Styles, standards and meaning

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Styles, standards and meaning: Issues in the globalisation of sociolinguistics[1]

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Abstract

Style, in the study of variation and change, is intimately linked with broader questions about linguistic innovation and change, standards, social norms, and individual speakers' stances. This article examines style when applied to lesser-studied languages. Style is both (i) the product of speakers' choices among variants, and (ii) something reflexively produced through the association of variants and the social position of the users of those variants. In the context of the languages considered here, we ask "What questions do we have about variation in this language and what notion(s) of *style* will answer them?" We highlight methodological, conceptual and analytical challenges for the notion of style as it is usually operationalised in variationist sociolinguistics. We demonstrate that style is a useful research heuristic which – when marshalled alongside locally-oriented accounts of, or proxies for "standard" and "prestige", in apparent time – allows us to describe language and explore change. It is also a means for exploring social meaning, which speakers may have more or less conscious control over.

Keywords: style variation, language standards, minority languages, sociolinguistic theory, superposed variety, indicators, markers, stereotypes.

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Style and lesser-studied languages

Style has been central to the study of language variation and change since the earliest sociolinguistic studies. The term is somewhat contested: there is perhaps no term more widely used and yet more recalcitrant to a single definition. Eckert & Rickford (2001) showcase some of the variability in how the term was understood in the field of sociolinguistics at the turn of the century; variability that reflected the dual heritage of sociolinguistics in the qualitative, ethnographic study of language (Gumperz & Hymes 1964a, b) as well as in sociological, quantitative studies of speech behaviour (Labov 1966, 2011).

It has been suggested (Bell 1984; Macaulay 1999) that early variationist sociolinguistics engaged insufficiently with style as a variable. As early as the 1970s, some sociolinguistics were concerned that we should attend "to the signals that tell where […] people […] have come from, are now, and aspire to be" (Hymes 1974:17). Eckert's (2012) classification system of three waves summarises changes in how social structure and individual agency manifest in three (non-chronological) waves of variationist research (summarised in Bell 2016):

First Wave: based on survey methodology and establishing correlations between linguistic variation and sociodemographic categories;
Second Wave: greater use of ethnographic methods to identify local categories that affect variation;
Third Wave: variation itself constructs social meaning, and styles are the focus.

How the macro-identity categories associated with earlier studies of language variation and change are linked to "Third Wave" perspectives on style remains a work in progress (Eckert 2018). Bell observes that "We can endorse [the] premise that a person is more than a static bundle of sociological categories…[but] he or she is also more than an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of personas created in and by different situations, with no stable core" (2016: 400), highlighting the disjunction between the different waves. Eckert & Labov (2017) attempt to articulate a bridge between macro and micro perspectives on style, but the paper remains (we would suggest) most helpful as a guide to some of the fundamental differences.

Notwithstanding Eckert's (2018) recent, summative work in this domain, there continues to be tension over the meaning of *style* in sociolinguistics.[2]

Recent research, within a Third-Wave paradigm, has sought to reconcile the divergent directions in which the term has drifted in variationist sociolinguistics. Eckert (2018) presents empirical case studies and argues that the association of speech behaviour with macro-sociological categories such as class, gender and age emerges from the accretion of stances in personal interactions. A strong version of this might argue that macro-sociological categories primarily exist as amplifications of those personal stances and traits – this is one way of reading Bourdieu's own analysis of such social categories, and it can be construed as being implicit in some neurocognitive analyses of inter-individual variation (e.g. Yu 2013). Eckert's approach suggests progress can be made by combining analysis that relies on close, ethnographic knowledge with broader generalisations. The social meaning of speakers' different stylistic choices is informed by prior tokens of a variable and what previous interlocutors have inferred about the relationship between macro- and micro-social categories on the basis of that exposure.

At the same time, if interlocutors perceive there to have been an alternative, any choice informs the social meaning that will be ascribed to a variant in the future.[3] For this reason, various theorists have observed that language is both forward and backward looking (Ochs 1990, Silverstein 2003). Thus, it is, within more recent approaches to style, that broad, social categories (such as gender or socioeconomic status) are constitutively linked to interpersonal categories (such as flirty, cute pre-teen; respected, knowledgeable community elder; confident, *laissez-faire* manager). As an example, Lee (this volume) links *a priori* perceptions about the social meaning of vocalic variants with sound symbolism in Baba Malay. She argues that over time a "refined" and restrained persona is becoming more strongly indexed by vowel fronting. Her ethnographically situated analysis also tackles the

[2] We might say that the indexical field (Eckert 2008) associated with *style* is itself undergoing change in the field of sociolinguistics.

