

Gender and Sociolinguistic Variation

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Sociolinguistic Variation

We generally think of language as a means of communicating referential meaning – for telling each other what we think, what we want, what we see. The linguistic system is also constructed in such a way as to create resources for the expression of social meaning – nuances of emotion, attitude, social identity – without actually stating it in so many words. One of the subtlest of these resources is what is referred to as *sociolinguistic variation*, particularly phonological variation, or what is commonly referred to as “accent.” Phonological variation, or nuances of pronunciation, can signal important information about aspects of speakers’ social identity – about such things as class, age, ethnicity and gender. This chapter will explore the manifestations of gender in phonological variation, and the interactions between gender and some other aspects of identity.

I begin with a very brief description of phonological variation, taking as an example a well-known instance from American English. In the midwest, as in many parts of the United States, the vowel in *bad*, *ham* and *rag* can be pronounced as [æ] – the way it is pronounced in RP, or by careful newscasters in the US. It can also be pronounced as a high front vowel [e] or as a diphthong [e^ɪ] or even [i^ɪ], sounding much like the vowel in *beer*. This variability does not change the identity of the word – it has no effect on its referential meaning. A [hi^ɪm] is every bit as much a smoked (or salted) pig’s thigh as a [hæm], but the difference in pronunciation carries social meaning. The nature of this social meaning, particularly with respect to gender, is the subject of this chapter.

The most common approach to variation is to view variables as constituting a continuum between “standard” and “vernacular” language. [hæm] is what we call the “standard” pronunciation in American English, whereas [hi^ɪm] is called “non-standard” or “vernacular.” Standard pronunciations are part of the standard language – the variety of language that is associated with education, central government, and other institutions of national or global power. In opposition to the standard is what

is commonly called the vernacular, the language of locally based communities – most people’s everyday language. The vernacular has local and regional features – features that are muted in the standard. The closer a person’s speech is to the standard the more difficult it is to tell where he or she is from; the closer to the vernacular, the stronger and more identifiable their regional or local accent. The difference between standard and vernacular is not abrupt, but a matter of degree. The phonetic continuum between [æ] and [i^ɪ], for example, offers a range of possible pronunciations that lie somewhere in between the most standard and the most vernacular pronunciation. All speakers use a range of these pronunciations, varying in their use depending on who they’re talking to, the topic, the degree of formality, etc. At the same time, the range of variants that a given speaker uses in this way reflects where she or he falls in the social matrix.

While the standard variety is associated with the people, settings and institutions of social and economic power, the non-standard variety is associated with locally based communities. The heart of these communities is in the working class and the lower middle class – in social networks based in local neighborhoods and workplaces (see Milroy 1980 for a thorough discussion of the relation between social class, social networks, and the use of the vernacular). The local vernacular has all the flavor of the community, and it both constructs and evokes solidarity among the community’s members.

Since there is a relation between such broad social categorizations as socioeconomic class and the extent to which one’s life is based in local networks, sociolinguistic variation is associated simultaneously with broad social categories like class, and with nuances of local meaning within communities. For example, in a study of Martha’s Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts, William Labov (1972) found a relation between the use of vernacular features and local identity. Speakers who identified with the local traditional fishing culture used more of the vernacular features than people who identified with the emerging mainland-oriented tourist economy. Thus, the vernacular can be associated not simply with place, but with quite local issues.

Quantitative studies of correlations between linguistic variables and the social characteristics of speakers have shown a set of patterns that recur from community to community in the industrialized world. The best-known set of findings in this correlational enterprise has been class stratification. Predictably, as one moves up the socioeconomic hierarchy, people produce an increasing percentage of standard pronunciations (see, e.g., Labov 1966; Macaulay 1977; Trudgill 1974). But while the study of variation has traditionally focused on socioeconomic class, it has emerged that gender is at least as powerful a force in patterns of sociolinguistic variation. The traditional focus on class, however, has led many researchers to treat gender as secondary, and as independent of other social variables. This is not only a result of a particular academic practice, but of popular thought about gender. It is traditional to think of gender as oppositional – indeed, the expression “the opposite sex” is the only colloquial way to refer to the other sex. Gender is commonly thought of, therefore, as independent of other aspects of identity as well, so that being male or female is

