



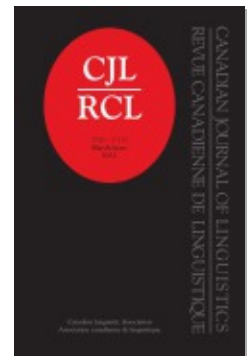
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Sociolinguistic Style: A Multidimensional Resource for Shared Identity Creation

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1. INTRODUCTION

The study of style has been one of the principal components of variationist research since Labov's ground-breaking work in 1966. However, there have been significant changes to the way that style is perceived and studied by variationist scholars. These changes have developed from the drive to produce a sociolinguistics that can explain (in addition to describe) the relationship between language use and social meaning.

In this paper, I will challenge the traditional notion of style as a unidimensional concept and provide support for its reinterpretation as a multidimensional entity. My critique of the traditional approach to stylistic analysis will focus upon its tendency to over-emphasise the taxonomic distinction between social and stylistic variation—a tendency which serves to decontextualise sociolinguistic behaviour. In abstracting from the concrete situation in which language becomes meaningful, traditional accounts have tended to wrench variables out of the contextual field that defines them. The consequences of such decontextualisation are evident in sociolinguists' inability to adequately explain the variation they describe. Using data from my own research into the sociolinguistic identities constructed by a group of adolescent girls from a high school in the northwest of England, I will illustrate how language is used not simply to reflect social and stylistic distinctions, but to construct sociolinguistic difference within a local context.

2. APPROACHES TO STYLE IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

As both Rickford and Eckert (2001:1–2) and Schilling-Estes (2002a:375) note, sociolinguistic research has traditionally divided analyses into two separable component parts:

- the study of *social constraints* or *inter-speaker variation*
- the study of *stylistic constraints* or *intra-speaker variation*

Whereas the former type of analysis studies the correlation between linguistic variants and social factors, such as age, sex, social class, and race (and, in doing so, seeks to describe the distribution of language in terms of socially salient varieties), the latter type of analysis studies shifts in a speaker's or a group's language use which transcend prototypical social usage (and, in doing so, seeks to describe the distribution of language in terms of range of use within a given sociolinguistic community).

Traditionally, stylistic constraints have been analysed according to Labov's attention to speech model (Labov 1966, 2001). Underlying this model are two beliefs: firstly, that individuals alter their speech according to how much attention they pay to it; and, secondly, that the attention individuals pay to their speech is determined by a given interaction's perceived level of formality (whereby increased formality correlates with increased attention to speech). Consequently, in this type of analysis, style is located in relation to a predetermined scale of formality and data collection is designed to elicit various speech genres which are situated along this scale; so word-lists and reading passages are intended to elicit formal style, for instance, whereas conversations on dangerous topics and those with peers are expected to elicit informal style. Emphasis, then, is placed upon the reproduction of pre-determined stylistic repertoires as captured in the consistent use of speech genres across and within sociolinguistic communities.

Increasingly, researchers have questioned the distinction made between social and stylistic constraints. The terms "dialect" and "style" are seen to mark a functional distinction, whereby dialects are considered to be varieties according to users and styles are considered to be varieties according to use. However, as Irvine (2001:27–31) observes, in reality, there may be no formal difference between these two classifications. Not only do both draw upon "cultural images of persons as well as situations and activities" (Irvine 2001:31), they also both imply user-awareness of alternative varieties and the contexts in which these varieties are prototypically used. Perhaps most importantly, though, both the social and the stylistic repertoires of a given sociolinguistic community draw upon the same linguistic resources.

Consider the data in Table 1, adapted from Trudgill (1974:92). Table 1 shows variation in the pronunciation of the suffix *-ing* (where an index score of 000 represents a consistent use of "standard" [ɪŋ], and a score of 100 represents a consistent use of "nonstandard" [n]). The data suggests that not only is there a distinction between "formal" and "informal" styles (with increasing use of [n] in less formal styles), but there is also a social difference (whereby lower social classes use proportionally more [n] in all contexts).

Table 1: (ng) index scores by class and style

Class	Style			
	Word List	Reading Passage	Formal	Casual
I MMC	000	000	003	028
II LMC	000	010	015	042
III UWC	005	015	074	087
IV MWC	023	044	088	095
V LWC	029	066	098	100

MMC = middle middle class MWC = middle working class
 LMC = lower middle class LWC = lower working class
 UWC = upper working class

This data clearly demonstrates that speakers operate within a system of social contrasts. However, when we try to explain these contrasts, the taxonomic distinction between style and social category becomes blurred. Table 1 reveals that, in less formal styles, the speech of higher social classes looks more like that of lower social classes; whereas in more formal styles, the speech of the lower social classes looks more like that of the higher social classes. If, in a particular context, the speech of one social group looks like the speech of another social group, do we explain the meaning of the variant in relation to the group or the context? The explanation surely lies in the combination between the two, in the sense that speakers don't merely respond to a perceived shift in formality, but also to their perception of the kind of speakers more likely to engage in the particular speech activity suggested by the interview context (hence they modify their language to more accurately reflect the speech of such speakers). As Irvine (2001:31) notes:

One of the many methods people have for differentiating situations and displaying attitudes is to draw on (or carefully avoid) the "voices" of others, or what they assume those voices to be.

This blurring of social and stylistic boundaries suggests that what we observe in Table 1 is not necessarily two independent forces acting upon the variation within a community, but one process of social differentiation defined in terms of two abstract concepts.

