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Variation, meaning, and social change¹

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Introduction

The perspective that I will develop in these pages, what has come to be referred to as the “Third Wave” approach to variation², takes as basic that the meaningfulness of sociolinguistic variation is not incidental, not a by-product of social stratification, but a design feature of language. Sociolinguistic variation constitutes a system of signs that enables the non-propositional expression of social concerns as they unfold in interaction. It allows people to say things without putting them into words, making it essential to social life and part of the pragmatics that link speech to the wider social system. I will argue further that language is not just a system that **happens** to change, but a system whose change is central to its semiotic function. Variation is a system of signs that enact a continually changing social world, and it is the potential for change in the meanings of these signs that makes language viable for human life.

This perspective appears to conflict with some of the basic tenets of the view of variation that emerged from work in the First Wave, and that endure in much current work in variation. To some extent, this is because the First Wave grew out of the structuralist study of sound change, and is primarily concerned with pre-social cognitive forces giving rise to change; and with macro-social patterns of variation as structuring the regular social contact that accounts for the spread of change. This limits the view of social meaning to forces deriving from the macro-structure of society, hence external to language. My argument will be that social meaning in variation is an integral part of language, and that macro-social patterns of variation are at once the product of, and constraint on, a complex system of meaning.

Three Waves Real Quick

The First Wave of survey studies found a robust and repeated pattern of variation correlating with macro-sociological categories, showing that change enters communities at the lower end of the socioeconomic hierarchy, and spreads upwards. According to the model that emerged in the First Wave, sound change is pre-social, originating in the most unconscious and systematic reaches of the speaker’s linguistic system, and emerging in the speaker’s most unmonitored speech, the vernacular. But the global prestige and stigma of class lend social evaluation to patterns across this hierarchy, which intrudes in production, interrupting the natural flow of the vernacular when speakers’ attention is

drawn to their speech. In this way, the class stratification of variation is embedded in each speaker's range of variation, which constitutes a small slice of the community pattern. The finding that several apparently stable variables show a similar social distribution solidified the idea that variables all range along a single vector of formality or attention to speech. Intensity of contact was the underlying cause of the spread of change, but the class origins of change were explained by orientation to the standard language market (e.g. Sankoff and Laberge 1978; Kroch 1978).

The Second Wave delved under the large social aggregates of the First Wave, uncovering the local categories and configurations in which change takes place at the local level, and drawing attention to the day-to-day social practice in which macro-social patterns emerge. Work in the Second Wave adopted a more constructivist view of the relation between variation and social categories, and called into question the relation between style and attention to speech, emphasizing the positive value of the vernacular in local practice. In its later stages, it drew attention to the importance of style in the construction of social categories, and this ultimately led to the beginnings of the Third Wave.

The Third Wave departs from the first two by viewing variation as a system of signs, whose meanings emerge in their role in styles that enact social personae or types. These types, in turn, are both constrained by, and contribute to, macro-social patterns. Thus variables connect only indirectly to the macro-social. The first two waves viewed social locations and their social evaluations as broadly consensual and stable, while the Third Wave views them as emergent.

In other words, the study of variation and change until now has been exclusively a study of change in form, with the social structuring the broad path through which change in form travels, and the boundaries around aggregates of people who use variable forms in similar ways. The promise of Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968), by locating change in the orderly heterogeneity of the speech community, was to break down the distinction between synchrony and diachrony, moving us away from the stadial (see Silverstein this volume) treatment of change. If work in variation has not achieved this transcendence, it is because it has been hamstrung by its treatment of the social as static. I will argue in what follows that change involves the entire sign – content as well as form.

Variation as a semiotic system

To examine the nature of social meaning in variation, I begin with three properties of variables that are particularly important to their functioning:

Implicitness. Unlike much of the propositional meaning that preoccupies semantics, the meaning of variables³ is implicit, only rarely overtly constructed, and eminently deniable. In this way, variation enables speakers to signal things about themselves and the social world without saying them “in so many words,” and allowing things to be left “unsaid.” This also allows a speaker to make small indexical moves, for example to try out the identity waters with less risk to face.