commonly thought to have the same effect on people's behavior, identities, etc. regardless of age, ethnicity, social class etc. But (as emphasized by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet in this volume, p. 484) gender practices differ considerably from culture to culture, from place to place, from group to group, living at the intersection of all the other aspects of social identity. Nonetheless, it has become commonplace to speak of "men's speech" and "women's speech" – even of "men's language" and "women's language." Because gender is viewed as independent of other aspects of identity, it has been common practice to generalize on the basis of observations in a restricted population, and it has also been common practice to interpret gross statistical gender differences as reflecting a pure gender effect. The use of statistics in an area as understudied as gender can lead researchers down a garden path of naive assumption, encouraging them to attribute things to gender that may well be more closely related to other aspects of identity. One particular difficulty with a heavy-handed use of statistics is that explanations frequently lie in the exceptions, which are just the cases that statistical studies tend to ignore.

Is Women's Speech More Conservative?

One of the most popular generalizations about male and female speech is the common claim that women's speech is more conservative than men's. And connected to this popular generalization is a series of popular explanations for it: e.g. women are status-conscious or polite, men are rough and down-to-earth. Since the generalization that women's speech is more conservative than men's is not entirely accurate, it is important to examine the ways in which it is true and false, and to consider the nature of possible explanations for the patterns that do emerge.

The patterns in phonological variation are quite heterogeneous. However, there is one fairly general observation that can be made (Labov 1991). Certain sociolinguistic variables have been around for generations: the so-called "stable" variables such as the variation between *walking* and *walkin'*, or between *this* and *dis*, *that* and *dat*. Women tend to be more standard overall in their use of these variables than men. Other variables are a reflection of the progress of linguistic change (the raising of (ae) discussed above is one such variable). Men are frequently more conservative than women in their use of these variables. As we move away from phonological variation to the use of grammatical variables, such as negative concord (e.g. *I didn't do anything* vs. *I didn't do nothing*), women's usage is considerably more standard, or conservative, than men's. It is significant that these grammatical variables are quite clearly consciously recognized and stigmatized, and far more so than the phonological variables. These differences suggest that conservatism is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon. A variety of explanations have been proposed for women's more conservative usages.

One important factor in people's use of variation is their relation to linguistic "markets." The notion of a symbolic market, developed by Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski (1975) and extended to the study of variation by David Sankoff and

Suzanne Laberge (1978), builds on the importance of symbolic capital for success in functioning in different parts of society. One will have little chance of succeeding in the diplomatic corps if one does not possess a range of knowledge that marks one as the "right kind" of person: the right table manners, the right style of dress, the right ways of entertaining guests, the right language. While the work of Bourdieu focuses on the symbolic capital of elites, this is equally true if one is to be accepted in a peasant village or in an urban ghetto (Woolard 1985) – what is "right" depends on the market in which one is engaged.

From the start, women and men overall stand in very different relations to linguistic markets. Peter Trudgill's account (1972, revised version reprinted in this volume, p. 21) of gender differences in the pronunciation of English in Norwich found women overall to be more conservative in their use of almost all variables. He speculated that this was because of women's exclusion from the workplace. According to Trudgill, because women's position in society is generally subordinate to men's, and because women have fewer opportunities to secure their positions through occupational success or other abilities, they find it necessary to use symbolic means to enhance their position.

While overall exclusion from the workplace may throw women onto symbolic means of establishing a place in the world, the workplace itself also has a variety of ways of constraining women to use more standard language. While standard language is crucial to performing many white-collar jobs, it is more generally crucial to the kinds of jobs that Sankoff et al. (1989) refer to as "technicians of language" – writers, academics, secretaries, receptionists. The earliest white-collar employment of women as teachers puts women's work squarely in the standard language market. But outside of education as well, many women's jobs require standard language by virtue of the function of these jobs as "front end" workers. Secretaries, receptionists, flight attendants and hostesses all make their living by representing an organization to its clients. In some important sense, they are part of the organization's symbolic capital. Thus for women, the need for standard language is not restricted to prestigious or higher paid occupations.

