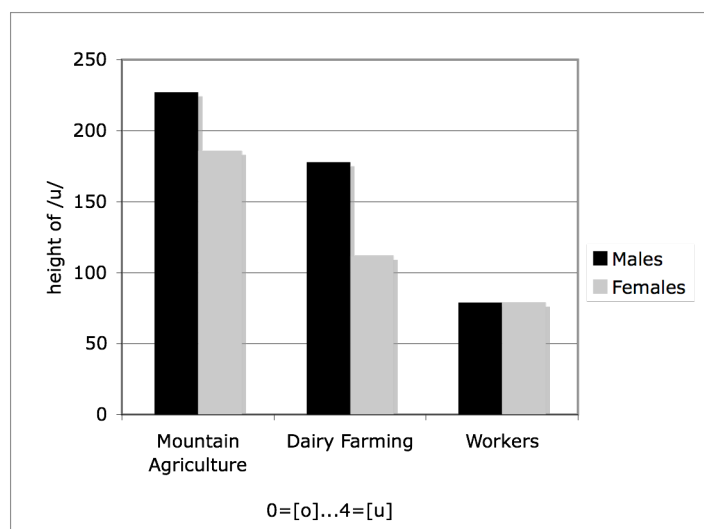


Figure 4. Height of /u/ in Ucieda. From Holmquist (1985). Height index is the average of values attributed to four levels of vowel height from [o] to [u], multiplied by 100

John Rickford's work (Rickford 1986) on a sugar plantation in Guyana uncovered another kind of local categorization based on occupation. In this community, Rickford found a major division between those who worked the sugar, and lived on the plantation (the Estate Class) and (those who worked in the offices and lived off the plantation (the Non-Estate Class). Rickford found a sharp differentiation in verbal culture, an opposition in language ideology, and quite specifically in linguistic production as witnessed in the use of standard English (acrolectal) variants in single pronoun subcategories as shown in Figure 5. This study emphasized that while the vernacular may be stigmatized on a global level, its association with local values and practices gives it positive value on the local level. While a larger study encompassing non-agricultural communities across Guyana might find gradual stratification along the lines found in urban studies, local experience in this community involves no such continuum but conforms more to a conflict model of class, and of linguistic variation.

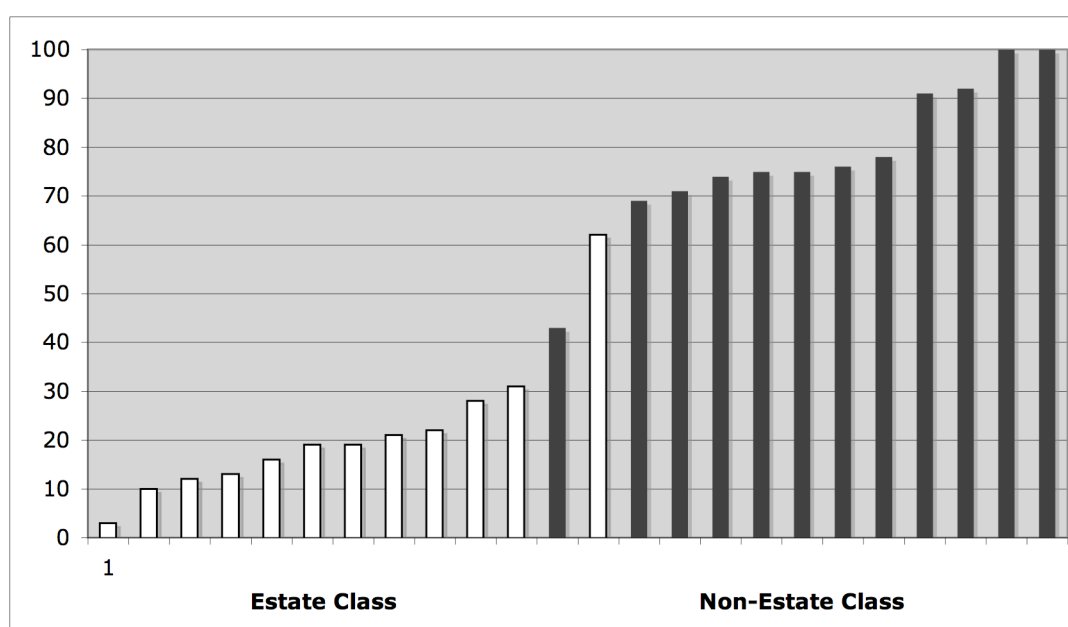


Figure 5. Percentage use of Standard English variants in singular pronoun subcategories among residents of Cane Walk, Guyana. From Rickford (1986).

In an ethnographic study of Belfast, Lesley Milroy (Milroy 1980) explored the positive forces in vernacular usage. Her focus was on social networks – configurations rather than categories – seeking what it is that makes working class speech local. A robust literature has shown that working class people's social networks are more locally based than those of the middle class – that working class people tend to get jobs through family and friendship networks, to live close to their friends and relatives, and to pursue leisure activities with them. The result is greater density and multiplexity of social networks overall. Based on LePage's notion of focusing (LePage 1978), Milroy posited that interacting with the same people in a variety of contexts – work, neighborhood, church, leisure activities, family, etc. – would have a strong vernacular norm-enforcing power. She showed a relation between the use of local vernacular variables and the density and multiplexity of women's working class social networks. This study was followed

by a range of studies showing a relation between the use of local variants and engagement in local ethnically-defined networks as well (Edwards and Krakow 1985; Edwards 1991; Knack 1991).

All of these studies explore the nature of class in local communities, seeking the motivations for those in the lower socioeconomic regions to lead in the use of local variants. But these local communities are not isolated, and the connection between local dynamics and the broader political economy is to be sought in the articulation between the local and the extra local. Eckert's study of adolescents in the Detroit suburbs found an intimate relation between local identities, class, the vernacular, and orientation to the broader local area – the Detroit conurbation. Explanations of the class stratification of variables found in survey studies had all been based on adult status and activities – education, occupation and income. But it is adolescents who lead in sound change and in the use of the vernacular. What, then, are the age-related dynamics behind this adolescent lead, and what is the role of class in adolescent variation? Ethnographic work in the high schools of the predominantly white Detroit suburban area (Eckert, 1989; Eckert, 2000), made it clear that the social energy invested in the development and maintenance of a peer-based social order articulates class in the adolescent population, and organizes the use of variation.

The social order in schools across the Detroit suburbs (and indeed in predominantly white schools across the east and the Midwest of the United States) has long been defined by an opposition between two class-based social categories. In Detroit suburban schools and throughout much of the northeast and Midwest at the time of the study (in the early eighties), the opposition involved two named categories, *Jocks* and *Burnouts*. The Jocks came predominantly from the upper half of the local socioeconomic hierarchy, while the Burnouts came predominantly from the lower half. However, there was sufficient crossover to allow the comparison between parents' class and adolescent class-based category affiliation as constraints in variation. A mismatch between the two would suggest that patterns of variation are not set in childhood but continue to develop along with social identity. The Jocks and the Burnouts constituted corporate middle class, and working class, cultures respectively. Jocks based their networks, identities and social lives in the school's extracurricular sphere, forming a tight and competitive hierarchy, and maintaining cooperative and even collegial relations with teachers and administrators. Through selective performance of roles in this sphere, they built careers that in turn qualified them leave their local area and their high school networks for their next institution, college. Burnouts, on the other hand, almost all pursuing a vocational curriculum, rejected the institution as a locus for social life and identity, and based their networks, identities and social lives in the neighborhood and the broader conurbation. They took an oppositional stance to the school and most school personnel, rejecting their in-loco parentis function and looking to local resources for preparation for their anticipated futures in local industry. While the burnouts sought out urban friends, and frequented urban neighborhoods, cruising strips and parks in search of excitement and experience, the jocks avoided Detroit except for museums and professional sports events. This opposition showed up in symbolic activity from language to clothing (e.g. the burnouts wore urban paraphernalia, including jackets with Detroit on the back while jocks wore school – particularly varsity or cheerleading – jackets).

