

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

Penelope Eckert (2009)

This paper discusses the chronological development of social meaning in variation in sociolinguistic studies. The first wave started with broad correlations between linguistic variables and macro-scale sociological categories (age, sex, class, ethnicity). The second wave applied ethnographic methods to investigate the local categories that lead to or constitute the macro- social categories. Finally, the third wave sees the variation as a social semiotic system, which doesn't reflect but constructs social meaning. The meanings of variables are basic and gain their more narrowed down meanings in the context of styles.

The first wave

Variationist studies have their beginning with Labov's work of the social stratification of English in New York City (1966). His findings were replicated in the 60s and 70s. The pattern of socioeconomic stratification of variables involves the terms *standard* variants vs. *non-standard* variants where *standard* refers to a speech lacking regional or socially stigmatized features (economic and educational institutions, etc). The assumption is that language varieties indicate the speaker's social status and the class stratification of language is therefore a matter of linguistic prestige. Stylistic variation is taking place also according to class hierarchy. In the binary opposition – *standard-vernacular* with *standard* being at the top – Labov (1972) defines *vernacular* in terms of speaker's most natural and unconscious linguistic behavior, not monitored or consciously interrupted.

The first wave studies suggest that the vernacular is not only the most natural way of speaking but also carries symbolic value which is locally related, whereas the standard is linked to larger institutions and global connections.

Age stratification has always been of interest. Life span is seen as representing stages with specific sociolinguistic dynamics.

Gender is uniformly defined *male-female*. Women were shown to lead in sound changes in progress although they use more standard variants compared to men.

Social meaning in the first wave

Social meaning is also based on the socioeconomic hierarchy. Variables are seen as directly marking social status. Meaning is constructed on the base of the binary opposition *prestige-stigma*. Pre-determined social categories receive more attention at the expense of social contact with the speakers that represent these categories.

The second wave

These studies concentrate on smaller communities for a long period of time and applying ethnographic approach. They aim to discover, not to presuppose, locally prominent social categories that are found thanks to place and social practice. This clearly makes the connection between the way of speaking and the local meaning as exemplified in Labov's Martha's Vineyard study (1963). Engagement in local networks and way of speaking is shown in Edwards and Krakow (1985), Rickford (1986) and Milroy (1980). Eckert (1980) shows that the way the peer-based social order is maintained defines class in the adolescents in high school and, moreover, organizes the use of variation. Her findings suggest that social stratification is actually realized through local ways. That means the broader class correlations are not a direct consequence of education, income and

occupation, but rather reflect local dynamics that take on practices and ideologies shaped by class. Also, patterns of variation are not predefined in childhood but are resources in the construction of social identity of the adolescents.

Social meaning in the Second wave

The ethnographic studies of the second wave tried to make the connection between the macro-level categories and the more specific local categories, and to search for its meaning. They, however, do not explain the indexical relations between variables and social categories.

Second wave research provides a new account – the agentive use of variation. Trudgill (1974) shows that the meaning of variation in that study is constructed on stereotypes of working class masculinity, and that vernacular variants do not claim working class status per se but claim a certain quality associated with the working class. Using Silverstein's terms (1976), this is called *indirect indexicality* where linguistic forms indicate categories not directly but indirectly, using their association with qualities that are associated with those categories.

The third wave

The third wave moves the focus from structure (categories) to practice and agency. Researchers are interested in how speakers are constrained by social structure in their every day life, and what the power relations that keep that structure in place are. In her study about Jocks and Burnouts Eckert shows that the differences between the two groups are not trivial but are based on ideological concerns that result from experiences over time. Linguistic variables attached to those two categories, Jocks and Burnouts, are not attached directly but through the practices and ideologies that constitute them.

The indexical value of the variation is shown to be constructed locally around ideological issues linking day-to-day interaction to the political economy.

Variation and Stylistic practice

In the first wave style was placed on the formality continuum. The third wave deals with the use of variation to create personal and social styles that are associated with social types. The concept of stylistic practice as a *bricolage* suggests that people combine different elements in new ways to create new meanings (or modify old meanings). Irvine (2001) says that style is “a system of distinctiveness, gaining its meaning only through its relation to other styles” (p.19), and those interconnections are ideologically mediated.

Eckert emphasizes that it is not only important to note the association between a linguistic feature and a social category, but it is also important how the social significance of this association is interpreted.

Another point Eckert makes is about the intentional stylistic choices. They give a chance for construction of meaning in variation because the stereotypes are not randomly chosen but rather chosen in support of social hierarchies. Further she outlines a set of 3 hypothesis underlying the theoretical foundation of the third wave studies:

- Variation expresses the full range of social concerns in a given community
- The use of variation doesn't only reflect but constructs social meaning => it is a driving force in social change. Variation should be studied as it unfolds in discourse.
- The meaning of the variables is basic and becomes more specific in the context of discourse and the construction of styles.

Style, personae and meaning

Zhang (2005, 2008) shows how local linguistic features (interdental /z/, rhotacization) contribute to Yuppie style in Beijing. Moreover, those variables are not just associated with Beijing but with specific Beijing urban stereotypes. Yuppies do not use stable linguistic styles but combine local and non-local resources (the use of full tone) to create a new style.

Conclusion

Each wave adds something to the preceding one. The third wave is focused on speakers' "moment-to-moment negotiation of selves as personal and individual dynamic" (p. 27). At the same time it is connected to the larger social order.

Not all variation is meaningful but certainly can be. Attention should be given not only to regional variables and changes in progress but to variables that seem to be exploited for social meaning.

REFERENCES

- Eckert, P. (2009). Three waves of variation study: the emergence of meaning in the study of variation. <http://www.stanford.edu/eckert/PDF/> accessed March 11, 2011.
- Eckert, P. (1980). Clothing and geography in a suburban high school. *Researching American culture*. C. P. Kottak. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press 139-45: 45-48.
- Edwards, W. and C. Krakow (1985). Polish-American English in Hamtramck: A sociolinguistic study. Paper delivered at Conference on New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English. Washington, Georgetown University.
- Irvine, J. (2001). Style as distinctiveness: The culture and ideology of linguistic differentiation. *Stylistic variation in language*. P. Eckert and J. Rickford. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 21-43.
- Labov, W. (1963). The social motivation of a sound change. *Word* 18: 1-42.
- Labov, W. (1966). *The social stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, DC, Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Labov, W. (1972). Some principles of linguistic methodology. *Language in society* 1(1): 97-120.
- Milroy, L. (1980). *Language and social networks*. Oxford, Blackwell.
- Rickford, J. (1986). The need for new approaches to class analysis in sociolinguistics. *Language and Communication* 6: 215-221.
- Trudgill, P. (1974). *The social differentiation of English in Norwich*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Silverstein, M. (1976). Shifters, linguistic categories, and cultural description. *Meaning in anthropology*. K.H. Basso and H. A. Selby. Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press: 11-55.
- Zhang, Q. (2005). A Chinese yuppie in Beijing: Phonological variation and the construction of a new professional identity. *Language in society* 34(3): 431-66.
- Zhang, Q. (2008). Rhotacization and the 'Beijing Smooth Operator': The social meaning of a linguistic variable. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 12(2): 201-222.