And what of women in the more prestigious occupations? To the extent that men dominate institutions, and particularly elite institutions, one might think of them as more engaged in the standard language market. However, one might also consider that to the same extent, men have greater legitimacy in these institutions, while women moving into them are generally seen as interlopers, and are at greater pains to prove that they belong. One means for proving worthiness is meticulous attention to symbolic capital – hence the millions made in self-help books to help professional women "dress for success." The more meticulous use of standard language, by the same token – "talking for success" – could make women's speech more conservative than their male peers'.

Margaret Deuchar (1989) argues that women's place in society more generally makes them more vulnerable to criticism, and that the more meticulous use of standard language could be seen as a way of being "beyond reproach." This has particular meaning in the light of Walt Wolfram's findings in his study (1969) of

variation in the Detroit African American community. Wolfram found women at all socioeconomic levels to be more conservative in the use of features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) than men. This gender pattern is overwhelmingly consistent, and more consistent than has been found in any other speech community. It is worth considering that among women in our society, African American women are the most subject to denigration, and that their very systematic use of standard language may well be a response to their greater social vulnerability. This argument is related to Penelope Brown's analysis (1980, reprinted in this volume, p. 81) of women's politeness in a Mayan community, in which she argues that women employ forms of politeness towards men as a strategy to avoid physical abuse.

In the above cases, we are focusing on women's place with respect to the standard language market. But women are vernacular speakers as well. Nonetheless, description of the social meaning of the vernacular has commonly focused on the relation between the vernacular and masculinity. Peter Trudgill (1972) has argued that men's use of the vernacular is associated with the general value among men of the toughness or physical prowess associated with working-class masculinity. But working-class culture and the local marketplace has to do with much more than toughness and masculinity. Perhaps more important is the role of know-how in locally based networks. The vernacular is commonly associated with blue-collar professions – not only people who work on the factory floor, but people who keep the infrastructure operating: mechanics, electricians, plumbers, construction workers. These are people whose skills are essential to the well-being of our day-to-day physical environment. The vernacular is associated, then, with a range of capabilities for functioning in the physical world – capabilities that include, but extend well beyond, physical power. And many of these capabilities are shared by men and women. It is notable, though, that the occupations traditionally available to, and associated with, women in the local market – such as cleaning, sewing, cooking and childcare – are as essential and often as skilled as men's work in the equivalent market, but not equally valued. Thus in the vernacular market, as in the standard language market, women's pursuits are marginalized, hence marginalizing women's claims to social centrality. If marginalization in the standard language market leads women to use more standard language, one might expect marginalization in the local market to lead women to use more vernacular.

This relatively abstract discussion of gender and the linguistic market makes it clear that we cannot understand the relation between variation and gender unless we explore quite concrete situations. To this purpose, the following discussion will examine some patterns of variation in a well-defined adolescent population, with the purpose of seeing the linguistic relation between gender and other aspects of social identity.

Belten High

Belten High is a comprehensive public high school in the suburbs of Detroit, serving 2,000 predominantly white students from families ranging from working-class through

upper middle-class. In most social science studies, children are assigned their parents' (usually their fathers') socioeconomic status. But adolescents are not just their parents' children – they are moving into their adult identities. The transition from parents' class to one's own commonly begins in school, and is articulated through one's forms of participation in the school. In Belten High, as in many high schools across the US, two class-based social categories dominate discourses of adolescent identity. Some students, primarily college-bound, participate enthusiastically in school, particularly in the extracurricular sphere; others, primarily bound for the blue-collar workplace, reject the school's pretensions to be a total institution, and base their lives and activities outside of school in the neighborhood and in the broader local urban-suburban area. These categories commonly have names, and in Belten High, as in high schools throughout the Detroit suburbs in the 1980s, the members of the school-oriented category were referred to (and referred to themselves) as *jocks* while the locally oriented category were referred to (and referred to themselves) as *burnouts*. The jocks constitute a middle-class culture, oriented to the global market that the school and its college- and career-bound emphasis represents. Spending most of their time in school, and engaged in the institutional enterprise, the jocks are very much in the standard language marketplace. The burnouts constitute a working-class culture, engaging in the school's downplayed vocational curriculum but minimizing their time in school in favor of independent engagement in the local and urban scene.