The opposition between the jocks and the burnouts shows up clearly in their differential use of linguistic resources, as represented here by the use of negative concord, the backing and raising

of the nucleus of /ay/, and the Northern Cities Shift ⁱⁱⁱ (shown in Figure 6). All five vowels involved in the Northern Cities Shift show social correlations in the high school population. The fronting of /æ/, /ow/ and /ɔ/ are older changes, appearing in the speech of Detroit-area speakers of all ages, with values fairly evenly spread through the suburban area. In the high school, girls in all social categories lead boys in these older changes. The backing of /ɛ/ and /ʌ/ are newer, as is the raising of the nucleus of /ay/. These all appear only in the speech of the younger generations, and are more advanced closer to the urban edge, from which they appear to be spreading out into the suburbs. As shown in Figure 7, the burnouts made greater use of all three recent, urban, changes than the Jocks, as well as nonstandard negation. And in every case, the correlation with social category affiliation was more significant than any correlation with parents' socioeconomic status.

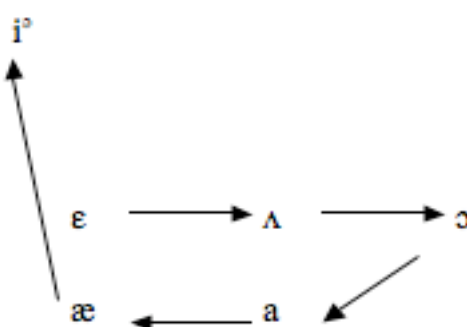


Figure 6. Northern Cities Shift.

These data suggest that social stratification unfolds in very local ways – that broader class correlations are not simply the fallout of education, occupation and income, but reflect local dynamics rooted in practices and ideologies that are in turn shaped by class. The data also suggest that patterns of variation are not set in childhood, but serve as resources in the construction of adolescent social identity.

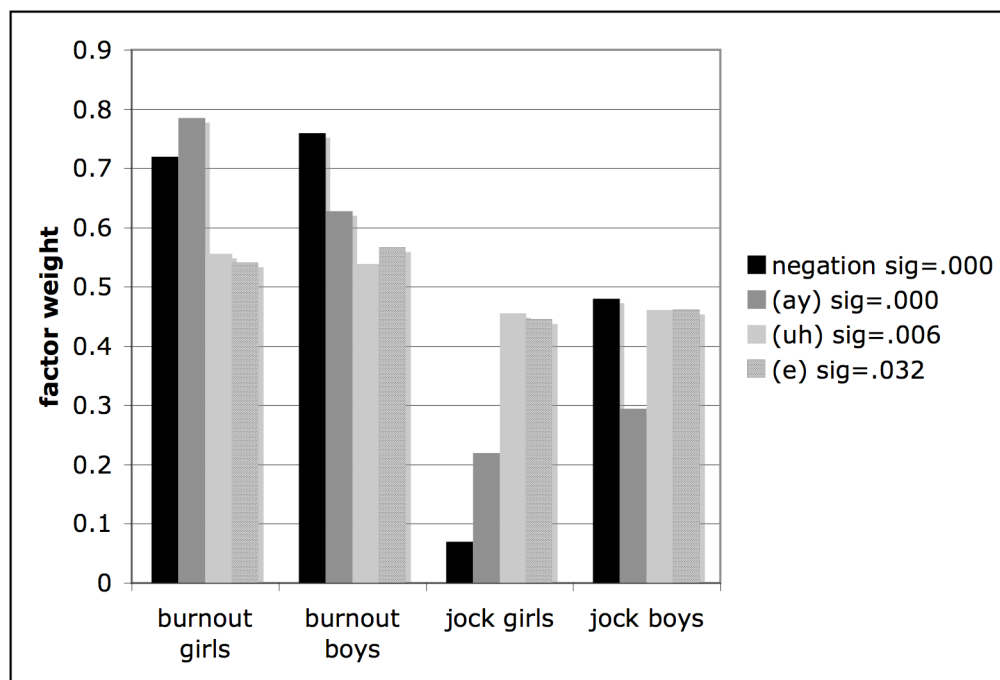


Figure 7. Use of urban variables and negative concord by gender and social category^{iv}.

3.1 Meaning in the second wave

The ethnographic studies of the second wave provided a local perspective on the findings of the survey studies of the first wave, making the connection between macro-sociological categories and the more concrete local categories and configurations that give them meaning on the ground. But like studies in the first wave, second wave studies focused on categories of speakers, and did not deal explicitly with the nature of the indexical relations between variables and social categories. At the height of the first wave, (Brown and Levinson 1979) questioned the view of variables as direct markers of social categories, pointing out that inasmuch as a single variable can be stratified by both class and gender, it would be impossible to say which category a given use is marking. People working in the first wave did recognize a more indirect relation between variation and social categories, but while this relation was invoked on occasion, it was not developed. The focus on the meanings of standard and vernacular as prestigious and stigmatized, respectively, opened the door for mediation among social categories, particularly with the claim that gender correlations are a function of gender-based orientation to the institutions associated with the standard. Accounts of agentive uses of variation, however, generally invoked class – women and the upper middle class were seen as using standard variants to lay claim to higher social status. Trudgill (1972), however, took a step beyond the direct in arguing that middle class men in Norwich adopt vernacular variants in identification with working class physical masculinity. In other words, the meaning of variation builds on stereotypes of working class masculinity, making vernacular variants available to non-working class speakers not as a way of claiming working class status, but as a way of claiming a certain quality associated with the working class. This is precisely the working of indirect indexicality (Silverstein 1976), whereby

linguistic forms index categories not directly, but indirectly, through their association with qualities and stances that are in turn associated with those categories. While first and second wave studies often resorted to indirect indexicality in seeking explanations for the patterns they found, the treatment had a kind of epicyclic theoretical status. The third wave of variation studies strives to incorporate the epicycles into the core of variation theory.

4. The Third Wave of variation studies: Practice and the stylistic perspective

The focus on categories in the first two waves of variation theory was a focus on structure. What is missing from this picture is agency – specifically, the day-to-day activity in which human beings make sense of their lives and move their projects along in the face of constraints imposed by social structure and the power relations that keep that structure in place. This move from the study of structure to the study of practice, giving agency its place in the analysis, has defined the recent history of the social sciences and recent intellectual history more generally (Ortner 1984). It does not negate the importance of structure, but emphasizes the role of structure in constraining practice and, in turn, the role of practice in producing and reproducing structure. In the study of variation, a focus on practice brings meaning into the foreground, as we try to get at what speakers are doing on the ground. At the same time, it moves us closer to the goal of studying the actual process of change.

