Variation, convention, and social meaning

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1. Introduction

The quantitative study of sociolinguistic variation has now been going on for forty years. During this time, the focus has been overwhelmingly on regional and ethnic dialects, and on linguistic change. Tonight, I would like to look squarely at variation as a resource for the construction of social meaning in language. This means that I'm backing away from changes in progress to consider the wider system of social meaning – a wider system in which changes participate.

To do this, I'm going to talk about three waves of analytic practice. These waves are not strictly ordered historically, and no wave supersedes the previous, rather all three waves are part of a whole. But I think of them as waves because each represents a way of thinking about variation and a methodological and analytic practice that grew out of the findings of the previous one.

What I call 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 primary social categories of socioeconomic class, sex class, and age. These patterns pointed to questions about what underlies the primary social categories, giving rise to a second wave, characterized by ethnographic studies of more locally-defined populations. In recent years, in what I call the "third wave," there has been an emerging focus on variation not as a reflection of social place, but as a resource for the construction of social meaning. Tonight's talk will be firmly planted in – even constitutive of – that third wave.

2. First wave of variation studies: The survey era

The first wave of variation studies was foundational to the study of variation. Following Labov's study of the *Social Stratification of English in New York City* (Labov, 1966), a series of urban studies (Macaulay, 1977; Trudgill, 1974; Wolfram, 1969) provided a big picture of the distribution of variables across large urban populations.

These studies established a regular and replicable pattern of socioeconomic stratification of variables, in which the use of non-standard, and geographically and ethnically distinctive variants, correlates inversely with socioeconomic status. These studies also showed a regular stylistic stratification of variables at all levels in the socioeconomic hierarchy, with the use of non-standard and distinctively regional variants correlating inversely with formality of style.

A classic example is the reduction of *–ing* to *–in*, which appears throughout the English speaking world, as illustrated in Figure 1. While (*–ing)* is an old and stable variable, apparent changes in progress show a similar stratification, with the use of innovative forms most commonly correlating inversely with speakers' socioeconomic status, and indicating the spread of most changes upwards through the socioeconomic hierarchy.
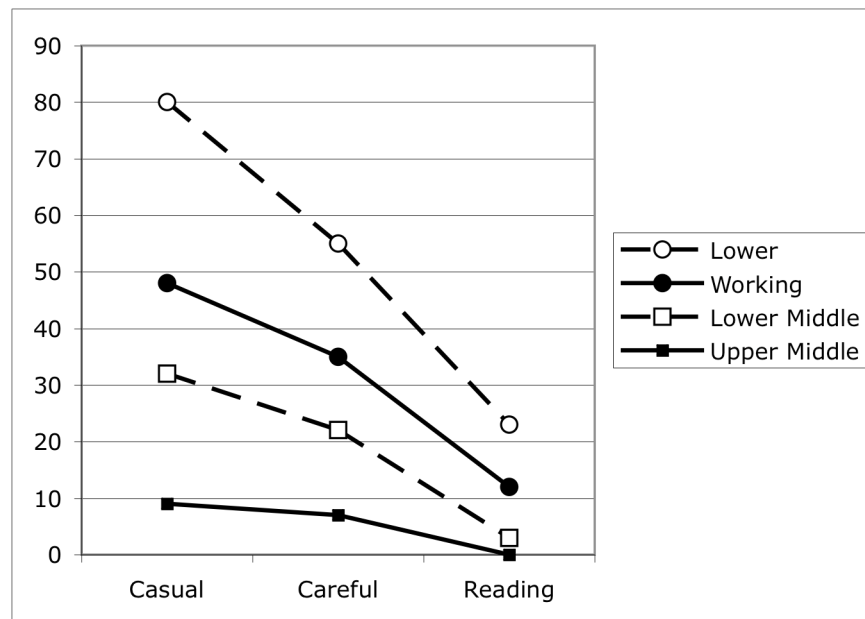

Figure 1. % Reduced –ing. from (Labov, 1966) in three styles and four socioeconomic strata.

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 significance of variables throughout the speech community, and the direction of style shifting prompted analysts to assign prestige to the speech at the upper end of the class hierarchy and stigma to the speech at the lower end.

The focus in these studies is on capturing the vernacular, the ingrained patterns found in the individual's most unreflective speech, and the source of regular linguistic change. The significance of casualness and formality lies in their effect on speakers' self-monitoring, as the avoidance of stigmatized vernacular features in formal speech focuses the speaker on norms, disturbing ingrained vernacular patterns.

The first wave established a set of encompassing facts that lay the ground for all subsequent work on variation, and can be summed up as follows:

The First Wave: Developing the big picture

- *Large survey studies of geographically defined communities*

- *The socioeconomic hieararchy as a map of social space*

- *Variables as markers of primary social categories and carrying class-based prestige/stigma*

- *Style as attention paid to speech, and controlled by orientation to prestige/stigma*

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 that represent those categories. As a result, the social significance of variation can only be surmised on the basis of a general understanding of the categories that serve to select and classify speakers. This led, above all, to a treatment of variables as markers of primary categories – particularly class and gender. But these studies also

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pointed out interesting exceptions to the apparent structure of the primary categories, which motivated the studies of the second wave.

For one thing, discontinuities in the expected smooth variation along the class and age continua have led to the attribution of significance to places in the class system and in the life span:

- The source of most innovation appears to be not the lowest rung of the socioeconomic hierarchy, but the upper working and lower middle classes (Labov, 2000). This is the segment of society that is the most locally engaged, and this finding supports the conviction that vernacular variants are actively employed for local symbolic value.

- Several patterns seem to indicate that the lower middle class has a wider range of variation than adjacent groups(Labov, 1972; Labov, 2000), suggesting that this segment of society, which is at the vulnerable cusp between the working class and the middle class, is caught between standard and vernacular norms. This has led Labov to generalize the position of this class group as "second highest" in recognition that while the global evaluation of linguistic norms may be shared throughout social space, the details of sociolinguistic dynamics are not.

- The idea that age represents the smooth passage of linguistic time has been interrupted by evidence of change across the life span, and most dramatically, by the fact that in the US at least, adolescents lead other age groups in sound change and in the use of vernacular variants more generally (Eckert, 1997). This particular pattern has been attributed to the identity work that goes on in adolescence, and more generally, the life span is increasingly seen as involving life stages with their own sociolinguistic dynamics .

Meanwhile, gender has been treated as a binary, putting the emphasis on opposition between women and men in the expectation that there will be uniform male-female differences throughout society. As a result, men or women who use forms associated with the other category are seen as speaking "like" the other category; and divergence between the categories is seen as avoidance of the other.

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- But while women in general tend to be more conservative in the use of stable variables (like the reduction of –*ing*) and clearly stigmatized forms such as negative concord, they tend to lead in changes in progress. And gender is not independent of class, as there is a frequent pattern of greater gender differentiation higher in the socioeconomic hierarchy (Eckert, 1990; Labov, 1991).

All of these complications of categorization schemes point to the probability that there are dynamics underlying these categories that deserve attention: that explanations for variation are to be found in the culture of class and gender, and further that the avoidance of stigma is not the only form of agency in variation. The second wave of variation studies sought to explore various of these questions by studying local dynamics directly.

3. The Second Wave

Ethnographic studies focus on smaller communities for relatively long periods of time, and aim to discover, rather than to assume, locally salient social categories. These categories may be local instantiations of the primary 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 waves are not purely chronological, because this study predates the first wave – indeed, it is the landmark study that established that the second wave could happen.

When Labov landed on Martha's Vineyard in the early sixties, he found a community in turmoil over its fate, as the tourist and summer residence was 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.

