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A new role for narrative in variationist sociolinguistics¹

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Labov and Waletzky's (1997[1967]) path-breaking description of "narrative syntax" arose in the context of variationist sociolinguistic research, and narrative continues to be an important source of data for variationist' work. In most of this work, however, narrative is not the object of study. Variationist sociolinguists are interested in the structure and function of sounds, words, and phrases found in narrative data, but they have not typically asked how the structure and function of narrative itself might bear on the questions about linguistic variation and language change that define their field. Here I suggest that close attention to the structure and function of narrative can, in fact, shed light on a topic of central interest to variationists, namely vernacular norm-formation. I argue that narratives about encounters with linguistic difference help create shared orientations to particular sets of nonstandard linguistic features and link them with region, class, and other sources of identity. I further suggest that narrative functions particularly well as a vehicle for language-ideological differentiation (Gal & Irvine, 1995) of this sort. (*Dialect, Enregisterment, Pittsburgh, Variation, Sociolinguistics, Propp*)

Variationist sociolinguists' work is aimed at understanding why and how language changes by studying why people in a community don't all talk alike and why individuals may use different words, sounds, or patterns of grammar in different situations. Since variability — the existence of multiple ways of doing "the same" thing — is a necessary condition for change, understanding reasons for and patterns of variability allows us to answer key questions about language change and about the histories of particular languages and dialects. The corpus of narratives on which Labov and Waletzky's work

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was based had been collected during interviews aimed at providing data about patterns of phonological variation — that is, variation in the pronunciation of phonemes and words. In these interviews (see Labov, 1972, pp. 79–94; Labov, 1984, pp. 32–42), narratives of personal experience were elicited because speakers were often found to shift to a more “casual,” “spontaneous” style characterized by more “vernacular” variants of phonological variables when they were caught up in the emotional tensions and interactional demands of narrating. Because “the vernacular, in which the minimum attention is paid to speech, provides the most systematic data for linguistic analysis” (Labov, 1984, p. 29), the Labovian sociolinguistic interview includes questions meant to elicit narrative in a number of topical “modules,” including “Did you ever get blamed for something you didn’t do?” “Did you ever get into a fight with a girl?” and, best known, “Were you ever in a situation where you were in serious danger of being killed?”

The Labovian sociolinguistic interview continues to be a key tool for data-collection in variationists’ research. Attempts to encourage personal narrative continue to be key elements of the interviews. Large-scale projects often draw on archival data as well, often from oral histories or letters, and this data frequently includes personal narrative. In these lines of work, researchers mine narratives for examples of the features they are interested in. In some instances, as with Labov, narrative is thought to be a particularly good data source; in other cases, narrative is used mainly because it is what is available. But neither the process of narration nor the resulting narratives are the focus of study.

Enregisterment and vernacular norm-formation

But there is at least one important way in which narration enters into the processes variationists are interested in. This has to do with the role of narrative in the formation of shared ideas about what constitutes a particular nonstandard variety and what it means to use features of it in one’s speech. As Wolfram (2003) points out, the processes leading to the development of such norms for vernacular varieties are not well understood. One set of questions about vernacular norming has to do with what Wolfram refers to as the “embedding issue”: How do linguistic features that covary with social ones come to index them? Another set of questions has to do with the “dynamic issue” (Wolfram, 2003, p. 253): “How have the norms of different vernaculars changed over time, and what social mechanisms are used to transmit and regulate these changing norms?”

One answer is suggested by research about standard varieties. In a study of Received Pronunciation (RP) in Britain, Agha (2003) points to some of the mechanisms involved in the identification of a particular set of linguistic forms as a “linguistic repertoire differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register” (p. 231). What became RP was once a set of pronunciations confined to southeastern England. Using these features was a more or less automatic consequence of growing up in that area, and the local pronunciations were not thought of as an “accent” or associated with social class. Beginning in the 18th century, however, via a variety of prescriptivist ideas and discursive activities that circulated these ideas, a subset of these regional features

came to be typified, or represented in the public imagination, as an accent associated with the upper class. This representation has been stabilized and maintained across time and region via practices that reiterate the features of the accent and its link to social status, including such things as pronunciation handbooks, educational policies requiring RP in schools, and newspaper cartoons caricaturing RP and non-RP speakers. Agha calls this process “enregisterment.” As Agha points out (p. 243), “the ... spread of a register depends on the circulation of messages typifying speech.”

