

Social Meaning in the Interaction of Variables

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LSA 2007

Anaheim

Introduction

- Research on the construction of social meaning has for the most part explored methods for accessing the meaning of variables one-by-one (Eckert 2000, Zhang 2001, Campbell-Kibler 2005).
- Much less attention has been devoted to understanding how meaning arises out of variable *interaction*.
- Yet it has long been recognized that styles are constituted by *bundles* of linguistic features (Ervin-Tripp 1972, Hymes 1974).

Negotiating Identity

1. Assembling linguistic variables into a stylistic package
2. Configuring variables differently across situations
3. Employing clusters of variables strategically within a situation as the discourse unfolds

Data

- Part of larger study on style shifting among gay professionals
- Focus of Talk: Heath in two situations
 - meeting with a patient
 - barbecue with friends
- Phonetic and Phonological Variation
 - segmental variation (word-final -t/ d)
 - prosodic variation (declarative intonation)
 - voice quality variation (falsetto)

Inferring Social Meaning

- Seeking commonalities in discourse contexts in which linguistic features occur
- Identifying patterns in previous scholarship on linguistic features under investigation
 - e.g., (dh) fortition in New York (Labov 1966) vs. Wisconsin (Rose 2006)

Falsetto Phonation



Yelling

Ahh! Stop it!

Expressing surprise or excitement

I'm so excited about your little vent thing!

Offering evaluative commentary

You people are just so screwed up!



Enlivening a direct quotation

Like, 'I haven't studied for an hour now.'



Engaging the audience when telling a narrative

And this other kid, like, two minutes later, has a little gun, completely separate area.

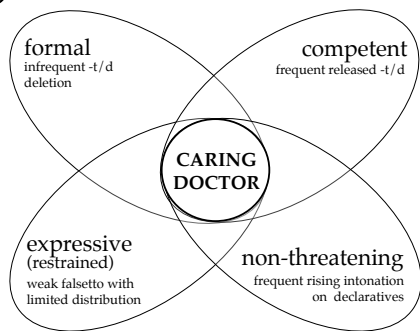
The Social Meaning of Falsetto

- The discourse contexts of these falsetto tokens suggest that falsetto has 'expressive' connotations.
- This meaning is consistent with previous studies observing the use of falsetto by mothers in child-directed speech (Blount and Padgug 1976) and Latina girls to express opposition when playing games (Goodwin et al. 2002).

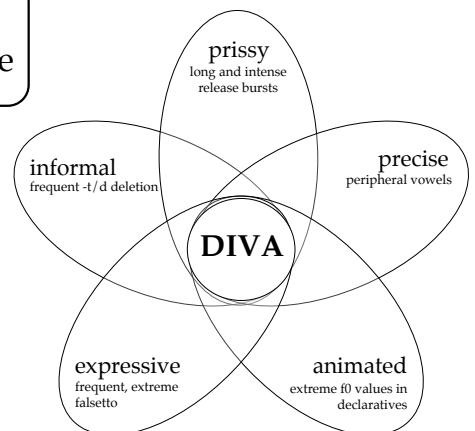
The Meaning of Variables and Styles

- Individual variables -- the components of styles -- have vague social meanings.
- The meaning of styles is more vivid, corresponding to the intersection of their component variables' meanings.

Heath in the Clinic



Heath at a Barbecue



The Distribution of Style over Time

- Constellations of features need not be static across a speaking situation (Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994, Schilling-Estes 2004).
- A method for representing how styles and their component features unfold over time is needed (see California Style Collective 1993, Schilling-Estes 2004 for other approaches).

Variation Score