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A raised nucleus in /ay/ and /aw/ is a highly salient feature of Vineyard phonology. In recent generations, the nucleus of this diphthong had been lowering to [a], 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.
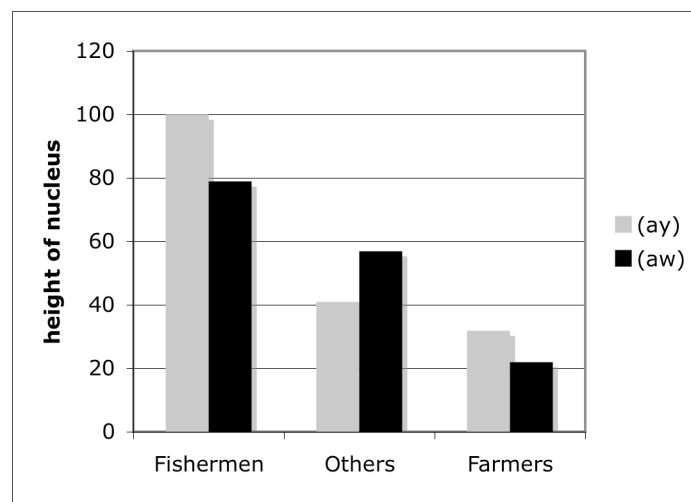

Figure 2. Raising of the nucleus of /ay/ and /aw/ in Martha's Vineyard[1].

And the rather striking picture of four teenage boys in Figure 3 suggests that the opposition was particularly strong among adolescents. The two boys on the left were from the non-fishing end of the island, and planned to leave the island after graduation. They show completely lowered nuclei. This contrasts rather starkly with the two boys from the fishing area who plan to remain on the island for their adulthoods.

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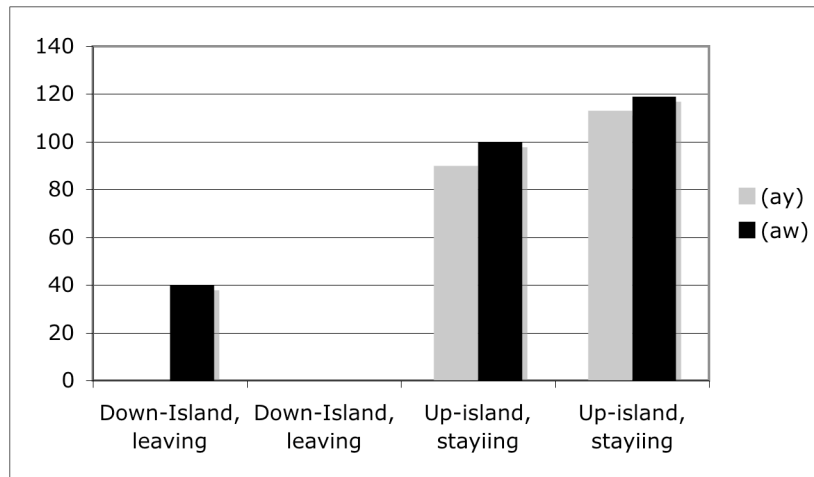
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Figure 3. Raising of the nucleus of /ay and /aw/ by four high school boys on Martha's Vineyard

The height of the nucleus, then, originally marking a geographic difference, seems to have become symbolic of 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.

Leaving for the mainstream economy is, of course, a common theme in Europe, and a number of studies have examined language shift and variation in these situations. Susan Gal's work on language shift in a Hungarian speaking village in Austria (Gal, 1979) documented 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), found a highly nuanced pattern of variation corresponding to two stages in the move towards the mainstream economy. 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 mainland 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/ where Spanish has [o] – in this case in the masculine endings of nouns:

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 as an accommodation to the Castilian form. 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). You will notice here 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 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, but also quicker to signal their distance from their current way of life in their speech.
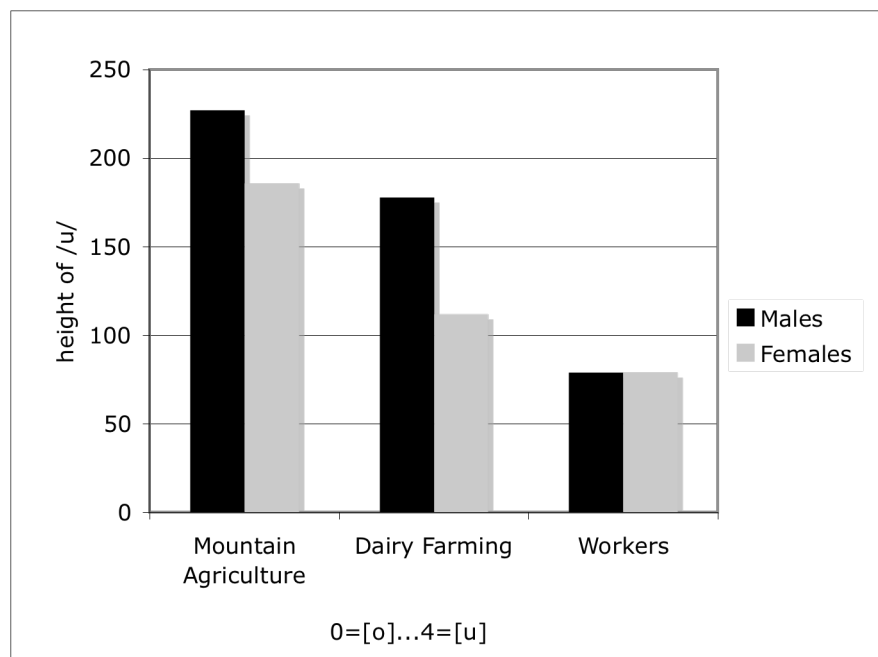

Figure 4. Height of /u/ in Ucieda.

John Rickford's work (Rickford, 1986) on a sugar plantation in Guyana led him to question the universal applicability of the consensual model of class that had so far dominated variation studies. In this community, he 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 (Figure 5). On the basis of this, he argued for alternative models of class – in this case, a conflict model – and 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.
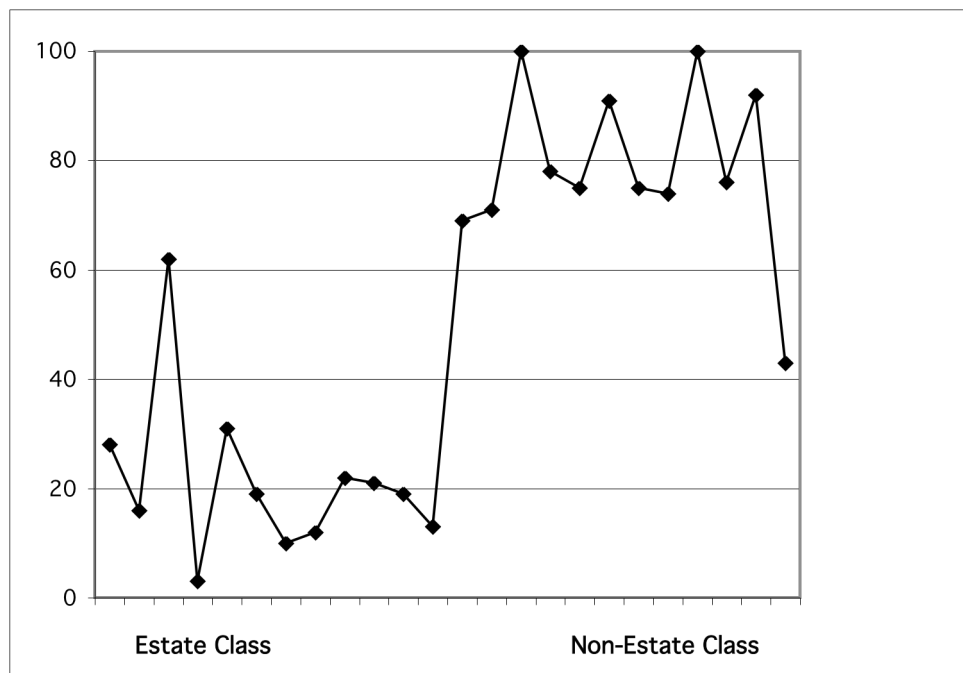
Figure 5. % Use of Standard English variants in singular pronoun subcategories among residents of Cane Walk, Guyana.