4.1 Practice

I have already given some background on the role of the jock and burnout categories as local articulations of socioeconomic class in the adolescent age group. In what follows, I will delve more into the everyday practices and concerns that make these categories what they are, in order to get at the meanings behind their linguistic differences. The differences between jocks and burnouts are not trivial, but stem from ideological concerns rooted in a range of experiences over time. I emphasize this because it locates motivations for the use of variation at a deep social and personal level.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977) places the habitus at the heart of the process of social reproduction. The habitus is the lasting set of dispositions – patterns of behavior, affect and thought – that one develops in the course of life in a particular social position. The habitus mediates between social structure and individual behavior, shaping, but not determining, individual action. Most of the jocks came from middle class families, and they were dependent on their parents for care, goods, services and even friendships (through parent-organized play dates). Most of the burnouts came from working class families, for whom neighborhood ties were an important support system for both adults and kids. Kids integrated early into the neighborhood peer community, many of them in the care of older siblings. As a result, they came to rely on age-heterogeneous neighborhood friendship networks for many of the resources that future jocks got from their parents. Elementary school offered the jocks their first freedom to make their own friends, while it interrupted and stigmatized the burnouts' age-heterogeneous networks. American school ideology expects kids to base their friendships in school, in the school's age-graded structure, and in its extracurricular activities. And the limited access to valued roles in these activities embeds these friendships in competitive and hierarchical relations. While this suited the jocks, the burnouts were eager to leave school to rejoin their

neighborhood networks which, as they moved towards adolescence, extended beyond the neighborhood into the larger urban area. Many differences in values and beliefs unfolded from this dynamic (see Eckert 1989). The jocks embraced the competitive hierarchies of the high school's extracurricular sphere, while the burnouts stressed egalitarianism and loyalty to the neighborhood, and resisted school as a force against these values. Kids from working class families who aspired to be jocks suffered from the lack of emotional support in jock networks, and kids from middle class families who became burnouts did so frequently for the emotional support offered in the burnout network. When asked whom they talked to about private personal problems, burnouts generally said they talked to any of the burnouts. Jocks said they either talked to someone who didn't go to their school, or kept things to themselves. Thus differences in social patterns that unfold from larger class concerns reach down and have lasting effects on individuals' emotional makeup, and in this case jocks develop habits of personal relations that are adaptive to a competitive corporate hierarchy, while burnouts develop habits that are adaptive to a solidary working class milieu. This is the nature of social reproduction.

The local opposition between Jocks and Burnouts is embedded in turn in the broader socioeconomic landscape of the Detroit conurbation. Every high school in the Detroit suburban area has Jocks and Burnouts, and the class distinction that they represent in their high schools is in turn embedded in urban geography. Socioeconomic status rises as one moves farther from the city, and Burnouts in schools closer to the city are seen as 'more burned out' than burnouts farther from the city, while jocks in schools closer to the city appear 'burnout-y' to jocks farther into the suburbs. Burnouts from the more suburban schools admire those from the urban periphery as more autonomous, world-worn, emotionally and physically tough, and street-smart; jocks from the urban periphery envy those from the more suburban schools for their affluent sophistication and their greater political and institutional skills. Personal characteristics, then, are associated with different environments within the conurbation, and these characteristics in turn are those represented by the jocks and burnouts in each school. It is in this context that urban sound changes take on social meaning. In each school, Burnouts use more urban variables than jocks, and both jocks and burnouts closer to the city use more urban variables than more suburban jocks and burnouts. Thus the jocks and burnouts are embedded in a coherent sociolinguistic landscape, and meaning is constructed for linguistic variables in the context of socio-geographic ideology as the differences between urban and suburban kids is played out both locally and in the context of urban and suburban linguistic space.

The focus on categories such as jocks and burnouts perpetuates the assumption that variables mark them directly – that, for example, urban variables in suburban Detroit mean 'burnout'. If one looks both within and beyond those categories, however, it becomes apparent that variables attach to these categories only indirectly, via the practices and ideologies that constitute them. To begin with, the jock and burnout categories exist because the social issues and practices that divide them are salient throughout the school population, and a variety of correlations suggest that variables are associated not simply with the polar categories, but with these practices and ideologies.

While no more than half the students in any school identified as jocks or burnouts, the rest referred to themselves as 'in-betweens' – a label that underlines the hegemony of the jock-burnout opposition. The in-betweens located themselves socially with respect to the two polar categories, and in terms of their orientation to the most salient differences between jocks and burnouts – school and its restrictions, the use of controlled substances, and urban orientation.

Someone might say, for example, ‘I’m like a jock because I get good grades, but I’m like a burnout because I like to party.’ Or even, someone might indicate a point representing themselves in a spatial continuum between outstretched arms, one fist representing the jocks and the other representing the burnouts. The burnouts have many ways of engaging in the urban scene – frequenting urban roller rinks, parks and neighborhoods, helping out or working on their own cars at service stations, holding down after-school jobs, and seeking relationships with urbanites. The most visible form of urban engagement is cruising. Urban-oriented suburban adolescents from around the Detroit area drive along set routes from their towns to converge on specified strips along the edges of Detroit. Cruising is a common evening activity, attractive to burnouts and urban-oriented in-betweens, and taboo among most jocks. When the speech sample is increased (from 40 to 70) to include in-betweens, the correlation with the polar categories gives way to a robust correlation between the use of urban and vernacular variants and whether or not one cruises (Figure 8).

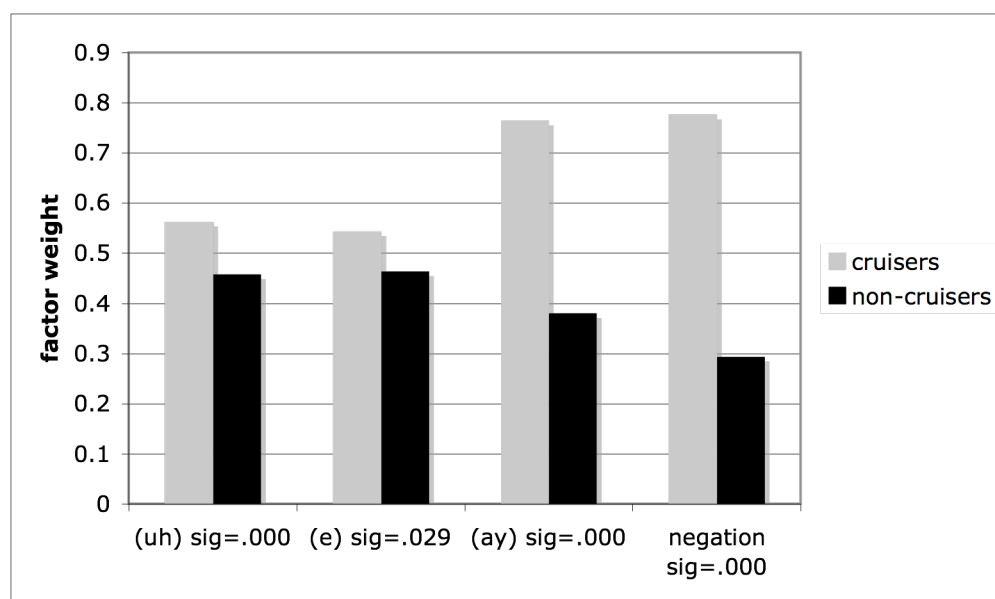


Figure 8. Use of urban variables by cruisers and non-cruisers

Nor are all jocks and burnouts alike. The jocks, burnouts and in-betweens constitute clusters in a continuous friendship network. Figure 9 is a sociogram of the girls^v in the focal graduating class in Belten High. Each circle or oval represents one girl, each line a friendship tie (the length of lines has no significance). The black ovals represent girls who are not in this graduating class – girls who are no longer in school, or are in another graduating class or another school. These girls are concentrated in the Burnout clusters, 1 and 2, palpable evidence of the Burnouts’ outward orientation.

