

Three Linguistic Strategies for Negotiating Identity

Robert J. Podesva
Georgetown University

<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/rjp39>
rjp39@georgetown.edu

Many thanks to Penny Eckert, Miyako Inoue, Norma Mendoza-Denton, John Rickford, Rebecca Scarborough, and Arnold Zwicky for feedback and encouragement. I am also indebted to audiences at Georgetown University and the Half Moon Bay Style Retreat for thought-provoking discussions.

SALSA 2007

Austin

Introduction

- Recent work in variationist sociolinguistics has demonstrated that speakers draw on the social meaning of variables to construct identities (Eckert 2000, Moore 2003, Zhang 2005).
- Few studies have directly addressed how variables are marshaled in the negotiation of identity.

Strategy 0: Using Linguistic Variables to Create Distinctions Between Groups

Interspeaker Variation

Nearly all “third-wave” variation studies have targeted inter-group distinctions.

“[S]tyles in speaking involve the ways speakers, as agents in social (and sociolinguistic) space, negotiate their positions and goals within a system of distinctions and possibilities.” Irvine (2001: 23-24)

Intraspeaker Variation

A focus on the individual (Johnstone 1996, Johnstone and Bean 1997) may enable us to observe the strategies speakers use to negotiate identity more closely.

Strategy 0

Three Strategies for Negotiating Identity

1. Assembling linguistic variables, and their individual social meanings, into a stylistic package
2. Reconfiguring stylistic packages as one moves across situations, adopting different clusters of variables
3. Employing clusters of variables strategically within a situation as the discourse unfolds, highlighting identities in particular conversational moments

Data

- Part of larger study on style shifting among gay professionals (Podesva 2006)
- 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 a linguistic variant occurs
- Identifying patterns in previous scholarship on a linguistic variant
e.g., (dh) fortition in New York (Labov 1966) vs. Wisconsin (Rose 2006)

Other Approaches:

1. Ethnography (Eckert 2000, Moore 2003, Zhang 2005, Rose 2006)
2. Historical/Enregisterment Approach (Agha 2003, Johnstone et al. 2006, Zhang in preparation)
3. Perception/Attitudes Experiments (Campbell-Kibler 2005)

Example: 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

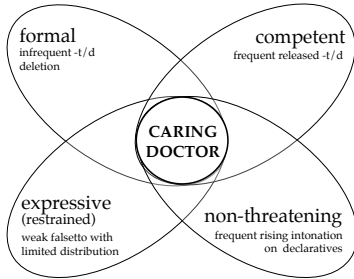
- The discourse contexts of these falsetto tokens suggest that falsetto has ‘expressive’ connotations.
- This meaning is consistent with previous studies observing the use of falsetto by mothers in child-directed speech (Blount and Padgug 1976), African American adolescents as a form of protest (Tarone 1973), and Latina girls to express opposition when playing games (Goodwin et al. 2002).
- Psycholinguistic studies (Scherer 1974, Pell 2001) find that expressive emotions (happiness, anger) had higher f0 levels than less expressive emotional states (sadness, neutrality).

Strategy 1: Assembling Variables into Stylistic Packages

- Compositional approach, with each variable contributing its own social meaning to a stylistic package of variables
- Identities emerge at the intersection of variables and their social meanings.

Strategy 1

Heath in the Clinic



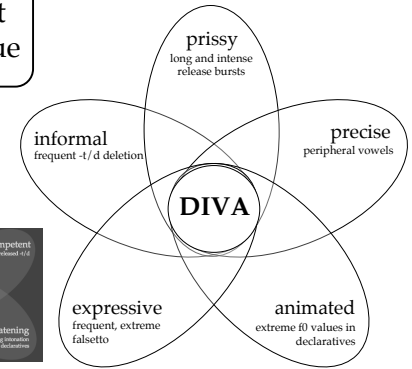
Strategy 1

Strategy 2: Reconfiguring Stylistic Packages

- Speakers reconfigure their stylistic packages as they move from one situation to another, adopting different sets of variables.
- Shifting stylistic packages index shifting identities.

Strategy 2

Heath at a Barbecue



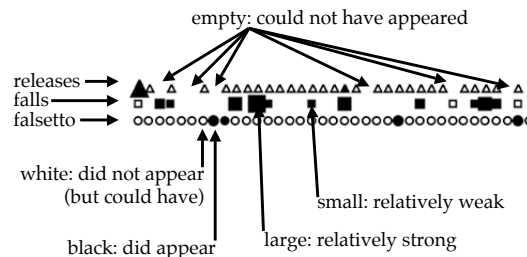
Strategy 2

Strategy 3: Employing Stylistic Packages as Discourse Unfolds

- Constellations of features need not be static across a speaking situation (Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994, Schilling-Estes 2004).
- Speakers can highlight identities strategically as discourse unfolds.
- 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).

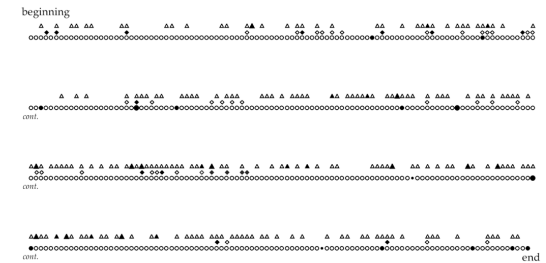
Strategy 3

Variation Score



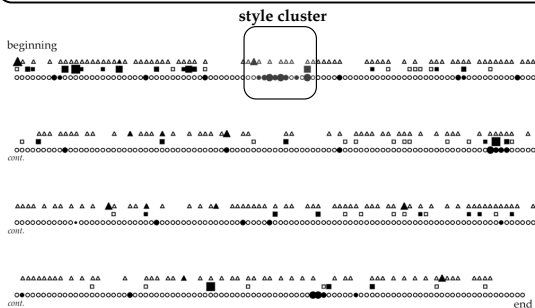
Strategy 3

Variation Score of The Caring Doctor



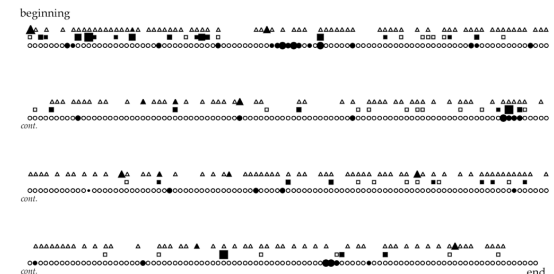
Strategy 3

Variation Score of the Diva



Strategy 3

Clusters as Phonetic Speech Acts



Strategy 3

Conclusion

- Importance of situating variation patterns in discourse.
- The three strategies for negotiating identity provide speakers with considerable room for creativity when managing their positions in the social world.