In her ethnographic study of Belfast, Lesley Milroy (Milroy, 1980) explored this further, focusing on working class communities, and examining the relation between local engagement and the use of the vernacular. 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 thus correlated the use of local vernacular variables with the density and multiplexity of the speaker's social networks. This study was followed by a range of studies examining the relation between the use of local variants and engagement in ethnically-defined networks (Edwards and Krakow, 1985; Edwards, 1991; Knack, 1991).

The view of variation as indexing affiliation to local groups and categories brings the class correlations down closer to concrete experience, and illustrates the positive value of both the vernacular and resistance to the vernacular, depending on the place of the particular networks in the political economy.

My own ethnographic work in the Detroit suburbs (Eckert, 1989; Eckert, 2000) explored the nature of class among white adolescents. Explanations of the class stratification of variables are generally based in adult status and activities – finished education, occupation and income. Yet it is adolescents who lead in sound change and in the use of the vernacular. Seeking the relevance of class to this age group, I undertook ethnographic work in the predominantly white high schools in the Detroit suburban area, where I could observe the relation between adolescent social practice and the Northern Cities Vowel Shift that characterizes the white dialect of the Detroit area. The main ethnography was in one school, but I also spent shorter periods in each of four other schools spaced around the suburban area in order to gain a geographic perspective.

It turned out that class was articulated in this peer social order through orientation to the school institution on the one hand, and to the urban area on the other. In a structure typical of schools throughout the Detroit suburban area, and indeed in high schools across the US, there are two opposed social categories. In Detroit area schools and throughout much of the northeast and midwest, these categories are called *Jocks* and *Burnouts*.

The Jocks constitute a middle class culture, one could say a corporate culture, basing their networks, identities and social lives in the school, and particularly in the extracurricular sphere. They constitute a tight and competitive hierarchy based in this extracurricular sphere. They avoid Detroit except for institutional contacts such as

museums and professional athletic events, and they plan to leave the local area for college, and establish new networks upon graduating from high school. The Burnouts, on the other hand, constitute a working class culture. They reject the institution as a basis for social life and identity, basing their networks, identities and social lives in the neighborhood and the broader conurbation. They are almost all pursuing a vocational curriculum, and intend to find work in the factories and businesses of the local and urban area upon graduation. The opposition between the jocks and burnouts is no doubt fired by the necessity of sharing resources in the very confining environment of the school – an institution that patently favors the jocks. Jocks maintain collegial relations with the faculty and administration of the school, while the burnouts take an oppositional stance to the school, rejecting its in-loco parentis function. The jock-burnout opposition therefore is a hostile one, and is maintained through a wide variety of symbolic means: clothing, posture and body movement, makeup, hair, territory, substance use, leisure activities, participation in school, urban orientation. These are not surface differences, but reflect fundamental ideological differences – Jock relations are hierarchical, while the Burnouts emphasize egalitarianism; the jocks expand their networks to increase their school-based constituency, while the burnouts' friendship networks are firmly based in the neighborhood and expand to gain access to the urban area. Hence the Jocks believe that the Burnouts are irresponsible and antisocial while the Burnouts believe that the Jocks are disloyal and status-oriented.

While about half the students in the school identify as Jocks or Burnouts, the rest refer to themselves as "in-betweens" – a label that underlines the hegemony of the Jock-Burnout opposition. The in-betweens locate themselves socially with respect to the two polar categories, and in terms of their orientation to the most salient differences between jocks and burnouts – e.g. school and partying the use of controlled substances.

The categories are not groups, but network clusters, composed of friendship groups that orient jointly to jock or to burnout practice. Figure 6 shows the girls' network of the graduating class from which these data come, showing the jock and burnout clusters, along with heterogeneous in-between clusters. Each circle or oval represents one girl, each line a friendship tie. The black ovals represent girls who are not in this graduating class – many of them from Detroit – and you will note that they are concentrated in the

Burnout clusters – palpable evidence of the Burnouts' outward orientation. The boys form a network that corresponds to this one in many places, but is in many ways independent of it.
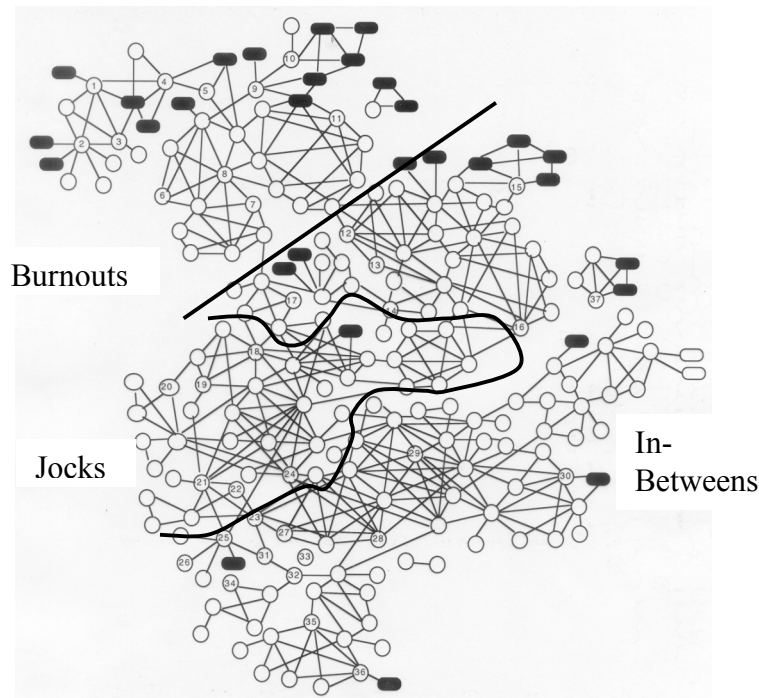

Figure 6. Girls' network

The Jock and Burnout categories can be seen as class tracking systems, as the Jocks come predominantly from the upper half of the local socioeconomic hierarchy, located to the right of figure 7; while the Burnouts come predominantly from the lower half. However, there is sufficient crossover that one can compare parents' class and adolescent class-based category affiliation as constraints in variation.
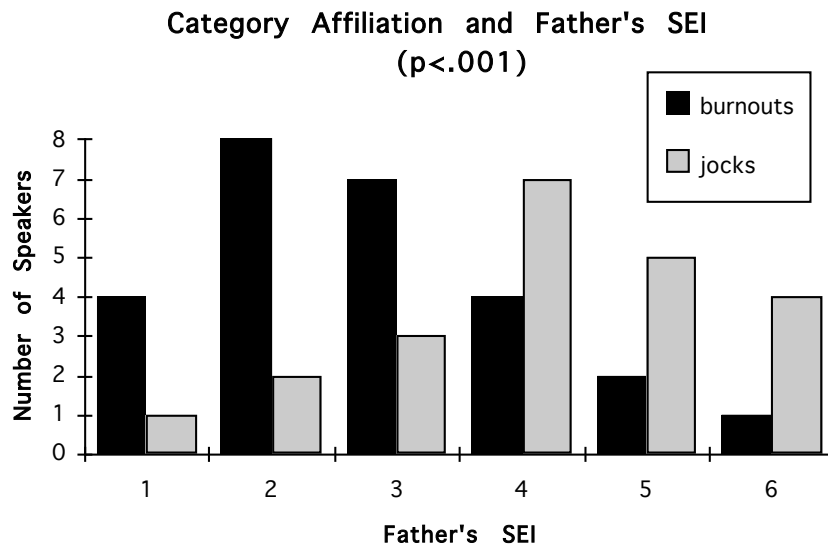
Figure 7. Category affiliation and father's[2] socioeconomic index.