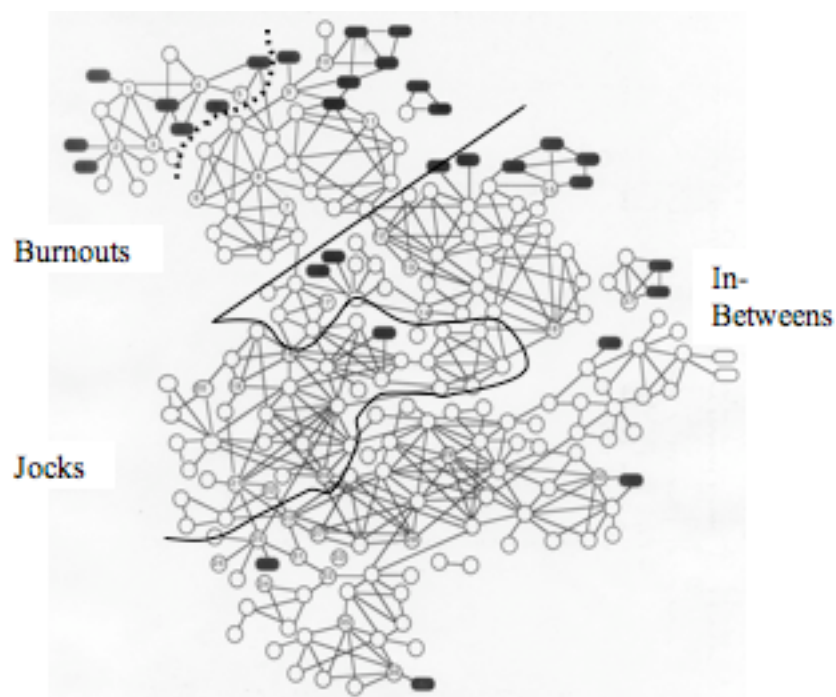


Figure 9. Girls' Network

There are, furthermore, two significantly different clusters of Burnout girls. The dotted line in Figure 9 separates a larger cluster who consider themselves 'regular' or 'normal' burnouts, from a smaller cluster (upper left) who refer to themselves as 'the biggest burnouts' (and who on occasion refer to those in the main cluster as 'jocks'). The 'regular' Burnouts base their Burnout identity primarily in their working class orientation and their anti-school stance. While they are regularly at odds with authority for such things as skipping school, illegal substance use and a general rejection of adult intervention in their personal lives, they do not get into serious trouble. In contrast, the 'biggest' Burnouts, referred to by others as 'burned-out burnouts', pride themselves on their wildness and rebelliousness, staying out all night or all weekend, coming to school on mescaline, and getting in trouble with the police. There is no similar division among the burnout boys. While some boys are considered tougher than others, they do not divide into separate network clusters in this way.

The burned-out burnout girls' extreme behavior extends to their patterns of variation, as shown in Figure 10 (based on each group's deviation from the mean of the entire sample including In-betweens), showing the use of vernacular variables by the burned-out burnout girls, the regular burnout girls, and the jock girls. While the difference between burnouts and jocks remains, it is clear that the burned-out burnout girls account for the more dramatic patterns. And while overall the burnout boys use more negative concord than the burnout girls, the burned-out burnout girls lead the entire school, including burnout boys, in their use of all vernacular variables with the exception of the newest change, /e/ backing. These girls constitute what one might call stylistic *icons*, standing out in the stylistic landscape as social and linguistic prototypes. And while their extreme stylistic displays may shout 'burnout', they shout more particularly about the extreme behaviors that make them burned-out burnouts.

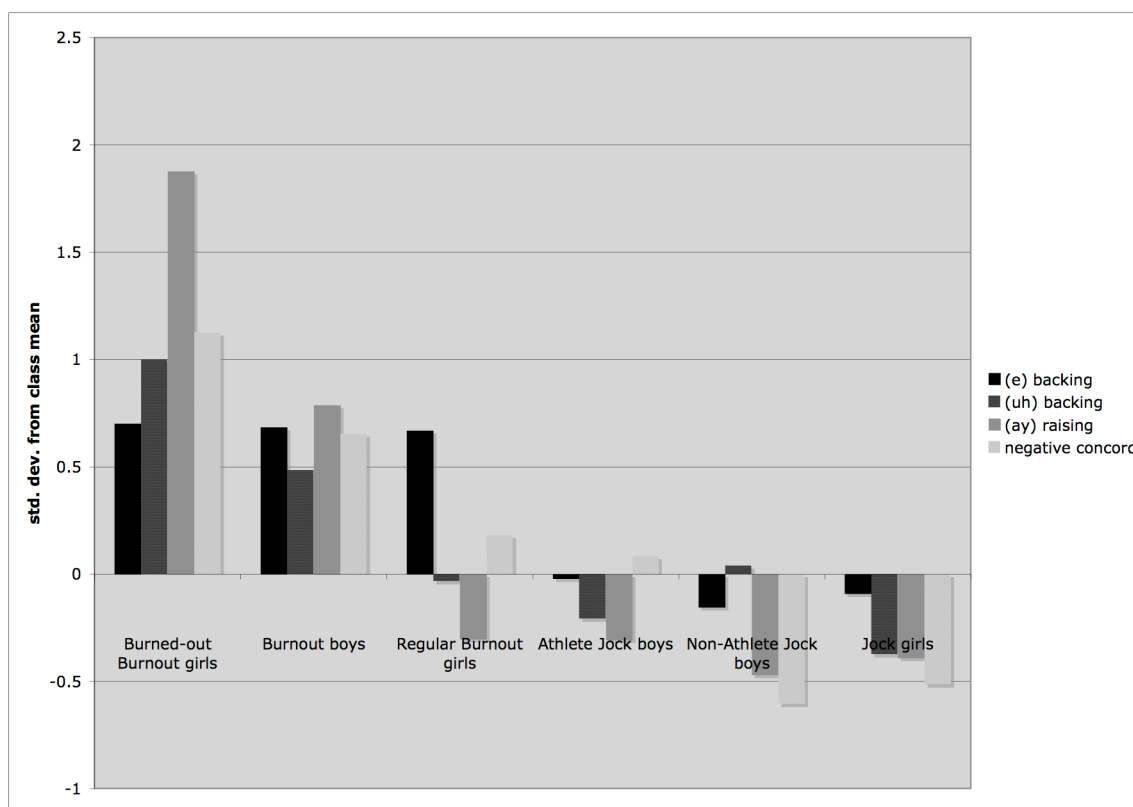


Figure 10. Use of urban variants among six categories of jocks and burnouts

Figure 10 also shows a smaller, but significant, difference between two kinds of male jocks – those whose main activities are athletic, and those whose activities include non-athletic social activities. These two groups of boys are in closely-allied friendship groups, but the student government types put forth more of a corporate image, while the athletes build their personae on ruggedness. It is notable that the only jocks who cruise are in this latter category.