Underspecification. A design feature of language more generally, underspecification allows a small number of forms to serve a large number of purposes. Individual variables never have a single meaning, but a broader meaning potential. In this sense, they are like other linguistic signs, as more specific meanings emerge only in context. This need for interpretation binds language to social action, and it lies at the core of language's capacity for flexibility, nuance, creativity and change.

Combinativeness. Finally, these underspecified variables do not take on meaning in isolation, but as stylistic components. They connect to the social through their role in enacting and re-enacting personae, which are visible marks of the distinctions that make up the social fabric. As these personae and the world they construct are not static, a kind of infinite semiosis continually affects a variable's meaning potential or indexical field (Eckert 2008).

These three properties make the meaning of variation eminently mutable, as the means of expression moves with the social world it engages. In this way, variation is not just a reflection of the social, but essential to its construction. Central to the Third Wave is the emphasis on practice. The First Wave is based in a theory of linguistic structure, rendering change problematic and maintaining separation between language and the social. But it is in practice that we reproduce, and in the process change, the structure of language. And this is inseparable from our more general practice that reproduces the social. Giddens (1979, p. 2) sums up social reproduction simply: "In and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible." The macro-social categories of variation studies – class, gender, ethnicity, age etc. – structure the conditions under which each of us lives, and to which our actions respond. In the process, we reproduce, potentially changing, that structure.

Variation and change

The macro-social categories of class, gender, ethnicity, and age are abstractions over an infinite range of activities and conditions that constitute the lives in and for which people use variation. In their day-to-day lives, people do not experience class as a stratification of economic and status indicators, gender as a simple binary, or age as a biological or calendric continuum – even if they can learn to think of them in these ways. Correlations of formal linguistic variation with these categories can point to, but cannot explain, the discursive use of variation. The important issue is not whether we recognize the importance of abstract social patterns, but what we take their significance to be for a theory of variation. Gender, class, age, and ethnicity will always emerge as supremely important in the study of variation because they are central aspects of our social order. But what is their relation to the use of variation? Are they cause or result? Is it more important to us that they structure interaction or that they are the outcome of interaction? From her perspective, does a person mop floors every day for a living because she is working class or is she working class because she mops floors every day? And does her way of speaking have more to do with the fact that she's working class or with the fact that it unfolds in the course of mopping floors? Is she more likely to be marking her class status as she speaks, or to be showing annoyance about her boss, showing worry about her car breaking down, or being polite or confrontational with her children's teachers? And does sound change just roll through her social networks or is it part of what happens

as she engages in these conversations? In other words, is she an intermediary or a mediator – does she just pass changes along or does she do something with them, hence to them, in the process?⁴ The crux of the matter lies in agency which, as I will discuss below, does not require conscious intention. And if we view variables as signs, we need to consider that the meaning can change as well as the form.

Having no denotational meaning of their own, phonological units are not signs in the received Saussurean sense. But once a piece of phonetic form comes to be associated with some social indexical meaning, it becomes a sign. The emergence of a sign, whether a new sign or a change in an existing sign, opens an order of indexicality (Silverstein 2003). Orders of indexicality are most commonly described as steps in a linear progression – a first order indexing a category of speakers, the next order indexing some association or stereotypic quality of that category, and so on. Thus in Labov's (1963) Martha's Vineyard study, (ay) with a centralized nucleus, originating as a regional ("first" order) index 'Vineyarder', was appropriated to index a particular stance in the struggle with mainland incursion, yielding a "second" order index – a particular claim about what constitutes an 'Authentic Vineyarder'. In fact, it's almost impossible for an index to be first order (see Silverstein 2003), since the moment a form becomes indexical, it is flush with meaning. The Vineyard (ay) no doubt had long had other associations on the mainland (such as some quaint associations with island people) that wouldn't have been affected by what went on on the Island. In other words, orders of indexicality involve interpretive orders – the socially located meaning systems within which construal takes place. This is particularly important because it keeps our focus on the multiplicity of interpretations. Once the centralized nucleus indexed an anti-incursion stance on the Vineyard, it was available for re-use, for example, indexing a strong stance on some other issue – possibly local or otherwise. This continuous reinterpretation of variables results in indexical fields (Eckert 2008), or ranges of potential meanings that can be called up depending on the context. While an indexical field encompasses variability of meaning, it does not imply boundedness – one person's indexical field for a variable will change continually, and will presumably be continuous with those of people with long-shared experiences (Jaffe's paper in this volume offers an expansion of the indexical field construct). In other words, just as the forms themselves are continuously variable across time and space, the meanings may be as well.

