Language and identity: the view from linguistics

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1 Overview

- Two main topics:

    1. Variationist sociolinguistics: sociolinguistics 'for its own sake'.

    2. Discourse analysis: more akin to textual analysis that literature students engage in.

- Take-home message:
    - There is a bidirectional relationship between language and identity: language use reflects our identity/'social address', but we also use language to claim or construct a particular identity.

2 Variationist sociolinguistics: a potted history

Prelude

- One of the earliest sociolinguistic studies: Labov (1963).
    - Martha's Vineyard: island off the coast of Massachusetts.
    - Home to some 5,500 inhabitants, plus up to 42,000 summer residents.
    - Population divided between those who intend to leave for work, and those who intend to stay on the island.
    - Centralisation of diphthongs (ay) and (aw), e.g. in *bite* and *bout*.
    - Usually pronounced [aɪ], [aʊ]; centralised variants found on island: [ɐɪ], [ɐʊ] or [əɪ], [əʊ].

First wave studies

- Large-scale surveys of urban populations, e.g. New York City (Labov 1966), Norwich (Trudgill 1974), Glasgow (Macaulay 1977), Belfast (Milroy & Milroy 1978).
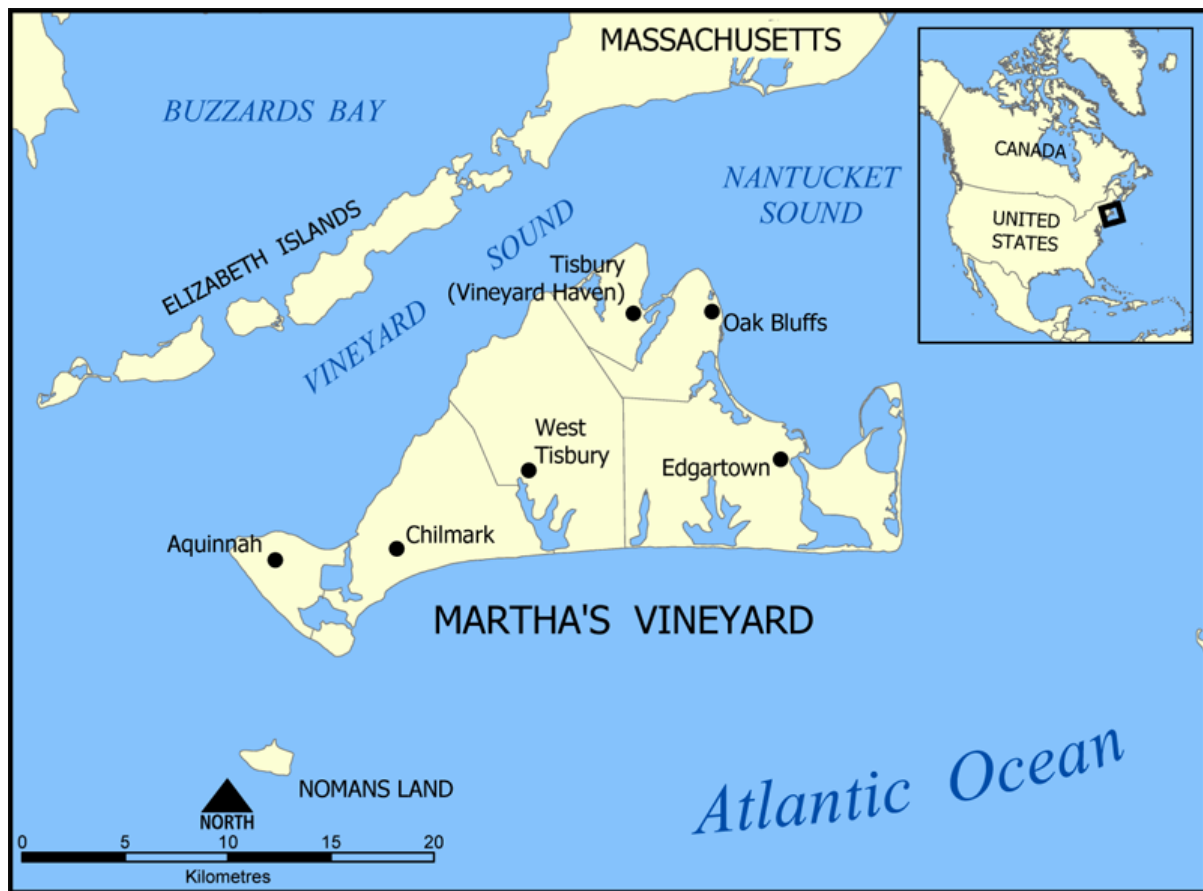
Figure 1: A map of Martha's Vineyard and its location in North America