The notion of indirect indexicality has been a focus for some time in the study of language and gender (Ochs 1991), and it is not surprising that some gender differences disappear when we look more closely at more subtle patterns among the jocks and the burnouts. The gender difference among jocks is based on the athletes' use of urban and vernacular variants – particularly negative concord – as the more corporate jock boys emerge as quite similar to the jock girls. Varsity sports do not have the same social value for girls as for boys, and while many of the jock girls are athletes, it is their participation in social activities that wins them their social status and their designation as jocks. The gender difference among burnouts is seriously complicated when we separate the burned-out burnout girls from the regular burnout girls, with the burned-out burnout girls reversing the apparent gender pattern in most cases except the newest change, /e/ backing. In other words, what emerge in the larger population as gender differences reflect something that is only indirectly related to gender, leaving the tougher and

wilder burned-out burnout girls with a more urban vernacular style than their male peers, and the non-athlete jock boys with a corporate style similar to their female peers. Data like these make it apparent that the search for a single difference between male and female speech (such as the common claim that women's speech is more standard than men's) is fundamentally flawed, based on our culture's preoccupation with gender normativity rather than with the scientific evidence. But also, it makes it clear that gender differences in language do not index 'male' and 'female', but the qualities, activities and stances that constitute a variety of ways of being 'male' and 'female'.

Here is the crux of the matter – the indexical value of variation is constructed locally, but around ideological issues that link everyday interactions to the political economy. The jocks and the burnouts owe their very local existence to a very non-local class structure, and it is at the local level that they – along with the in-betweens – live out their places in, and their struggles with, that structure. From orientation to institutions and the urban area to norms and desires in human relations, differences across the local adolescent population – and as articulated in the jock-burnout opposition – tie day-to-day white suburban adolescence to the larger class structure. And it is only at this local level that jocks and burnouts can make indexical moves with respect to the larger structure. At the local level, as Michael Silverstein (2003, p. 193) puts it, 'semiotic agents access macro-sociological plane categories and concepts as values in the indexable realm of the micro-contextual.

4.2 Variation and Stylistic Practice

In the first wave, the concept of style was pared down to focus on a formality continuum, and was applied to the examination of individual variables. While formality is a complex (Irvine 1979) notion that has everything to do with style, its implementation in sociolinguistic interviews has been aimed primarily at capturing speakers' monitoring of the standardness of their own speech. This approach also yielded a treatment of all variables as equivalent, as shifting together as a function of attention paid to speech. In artistic fields, where style is a central construct, style is treated quite fundamentally as multidimensional, and individual styles are described in terms of the form and combination of specific elements. Central to this view of style is the differential contribution of each element.

Third wave studies focus on the use of variation to construct personal and social styles – styles associated with social types. In his study of British youth styles, Dick Hebdige (Hebdige 1984) defined stylistic practice as a process of *bricolage*, in which people combine elements in innovative ways to construct new meanings or new twists on old meanings. In turn, the elements that make up styles gain their meanings through their deployment across styles, which includes both the combinations they enter into and the ways in which they become modified.

The language of jocks and burnouts constitute quite distinct styles that go far beyond the variables discussed above, and these linguistic styles are embedded in broader social styles that create a highly visible differentiation from adornment to movement to broader patterns of consumption. Judith Irvine (Irvine 2001) emphasizes that style is a system of distinctiveness, a style gaining its meaning only through its relation to other styles. She also emphasizes that these relations are ideologically mediated. This view, of course, is second nature to linguists, and is clearly illustrated in the stylistic practice of jocks and burnouts. Every element of jock and burnout style is based in the ideological oppositions that gave rise to, and define, these

categories. Clothing (Eckert 1980), for example, makes jocks and burnouts unmistakable. Every element of their clothing oppositions is based in their ideological oppositions: burnouts wear Detroit and Ford factory jackets while jocks wear school, varsity and cheerleading jackets. Furthermore burnouts wear these jackets in school, symbolizing and facilitating their fleeting presence in the school, whereas jocks plant their jackets in their lockers. In conscious rejection of the school's in loco parentis role, burnouts do not use their lockers or the cafeteria. Burnouts wear working clothes while jocks wear preppy styles. And the burnouts' clothes are all in dark colors, while jocks wear pastels, in keeping with their opposing orientations to youth, innocence, and mood. This opposition extends to paraphernalia (such as wallet chains), hair styles, makeup, posture, gait, territory, substance use and food consumption (Eckert 1989). And all of these differences are highlighted by their concentration in separate school territories – the jocks in prime visible real estate, the burnouts in the outdoor smoking area. Jock and burnout stylistic oppositions, in other words, articulate their ideological opposition across the board.

This stylistic activity does not just mark pre-existing categories, but is part of their continued reproduction, and the energy that goes into this reproduction underlines the importance of this opposition in the community. Stylistic practice, in other words, is anything but trivial. Archaeologist Ian Hodder emphasizes the relation between stylistic and ideological activity in cultural artifacts:

‘... decoration and shape distinction may relate not so much to the existence of social categories but to a concern with those categories.... Where social groups are threatened or contradicted, or are otherwise concerned with self-legitimation, 'stylistic behaviour', in the form of numerous contrasts and variations in pottery, stone, metal and other types, may be most marked. Stylistic behaviour is not linked directly to group size but to ideologies and strategies of legitimation.’
(Hodder 1982)

Stylistic practice takes place in moment-to-moment adjustments, as stylistic agents encounter styles that they interpret as standing in some important relation to their own. Work on speech accommodation (Giles 1984) brings this process down to the face-to-face level, as speakers adjust their styles in response to their interlocutors. Alan Bell's audience design model, based on close-up examinations of style shifting, views stylistic variation as accommodation to one's audience – specifically to the audience's social category – actual (Bell 1984) or imagined (Bell 2001). Audience design is indeed central to variation and speech more generally, and Bell's approach emphasizes the encounters in which inter-group distinctiveness is made immediately salient. It is in encounters with styles (face-to-face and otherwise) that speakers recognize and interpret linguistic differences. But I would go on to argue that the recognition does not stop at an association between a linguistic feature and a social category, but involves an interpretation of the social significance of this association – and of the encounters in which the association is made. It is in these moments of recognition that a salient feature may be abstracted from the wider linguistic style, and imbued with social meaning.

Stylistic elaboration is what makes Jocks and Burnouts visible in the school, and what makes them local interpretable landmarks in the social landscape. Such sociolinguistic landmarks serve a similar purpose on the national level – Valley Girls, New York Jews, Cholos, Hillbillies, New

Jersey Mafiosi are among a large number of well-known stereotypes with clear linguistic styles. Sociolinguists have generally focused on the use of distinct sociolects by their native speakers, to build and maintain solidarity within the group, and to perform identities both within and beyond the social group (Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994). At the same time, they provide resources that speakers across the country appropriate on a regular basis, invoking aspects of the stereotypes that go with them. While the study of variation has always focused on speakers' use of the resources of their own dialects, other dialects provide quite important resources for stylistic performances. White American teenagers, for example, appropriate features of African American Vernacular English to index admired aspects of African American and Hip Hop identity (Bucholtz 1999; Cutler 1999). Nik Coupland (Coupland 2000) has shown how a radio DJ regularly pulls in resources from surrounding dialects for a variety of expressive purposes. He invokes Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1981) and his notion of a 'language collective' in a general argument that extends the range of legitimate resources well beyond those common to variation studies. The dialectological origins of variation study, focusing us on resources deemed to be authentic parts of a locality, have put resources from other speech communities in a category of irrelevant outliers, making them illegitimate objects of variation study. But 'outside' resources incorporated into the regular linguistic practices of a community become part of that dialect's resources. We only have to consider the use of Yiddishisms in American English, and more saliently in the current immigration climate, Jane Hill's work on American's use of Mock Spanish (Hill 1993) shows how the stylistic use of stereotyped Spanish invokes pejorative stereotypes, building racial ideology quite centrally into English.