At the very micro-level, meaning is constructed where production and interpretation come together. Peirce's triadic theory of the sign involves three components – the sign-vehicle (roughly form), the object (roughly meaning), and the interpretant⁵ – the in-the-moment construal of the sign. The interpretant, in turn, launches a new sign. Signs, in other words, are in a continual process of enregisterment. This is crucial to any theory of language, underlying change at all levels. We simply do not have a viable theory of linguistic change if we separate the sign vehicle from the object, and if we view some signs as changing, others as stable. By their very nature, signs are unstable. While some may be continually maintained, that maintenance is best seen as a kind of change. Needless to say, some parts of language, and some meanings, are more volatile than others. We expect the meaning of *table* to be more stable than that of *hipster*. We also can observe that words denoting women (e.g. *hussy*) change faster than equivalent terms

denoting men, given the enduring tendency to render terms for women pejorative. Here, once again, change of meaning takes place within an interpretive (in this case gender) order. And the effect of the gender order is not abstract, but is played out in the continual situated use of the word. The shift of the etymon from ‘housewife’ (Thirteenth century *huswif*) to ‘slattern’ (McConnell-Ginet 1984) took place in repeated social moves in particular kinds of situations on the part of particular kinds of people. And the gender order within which this took place accounts similarly for shifts of meaning such as those for *mistress* and *bitch*.

Like the rest of language, variation does not simply reflect the social, but enacts it, and in the course of this enactment, it participates in social change⁶. Social distinctions such as gender, class, age and ethnicity are instantiated through day-to-day activity that includes linguistic variation. But while they are being instantiated, they are also changing. Gender is not the same as it was in my mother's generation, and in recent years, we've seen the technology industry rearrange class in significant ways. It certainly does not mean the same thing to be African American today as it did when I was a kid, and of course sixty is the new forty. The character of cities and geographic regions is unstable as well - urban gentrification and the industrialization of agriculture bring consequences for the use and perception of dialect features. And the movement of people to and away from areas brings about new perceptions as well (e.g. Johnstone et al 2006). The distinctions remain, even sometimes labeled the same, but they are not static. Society and the people who make it up are always works in progress, so if variation is to do semiotic work, it has to be a dynamic resource.

Who we are and what we do changes over time because who we can be and what we can do changes over time. The persona that I present every day as an academic woman was impossible when I was a 30-year-old Assistant Professor⁷, both because I had the mind and body of a 30-year-old, and because the world around me was the world of the Seventies. Like the sprinkling of female Assistant Professors around me, I consciously lowered my F0 in order to be taken more seriously – a move that some young female academics nowadays feel they can afford to resist (whether they can actually afford to is another issue). Granted that changes in academic gender balances were brought about to some extent through legislation, and institutional change made room for new kinds of female assistant professors, those high-level changes were the result of action on the ground, and the way of “doing being” female assistant professor emerged on the ground as well. In other words, much social change is brought about through changes in personae – modifications of existing personae, and the emergence of new ones. Skaters, Valley Girls, Bros, and Hipsters are all young white personae that have emerged in the current generations, and that personify issues in millennial social life. The Kogals (Miller 2004) and Gothic Lolitas (Gagné 2008) of Japan were not even imaginable fifty years ago. Their stylistic innovations, including their linguistic innovations, are integral to social change in Japan.

