Language and power in the heterosexual market

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Gender and sexuality are not so much individual properties as social arrangements, and the relation between either of them and sociolinguistic variation lies in the dynamics that unfold in those social arrangements, and in their role in the political economy. Gender and sexuality can also not be considered separately, for the gender of one's sexual partners is salient only because in this particular society and at this particular historical juncture, there is a strict hegemonic division into two gender categories, and an imperative that sexual activity should occur only across categories. And this division involves a central institution of long-term cross-category alliances that are basic to the system of economic exchange. Power is closely tied to heterosexuality, and a certain amount of that power lies in the potential for heterosexual partnerships to enhance social and economic positions at the individual and family levels. Our discourses of romance allow most of us to live in denial of the economic aspects of heterosexuality, but as I will argue here, our earliest experiences of romance are quite fundamentally about the relation between social power and heterosexuality. In what follows, I will relate developments in phonological variation to the emergence of a peer-based social order among preadolescents – a social order in which status and power are directly linked to heterosexual practice.

The preadolescent heterosexual market

The study of sociolinguistic variation has been gradually making its way backwards in the life cycle, with its roots in studies of adult variation that have shown robust correlations between a wide range of variables and speakers' class, gender and ethnicity. Studies of adolescent communities (Eckert 1989; Fought 1999; Eckert 2000; Mendoza-Denton 2008) have moved things back a life stage, showing equally robust correlations between phonological variables and participation in specifically adolescent social categories. It is clear that by the time kids are well into adolescence, the age cohort has constructed a social order that is sufficiently integrated to support structured social-indexical activity. Furthermore, individuals' patterns of linguistic variation are, by this time, better predicted by their own forms of engagement in the peer-based social order than their family class or ethnic origins. In this paper, I move back one more life stage to preadolescence – the time when an age cohort moves away from childhood in the transition to adolescence. Like adolescence, this life stage involves considerable symbolic activity, and the motivation behind it is not the decision to be a jock or a burnout, but to be a teenager. What gets engaged here is what I call the developmental imperative (Eckert 2000) – the basic childhood need to grow up – to not be called 'a baby.'

In preadolescence, children begin to move away from an identity based in the family to an identity based primarily in a peer social structure. Viewed from the perspective of the larger social dynamic, preadolescence is when the kids in an age cohort develop a cohort-based social order, constructing non-family-based social categories and norms that regulate status, goods, services, and rights. And, importantly, they come to think of their joint selves as a structured social entity. I locate my discussion of language and sexuality in this life stage, because it is in this emerging social order that heterosexuality is instituted as the hegemonic life mode. And it is in this early social order that kids' sociolinguistic competence expands to engage with the wider social world. Studies of social and linguistic development often view adult behavior as the target, and stages in between as simply progress towards that target. While this is reasonable in some ways, it is counterproductive for the understanding of the development of sociolinguistic variation. Sociolinguistic competence is not the ability to perform and perceive adult patterns of variation, but to understand the social indexical nature of linguistic variation, quite independently of the categories that variation happens to be indexing in a particular time and place. Studies (e.g. Roberts 1995; Foulkes, Docherty et al. 1999; Foulkes, Docherty et al. 2005) have shown that very small children are exposed to systematic social variability and that they develop linguistic constraints for what will later emerge in their speech as sociolinguistic variables. It is also clear that very small children attune to, and can perform, social differences in adult speech (e.g. Andersen 1990) as a function of the social categories that make up their domestic world. It makes sense then that small children's perceptions of gender are based in the gender dynamics they experience in that sphere. (Needless to say, I do not limit this sphere to any nuclear household, but to whatever relationships children develop while at this life stage). While it remains to be seen how the social use of phonological variation develops in the early years, I would argue that the patterns small children hear and produce are based first in relations within and around the family – primarily relations of power and affect – and that their use of variation follows the social changes in their lives from there.