In addition to this blurring of boundaries, there is another issue related to the categories and contexts evoked in the kind of survey style analysis illustrated above: they abstract from the local situation in which variables become meaningful. The social categories evoked (social class in the case of Table 1) are aspects of social structure which have resonance at a global level. Similarly, the stylistic contexts evoked are predetermined and abstract, as opposed to being social moves occurring as a consequence of local interaction. This is not to say that the categories and contexts evoked by survey style analyses are meaningless, but that their explanatory power is diminished by their distance from the processes of

meaning-making which occur locally. In effect, abstract, global, social, and stylistic forms of organisation serve as “stand-ins” for the social practice occurring in a given community (Eckert 2000:44). They illustrate convincing correlations because they are ways in which practice is structurally organised in society, but they can never fully explain the data because they are several steps removed from the sites where data becomes meaningful.¹ It is for these reasons that Coupland (2001:191) suggests that accounts which make such abstract social and stylistic distinctions are inexorably limited:

A method which predetermines categories called “social contexts” and which then examines the aggregated scores speakers achieve on sociolinguistic indices across them *asks* only very limited questions about sociolinguistic variation . . . And the “success” of the answers (finding regular patterns of co-variation of “style” and context) seemed to warrant having asked those, and only those, questions.

3. STYLE AS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL CONCEPT

Accounts which utilise the distinction between dialect and style have provided us with a useful depiction of the sociolinguistic system broadly defined. However, they have only provided an abstract description of the relationship between language, context, and the social world. In recent years, several researchers (including The California Style Collective 1993; Coupland 1980, 2001; Eckert 2000, 2002; Irvine 2001; and Moore 2003) have argued that in order to really understand sociolinguistic meaning, we need to stop focusing upon the taxonomic distinction between a dialect and a style and start focusing upon the symbiotic processes which allow linguistic variants to become meaningful.

For these researchers, what matters is not whether a particular speaker selects a particular variant in a particular pre-defined context, but how speakers create sociolinguistic meaning by manipulating the range of social and linguistic variants accessible in a given community. Therefore, to understand the meaning of variation and not just describe a series of correlations, these researchers suggest that we must consider the outcome of combining variant possibilities within a community and not focus upon single, unidimensional axes of variation (whether these are social or stylistic in the traditional sense). This is because the language used by an individual is never determined by a single factor (such as perceived formality) but rather is a consequence of a speaker’s attempt to construct an identity appropriate to the context of a given interaction. The notion of what kind of identity is salient in a given interaction will differ from speaker to speaker dependent upon each speaker’s sociolinguistic knowledge and experience of contrastive “ways to be” in different interactions. Furthermore, the resources selected by a speaker to construct an identity will also differ dependent upon knowledge and experience

¹See Cameron (1990) and Romaine (1984) for a discussion of the reliability of explanations which rely upon social structure.

of the social and linguistic variants used to construct recognisable “ways to be” in their local interactions.

Rather than evoking a taxonomic distinction between dialect and style, this approach to sociolinguistic analysis views everything as stylistic. In this sense, style is not just one axis of variation, it is *the* multidimensional axis of variation. It is how speakers construct a “way to be” or identity by combining the social and linguistic resources available in a community in a salient way. So, speakers do not give meaning to variants in any abstract sense, but create meaning for variants and for themselves as they negotiate combinations of variants (or styles) which are relatively similar or different from the combinations negotiated by other speakers who share their sociolinguistic space. In this sense, sociolinguistic meaning is not “out there” in any abstractly predetermined way, but is constantly negotiated, contested and revised as speakers use combinations of social and linguistic variants to stylistically situate themselves relative to one another.²

It should be noted that this interpretation of style is not intended as a complement to previous dialect and “style” distinctions; rather it is intended to supersede these classifications. In doing so, it recognises the differences that traditional dialect/style distinctions encode, but it attempts to interpret the processes of distinction that imbue these differences with meaning (rather than simply correlating isolated variables with imposed speaker categories or pre-determined contextual styles). Furthermore, by this new definition, style is much more than a purely linguistic entity—in fact, sociolinguistic style is perceived to be no different to style in any other realm of life (Irvine 2001:21). As noted by Eckert (2002:4), this interpretation follows Hebdige (1979:102–106) in viewing style as a process of *bricolage*, whereby the meaning of styles are constructed via the systematic clustering of multiple social resources. Language, then, is just one feature (albeit a principal one) in a much wider construction of social meaning. As speakers live alongside other speakers and as disparate practices and forms of participation create differences between groups, language is implicated in the development of differentiation in the same way that clothing, appearance or consumption are. As Irvine (2001:23–24) makes explicit, style is a composite “system of distinction” which subsumes all forms of activity within a given social space:³

²Of course, it is possible to view some meanings as being “out there” if they exist as dominant associations within a community. For instance, most of us are aware that the variant nonstandard *-ing* connotes something like “casualness” or “informality”. However, this is only a general or abstract meaning. When speakers manipulate this variant they may do so to construct meanings as diverse as “nonchalance”, “rebelliousness” or “friendliness” (Eckert 2002:6). This specific meaning can only be constructed in the local context of the variant’s use.

