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# Review of Eckert and Rickford, Style and sociolinguistic variation

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## BOOK REVIEWS

PENELOPE ECKERT AND JOHN R. RICKFORD (eds.). *Style and Sociolinguistic Variation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2001. xvi + 341 pp. Cloth (0–521–59191–0) £45.00/\$65.00 / Paper (0–521–59789–7) £15.99/\$23.00.

Reviewed by BARBARA JOHNSTONE

This book is the result of a workshop held at Stanford University in 1996, where scholars from linguistic anthropology, psychology, and (mostly) linguistics exchanged ideas about style and its role in accounting for linguistic variation. The workshop did not result in consensus – quite the contrary. In forcing people to confront and articulate the fact that they were defining style in different ways in order to answer different questions about language, discourse, and society, predicated in some cases on different understandings of the purpose of sociolinguistics, the workshop did something much more valuable. The result is both thought-provoking and frustrating in the way a book should be if it is to push the field forward. The editors deserve our gratitude for organizing it and seeing it through.

In the most general terms, stylistic variation as it is understood here is variation within an individual's speech. (As is conventional, 'speech', 'speaking' or 'language' are typically used to refer to utterances, although each of these terms carries potentially misleading implications.) The questions sociolinguists have asked about style have to do with how and why an individual's pronunciation, lexical choices, or morphosyntax may vary from one instance to another, and what the significance of this variation is for how we understand language. In their introductory chapter, Rickford and Eckert identify three trends in the treatment of style in variationist sociolinguistics.

In the Labovian approach, style is operationalized as the degree of attention speakers are paying to their speech as they speak. As variationists in this tradition collect data, different levels of attention are elicited in different interview topics and tasks, ranging from the most casual conversation an interview can contain, when speakers are presumably focused mainly on the referential and interactional goals at hand, to the reading aloud of minimal pairs, which presumably focuses speakers' attention mainly on their pronunciation. Style thus defined has been a key explanatory variable, repeatedly found to be correlated with class, sex/gender, age, and other demographic attributes in predictable ways. Style is crucial for answering the questions about language change that centrally concern Labovian variationists, since new variants spread through the speech community differently depending on how they pattern stylistically.

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The second approach, originating in speech accommodation theory and associated with Allan Bell and others, sees style as audience design. The fact that individuals do not always speak the same way is attributed to the fact that they alter their speech depending on who their audience or reference group is at the moment. To do this, people use the variables that are (already) associated with social class differences; this is why the same differences have been repeatedly found to distinguish lower-class from upper class speech and more informal from more formal speech.

A third approach, associated with Douglas Biber and Edward Finegan, originates in Hallidayan functional linguistics. In Biber and Finegan's analyses of the patterning of large numbers of grammatical features in large numbers of (mostly written) texts, they explore how texts sort out into stylistic groups that can be associated with functional characteristics. In this approach, the fact that an individual's speech varies is explained as resulting from the fact that people are carrying out different linguistic tasks at different times, requiring different linguistic resources. In the most general terms, sometimes people need to use more elaborated forms of language and sometimes they need more economical forms. Patterns of differences among social classes are attributed to the fact that people in different social classes typically need language for different purposes.

Ethnographers of communication have explored how linguistic styles are defined and deployed in many linguistic and cultural contexts. (The socio-linguists represented in the book all work primarily or exclusively with varieties of English.) Contributions by two key figures from this field anchor Part 1, 'Anthropological approaches', meant to situate variationist approaches in a wider context. It consists, like the rest of the book, of position papers interspersed with commentaries on them. (Some of the commentaries are more like position papers themselves, and most include summaries of the authors' own research in addition to critical analysis of the papers they comment on.) Judith T. Irvine characterizes style as distinctiveness, styles as mutually constitutive parts of a system in which sets of linguistic differences are ideologically evaluated as signs of social differences. Such an understanding of style problematizes the distinction between 'registers' and 'dialects' and focuses attention on the discursive processes by which linguistic difference and social difference come to be linked. In her commentary, Susan Ervin-Tripp explores the workings of one such process, 'iconization', in an analysis of the rhetorical functions of switches to and from AAVE in the speech of two 1960s U.S. civil rights leaders. Richard Bauman analyzes excerpts from vendors' calls and spiels in a Mexican market to show how genre, register, and style function as emergent resources for linguistic practices associated with particular text types, situations, and speakers. Performances of sales talk may be relatively routinized, or they may be relatively creative, poetically juxtaposing multiple registers, genres, or styles. Ronald Macaulay further explores the various uses of the idea of genre.

