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What's so standard about standards? Variationist principles and debates

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Introduction: What's so standard about standards?

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This special issue of *Asia Pacific Language Variation* is concerned with the role that standard languages have played in the focusing of a socially accountable theory of language change. It has been acknowledged for some time now that variationist theory, like linguistic theory more broadly, has been heavily dependent on, and modelled on the properties of, uniform standardized varieties (Milroy 2001: 539). Indeed, in spite of some important exceptions (e.g. Sankoff 1980[1976]; a number of case studies in Stanford & Preston 2009 and Hildebrandt, Jany & Silva 2017; as well as papers that continue to emerge in this venue) most variationist studies are (and have been) carried out in what Milroy called 'standard-language cultures', that is, 'cultures [in which] virtually everyone subscribes to the ideology of the standard language' (2001: 530).¹²

As Sharma (2017: 233) among others has pointed out, the motivating factor behind this narrow sampling has been the need for careful hypothesis testing and study replication from which the postulation of principles of language variation and change could emerge. Yet, the extent to which sociolinguistic theorizations have been tested on data from representative populations remains an ongoing debate in the field, as recent *états des lieux* such as Coupland (2016), Labov (2016), and Bell (2017) make clear. Owing to the fact that variationists have worked (and continue to work) largely on languages that have been heavily standardized, the potential influence of standard-language ideology on the selection of variables at the very least should give pause for thought (see Cheshire 2005: 87). Yet, given the success of the earliest variationist studies, the extent to which our theorizations remain ideologically embedded in a standard-language mindset continues to go largely unquestioned.

In their seminal manifesto, Weinreich, Labov & Herzog (1968) reasoned that arriving at a socially accountable theory of language variation and change required a consideration of a set of empirical 'problems' (1968: 183). Among the most widely addressed of these in the variationist literature are *embedding* and *evaluation*. Since researchers want to understand how fluctuating variants are selected and propagated, it is important to understand how they are socially embedded. Therefore, as this requires understanding how communities evaluate features, Labov (1966) first proposed that methods targeting *attention to speech* can tap into evaluations when speakers style shift. While the field today acknowledges different approaches to style shifting and the evaluation of variation (see e.g. Eckert & Rickford 2001; Eckert 2012), Labov's observations have been so widely replicated that patterns such as those depicted in his classic New York City study have come to be anticipated as likely distributions for macro-level social categories everywhere. There have, however, been dissenting voices.³

Nearly thirty years ago, Dorian (1994a: 694) had noted that 'the idea that linguistic variation within a speech community will correlate with social differences [has come to gain] unquestioned acceptance'. Yet, her broader contention was that, in *not* questioning this idea,

¹ Nagy & Meyerhoff (2008; 2019) and Adli & Guy (2022) all offer ample quantitative evidence for this claim.

² Standard-language ideology can be understood as a bias towards an abstracted, idealized, homogeneous spoken language which is imposed from above, and which takes as its model the written language (Lippi-Green 1994: 166). This ideology, which gives rise to shared, community-wide notions of 'correct' (often interpreted as standard) and 'incorrect' (often interpreted as 'dialectal', or 'non-standard' or 'vernacular') language is found in most (if not all) European language communities and elsewhere (Kroskrity 2010; Schieffelin, Woolard & Kroskrity 1998).

³ It is noteworthy that Labov (2016) himself has warned of the risks inherent in this.

we miss an opportunity to establish what other kinds of sociolinguistic variation might be possible. Dorian's thinking stemmed from her own work on minoritized (and moribund at the time of writing) Embo, a variety of East Sutherland Gaelic (ESG, see e.g. Dorian 1981). Unlike other, more prestigious varieties of Gaelic, Embo did not benefit from a written standard, and so had: 'no school teachers holding up preferred ESG models to be emulated' (Dorian 1994a: 674); no prestige norm that was readily available for the purpose of standardization; and no local Gaelic-speaking professional class or elites to model. At the same time, Dorian demonstrates in her data no clearly discernible correlations between 'a profusion of variant forms' and classic variationist social factors (Dorian 1994a: 633), a phenomenon that she referred to as *personal-pattern variation*.⁴ She further argued that this phenomenon would not be unique to Embo, and invokes Hill & Hill's classic (1986) study of Malinche Mexicano as a comparable example, where the same sort of linguistic variability can be observed. This, Dorian contends, invites certain generalizations about the sorts of linguistic ecologies in which such variation might also be observed:

The Malinche Mexicano speakers live in a region which is rural and isolated, as the ESG speakers do. Many members of both groups are illiterate in their home language, which is not taught in the schools. In both cases isolation plus low or absent literacy, with the insulation the latter provides from linguistic authority external to the community, may play a part in allowing more leeway for variation (Dorian 1994a: 685).

