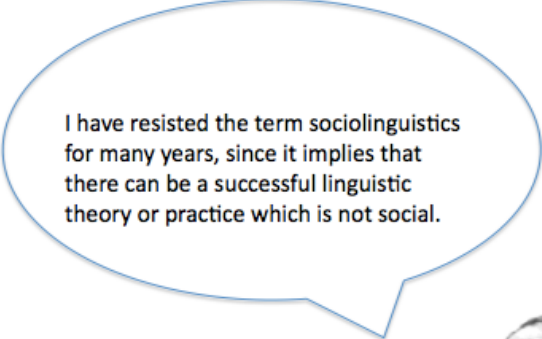


All Star Panel on the past, present and future of NWAV and Variation Studies.
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The Future of Variation Studies

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I have resisted the term sociolinguistics for many years, since it implies that there can be a successful linguistic theory or practice which is not social.



These are exciting times for the study of variation. For some time there has been an emphasis on interdisciplinarity in sociolinguistics, particularly in the integration of variation studies with sociological and anthropological theory. But now, at long last, the importance of variation is beginning to permeate our **own** field of linguistics. People in phonetics, phonology, syntax, semantics, psycholinguistics, computational linguistics are taking up the study of variation. And they are bringing to it different perspectives, methodologies, and expertise. The field as a whole is edging closer to what Bill Labov had in mind when he originally rejected the term “sociolinguistics” for what we do.

Meanwhile, and not independently of these developments, the availability of speech recognition and analysis technology – the powerful combination of automatic alignment and acoustic measurement – is moving the study of variation onto a completely new level. The internet and communicative technology provide access to varied speech and written samples, in the form of large corpora and media of all sorts.

As a result of all these innovations, we can now take a far broader range of social and linguistic variables into consideration, and interpret the patterns we find – in collaboration with people who are thinking about them in different ways. At the same time, phoneticians and computational linguists working with large corpora come up with all kinds of unexpected patterns, but most of them know that they're not in a position to figure out on their own what the patterns mean. Together, these developments are allowing us to dive even more broadly and deeply into the kinds of analyses we've been doing on variation and change, **and** to expand our focus to forms of variation that have until recently been at best marginal in our analytic practice.

And just as the greater use of ethnographic methods marked the decades following the eighties, a huge variety of experimental methods in language processing are now coming to be integrated into the study of variation. And these are enhanced by access to vast subject pools through crowdsourcing. Experimental work is finding an increasingly broad place in the study of variation, and is playing an important role in integrating sociolinguistics with the more traditionally experimental areas such as psycholinguistics and phonetics.

Finally, the increasing popularity of exemplar models has had important implications for us, as it is based on the understanding that contextual information is stored in some way with linguistic information. This insight does not necessarily require an exemplar model, but the interest in exemplar models is bringing more non-sociolinguists to the recognition that the linguistic and the social are

inextricably intertwined, making what we do deeply relevant to the concerns of grammatical theory. And as the line between laboratory phonology and sociolinguistics becomes blurred, there is increasing attention to phonetic detail in variation which, among other things, makes it clear that phonology is even less discrete than we'd thought.

The areas I consider particularly crucial at this point have to do with creating a more dynamic view of language, integrating meaning not only into our understanding of variation but into linguistic theory more generally, and exploring the relation between the psychological and the social.

The variationist project has always been to create a theory of grammar that embodies change. And this is not just because we need to study sound change in vivo, but because change makes human practice what it is. It's what makes our lives meaningful. We are always in the process of becoming – and language is central to that process. It is not simply that we manage to continue interpreting language as **it** changes, but that language change allows us to continue interpreting each other as **we** change. This is, of course, most apparent in semantic change.

Whether it's about distinguishing between a nerd and a dweeb, or between a cup and a glass, all meaning is constructed in the course of social interaction. As a result, as philosophers of language such as Hilary Putnam have recognized for some time, all meaning construction involves power, and all meaning is always potentially in the process of change.