The Northern Cities Shift is a rotation of the low and mid vowels, and all five vowels involved in this shift show social correlations in the high school population.
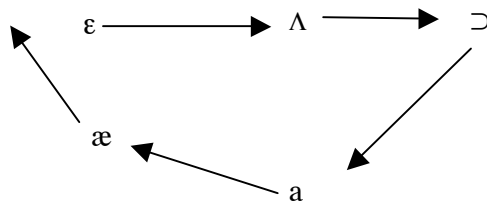

Figure 8. Northern Cities Shift.

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[2] The figures are similar when mothers' and fathers' education are correlated with category affiliation. However, the number of mothers who do not work outside of the home rules out using a full socioeconomic index for mothers.

Of these changes, three – /ae/, /o/, /oh/ – are old, that is, they appear in the speech of Detroit-area speakers of all ages, and they are fairly evenly spread through the suburban area. The backing of /e/ and /uh/ are newer. They appear only in the speech of the younger generations, and they are more advanced closer in to the city, from which they appear to be spreading out into the suburbs. In addition, there is a new raising of the nucleus of /ay/, also stronger closer to the city. The nucleus raises, on occasion, as high as [U]. These latter three variables, then, offer considerable urban symbolic value, and in keeping with their greater urban orientation, as shown in Figure 9, the Burnouts make greater use of the urban changes than the Jocks. And in every case, the correlation with social category affiliation is more significant than any correlation with parents' socioeconomic status.
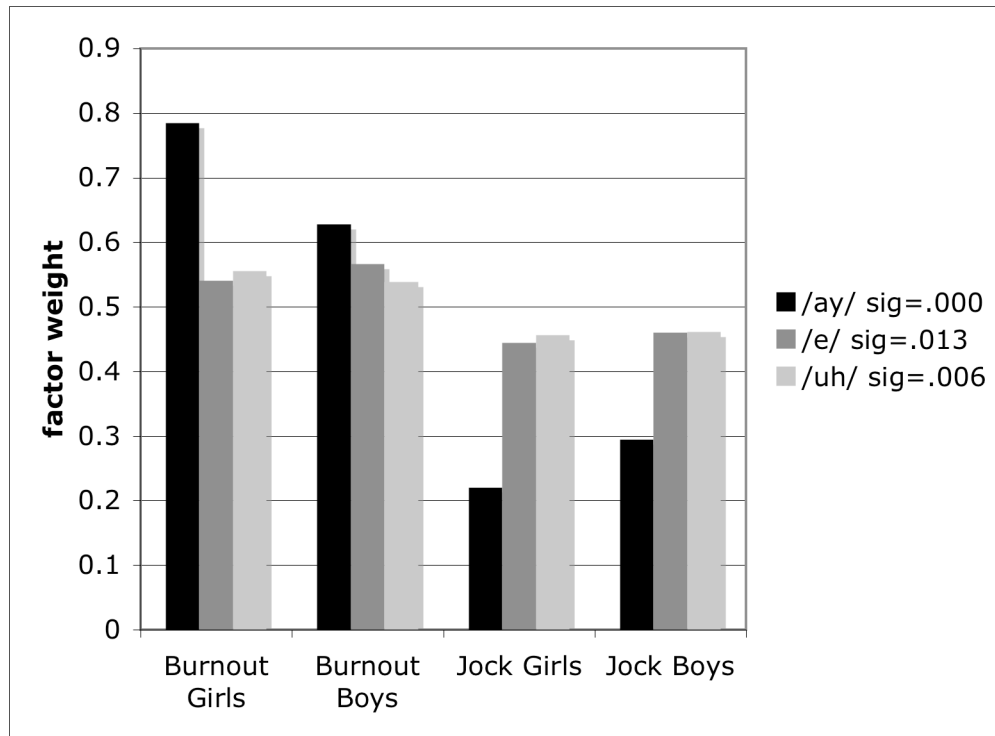

Figure 9. Use of urban variables by gender and social category[3].

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[3] The y axis shows factor weights from multivariate analysis using GOLDVARB, developed by David Sankoff and David Rand.

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These data suggest several things:

- First, patterns of variation are not set in childhood, but serve as resources in the construction of adolescent social identity. How long these variables continue as flexible resources remains an empirical question, but there is already evidence that patterns of phonetic variation change later in life, and I believe that the data will continue to confirm this.

- Second, social stratification unfolds in very local ways, and class correlations on the ground are not simply the fallout of education, occupation and income, but are about concerns that connect to these locally.

- Third, patterns of variation within one community are linked to broader extra-local patterns – every school in the Detroit suburban area has Jocks and Burnouts, and throughout the suburbs the Burnouts tend to lead the Jocks in the use of urban innovations. Class is embedded in urban geography, rising as one moves farther from the city itself. Meaning is constructed for these variables in the context of socio-geographic ideology – the differences between urban and suburban kids being played out both locally in the context of urban and suburban linguistic space. Burnouts look to urban kids as more autonomous, street smart, and tough – both physically and emotionally.

The second wave established a connection between the big picture of the first wave and local dynamics, and can be summed up as follows:

The Second Wave: Developing the local picture

- *Ethnographic studies of geographically defined communities*

- *Local categories as links to demographics*

- *Variables as indexing locally-defined categories*

- *Style as acts of affiliation*

Third Wave: The stylistic perspective

The ethnographic studies of the second wave have provided more local spin on the findings of the survey studies of the first wave. Their value, of course, depends on the extent to which they connect to larger patterns. Peter Ladefoged was arguing last night that **a language** is an institution. I am arguing that **language** is a practice that unfolds with respect to that institution. And it is the accumulation of practice that produces and reproduces that institution. The connection between the individual speaker's competence on the one hand, and the institution on the other, therefore, lies in the layering of communities from the individual speaker's most intimate contacts to the imagined community that is the English speaking world. Within the confines of the studies of variation, which limit themselves to fairly limited geographic entities, the link must be established between the individual speaker's day-to-day experience and abstract categories such as class, gender and ethnicity – and the socio-geographic unit that is taken to be the speech community. Ultimately we need to connect these to the larger imagined communities.

I turn for this task to the construct of community of practice, a construct developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000), which Sally McConnell-Ginet and I have called upon in our work on language and gender (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003). A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together on a regular basis to engage in some enterprise (writ large). A family, a linguistics class, a garage band, roommates, a sports team, even a small village. In the course of their engagement, the community of practice develops ways of doing things – practices. And these practices involve the construction of a shared orientation to the world around them – a tacit definition of themselves in relation to each other, and in relation to other communities of practice. I would argue that the social order comes down to the nature of communities of practice – gender, ethnicity, age and class are manifest in the range of communities of practice that exist, in the combinations of communities of practice that people at different places in the social order participate in, and in the practices within those communities. Thus, for example, women are more likely

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than men to participate in secretarial pools and exercise classes; working class people are more likely than middle class people to participate in bowling teams and production lines.

The individual, thus, is not a lone ranger wobbling out there in the social matrix, but is tied into the social matrix through structured forms of engagement. The individual constructs an identity – a sense of place in the social world – in balancing participation in a variety of communities of practice, and in forms of participation in each of those communities. And key to this entire process of construction is stylistic practice. So far in variation, style has been treated as a speaker's situational adjustments in use of individual variables. The other side of style is how speakers combine variables to create distinctive ways of speaking. These ways of speaking are a key to the production of personae, and personae in turn are particular social types that are quite explicitly located in the social order. Linguists get nervous about studying individuals, but I would say that the individual is a key to much that we need to learn, but only inasmuch as individual practice is seen in its role in community practice. In turn, ethnographic study that seeks to provide explanations for larger scale patterns of variation must select communities of practice that are of particular salience to these patterns.

