

Style and **Sociolinguistic Variation**



edited by **Penelope Eckert**
and John R. Rickford

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Stanford University



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Introduction

John R. Rickford and Penelope Eckert

1 The place of style in the study of variation

Style is a pivotal construct in the study of sociolinguistic variation. Stylistic variability in speech affords us the possibility of observing linguistic change in progress (Labov 1966). Moreover, since all individuals and social groups have stylistic repertoires, the styles in which they are recorded must be taken into account when comparing them (Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994:265). Finally, style is the locus of the individual's internalization of broader social distributions of variation (Eckert 2000).

In spite of the centrality of style, the concerted attention that has been paid to the relation of variation to social categorizations and configurations has not been equaled by any continuous focus on style. In other words, we have focused on the relation between variation and the speaker's place in the world, at the expense of the speaker's strategies with respect to this place. But as social theories of variation develop greater depth, they require a more sophisticated, integrative treatment of style that places variation within the wider range of linguistic practices with which speakers make social meaning. For this reason, the editors of this volume organized a two-day workshop on style at Stanford University in February 1996, funded by the National Science Foundation (no. SBR-9511724). Bringing together scholars who have worked on style in language from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives, the workshop had the goal of stimulating discussions that would set new directions for future work on style in variation. This volume is a product of that workshop.

2 The history of the study of style in variation

The study of sociolinguistic variation is commonly characterized (Bell 1984:145, Finegan and Biber 1994:316) as involving three principal components: *linguistic* or internal constraints, *social* or inter-speaker constraints, and *stylistic* or intra-speaker constraints.

The study of *linguistic* constraints is the area in which the concerns of

variationists articulate the most clearly with linguistic research in other areas, adding use data to intuited or experimental data, and bringing quantitative insights to an otherwise exclusively qualitative enterprise. The examination of linguistic constraints, both qualitative and quantitative, has been an active component of variationist work from the 1960s to the present. The quantitative study of large corpora of variable speech data has yielded detailed insights into several aspects of language, including constraints on variable speech output, sound change and syntactic change, the mechanisms of vowel shifts, and structural relations among regional dialects.

The study of *social* variation has also been continuous and productive over this period. The past thirty-five years have seen a flourishing of empirical studies of variation: studies not only in urban settings, but also in suburban and rural settings, in a range of societies outside the USA, and drawing on both survey and ethnographic methods. In these studies researchers have refined their understanding of the relation between variation and social parameters, including class, gender, ethnicity, social networks, identity, local categories, and ideology.

The study of *stylistic* variation, however, has been more uneven. The traditional delimitation of style in the variationist paradigm has been any intra-speaker variation that is not directly attributable to performance factors (in the strict sense) or to factors within the linguistic system. We will begin with this definition, partially to show that the next phase of stylistic studies will have to focus on the highly permeable boundaries among linguistic, social, and stylistic constraints.

William Labov's (1966) New York City study, which launched the current quantitative study of variation, gave central theoretical and methodological importance to style. This study established that stylistic variation constitutes a crucial nexus between the individual and the community – between the linguistic, the cognitive, and the social. Labov demonstrated that the use of sociolinguistic variables is socioeconomically stratified, and that each speaker's stylistic range covers a continuous subset of use within the socioeconomic matrix. Placing global prestige at the upper end of the socioeconomic hierarchy and global stigma at the lower, Labov characterized each speaker's stylistic continuum in relation to these two poles. He viewed the "prestigious" end of the speaker's range as the result of more formal, careful, speech, and the "stigmatized" end as the result of more casual, unmonitored speech. The speaker's stylistic activity, therefore, was directly connected to the speaker's place in, and strategies with respect to, the socioeconomic hierarchy.

While the notion of prestige plays an important role in Labov's work on style (e.g. 1972), it is attention paid to speech that he puts at the center of the theory, presumably because attention is the cognitive mechanism that

links social to linguistic factors. Fundamental to his work, then, is the notion of the speaker's vernacular – that speech that is most natural, that is prior to an overlay of correction, and that emerges when the speaker is not monitoring their speech. And it is in the vernacular that Labov expects to find the most natural speech and the best evidence of the processes of change. With this theorizing of style came a focus on field methods, making the manipulation of informants' style central to the process of data extraction. Labov designed the sociolinguistic interview to elicit as wide a range of a speaker's style as possible, from the most careful to the most casual speech. Fundamental to the interview is what Labov called the "observer's paradox" (Labov 1975) – that the vernacular the linguist wishes to observe is unlikely to be produced in the relatively formal context in which speakers interact with interviewers who are strangers. Labov sought to elicit a broader range of interviewees' styles primarily by manipulating the topic, on the assumption that some topics will focus interviewees on their speech while others will focus them away from it. While topic is the parameter that Labov most consciously controls in the interview, the need for such a strategy, the observer's paradox, stems from the fact that audience is a fundamental influence in stylistic production. Labov showed some early recognition of this (1966:101–4) insofar as he defined speech to family members and friends rather than the interviewer as potential casual speech contexts within the interview.