³It should be noted that the notion of style as much more than level of formality has existed in interactional sociolinguistics for some time. For instance, many gender studies make reference to gender-related “cooperative” and “competitive” speaking styles (Coates 2004 and Tannen 1990). Like the definition of style I am describing here, this definition

[S]tyles in speaking involve the ways speakers, as agents in social (and sociolinguistic space), negotiate their positions and goals within a system of distinctions and possibilities. Their acts of speaking are ideologically mediated, since those acts necessarily involve the speaker's understandings of salient social groups, activities, and practices, including forms of talk. Such understandings incorporate evaluations and are weighted by the speaker's social position and interests. They are also affected by differences in speakers' access to relevant practices.

By acknowledging speakers' ability to negotiate their use of resources, this approach avoids viewing speakers as "passive respondents who alter their speech to changes in the external situation" and, instead, credits their agency in the use of social and linguistic resources (Schilling-Estes 2002a:383). In this sense, speakers choose the manner in which to manipulate the resources to which they have access, and carve out particular representations of self by exploiting the meanings assigned and assignable to recognisable styles.⁴ This definition of style, then, fully integrates language and the social world, addressing Cameron's (1990:81–82) observation that "we need a far more complex model that treats language as *part of* the social, interacting with other modes of behaviour and just as important as any of them."

4. OBSERVING STYLISTIC PRACTICE: THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The key feature of this definition of style is that what matters is not any single variant but the salient combination of variants (both social and linguistic) in a particular context. In order to understand how language is implicated in this complex construction of style, we must engage in more complex social observation than has traditionally been the case in survey-type sociolinguistic research. Ultimately, we must be able to observe what individuals do as social beings, rather than simply assign individuals category membership on the basis of who they appear to be.

In (1992) Eckert and McConnell-Ginet introduced sociolinguistics to a "conception of community that articulates place with practice": the *Community of*

also involves the clustering of resources; however, the emphasis is usually upon language as separable from social dimensions. Researchers tend to focus upon linguistic style rather than composite *sociolinguistic* style. The social element — gender — is usually taken as a static social category, with little or no exploration of how social practices combine with linguistic practices to create a specific gender identity. (See Cameron 1997 for a critique of the representation of gendered linguistic styles.)

⁴Although this approach views speakers as agentive, it does not assume that speakers do not experience constraints in their use of resources. Bourdieu (1977) notes that speakers' social behaviours are conditioned by their habitus, which serves to constrain their social action. However, as de Certeau (1984) notes, while speakers may feel constrained by their social position, they may also manipulate symbolic means to contest constraints. (See Rose and Sharma 2002 for a discussion of agency, constraints and social practice.)

Practice (CofP). The CofP was an analytical domain first used by Lave and Wenger (1991) in their effort to describe how individuals learn their place as social beings. It describes “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992:464); that is to say, it situates individuals according to joint engagement in social practice and not according to membership of decontextualised social structure. Wenger (1998:73–83) uses three criteria to define the CofP:

- mutual engagement: This is what distinguishes a CofP from a group, team or network. Individuals must be engaged with one another and not simply share a certain characteristic.
- a joint enterprise: This refers to the purpose around which mutual engagement is structured. As Meyerhoff (2002:528) states, “members get together for some purpose and this purpose is defined through their pursuit of it”.
- a shared repertoire: This refers to the shared collection of resources that are constructed as a consequence of engagement in a joint enterprise. (These resources include the linguistic features that are constituents of community identity.)

CofPs can arise around a number of different social endeavours, some of which are explicitly reified as a collective enterprise (for instance, a school football team) and others which are less so (for instance, a group of friends who gather regularly in the school lunchbreak to swap gossip). What matters is not the kind of joint enterprise involved, but that the enterprise also fulfils the other two criteria outlined above; i.e., that it has the capacity to produce a set of practices (a repertoire) shared by those who mutually engage in it.

The practices constructed by a CofP will be wide-ranging, but what makes these practices significant is their relative status within a given sociolinguistic landscape. That is to say, the practices that develop as individuals interact become meaningful because they serve to identify a particular group of individuals and contrast these individuals with others engaged in more or less different forms of social practice.

5. THE CREATION OF STYLES IN A HIGH SCHOOL COMMUNITY

In order to demonstrate the negotiation of stylistic meaning in context, I will provide an example of the way in which adolescent CofPs at a high school, Midlan High, in the northwest of England, gradually differentiated themselves over a period of two years.⁵ The following analysis will reveal that stylistic differentiation was achieved not just by manipulating distinct sociolinguistic resources, but by combining the same resources in subtly unique ways.

⁵Midlan High is a pseudonym, as are any personal names given in subsequent examples.

5.1. The Populars and the Townies: The emergence of distinction

The two CofPs comprised female members of a high school year group who I first observed in June 2000. The girls were aged 12–13 (and in Year 8) when I began my fieldwork and aged 14–15 (and in Year 10) when I completed my data collection. During this period, I engaged in participant observation at the high school—going in to spend the lunch hour with the girls and engaging in whatever activity was occurring. (This could range from simply eating lunch in the canteen, to attending a dance practice, to hanging out with the smokers behind the sports hall.) From Year 9 onwards, I began to tape-record interactions with the girls. These recordings never took place as a formal interview and served as an extension of my regular interaction with the girls. The children would discuss recent events and used the sessions as a way to record their activities.

The two CofPs I will focus on in this paper were known as the *Populars* and the *Townies*. These two groups comprised communities who developed increasingly distinct social trajectories despite the fact that, at one time, they had shared a high level of social practice.