Dorian's conclusions are principally twofold. First, that there was not at the time of writing a 'movement toward reduction of variants' nor 'the development of differences in the social evaluation of most variants' (Dorian 1994a: 685) in the community she was studying. Second, 'the role of external and internal prestige norming in the degree and kind of variability that a language exhibits may merit further exploration' (1994a: 693). More broadly, she suggests that a lack of a prestige norm may encourage the persistence of the sorts of variation she describes, which may also be recalcitrant to modelling in apparent-time, and which may carry little or no social loading. Most recently, Dorian has argued that this concern still has not been adequately addressed by a sociolinguistic theory that remains focused on standard-language cultures (Dorian 2010: 277).

In a sense, Dorian's warnings underscore the hegemonic domination of the standard in variationist research, which raises a number of pressing issues for linguists to overcome. For example, as Lüpke (2021) has suggested, multilingual non-standard-language communities still 'far outnumber officially monolingual or regulated multilingual nation-states' (2021: 139), notwithstanding the colonial violence that brought with it the transplanting of such western notions to many of societies and cultures. Indeed, outside of northern universalist thinking, southern scholars have long drawn attention to the inapplicability or inappropriateness of the notion of discrete languages and of standards to, for example, complex African multilingual settings (Lüpke 2021: 140).⁵ Other issues stem from this: in many non-western communities, language use 'is not tied to prestige associated with particular languages' in the same way as has been theorised in the West (*ibid*). Ergo, while the functional, consensual model adopted into sociolinguistics is central to the modelling of sociolinguistic variation, in the sorts of communities that Lüpke describes, the relationship undergirding linguistic variation is more likely to be non-hierarchical, and tied instead to speakers' own heteroglossic ideologies.

⁴ Dorian is also clear that 'personal-pattern' variables differ from what linguists have called 'free variation', since they can show linguistic conditioning and also speaker-specific discourse-patterning (see discussion in Dorian 1994).

⁵ Milroy has also suggested that 'different methods and different underlying assumptions about the concept of "a language"' may be needed for the study of variation in language communities that are without standardization of the native language (1999: 36).

Similar commentary has been offered by Satyanath (2015, 2021) in Indian sociolinguistics, where she claims that the relationship that best characterizes state languages vs. vernaculars, or literary vs. spoken varieties, or standard vs. non-standard varieties is decidedly non-hierarchical, even if these relationships might seem on the surface to be hierarchical. Therefore, Satyanath argues, ‘it does not come as a surprise that [e.g.] style shifts reported between standard vs. non-standard as experienced in [western variationist studies] is conspicuously absent across diverse settings of India’ (2021:15). In these language ecologies, then, the nature of the relationships that exist among languages and speakers are not best characterized by western notions of standardness, power and prestige, nor are hierarchical views of variation, that have been influenced by classic works such as Bourdieu (1977), necessarily applicable. Lastly, Dorian (2010: 4) outlines two conditions fundamental to the variationist paradigm that are not – in so far as we are aware – universally present in contemporary societies, which might give rise to other forms of variation. One of the conditions in question is socioeconomic stratification, and the other is a set of linguistic variants that can be construed as standard variants. To paraphrase Dorian, if no variant is established as standard then this should allow for the possibility that linguistic variants might well take on no social significance relative to one another.

Given the above, it seems pertinent to continue to consider how language varies in lesser-studied societies and cultures, absent standards or standard-language ideologies as traditionally understood. There appears to be consensus that all groups will have ideologies: Silverstein has noted that ‘there is no possible *absolute* pre-ideological, i.e. zero-order, social semiotic’ (1992: 315). Yet, it is clear from the above discussion of e.g. Embo that some communities (perhaps even a majority, cf. Lüpke 2021) will not put the same premium on prestige forms. Owing to the centrality of notions of prestige for canonical variationist modelling, it is likely that a lack of awareness of the ways in which disparate types of language ideologies shape encounters between speakers has the potential to lead to problems (Milroy 2001, Cheshire 2005). However, at the same time, many such communities that are likely to harbor more heterogeneous language ideologies are also increasingly under threat. As with variationism, the field of language endangerment has also grown considerably in recent years, which points to the escalating severity of language endangerment. Lee (2020) cites Campbell et al. (2013) in estimating that one language ceases to be spoken every three months. Bromham et al. (2021) suggest that this figure could rise to one language every month without intervention. This rate of loss in geolinguistic diversity exceeds the loss in diversity than we are seeing in biological and ecological systems (Bradley & Bradley 2019). At a time of unprecedented attrition in global linguistic diversity (Loh & Harmon 2014), and as speakers of many languages age without transmitting them to future generations, the calls for more diverse sources of data from non-standard-language communities should be a pressing concern for variationism in particular (Stanford 2016). Indeed, as Trudgill has suggested:

If we are keen to learn more about the inherent nature of linguistic systems, we must urgently focus more of our attention on linguistic structures and changes of the types that occur in the ever-dwindling number of low-contact, dense social network varieties of languages in the modern world. If we want to [...] built up an accurate picture of the nature of human languages [...] we had better hurry [...] not only because most of the world’s languages are in danger, but also because those that are going to be left behind will increasingly tend to be of a single historically atypical type (2011: 187-8).

The four cases studies included in this issue and summarized below all engage with the open questions and theoretical debates sketched out above. Each paper presents a quantitative analysis of variation in production or perception at different levels of linguistic description, and across disparate language sites, including Ende (Strong, Lindsay & Drager), Guyanese (Satyanath), Raga (Duhamel), and Chanka Quechua (Povilonis & Guy).

Strong, Lindsey & Drager undertake a sociophonetic study of variable retroflex production among Ende speakers in Limol (Western Province, Papua New Guinea), where these obstruents are realized variably as stops or affricates. In and around Limol, there is what the authors describe as a regional egalitarian multilingualism, common among Ende speakers, where no local language holds more prestige than another. At the same time, there is no explicit standard Ende, and the authors report that speakers do not offer metalinguistic commentary about the use of any given form. However, the study results indicate that there is an interaction between classic age and sex variables when one further locally relevant social factor is modelled – that of orator status – which does predict stop-variant selection. The authors reason that, in this particular context, many positions of power are reserved exclusively for men. Conversely, leadership roles and positions that confer privilege are restricted, but women who do accrue sufficient prestige over time can become orators who practice *kawa*, a long-standing tradition in which select individuals perform regular public orations. The dynamics of this ecology are therefore reflected in the production of retroflex stopping, in that a speaker's gender, age and orator status play a role in speech production, which is linked to the distribution of power in the community, in the absence of an explicit standard. However, given the prestige associated with being an orator and being older, it stands to reason that the forms that orators use may come to carry some level of overt prestige over time. The Ende case study also emphasizes the importance of uncovering locally meaningful social categories that can only be understood through long-term engagement and collaboration with the community under study (see also Stanford 2009).

Much like Dorian's work described above, Satyanath problematizes the very labelling of variants as 'standard' or 'non-standard' in sociolinguistics, and contends that where such labels are adopted by researchers outside of the West, outcomes do not necessarily map onto attitudes about language, nor do they necessarily result in the same sorts of correlations that are typically observed in western anglophone variationist studies (that are taken for granted). To demonstrate this, she considers one under-studied English-speaking setting in particular – that of Guyanese speakers in Guyana. Her study has three specific aims: to explore (a) the usefulness of the notions of standard-ness and social hierarchy as heuristics in understanding language variation in Guyanese; (b) the possible social meanings associated with variants and language variation, more generally; and (c) local language ideologies associated with English and other varieties in the ecology, namely Creole(se). In revisiting and offering an augmented analysis of production and perception data that she gathered in Georgetown (Guyana) in 1989, Satyanath offers an analysis of variation in the use of a number of variants that mark habitual aspect (and that are derived from the English periphrastic *do*), including /daz, az, a iz, z/ and Ø. Findings from her perception task suggest that participants do not assign high status scores to the most English-like variants, and that the variants in the round do not index socio-economic status, *contra* most studies of morpho-syntactic features in English contexts. At the same time, Satyanath notes a loosening of the association of traditionally creole-like variants as belonging to Creole(se), which researchers might otherwise label as 'vernacular' or 'non-standard' but which clearly have a much more neutral association for speakers themselves. Therefore, Satyanath observes a feature pool in which English variants are not more highly ranked than other variants on socio-economic status scores, and, further, that these observations in perception track findings in production too, in that speakers do not style shift to more English-like variants as greater attention is paid to speech (see also Satyanath 1990). On the balance of evidence, it is more likely, Satyanath contends, that the findings replicated in western sociolinguistics are unique to those linguistic ecologies. Her findings raise the possibility, then, that the orientation to prestige variants as observed in standard-language cultures may be a reflex of a more general, underlying principle: that speakers orient themselves linguistically to the most important structures in their social worlds. After all, language ideologies that might

drive orientation to particular features are ultimately ‘socioculturally motivated ideas, perceptions and expectations of language’ (Blommaert 1999:1)