The data I will be presenting are from a longitudinal and ethnographic study of an age cohort of kids in a predominantly white Anglo middle class elementary school in Northern California[1]. I chose to follow a cohort through fifth and sixth grades in order to witness the emergence of a peer-based social order. I was particularly interested in gender, because although gender is quite salient to kids from a very early age, systematic gender differences in phonological variation do not emerge until preadolescence or early adolescence. (It is clear that there are gender differences in language among small children, but they do not seem to involve the kinds of segmental variables that sociolinguists have traditionally studied.) As they approach adolescence, females begin to lead males in the use of standard variants of stable sociolinguistic variables, and in the use of innovative forms in sound changes in progress. In other words, it is at this point that the common adult pattern begins to set in. The big gender question (aside from problems with treating male and female as homogeneous categories) is why these particular patterns. And in the present context, I'm particularly interested in why girls begin to lead boys in sound changes in progress. I have long argued (Eckert 1990) that females use variation for social indexical purposes more than males – and that, among

other things, females are more licensed than males to be flamboyant. I will follow up on that in what follows.

A good deal of attention has been paid to gender segregation in the childhood years – to kids' general preference for same-gender play groups beginning as early as the age of three (Maccoby 1998), and then diminishing in adolescence. This is an extremely important part of the gender dynamic and is clearly relevant to gender differentiation in language. However, I would argue that it is not the separation itself that is at issue in variation – that is, I would not go for a Bloomfieldian argument that linguistic divergence results from lack of male-female contact during these years. After all, smaller kids who hang out in same-sex groups are not isolated from the other gender – boys and girls grow up in families with siblings and other relatives of another gender, and most boys and girls in American society are in each other's company in co-educational schools for at least seven hours a day. And gender differences – at least in variation – emerge just at the point when male-female separation gives way. This pattern has been shown over and over in the literature, and is dramatically illustrated by Richard Cameron's (2005) work in Puerto Rico, showing several variables in which gender differences peak in the 14-17 year age group.

It's clear to me that the gender-segregated friendship groups and the constant contact between boys and girls outside of their play groups work together in the foregrounding and construction of difference. It's not separation itself, but the significance of separation that's at work. The adolescent social order does not end this play of separation and contact, but changes its terms. Above all, it creates a new distinction within the cohort between those who continue childhood patterns, and those who enter into a new set of gender relations. More specifically, the peer-based social order that emerges in fifth and sixth grades is quite specifically a heterosexual order, and the social arrangements that come to structure relations among kids in this cohort are about heterosexuality, but more importantly, about the relation between heterosexuality and social status and dominance. The developmental imperative at this point focuses on engagement in heterosexual social arrangements, and those who do not engage in some way are left in the developmental dust. But such engagement is not up to the individual, and this is where heterosexuality and social dominance come together.

In the course of elementary school, kids develop reputations. They arrive in late elementary school already judged as cute, athletic, clumsy, funny, creepy, babyish, quirky, likeable or unlikeable, stupid or smart. Some of them have become social foci – judged by teachers and kids alike as quicker, cuter, more athletic, cooler, more savvy, in short, socially desirable. The big transition towards adolescence brings these desirable kids together in a significant mass – a "popular crowd". And what is most distinctive about the crowd is that it is a collaboration between boys and girls – a collaboration in the move towards adolescence and, above all, towards a heterosexual social order. The popular crowd are quite self-consciously social-developmental leaders, and pioneers in heterosexual practice. The crowd brings girls and boys together in the new enterprise of making and unmaking boy-girl pairs, which is something that individuals cannot engage in on their own. It requires unified action among and between boys and girls, and the

social support to engage in new and highly face-threatening acts. While the individuals involved certainly play a role, their pairing is negotiated and sanctioned by the crowd, and exists primarily for the construction of the crowd. Couples play a role in a system of social value, with each pairing-up contributing to the establishment of value for the individuals being paired up, for the agents who negotiate the pairing, and for the crowd itself. It is in this sense that Barrie Thorne's term *heterosexual market* (Thorne 1993) could not be more apt, for it is, in fact, the beginning of the commodification of the self. For the first time, kids come to see their cohort as structured around social value – a social market – and to see themselves as commodities on that market. And the value of this commodity is based in what the kids view as elements of heterosexual attractiveness.