Before I had even entered Midlan High, I was already conscious of the Townie community. During my preliminary fieldwork in the local area, several children had mentioned the term *Townie* to me, stating that this was a very significant social category. Consequently, when I arrived at Midlan High, I was confident that I would find this group. All of the children I met in Year 8 knew of Townies and described them as an anti-school group who thrived on trouble. Some of the descriptions I collected are given in (1)–(3):⁶

- (1) DY>Townies always hang around like town, and on corner streets and everything like that. And all those ones like, you know ... You know all the Townie people in our school, they go up to Green Heights, drinking and everything like that.

DA>And they all—they go out drin-, they go out drinking and stuff.

(Dylan and Danny 31A)⁷

⁶The following broad transcription conventions are used:

- > overlap during turn
- ... pause
- self- or other speaker interruption
- [] transcriber comment

⁷Although my analysis focussed upon female communities, the high school was a mixed sex-class institution; consequently, my fieldwork involved interaction with male students also (hence the data from male informants given here). My decision to focus upon female communities was taken for several reasons (see Moore 2003:41–43), but largely because my interactions with male CofPs were more constrained (in part a consequence of my own gender identity) and thus less productive. My decision to focus on female communities also reflects my desire to redress the imbalance of sociolinguistic research (i.e., the tendency to favour male informants over female—see Cameron 1989 and Cameron and Coates 1989).

- (2) L> Every Friday night, getting —killing themselves with drinking and taking E pills . . .⁸
 D> And drugs! (Luke and Danny 31A)
- (3) K Townies wear Rockports.⁹
 S> Yeah, Rockports, rolled up Adidas pants –
 K> Rolled up pants that are like up there.
 S> Helly Hansons¹⁰ and fag in hand with bleached blonde hair, permed, on top of the head.
 K> Bleached hair.
 K Big massive earring things. (Kara and Susan 1A)

Despite the clarity of these descriptions, it quickly became apparent that this category was generally perceived as a phenomenon which occurred beyond Year 8. In fact, several times, I was told quite explicitly that there were no Townies in Year 8 and that their emergence could only be witnessed from Year 9 onwards.

Nonetheless, at the beginning of Year 9, I started to associate with a group of girls who labelled themselves *Popular* and were labelled Popular by their peers. While the practices of these girls were not as extreme as those attributed to Townies, there were obvious correlations between their behaviour and that assigned to the phantom Townie group. These girls could be seen cruising around the school in large groups. They tended to avoid supervised areas (including the canteen and the playground), instead favouring quiet areas where many of them were able to smoke undetected. The girls regularly hung out together outside school—especially on a Friday night, which was the big night out for the group when the girls would meet up in the local area to hang out and drink alcohol.

While all the practices discussed above were shared between the group, girls had differential levels of participation. Towards the end of Year 9, shifts in behaviour allowed small differences to take on new significance. Some girls started to hang around with a group of older boys and their Friday night social behaviour became more extreme, involving both sexual activity and drug-taking. This caused splits to emerge in the group as individuals took various stances towards this behaviour. Some girls started to avoid “Friday night” altogether—preferring to go to the cinema instead (although these trips continued to include alcohol). On other occasions, girls would go out, but end up splintering off when the behaviour of others in the group became too extreme for them. In (4), two Popular girls discuss the changes in their social community between Years 8 and 9 and their location between the emerging subgroups. They then go on to talk about an occasion when some of the girls had been intimidated by the older boys with whom other group members were associating.

⁸“E pills” refers to the illegal drug Ecstasy.

⁹“Rockports” are a brand of footwear.

¹⁰“Helly Hansons” refers to a designer brand of coat.

- (4) L> In Year 8, we'd all just sit round that table in our form.¹¹ We'd all just have this massive table to sit round. And now, it's changed into all — we're all set — sat in like the groups that we hang around with. There's like Meg, Ellie and Sharon sit next to each other, and then we sit — cos ... we're in between them all, aren't we? Like we'll go out with Ellie and Meg ...
- B> Um. We're sat between the two groups.
- L> ... but then we'll go out with Tina and Paula as well. So we're not either in one or the other. We're both. But, erm ... Tina and that lot don't go out with Ellie and that, do they? And then last week it was so annoying, right. Was it last week? Pete's?
- B> What?
- B Pete's? Yeah.
- L> Right, we went out on Friday night ... instead of going to the cinema. And we said ... And Paula said, "Right, I'm coming out tonight," cos she never, ev-, ever comes out. And — and we seen Pete, right. And he said, "Oh, I've got a free house."
- B> Ohh. This — this done — did my head in and all.
- L> So we went up to his house. We're just sat there. And then all Roughley crew came down. There were about 30 people, so we were all just sat there, like that.
- B> They're quite fit,¹² the Roughley crew.
- L So we just quickly ran up to his room, right. We looked so sad. We were just sat in his house, like that.
- E [Laughs]
- L And then they said, "You can come down, you know. We're not gonna twat you or anything."¹³ So we're like that [looking around]. So we came down, and then — then Georgia, Sonia and, erm ...
- B [Laughs]
- L Georgia, Sonia and Paula said, "Aw, I wanna go," so we all went, and then we were just soot — s-, like sat in the middle of the road for about half an hour, deciding what we were gonna do. And me, her, and ... Tina wanted to go back, and they were saying, "No, no. I don't wanna go back." (Beverly and Lindsey 41A:375–410)

The behaviour of the extreme sub-group was reified in Year 10 when other children began to refer to the sub-group as Townies. Through their practice, these girls began to vivify the descriptions that I had heard in Year 8.

¹¹A "form" is a tutor group.

¹²Here the term "fit" is used to mean physically attractive.