Pointing to these stereotypes emphasizes more conscious stylistic choices, and because of the traditional variation focus on unconscious production, this kind of stylistic practice is commonly considered linguistically uninteresting. However, intentional stylistic work provides the backbone for the construction of meaning in variation – the stereotypes are not random, but reinforce important social divisions and hierarchies, and less intentional patterns of variation cannot be understood without reference to these. For this reason, intentional performances, such as media portrayals, can be important components of an examination of variation. Speakers can also do intentional performances of their own dialects. Natalie Schilling-Estes (Schilling-Estes 1998) has shown how the commodification of the Ocracoke 'brogue' has led certain speakers to volunteer heightened performances of the brogue, emphasizing features that are considered particularly salient. In fact, stylistic activity runs the entire gamut from quite automatic accommodation to completely contrived performances, and all of these offer their own kind of evidence of the social meaning of variation.

The basic tenet of the third wave is that variation constitutes an indexical system that embeds ideology in language, and that enables the form of speech itself to act upon society. Thus it begins with a set of hypotheses that are quite distinct from those underlying the first two waves. I start with a set of working hypotheses:

- Variation expresses the full range of social concerns in a given community. This is an ambitious, and no doubt overblown, hypothesis, but a reasonable point of departure for the exploration of social meaning.
- The use of variation does not simply reflect, but constructs, social meaning, hence is a force in social change. To observe this process, we need to study variation not just in the aggregate, but as it unfolds in discourse.

- The meaning of individual variables is underspecified, and takes on specificity in the context of discourse, and crucially, in the construction of speech styles. The study of variation, therefore, must center on stylistic practice.

These hypotheses are best illustrated in a few early studies in the third wave.

4.3 Style, personae and meaning

Qing Zhang (Zhang 2005; Zhang 2008) illustrates all of these points in her study of a new and growing young elite in Beijing, often referred to as ‘Chinese yuppies.’ Managers in the new foreign-owned financial sector, the yuppies are the vanguard in the construction of a materialistic and cosmopolitan life style, distinct from that of their more ‘traditional’ peers in state-owned businesses. The yuppies’ value in the global financial market depends on their ability to project a cosmopolitan self, and they do so through the consumption of home furnishings, clothing, toys and leisure activities, and the construction of a new and distinctive cosmopolitan speech style. This style also involves a new western style gender differentiation, for while the state owned businesses stress gender equality and similarity, the financial sector follows western practices of hiring and moving women based on their decorative value in the front office. This value depends on linguistic skills, including expertise in other languages and a more general crisp feminine style of Mandarin.

Perhaps the most salient resource in this linguistic construction is the use of the full tone, which is a feature of non-mainland Mandarin and associated with the global market, most particularly of Hong Kong. This variable (Figure 11), completely foreign to Beijing and never appearing in the speech of the managers in state-owned businesses, brings Yuppie speech into the transnational sphere. The yuppie women lead the yuppie men in the use of this feature, giving their speech a crisp ‘staccato’ sound.

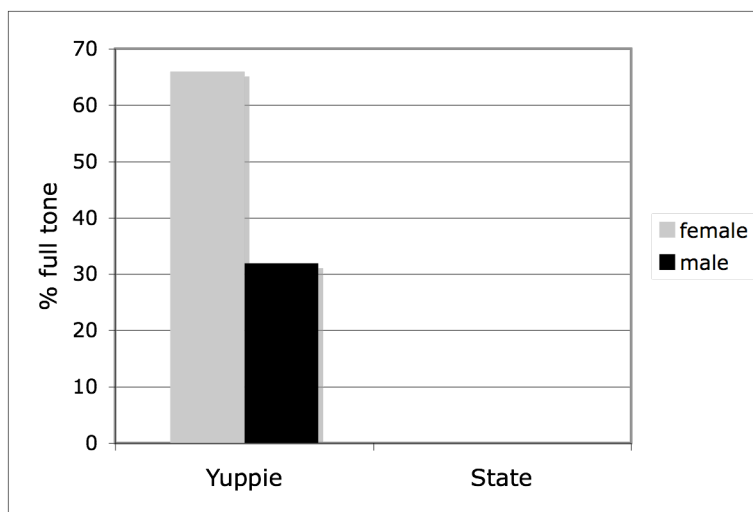


Figure 11. Percent full tone in the speech of Beijing Yuppies and managers in state-owned businesses

Meanwhile, local Beijing features play a quite different role in Yuppie style. The rhotacization of finals is probably the best-known diagnostic variable of Beijing speech, and is popularly seen as giving Beijing speech a distinctive ‘smooth’ quality. Zhang (2008) traces the indexical value of

rhotacization in popular discourse, offering a remarkable example of enregisterment (Agha 2003). Since rhotacization can be marked orthographically, Zhang was able to trace the use of rhotacization in the ‘Beijing-flavor’ literature of the twentieth century^{vi}. It is used in this literature to portray the speech of a prototypical male Beijing urban persona, the ‘smooth operator’ – a man who always manages to get by no matter what the system may throw in his way. Figure 12 shows that the state managers show considerable rhotacization, while their yuppie colleagues show a subdued use of this variable – particularly the women, for whom a ‘smooth operator’ persona would detract from the ‘crisp’ persona expected of women.

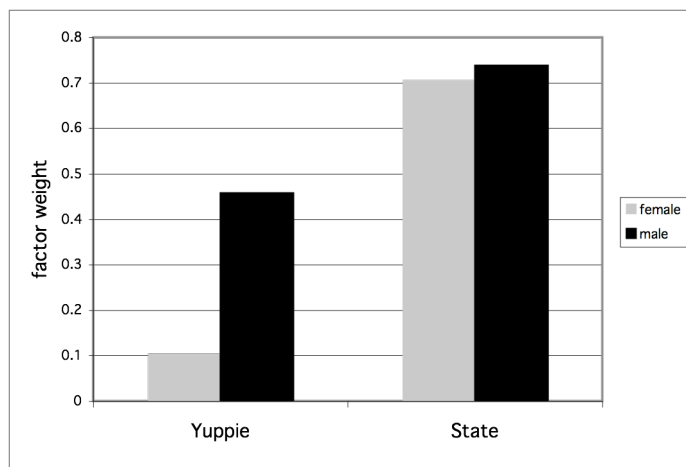


Figure 12. Rhotacization of finals in the speech of Beijing Yuppies and managers in state-owned businesses

Another Beijing feature, the interdental pronunciation of /z/, is commonly associated with another local character, the ‘alley saunterer’ – a feckless urban character who hangs around the now disappearing *hutongs* of Beijing waiting for something to happen. As Figure 13 shows, the yuppies stay away from this one altogether, as casual fecklessness is not a desirable trait for a transnational business person. One of the yuppies in Zhang’s study, in fact, commented to her that he would never use the interdental /z/ because, after all, he is not an alley saunterer.