Both the pairing and the process of negotiation give the crowd visibility and structure. The status as couple is a public, not a private one, and the relationships are purely transactional. In fifth grade, the individual pairs involved do not interact with each other to speak of. In sixth grade, some of them do, occasionally sitting next to each other, walking home together, in rare cases stealing kisses. But it is not a question of personal commitment or particular compatibility – it is common for a couple to last a day or two, for an individual to go through several partners in a week, and for friends to pass partners back and forth and to compete for number of pairings. Indeed, it is not unknown for a couple to break up so they can go back to being friends. Heterosexuality at this stage, then, is about social value, not about sexuality. This is not to say that these kids don't think about sex. The boys are, indeed, somewhat obsessed with their penises, but the girls are more concerned with their emerging or non-emerging breasts and menstruation than with sexual desire. And both boys and girls tend to focus on distant people, like TV stars, as objects of desire. It is also not to say that adult heterosexuality isn't about social dominance either – indeed these kids are learning an important aspect of adult heterosexual practice.

The terms of engagement in the heterosexual market constitute a hierarchy within and beyond the popular crowd. The main players in the crowd boast multiple pairings. But there are also a number of kids who are deemed desirable and who participate in negotiations, but hold back from being paired off – usually on the grounds that nobody's cute enough. Meanwhile, while other individuals may decide to pair up as well, couples not resulting from crowd transactions are considered inconsequential, illegitimate, and ridiculous. The crowd gains its power by pioneering the joint appropriation of power from adults in the school. While smaller children's associations in school are almost entirely restricted to their classroom, the crowd transcends classroom boundaries, constituting a the first significant mass whose membership is determined by peers rather than adults. This significant mass is achieved through the merger of smaller friendship groups, which of course involves a certain amount of triage, negotiation and conflict. Friends who don't measure up are left behind, and by virtue of their crowd membership, the newly anointed popular people emerge as independent of adults while the majority of their peers remain children.

At the same time, as the boys and girls of the crowd come together, they enter into more focused gender opposition. Quite saliently, while up until now girls and boys have

participated together and equally in sports – particularly in a soccer game that dominates the central area of the playground – now boys begin excluding the girls, and the girls in response take up walking around in small groups and talking about social stuff. Most particularly, girls take up social engineering, basically controlling the transactions of the heterosexual market, while the boys pretty much go along. And boys' sports activity becomes professionalized, particularly in sixth grade when they give up soccer for (American) football, organizing their teams rather than playing pickup games, and creating a new gender division both by excluding girls as not possible football players, and by appointing popular girls as team owners.

The activities of the crowd constitute theatre both for themselves and for the rest of the cohort – and for adults as well. Who's with whom, who's mad at whom, who's friends with whom are all valued information. Functioning in or around the crowd requires making news or at least being up on it. The crowd's news, and only the crowd's news, matters. And the crowd's news involves all kinds of drama around the redistribution of friends, the negotiation of heterosexual pairs, and construction of norms of appropriate behavior in the heterosexual market. On the playground, the crowd take up central space, making their activities highly visible. And they dominate the classroom as well, loudly doing their business in the cracks of classroom activity, and attending carefully to crowd members speaking in class while ignoring others. Dress and adornment, popular culture, and consumption more generally constitute another arena of information that the crowd owns and controls. And the crowd determines what behaviors are now childish. A common means of establishing public dominance is interrogation of non-crowd members about whether they watch *Barney* or *Power Rangers*. Through constant discussion, negotiation, evaluation and display, the crowd members maintain control of a whole range of norms that others can only have indirect access to. While any girl can read a teen magazine, the meaning of what's in that magazine is negotiated through intense discussion within the crowd, and the crowd's take in the end is the only legitimate take. In other words, the crowd achieves hegemony by laying claim to adolescence on behalf of their cohort, and defining the only legitimate terms for being adolescent. The rest of the kids in the class can ignore them or they can find their own sources of information, for example, through access to older kids. But the latter does not bring status within their cohort. In the end, most must recognize the crowd's hegemony.