¹³In colloquial British English, "to twat" someone means to be physically violent towards someone.

6. THE NATURE OF LINGUISTIC VARIABLES

The social split between the Popular and Townie girls was not just realised in increasingly divergent social practice, but also in increasingly divergent linguistic practice. In Moore (2003), I discuss four linguistic features used as a means to differentiate the various communities at Midlan High: nonstandard *were*, tag questions, negative concord and right dislocation. These variables were selected because of their significance within the local context. Eckert (2002:5) has argued that, because of their interest in the spread of linguistic change, sociolinguists typically tend to focus upon particular kinds of variables; namely, those which relate to the traditional study of regional dialectology, linguistic change, or the wider grammatical enterprise. Consequently, the study of sociolinguistic variation has tended to focus upon particular prototypical variables at the expense of other less visible resources. More often than not, these prototypical variables are phonological. There are good reasons for this focus on phonology. Firstly, Labov (1972a:8) notes that a linguistic variable ought to be frequent in order to facilitate analysis, and phonological variables are undoubtedly more frequent than morphosyntactic ones. Secondly, literacy and the codification of standard language means that we are often more conscious of morphosyntactic variables than we are of phonological ones.¹⁴ Hence, the collection of morphosyntactic data tends to be more problematic — in that the process is more likely to be constrained by the Observer's Paradox (Labov 1972a:209).

However, the stylistic approach to linguistic variation encourages the analysis of a range of social and linguistic resources. Eckert (2000:124) observes that “we are surrounded by stylistic material, and as long as we can position ourselves in relation to the sources of that material, and attribute meaning to it, we can use it.” This suggests that our sociolinguistic analyses should be able to account for what is locally salient (and not just what is generally perceived to be a prototypical sociolinguistic marker). Consequently, my focus upon morphosyntax was not only driven by my interest in that area of the grammar, but also by my desire to demonstrate that all areas of the grammar can be socially salient elements of style.

In the following section, I will provide a brief overview of how each of the linguistic variables analysed at Midlan High contribute to Popular and Townie style. I will then move on to focus upon two of the linguistic variables, non-standard *were* and tag questions, to demonstrate their particular importance in the differentiation of Popular and Townie identities.

6.1. Linguistic data

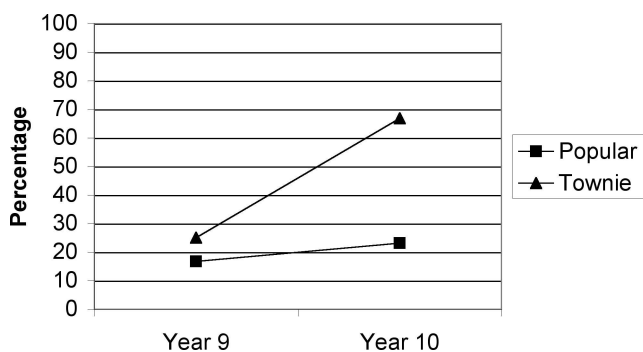
In Year 9, both sets of girls made consistent use of nonstandard *were*. *Was/were* levelling has been discussed extensively in research on English-speaking

¹⁴See Cheshire and Milroy (1993:11) for a discussion of the influence of written language on spoken morphosyntax.

Table 2: Use of nonstandard *were* over time

	Year 9		Year 10		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Popular total	56/336	16.7	116/502	23.1	172/838	20.5
Townieie total	74/295	25.1	249/373	66.8	323/668	48.4

Note: The differential use of this variable is significant to the level of $p = 0.001$.

**Figure 1:** Use of nonstandard *were* over time

communities (Britain 2002; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1994; Schilling-Estes 2002b; Tagliamonte 1998; Wolfram and Sellers 1999). At Midlan High, the overwhelming tendency was levelling towards *were* (i.e., the extension of *were* to first and third person singular contexts; for example, *I were so drunk* or *he weren't that nice*), with *was* levelling only a very minor tendency (nonstandard *was* occurred only 4.9% of the time, compared with nonstandard *were*, which occurred 18.7% of the time in the sample as a whole). The Popular and the Townie girls were unequivocally the highest users of nonstandard *were* and, as shown in Table 2 and Figure 1, the Townie girls' use exceeded that of the Popular girls. Whereas, overall, the Populans used this variant 20.5% of the time, the Townie girls used this variant 48.4%.

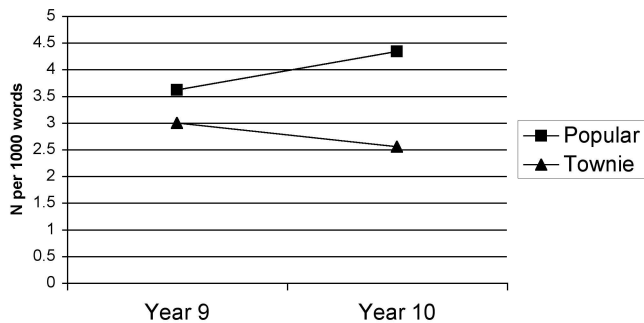
The difference between the two groups was not immense in Year 9; however, by Year 10, a much more significant process of differentiation was occurring with this variable. Whereas the Populans increased their use modestly from 16.7% to 23.1%; the Townie girls increased their use dramatically from 25.1% to 66.8%.