In what follows, I explore the role of narrative in the enregisterment of a regional dialect in the US. I show that personal narrative is one of the discursive practices through which certain speech features that can be heard locally are typified as signals of localness, and normative instructions about how to hear and use this (imagined) vernacular variety are disseminated. The set of vernacular forms I will discuss are associated with “Pittsburghese,” or what is imagined locally to be a dialect unique to the city of Pittsburgh.

Narrating encounters with linguistic difference

We have described elsewhere how geographic, linguistic, and historical facts have come together to set the stage in Pittsburgh for the enregisterment of “Pittsburghese” as a dialect linked ideologically with place (Johnstone, Andrus & Danielson, 2006; Johnstone & Baumgardt, 2004). Onto this stage have emerged discursive practices and artifacts that serve to enregister “Pittsburghese” in the local imagination as unique and unchanging. One of these practices is the telling of stories about encounters with linguistic difference, either as an outsider coming to the city or as a Pittsburgher going elsewhere.

In narratives by Pittsburghers about linguistic encounters elsewhere, local speech is evoked in one of two ways. In some, the Pittsburgher is told that some word or bit of grammar he or she uses is nonstandard, or at least different from what someone from elsewhere would say. The narrative in example (1) arose as Molly G., a woman in her 30s, answered BJ’s interview question, “So, have you ever heard of ‘Pittsburghese?’”²

2. In the transcripts I use normal orthography and punctuation as much as possible.

- [Single brackets] enclose simultaneous speech, which is left aligned.
- [[Double brackets]] enclose phonetic transcription.
- =Equals signs indicate that the second utterance follows immediately on the first.
- Empty single parentheses () indicate the presence of verbal material transcribers could not make out.
- (Single parentheses) enclose words the transcribers were not sure about
- ((Double parentheses)) enclose transcriber comments about voice quality, gaze, or nonverbal sounds
- Colons indicate syllables that are elongated
- CAPITAL letters indicate emphatic, loud, stressed production.

Except for Lynn Cullen, names are pseudonyms.

(1) FH19.interview5, 10.39 to 11.05

- 60 Molly G. Well, I was in college- ((Laughing)) This is so embarrassing and this is going to be on the tape. ((Intake of breath)) My roommate said, "You know, that isn't proper English." I said, "What?" And she said, "You- you said your 'shirt needs ironed.'" I'm like, "Well, it does."
- 61 BJ ((Laughs))
- 62 Molly G. She said, "Well, it either 'needs ironing,' or it 'needs to be ironed.'" And it never occurred to me... I had never been corrected [all] the way through school even though we stuttered- studied grammar and everything else that...
- 63 BJ [Mm-hmm.] Mm-hmm.
- 64 Molly G. And that's a Pittsburgh thing. ((1 second pause)) I- I think.

Kristi G. is a student in her early 20s, talking about an experience at her college in another state.

(2) FH25int 2, 2.39 to 3.17

- Kristi G. Um, the only people that, I've really noticed, like, get on me because of my accent is, I called, I asked for a gumband from some kid from Ohio, and he didn't know what that was, and I was like, "A gumband, I need it for this," and so, 'bout five minutes later h- he, like, figured out it was a rubber band, or something like that, so, they got me on that one.

In other stories, someone recognizes the Pittsburgher's origin on the basis of his or her accent. Jen R., a woman in her 40s, and her daughter, Donna R., who was 13, co-narrate such a story. They are talking about local speech.