The girls in the crowd become increasingly flamboyant, focusing on the heterosexual market, and engaging enthusiastically in the technology of beauty and personality, in the intensive negotiation of style, and in constant drama in the continual making and breaking of friendships and couples. It is in this context that linguistic variation comes into play. In preliminary work on prosodic variation in this population, Drager, Eckert, and Moon (2008) found a correlation between pitch variability and what the nasal split – that is, the distance between the F1 mean of /ae/ as it raises before nasals and backs and lowers before non-nasals. We found that the nasal split increased along with pitch range, and along with pitch variability. We were pursuing stylistic variation in this study, so our sample included a small subset of the speakers I'm discussing here, but in several styles ranging from interviews about school to conversations among friends, to impassioned talk on the playground. There was considerable prosodic variation among kids and

among styles within each speaker, and greater pitch activity accompanied more emotive talk and, in turn, accelerated this particular sound change. Since the prosodic study was on a small subset of speakers, I cannot yet correlate the pitch measures with the variation I'm going to discuss here. But the findings of the Drager, Eckert and Moon study clearly suggest that phonetic innovation emerges not just in less formal style, but in more flamboyant style. This being the case, it is not surprising that the girls in the crowd, who regularly engage in legitimized flamboyant performances, lead in sound change.

The fronting of California /ow/

The most salient elements of the Northern California Shift in the Anglo community are the fronting of the nuclei of /uw/ and /ow/. These are generally considered to be diagnostic of California Anglo speech, and no performance of Valley Girl speech would be without them and no self-respecting surfer would pronounce *dude* with a back vowel. Lauren Hall Lew (2009) has studied these two vowels in the speech of residents of the Sunset district in San Francisco, showing significant correlations between fronting measures and speaker age across the speaker sample, with younger speakers leading, suggesting that these are indeed changes in progress. Both of these variables show correlations in this preadolescent community with both gender and participation in the heterosexual market. The data discussed here are from 31 speakers, including both males and females, and crowd and non-crowd members.

The nuclei of both /ow/ and /uw/ tend to front, particularly after anterior coronals. And regardless of the preceding segment, they both retract or resist fronting before /l/. Depending on the speaker, /uw/ or /ow before /l/ defines the back of the vowel space. The only exception to this is an occasional quite conscious use of the surfer version of one lexical stereotype – *cool* [kɪʷl]. (This occurs only as an exclamative – *cool* in the context of a sentence is never fronted.) The nucleus of /uw/ fronts after anterior coronals across dialects, and indeed some degree of fronting of these occurrences shows up in the speech of all of the kids in my cohort. Less frequently, speakers front the nucleus after other consonants. I have so far found no social differences in the fronting of /uw/ before anterior coronals. It is the other occurrences that seem to be salient. Paired T-tests show a low-level correlation between the fronting of this vowel and gender, with girls leading boys. And among the girls, crowd members front this vowel more than those not in the crowd. However, this vowel does not occur sufficiently often in these environments to allow complete confidence in the social correlations. The results for /ow/ are far more robust, however, as this is a frequently-occurring vowel in all environments, and it will be the focus of the remaining discussion.

I will begin by examining the pronunciation of /ow/ in the speech of Rachel, a prominent flamboyant and central member of the popular crowd, showing that the fronting of this vowel indexes what one might call a "teenage stance". Figure 1 shows all the measurable occurrences of /ow/ (n=144) in an interview with Rachel lasting about 45 minutes. In Rachel's speech, as in the speech of the other kids in her cohort, /ow/ occurs most frequently after apicals, and it is significantly fronted in this environment (F2 p<.001). And also as in the case of /uw/, occurrences before /l/ are held back or retracted and

raised. While there are fairly few such occurrences in this text, represented by the squares with arrows in Figure 1, the backing and raising effect of a following /l/ is clear (F1 and F2 difference p<.001).
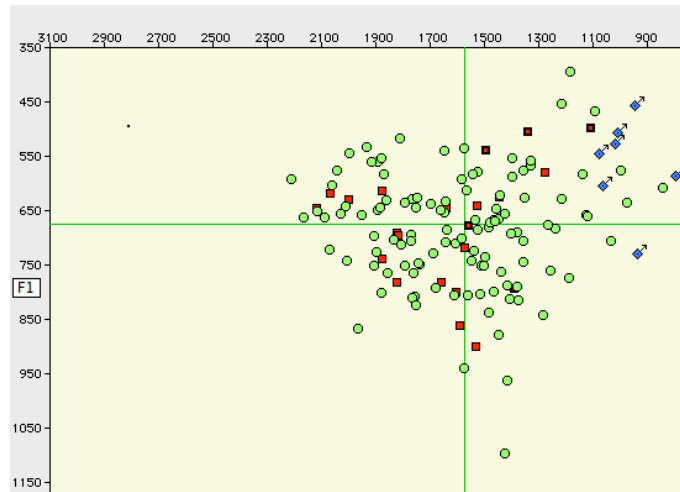

Figure 1. Rachel's fronting of the nucleus of /ow/.
squares = *go*; bolded squares = non-quotative *go*;
boxes with arrows=/ow/ before /l/; circles=all other
occurrences of /ow/.