The jocks and the burnouts, together accounting for just less than half the students in the school, constitute mutually opposed and relatively hostile categories. This opposition is constructed through a broad range of symbolic means, from territory to clothing, hairdo, substance use, musical tastes and friendship patterns (for a full account of these categories, see Eckert 1989). And while many people are neither jocks nor burnouts, the importance of these two categories is underscored by the fact that almost all students in the school who are neither jocks nor burnouts are referred to (and refer to themselves) as *in-betweens*, and describe themselves in relation to those two categories.

Each of these categories is composed of several social network clusters, and roughly equal numbers of boys and girls. The categories began in late elementary school as two separate, and somewhat rival, heterosexual crowds, surfacing in junior high school as full-blown opposed social categories. The jocks and the burnouts constitute communities of practice, based in very different (and class-based) responses to the school institution. They are distinguished not simply by their attitudes towards school, but by a range of differences in social practice, some of them quite profound. The jocks and the burnouts are continually engaged in a mutual process of meaning-making, as individuals engage among themselves in making sense of who they are, why they're together, and what their place is in the world.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) discuss at some length the complexities of the interactions among gender and social category in Belten High. The resources and constraints for girls' and boys' actions and construction of identities are radically different. Just as women are marginalized in the adult marketplace, so are girls in

the adolescent marketplace. Most specifically, boys' actions and roles are defining of the jock and burnout categories, just as men's actions and occupations are defining of the adult professional and blue-collar worlds. While a boy can build a highly valued jock identity through athletics, a girl cannot (or could not in the early 1980s, when this work was done). And while a boy can build a highly valued burnout image by rumbling in the streets of Detroit, with dirt biking or working on his car, a girl cannot. Jock girls can gain status only through participation in the school social sphere – student government, cheerleading, organizing dances – all of which are seen as secondary, or even auxiliary, to boys' varsity athletics. Legitimized activities are harder for burnout girls to find, since there are relatively few interesting non-school activities open to girls. Rather, burnout girls gain status through their social skill, their networks, and their reputation for daring and fun. Furthermore, while a boy can gain importance and popularity without good looks, a girl cannot; and while a boy can experiment with quasi-legal behavior and maintain (perhaps even enhance) his status as a jock, a girl who does risks not only her status as a jock but her closest friendships. There is little latitude for jock and burnout girls to stray into each other's territories – a jock girl who behaves in the least like a burnout will be labelled a "slut," while a burnout girl who behaves in the least like a jock will be labelled a "snob." The relation between female jocks and burnouts, then, is truly a relation of opposition and avoidance. On the other hand, the relation between male jocks and burnouts is more one of competition around physical prowess. While the jocks establish their physical prowess through school sports, the burnouts establish theirs sometimes through independent sports, but more saliently through fighting ability and urban know-how. Jock and burnout boys, therefore, represent something of a mutual threat, since each is recognized for a different and important aspect of masculine physical capability.

Sociolinguistic Variation in Belten High

Virtually all of the students of Belten High speak a local version of white Anglo American English. To illustrate the range of gender dynamics in variation, I will focus on three vowels that show flux in this dialect: (ae) as in *bad*, (uh) as in *cut*, and (ay) as in *fight*.¹ As described above, the variable (ae) ranges from a conservative pronunciation [æ] to a raised variant [e], so that *bad* sounds more like *bade*. (uh) ranges from its conservative pronunciation [ʌ] to a backed pronunciation [ɔ], making *cut* sound more like *caught*. Finally, the diphthong (ay) monophthongizes to [a:] so that, for example, *right* sounds like a drawn-out pronunciation of *rot*. All speakers in Belten High produce a range of variants for each of these three variables. What differs from speaker to speaker, or from group to group, is the frequency with which they produce the different variants. In the following discussion, I will refer to raised (ae), backed (uh) and monophthongized (ay) as advanced (vernacular) variants.