Persons	Attitude	(ay)	(aw)
40	Positive	63	62
19	Neutral	32	42
6	Negative	09	08

Table 1: Centralisation and orientation towards Martha's Vineyard (Labov 1963:Table 1.6)
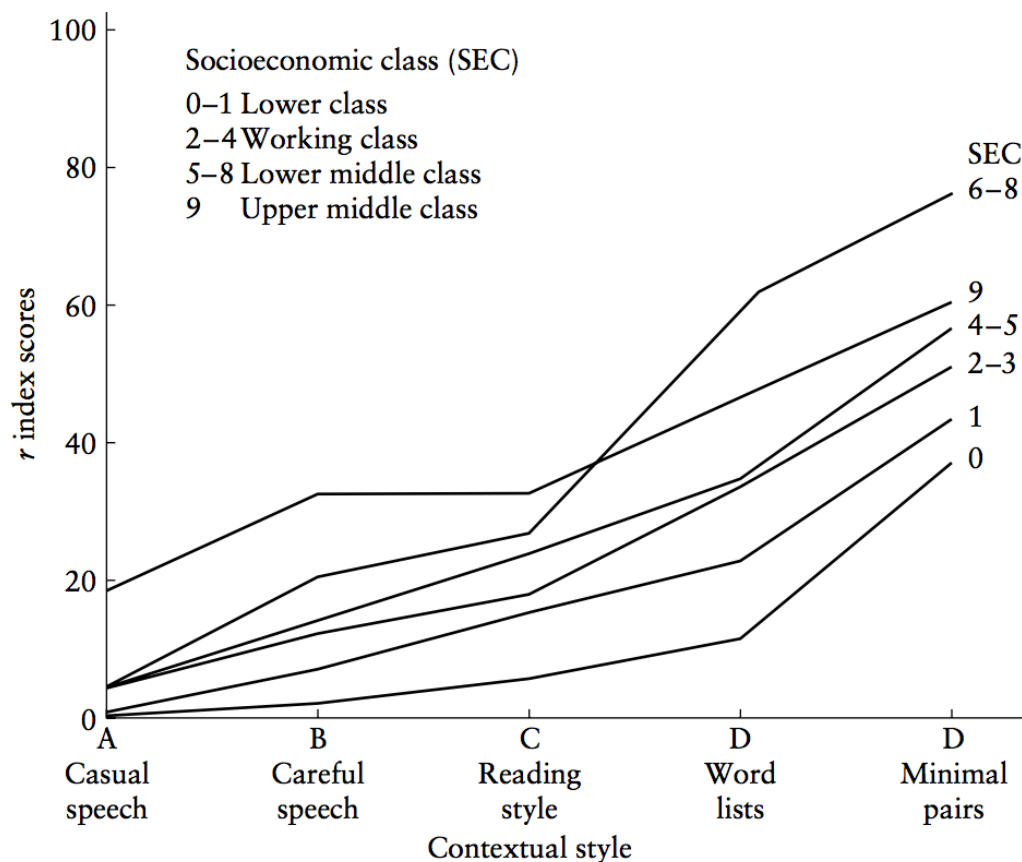
Figure 2: *R*-pronunciation in New York City by social class and speech style (Labov 1966:240)

- Focus on correlations between linguistic variables and macro-level social categories, e.g. social class, gender, ethnicity.