Concurrent with this variation, changes were occurring in how the girls used tag questions. Tag questions are not a typical sociolinguistic variable of variationist analysis: much of the analysis conducted has been qualitative (see Coates 1987, Fishman 1983, and Lakoff 1975) although tag question use has been

Table 3: Use of tag questions

	Year 9		Year 10		Total	
	N	N per 1000 words	N	N per 1000 words	N	N per 1000 words
Popular total	115	3.61	191	4.33	306	4.03
Townie total	64	2.99	71	2.55	135	2.74

Note: Unlike nonstandard *were*, the number of tag questions used cannot be represented as a percentage of application versus non-application as speakers could potentially attach a tag to almost any utterance. Consequently, the figures presented are adjusted to reflect the calculated number of tags per 1000 words. The fact that there is no way to test application vs. non-application also makes it impossible to provide chi-square probabilities for the tag question data.

**Figure 2:** Use of tag questions over time

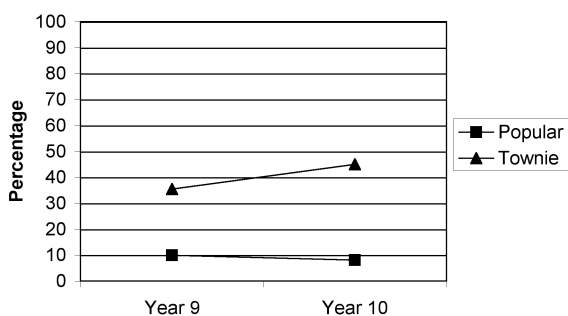
examined in an increasing number of quantitative studies concerned with gender differentiation (Cameron et al. 1988; Dubois and Crouch 1975; Holmes 1984). My research provides further evidence for the salient quantitative distribution of this variable (although social stratification at Midlan High was within and across gendered communities). Table 3 and Figure 2 shows that, as with nonstandard *were*, we find that both Popular and Townie girls share a similar use in Year 9 (although this time the Populars have the slight lead of 3.61 tags per 1000 words compared with the Townies' 2.99 tags per 1000 words). However, by Year 10, we find a marked difference, with the Populars increasing their use to 4.33 and the Townies decreasing their use to 2.55.

While marked differentiation in nonstandard *were* and tag question use did not occur until Year 10, differentiation in negative concord use was already clearly apparent in Year 9. Out of all of morphosyntactic variables, negative concord is perhaps the one which has received the most attention from sociolinguists

Table 4: Use of negative concord over time

	Year 9		Year 10		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Popular total	7/71	9.9	8/100	8.0	15/171	8.8
Townieie total	11/31	35.5	27/60	45.0	38/91	41.2

Note: Due to the small data set (a hazard of morphosyntactic analysis), chi square tests recorded lack of significance for this data. Nonetheless, the patterns of variation suggest a notable distinction between Popular and Townie use of this variable.

**Figure 3:** Use of negative concord over time

(Cheshire 1982; Eisikovits 1998; Labov 1972b; Smith 2001). However, there are few accounts that analyse the meaning of negative concord in relation to local sociolinguistic styles (Eckert 2000 being one exception).

The only truly variable context for negative concord at Midlan High was multiple negation with postverbal indeterminates (e.g., *I didn't say nothing*).¹⁵ In the whole sample, only two examples of negative concord with preverbal indeterminates were found (e.g., *None of the girls talk to Rick no more*); consequently, this context was excluded from the overall analysis.

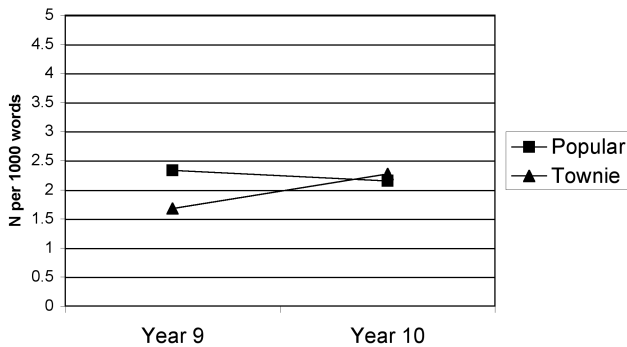
Table 4 and Figure 3 illustrate that while the Popular group make some use of negative concord, their use is much lower than that of the Townie girls. Furthermore, their use of this variant decreases over time, whereas the Townie girls show quite a dramatic increase over time. This suggests that negative concord is a more established resource for differentiating Popular and Townie identity than are nonstandard *were* or tag questions. However, significant changes in Year 10 reveal the increased visibility of this variable as a salient linguistic resource.

¹⁵The term "indeterminate" is used following Labov (1972b:775) who states that "the label 'indeterminate' was first applied by Klima (1964) to distinguish *any*, *ever* and *either* from other indefinites like *some*, primarily on the basis of their co-occurrence with negative and question features". This practice is also followed by Cheshire (1982) and Smith (2001).

Table 5: Use of right dislocation

	Year 9		Year 10		Total	
	N	N per 1000 words	N	N per 1000 words	N	N per 1000 words
Popular total	74	2.33	95	2.15	169	2.22
Townie total	36	1.68	63	2.27	99	2.01

Note: This data was analysed in the same way as the tag question data (see Table 3).