Lexico-semantic change has not fallen under the umbrella of variation studies for a variety of reasons. We have focused on the indexical properties of variation – that is, what variables say about the identity of the speaker and the situation in which the speaker is engaged. But one could say that there is an indexical component to all meaning. Patterns of pejoration of terms for women – hussy, mistress – don't just happen. They emerge over time in the indexical use of otherwise colorless terms in socially-loaded situations – situations that are central to the construction and

maintenance of the gender order. We see this pejoration at work in current uses of *gay*, as in “that’s so gay”, and Andrew Wong (2005) has followed it in his study of the comparable pejoration of *Tongzhi* in Hong Kong. Our moment-to-moment ability to tweak our word uses or our pronunciations as we convey some little twist to our interlocutors is ultimately what allows a speech community over time to accomplish not only lexico-semantic change, but chain shifts and grammaticalization.

Ultimately we don’t have a theory of language unless meaning is at its center. Social meaning was what started the quantitative study of variation, but in spite of the great findings of the Martha’s Vineyard Study, we danced around the issue of meaning for years along with our colleagues elsewhere in Linguistics. At this point, meaning is working its way into Linguistics more generally, and the kind of indexical meaning we normally associate with variation is enjoying more attention as the divide between semantics and pragmatics is increasingly blurred.

Meaning allows us to unify our study of broad patterns with the day-to-day practice in which they unfold. The abstracted socioeconomic hierarchy provides an important general roadmap to the sites of linguistic production, and keys to the nature of those sites. But just as a map of New York City does not tell you what the streets are like, or what it's like to walk on them, the macro-sociological patterns of variation do not reveal what speakers at different places in the political economy are doing with those variables. And what they are doing with them is not trivial, for meaning is constructed in the give-and-take between the immediate situations of interaction and the broader conditions in which those situations unfold. Variables can index our relatively enduring demographic characteristics, and such things as momentary as our mood. Simultaneously.

The complexity of social meaning raises the question of whether social meaning is simply indexical, or whether it is compositional as well. Work so far on style suggests that there is indeed some compositionality going on – that the interpretation of a single variable will depend on the other variables it occurs with, in other words, on the style in which it is embedded. The bottom line is that it is

time to integrate the study of variation with the study of meaning in language more generally. This puts us in a unique position to integrate the social with the cognitive. And this integration is emerging in a variety of ways.

Alan Yu's work connecting an individual's place on the autism spectrum to processing strategies is opening up questions about the nexus between social and cognitive makeup. While the danger in this kind of work is a precipitous essentialization of social categories – as it certainly has been in this area with gender – it still has intriguing, if scary, possibilities for making connections between social and psychological dispositions. Is there a relation between the gregariousness of Bill Labov's leaders in sound change and the cognitive patterns that might lead them to be more sensitive to social patterns of variability?

Nygaard and Lunders (2002) have demonstrated the role of emotional tone of voice in the resolution of lexical ambiguity – so that subjects are more likely to hear the seed-bearing part of a plant when *flower* * is uttered in a happy voice, and the powder made from grain otherwise. In other words, affect is apparently integrated during language processing to constrain the listener's selection of word meaning. This points simultaneously to more general interactions between variability and processing and to the role of affect in variation more generally.

The focus on social categories, and perhaps a fear of studying individuals, has kept us away from the study of emotion. But emotion, and particularly its expression, affect, is fundamental to the human condition. Affect is, of course, social – and the social is affective. We don't build social categories around things we can't get emotional about. More importantly, expressions of affect are no doubt the child's first opportunity to interpret the relation between social relations and linguistic variability, so I would say that affect is a primary site of variation .

So how do I see the future of variation studies?

- (1) as expanding both through the increased analytic power that allows us to develop and explore ever-expanding corpora, and through the participation of a more diverse set of linguists in the exploration of the constraints on variation.
- (2) as taking meaning seriously.
- (3) as increasingly integrated with the rest of linguistics – not simply integrating variation into theories of language that are based in invariable assumptions, but taking a stronger role in the development of theories based on an assumption of variation. I'd love to see no such thing as a sociolinguistics lab.

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