(3) from FH01and02Pittsburghese

- 78 Jen R. Well when I've been in [different] states, in different cities,
- 79 BJ [Mm hmm]
- 80 Donna R. They'll- they'll say "You're from Pittsburgh."
- 81 Jen R. Yeah, they'll immediately [say,]
- 82 Donna R. [When we were in] South Carolina, right?
- 83 Jen R. "You're from Pennsylvania,"=
- 84 Donna R. ="Yeah. you're- you're [definite-]"

- 85 Jen R. ["Are you-], are you from the
Pittsburgh area?"
- 86 Donna R. Yeah. ((laughing))
- 87 BJ Does that happen to you, too, or?=
88 Donna R. =Yeah. I mean, I remember one time, we were in South
Carolina visiting my, my uncle and my two cousins and
my aunt. And we went to (s- some) store, and we were
talking about how like the South kind of moves slow,
[you know?]
- 89 Jen R. [Yeah,] [God, it drives you crazy.]
- 90 Donna R. [And then she's like] she's like, "You guys from
Pennsylvania?" We're like "Yeah." And she's like "You
guys wouldn't happen to be from Pittsburgh, right?" And
we're like, "We're from Pittsburgh." And she's like, "Oh,
okay. I can tell by your accent."

Outsiders' stories have to do with communicative difficulties they encounter in Pittsburgh. An example comes from a radio talk show on which I was interviewed. The interviewer, Lynn Cullen, moved to Pittsburgh as an adult, to take a new job. She introduced the topic of the interview with a narrative.

- (4) Lynn Cullen, interview with Barbara Johnstone, Feb. 22, 2002, WPPT talk radio, beginning

Lynn Cullen: The first night I ever spent in Pittsburgh, uhm, I I had come in to look for an apartment, or a home, someplace to live because I was going to be moving here to live, and there was a hhhorrible blizzard, that night, and I found myself snowed in at a Holiday Inn on the Parkway East, a::nd, I just tuned on the TV, thought I might as well watch Channel 4 where I was going to be employed, and the first interview was with, a guy who owned a gas station, right off the Parkway. His name was Peewee. ((1.5 sec)) And Peewee was talkin' to the reporter about how he was knee deep in people coming in off the Parkway and he couldn't help 'em any more and there wadn't any gas, and there wasn't any help, and people were stuck, and his tow truck couldn't this and that. ((Breath intake)) ((2 sec)) I think that's what he was talking about. I did not really understand a word:: the man said. And I remember sitting there and thinking, "Is he talking English?" wondering why, this wasn't being subtitled. ((3 sec.))

Another such story has to do with an outsider's more specific communicative difficulty having to do with a pair of words, *towel* and *tile*, that are homophonous in some Pittsburghers' speech. I am the narrator in this example; my interlocutor, Raymond T., is a native Pittsburgher.

(5) FH20Pairs.1–52 to 2–29

- 1 BJ In fact, one of the first, encounters I had when I moved to Pittsburgh was a, walking, the dog in the, in Frick Park in the morning and there w's a, gentleman who also walks his dog who's a real estate agent, from Squirrel Hill, he's, we were talking about what we were gonna do during the day he said, that he was gonna have some workmen come in and replace the [[talz]] in his bathroom
- 2 Raymond T. [[[laughing]]]
- 3 BJ [I thought why would you need workmen ((laugh voice)) to replace the towels in your bathroom, why couldn't you do that yourself]
- 4 Raymond T. ((laughs))
- 5 BJ Turned out he meant the TILES, (in the bathroom)
- 6 Raymond T. ((laughing)) They were heavy [[talz]].
- 7 BJ They were heavy towels, yeah, ((laughing voice)) yeah.

Plot types and ideological work

No two personal narratives of linguistic encounter are identical, and all are based in some way in personal experience. Thus what circulates as a model for the discursive practice of telling stories like these are not actual stories but rather plots, or semantic scaffolds on which stories can be built. To describe these plots, we need a way of abstracting away from the particular details of stories. Proppian "morphological" analysis is useful for this. Propp's (1968) system of functional analysis was intended to aid in the the classification and comparison of fairytales. A "function," for Propp, "is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action" (p. 21). Functions are repeatable from tale to tale, no matter which character fulfills them and how, and in a class of stories with the same functions, their sequence is always identical. The structure of a given fairytale type is described as a series of Roman-numbered clauses, each encapsulated in a noun such as "interdiction," "flight" or "departure." Annotations following each clause provide descriptive detail and examples.