Just as jocks and burnouts differ in their relation to the urban area, so do the linguistic variables. Belten High sits in the midst of the urban sprawl that surrounds

Table 1 Correlations of three phonological variables with gender and social category as independent variables

Variable	Girls	Boys	Burnouts	Jocks	Input	Significance
(ae)	0.573	0.438	—	—	0.371	0.000
(ay)	0.426	0.555	—	—	0.072	0.006
(uh)	—	—	0.571	0.437	0.494	0.000

Detroit, a vast social landscape, and as discussed above, an important part of social practice in the urban-suburban continuum involves orientation towards the city of Detroit. An important aspect of the social meaning of variables, therefore, is to be found in the distribution of uses of variants in the urban-suburban area. The backing of (uh) and the monophthongization of (ay) are considerably more advanced as one moves closer to Detroit, while the raising of (ae) is more advanced as one moves away from Detroit (Eckert forthcoming). Thus while (ay) and (uh) can be associated with urban white speech, (ae) is more closely related to the suburbs. For this reason, I refer to (ay) and (uh) as urban variables, and (ae) as a suburban variable.

As shown in table 1, these three variables show different statistical patterns across the population of jocks and burnouts in Belten High. The figures in this table represent the results of a variable rule analysis,² indicating the relative rates of use of advanced variants by categories of speakers.³ Table 1 treats gender and social category as independent variables, following a common statistical approach to gender and variation. This mode of analysis assumes that gender and social category membership have completely independent effects on language use – that gender and social category are separable. Each of these three variables shows a quite different pattern of correlation with gender and social category. In the case of (ae) and (ay), only gender correlates significantly with the use of advanced variants, with opposite effects: girls lead in the raising of (ae) and boys lead in the monophthongization of (ay). In the case of (uh), only social category shows a significant correlation, with burnouts leading jocks in the use of advanced variants. On the basis of table 1, one might be tempted to say that (ae) is a "female marker", (ay) is a "male marker", and (uh) is a "burnout marker." If we assume that social category and gender are inseparable, though, we might do well to examine the behavior of male and female jocks and burnouts separately, as shown in table 2. The figures shown in table 2, and displayed graphically in figure 1, paint a very different picture of the use of these variables. There is a clear and quite complex interaction between gender, social category, and local orientation. While the gender differentiation of (ae) and (ay) is overwhelming and clearly greater than the social category differentiation, it is also clear that these variables are not simply gender markers. Particularly, there is an apparent relation between gender, social category, and urban-suburban orientation. Not only do boys lead in the use of the urban variable (ay), but burnouts lead jocks in its use among the girls (the jock-burnout difference among the boys is not

Table 2 Correlations of three phonological variables with gender and social category as interacting variables

Variable	Girls		Boys		Input	Significance
	Burnouts	Jocks	Burnouts	Jocks		
(ae)	0.611	0.535	0.386	0.466	0.371	0.000
(ay)	0.483	0.336	0.579	0.545	0.070	0.008
(uh)	0.619	0.418	0.532	0.450	0.494	0.000