The jocks and the burnouts are class-based communities of practice. While kids learn about class from participation in their families and neighborhoods, they construct a peer-based sense of class in the jock-burnout opposition in school. And their participation in this opposition, bringing together orientation to standard institutions with orientation to the wider conurbation, links them concretely to what is normally proposed as a speech community (e.g. New York City or the US), which is what Benedict Anderson (Anderson, 1983) calls an imagined community. The only burnout in this study to have moved into the middle class in adulthood has told me that he avoids corporate headquarters of his company as much as possible, because he gets very nervous there, feeling the same antagonisms as he felt towards school. Similarly, a past burnout who became an engineer wrote me after reading about my work, to tell me that he had gone back to being a plumber because he found it too distasteful to participate in the kind of corporate practice expected of him as an engineer. Thus the jocks' and burnouts' differential engagement in the urban area and in the school institution insert them

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differentially in the imagined communities of the suburbs, Detroit, the Midwest, the US and so on.

Now as long as we focus on the opposed categories of Jocks and Burnouts, we can think of variation as marking categories. However, I will argue that variables attach to these categories only indirectly, via the practices and ideologies that constitute them. The Jock and Burnout categories exist because the issues that divide them are salient throughout the school population. And a variety of correlations indicate that variables are associated not simply with the polar categories, but with these practices and ideologies. For example, certain cruising strips along the edges of Detroit attract adolescents from around the suburbs, and the practice of cruising is a popular way of participating in the urban "scene." Cruising, therefore, is attractive to Burnouts and taboo among most Jocks. But urban-oriented In-betweens cruise as well.

When the speech of In-betweens is taken into consideration alone or along with that of Jocks and Burnouts, there is a robust correlation between the use of urban variants and whether or not one cruises (Figure 10).
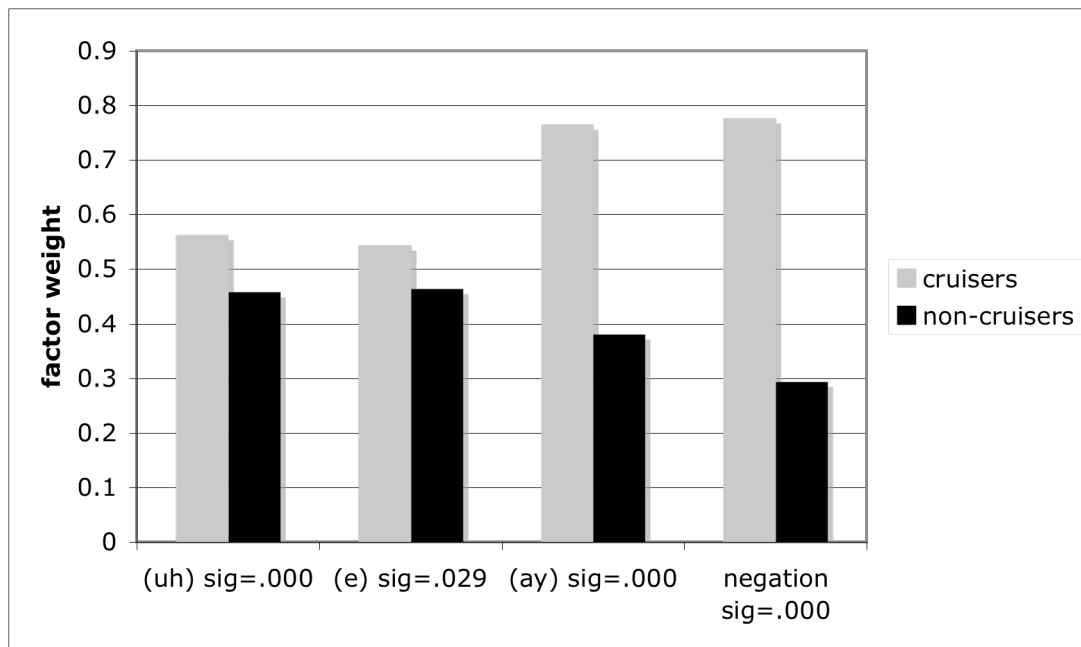

Figure 10. Use of urban variables by cruisers and non-cruisers.

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But not all Jocks and Burnouts are alike either. In keeping with their anti-school stance, the Burnouts make considerably greater use of negative concord than the Jocks. But as you can see in Figure 11, there is also a significant difference between two kinds of male jocks – those whose main activities are athletic, and those whose activities include non-athletic activities – particularly student government. These two groups of boys are in closely-allied friendship groups, but the student government types are putting forth more of a corporate image, while the athletes build their personae on ruggedness.
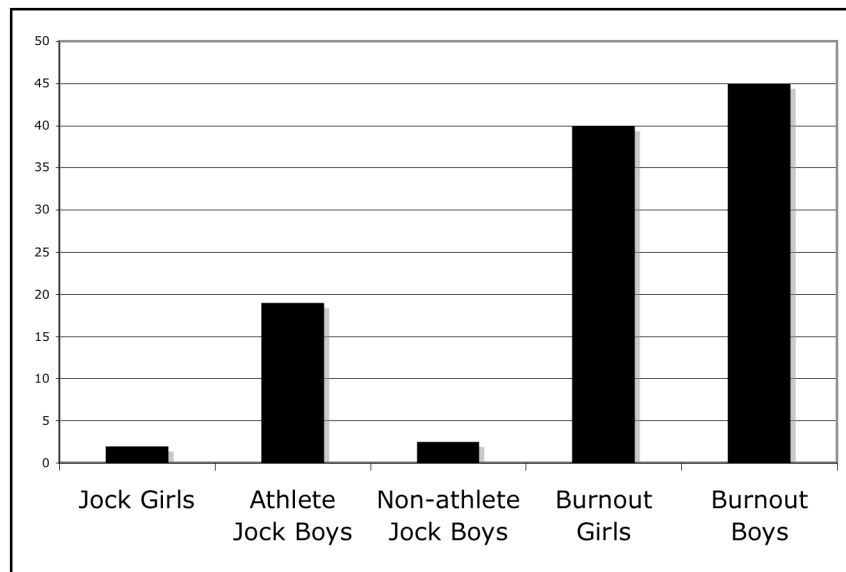

Figure 11. Use of negative concord.

There is also a distinction between two clusters of Burnout girls. The main cluster (2 in Figure 12), consider themselves "regular" or "normal" burnouts, and 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 girls in cluster 1 pride themselves in being "the biggest burnouts" – and are often referred to as "burned-out burnouts". These girls are more wild, and pride themselves on coming to school on mescaline, being in serious academic trouble, staying out all night or all weekend, and getting in trouble with the police.
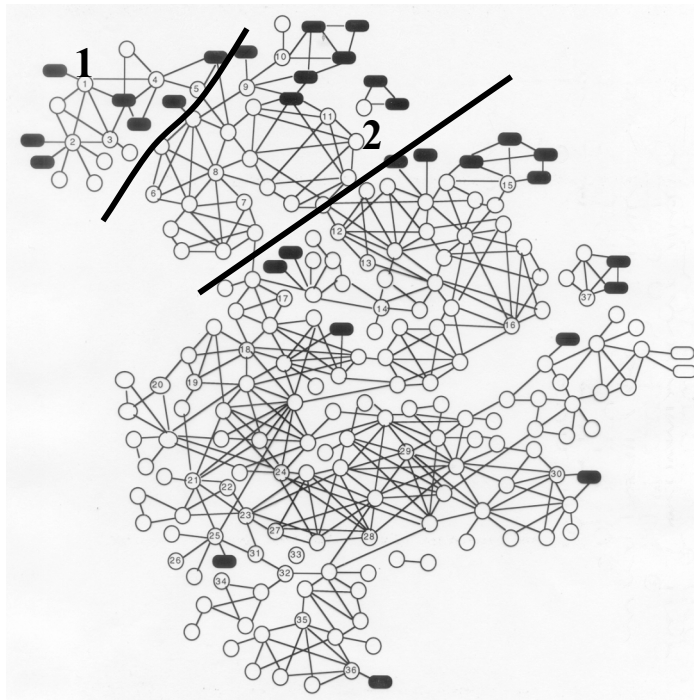
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Figure 12. Two clusters of burnout girls.