Using Propp's method to describe the plot types exemplified above, we might arrive at something like this:

Encounter with Linguistic Difference: Type 1

- I. THE TELLER/PROTAGONIST IS A PITTSBURGHER (*initial situation*)
- II. THE TELLER/PROTAGONIST LEAVES HOME (*move*)
 1. The move may be that of a student going to college, someone moving for work, someone going on vacation.
- III. THE TELLER/PROTAGONIST ENCOUNTERS AN OUTSIDER (*encounter*)
- IV. THE TELLER/PROTAGONIST SAYS SOMETHING (*utterance*)
 1. Typically, the teller/protagonist says very little, a word or a phrase.
- V. THE OUTSIDER REACTS (*reaction*)
 1. The reaction orients to or comments on some aspect of the form of the teller/protagonist's speech.
 2. The reaction can take the form of a correction, indication of failure to understand, or recognition of the Pittsburgher's provenance.
- VI. THE REACTION CAUSES THE TELLER/PROTAGONIST TO MAKE A GENERALIZATION ABOUT PITTSBURGH SPEECH (*generalization*)
 1. Usually, this generalization is explicit and functions as the point of the narrative.

Encounter with Linguistic Difference: Type 2

- I. THE TELLER/PROTAGONIST IS NOT A PITTSBURGHER (*initial situation*)
- II. THE TELLER/PROTAGONIST COMES TO PITTSBURGH (*move*)
 1. The move may be that of a student coming to college, someone moving for work, someone on vacation.
- III. THE TELLER/PROTAGONIST ENCOUNTERS A PITTSBURGHER (*encounter*)
- IV. THE PITTSBURGHER SAYS SOMETHING (*utterance*)
 1. The Pittsburgher may say very little, a word or a phrase.
- V. THE TELLER/PROTAGONIST MISUNDERSTANDS OR FAILS TO UNDERSTAND (*reaction*)
 1. The misunderstanding has to do with some aspect of the form of the Pittsburgher's speech.
- VI. THE REACTION CAUSES THE TELLER/PROTAGONIST TO MAKE A GENERALIZATION ABOUT PITTSBURGH SPEECH (*generalization*)
 1. Usually, this generalization is explicit and functions as the point of the narrative.

Thinking about linguistic encounter narratives in this abstract way highlights similarities and differences among them and points to how they work ideologically to circulate claims about what counts as "Pittsburghese" and who speaks it, to link this "dialect" with place, and to differentiate it sharply from other dialects. For one thing, both plot types require geographic mobility (Function II) and an encounter between a Pittsburgher and a non-Pittsburgher that is usually face-to face. Encounters by Pittsburghers

with outsiders happen outside of Pittsburgh, and encounters by outsiders with Pittsburghers happen in Pittsburgh. Thus dialect is ideologically linked with place not just in the details in the stories, but on the more abstract level of their plots.

The two story types are different with regard to the social identity of the encounter (Function III). Pittsburghers' stories (Type 1) tend to name and describe the non-Pittsburgher they encounter in ways that link dialect with place, while non-Pittsburghers' stories (Type 2) tend to name and describe the Pittsburghers they encounter in ways that link dialect with class and ethnicity. In the stories in which the teller/protagonists are Pittsburghers narrating encounters elsewhere, the encounter is often with someone identified as a social peer: students' encounters are with fellow students, for example. Social identities are suggested only indirectly if at all ("my roommate" (1), "she" (3)), with the exception of identities connected with place: "this kid from Ohio" (2). In these stories, then, linguistic difference is correlated with place, and not with such social identities as class or ethnicity. In the Type 2 stories, by contrast, dialect speakers are linked with class identities. Cullen's encounter in (4) is with a gas station owner whose identity is further linked with class via his name, "Peewee." In my encounter in (2), I identify my interlocutor as "gentleman" and as "a real estate agent," and further by naming his middle-class neighborhood, "from Squirrel Hill." Although the class differential between outsider and Pittsburgher is maximized in Cullen's story and minimized in mine, both stories link local speech with social class.