[3] The perception of an alternative need not entail speakers having overt awareness of the variation. Labov's (1972) distinction between **indicators**, **markers** and **stereotypes** (foreshadowed in Weinreich, Labov & Herzog 1968: 181) allows for perception to be below the level of conscious awareness for both indicators and markers. As early as Weinreich et al. (1968), and up to the present (Walker 2010, Levon & Buchstaller 2015), the question persists as to whether researchers can expect or ask the same things of speakers' perception of grammatical alternatives operates the same as their perception of phonological alternatives.

embedding problem, reminding us that the fronting of back vowels is part of a suite of features that signals "refinedness".

Part of the problem with articulating the kind of bridge that is needed between micro- and macro-analysis may be rhetorical. Eckert (2018) notes that the "wave" metaphor generates certain implicatures that she had not intended when introducing it to sociolinguistics. We tend to think of one wave cresting and being replaced by another after the first has petered out completely, and this encourages us to think that the task for sociolinguists is to get *from* a first wave *to* a third wave. But we also know waves all simultaneously exist as the water,[4] so asking how we get *from* one wave *to* another is an epistemological error. All waves are immanent in any one. Eckert has always acknowledged that solid third-wave analysis relies on sound descriptive work that may well take shape within a first- or second-wave perspective. A focus on structure (in Saussure's and Jakobson's senses of structure) may be a strategic necessity when researchers are describing the grammar of a previously undocumented language or variety. Equally, a focus on structure (in Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss' sense of structure) may be strategically needed when researchers are investigating the early stages of variation and change in any community. Where the variation or change occurs in an under-documented or less well-described language variety, the two kinds of structure converge as important means for researchers to make sense of the data. This claim is asserted by Childs et al. (2014), Meyerhoff & Stanford (2015) and is demonstrated in Satyanath (2017).

The papers in this special issue of *Language Ecology* are less concerned with debating whether linguistic style is (i) the product of speakers' agentive and conscious choices among variants or (ii) something reflexively produced through the association of variants and the social position of the users of those variants. We take the answer to that question to have now been resolved in variationist sociolinguistics – the answer is clearly "Both" and "It depends on the lens you are using". Any further debate about which definition of style is "right" or "wrong" seem to us to have about as much point as heated debate about whether phonetics or phonology is "right" or "wrong". We need both to do different things.[5]

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[4] To avoid further such reification, we cease to capitalise **first**, **second** and **third wave** at this point.
[5] Naturally, we are aware that some phoneticians are deeply sceptical about the notion of phonology (e.g. Pierrhumbert 2000); this is not a position we subscribe to.

Instead, the purpose of this issue is to advance the synthesis of approaches a little further. By transferring existing methods for studying style and pushing the application of previous generalisations about style to sociolinguistically, less well-described languages, the papers are united in posing a different question: "What questions do we have about variation in this data set and what notion(s) of *style* will shed light on them?" As a consequence of asking this, we note that some modifications to and creative permutations of our methods may be needed.

The simultaneous existence of the different waves of sociolinguistics creates challenges and opportunities for the contributors to this issue. Some of the language varieties considered in this volume are not well-documented (Baba Malay, Francoprovençal, Garifuna), so establishing what is variable is a necessary first step. Moreover, where communities are undergoing acute language shift, and where rapid language change in just one or two generations is typical, establishing consensus around norms and variation among speakers themselves can be difficult. In cases of severe language endangerment, the literature has contended that stylistic variation is lost altogether, a position that the papers here reject.

For some of the languages discussed in this issue, speakers' relationship with internal variation is sociolinguistically complex, because ongoing efforts towards language maintenance and revitalisation mean it may not be straightforward for the linguist, or the speakers, to definitively say which forms are considered "innovative" and which are "conservative" (Francoprovençal, New Zealand Māori; similar issues arise with Arabic, as discussed below).

