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978-0-521-61814-4 - Style: Language Variation and Identity

Nikolas Coupland

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Style: Language Variation and Identity

Style refers to ways of speaking – how speakers use the resource of language variation to make meaning in social encounters. This book develops a coherent theoretical approach to style in sociolinguistics, illustrated with copious examples. It explains how speakers project different social identities and create different social relationships through their style choices, and how speech-style and social context inter-relate. Style therefore refers to the wide range of strategic actions and performances that speakers engage in, to construct themselves and their social lives. Coupland draws on and integrates a wide variety of contemporary sociolinguistic research as well as his own extensive research in this field. The emphasis is on how social meanings are made locally, in specific relationships, genres, groups and cultures, and on studying language variation as part of the analysis of spoken discourse.

NIKOLAS COUPLAND is Professor and Research Director of the Cardiff University Centre for Language and Communication Research. He is a founding co-editor of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*.

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Preface and acknowledgements

In the new world of sociolinguistics, the simple concept of ‘style’ has a lot of work to do. The idea of ‘stylistic variation’ emerged from William Labov’s seminal research on urban speech variation and language change, and it existed there in order to make a few key points only. As Labov showed, when we survey how speech varies, we find variation ‘within the individual speaker’ across contexts of talk, as well as between individuals and groups. Also, when individual people shift their ways of speaking, survey designs suggested that they do it, on the whole, in predictable ways that are amenable to social explanation.

From this initially narrow perspective, crucial as it was in establishing a basic agenda, a sociolinguistics of style has steadily come to prominence as a wide field of research, whether or not researchers use the term ‘style’ to describe their enterprise. Style used to be a marginal concern in variationist sociolinguistics. Nowadays it points to many of the most challenging aspects of linguistic variation, in questions like these: How does sociolinguistic variation interface with other dimensions of meaning-making in discourse? What stylistic work does variation do for social actors, and how does it blend into wider discursive and socio-cultural processes? Are there new values for variation and for style in the late-modern world?

When we work through issues like these, some important boundaries shift. For one thing, the study of sociolinguistic variation becomes very much wider. The canonical study of language variation and change will always remain a pillar of sociolinguistics, but it need not be an autonomous paradigm. One of my ambitions for the book is to show what variation study is like when it ‘goes non-autonomous’. The boundary between ‘dialect variation’ and the social construction of meaning in discourse starts to collapse. Theories and sensitivities from different parts of sociolinguistics start to coalesce – interactional sociolinguistics, pragmatics, anthropological linguistics and even

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conversation analysis do not need to stand outside of variationism, nor it outside them.

My own thinking on sociolinguistic style has spanned two-and-a-half decades, although it remains to be seen whether this particular quantitative index (like some other quantitative measures that come up for review in the book) makes a meaningful difference. I was enthused to write this book mainly because of the acceleration of sociolinguistic interest in things 'stylistic' and 'contextual' and 'socially meaningful' in the last decade, prompted by some remarkable new waves of research. I won't attempt to list the relevant names and paradigms here – they fill out the pages of the book. But I would like to make a few biographical notes, by way of personal acknowledgement.

I had begun writing about style in the late 1970s, when the theme emerged from my doctoral research on sociolinguistic variation in Cardiff, the capital city of Wales. I was fortunate to start long-running dialogues, soon after that, with Allan Bell and Howard Giles. In their own research they developed new relational perspectives on spoken language variation that opened up an entirely new theoretical chapter for sociolinguistics. I continued to collaborate with Howard Giles over many years on various themes that lay at the interface between sociolinguistics and social psychology. I have been fortunate to be able to develop some of that work, more recently, in collaboration with Peter Garrett and Angie Williams in Cardiff, and more recently still with Hywel Bishop.

After some scratchy ink and pen exchanges about his evolving theory of audience design in the very early 1980s, Allan Bell and I maintained close links, latterly in co-editing the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*. That particular collaboration ensured we would have no time to write collaboratively about style, although we had firmly intended to do this. I have no doubt that this book would have been much the better if Allan and I had achieved our aim of writing a similar book together.

As the Centre for Language and Communication Research at Cardiff University grew and diversified through the 1980s and 1990s, several of my colleagues there were involved in developing new sociolinguistic fields, particularly critical and interactional approaches to language and society. The study of style needed the sorts of insight that they were developing in their own and in our joint research. In particular there has been the formative effect of my many collaborations with Adam Jaworski, for example on metalanguage, sociolinguistic theory and discourse analysis. My other Cardiff colleagues, including Theo van Leeuwen and Joanna Thornborrow, have again been important sources of inspiration. My research collaborations with Justine

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Coupland, for example on the theme of discourse and ideology, social identities in later life and on relational talk, have been where I developed most of the ideas behind the present book, although her contributions to this book are far too pervasive to summarise.