**Figure 4:** Use of right dislocation over time

The final linguistic variable analysed at Midlan High was right dislocation. Right dislocation (also referred to as postponed identification) is the phenomenon whereby a clause is followed by a tag which is co-referential with the preceding subject or object pro-form. This structure has received some attention in the descriptive literature (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:1408; Quirk et al. 1985:1310), and Shorrocks (1999:85) and Wales (1996:43) note that it is common in colloquial British English. However, there has been little research into its distribution (the accounts given are all descriptive, rather than empirical). Examples of the right dislocated tags found at Midlan High include: full noun phrases (e.g., *She was four, your sister*; *I really do envy them, grebs*¹⁶), object pronouns (e.g., *I hate her nanna, me*), demonstrative pronouns (e.g., *It's nice, that*); non-finite verb phrases (e.g., *It's good, going out with friends*; *I wouldn't do that, get bullied*), or relative clauses (e.g., *That's cheating, what you're doing*).

Table 5 and Figure 4 demonstrate that, despite some difference in use in Year 9, by Year 10, the Popular and Townie groups have remarkably similar use

¹⁶Generally speaking, a “greb” refers to an individual who engages in skate-board culture.

of this variable. It seems that both CofPs integrate a reasonably high use of this variable into their linguistic style.

6.2. Interpreting sociolinguistic style

If we were to take the traditional view of linguistic variants as markers of social identity, it would be tempting to interpret nonstandard *were* and negative concord as Townie variants, tag questions as a Popular variant and right dislocation as a neutral sociolinguistic marker. However, this interpretation simplifies what is in fact a complex negotiation of sociolinguistic meaning at Midlan High.

It is certainly true that the Townie girls show a greater commitment to the established nonstandard syntactic forms, and this is entirely in keeping with the local orientation of their social practice. Their social activity is centred in and around the local community: they dominate local space physically by taking over the local parks and patrolling the streets. Furthermore, they predominantly engage with those whose lives are contained within local discourses, giving them access to the sociolinguistic resources of the vernacular market. Shorrocks (1999:168–169, 193) notes that both nonstandard *were* and negative concord are variants associated with the nonstandard dialect of the local area surrounding Midlan High.

The Popular girls, on the other hand, are less committed to nonstandard *were* and negative concord. However, it is significant that these girls don't reject these variants entirely. Their use of nonstandard *were* and negative concord illustrates that the Popular girls engage in the same kind of social practice as the Townie girls. However, slight differences in the nature of their social practice results in renegotiated linguistic practice. Not only is the Popular girls' engagement in locally oriented practice less extreme (for instance, they drink, but they don't do drugs; they wear the same brands of clothing, but they will often mix and match items with other kinds of clothing), they also tend to cooperate more with the school (many girls are members of school dance groups and participate in talent shows, others are simply just better students). In this sense, the Populars' practices cause them to engage more actively with the institution of the school. In order to successfully engage with the institution, it is necessary to acknowledge the legitimacy of its authority — part of which includes its authority over language. The emphasis upon literacy at school may mean that nonstandard morphosyntactic features are the linguistic features that are most subject to overt comment and monitoring (Cheshire and Milroy 1993:11), and the use of these variables is most likely to be affected as a result of engagement with institutional ideologies. Consequently, out of all of the variables studied, it is unsurprising that negative concord and nonstandard *were* are the variants most cautiously utilised by the Popular girls.¹⁷ While their engagement in locally orientated practices

¹⁷It is also unsurprising that the Populars' use of negative concord is even more cautious than their use of nonstandard *were*. Negative concord is a highly visible, widely distributed nonstandard form in English-speaking communities; consequently, it is likely to be more

(including hanging out in parks and local spaces) may give them access to these variables, their concurrent engagement in school-related practice may mean that they are less motivated than the Townie girls to incorporate these institutionally stigmatised language features into their linguistic style.

On the other hand, while intense use of tag questions might be marked, tag questions themselves are not stigmatised in institutional discourse. In this sense, there is little at stake for the Popular girls in the increasing use of this variant. High use of tag questions may signal the Popular girls' engagement beyond the standard or institutional market of the school (after all, the stylisation of tag questions reflects language use which is more flamboyant than conservative institutional style) without attracting too much disapproval from those in authority (the form is not overtly vernacular or local).

The remaining variable, right dislocation, does not seem to be aligned predominantly with either CofP. By Year 10, both groups use this variable with very similar frequencies. Like tag questions, this linguistic form does not tend to attract the kind of disapproval reserved for more visible nonstandard features. Right dislocation seems to be acknowledged as quaint and is validated by its historical associations with the area (Shorrocks 1999:84–90). In this sense, both the Popular and the Townie CofP have sound reasons to incorporate this variable into their linguistic style. For the Populars, it is a nonstandard form acquired from interactions in the local community which does not conflict with their concurrent engagement in school-based activity. For the Townies, it is one more local, nonstandard form to add to their linguistic repertoire.

6.3. Negotiating meaning

Although the Townie group's high use of negative concord and nonstandard *were* helps us to understand the social significance of these variants (and, likewise, the Populars' high use of tag questions helps us to understand the social significance of this feature), it is simplistic to talk in terms of "Townie" or "Popular" variants. Certainly, one CofP might have a greater use of a particular variant, but that is not to say that the other CofP cannot negotiate their use of the same variant in a way that is meaningful for their own sociolinguistic style. This kind of negotiation can be seen most clearly in the data when we consider how the Popular CofP negotiate their nonstandard *were* use relative to another linguistic form in their repertoire, tag questions.

Tag questions in this community tend to be formed using a tag with negative polarity; for example, *It were that new t-shirt, weren't it?*¹⁸ Figure 5 shows how the two groups use nonstandard *weren't* tags over time. Despite markedly

explicitly and consistently censored than is the less visible, locally salient nonstandard *were*.

