

Enregistering Style

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Paper presented at Rhetoric Society of America conference, Minneapolis, May 2010

I hardly need to note that “style” has meant many things in the rhetorical tradition. Some see style as a matter of clarity. In this view, good style is easy for readers to process. Others see style as a matter of appropriateness. In this view, good style is what readers expect. Style is sometimes described as expressive of self, sometimes as responsive to audience; sometimes as constitutive of truth and sometimes as simply ornamental. And so on. Pedagogies of style sometimes borrow from multiple models. In his book *Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, for example, Joseph Williams (2007) teeters between a mechanistic, non-rhetorical view of style as clarity and a deeply rhetorical view of style as epistemic.

As a teacher of style, I find this frustrating. Why can't rhetoricians settle on what they mean by style, so I can teach my course without feeling as if I am juggling multiple epistemologies, telling students one day that it's always important to be clear and direct, another day that it's imperative to think about what their audiences expect? As a sociolinguist, however, I find the confusion about style interesting. Style is a key concept in contemporary sociolinguistics, even if, in rhetoric, style seems to be somewhat out of style.¹ Sociolinguists' term “style-shifting” labels what people are doing when they vary their speech and writing from situation to situation. Like rhetoricians, sociolinguists argue over multiple accounts of how style-shifting happens and what it accomplishes. And, as I suspect is also true in rhetoricians' discussions of style, all of these accounts are accurate in some ways, even if they are often represented as competing.

In this paper, I attempt to offer some insight into why there are so many ways to think about style, in rhetoric and sociolinguistics alike. To do this, I take a step back from the debates about what style *is* to sketch the semiotic practices that give rise to *ideas* about style, styles, and stylishness in language. I draw on Asif Agha's (2003; 2006) description of “enregisterment”, or the process in which particular linguistic forms and sets of forms come to index particular meanings and social identities. I suggest that Agha's semiotic theory can help integrate views of style that have sometimes been seen as conflicting. I want to stress that this is very

¹ But see Butler (2008) and Johnson and Pace (2005) for attempts to “reanimate” style in composition studies.

preliminary, exploratory work. I don't know yet whether it will be useful or whether it is even accurate. So I hope you will tell me.

In his 2003 article "The social life of a cultural value" and his 2006 book *Language and Social Relations*, anthropologist Asif Agha builds a model of how meaning gets attached to linguistic forms and how these form-meaning links are circulated and reproduced in social interaction. Agha is particularly interested in what, following Charles Peirce and Michael Silverstein, he calls "indexical" meaning. Indexical meaning is meaning that arises through juxtaposition, such that a linguistic choice brings part of its context with it. Classic examples are personal pronouns. In order to know what *I* or *you* refers to in a particular situation, you need to know more than just what the words *I* and *you* mean. You have to draw on the context: *I* is whoever is speaking, *you* is the audience. This sort of link between meaning and context comes into play in cases where the "literal" meaning of a form is not involved, too. If, for example, a particular word or structural choice recurs in the writing of a particular group of people, that choice can come to be associated with that group. (Scientists use the passive voice; lawyers use pleonasms, kids say *like* all the time.)

However, not all co-occurrences of a particular linguistic form and a particular social identity result in indexical meanings. In order to seem meaningful, co-occurrences have to be noticed and ideas about their meaning have to be circulated. This will work only if there is some set of ideas – some ideological schema – according to which it makes sense to link particular forms with particular meanings. For example, Americans have noticed that kids say *like*; it is called to attention again and again in all sorts of ways. One thing that calls the indexical link between *like* and youthfulness to attention is the fact that kids try not to use *like* as much when they are trying to sound more professional. Another is the fact that kids' use of *like* is bemoaned, parodied, and played with, as on the poster in Figure 1, for example.