Figure 13 shows the use of vernacular variables by the burned-out burnouts, the regular burnouts, and the jocks. While the difference between burnouts and jocks holds up, it is clear that it's the burned-out burnout girls who account for the more dramatic patterns, making the greatest use of every single variable resource that I've seen yet. Negative concord, for instance, is pretty universally lower among women than men. Yet the burned-out burnout girls lead the entire school, including burnout boys, in their use of negative concord. These girls are busy symbolizing, and constitute what I call stylistic icons. A person wanting to know what kind of people raise /ay/ has only to look at the burned-out burnouts, who offer a perfect stereotype. They are, indeed, iconic individuals within the school and pointed to as the ultimate burnouts.
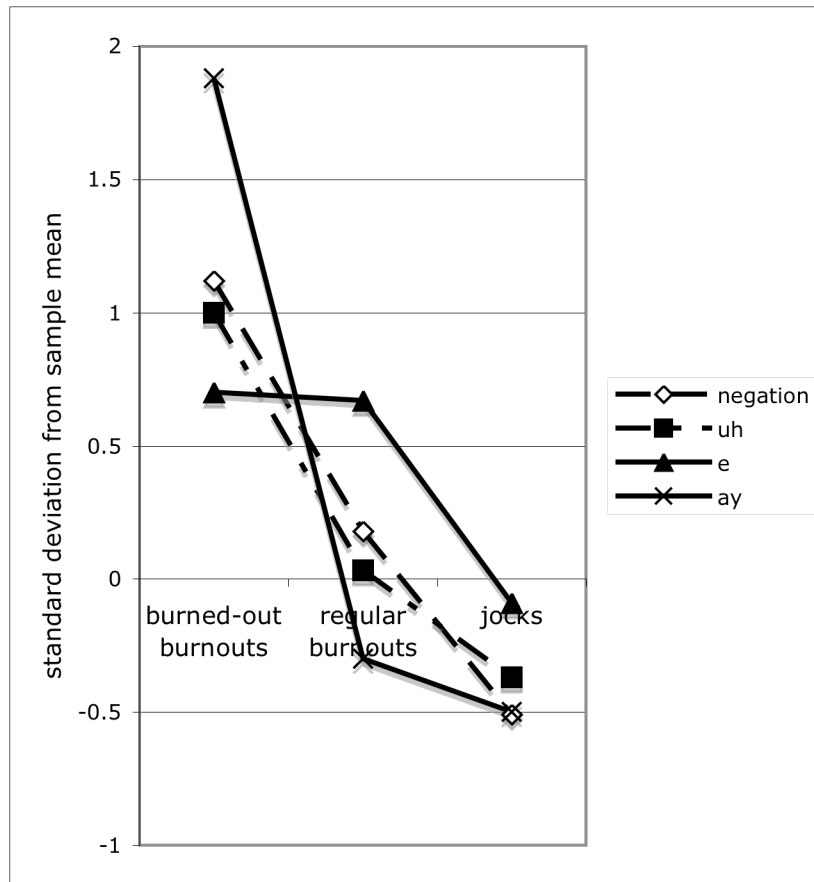
Figure 13. Use of urban variables and negative concord by jock girls and two clusters of burnout girls.

Variation, then, appears to be linked to categories through the practices that define those categories.

In 1979, Penny Brown and Steve Levinson (Brown and Levinson, 1979) raised the problem of viewing variables as markers of social categories. Inasmuch as a single variable can be stratified by class and gender, they said, when can one say that the use of a particular variant is marking which category? The answer to this dilemma lies in intervening meanings.

For some time, linguistic anthropologists (Ochs, 1991; Silverstein, 1976) have stressed the fact that linguistic choices rarely index social categories directly; rather, they index

attitudes, stances, activities that are in turn associated with categories of people. Let me take a particularly obvious case – so-called Japanese "women's language."

Japanese women's language is viewed as a variety characterized by the use of a range of honorific and mitigating forms. The construct of "men's" and "women's" language is an ideological formation (Inoue, in press) that constructs, rather than reflects, gender differences in middle class urban Japanese society. But it is pointed to regularly as evidence of women's and men's inner characters. In recent years, as young girls have increasingly laid claim to "men's" forms (Okamoto, 1995), the press has been accusing them of trying to speak "like men," and of breaking down the difference between male and female. In fact, Japanese girls using assertive forms are not trying to be boys, but to be assertive, employing language to challenge a particular aspect of the gender order.

But they clearly are not trying to break down male-female difference, for this assertiveness is part of a very female teenage trendy style (Miller, 2004; Okamoto, 1995). It is this indirect nature of the relation between variables and categories that allows variation to be a resource not simply for the indexing of place in the social matrix but for the construction of new places and of nuanced social meanings.

Take the two most-studied stable variables: the reduction of *-ing* to *-in* (as in *walkin'* for *walking),* and the fortition of /th/ and /dh/ to /t/ and /d/ as in *dis ting* and *dat ting*. William Labov has found them both to correlate with class in New York and Philadelphia. However, in his Philadelphia study (Labov, 2000), /dh/ shows regular socioeconomic stratification among both women and men – similar to negative concord. *–ing*, on the other hand, shows regular stylistic and socioeconomic stratification on the part of women, but not on the part of men – indeed, upper middle class men's casual speech shows reduction of *-ing* at the same level as working class men (see Figure 14).