Part 2, 'Attention paid to speech', begins with a chapter by William Labov

explaining and testing the method by which 'Careful' and 'Casual' styles are operationalized in his *Language Variation and Change* project. Labov stresses that he is not arguing against more 'naturalistic' approaches that define styles from the perspective of speakers rather than that of analysts and explore the particular functions of style-shifting in the speech of particular individuals. Rather, he is concerned, for the purposes of tracing how changes emerge and spread through populations, with identifying linguistic tasks that minimize the effects of auto-monitoring and emotional detachment, because he defines 'vernacular' speech as speech in such contexts.

In commentaries on this paper, John Baugh makes the point that methods for isolating styles need to be adapted for different speech communities: tasks requiring reading will not work everywhere, and the same topic, rhetorical purpose, or participant structure may not elicit the same level of formality or casualness everywhere. Penelope Eckert points out that the usefulness of Labov's system depends on how predictable it is that certain social meanings will be called up and re-inscribed in the defined tasks. Why is it, for example, that when people speak about childhood experiences from the perspective of their childhood selves they can be expected to use more vernacular forms (Labov's 'Kids' style)? How do particular genres and personas come to serve as 'stages' on which ways of speaking are formed, shared, and conventionalized? Elizabeth Traugott explores how grammaticalization theory might help answer sociolinguistics' questions about the spread of change, pointing out that sociolinguists may sometimes be too quick to assume that variants are functionally equivalent, and that the same lexical item may in fact pattern differently in the community in its different functions.

In Part 3, 'Audience design and self-identification', Allan Bell's chapter updates his 1984 model, attributing more significance than before to referee design and refocusing the idea in such a way that shifts in style seem much more like 'acts of identity' (LePage and Tabouret-Keller 1985) than in the earlier formulation. This brings his understanding of style closer to that of Nikolas Coupland, who more explicitly describes style from the perspective of individuals making on-the-spot, dynamic choices about what sorts of 'relational selves' to project at particular moments in interactions, making use of generalizations about which linguistic choices can conventionally signal which social identities. Drawing on work by Rampton and others (Rampton 1995, 1999) on 'stylization', Coupland's carefully argued contribution highlights how stylistic variation can be self-expressive and strategic and the fact that styles may be associated with and socially evaluated in individuals rather than groups.

Malcah Yaeger-Dror compares Bell's and Coupland's approaches, and others, in terms of the analytical 'primitives' suggested by each, arguing that variables having to do with purpose (how informational or interactional a text is) and with participation structure (framing and footing) in addition to audience and identity are needed for predicting how negation will be expressed in American

English. Howard Giles raises a key issue, citing social psychological studies demonstrating that what an analyst perceives as a style shift may not be so perceived by participants, and vice versa. This points up the need to incorporate ethnographic work and feedback techniques in research about what variation means, so as to avoid the mistake of assuming that linguistic differences that covary with social or functional ones (a statistical claim that an outsider is competent to make) automatically index them (an insider claim about meaning, ideology, speakers' beliefs). While praising the turn towards seeing style as an 'active motivated process' involving agency and purpose, John Rickford cautions against replacing one unidimensional model with another in the rush to acknowledge the role of identity, and he stresses that there are limits to what persons an individual can opt to project and how.

