

NIKOLAS COUPLAND. *Style: Language variation and identity*. (Key Topics in Linguistics). Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press. 2007, xiv, 209.

Sociolinguistic inquiry has extended far beyond the variationist paradigm delineated in the 1960s and 1970s, which isolated a single feature and quantified observed variation in its use to establish an index of social distinction. This volume, moderate in size but by no means modest in scope, reviews important streams of recent research and against that background sets forth a theory of *style*, or *styling* as it is sometimes put, as a means of constructing social meanings, social categories, and identity discursively. This review will focus on elements of that theory and how they contrast with some traditional approaches.

The reliance on frequency of occurrence of features in a given social group that is a prominent element of variation studies to characterize a group's speech on a linear scale of socio-economic status, and therefore prestige, according to the percentage of occurrence of this or that feature among its members introduces, it is pointed out, results in a "considerable level of abstraction" (41); furthermore the scale of prestige is construed without reference to context or situation. It has long been recognized that networks of speakers share socially structured meanings and stereotypes that figure into their structured system of meaning attribution. Social varieties, seen as the sum of these variables, figure into a relatively static model of social identity. The aim of the present work is to elaborate an account of individual *style* which focuses on speaking in specific contexts, examining the "social nexus between happenings in talk and socially structured beliefs and expectations" (17 – 18) in a dynamic model of how social meaning and identity are negotiated in various social contexts (24, f). Features of speech as indicators of class, i.e., socially structured meaning, give way, in the theory of *style* expounded here, to a reworking of "historical meanings," as social styles are "creatively transformed" (53).

Previous generations in sociolinguistics made much of the phenomenon of *attention to speech* as an influence on formality, in traditional stylistics taken as a primary determinant of style, linearly indexed by degree. In the approach taken in this text, much competition to attention to speech is felt from theories of audience, social relations, and speech context in accounting for shifts in style (54 -56). The point is well made here that arbitrary symbolic signs — certain features in human language, whether grammatical features, words or smaller morphs, or phonetic realizations — come to participate in a broader semiotics of language as they gain indexical associations in various relationships (22); these can thus be manipulated in talk to create social meanings. *Style* as discussed here appears to involve everything we can learn about language that is attributable to the social context in which it is used.

In contrast to a traditional approach to the question of “standard” and “vernacular” varieties with the usual assumptions of “establishment-endorsed value,” i.e., prestigious, vis-à-vis a “stigmatized,” and “low prestige” set of features, it is asserted here that components of the complex patterns of features that make up regional or social varieties do not carry the same values across social contexts (43). We can consider, for example, the well reported social indices of features of Jamaican Creole in the following contexts:

- (a) in Jamaica, under the shadow of official English
- (b) among urban British youth whose families have immigrated from the island
- (c) among North American fans of *reggae*, who have no other connection to the variety or its users.

In each of these situations, a young adult at a party of their peers “speaking Jamaican” creates very different social meanings.

Social meanings are here held to be “*multi-dimensional*,” involving regional and social variables and group stereotypes in a mix of “simultaneous traits and attributions” (94 – 95). All speakers, it is recognized, possess *linguistic competence* and *communicative competence*, but beyond these are found individual degrees of control over features and variables in constructing meaning through discourse (103). Thus, this theory of style takes issue with traditional notions that existing “speech repertoires” are employed to negotiate social meaning and identity, as they do not engage political and ideological implications, nor do they pay adequate attention to the “*contextualization* of speaking” (83), where, for example, in an interview for an office job in a British (or North American) city, employing features of the RP helps create the desired identity, but among relatives on the farm in the Northwest, talking “posh” (i.e., RP) is seen as creating social distance. The theory thus here moves away from static models of identity (105).

This theory recognizes that speakers draw on historical and linguistic relationships as resources in designing their personal identity and relationships with peers during talk (128). This approach has implications for language change as well, as it can be seen that changes in social meaning, e.g., the changing perception of speaking “posh” in Great Britain, do reflect shifts in the values of language features (95, f).