¹⁸That negative polarity is the salient context can be seen in the fact that there were only 0.01 positive tags per 1000 words, compared with 0.22 negative tags per 1000 words.

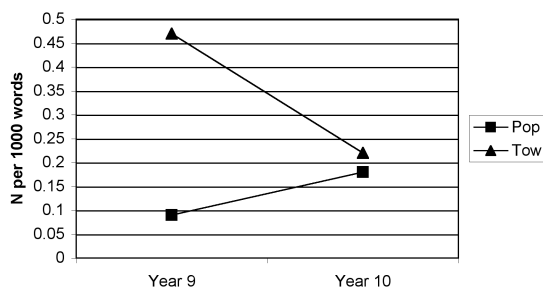


Figure 5: Use of nonstandard *weren't* tag questions over time

increasing their overall use of nonstandard *were* over time, the Townie group more than halve their use of nonstandard *weren't* tags. On the other hand, despite only moderately increasing their overall use of nonstandard *were* over time, the Popular group double their use of nonstandard *weren't* tags.

It should be noted that these data do not just reflect the overall trends already discussed. Figures 6 and 7 illustrate that the Popular and Townie CofPs actually demonstrate very similar patterns of use for most negative BE contexts (both groups increase their use of *innit/int/in*, *aren't*, and *isn't* tags over time, and decrease their use of standard *weren't* tags over time).¹⁹ The only negative BE context where they pattern in opposite directions is nonstandard *weren't*.

Here, then, we have an example of the way in which two CofPs jointly negotiate the meaning of resources available in their wider community. The negotiation is reciprocal, in that each community adapts its stance to the variants as a consequence of the other community's behaviour. As the Populans encroach upon what might have been described as Townie linguistic territory in their use of nonstandard *weren't*, the Townies respond to this by retreating from nonstandard *were* in this context. This suggests that the relationship between tag questions and Popular style is significant enough to discourage the Townie CofP from using these tags even in a context (nonstandard *were*) that would otherwise be strongly associated with their own style. On the other hand, the Popular group may be more cautious in their use of nonstandard *were* overall, but in a context where its over-riding association with Townies is neutralised (tag questions), they appear to be flagging a moderated social meaning.

7. CONCLUSION

In this data, we see both sets of speakers manipulating the same linguistic resources in subtly different ways in order to create unique social meanings. When

¹⁹The contexts given here are all of those present in the data. Some negative BE contexts were not found at all, for instance, standard *wasn't* and *ain't*. *Innit/int/in* are all nonstandard variants of standard *isn't*.

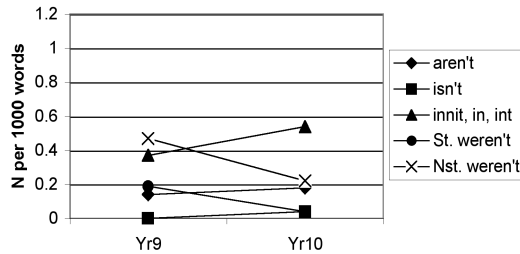


Figure 6: Townie use of negative BE tag questions over time

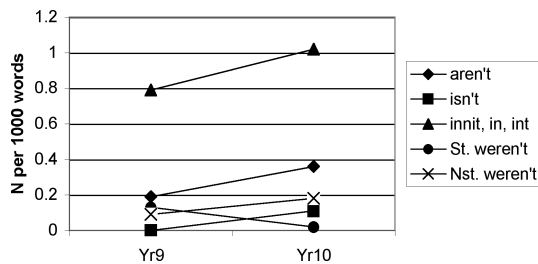


Figure 7: Popular use of negative BE tag questions over time

the Popular girls use nonstandard *weren't* tags, they don't simply borrow a Townie variant, but manipulate their use of nonstandard *were* in such a way that they absorb the variant into their own linguistic style. On the other hand, when the Townie girls reject the use of nonstandard *weren't* tags, they are not rejecting a Townie variant, but simply reconstructing their use of nonstandard *were* in order to signal their difference from the Popular CofP in a context where group identity is at stake.

It is always tempting to interpret the sociolinguistic meaning of linguistic variables in relation to those whose use of them is the most extreme. However, variables are only meaningful in as much as they are constituents of a sociolinguistic style; so while a Townie girl's use of nonstandard *were* (combined with a high proportion of negative concord, some right dislocation and extreme forms of local social practice) might generate the social meaning "rebellious, locally orientated, non-institutionally engaged", when a Popular girl mixes some nonstandard *were* into her sociolinguistic style, its use alongside tag questions, right dislocation and modified engagement in local practice reconstructs the social meaning to create a more specifically Popular identity (i.e., someone with local associations but also a disregard of the most rebellious extremes).

What we see at Midlan High, then, is not one group borrowing the variants that belong to another group, but all speakers mixing and matching variants

in order to define themselves in relation to community-salient contrasts and commonalities. In constructing their sociolinguistic repertoires, speakers do not select variants in relation to any abstract taxonomic distinction (whether this be a dialectal distinction or one evoked in terms of perceived level of formality), but in relation to the processes of stylistic differentiation occurring in the community in which they engage as social beings. Consequently, if we are to define varieties of language, then our definition must describe the combination of variants that are used meaningfully by users and not the correlation between independent variants and isolated social groups. In this sense, the only varieties that we can meaningfully explain as social entities are the salient and concrete sociolinguistic styles constructed by speakers in context.

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