

## On Indeterminacy in the Social Meaning of Variation

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## Introduction

- Sociolinguistic variation creates and carries social meaning (e.g., Eckert 2000, Moore 2003, Zhang 2005).
- Social meaning is often indeterminate; a feature may have multiple social meanings.
- This paper addresses how analysts of the social meaning of language practices might deal with indeterminacies.

## Goals of the Paper

- Present a framework for conceptualizing how indeterminacies of meaning can be resolved, or sometimes left unresolved for social effect.
- Apply the framework to a range of our own data, demonstrating its broad applicability:
  - gay professionals across situations
  - Korean American teenagers in a Texas high school
  - Condoleezza Rice during speaking engagements
  - Margaret Cho during stand-up comedy routines

## The Indeterminacy of Social Meaning

- The link between a linguistic form and its social meaning is never wholly singular.
- Two types (Zwicky and Sadock 1975)
  - ambiguity
    - r-lessness
    - nasality
  - vagueness/underspecification
    - high pitch

## Our Proposal

1. Indeterminacies are resolved along three dimensions of context (the semiotic web in which a linguistic feature is embedded):

- Linguistic
- Situational
- Interactional

2. Speakers and listeners sometimes permit indeterminacies to go unresolved, and our framework should accommodate such a possibility.

## 1A. Linguistic Context

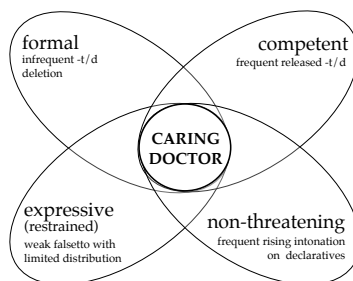
- Linguistic variants occur not in isolation, but alongside other variables. The co-presence of linguistic features vivifies social meaning.
  - Bundles of variants may conventionalize over time, yielding a style/genre/register (Ervin-Tripp 1972, Ferguson 1994).
  - For less conventionalized sets of features, each component feature may contribute its own meaning. Stylistic meaning is determined compositionally.

## Example: Heath's Variation Patterns in a Clinical Setting

Heath - 20s, MC, white, attends med school

variable	medical setting	bbq setting	significance
-t/d deletion	FW = 0.375	FW = 0.63	$p \leq 0.03$
-t/d release	FW = 0.605	FW = 0.389	$p \leq 0.048$
rising int. on declaratives	28% of decl.	12.7% of decl.	$p \leq 0.05$
falsetto dur.	159 ms	406 ms	$p \leq 0.0004$

## Example: Compositionality and the Social Meaning of Heath's Style



The meaning of the style is determined compositionally, at the intersection of individual features' meanings.

## 1B. Situational Context

- Refers to a conventional association between locations and participants, as well as a set of concomitant expectations.
  - medical exam
- These ideologically mediated expectations may privilege some interpretations over others.
- In addition to situations, situational context may include acts and activities.

## Example: Heath's Stop Release Variation Patterns

### Competing Meanings

- 'Educated' - Bucholtz 1995, Ashburn 2000, Benor 2001, Podesva et al. 2001, Eckert 2005
- 'Gay' - Walters 1981

variable	medical setting	social setting	significance
frequency of occurrence	FW = 0.605	FW = 0.389	$p \leq 0.048$
duration (normalized)	0.445	0.896	$p \leq 0.00004$
intensity (normalized)	0.783	0.866	$p \leq 0.00025$

## 1C. Interactional Context

- Refers to the context in which meanings emerge through their specific moments of talk
- Meaning in this context depends on two general types of actions:
  - Indexing:** How speakers link linguistic features with social meanings (Silverstein 1976, Ochs 1992)
  - Framing:** How speakers position themselves with respect to an utterance or linguistic feature (Goffman 1974)
- Indexing and framing allow speakers to position themselves and others in relation to other participants and social categories.

## Example: Speaking like Preps at a Texas High School (1)

- Piggy, Korean American, female
- Miss Thang, Korean American, female
- Yoshi, Korean American, female
- White Tiger, white-Korean American, female

1 Piggy: You know when you run?  
 2 You need to put your knees up. h.  
 3 You and *Miss Thang* both do that=  
 4 I was so (xxx)-  
 5 *Miss Thang* got faster though.  
 6 *Miss Thang*: **Really?**  
 7 Yoshi: **"Rea:LY?"**  
 8 Piggy: Cause you been kicking your knee-  
 9 if you got them a little bit higher.  
 10 You could be faster.