The author is correct in his contention that the influence of mass media is ubiquitous but short-lived (184). Readers in North America who remember the 1980s may recall films like *Fast Times at Ridgmont High*, which popularized *Valley Speak*, the language variety of the legendary Valley Girls (high school age girls in the upscale Western San Fernando Valley suburbs of Los Angeles), which popularized such features as *totally tubular*, *gag me with a spoon*, and “up-speak” (i.e., rising intonation at end of indicative clauses); today only the up-speak intonation is occasionally heard outside “the Valley,” chiefly in the intra-group, hyper in-crowd speech of

girls of high school and early college age, who employ it not for the sake of any prestige that might have been associated with the variety but in their solidarity work.

In the theory of style exposited here, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish dialect from discourse analysis as details of local contextualization are investigated (105). It is recognized that greatly increased population movements have transformed regional features into indices of social solidarity, both locally and among resettled speakers (121). It is a keen insight that this phenomenon has forged a disconnect between *dialect* and *social register* (172). In China, students at national universities learn features of their dormitory mates' local varieties as an element of forging solidarity, but without any hint of the indexical association they hold for native users of the varieties. Likewise, at the famed India Institute of Technology, students freely code switch across languages and varieties in choosing elements of the in-group register, without reference to sociolinguistic attitudes traditionally associated with the varieties (Nair, R.B. 2008. Language and Youth Culture. In B.B. Kachru, Y Kachru, and S.N. Sridhar, Eds. *Language in South Asia*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 466 - 494).

This situation is visible in Taiwan, where, over the last fifteen years or so, Taiwanese (the native variety developed among earlier migrants from the mainland, mainly from Fujian [or Hakkian], with which variety it is associated) is employed intermittently during episodes of dramatic programs on network television, especially during scenes of domestic intimacy (ending four decades of strict enforcement of government-preferred *guoyu* 'national language' in public communications media). Meanwhile, on the mainland, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw a relaxation of the aggressive state language policies that enforced a variety of Northern (so-called Mandarin) Chinese on state television. Popular *manhua* 'cartoons' from the United States were dubbed in the Shanghai variety of the Wu branch. Regional varieties were heard in local

dramatic programming and comedy. Fast talking eastern urban dwellers were exposed to the vernaculars, with the result that the folksy locutions and rustic accents, which had indexed lower SES, were re-associated with the earthy charm and homey appeal of the characters. (During the early middle 2000s, however, language controls were reasserted.) Models of prestige or networks of features do not accommodate the complex identify and social meaning relations negotiated in these contexts.

As in all things, caution must be exercised with regard to information gleaned from media accounts and books. For example, “there is a risk that non-AAVE-using African American men,” it is asserted, “will be thought to have abandoned their African American identity” (165). Necessary to comprehend this remark is the vital qualification that such an attitude is felt as a reflex in certain highly restricted social contexts, when a *home boy* is finding success in the world outside the neighborhoods, primarily among the lower working and under class in central urban environments, a subclass that no more characterizes the totality of African Americans than Appalachian transplants in Northern city slums represent Caucasians in the United States. But it is this subclass that appears on the six o’clock news, and it is this subclass that is exclusively written about by the fashionable *intelligentsia*.

The principles explicated in this text are richly exemplified in numerous sets of data, such as the running telephonic and other conversations in the Cardiff travel office, that demonstrate multi-dimensional, ongoing projects of negotiating identity and social meaning. The volume requires familiarity with major concepts in dialect geography, sociolinguistics, and stylistics as developed over the last forty or fifty years, combined with good experience in their application, in order to keep up with the meaty exposition. The theory of style articulated here represents a conscious program to connect sociolinguistic style research with discourse analysis, language

ideology, and general social theory (103) in a theory of style that exceeds the social stratification models of variationist approaches, the static identities implicit in network models, and the preadolescent polarity of feminist- and gender-based models to account for how individual speakers manage their considerable language resources to negotiate and establish social meanings and identity. In the opinion of this reader, it succeeds admirably.

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