From an indexical perspective, what is important in this work is that the Beijing variables are not simply associated with Beijing, but with particular Beijing urban stereotypes whose local histories highlight particular urban qualities. Similarly, the yuppies’ use of a non-native full tone allows them to incorporate qualities associated with the cosmopolitan flavor of the global Chinese financial world. It is particularly important to emphasize that in combining these variables in the ways they do, the yuppies are not employing existing and stable linguistic styles, but combining local and extra-local resources to construct a new style. And this stylistic construction is part and parcel of the construction of yuppie-hood. While material consumption – trendy fashions and the latest electronic gadgets can index the distinctive wealth and modernity of this emerging category, their new linguistic style allows them to index their cosmopolitanism

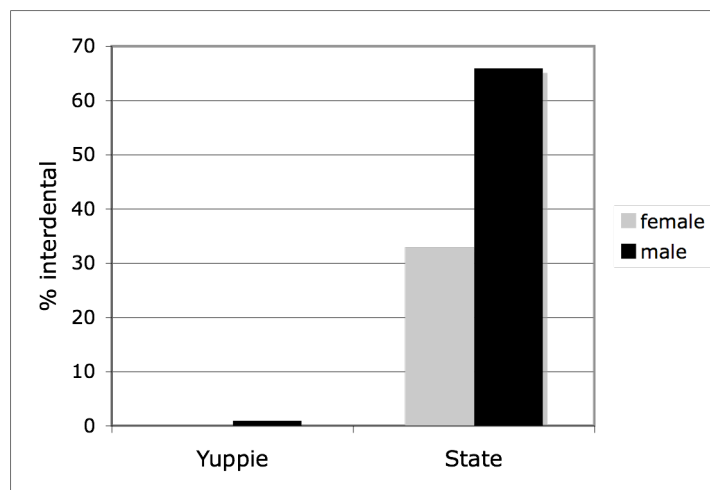


Figure 13. Percent interdental realization of /z/ in the speech of Beijing Yuppies and managers in state-owned businesses.

at every moment. While the emerging class split in China can be seen abstractly in purely economic terms, this stylistic practice is essential to the yuppies' qualification for, and participation in, the new wealthy elite. The yuppies' stylistic practice, in other words, is part of what is changing the social landscape of Beijing.

/t/ release in American English. Variables tend to be associated with categories of people, deriving indexical value from the social differences that give rise to these categories and the stereotypes that keep them salient. But social categories are not the only source of meaning. /t/ release in American English is a particularly interesting variable because of its range of sources and indexical potential. It has not been included in studies in the first two waves, possibly because it is not known to be a regional feature or to be socially stratified, and it is not particularly prominent in the standard-vernacular opposition. It does, though, play a clear role in stylistic practice.

The release of intervocalic /t/ is a feature of British English in salient contrast with American English flapping, and the release of both intervocalic and final /t/ is a common resource for Americans imitating British English. It is not likely to be heard as British unless it co-occurs with other British features, but when it does, it invokes the age-old stereotype of the British, and British English, as superior, intelligent and educated, and Americans as rough upstarts. Not completely unrelatedly, but also by virtue of its status as hyperarticulation, released /t/ is also associated with a school-teachery standard – with clarity and meticulousness. And meticulousness, along with the sheer force of what is heard as standard, can invoke propriety, politeness, and finally social status. /t/ release also involves fortition, and can be forceful and emphatic. And forcefulness and emphasis in turn can index states of mind such as excitement, anger or exasperation.

This range of meanings outlines an indexical field (Eckert 2008), a constellation of ideologically related meanings, any of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable. Depending on the context of use, a variable can invoke meanings in different areas of that constellation. Several studies of /t/ release can illustrate this.

In an ethnographic study of a Northern California high school, Mary Bucholtz (1996) noted the use of /t/ release by a group of girls fashioning themselves as geeks. These girls saw themselves as maverick intellectuals – not as goody-goody good students, but as smarter than their teachers. Their use of /t/ release was a prominent resource in their development of a distinctive ‘intellectual’ verbal style.

/t/ release is also often heard as Jewish, and particularly as Orthodox. Sarah Benor (2001) examined this variable in a study of kids in an Orthodox community in California, and found that those who had been to Yeshiva released their /t/s more than those who had not. Benor’s work more generally documents the acquisition of Yeshivish, a highly reified Orthodox style that is quite consciously influenced by Yiddish, and this connection no doubt over-determines the value of release in much the same way that the British connection does in other communities.

At the same time, /t/ release has been identified as a feature of gay speech. In a study of a radio debate between a gay-identified lawyer and a straight-identified lawyer, Kathryn Campbell-Kibler, Sarah Roberts and Robert Podesva (Podesva, Roberts et al. 2002) found that the gay-identified lawyer indeed released more /t/ than his opponent. Reluctant to subscribe to a monolithic view of ‘gay’ speech, Podesva has continued this work in a study of gay professionals (Podesva 2004) as they adjust their style moving from more to less saliently gay situations. Comparing the language of a medical student, as he moved from the clinic with patients to a barbecue with his friends, Podesva found a subtle pattern in the use of /t/ release. The medical student, Heath, adopts a highly competent and educated persona in the clinic, and a playful ‘bitchy diva’ persona among his friends at the barbecue. As Table 1 shows, Heath uses significantly more instances of /t/ release in the clinic than at the barbecue, in keeping with the precise, intelligent and educated persona expected of a physician. At the barbecue, however, while his /t/ release is less frequent, the actual bursts are significantly longer. Podesva argues that the long burst is a particular way of exaggerating /t/ release, and that what is being conveyed is a kind of fussy hyper-articulation. In other words, the exaggerated release is intended not to convey intelligence, but prissiness – a parody of school-teacheriness – in keeping with the ‘bitchy diva’ persona that Heath enjoys performing with his friends. It is particularly interesting that this variable is not binary, not simply a matter of aspirated or unaspirated, but continuous, with length of the aspiration intensifying its meaning.

/t/ release, then, carries meanings that may well derive from emphasis and clarity, but its precise meaning in actual use depends on the particular style that it’s incorporated into – Orthodox Jew (learned), California geek girl (smart), Gay diva (prissy). It does not, on its own, index the social categories that use it in their styles. In the same way, released /t/ does not on its own constitute a style. Podesva has shown a stylistic co-occurrence of /t/ release with falsetto (Podesva 2007), and with innovative variants of the California Vowels /ae/ and /ow/ (Podesva 2009) in gay performative speech. The study of the indexical value of variation, then, requires an exploration of the use of variables across styles, and the ways in which linguistic resources combine to constitute styles.

The study of /t/ release raises the prospect that just as the meanings of variables may be abstract, so may the phonetic resources themselves. Specifically, a variety of variables may have in common phonetic processes that have some general indexical value. An important source of the indexical value of /t/ release is hyper-articulation, and this value may well extend to hyper-

articulation more generally. At the same time, some variables may enter the ideological reach of hyper-articulation without actually being phonetically opposed in this way. For instance, English speakers – who commonly refer to the apical form of (ING) as ‘dropping their Gs’ – apparently view the apical form as hypo-articulated. Central to this perception is a view of the velar form as a full form and therefore effortful, and of the apical form as a reduced form hence a sign of lack of effort (Campbell-Kibler 2005). An apparent absence of effort can be further construed as a result of relaxation or laziness, not caring, or even rebellion, and by extension, impoliteness.

Kathryn Campbell-Kibler’s experimental work (Campbell-Kibler 2007; Campbell-Kibler 2007) using advanced matched guise techniques has probed the indexical value of variation in (ING). She has found that hearers associate the velar variant of (ING) with education, intelligence, formality and articulateness, and the apical variant with a lack of these qualities. But they interpret a particular use of a variant against the background of expectations based on their general impression of the speaker, which they may glean from the style more generally and from content. Listeners, both southern and northern, expect to hear the apical form from people they judge to be southerners, and the velar form from people they judge to be northerners, urban, and educated. The common southern stereotype also applies in this case, as listeners – again both southern and northern – judge users of the apical form to be rural, and relatively uneducated. These assumptions clearly underlie listeners’ evaluations of specific uses of the variable – the use of the unexpected form is evaluated as a social move – a display of pretension, lack of sincerity, etc.