Part 4, 'Functionally motivated situational variation', begins with a chapter by Finegan and Biber in which they recapitulate their argument (Biber and Finegan 1994) that most differences among stylistic registers are functional, and social-class dialect differences derive from differential access to and need for relatively elaborated and relatively economical registers. They contrast their model with Bell's, in which register differences are seen as deriving from social-class-marking differences, and Dennis Preston's, in which linguistic differences such as differences in underlying grammatical simplicity and phonetic naturalness make particular variables available and predispose certain variants of them to serve certain functions and have certain social meanings. (For example, Kroch (1978) claims that patterns of social variation arise because higher-status groups resist process of phonetic conditioning – like assimilation – that produce simplified variants in lower-status speakers' speech.)

In a particularly clear and thoughtful commentary on Finegan and Biber's contribution, Lesley Milroy points to a number of concepts she says are poorly defined in their model. Two such concepts are 'economy' and 'elaboration'. For example, in what sense is it more elaborated to merge two phonemes, as tends to happen in more leveled contact varieties that are often more prestigious than local varieties, and where Biber and Finegan's model would thus lead us to expect elaboration? Finally, Dennis Preston lays out his view, summarized above, about where stylistic variants come from, contrasting it with Bell's and Finegan and Biber's and suggesting that each helps us feel our way along part of the elephant that is style.

But not all the contributors to this volume are exploring exactly the same elephant. Some ask more sociological questions about processes (How do social meanings get associated with linguistic forms?), some ask more descriptive questions about the results of such processes (Which kinds of features index which social meanings? How does differential social evaluation affect the historical trajectory of variant forms?) They have different views about the proper object of study for sociolinguistics, some more interested in the relatively sedimented, fixed, shared, sets of resources that can be usefully described as 'dialects' or 'varieties', while others come closer to taking the perspective of the

individual in the course of a particular interaction, asking about the creative, self-expressive processes by which people select and combine resources from the repertoires they may (or may not) associate with dialects or varieties. They have different ways of arriving at explanation, some positivistic and quantitative, some relativistic and interpretive. (Critical approaches are not represented; it is interesting to speculate about what a critical discourse analyst or sociolinguist would have contributed.) As stimulating as the mix turns out to be, there are of course ways in which the discussion could be pushed further along.

For one thing, although many of these treatments make fruitful interdisciplinary connections, these efforts are still somewhat arbitrarily selective. Many draw productively on theory from anthropology and certain strands of sociology, but fewer on social psychology or theories of communication from other sources. Autopoietic theory (Maturana and Varela 1972), for example, would almost certainly suggest useful ways of understanding what gives rise to regular patterns of stylistic variation. It is odd not to see a single reference to the analytical tradition of rhetoric, where style, audience, and purpose have been the focus of inquiry for centuries. It is also surprising not to see more connections made with the study of literary style, where the tradition of exploring authorial style in addition to authors' techniques for creating voices and minds in fiction suggests questions about stylistic consistency in an individual's speech that could supplement the book's focus on variation. The five-year lag between the workshop and the volume's publication means that some relevant work by linguists on identity and self-expression (e.g. Schiffrin 1996; Johnstone 1996) is also silent.

For another thing, 'style' is sometimes distinguished from 'content' in a way that closes off some promising paths. For Bell, for example, the 'sociolinguist's core question about language style' is 'Why did this speaker say it this way on this occasion?' (p. 139), where the italicized parts of the question are to be taken to suggest the relevant variables. The assumption seems to be that there is an (italicized) it which remains constant from reason to reason, speaker to speaker, encoding choice to encoding choice, occasion to occasion. (Italicizing 'say' as well would raise useful questions about the relationship between style and medium.) But no two combinations of purposes, participants, media, linguistic resources, and genres set the same stage for reference; language is not a tool for encoding pre-existing propositions.