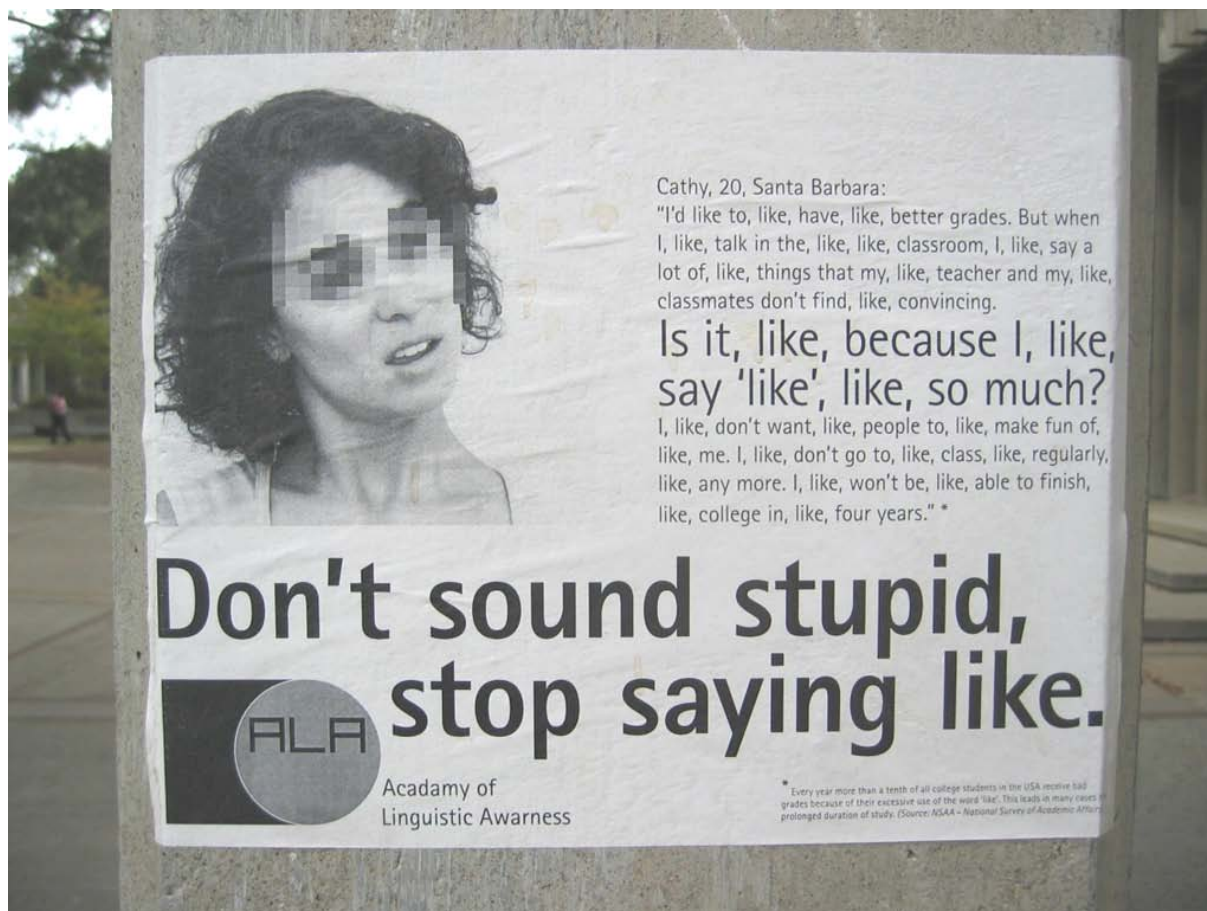


Figure 1: Poster that enregisters *like* as an index of youthfulness and inarticulateness

It is not just the fact that *like*-use and youthfulness are statistically correlated that creates the indexical link between them. Statistically, it is perfectly possible—perhaps even likely—that that kids also use *bike* or *mike* or *psych* more than older people do, but these forms have not become indexically linked with youthfulness in the way *like* has. The link between *like* and youthfulness makes sense according to an ideology of style according to which we expect people of different ages to use different bits of language, and we expect young people to sound inarticulate—a self-fulfilling prophecy that has been made generation after generation.

When a linguistic form, be it a word, an element of structure, an organizational strategy, whatever, gets indexically linked with a social identity, that form has been **enregistered**. A single form can be enregistered. For example, those of us who know Chris Neuwirth may have noticed that she often uses the phrase “the notion of” as a way of buying time to process as she speaks. If you haven’t noticed this, I am hereby telling you to notice it: I am enregistering the “the notion of” as an element of Chris’s style, giving “the notion of” a social meaning by linking it to a personal identity. I can do this because we share an ideological scheme according to which an individual human can (is even expected to) have an individual linguistic style, so that it

makes cultural sense to us to associate a particular phrase with a particular speaker. This idea is not universally shared, let me note.