Rachel creates considerable visibility for herself by engaging in public friendship drama with her girlfriends and public teasing and couples drama with boys. In this drama, she juggles childish and teenage personae, registering childish hurt over being wronged by her friends and her boyfriend of the moment, and registering teenage sophistication in connection with the more general workings of the social market. In the course of these activities, Rachel's pronunciation of /ow/ moves considerably in the vowel space – retracting to express a "poor little me" persona[2], and fronting to express a cool teenage persona. A clear example of the function of fronting is offered by her pronunciation of *go*, which serves as a common quotative in Rachel's speech (there are sixteen occurrences in this text). Virtually all of her narratives that involve direct quotation are about her peers and more specifically about relationships and events in the crowd, and are an important means of enacting a teenage, crowd-member stance. One can, therefore, take the use of quotative *go* as indexing aspects of her crowd status. Rachel's occurrences of /ow/ in the quotative *go* are significantly more fronted than those in non-quotative occurrences of *go*. (F2 difference p<.001; F1 difference p<.01). In fact, occurrences of quotative *go* are significantly more fronted than all other occurrences of /ow/, including those following apicals (F2 difference p<.025).

This role of /ow/ fronting in the construction of the crowd and its heterosexual market shows up in the larger population. Calculating the relation between sex class and the height of F2 over tokens occurring after apicals and not followed by /l/, girls show a robust lead over boys in fronting (p<.0001). This is not surprising, inasmuch as social

drama is primarily the purview of girls. Furthermore, the girls in the crowd front more than other girls, once again at a highly significant rate (p<.0015).

This particular sound change is nationally recognized as trendy, and itsappearance in the speech of the kids who are consciously leading their cohort intrendiness should not be surprising. What's important here, though, is that trendiness isconstructed through heterosexuality. As the heterosexual market engages girls in socialengineering, it also engages them in the energetic and collaborative elaboration of style.Girls who are not part of this crowd have little access to the process of style setting, andwhile some of them are stylistically active, their innovations fall on deaf ears. It is thisaspect of the crowd that's the most important. By virtue of their social dominance of airspace and visual space, they are in a position to engage in symbolic domination. So theynot only set the style, they have the greatest access to sites for circulating it and thegreatest rights to performing it. In this way, the heightened engagement of girls inlinguistic innovation is inseparable from their social dominance which, in turn, isinseparable from their engagement with heterosexuality. What's fundamental is that it isnot heterosexuality in any sexual sense that is at issue; these kids are not constructingheterosexuality in opposition to any other kind of sexuality. Indeed other sexualities aresomewhat orthogonal to this activity. Nobody by this stage is out. And while a couple ofthe tough guys use the term *fag* as a term of derision, many of the kids in the crowd lookupon this kind of prejudice with disapproval. Rather, the crowd is constructing hegemonythrough heterosexuality, as they construct heterosexuality in opposition to immaturity, toa-sociality, to lack of status. And as in the adult world, power is based in wise alliances ofa legitimized sort.

I draw two conclusions from this story. First, when we consider issues of gender and sexuality in language, we need to think beyond the obvious dichotomies, and considerthat gender and sexuality are completely co-constructed, and inseparable fromrelations of power. Second, we need to move away from society's relegation of people who are not white, male, and heterosexual, to marked categories – from the focus on the speech of women, ethnic minorities, and non-heterosexuals as deviations from "basic" white male heterosexual speech. Studies of speech in virtue of the speaker's status as a white male heterosexual are few and far between. There is, however, a growing move to examine the linguistic construction of whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality (Bucholtz 2001, in press; Cameron 1997; Kiesling 2001, 2002; SturtzStreetharan 2004, in press). These are important developments as we move away from the view of heterosexuality asunmarked, and consider how heterosexuality is done, and how linguistic style participatesin the construction and maintenance of heterosexual privilege.

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[2] For a detailed discussion of the relation between negative affect and backing, see Eckert (in press).