However, Bell's question rightly encourages variationists to start (in the development of interview tasks or coding schemes) and end (in the interpretation of results) with close, ethnographically informed readings of particular instances of discourse. As variationists continue to move towards richer, more relativistic accounts of how explanatory variables are embedded in local systems of meaning and a clearer understanding of how languages and varieties emerge in discourse and metadiscourse, we need, as Coupland puts it, 'a far broader, more flexible, interpretive, and ethnographic apparatus to capture the stylistic processes at work' (p. 209). Such an apparatus will have

to include a kind of discourse analysis that systematically attends to all the reasons particular utterances and texts take the shapes they do (Becker 1995; Johnstone 2002).

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RICHARD WATTS AND PETER TRUDGILL (eds.), *Alternative Histories of English*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. xiv + 280 pp. Cloth (0-415-23356-9) £50.00 / Paper (0-415-23357-7) £15.99.

Reviewed by ROBERT TRAIN

In recent years, much attention has focused on issues of linguistic pluralism and diversity, where local languages and identities confront the standardizing and homogenizing pressures of world standard languages, the Goliath of which is English. Sociocultural and sociolinguistic perspectives have converged in the metaphor of 'voice' such that cultural and linguistic diversity can be seen in

terms of empowering the multiplicity of individual and collective voices by silencing them in favor of a single dominant language, whether on a regional or international level. Awareness of nonstandard varieties 'minority' languages has been seen as a line of defense against the spectre 'vanishing voices', to use Nettle and Romaine's (2000) apt phrase, and 'linguistic genocide' (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000) perpetrated through standard language education. It is in this context of increasing awareness and knowledge of (socio)linguistic variety that one must approach the excellent volume edited by Richard Watts and Peter Trudgill, which endeavors to present a more socially inclusive and sociolinguistically realistic view of the complexity and diversity of the history of English from 1600 to the present. The position taken openly a corrective to traditional histories of the language that have been for most part, in the editors' words, 'sociolinguistically inadequate, anglocentric and based on Standard English' (p. 2). This volume is an attempt to renegotiate the narrative of the history of English to include nonstandard and non-British/American varieties. Awareness of the legitimating power of historical narrative in the defense of sociolinguistic variety adds a note of urgency to the editors' call to 'begin to put the balance right' so that readers centuries hence the year 2525' (an allusion to a 1960's pop tune that will undoubtedly be 100 years on American and/or younger readers) will have 'a fuller and richer picture of the fascinating complexity of the history of English' (p. 3).

The volume is a collection of 12 papers by an international group of scholars (from Britain, New Zealand, Canada, U.S.A., South Africa, Denmark, Finland, Switzerland, and Germany) ranging from established voices in the field of doctoral students and recent graduates. As a genre, histories of the language (e.g. Leith 1983; Lodge 1993) tend to appeal to a broad audience, frequently interested laypersons to professional specialists. And so it is with the volume under review. For non-specialist readers, the contributions by J. Milroy and Crystal follow a reader-friendly approach that has already given these two linguists a relatively large non-linguist audience. The publisher's introductory description obliquely promotes this volume as an alternative to most other histories of English in use at undergraduate and graduate levels in universities. The high-interest, low-jargon character of many of the chapters merits inclusion in undergraduate courses, while graduate students can profit from the variety of writing styles and research methodologies used in this book. In pedagogical terms, it would be useful to pair this collection with its unstated companion volume on Standard English (Bex and Watts 1999, to which Watts, Trudgill, J. Milroy, and Preston contributed papers, with jacket notes by Crystal), in order to give students a fuller perspective on the standard language and its hegemonic influence on representations of language. For professional researchers, the articles provide a set of thought-provoking and evaluative perspectives on the historical dimensions of legitimation, ideology and evaluation in language, even though some of the contributions (e.g. J. Milroy, Preston, Watts) cover territory already explored by those authors elsewhere.