

OUTLINE FOR *VARIATION AND THE INDEXICAL FIELD*

ECKERT, PENELOPE – Eckert (2008)

In this article Eckert explores the notion of indexical field as a way of uncovering the meaning of sociolinguistic variation.

Eckert begins with a critique of the larger-scale studies of variation saying that they have in general ignored meaning, showing for example how the notion of *toughness* in Trudgill (1972) and its connection to class and gender was not sufficiently explored; rather it was assigned. Eckert does not call for abandoning large-scale studies, just for the realization that they cannot provide an adequate understanding of variation on their own. What we need to realize is that “index demographic categories not directly but indirectly, through their association with qualities and stances that enter into the construction of categories” (p. 455).

Eckert uses the concept of style to explain the construction of social meaning in linguistic variation. Other terms that surround the term *style* are

- persona style
- enregisterment
- stylistic practice
- bricolage

The author then discusses two examples of how styles are constructed from her own work in Detroit, and the work of Zhang (2005) in Beijing. In these cases as in Labov (1963) “the meaning is based in ideologies about what the locality is about – what kinds of people live there and what activities, beliefs, and practices make it what it is. Local identity is never an association with a generic locale but with a particular construction of that locale as distinct from some other. Local identity claims are about what it means to be from ‘here’ as opposed to some identified ‘there.’” (462).

In the remainder of the article, Eckert develops her idea of an indexical field for sociolinguistic meaning, drawing from two studies, Campbell-Kibler (2009) and Podesva (2007). She shows how the different cognitive associations that community members make when they interpret a particular variable (and its variants) can be mapped out as a field where their specific relationships and even their overall standing can be visually expressed. The important aspect of this is not necessarily the drawing but the collection of meanings and stances that speakers can be shown to have at their disposal.

Discussion items

- the case of (t), and what it means
- how do we feel about *style*, *bricolage*?
- Should the map of the indexical field be regularized?

What we actually discussed

We talked a lot about style:

- The different definitions of style; we spent some time discussing the difference b/w style and register; what Eckert means vs. what Labov means by the term
- is style always a conscious choice? – don’t know that we got an answer to that, but I would say “no, not always”

- we talked about the importance of positioning within a community, style as a response to the categories we see around us
- there was a question about how styles end up overlapping and we talked about how the choice is to some extent forced
- we tried to get a better understanding about indices vs indicator/marker/stereotype as tools with which to explore variation
- we discussed how one should read an indexical field representation and how much we can take from it, given the caveat that these meanings can change quite a lot.

REFERENCES

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