Finally, some of the language varieties discussed in this issue have extraordinarily complex historical and sociolinguistic relationships with a supra-local or written variety (Arabic, Hebrew). These case studies invite us all to reflect more deeply on the relationship between spoken variation and written norms. The situation with Arabic provides an acute example of the need to critique reading aloud as a means of probing subconsciously held norms about standardness or correctness (the two are related but different, of course). But it is easy to see that as previously oral languages acquire written norms, similar questions may be forced in historically very different language ecologies.

As a result, the researchers included in this issue have to be willing to question epistemologies of style (their own and those held more widely in the field of sociolinguistics) and to engage creatively with established methods and in the interpretation of their findings. The differences among them reflects the authors' commitment to analysis that is faithful to the specific ecological conditions of the language, the speakers under investigation and the variables considered.

The papers presented here are unified in reflecting on one of two questions about style in sociolinguistics:

1. How is the notion of *styles* useful in the study of variation and change in less well-documented language?
2. Is a view of *style* as *social meaning* readily translated into studies of variation and change in less well-documented languages?

In the course of exploring these questions, the contributors highlight various methodological, conceptual and analytical challenges for the notion of style as it is understood and operationalised in variationist sociolinguistics.

The job of the individual articles is to probe the limits in social, cultural and linguistic specificity the limits of either traditional (first and second wave – Gafter, Horesh, Kasstan, King et al.) or ethnographic (third wave – Abtahian, Lee,) approaches to language variation and style. In doing so, they contribute to our growing appreciation of the ecology of language (Lim & Ansaldo 2015). Rather than repeating the content of individual articles, the purpose of this introductory essay is to tie their content to some observations about the history and philosophical underpinnings of variationist sociolinguistics. We seek to (i) provide an outline of the context in which researchers looking at non-Western and less familiar languages approach stylistic variation, (ii) clarify what epistemological challenges are raised in these research contexts, and (iii) clarify the practical (methodological) implications of (i) and (ii).

In order to do this, we review some of the reasons why style has been useful and important in the field of sociolinguistics. This reminds us why style has been defined and operationalised differently at different points in time: as research questions have changed, so too have definitions of the object of study. This takes us first from the positivist tradition through to

the position today where researchers may seek to track the dynamic and negotiated nature of the meaning of variants within a speech community.

In reviewing this trajectory, it reminds us that style has never been an isolable construct; that its use in the study of variation and change is intimately linked with broader enquiry about linguistic innovation and change, standards, social norms, and individual speakers' social address (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003; Hernandez-Campoy 2016).

Style as a heuristic tool

In some of the early, and methodologically influential, sociolinguistic research, style was deployed as one of several research heuristics. It was, in this research paradigm, completely inseparable from notions of "standard", "conservative", and "prestige". We recognise today that these three concepts are complex, situationally particular and that to understand them, we first need to carefully consider the social context in which speakers operate. It follows, therefore, that "style" too is subject to local constraints – the analyst might construe these as principally in terms of social constraints on the individual (e.g. Sankoff & Laberge 1986) or in terms of interlocutors' constraints on individual expressions of agency (e.g. Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985) or indeed – as is beginning to be more widely accepted in the post-post-structuralist perspectives emerging in sociolinguistics – a combination of both structural constraints and individual agency (e.g. Barrett 2017).

It is helpful to bear in mind that early sociolinguistic studies sought to use synchronic variation to:
(a) illuminate the mechanisms of language change, and
(b) demonstrate the systematic nature of language variation, i.e. that variation is not "free" and can be explained in terms of probabilistic constraints.

In pursuit of (b), variation in different speech styles became one way of partitioning the variation space, and hence offered an independent check on the systematicity of variation. To the extent that these inferences aligned with inter-generational data, it also contributed directly to the first goal. Ultimately many researchers could see the potential of more fluid notions of style, which is how style became fundamental to the sociolinguistic research problematising the meaning of social categories – a matter we turn to in the next section.