Stylistic variation emerged from the New York City study as among the most important constructs in the field. Yet despite its importance, style became less of a focus of empirical research from the 1970s onward, at least in the influential American quantitative tradition. This was partly because people questioned Labov's focus on attention paid to speech (Milroy 1987:172–83), partly because of the operational difficulty of separating casual speech from careful speech via interview contexts and channel cues (Wolfram 1969:58–9), and partly because researchers became absorbed in the study of the linguistic and social constraints on variation. (See Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994:238–9 for further discussion.)

Social psychological work in accommodation theory (Giles and Powesland 1975, Giles 1984, Giles, Coupland, and Coupland 1991) ran parallel for some time to efforts in variation, showing among other things the important influence on language style of the speaker's orientation and attitude to addressees. Some early variation studies explicitly explored the effect on variation of the addressee (Van den Broeck 1977, Baugh 1979, Hindle 1979, Rickford 1979, Coupland 1980) and of audience more generally (Bell 1977). Bell (1984) followed up these early studies with focused research that put audience at the center of stylistic production. Specifically, he argued that stylistic variation can be explained as a response to the

present audience: primarily the actual addressee, but also third persons (i.e. auditors and overhearers). He argued that the apparent influence of topic shift is actually due to the association of topics with audience types. Recognizing that not all stylistic shifts are obvious responses to present participants, he posited the effect of “referees” – absent reference groups – whose presence in the mind of the speaker could influence variability. This paper not only introduced a coherent view of style-shifting, it also integrated a wide range of previously disparate sociolinguistic findings, and posited a number of novel theoretical generalizations and testable predictions about the relation between social and stylistic variation.

In their (1994) paper on the relation between register and social dialect variation (first circulated in draft in 1990) Finegan and Biber credited Bell with explaining the parallel relation between stylistic and social variation, but not the internal systematicity of each category (why consonant cluster simplification *decreases* as formality *increases*, for instance). Their own explanation for this systematicity was a functional one, which argued (p. 339) that “Social dialect variation . . . depends upon register variation, and register variation is largely shaped by communicative constraints inherent in particular situations.” Where Bell focused on audience, Finegan and Biber focused on the broader *situation*, and sought to establish a link from the variables themselves to the situations in which they are used and finally to the socioeconomic hierarchy. They began with the argument that socially stratified variables tend to involve some kind of reduction or simplification, and that complexity of linguistic form correlates with socioeconomic status. They argue that more complex linguistic forms are called for in more “literate” situations, as a function both of the tasks being undertaken in these situations and of a relative lack of shared context. They then attribute the social stratification of language use to the stratification of access to these situation types.

With Coupland (1980), we come full circle, with a focus on the speakers themselves. Introducing an emphasis on the “identity dimensions” of style, Coupland treats stylistic variation as a dynamic presentation of the self. For this reason, rather than focusing on the cumulative use of variables by speakers or groups of speakers, he focuses on the strategic use of variables in discourse. This emphasis also led him to approach the selection of variables differently. Because of the structural focus in the field of variation, variables have been customarily selected not so much on the basis of their apparent social significance as on the basis of their interest to the study of linguistic structure and change. Coupland’s focus on the speaker’s identity led him to take seriously the participants’ perceptions of style, and to argue that the tendency to focus on individual variables abstracts away from what speakers themselves perceive as style.

This emphasis on style as a set of co-occurring variables that are associated with the speaker's own persona was a major departure from the studies of style that preceded, and is becoming increasingly important in the study of variation. Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994:263–5) and Rickford and Rickford (2000:128) have raised the issue of performativity in style, suggesting that variability can play a role in the performance of the speaker's own social affiliations and identity. The California Style Collective (1993) and Eckert (2000) have explored the role of variation in the active construction of personal and group styles, viewing individual variables as resources that can be put to work in constructing new personae.

Some of these explorations are part of a movement in the field of variation away from the purely structural models of society that formed the original basis of variation theory, into a view of variation as social practice. An emerging focus on agency is bringing researchers to examine variation as part of a process of construction of identities and social meaning (California Style Collective 1993, Bucholtz 1996, Eckert 2000), and to view variation in terms of relations of linguistic production (Bourdieu 1982) rather than simply in terms of appropriateness to “social address” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992).

These explorations remain in the early stages, and are bringing variation studies into synch with work in anthropology. Roughly the same decades that have seen the development of modern variation theory have also seen the development of the anthropological study of communicative competence and the ethnography of speaking (e.g. Hymes 1964, 1972, Bauman and Sherzer 1974, Heath 1983, Briggs 1988). Researchers working on these topics, focusing on verbal performance, have developed perspectives on linguistic practice that are quite crucial and complementary to the explorations of style that have been developing in the field of variation. While in earlier years there was considerable interaction between people studying variation and people studying the ethnography of speaking, as variation emerged as a field in itself, this interaction dwindled. As a result, there has been little integration between the study of variation and the study of verbal genres as pursued in folklore and the ethnography of speaking.

The models of style discussed above that have arisen in the study of variation are not contradictory or mutually exclusive. One might think that, for example, Labov's view of style as a function of attention paid to speech is irreconcilable with the view of the use of variables in terms of “identity performances.” A resolution between the views, however, may well lie in an examination of differences among variables, and also of the interaction among variants of a single variable, and of the situated use of variation.