Alternatively, a set of forms can be enregistered, such that the whole set together indexes the identity. For example, “lawyerese” is a set of forms that have been enregistered according to the ideological scheme that makes us expect a profession to have a professional argot. A set of enregistered forms such as this could be called a register, although when used in this sense the term *register* has a much wider scope than it does in its more traditional use in discourse studies, where a register is seen as a set of forms linked with a particular communicative situation.

Now, what does all this have to do with style? According to the model I’ve been sketching here, rhetoricians have used the word *style* to refer to sets of form/social meaning links that are enregistered in different ways. **First, “style” can label a set of patterns of co-occurrence that an outsider such as a researcher notices, but which an insider (the rhetor under study) may not notice and probably does not label.** For example, as sociolinguist might notice that people with a particular social identity use some forms and not others or have some forms and not others used to them. To adduce a well-known example, linguist Robin Lakoff (2004) noticed, in her own speech and that of her social circle, that women used more tag questions than men and were addressed with terms like “sweetie” more often than men were. The men and women she was observing did not notice this about their own speech and were not trying to do it. (In some cases, they were no doubt horrified.) It was Lakoff’s work that enregistered the forms she described as features of “women’s language.” They were not enregistered this way before – which is another way of saying that insiders didn’t notice them or associate them with a social meaning, although an outsider did.

Rhetorical accounts of style as “clarity” in Joseph William’s sense are often based on research about co-occurrence. To establish what contributes to clarity, researchers do experiments (like those of Hake and Williams (1981)) whose results establish correlations between linguistic and semantic features of texts and the speed and accuracy with which the texts are understood. Explanations of these findings rest on claims about cognition. For example, Kaufer and Steinberg (1988) suggest that clear style is characterized by structural patterns that put familiar information before new information. (As Fahnestock (2005) points out, this mechanistic view of style as the lubricant that reduces “the frictions in the workings of the style machine” can be seen Herbert Spencer’s *The Philosophy of Style* from the mid-nineteenth century.)

When they see style as adaptation to audience, rhetorical analysts are also sometimes talking about co-occurrence styles. Genre researchers like John Swales (1990) study scientific

abstracts, for example, and describe their linguistic characteristics, characteristics that may or may not be noticeable to or noticed by the people who wrote the abstracts under study. An academic who can write an acceptable abstract may not be able to articulate how he or she does this; may never have thought about abstracts as a rhetorical task requiring a certain organizational strategy; may have no idea when scholars use the first person and when not; may never have noticed, exactly, that successful abstracts are ones in which the current project is clearly situated in an open niche in the existing literature.

But Swales' work is meant to be of use to people who need to learn to write abstracts. Graduate students who are taught to write abstracts according to the formula discovered by Swales are reflexive about the task in a way the "naïve" abstract-writers Swales studied were not. Students of abstract-writing are encouraged to talk about the features that characterize successful abstracts and to judge abstracts and abstract drafts against this list of features. When this happens, it is no longer just the researcher who associates the style with the social meaning. It is now the rhetors themselves. To put it another way, **when a co-occurrence style becomes the object of reflexive scrutiny by its users, and the set of co-occurring forms gets linked with one or more social or referential categories by the people who use them, it becomes an "enregistered style."**

When rhetors themselves associate a set of linguistic choices with a particular constellation of contextual features, they are labeling enregistered styles. For example, a rhetor whose planning involves deciding whether his or her style should be "plain" or "high" is choosing between enregistered styles. A pedagogy based on encouraging students to choose among enregistered styles would be like that of Walpole (1980), who argues that "... students ought to be encouraged to experiment with a host of styles – the high, the plain, and the middle, the purple, the pedestrian, and the polemic, the comic and the casual, the newest and the period-piece. That way, they will eventually develop a repertoire of comfortable and appropriate styles..." (p. 209). Walpole's list of styles is a bit fanciful; however, as Woodman (1981) suggests, "While the hierarchy of [typologies like grand, middle, and plain style] has largely disappeared, the tradition survives in current genre taxonomies which ascribe to each category of discourse an appropriate style..." (71).