In pursuit of (a), sociolinguists set about exploring the extent to which synchronic variation could be used to infer change in progress (Labov 1966; Weinreich, Labov & Herzog 1968). In other words, to ask what potential synchronic variation has as a window on past (and now unobservable) practices of the speech community and to ask whether synchronic variation can help analysts infer the current and future directions of change. Central to this enterprise was the apparent time construct, the comparison of speakers of different ages at one snapshot in time as a surrogate for observing the same community over time.

This gambit was based on the (lay and scientific) observation that older and younger speakers in a community often use different words, different pronunciations of the same words and that they may have different attitudes towards or awareness of such variation. Such observations were supported by neurolinguistic evidence emerging in the mid-20th century that suggested a reduced plasticity in the linguistic capabilities of normally-developing speakers after puberty (the **critical period hypothesis**). To the extent that older speakers' present-day speech preserves the norms they acquired when they were younger, a sample of progressively younger speakers offers a simulacrum of the passage of time. "Preserve norms" does not entail fossilisation – a common strawman set up by some critiques of the apparent time construct. Recent research on lifespan change among individuals largely corroborates the fundamental assumption underpinning the apparent time construct (Sankoff 2018).

The ability of apparent-time data to shed light on how norms may have changed over time seems to be especially powerful in communities where institutions such as the education system promote strong, "superposed" (Gumperz 1968: 383-384) norms about "correctness", where standards are reinforced through formal and informal instruction and assessment, and by social practices such as hiring policies, in which an applicant who sounds "right", or like they will "fit in", may be favoured over equally qualified applicants. Within variationist sociolinguistics, such variants are often associated with clear stereotypes or speakers' meta-linguistic ability to comment on alternate forms. That is, they may be above the level of conscious awareness.

Against this backdrop, stylistic variation in work such as Labov (1972, 2001) provided a means of triangulating the (social and linguistic) significance of variants. As operationalised by Labov, "styles" were defined as different activities, which were interpreted as being related in consistent and predictable ways, corresponding to the speaker's greater or lesser

attention to the act of speaking. Defining **style** in terms of attention to speech meant that conversation to ingroup and outgroup members could be paired with radically different activities such as reading aloud, or even artificial (essentially experimental) activities such as reading minimal pairs or semantic differential tasks. By guiding a speaker through different linguistic tasks (from conversation with friends or family, through to conversation with the researcher, to reading a prose passage aloud, to reading word lists and sets of minimal pairs), Labov proposed that we could draw inferences about which variants are subconsciously associated with intimate and less formal interactions, and which variants were associated with more careful and attentive speech. The rationale for this approach to style was that consistent inter-speaker patterns in the relative frequency of a variant across these different tasks enables the linguist to infer community or group norms. In particular, changes in which form is favoured in reading (as opposed to conversation) can provide indirect evidence about which forms are considered more correct, more careful or more prestigious, since speakers' ability to introspect on these values may be flawed.

Additionally, speakers' performance in these different tasks may provide an independent measure that enriches our notions of what counts as conservative or innovative in a given speech community or any group of speakers. Labov argued that "there are no single-style speakers" (1971: 112) – everyone tailors their speech to the situation, task, topic, addressee, the persona they want to foreground for whatever solipsistic or strategic purpose. This **principle of style shifting** means that – to the extent that the same variants occur most often in a speaker's most mannered and contrived activities (reading minimal pairs or word lists aloud) **and** in the speech of older speakers within the speech community – we have independent evidence for claiming that those variants can be labelled "conservative". Where this can also be verified with real time data (e.g. earlier dialect surveys), this argument is so much the stronger.

Some earlier work on language endangerment had suggested that a consequence of obsolescence is the reduction of speakers' linguistic capacity to the extent that they effectively become single-style speakers (e.g. Dressler and Wodak-Leodolter 1977: 37, cf. also Bell 1984: 158). Even setting aside the fact that bilingual speakers under such circumstances surely use the alternation between languages as a stylistic resource, Kasstan (this volume) shows that we continue to find stylistic variation in the very late stages of fluency in Francoprovençal.