To the people on the ground, stylistic change does not place us in a ready-made spot but carves out a new spot in a structure that is itself in flux – or that we would like to put into flux⁸. I probably raised my F0 when I went home at the end of my Assistant Professor

day – but over time, aspects of my Assistant Professor self spread to the rest of my life. The Gothic Lolitas leave home in their school uniforms and a matching demeanor, changing into Lolitas in their free public space. And no doubt becoming – and ceasing to be – Gothic Lolitas is part of their movement through life. Heath, the gay doctor of Podesva’s (2007) study, switches styles radically as he moves from the clinic to the barbecue with his friends. Most likely Heath did not have a “gay diva” style as a young boy, nor could he have envisioned the possibility of the personae he would develop. Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994) warned against taking one recording as evidence of a person’s “habitual” speech – or differences between recordings at two points in time as evidence of change in that person’s “habitual” speech. Indeed one’s change over time is an unfolding of identity work that is always in motion moment-by-moment, situation-by-situation. And Heath’s particular ensemble of personae is not only part of his moving into adulthood, but also, importantly, part of social change. Not only has change in sexual and gender ideologies brought about increasing performances of sexual and gender diversity, but each such performance brings about change in these ideologies.

Personae and the semiotic landscape

The development of new personae is social change at a basic level, and variation does its semiotic work in the stylistic practice that puts these personae flexibly into the landscape. Coupland introduced the notion of *persona* into the study of style and variation, pointing out the relation between personae and macro-sociological categories. This perspective lies at the origins of the Third Wave:

“Dialect style as persona management captures how individuals, within and across speaking situations, manipulate the conventionalized social meanings of dialect varieties – the individual through the social. But it is the same process of dialectal self-projection that explains the effect of dialect stratification when the speech of social groups is aggregated in sociolinguistic surveys. Individuals within what we conventionally recognize to be meaningful social categories enact dialect personas with sufficient uniformity for survey researchers to detect numerical patterns of stratification.” (Coupland 2000 p. 198.)

The attention to personae shifts the focus away from the social aggregate to individuals as they move through identities and situations. However, it does not amount to a study of the individual, but of the structure within which individuals find and make meaning. This structure can be viewed as a semiotic landscape, in which styles and the linguistic features that constitute them, connect to the social. This is a slippery spatial metaphor, with many of the problems of the metaphorical socioeconomic hierarchy, but it focuses us on styles rather than individual variables, thus foregrounding the social basis of meaning. Rather than seeking out variables that correlate with class, we will seek out variables that play a role in this landscape, but needless to say, abstractions like class will emerge as areas in this landscape. This will greatly expand the number and kind of variables we examine, and in the process we may find other abstractions, intersecting or not, with class. This multiplicity of variables does not mean that the study of style moves us into disorderly heterogeneity, but it puts new demands on us to find order. It is crucial that we recognize that there is nothing random about variation – that when we move on

from our focus on the macro-social, we continue to find patterns that explicate, rather than conflict with, the macro-social.

Order in the First Wave comes in treating all variables as moving continuously along a single vector of formality, which conditions the speaker's attention to speech. Thus the raising of (eh) in New York City can be expected to co-occur with the raising of (oh), apical pronunciations of (-ING), and even (th/dh) stopping. Although this co-variation is not strict⁹, a general class and formality stratification applies to all. This treatment of relative formality as the social impetus for changing states of attention is in support of the theory of the vernacular, but to the extent that co-variation is not strict, this cannot be a theory of style. The essence of style is difference, and the study of style needs to focus on the novel patterns of co-occurrence that bring about difference. Such patterns have been treated extensively over the years in discussions of alternation and co-occurrence (Ervin-Tripp 1972), register (e.g. Halliday 1978; Agha 2003), and heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981), all of which are defined by distinctive combinations of alternative forms, whose use corresponds to some combination of social type and situation. In most of these cases, quite explicitly in Halliday's case, registers are treated as emergent in the situations that structure the social world, and tied to situations through the meanings in play in those situations. Registers are styles with broad recognition, and whatever the breadth of that recognition, they give shape to the semiotic landscape.