Both plot types include a "reaction" function (Function V). In both sub-types, communicative difficulty is sometimes represented as a complete failure to communicate: In (4), Cullen's character "did not really understand a word [Peewee] said," despite the fact that she is able to paraphrase him at length, and she wonders whether he is actually "talking English." In (2), it took the kid from Ohio "five minutes" to figure out what the narrator was asking for. In (5), I represent my character as having failed to understand what my neighbor was talking about, wondering aloud why he would need a workman to replace his towels, rather than, as actually happened, figuring out immediately and silently that he must be talking about tiles. In stories like this, the non-Pittsburgher is represented as failing to do the kind of interpretive work that would be expected of people communicating across difference. Rather than drawing on contextual factors to figure out what could be going on, the outsider runs into an interpretive wall. In (1), for example the roommate reacts to the narrator's saying her shirt needs ironed not with the sort of second-assessment move (something like "Yes, it sure does" or "Oh, no, it doesn't.") that would be expected as the second part of this adjacency pair but by pointing out that the phrase "isn't proper English." These narrative representations of communicative difficulty as communicative failure work ideologically to differentiate Pittsburgh speech far more sharply from other ways of speaking than is justified by the empirical facts.

When the reaction function involves recognition of fellow Pittsburghers, as in example (3), the recognition is immediate and unambiguous "they'll *immediately* say 'You're from Pennsylvania'" (lines 81, 83); "You're *definitely* [from Pennsylvania]" (line 84). Even the wording of Donna R.'s representation of the South Carolina woman's question gets edited in production from a hedged yes/no question to a confirmation-

seeking tag question that projects a much more certain stance: “You guys wouldn’t happen to be from Pittsburgh, *right?*” (line 90). Representing the recognition, and what is recognized, in this way also works to link speech with place and differentiate Pittsburgh speech from other varieties.

The generalization (Function VI) that follows the reaction continues this ideological work. Before a difference between a Pittsburgher’s speech and someone else’s is noticed, it’s completely unnoticeable: “It *never occurred to me*,” says Molly G., that *needs ironed* wasn’t “proper English” (line 62). When the difference is noticed, it is linked with place as “a Pittsburgh thing.”

Discussion

Personal experience narrative is not the only discursive practice in which dialect enregisterment takes place. But narrative is perhaps a uniquely effective genre for purposes of dialect enregisterment, because there are interactional reasons for dialect boundaries to be drawn more sharply in this genre than in others, more so than the facts on the ground would justify. The plot types I have described are realized as conversational narratives, told in real time in face-to-face interaction. Thus, as Labov showed (1972, pp. 354–396), they need to be highly evaluated. Evaluative material states or highlights the point of the story, why the audience should keep listening and allow the teller to keep talking. Evaluation may occur in clauses that comment on the story from outside: “I did not really understand a word the man said” (4); “This is so embarrassing” (1, line 60), or in clauses that attribute evaluative commentary to characters in the story: “I remember sitting there and thinking, ‘Is he talking English?’” (4). Alternatively or in addition, evaluation can be embedded in the narrative, in the form of such things as extra detail about characters (“some kid from Ohio” [2]), suspension of the action via paraphrase or repetition (“They’ll say, ‘You’re from Pittsburgh.’ / Yeah, they’ll immediately say, ‘You’re from Pennsylvania, are you from the Pittsburgh area?’” [3, lines 80–85]), and intensifiers (“’bout *five minutes* later” [2]; it *never occurred to me*” [1, line 62]).

“I did not really understand a word the man said” makes a stronger bid for interlocutors’ continued attention than would “He was a little hard to understand,” or “He sounded a little different,” even though the latter formulations might be truer. In these stories, in other words, the interactional demand for evaluation pushes narrators to exaggerate the differences between their speech and that of the others they encounter and the scale of the interactional difficulty to which these differences give rise. By the same token, Pittsburghers narrating encounters with fellow Pittsburghers elsewhere are interactionally constrained to exaggerate the recognizability of their accent by fellow Pittsburghers. This means that narratives like these are particularly well suited for producing and circulating ideological differentiation among (imagined) vernacular dialects.

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