/dh/   -ing

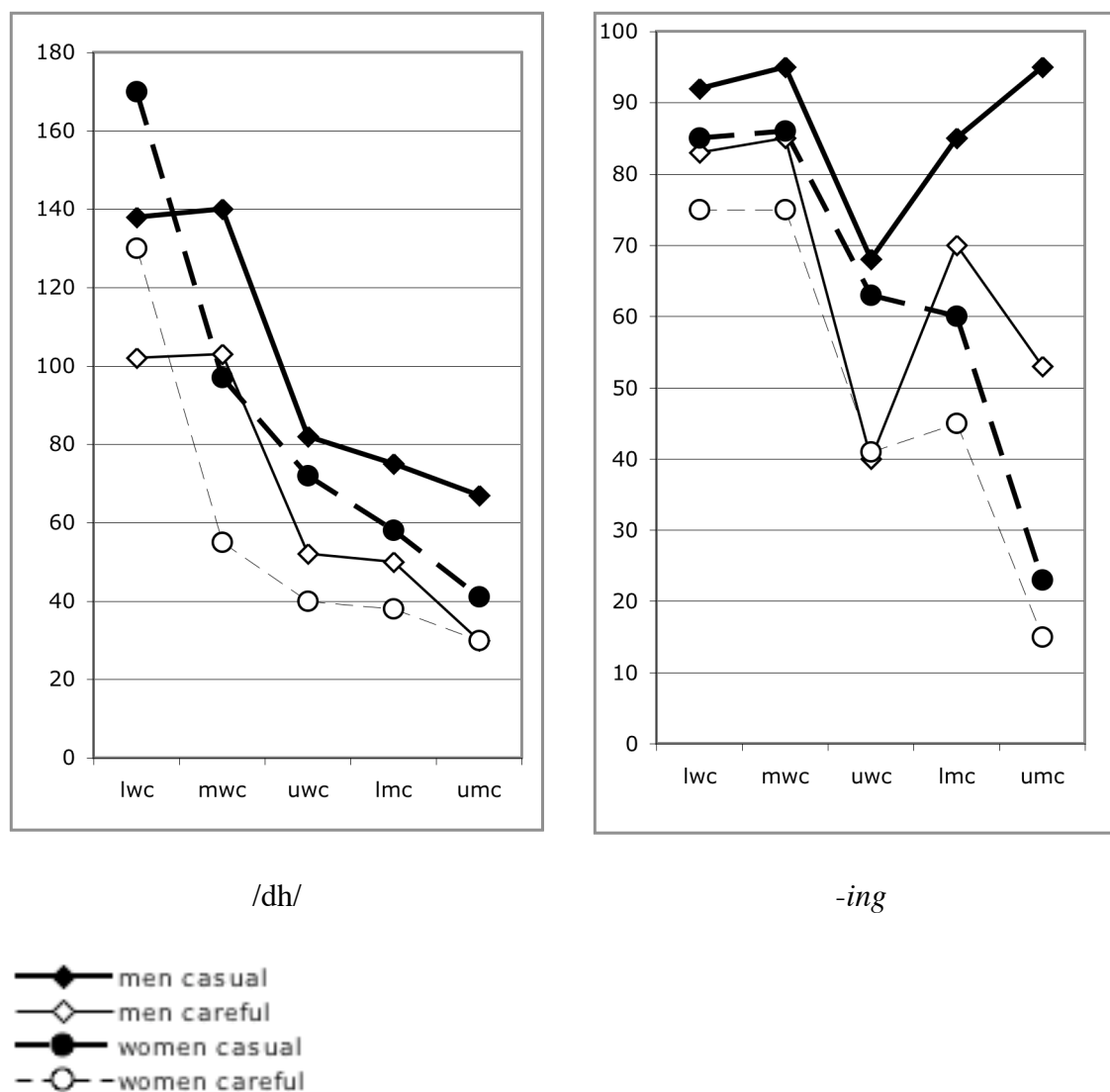men casual
men careful
women casual
women careful

Figure 14. Fortition of /dh/ and reduction of *–ing* by gender and class.

I would argue that this variable is associated with casualness, and is in turn connected to broader categories like class and gender through the kinds of things that people at different places in the social order do and the kinds of personae that they construct. Lord Peter Wimsey, for example, makes quite regular use of reduced ing, clearly signaling entitlement, not low status. Labov's data show little style shifting for this variable among working class speakers – rather, they keep it at a uniformly high level. I would argue that this has to do with class-based attitudes about formality, and Labov's data even seem to suggest that the unreduced form is marked and heard as hypercorrect in the working class. Kathryn Campbell-Kibler's ongoing experimental work on the meaning of *–ing*

reduction indicates that hearers interpret reduction as a function of their more general evaluation of the speaker using it. This general evaluation is based in the speaker's larger style, and the content of the stimulus utterances. She has even found that both southerners and northerners interpret this variable differently depending on whether it occurs in a southern or a northern dialect.

When we think about the relation between variation and social groups, we don't generally identify individual variables. We have constructs in mind like Valley Girls, New York Jews, Mafiosi, Rappers, Southern Belles – persona types that constitute an ideological social landscape. The variables that characterize the varieties associated with these types do not themselves generally mean "Valley Girl, New York Jew" etc., but combine to produce those meanings. In other words, the meaning of variation lies in its role in the construction of styles, and studying the role of variation in stylistic practice involves not simply placing variables in styles, but in understanding this placement as an integral part of the construction of social meaning.

Stylistic practice involves a process of *bricolage* (Hebdige, 1984), by which people combine a range of existing resources to construct new meanings or new twists on old meanings. It involves adapting linguistic variables available out in the larger world to the construction of social meaning on a local level. But the use of these variables requires that they have some general conventional meaning, which can be vivified in the particular style. Rather than talking about convention, I prefer to talk about conventionalization. Inasmuch as language is a practice, it involves the continual making and remaking of convention.

And style (like language) is not a *thing* but a *practice*. It is the activity in which people create social meaning. Neither language nor the social world is static, and stylistic practice is part of the practice in which change – or stability – is brought about.

Consider Qing Zhang's work on Beijing Mandarin. Zhang (Zhang, in press) examined the emergence of a new and growing young elite in Beijing, often referred to as "Chinese yuppies." The yuppies are managers working in the foreign-owned financial sector, pioneering a materialistic and cosmopolitan life style in Beijing. In doing so, they are setting themselves quite apart from their peers – managers in state-owned businesses. In

addition to the active construction of "life style" through the consumption of home furnishings, clothing, toys and leisure activities – or one might say, to go with these – the yuppies are developing a new and distinctive speech style. Perhaps the most salient resource in this linguistic construction is the use of the full tone, which is a feature of non-mainland Mandarin. This variable (Figure 15), completely foreign to Beijing and never appearing in the speech of the managers in state-owned businesses, brings a very clear cosmopolitan quality to Yuppie speech. Zhang emphasizes that the speakers are not imitating Hong Kong speech, but calling on a Hong Kong feature to bring Beijing into the transnational sphere.
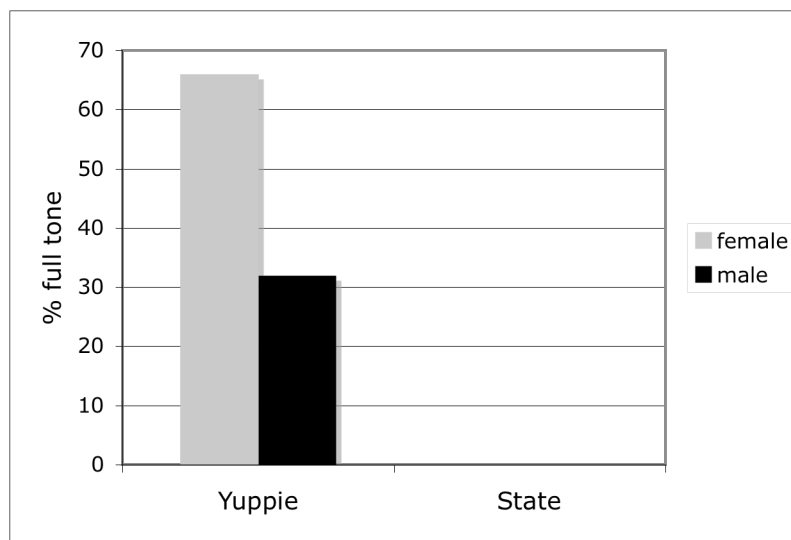

Figure 15. % Full tone in the speech of Beijing Yuppies and managers in state-owned businesses.

Zhang went on to delve into the construction of meaning in local Beijing variables: most notably rhotacization of finals and the interdental pronunciation of /z/, both of which are quite saliently associated with Beijing Mandarin. These variables are particularly interesting because they are fairly overtly associated with salient personae in Beijing culture – personae that appear commonly in modern literature, and that Zhang's informants referred to on occasion when discussing local speech.