Agha's register (2003) is a sign at a particularly high level of consensuality and metadiscursivity – a style that is enduringly associated with some widely-recognized character type such as *Posh Brit* or *Surfer Dude*. Agha's notion of enregisterment emphasizes the processual, the creation of a sign through the linguistic bringing-into-being of a characterological figure. And this bringing-into-being is where variation comes in. From the perspective of variation, registers are an outcome of stylistic practice, in which speakers make small or large interactive moves. A girl on the Fields elementary school playground (Eckert 2011a) who wants to talk about “who's going with who [hI:w]”, or her classmate who, upon the approach of someone she's shunning, says “I better move [mIwv]”, are advancing an element of the California vowel shift as they fashion themselves as players with attitude in the emerging popular crowd. These girls, in these stylistic moves, can be said to be modifying their personae, modeling themselves as someone quite distinct from their less popular peers and from their own childhood personae. But there is nothing random or particularistic about what they are doing, as it all takes place within and with respect to a cultural paradigm yielding a particular configuration of youth, gender, ethnicity, class, attitude, region. And while they are using a resource that is even still commonly associated with Valley Girls, they are not using a Valley Girl register, but drawing on, and referring to, that register and its persona.

Based on the patterns we encounter, we construct our own patterns, engaging in stylistic activity as we move through, and make places for ourselves in, the social landscape. Styles are put together in a continual process of bricolage (Hebdige 1984 adapting Lévi-Strauss 1967), which may take place in minute and quite unconscious moves (e.g. a slightly longer voiced onset time or slightly shifted vowel) or in more intentional moves (e.g. a more drastic vowel shift or an intense use of creak). A skinny white boy may start

saying “yo!” or indeed – at some point in recent years, a white frat boy ventured to call one of his brothers “bro.” Depending on how these moves come off, one might use them again, refine them, back off from them. A stylistic move is always creative – people don't make stylistic moves to replicate what's already there, but to move on¹⁰. And these moves are the micro-organisms of linguistic and social change and stability.

The perception of social meaning involves a reverse process. When we see a new person, we perceive a style – a combination of clothing, facial expression, posture, movement, speech, etc. – which helps us place this person in the social landscape and predict how he or she might think and act, both in the present situation and in others. Campbell-Kibler (e.g. 2008) has shown that hearers interpret variables on the basis of their understanding of what kind of person is speaking and what a particular variant can mean coming from that person to that hearer in that situation. In other words, the hearer's model of the speaker in the situation is the basis from which he or she interprets the use of a particular linguistic variant. While perceptions vary from person to person, patterns emerge as people with similar experiences tend to have similar interpretations.¹¹ The more similar the participants' semiotic systems the better the match is likely to be. People who are socially closer will have more similar experiences, more mutual concerns, and more similar interpretations of the semiotic landscape. As a result, they are more likely to give and take small stylistic innovations. And to the extent that individuals participate in the same communities of practice, they are likely to reach out jointly into the wider stylistic landscape to appropriate resources from more distant styles. These similarities accumulate into larger social patterns, which ramp up into macro-social differences. In this way, our social landscape comprises a stylistic continuum.

Agency does not equal awareness

Some view the focus on style and persona as separate from the “mainstream” quantitative tradition in variation both because it examines variables that are not primarily associated with the macro-social, and because it brings in intentional uses of variables. But the status of these “other” variables cannot be established a priori. First of all, these “other” variables are not random, but engage social issues that are part of the same structured social world as the macro-patterned variables. Given that front-liers in changes in progress that are not markers or stereotypes can clearly be produced for stylistic emphasis, the line between the intentional and the unintentional, the conscious and the unconscious, is a problematic one.

The theory of the vernacular protects the autonomy of sound change by presupposing a clear line between the conscious and the unconscious. While the regularity of sound change and the automaticity of speech are central to any theory of variation, this line between the conscious and the unconscious, and the strict separation of the social from the linguistic, are not. Social motivations have been snuck into discourses about variation from the start. For example, (Trudgill 1972), proposed a notion of “covert prestige” to account for the spread of change upward from the working class. As a leading denier of the role of the social in sound change, Trudgill presumably found this bit of social meaning acceptable because it is “unconscious.”