In other words, independent assumptions underpinning the apparent time construct can be verified by drawing on speakers' performance in different activities. The fact that in a typical survey, representing a slice-in-time of a speech community, speakers only exist with a single age (only a panel study samples the same people at different ages) means we have to extrapolate from cognitive and neurological studies that suggest after a certain point, certain cognitive capacities (such as fundamental rules for pronunciation and grammar) are unlikely to change.[6] Insofar as older speakers use more of a particular grammatical or pronunciation variant than younger speakers do, we are willing to classify that variant as (temporally) conservative. However, if we also discover that the same variant is used more often by all speakers (regardless of age) in ritual activities such as reading aloud than it is in conversation with friends, this provides us with a different measure of conservatism.

The fact that none of us are "single-style" speakers allows researchers to transcend the limitations that result from the fact that we are all bodily consigned to being "single age" speakers at the moment when we speak.

The process of triangulation outlined here is different in detail, but not in kind, from the triangulation of social meaning that characterises Eckert's (2008) indexical fields, Mendoza-Denton's (2011) analysis of transformations in the significance of creaky voice across different users and domains, Starr et al.'s (2020) analysis of how ASMR is "heard" in Chinese, and Podesva's (2008) clustering of variables. In each case, the interpretation of how a variant is used in intra-speaker data further informs the interpretation of cross-speaker patterns, including patterns which may be interpreted as social categories or characterological types (Agha 2007).

Bell's (1984) strongly-phrased style axiom proposed that individual stylistic variation derives from social variation. While such a position seems persuasive in the context of languages predominantly studied in the variationist paradigm, it remains unclear to what extent this relationship is axiomatic. An exception has been observed in the case of hyperstyle variation

[6] Or perhaps be acquired. Research on early versus late L1 acquisition of British Sign Language finds a significant drop in accuracy and response time on grammatical tasks depending on age of acquisition (Cormier et al. 2012).

in Metropolitan French (e.g. Armstrong 2013) and it is not yet clear whether the style axiom applied in smaller speech communities (where variation may not stratify social groups as markedly as has been observed to do in the urban West). Abtahian's analysis of style shifting in Garifuna for instance recognises the problems posed by mapping Labov's typology of variables (indicators, markers, stereotypes) in language documentation. Similarly, Kasstan's analysis of /l/-palatalization in Francoprovençal suggests that in situations of language endangerment, stereotypes that have been iconised through revitalisation and codification, might be very important. Such observations find support elsewhere, too. For instance, Rodríguez-Ordóñez's (forthcoming) analysis of the variable use of Differential Object Marking in Basque concludes that stigmatised variants have been recruited by some speakers as emblematic of an "authentic" Basque stance.

Meanings of styles

One of the fundamental critiques of the task-/attention-based conceptualisation of style rested on the observation that tasks like reading aloud or answering direct questions in a one on one format are associated with specific social domains or interlocutor roles. That is, speakers might be increasing their attention to their speech when they engage in these different activities or they might consider them to be socially differentiated, i.e. activities associated with very different addressees or audience types (for a review, see Meyerhoff 2016)

In other words, the act of reading aloud may be construed as purposeful attention to one's own speech, as attention to an imagined or perceived interlocutor, or as the speaker adopting an interpersonal or social stance as an "educated individual". The latter is presumably why, in most Western studies of variation and change, conservative variants also tend to be associated with speakers who have had more experience with the formal education system or who have grown up in communities where the majority of speakers have had greater access to formal education (the communities we would call "middle class"). Indeed, real-time data from Montreal suggests that speakers may even **diverge** from the community's direction of change when they have had significant exposure to formal instruction (Sankoff & Wagner 2020).

It is apparent, then, that in communities where there is no superposed variety and where the formal education system systematically ignores or avoids some language varieties or some speakers, the complex triangulation between style, socioeconomic class and temporal

conservatism will not necessarily carry over. Such is the case for most of the language situations considered in this special issue. Many studies have already questioned the relevance of socioeconomic class to language variation in non-Western or non-urban speech communities. In this issue, King et al. reject socioeconomic status as a relevant factor in identifying prestige forms for New Zealand Māori. It seems plausible that, in the absence of superposed norms in standardised languages, the sociolinguistic trinity of indicators, markers and stereotypes will cease to be relevant. It is still likely that sociolinguistic stereotypes at least will exist in all speech communities (and Kasstan finds them useful for analysing variation in Francoprovençal), but as Abtahian notes, the indicator/marker distinction may not be operative in minority-language communities. Nevertheless, King et al. argue that all three types of variable can be found in Māori despite its minority status. In this case, older speakers' norms fill in for socioeconomic status; older speakers are respected as repositories of many kinds of knowledge, including linguistic knowledge.