- Some robust findings about, e.g. class (Figure 2), gender (Table 2).

Second and third wave studies

- Second wave: seeking local reflexes of abstracted categories from first wave (e.g. social networks—Milroy & Milroy 1992).

- Third wave: 'postmodern turn'; focus not on abstract categories but on construction of personae/styles.

- Interested in local significance of variants and how they acquire meaning (cf. Martha's Vineyard), e.g. Cameron (1997)—US college students gossiping about gay classmate; Eckert (1996)—construction of heterosexual femininity in a group of pre-adolescents.

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BRYAN: uh you know that really gay guy in our Age of
Revolution class who sits in front of us? he wore
shorts again, by the way, it's like 42 degrees out he
wore shorts again [laughter] [Ed: That guy] it's like
a speedo, he wears a speedo to class (.) he's got
incredibly skinny legs [Ed: it's worse] you know=

ED: =you know
like those shorts women volleyball players wear? it's
like those (.) it's l[ike

BRYAN: [you know what's even more ridicu[lous? when
ED: [French cut spandex]

BRYAN: you wear those shorts and like a parka on ...
(5 lines omitted)

BRYAN: he's either got some condition that he's got to
like have his legs exposed at all times or else he's
got really good legs=

ED: =he's probably he'[s like
CARL: [he really likes

BRYAN: =he
ED: =he's like at home combing his leg hairs=
CARL: his legs=

BRYAN: he doesn't have any leg hair though=   [yes and oh
ED: =he real[ly likes

ED: his legs=
AL: =very long very white and very skinny

BRYAN: those ridiculous Reeboks that are always (indeciph)
and goofy white socks always striped=   [tube socks
ED: =that's [right

ED: he's the antithesis of man

Figure 3: Conversation between two frat buddies (Cameron 1997:53–54)

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		Style			
Class	Sex	WLS	RPS	FS	CS
MMC	M	0	0	4	31
	F	0	0	0	0
LMC	M	0	20	27	17
	F	0	0	3	67
UWC	M	0	18	81	95
	F	11	13	68	77
MWC	M	24	43	91	97
	F	20	46	81	88
LWC	M	60	100	100	100
	F	17	54	97	100

Table 2: (ng) index scores in Norwich by class, style, and sex (Trudgill 1972:182)

> Linguistic devices, such as the pronunciation of /æ/, the meat of studies of variation, take on their social meaning in use—in the occasions on which they are given prominence in connection with social action. (Eckert 1996)

3   (Critical) discourse analysis

- While variationist studies are interested in the social significance of often very subtle linguistic variation, discourse analysis tends to look at higher level properties like lexical choice, argument structure, etc.

- 'Discourse' taken in Foucauldian sense.

  > Material objects and social practice 'exist' outside of language. However, they are given meaning or 'brought into view' by language and are thus discursively formed. (Barker 2003:102)

- *Critical* discourse analysis takes a political/activist angle on DA. Not just observing the social structures manifested through discourse, but critiquing them too (Fairclough 1995; Baker 2008).

- E.g. Findlay (in press)—analysis of the arguments used in the House of Lords debate on same-sex marriage.

Word	Frequency in supporters' speeches	Frequency in opponents' speeches	Level of keyness
gay	160 (2.99)	40 (0.86)	61.3
their	245 (4.58)	114 (2.45)	32.4
religious	114 (2.13)	33 (0.71)	23.1
couples	181 (3.38)	88 (1.89)	21.2
allowing	16 (0.30)	0 (0.00)	20.0
our	174 (3.25)	87 (1.87)	18.7
wales	28 (0.52)	4 (0.09)	17.1
noble	375 (7.01)	233 (5.01)	16.6
changed	48 (0.90)	14 (0.30)	15.3
marry	65 (1.22)	24 (0.52)	14.3
women	54 (1.01)	18 (0.39)	14.2
lesbian	36 (0.67)	9 (0.19)	13.8
listen	11 (0.21)	0 (0.00)	13.8
who	254 (4.75)	152 (3.27)	13.6
love	69 (1.29)	27 (0.58)	13.6
amendments	49 (0.92)	16 (0.34)	13.3
protections	24 (0.45)	4 (0.09)	13.2
able	43 (0.80)	13 (0.28)	13.0
want	101 (1.89)	48 (1.03)	12.6
trans	10 (0.19)	0 (0.00)	12.5