But consciousness and awareness are not simple matters, and agency does not equal or require awareness. A central source of this problem is the common belief that the social is somehow external to cognition, or at a “higher” level. People talk about social constraints as “top down” constraints. Such spatial metaphors can facilitate scientific discourse, but in doing so they often render problematic generalizations as given. Anyone who has thought carefully about the social will know that the social is every bit as interior and basic as the linguistic. The social is embedded in the unconscious to the same extent, in the same way, and along the same timeline, as the linguistic. Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of the *habitus* is a cognitive embedding of the social, developed from the earliest years as a function of one’s location in society. The habitus has even been described (Wacquant 2005) as the social equivalent of linguistic competence. This is a problematic analogy since the vernacular does not encompass the full range of variation, and one would be better off speaking of a linguistic habitus. Experimental work is showing that a speaker’s perception of the social meaning of variables can operate at a very unconscious level, whether the variables are stereotypes (e.g. Hay and Drager 2010) or recent sound changes in progress (D’Onofrio 2014). Most importantly, D’Onofrio (forthcoming) has shown that social information enters the process of perception from the very start, and is inseparable from phonological processing. This perspective on stylistic practice does not erase the importance of the systematicity and automaticity of sound change, but raises the question of when and how that automatic sound change becomes a sign.

Labov proposes a continuum of awareness, among indicators, markers, and stereotypes on the basis of (1) the presence or absence of stylistic use and (2) the presence or absence of metapragmatic awareness. These are, presumably, stages in the process of enregisterment, and can be part of the development and progress of sound change as the progress from indicator to marker is a gradually emerging pattern sensitivity, eventually leading to recognition. At the same time, very intentional stylistic moves may eventually become automatic. White boys with little contact with African American peers who adopt features of AAVE (Bucholtz 1999) know what they’re doing. The skinny white kid saying “yo!” knows what he’s doing. The result may be a little jerky, but if the innovation works – that is, if it goes over in the right circles – it may over time become integrated into his style, eventually becoming smoother and more automatic. It will not be the same sign that his African American peers use (and may hence cease to use), but it will be a new one whose meaning includes the conditions of borrowing. In other words, change can progress from unconscious to conscious, and vice-versa. Certainly we do things unconsciously all the time, and our lack of consciousness does not mitigate its effect or our role in its effect. Personae are not necessarily entirely intentional. Even involuntary tics become part of a person’s style, whether they like it or not, since the style is not in the intent but in the inter-subjective space between production and perception.

Kinds of meaning

The objects of study of variation and pragmatics together make up a social-indexical system, but having emerged from different directions, they remain disciplinarily separate. Pragmatics compensates for a decontextualized semantics, which concerns stable but underdetermined meanings. But nothing in language is stable, and semantic change is a product of regular patterns of the contextualized use that is the subject matter of pragmatics. The division of labor between semantics and pragmatics is an analytic

convenience, one might say an analytic requirement, but stability is a matter of degree. Similarly, the line between pragmatics and variation is fluid. Acton (2014) and Gardner and Tagliamonte (2015) have shown, for example, how the presence or absence of the definite article patterns socially but along pragmatic lines. This is as it should be, and the question is to what extent the meanings associated with more traditional variables are significantly different.

Over the years, the move from phonological to syntactic and discourse variables has broadened meaning preservation to include functional equivalence (e.g. Coupland 1983; Cheshire 2005; Buchstaller 2006), which leads into classic pragmatic territory. The emphasis, though, has been on abstracting away from pragmatic force. Social stratification, in these cases, seems to be what qualifies something as a sociolinguistic variable. The fact that Labov and Weiner (1983) didn't find social constraints in the use of the agentless passive may not mean that it is not a sociolinguistic variable, but that they have not found the right social constraints (Romaine 1985). Whatever social differentiation there is to be found will be a function of social differences in pragmatic strategies. Perhaps there is a category of people, for instance the compulsively obfuscating (see e.g. Ehrlich 1998), who are more likely than others to background their own agency. But as long as this tendency does not align with macro-social categories, they will not be considered sociolinguistic variables. Acton has shown that when referring to a group of people, the use of *the* rather than a bare plural (*the Americans* vs. *Americans*) “tends to depict the group as a monolith of which the speaker is not a part.” (2014, p. iv). People inclined to engage in othering, or individuals when they are in “othering mode”, then, may be more likely to use this variant (Melnick and Acton 2015).

