

The meaning of the meaning of variation

As long as we've focused on variables that pattern predictably with macro-social categories, the meaning of variation has been treated as almost incidental. But the Third Wave focus on variation as a heterogeneous social-semiotic system raises issues of agency and meaning construction, and requires that we examine how variation relates to the larger meaning system of language. This talk is a move in this direction, with a focus on the meaning potential of different parts of the variation system, and the relation of this indexicality to semantics. What is distinctive about variation is not so much the meanings it conveys, but the way in which it conveys them: the semantic system is primarily propositional, while variation is primarily performative. The meanings associated with sociolinguistic variables can generally be expressed propositionally, but performativity lies deep in the linguistic system, as the ability to convey information non-propositionally about one's self, one's acts, states and stances is essential to human sociality.

Sociolinguistic variables range from the lexicon and morphosyntax to prosody, and I suggest that different kinds of variables provide material for different kinds of meanings. I propose a continuum of interiority – a range of indexicality from public and enduring facts (e.g. class, ethnicity) to states associated with an “interior self” (e.g. affect). This continuum emerges among phonological variables in the range from sound changes in progress, which at least initially index aspects of the social path of their spread (Labov 1966; Eckert 2000), to sound symbols (Eckert 2011), prosody (Jeong and Potts 2016) and voice quality (Podesva 2007), which conventionally link speech to the immediate, affective and even corporeal.

When we move above the level of phonology, there is no sharp line between the propositional and the performative. Expressives (e.g. *damn, fucking*), for example, are highly performative, with quite underspecified semantics. Potts (2007) has proposed six properties that distinguish expressives from the descriptive content that occupies most semanticists, all of which apply to sociolinguistic variables as well, by virtue of their performative nature. Recent work in variation has uncovered a wealth of forms such as discourse markers (e.g. Tagliamonte 2005), quotatives (Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2004), intensifiers (Beltrama 2016), and determiners (Acton 2014; Acton and Potts 2014), whose indexicality is linked to, and often feeds back into, denotation. In other words, as Lavandera (1978) argued some years ago, variation above the phonological level is not independent of semantics, nor should it be.

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