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## Example: Speaking like Preps at a Texas High School (2)

11 Yoshi: Ha.  
 12 *Miss Thang*: THEY BE MAKING FUN OF ME like crazy in class man.  
 13 Yoshi: H h. (she's) like- in class  
 14 she's like "Do I talk like a prep."  
 15 And then I started mocking (her).  
 16 And *everybody* starts *mocking* her  
 17 because she *thinks* she doesn't talk like a prep  
 18 but she *docs*.  
 19 She's like  
 20 **"Oh my god everybody"**  
 21 **"blah-blah-blah."**  
 22 Rh ((uvular trill, expression of disgust))

## Example: Speaking like Preps at a Texas High School (3)

23 *Miss Thang*: I don't talk like that?=  
 24 Piggy: =This tastes like soybeans.  
 25 Yoshi: You *do* talk like a prep.  
 26 Piggy: You // do too  
 27 *Miss Thang*: So do you. So // *booya*.  
 28 Yoshi: You're worse than me.  
 29 White Tiger: Sometimes I talk like a // (black) person.  
 30 Yoshi: h h  
 31 *Miss Thang*: Your voice is *higher*.  
 32 Piggy: h ha ha.

## Negotiation and Emergence of Meaning

Line #	Speaker	Referent	
		Doesn't talk like preps	Talks like preps
6	Miss Thang		
7	Yoshi	(Yoshi)	Miss Thang
12	Miss Thang	Miss Thang	
18	Yoshi	(Yoshi)	Miss Thang
20-21	Yoshi	(Yoshi)	Miss Thang
23	Miss Thang	Miss Thang	
25	Yoshi	(Yoshi)	Miss Thang
26	Piggy	(Piggy)	Miss Thang, Yoshi
27	Miss Thang		Miss Thang, Yoshi
28	Yoshi		Yoshi, Miss Thang
31	Miss Thang		Miss Thang, Yoshi

## 2. Unresolved Indeterminacy

- Indeterminate meanings can be left unresolved.
  - Variables can be exploited by leaving them open to interpretation.
  - Comprehending art or humor in language may require the simultaneous acknowledgement of multiple meanings.

## Example: Southern American/AAE Feature in Condoleezza Rice's Speech

### Glottalization of (-d)

(Fasold 1981, Bailey and Thomas 1998, Kohl and Anderson 2000)

- Iraqis voted despite the threats of the terrorists
- not to become diverted by
- the United Nations

(-d) glottalization	q&a	speech	significance
frequency of occurrence	FW=0.596	FW=0.314	$p \leq 0.013$
preceding vowel duration (ms)	50 ms	60 ms	$p \leq 0.048$

work with Jason Brenier, Lauren Hall-Lew, Stacy Lewis, Patrick Callier, and Rebecca Starr

## Example: Margaret Cho's Stylized Mocking of Asian Immigrants

1 Cho: I-I was raised in San Francisco.  
2 I went to Lowell High School  
3 Audience: ((*few cheers*)  
4 or uh Ro: High school.  
5 Audience: ((*laughs*)  
6 Such a hu:ge Asian population  
7 that they dispensed with the L altogether.  
8 Ro:—Ro::  
9 I-go-to Ro: High School.  
10 Audience: ((*laughs*)  
11 Ro: high.  
12 Audience: ((*laughs*)  
13 Ro::  
14 Great school. I was expelled.

## Multiple Indexical Meanings in Cho's Stylized Mocking

- Cho's U.S.-raised and Asian identities assumed by her audience
- Her revoicing potentially indexes at least two social meanings
  - A non-immigrant who can mock Asian immigrants
  - A critical stance toward Asian immigrant mocking
- The interpretation is left purposefully indeterminate (Chun 2004).

## Conclusion

- The linguistic, situational, and interactional dimensions of context are interrelated, so analyses should combine approaches.
- Methodological recommendations: consider multiple variables, examine cross-situational variation, situate variables in discourse.
- Indeterminacies of meaning are part and parcel of the symbolic world in which we live.

## Types of Social Meaning

1. Social Function (Pragmatics)
2. Social Identity Category (Variation)
3. Social Stances or Characteristics (Third Wave Variation, Eckert 2005)