Duhamel’s study of variable /□/-deletion in Raga (Vanuatu) takes aim at the sociolinguistic gender pattern in particular, a classic distribution reproduced in many anglophone (i.e. standard language) communities that is well-represented in most if not all variationist textbooks. In her study, Duhamel observes that younger and older men deleted /□/ more in apparent-time when compared with middle-aged speakers, be they men or women. As with Strong et al.’s consideration of locally relevant social factors, the distribution of variation in Raga makes sense only when considering the activities of social groups in the community in which older men carry greatest prestige, as well as the broader change in social-economic conditions that the community is currently enjoying in North Pentecost, in which younger men are playing a leading role. In this particular context, elder men are the highest-ranking members of their society, whose input is sought and valued by the rest of the community. Conversely, young men are unestablished members of Raga society. They are however much more likely to serve elder chiefs as part of an evening ritual of *kava* drinking, in which young men prepare the traditional drink for consumption. This offers them opportunity to silently observe the practices and conversations of their elder reference group, an hours-long ritual that is less likely to involve middle-aged men and women. As Duhamel shows, the younger men move on the variation that they observe among their higher-status elders, and adopt more /□/-deletion which they see as a prestige marker. It is however noteworthy that a rise in *kava* trade has coincided with a rise in apparent-time in the deletion of variable /□/. The findings from the study thus augur with Coupland’s recent call for variationists to consider the reflexes of what he terms ‘sociolinguistic change’, that is, ‘a consequential change over time in language~society relations’ (2016: 433). In the case of this Raga community, the prestige associated with /□/-deletion is not conferred by a standard, and it is not an overtly prestigious, community-wide norm. It is however argued to be a change observed among elder men who occupy the highest social position in their society, and which is being adopted by the younger men in the community.

The final case study in this issue focuses on rural and urban Chanka Quechua speakers in the Peruvian city of Andahuaylas, on the Eastern side of the Chanka dialect region. As a minoritized language, Quechua is reserved for the most intimate domains of usage in and around Andahuaylas, where Spanish is the dominant, superordinate variety. While many speakers are bilingual, employing Quechua in public is often interpreted through the lens of social-class status, and so is avoided, in spite of a renaissance of authentic indigeneity in the region – in which language plays a prominent role – as well as language-planning strategies at governmental level. These efforts have led to a standard for Quechua that was introduced by the Ministry of Education. However, in spite of their efforts to augment literacy rates in, a large majority of adult speakers are illiterate in Quechua. Povilonis & Guy argue that Quechua norms are instead arbitrated at a local level, which can differ from village to village and town to town. As a result, there is no overarching standard-language ideology among Quechua speakers as typically described for standard-language communities more commonly studied in variationism (i.e. where standard-language ideology might be propagated through the widespread adoption of a written standard, in the media, or among high-status speakers). Speakers do however share in an ideology of authenticity that carries prestige as a component of indigeneity. Located in a rural imaginary of the past, this ideology reifies and totemizes an ideal monolingual Quechua speaker *quechua neto* (‘pure Quechua’), ‘uncontaminated’ by Spanish. In this sense it is a type of sociolinguistic authenticity that is commonly observed in many other minoritized-language settings (see e.g. Dorian 1994b). To understand how these sociolinguistic dynamics play out in speech production, Povilonis & Guy consider the variable realization of the uvular /q/ phoneme in the past tense /-rqa/ morpheme. Their findings, taken

from sociolinguistic interviews and a novel sentence-correction task suggest that speakers do not offer any conscious evaluation or overt preference for either of the two forms [rqa] vs. [ra], even when explicitly asked about them. However, production evidence from their elicitation task indicates an overall implicit preference for the uvular-full pronunciation of /-rqa/ (the variant used more in conversation by speakers who are older, rural, less-educated and less Spanish-dominant), even if urbanites showed a growing acceptance and use of the uvular-less. The study in particular highlights the need to adopt a more varied understanding of standard language ideology (as Lüpke 2021 indicates, above), where doing so requires seeking out alternative community norms and priorities.

To conclude, while strides are being made in exporting revised variationist methods to lesser-studied communities absent standards or standard-language ideologies (not least in the present venue), gaps in our knowledge remain, and this issue assembles the pieces of further local understandings of such notions to provide an augmented picture of how linguistic variation can manifest.

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