



Carnegie Mellon University  
Language  
Technologies  
Institute

# 11-324/11-624/11-724 Human Language for AI

## Interactionist Sociolinguistics

---

David R. Mortensen

November 29, 2021

Language Technologies Institute  
Carnegie Mellon University

# Learning Objectives

By the end of this lecture, students will understand:

- The difference between variationist and interactionist sociolinguistics
- The relationship between social interactions and identity
- The use relationship between discourse analysis, dialog, and sociolinguistics

# Variationist Sociolinguistics and Interactionist Sociolinguistics

---

# Identity in Variationist Sociolinguistics

Variationists see identity rather like a pollster does: A person is a vector of static demographic features and, together, these make up an identity.

Id	Age	Gender	Race	Religion	Class	Orientation	...
01	44	M	White	Mormon	Middle	Straight	...
02	56	F	White	Jewish	Middle	Straight	...
03	18	M	Black	None	Upper	Gay	...

This does capture the fact that identities are made up of many overlapping social categories. It also captures how these categories correlate with linguistic behavior. But does it capture identity adequately? Does it tell us all there is to know about how language and society interact?

# Interactionist Sociolinguistics

- In our experience, our identities, or we present them, are evolving all of the time.
- Identity, rather than being a static set of features, is constructed through interaction
- Identities and relationships are negotiated through linguistic performance
- Linguistic form is deployed to do social work
- A truly intelligent artificial agent would be able to negotiate identity in the same way
- This is what interactionist sociolinguistics is about.

### 7.3 Identity as a Process

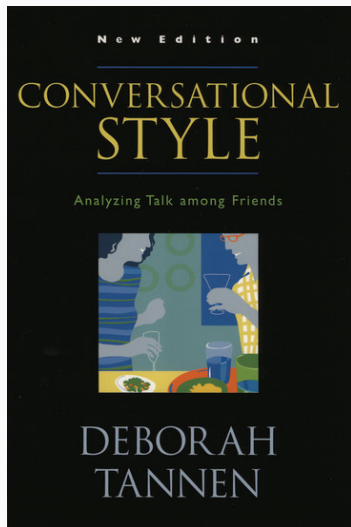
Per Shultz Jørgensen<sup>9</sup> (1999) understands identity as something one attempts to create or construct, which takes place when interacting with others, through life experiences by performing something, and during everyday life. The construction of identity is a constant process that never ceases. *“Identity is accordance with others and with itself. The social identities represent various options that are being tested, assessed, contemplated, and involved/implicated in the core one gradually constructs as an adequate image of oneself: the personal identity”*<sup>10</sup> (Brørup et al, 2003: 179).

Furthermore, Schultz Jørgensen depicts identity as having two dimensions: the personal (internal) and the social (external) identity. Every construction of identity consists of both dimensions. However, they are not inseparable, but intertwined processes that are continuously in interaction (Schultz Jørgensen, 1999: 48-62). Thus, the construction of identity is highly dependent on society and hereby culture, occurring both within and around the individual.

# Some History

- Variationist sociolinguistics grows out of the work Uriel Weinreich and his student, William Labov
- Labov's famous studies:
  - Martha's Vineyard
  - "Fourth floor"
  - Studies of AAVE structure
- Interactionist sociolinguistics (within linguistics) grows out of the work of Robin Lakoff and her student, Deborah Tannen.
  - Lakoff's work on politeness and language and gender
  - Tannen's Thanksgiving thesis
- It has deeper roots in the work of linguistic anthropologist John J. Gumperz
- Gumperz, Lakoff, and Tannen were not looking at identity as something that was given, but as something that was negotiated

# Tannen's thesis (as a book)





## Some Examples

---

This is from an analysis of a conversation between two kids educated in an international school and two kids educated in a normal school. The international kids form a group right away, and start using in-group and out-group words.

*D:... But I mean it is kind of hard for **anyone else** to relate to that because **they** don't really understand the, ehrrm, it's almost like a **cultural background** that **we** carry. Like **we** said before **we** don't have a really deeply rooted sense in any national country, but **we** do have this **feeling of a community** (appendix: 119-120).*

B: *But it is true, because if I can't understand a lecturer in their English, I mean it **drags down my level** because when I raise my hand to say something in class **I'll try to make it easier for them**. I mean it sounds really ridiculous but I know they understand everything I'm going to say cause obviously they speak English but just because I cannot always understand what they are saying in English, **I'll try to dumb it down** (appendix: 113).*

This quote could demonstrate that Bettina believes that she possesses a higher position within an English-speaking environment, whether it is within the focus group or during lectures. Employing the term "*dumb it down*", which has a negative connotation to it, she implies that she sees people who do not understand her level as

# Code Switching

---

# Code Switching

- Code switching is switching between linguistic codes (languages, lects) for social or linguistic purposes
- Everybody code switches
- There are different reasons to code switch

## Code Switching to Show Solidarity

Take the following example from two boys in Jamaica, one black and one white:

**White boy:** Oh, Royston, ya goin' football on Saturday?

**Black boy:** Mi na go football! Who for?

**White boy:** Check some gyal later.

**Black boy:** Na. Mi na wan check gyal now.

**White boy:** Rassclaht! Fink ya bent'

Sometimes code switching is used to “show power over the less powerful.”

Speakers sometimes find it easier to discuss particular topics (e.g. sex or machine learning) in a language other than their mother tongue.



“Speakers may switch codes to express happiness, excitement, anger, sadness, and many other feelings.”

Speakers often switch codes during speeches in order to be more convincing or persuasive.

# Interactionalism and Discourse Analysis

---

# Is There a Boundary?

- It should be clear, now, that there is a close relationship between interactionist sociolinguistics and discourse analysis
- Both sub-disciplines look at language in its discourse context.
- Interactionist sociolinguistics adds social context
- One way of looking at this is to view interactionist sociolinguistics as the sociolinguistic flavor of discourse analysis (as opposed to the kind of discourse analysis that focuses on things like coherence or cohesion).

Questions?