The interdental pronunciation of /z/ is commonly associated with the "alley saunterer" – a feckless character who hangs around back alleys waiting for something to happen. As Figure 16 shows, the yuppies stay away from this one.
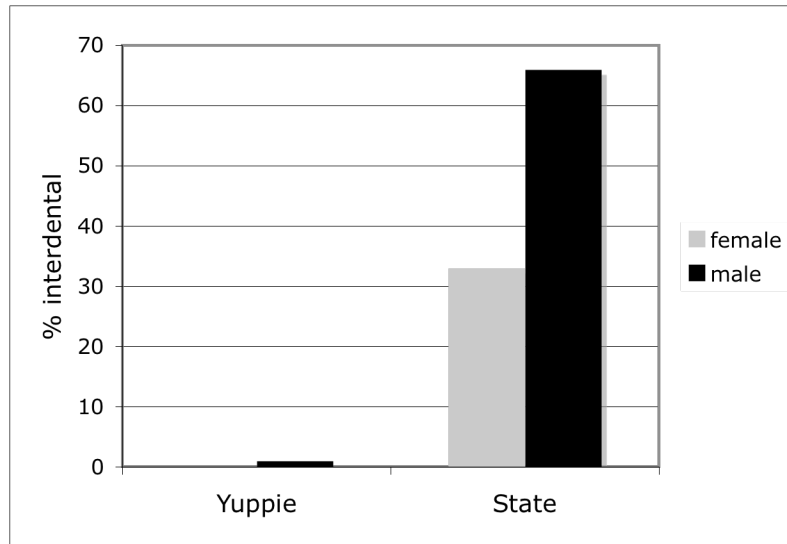
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Figure 16. % interdental realization of /z/ in the speech of Beijing Yuppies and managers in state-owned businesses.

Rhotacization of finals, on the other hand, is commonly referred to as "oily" and associated with a "smooth operator" – the guy who manages to get by no matter what. Zhang found that the yuppies selectively adopt (or reject) these variables as a function of the nature of the personae they are developing. Women avoid both the smooth operator and the alley saunterer variables, as neither of these character types is useful to a business woman. The men, on the other hand, reject the alley saunterer variable as reflecting a character who is too feckless for a transnational businessman, but adopt a moderate amount of the smooth operator variable (see Figure 17). The yuppies, thus, recombine locally available resources to construct a new, cosmopolitan – yet sitill Beijing – persona. On the other hand, the managers in state-owned businesses, still linked to local networks, continue to use a high level of Beijing features, and never use full tone.
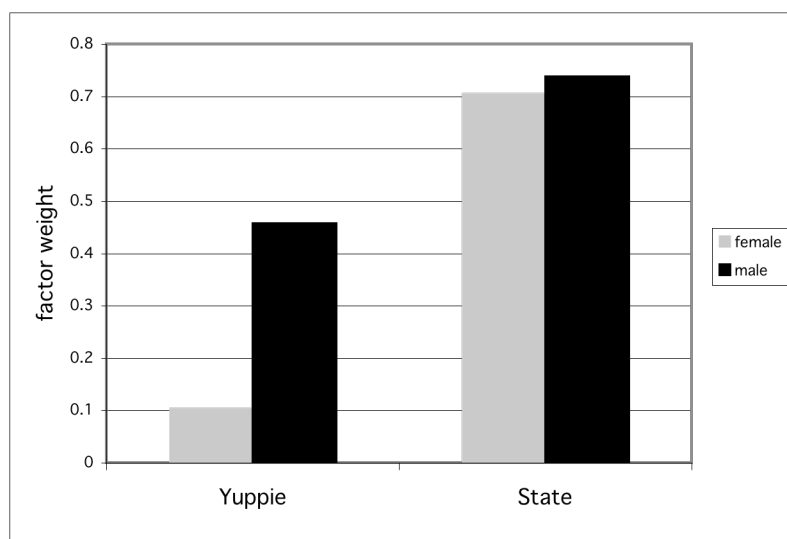
Figure 17. Rhotacization of finals in the speech of Beijing Yuppies and
managers in state-owned businesses.

Here again, we're talking about local variables – variables that are distinctively Beijing, and that apparently have become conventionalized over time both in use and in explicit reflection. 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.

Let me turn to a much more distant source – a source more remote from change in progress and from regional variability. Hyperarticulation has a variety of roles in English. At the bottom line, it can sound emphatic. Emphasis, in turn, can enhance clarity, and it can communicate heightened emotion. It is also associated with the written word and a school-teachery standard – with meticulousness hence propriety. This is a bundle of meanings in which one might say that the natural blends with the conventional. Which aspect of these meanings gets attached to a particular pattern of hyperarticulation appears to depend on the style in which it is implemented. Recently, several people have studied the hyperarticulation of word-final stops and particularly the release of word-final /t/.

The non-flapping of intervocalic /t/ is an very salient feature of British English in contrast with American English, and the hyperarticulation of both intervocalic and final /t/ is a common resource for Americans imitating British English. Mary Bucholtz has noted that people in science fiction role-playing games lean on this feature when "doing" a British accent. I heard just a few weeks ago a conversation in a Palo Alto bookstore, in which a

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bookstore employee, commenting that the author of a particular book was British, said, "The Brit^{h}ish are very lit^{h}erary and int^{h}elligent^h". The age-old stereotype of the British, and British English, as superior, intelligent and educated, is no doubt at work here. Building on the large-scale opposition between British and American English, combined with the historic construction of Americans as rough upstarts in opposition to the refined and educated British, /t/ release provides a global resource that can, in turn, be put to local use. A distinction made at the international level, then, seems to be providing American speakers with a resource for signaling meanings associated with intelligence, education, articulateness. I would say, then, that the meaning of /t/ release is over-determined.

In an ethnographic study of a Northern California high school, Mary Bucholtz (Bucholtz, 1996) noted the use of this variable 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 (Benor, 2002) examined this variable in a study of kids in an Orthodox community, and found that those who were studying the Talmud (i.e. those who had been to Yeshiva) released their /t/s more than those who were 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 also been identified as a feature of gay speech. If this is so, how does it square with the view of /t/ release as articulate? 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 et al., 2002) found that the gay 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, in the clinic with

patients and at 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, but 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 meaning of preciseness, intelligence and education that one would certainly want to evoke when functioning as a physician. At the barbecue, however, his /t/ release is rarer but the actual bursts are significantly longer. Note that this offers a wholly new view of the nature of variables as potentially multidimensional. Podesva's interpretation of this is that the long burst is a particular way of exaggerating /t/ release, and that what is being conveyed is a kind of fussy hyper-articulateness. In other words, the exaggerated release is intended not to convey intelligence, but prissiness – in keeping with the "bitchy diva" persona that Heath enjoys performing with his friends.

	Released /t/	Burst duration
Medical	24/321 6%	33 ms.
Barbecue	12/313 3%	49 ms.
	p=.010	p<.048

Table 1. /t/ Release by gay medical student in two situations.

Until these people studied /t/ release, the only time linguists had paid attention to word-final stops is in the study of cluster reduction in African American Vernacular English. Are these independent linguistic facts? Probably not entirely. 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 the distinctiveness between standard English and AAVE. Sensitivity to /t/ release, then, seems to permeate US

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language ideology and offer material for the construction of local stylistic features. The precise meaning of /t/ release in actual use depends on the particular style that it's incorporated into – Orthodox Jew (learned), California geek girl (smart), bitchy diva (prissy).

The third wave, then, moves the study of variation off in a new direction. Rather than defining variation in terms of the speakers who use variables, it seeks the meanings that motivate particular variable performances.

The Third Wave: The stylistic perspective

- *Ethnographic studies of communities of practice*

- *Local categories as built on common stances*

- *Variables as indexing stances, activities, characteristics*

- *Style as persona construction*

Conclusion

Speakers continually imbue linguistic variability with social meaning, and as far as I know, inconsequential social differences don't correlate with linguistic variables. This implies a certain amount of speaker agency, so in closing, let me talk about this point. I am not arguing that all variation is consciously controlled, or even socially meaningful. What I am arguing is that all variation has the potential to take on meaning. I assume that the Northern Cities backing of /e/ and /u/ – and possibly the raising of /ay/ – 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 accelerate them because they're specific to the city.

The indexicality of phonological variables is not as transparent as negation, or 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 has argued (Haeri, 1997), 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. Just as there is a continuum of conventionalization, there is a continuum of intentionality. 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.

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