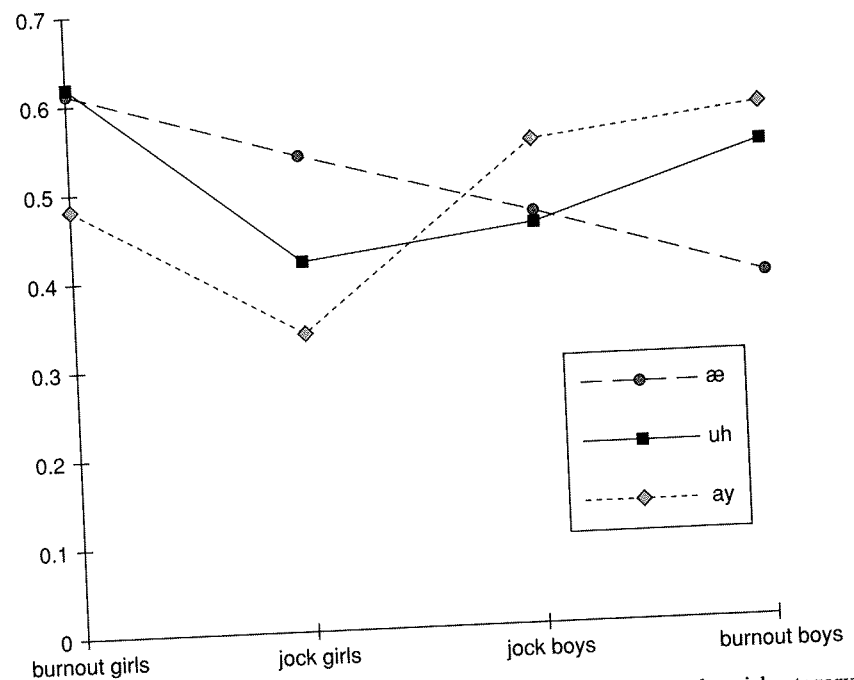


Figure 1 Patterning of three phonological variables with gender and social category

statistically significant). And not only do girls lead in the use of the suburban variable (ae), but jocks lead burnouts in its use among the boys. This makes a complex association among masculinity, burnout affiliation and urban-ness on the one hand, and femininity, jock affiliation and suburban-ness on the other. In the case of (uh) backing, gender gives way to a more straightforward relation between urban orientation and burnout affiliation.

Another, more general way of considering these data is in terms of the overall accent. The burnout girls lead the jock girls in the use of all three variables, and

indeed they lead the entire population in the use of (ae) and (uh). This means that their local accent is the strongest of all the four categories of speakers. Following the burnout girls in the localness of their overall accent are the burnout boys. However, the burnout boys' extremely low values for the suburban variant (ae) leave them with a specifically urban accent. The jocks, male and female, emerge as relatively conservative, but with the boys making greater use of the urban variables (uh) and (ay) and the girls making greater use of the suburban variable (ae). The jock boys' accent is more suburban than the burnout boys', and less than the jock girls'. The question of who is more conservative in this population, then, does not have a simple answer. But perhaps what is most striking is that the girls describe the overall envelope of variation in this community. The burnout girls are the most advanced speakers in the community overall, and the jock girls are the most conservative – if only marginally more conservative than the jock boys. This is consonant with the observations from earlier studies made above. The constraints on girls to conform to an exaggerated social category type are clearly related to their diminished possibilities for claiming membership or category status. In Eckert (1990), I argued that to the extent that men control material capital, women are constrained to accumulate symbolic capital. Thus while men develop a sense of themselves and find a place in the world on the basis of their actions and abilities, women have to focus on the production of selves – to develop authority through a continual proof of worthiness. Thus the jock and the burnout girls are continually working on their jockhood and their burnouthood, refining and elaborating their mutual differences, focusing on being good jocks or burnouts, just as later in life they will no doubt be focusing on being good mothers, wives, friends – focusing on how they are, while their male peers will be focusing on what they do.

Conclusions

One important lesson from these correlations is that across-the-board differences taken alone can seriously misrepresent the social meanings of variables. We clearly cannot talk about gender independently of other aspects of social identity, as no variable correlates simply with gender or social category. The major generalization in Belten High seems to be that girls are putting these phonological resources to greater use than the boys, as the greater social polarization between jock and burnout girls emerges in a greater linguistic polarization as well. This view of gender and variation can lead to a generalization, but not a generalization that would yield a consistent male–female difference across the board that would allow statements such as “women are linguistically more conservative than men.” Rather, the generalization is likely to have more to do with women's greater use of symbolic resources to establish membership and status. And since the communities of practice in which women are seeking status vary widely, the particular linguistic nature of these symbolic resources will vary widely as well.

NOTES

- 1 For a more thorough discussion of these and other variables in the same community, see Eckert (forthcoming).
- 2 The variable rule program, in this case Goldvarb, a multiple regression package for the analysis of linguistic variation, is described in Rousseau and Sankoff (1978). The numbers shown in the tables and figure are probabilities of the occurrence of vernacular variants, within the context of an overall probability of occurrence in the population as a whole. These numbers should be regarded as indications of relations among the speaker groups represented, rather than as absolute values of occurrence.
- 3 These figures are based on 50 occurrences of each variable per speaker, extracted from free-flowing tape-recorded speech. For details of the methods used in data collection and analysis in this study, see Eckert (forthcoming).

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