Apart from those already mentioned, a long list of people have made very valuable input into my thinking and writing about 'style', whether they recall it or not. No doubt with unintended omissions, let me thank Peter Auer, Mary Bucholtz, Janet Cotterill, Penelelope Eckert, Anthea Fraser Gupta, Janet Holmes, Tore Kristiansen, Ben Rampton and John Rickford. Thanks also to Rachel Muntz and Faith Mowbray for their help in connection with the BBC *Voices* research that has a walk-on part in Chapter 4. Reading groups convened by Julia Snell, Emma Moore and Sally Johnson fed back some valuable criticisms on parts of the text. Ayo Banji made extremely helpful input into compiling the Index. Allan Bell, Adam Jaworski and Natalie Schilling-Estes, as well as Rajend Mesthrie, read and commented on the whole manuscript in draft form, for which I am extremely grateful.

I have summarised and rewritten parts of my previously published writing in this book. The main sources in this connection, listed in the References section, are Coupland 1980, 1984, 1985, 1988, 2000b, 2001b, 2001c, 2003, in pressa, in pressb, Coupland and Bishop 2007, Coupland, Garrett and Williams 2005, Coupland and Jaworski 2004. I am particularly grateful to my co-authors for letting me rework some parts of this material here. Figures 2.1 and 2.2 are adapted from Figures 7.23 and 7.11 in Labov (2006).

The disciplinary boundary-shifting that I referred to above has presented me with the problem of knowing where to draw the line around style in this book. I have given most space to those studies of how classical forms of sociolinguistic variation – what most people call accent and dialect features – are worked into discursive social action and where they make meaning at the level of relationships and personal or social identities. As I say later, this is a rather artificial boundary to try to police, because my motivating concerns for the book are social meaning and social identity, much more than sociolinguistic variation itself. For example, I would have liked to include some detail on the discursive management of age-identities in later life (an area of my own my research with Justine Coupland). But this would have taken the book away from indexical meanings linked to the domains of social class, gender and racial/ ethnic identities, which is where style research has been most active to date.

This book can be read as a critique of variationist sociolinguistics. Meaning-making through talk has not been what variationists have

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generally tried to explain, although it has seemed to me a strange omission. It is all the more strange when we think of William Labov's commitment to the politics of language variation, his interest from the outset in the social evaluation of varieties, and his ground-breaking work in narrative analysis and interactional ritual. His followers in the field of variationist sociolinguistics have not often been able to maintain that breadth. In order to bridge back into questions of social meaning, I have found it important to challenge some of the assumptions of variationist research. These are mainly its dogged reliance on static social categories, its imputation of identity-values to numerical patterns (quantitative representations of linguistic variation), and its thin account of social contextualisation.

I fully recognise that, and celebrate the fact that, variationist sociolinguistics has taken great strides through keeping within these constraints, when research questions have been formulated at the level of linguistic systems and how they change. But I think we need a sociolinguistics of variation *for people* and *for society*, as well as (not instead of) a sociolinguistics of variation *for language*. 'Sociolinguistic style' has been the rubric under which quite a lot of that extension of the programme has already been achieved, and where further progress is clearly in prospect. 'Stylistics', as a label for a sub-discipline of linguistics, has a dated feel to it, and so does 'style'. But in the context of sociolinguistics, style nevertheless points us to a range of highly contemporary phenomena. We seem to find meaning in our lives nowadays less through the social structures into which we have been socialised, and more through how we deploy and make meaning out of those inherited resources. How social reality is creatively styled is a key sociolinguistic question, and the main question in what follows.

NC

July 2006

Transcription conventions

Where necessary, International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols are used to identify consonant and vowel qualities, as in the following charts (as shown over).

THE INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET

EXTRACTS OF TRANSCRIBED CONVERSATION

These are numbered consecutively within each chapter. Where possible, I have re-transcribed data extracts from the original sources in the interests of simplicity and consistency. Wherever possible, these transcriptions use orthographic conventions, but with the following additions and deviations:

(.)	a short untimed pause of less than one second
(2.0)	a timed pause, timed in seconds
[quietly]	stage directions and comments on context or spoken delivery
[]	between lines of transcript, denotes overlapping speech, showing beginning and end points of overlap
:	lengthened sound
::	more lengthened sound
<u>you</u>	(underlined) said with heavy stress
?	marks question intonation not interrogative syntax
(())	inaudible speech sequence or unreliable transcription
italics	sequences of particular analytic interest, explained in the text

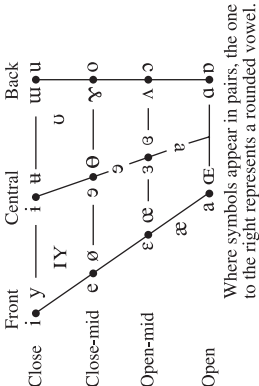
Any other conventions used in particular extracts are explained in the text.

CONSONANTS (PULMONIC)

			Dental	Alveolar	Post alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal
Plosive	p b		t d	n		ʈ ɖ	c ɟ	k g	q ɢ		ʔ
Nasal	m	m̥		n		ɳ	ɲ	ŋ	ɴ		
Trill	ʙ			r					ʀ		
Tap or Flap				ɾ		ɽ					
Fricative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ	ħ	h ɦ
Lateral fricative				ɬ ɮ							
Approximant		ʋ		ɹ		ɻ	j	w			
Lateral approximant				l		ɭ	ʎ	ʟ			

Where symbols appear in pairs, the one to the right represents a voiced consonant. Shaded areas denote articulations judged impossible.

VOWELS



The International Phonetic Alphabet (revised to 1993, updated 1996)