But one does not have to go to syntax to see the pragmatic potential of variation. To take the simplest interpretation of its meaning, people will agree that apical pronunciations of (-ING) are more casual than velar ones. So is the social stratification of this variable an otherwise meaningless difference in how people pronounce this morpheme? Or does stratification reflect class differences in participation in situations that call for casualness, and/or to differences in ideologies about casualness and formality? Campbell-Kibler (2008) has shown that listeners hear the apical variant as condescending if they believe the speaker is educated, and the velar variant as pretentious if they believe the speaker is not educated. If a college student tells his friends he can't go out for a beer with them because “I'm studyin',” are his friends more likely to urge him to go, inferring that he's less serious about not going out than if he had said “I'm studying”?

Crossing another disciplinary boundary, variation plays an important role in the expression of emotion which, although commonly relegated to psychology, is eminently social. Although emotion is thought of in terms of states, it is also a practice. People “do” affect just as they “do” gender or other category memberships (see e.g. Eckert 1996). Affect interacts with, is part of the construction of, macro-social categories as certain populations find themselves in particular affective states more often, or are expected to display or to not display particular affective states, or because they have come to distinguish themselves on the basis of those states. The mutually opposed high school communities of practice of Belten High in the Detroit suburbs (Eckert 1989), the Jocks

and the Burnouts, distinguished themselves among other things on the basis of affect. The Burnouts considered themselves a problem culture, the have-nots, and resented what they saw as the Jocks' fake smiles. Many Jocks, meanwhile, prided themselves on presenting a happy face at all times (regardless of how they felt). One might ask to what extent this is responsible for the fact that the Jocks favored the fronting (hence lip-spreading) components of the Northern Cities Shift while the Burnouts favored the backing (hence lip-rounding) components. This raises the question of what exactly constitutes a variable.

The traditional focus in variation has been on individual units, primarily segments, and when we turn to prosody we generally focus on specific intonational contours (e.g. Guy et al 1986) or rhythmic patterns (e.g. Carter 2005). But one might consider that the Jocks' and Burnouts' preference for fronting vs. backing changes involves difference in articulatory setting, extending the variable to multiple related segments. Similarly, fortition can index anger, and may affect a variety of segments. In this case it may be the process that is the variable. And some instances of fortition might also be hyperarticulations, and index clarity or carefulness along with other forms of hyperarticulation (as discussed at greater length in Eckert 2008). This also introduces embodiment and iconicity. Certainly prosody is closely tied to affect, and the relation is in large part iconic, but iconicity creeps into segmental phonology as well. The frequency code (Ohala 1994) has been shown to relate front vowels with positive affect and back vowels with negative (Eckert 2011b; Geenberg 2010). Prosodic expressions of affect can generally be said to not change propositional value, but they can disambiguate. Nygaard and Lunders (2002), for example, found that emotional tone of voice affects the processing of tokens of homophonous lexical items, so experimental subjects are more likely to process [flæwə] as *flower* when hearing it in a happy voice, and *flour* when hearing it in a neutral voice; and to process [daj] as *die* when hearing it in a sad voice and *dye* when hearing it in a neutral voice. Indeed, it would be strange if iconicity were not frequently at work in the indexical realm. Although sound symbolism is conventional, once conventionalized it brings ready-made meaning potential to the enregisterment process.

Conclusion

Perhaps because my intellectual roots are in the Labovian tradition, I think of the Third Wave study of meaning as part and parcel of a larger variationist endeavor. If there are two robust facts about variation, they are that (1) variation is socially meaningful and (2) variation patterns socially on both the macro- and the micro-social scale. A robust theory of variation will integrate these facts, tracing the links between local stylistic practice and macro-social patterns, examining meaning-making on the ground in view of the conditions on life represented by macro-social categories. A theory of variation will also have to deal with the contributions to meaning of different kinds of variables, from sound changes in progress to segmental and prosodic indexes of affect.