Studies of variation and change in Arabic long ago highlighted the culturally specific nature of the association between conservative styles and social indexes such as social class and gender. Research on Arabic prior to the mid-1980s tended to present a simplistic picture of the so-called diglossia in the Arabic-speaking world, equating the learned, mostly written variety referred to in the West as Standard Arabic with the standard or conservative norms. Scholars such as Ibrahim (1986) and Haeri (1987, 2000) have rightly pointed out that Standard Arabic, a superposed non-native variety, has very limited relevance to variation and change in the many Arabic vernaculars. When taking the ecological particularities of each Arabic dialect into account, we see similar gender patterns in Arabic-speaking communities to those found in the classic sociolinguistic studies of English (e.g. Al-Wer et al. 2020). For centuries, the rapidly narrowing gender inequality in access to literacy in the Middle East limited women's access to written forms, but its impact on the core elements of variationist sociolinguistics is questionable at best. Arabic dialects are nowadays orienting towards the dialects of nearby cities, and this differs from region to region within the Arab world. What they do not do is systematically converge towards a pan-Arab linguistic standard.

The importance of having access to all variants in order to use them may seem self-evident, but as Le Page & Tabouret-Keller (1985) showed in their close study of variation in the speech of Belizean students, lack of exposure or access to some varieties used in the wider speech community can have implications for the overall patterns of variation. This can

account for inter-individual differences but also any given individual's ability to use these resources to exercise agency and claim certain social identities. Horesh (this issue) adds to this pictue, observing that one of the obstacles in studying a multilingual community is that the repertoire of styles may not be equivalent from one language to the other. Speakers of Arabic and Hebrew approach reading aloud differently in the two languages. In Hebrew, reading and casual speech can be construed as styles of the same linguistic code, but in Arabic reading is usually done in a very different variety than is used for casual speech, leading us to question whether the difference in modalities is indeed a difference in style *per se*, or something more drastic.

This also raises the question of prescriptive norms and standards. In this issue, Gafter argues that for Hebrew speakers, there are two quite distinct sets of norms in play – one prescriptive and one conventional. Speakers orient to different norms depending on the speech activity. In spontaneous speech, conventional norms may be more relevant, while when reading aloud, prescriptive norms may play a stronger role. One can also imagine a situation where the relationship between prescriptive and conventional standards is nested and overlapping, as, indeed, may be the case for the relationship between Standard Mandarin (Putonghua), regional or city standards and local, innovative variants (Zhao 2021). The co-existence of (social) conventions and (formal) prescription – and potentially competition between them – is not unique to Hebrew, but Gafter argues that in Hebrew the degree of disconnect between them makes this distinction crucial for interpreting reading tasks. The distinction between conventional norms and prescriptive norms may play a larger role than we think in many speech communities, and is not an entirely novel observation. If variation in reading aloud is less systematic than the variation observed in ingroup conversation, it is plausible that this has its roots in the fact that different, and dissoluble, norms compete to hold sway in the two activities. Nagy's (2018, 2021) work on pro-drop in several typologically dissimilar languages suggests that whatever linguistic competence experimental studies of pro-drop tap into, it is radically different from the sociolinguistic competence of speakers' actual production. There is, it seems to us, a fairly direct line between these claims and findings, and Paul's (1891) observations over a century ago that replicating written norms in speech exacts a significant toll on the speaker. Paul argued that reading aloud renders her unable to express her own thoughts and requires "a renunciation of all individuality" (1891: 481).

A mindful and ethnographically critical view of how speakers engage with norms, and which norms they are able to engage with informs all the articles in this issue, and in each case, it shapes how the authors draw inferences from their observations. As Labov (2015) notes, the observation of unexpected or unusual patterns of variation takes sociolinguists out of their comfort zone, and these are precisely the spaces where new insights into what Goffman (1981) referred to as the laminated nature of language and social meaning are to be found. They are also the intellectual spaces where native-speaker intuitions can contribute directly to the analysis of variation.

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