Table 3: Keywords in the supporters' speeches. Numbers in brackets are frequencies per 1000 words

Word	Frequency in opponents' speeches	Frequency in supporters' speeches	Level of keyness
you	89 (1.91)	34 (0.64)	33.8
been	232 (4.99)	158 (2.95)	26.4
meaning	40 (0.86)	9 (0.17)	25.8
consultation	34 (0.73)	7 (0.13)	23.3
between	127 (2.73)	75 (1.40)	21.8
government	114 (2.45)	69 (1.29)	18.4
process	29 (0.62)	7 (0.13)	17.7
difference	42 (0.90)	15 (0.28)	17.4
law	120 (2.58)	77 (1.44)	16.4
being	87 (1.87)	50 (0.93)	15.9
written	14 (0.30)	1 (0.02)	15.3
deep	19 (0.41)	3 (0.06)	15.3
consequences	28 (0.60)	8 (0.15)	14.7
there	237 (5.09)	188 (3.52)	14.6
can	139 (2.99)	98 (1.83)	14.0
proposed	20 (0.43)	4 (0.07)	14.0
war	13 (0.28)	1 (0.02)	13.9
redefining	9 (0.19)	0 (0.00)	13.8
consummation	15 (0.32)	2 (0.04)	13.1
has	283 (6.08)	237 (4.43)	13.0
implications	12 (0.26)	1 (0.02)	12.6
complementarity	8 (0.17)	0 (0.00)	12.2
employment	8 (0.17)	0 (0.00)	12.2
referendum	8 (0.17)	0 (0.00)	12.2

Table 4: Keywords in the opponents' speeches. Numbers in brackets are frequencies per 1000 words.

- *gay lesbian*, *trans* in the supporters' speeches; part of a discourse of equality and egalitarianism:

  > [A]llowing same-sex couples to marry will remove yet another distinction between **lesbian**, **gay**, bisexual and transgender people and those who are straight. This will reduce stigma and take another step forward on the road towards LGBT people receiving their full rights.
  > Baroness Gould of Potternewton, 3 June 2013

- *consultation*, *government*, *process*, *referendum*; part of a discourse of due process:

  > My Lords, as I have studied the development of this Bill thus far, I have been profoundly alarmed by the violations of constitutional due **process** that seem to have accompanied it at every turn.
  > Lord Browne of Belmont, 3 June 2013

  > It [i.e., the Bill] is not the outcome of a manifesto commitment, of a **referendum**, of a green paper, of a white paper and of normal **consultation**. In the 126 letters in my postbag yesterday, 120 were against this Bill and six were for it. One thing that was articulated re peatedly in those letters [. . .] was that the **Government** had not gone through the normal processes in approaching this matter.
  > Baroness O'Loan, 4 June 2013

- *redefining*, *meaning*; part of a discourse of linguistic rigidity:

  > However, in this Bill the Government have chosen to proceed not by addressing real, material or legal inequalities but by **redefining** the key concept of marriage and its **meaning**.
  > The Lord Bishop of Exeter, 3 June 2013

4 Conclusion

- Linguistic performance and (social) identity are intimately linked, but one can come at the question of their relationship in several different ways.

- Close reading and textual analysis play a role in the social sciences just as they do in literary studies: discourses are (embodied) texts, and a successful critique of power structures necessitates a critique of the discourses which instantiate and support them.

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