And we will have to recognize questions that are still open. Social meaning has been an untheorized subtext of all work on variation, tempered by a commitment to protecting the autonomy of sound change. The focus on macro-sociological categories has played an important role in this protection, as it foregrounds mechanical contact and distance. And

arguments against the role of the social in sound change have fixated on macro-sociological notions of identity. Trudgill (2008) argues that identity played no role in dialect mixture in a variety of historical situations of contact, based on the lack of evidence that the mixture was ever associated with a new colonial identity. Identity, he claims, does not have the power to drive change, but is parasitic upon automatic, unconscious, interactional synchrony. Labov (2001, p.191) questions the importance of identity, setting forth density of contact as the most powerful force in the spread of change:

The Martha's Vineyard study is frequently cited as a demonstration of the importance of the concept of local identity in the motivation of linguistic change. However, we do not often find correlations between degrees of local identification and the progress of sound change. (Labov 2001:191, cited in Trudgill 2008 p. 244)

However, this was meant to raise the issue rather than reject the social motivation. But as in Trudgill's case, the social force that Labov is questioning is a kind of identity based on macro-sociological constructs – nation, region, island. But it is not at all clear that local identity is what was at issue in the Martha's Vineyard case. Rather, a variable that had been a local marker was used in taking an ideological stance within – and dividing – the local community. The fisherfolk may have been laying claim to greater local authenticity as a way of bolstering their stance, but not to local identity. Accommodation in colonial situations may have more to do with emerging local social types or stances in the colonial situation than with some abstract colonial identification. It seems that there is an 'it-must-be-like-that' school (Trudgill 2014, p. 220) on both sides of the issue, when in fact we are faced with open questions.

Certainly we cannot ignore the automaticity of sound change, and the possibility that where change is involved, social meaning may well be only parasitic on internally constrained processes, at least in the early stages. But sound changes also make up a minority of the sociolinguistic variables at any given time, possibly even of the phonological variables, so a theory of variation cannot be just a theory of sound change. It isn't always clear which variables are actually changes in progress, but there is no question that while some variables are very obviously changing over time, others show greater durability as variables. The meaning potential of variables as a function of their durability is an open and interesting question. No doubt an apparently long-term stable variable such as (-ING) or negative concord has had a greater possibility of setting down more widely consensual and possibly well defined indexical meanings (Haeri 1994:103). But I also believe that a central question is where changes in progress fall in the ecology of meaning. What kinds of social meanings can sound changes take on as they progress?¹² The serious study of variation calls for the unification of the macro- and micro-perspectives, which will no doubt require reconsideration of assumptions that lead to, and theoretical constructs that emerge in, the study of variation at any single social-structural level.

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² See Eckert (2012) for a fuller account of the three waves of variation study.

³ For the sake of brevity, I use *variable* to mean *sociolinguistic variable*, but do not claim that all linguistic variables have a social function.

⁴ See Latour (2005) for a discussion of the distinction between mediator and intermediary.

⁵ Strictly speaking, as I understand Pierce's distinctions, a *dynamic interpretant*.

⁶ This is one aspect of Coupland's (2014) *sociolinguistic change*.

⁷ And this female academic persona barely existed in my mother's generation, which is why in my entire undergraduate and graduate career I had three tenure-track female professors.

⁸ This is what Silverstein (1976) terms *creative indexicality*.

⁹ These variables show different class patterns; there are differences between and among changes in progress and stable variables. While movement of (eh) and (oh) is constrained by their structural relations, differences correspond to ethnic differences, with Italians raising (eh) more than Jews, with consequences for the pronunciation of (ah) (Labov 1966 p. 511 ff.). Labov speculated that the Jewish lower (eh) might be due to Yiddish substrate. But is this purely a cognitive phenomenon or did Jews hold back on (eh) because the lower version sounded "Jewish"?

¹⁰ Hodder (1982) emphasizes that stylistic innovations are linked to ideologies and "strategies of legitimation."

¹¹ This is the habitus (Bourdieu 1997) writ small.

¹² These are questions that have been considered at the macro-sociological level (e.g. Labov's "Eckert progression" (2010 p. 192ff.)), and are being considered at the stylistic level (Podesva and Hofwegen (in preparation)).