The continuum between hyper- and hypo-articulation plays a central role in language ideology. Until the people discussed above studied /t/ release, the only time linguists had paid attention to stop release in American English was in the study of cluster reduction in African American Vernacular English. These are probably not entirely independent linguistic facts. While cluster reduction in AAVE may be historically unrelated to unreleased /t/ in Standard American English, the presence or absence of word-final /t/ is highly salient in the social evaluation of the speech of African Americans. Julie Sweetland reports (p.c.) that African American school children emphasize this variable when imitating Standard English. And Andrea Kortenhoven (p.c.) reports that her group of African American friends in high school had a special stylistic feature, the use of antyways for anyway. Seen as school-teachery talk, this insertion of consonants was no doubt in recognition of this particular aspect of the distinctiveness between standard English and AAVE. Sensitivity to /t/ release, then, seems to permeate US language ideology and offer material for the construction of local stylistic features.

We will want, therefore, to look beyond individual variables, or variables that are linked simply by their co-occurrence in regional dialects, to general phonetic processes which may have a more abstract indexical value. Fortition and lenition, for example, may serve emphatic purposes similar to hyper-articulation, but their role in clarity may be more complex. (TH,DH) stopping, for example, is certainly used emphatically, and in dialects in which it occurs frequently, it might even be used for clarity. However, it does not enter into the indexical area of refinement. One might also consider that basic uses of hyper-articulation for clarity and emphasis are in part iconic. Iconicity, of course, requires conventionalization, but the iconic potential of some phonetic resources may predetermine their basic stylistic uses, and render them more universal. Other kinds of iconic potential, such as sound symbolism or even facial gestures involved with lip rounding or spreading, may well contribute to the indexical potential of vowel shifts. Work in progress on the speech of preadolescents (Eckert in press) shows a significant relation between

the backing of low vowels and the expression of negative emotional states. While it may seem that this is a different order of things from the use of variation to index social categories or identities, emotional differences enter into social differences as well. Jocks, for example, take pride in their happy demeanor, while Burnouts consider Jocks' perennial smiles to be fake, and consider problems to be an integral part of who they are individually and collectively. Emotional states, in other words, are central to Jock and Burnout identity – and style.

5. Conclusion

My use of the term 'wave' may seem to imply that each wave supercedes and replaces the preceding. In fact, each wave adds to the preceding. While it should no longer be possible to consider variation as simply marking macro-sociological categories, it is fruitless to consider local uses of variation without reference to the structure that those categories articulate on the local level. Without survey studies of variation, we lose the larger structure, and without studies of local categories we lose the connection between the local and the macro-sociological. The third wave moves us away from the macro-sociological by looking into people's moment-to-moment negotiation of selves as a personal and individual dynamic. At the same time, though, it is tied inextricably to the larger social order as our joys and our woes are shaped by whether we're rich or poor, male or female, white or African American, old or young. I am proposing, in other words, not a change, but an expansion, of how we study variation. Whatever potential the study of variation may have for our understanding of the formal linguistic system, it also constitutes in itself a powerful semiotic system.

The third wave of variation studies also affects how we think about meaning in language. Central to the study of variation has been the notion that phonological variants constitute different ways of saying the same thing. This assumption is compatible with the exclusive focus in linguistics on propositional meaning, and with a view of variation as simply marking social address. One has to ask, however, if people at different places in the social order are ever quite saying the same thing. Beatriz Lavandera argued in 1978 that the issue of social meaning becomes more fraught in the case of morpho-syntactic alternatives, which may have subtle differences in meaning (she was particularly talking about the alternation between active and passive). In that case, social differences in variation could result from social differences in the meanings people are expressing. When we take the perspective that variables carry complex indexical meanings well beyond place in the macro-sociological matrix, we encounter a similar issue for all variation – phonological as well as morphosyntactic and lexical. Certainly the distinction between variation and pragmatics blurs when we consider that, for instance, nasality can change the force of an utterance by indexing sarcasm – or that the backing of a vowel can do the same by indexing a negative emotional state. This, of course, remains to be studied, but the potential is clear.

I am also not arguing that all variation is socially meaningful, but certainly all variation has the potential to take on meaning. I assume that the Northern Cities Shift will happen regardless of what the Jocks and Burnouts do. However, these changes are available to take on meanings associated with the urban area from which they spread precisely because they are fleeting. They don't spread because Burnouts pick them up, but Burnouts pick them up and even accelerate them because they're specific to the city. The indexicality of phonological variables is not as transparent as the use of mitigating and honorific particles. But it is precisely their fluidity that

makes them available for a variety of social purposes. What is required is enough time and enough continuity – and enough reason – to conventionalize the relation between a variable and a social meaning. It is no doubt for this reason, as Niloofar Haeri (1997) has argued, that the long-term stable variables such as (ING), have fairly clear meanings – what are commonly referred to as linguistic stereotypes – while changes that are moving through communities are more fleeting resources and are available to take on meaning in virtue of their temporariness. As long as our focus remains on sound change, we won't be able to do this process justice, because we will be looking at the most evanescent end of the variation continuum. A focus on social meaning requires that we begin with a view not just to regional variables and changes in progress, but to the variables that appear to be exploited for social meaning, whatever their origins. Up until now, interests having little to do with meaning have determined which variables have been studied. In the case of phonological variation, the overwhelming interest in sound change has focused analysts on regional features, particularly regional vowel shifts. Certain other phonological variables have been selected for their clearly stigmatized status, e.g. (TH/DH) stopping, or their ubiquitous role in style shifting, e.g. (ING). Also, the interest in the vernacular, and particularly the educational treatment and consequences of vernacular speech, has led in the case of morphological and syntactic variation to a focus on stigmatized vernacular grammatical patterns^{vii}. As a result, the issue of social meaning has not been approached directly but has been an afterthought of studies of other issues. The enterprise of studying variation as an indexical system takes meaning as a point of departure rather than the sound changes or structural issues that have generally governed what variables we study and how we study them. This makes potential meaning the main criterion for the choice of variables to study, leading us to pursue variables that have not heretofore been part of the analytic repertoire.

When we talk about the conventionality of language, we speak as if conventions are static. But it may be more productive to think of language as a practice inseparable from conventionalization – a continual making and remaking of convention. It is only from this perspective that the promise of a study of change in progress can be completely realized – that we can have the kind of dynamic view of language that Weinreich, Labov and Herzog originally led us to expect. Neither language nor the social world is static – it is in the continual articulation of the two that people create meaning.

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Notes

ⁱ The standard sociological measures of class employed in these studies are numerical scales based on level of education, occupation and income. This yields a linear scale, suggesting a homogeneous continuum from the chronically unemployed through well-to-do professionals. (The fabulously rich and the true upper class, and the urban underclass, have not been systematically included in community studies).

ⁱⁱ Ethnicity is not included here because it has played a liminal role in variation studies. In a few cases (Labov 1966, Laferriere 1979, Horvath 1985), ethnicity has been examined as a primary variable in a variation study. In most cases, however, the dialects of oppressed minorities (most particularly African Americans and Latinos) have been studied separately from their co-territorial white dialects.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Labov, Yeager and Steiner (1994) and Labov (1994) for detailed descriptions of this shift.

^{iv} The y axis shows factor weights from multivariate analysis using GOLDVARB, developed by David Sankoff and David Rand, and (in the case of the vowel changes) controlling for phonetic constraints.

^v The boys form a network that corresponds to the girls' network in general structure.

^{vi} Miyako Inoue (2006) details the analogous history of Japanese 'women's language', in which features of this style are circulated in the dialogue of women's magazines.

^{vii} A notable exception to this is Rickford et al 1995.