Enregistered styles are inevitably prescriptive. Success in writing in a particular style can be judged according to how well the normative features of the style are adapted. Textbooks and professional writing classes help enregister styles, calling students' attention to sets of form-meaning links associated with rhetorical tasks, identities, or situations. In fact, textbooks about style inevitably enregister one or more styles, whether or not the books' aim is to talk about enregistered styles. Students who are taught to write "clearly" according to Joseph Williams'

criteria, and who are graded on the basis of how well they can do so, will inevitably suspect that it's not actually Williams' principles of clarity that matter, despite what he says, but a resulting set of forms, forms that are ideologically associated with a style called "clear style." If they are smart, they may rediscover Lanham's (1974) argument that what counts as clarity depends on the situation, because what strikes people as "clear" is what strikes them as transparent. As Gage (1982) puts it, "Meaning results from conventional agreement within a rhetorical community, no less so when we choose the 'plain' word as when the technicians communicate with each other perfectly in their pernicious jargons" (p. 620). Students who wonder about the ideological schema that makes the idea of "clear" or "plain" style possible, they may rediscover the Enlightenment idea that language can be—perhaps ideally is—a transparent window on reality.²

Styles are enregistered in other discursive practices, too, besides those associated with teaching. Parody can help enregister style, for example. The parody excerpted below was circulated by email in the early days of email, when instructions for computers were still written this way. The juxtaposition of computer-documentation style with pet-care advice calls the style of computer documentation to attention, thereby helping to enregister the style.

CAT v.6.1b: Completely Autonomous Tester, Manufactured by MOMCAT. User Installation and Maintenance Documentation:

Installation Procedures:

Upon receiving the CAT unit, the user should examine the unit to verify that all I/O channels are free of debris and operational. The user should look for minor bugs in or on the system. Bugs are indicative of the MOMCAT production environment. The user may manually remove any bugs. Bring the CAT to operation in an environment temperature of 20degC (+/- 3deg tolerance). Use a quiet room with the primary user(s) present. Open the transportation case and let the CAT unit autoexit. Initialize the self learning program by displaying the output bin. The next step consists in displaying the input bins. These should contain H₂O (liquid state, room temperature, 99% purity) and dry energy pellets. Immediately afterwards, you must display the output bin.

The fact that a style has been enregistered in a particular way can itself be noticed, however, and people can then use bits of it to point to the category it indexes. To adopt Halloran's (1978) analogy of stylistic choices to sartorial ones, if I were to wear casual slacks (not jeans), a blouse, and a jacket to class, I would be making use of a somewhat enregistered style associated with academic women. My clothing style would index an identity category to which

² See Milic (1969), Gage (1982), Eisenhart and Johnstone (2008) on competing ideologies of style in the rhetorical tradition.

people would assign me routinely. But if I were to add a cowboy hat or a necktie, I would be doing something a little different. I would be appropriating a feature of dress that “belongs” to another style, be it that of western men or men in general, using that feature of an “other”’s style to index something about myself, about the situation, about my relationship with my interlocutors. Sociolinguists use the terms “styling” or “stylization” for this practice.³

Christopher Holcomb (2007) has talked about what I would call styling in the context of his discussion of figures of speech. Holcomb suggests that rhetorical figures are “rituals of language that structure and organize social experience” (p. 76). When a rhetor appropriates a figure of thought or speech associated with a realm of experience he or she does not inhabit, the figure brings that realm of experience with it. When Steven Colbert, on “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,” adopts the combination of tricolon and anaphora in “not as Democrats, not as Republicans, but as Americans” in a parody of a Washington news reporter, he appropriates not just the figures but the “social experience” they evoke, in this case that of a certain kind of political epideictic. To put Holcomb’s observation in the terms I have been using in this paper, once particular figures and tropes, or combinations of them, are enregistered as indexes of particular identities or situations, they can be used to evoke those identities or situations. Styling is associated with performance, particularly the sorts of knowing, self-conscious performances that call attention to themselves. Pedagogies of style based on imitation of models use styling as a step on the way to style. The meaning of styling is made possible by an ideology of style that links language choices not to authenticity or correctness but to a post-modern conception of creativity as playful sampling, mashing up things that are traditionally distinct. Returning to the example of *like*, note that the poster in Figure 1 is funny because it not only recycles the familiar process in which people in the know link young people’s speech with incorrectness, but it also stylizes this process. It does this by exaggerating the degree to which *like* is actually used in the speech of people like Cathy and by means of the creatively misspelled name of the organization responsible, the “Acadamy of Linguistic Awarness”. The whole thing is a post-modern performance of the enregistration process.

My modest goal in this paper has been to open up a way of thinking about the meanings of style in terms of how style can work semiotically – how style means, and to whom. In particular, I suggest that the concept of enregisterment may be a useful way to think our way through some of the ways style has been imagined and used in the rhetorical tradition. I will be eager to see if you agree.

³ See Coupland (2007).

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