1 Why Does the Social Meaning of Grammar Matter?

> For some who may want to forget or downplay their class backgrounds, 'class is never simply a category of the present tense. It is a matter of history, a relationship with tradition, a discourse of roots' (Medhurst 2000: 20). Indeed, it is important that sociolinguists' own classed identities and backgrounds also be addressed and foregrounded in their work on class, to further 'encourage reflexivity about the role of the researcher in data collection and analysis and the politics of representation in scholarly writing' (Bucholtz & Hall 2008: 406).
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Before I went to university, I didn't think about how much of the grammar I used diverged from standard English, never mind why I might be using it. Non-linguists generally don't spend a lot of time thinking about how or why they use language – until someone points out that their speech is 'unusual' or that it needs 'correcting', of course. But not being able to identify the relative clause in a sentence like 'I read this book, *which was fun*', doesn't mean that you aren't capable of using a relative clause to add information about your attitude towards reading a book. People adapt their language to subtly communicate social detail all the time. They might be able to say how they were trying to sound but, rarely, how they used language to try and sound that way.

The extent to which people are able to adapt their grammar to communicate social detail is the focus of this book. There are many, many studies which show a correlation between the use of localised grammar and low socio-economic status, but far fewer interrogate the extent to which our use of localised grammar is constrained by our class status. Does being working class mean you can't help but use localised grammar, or are we free to use language to develop styles and personas which transcend our place in the social hierarchy? This book seeks to answer this question.

The volume of research on social class in sociolinguistics can give the impression that we are all constantly and consciously working to present our classed selves to the world. But, just as people don't think about the language they are using, people who aren't social scientists or social activists don't tend

to think about social class much either. We're all too busy just being, day-to-day. We know that there are people who are different from us and that can make us feel many things about ourselves and them, but it takes social mobility or encounters with 'others' to make us reflect on our precise place in the social order. I didn't know what linguistics was until I went to university, and I didn't know that I was working class either. I just knew I wanted to learn some more and that going to university involved stepping outside the norms of my everyday experience and usual ways of being (my *habitus*, Bourdieu 1990: 12–15). I had signed up for a degree in English Language and Literature, without really understanding what it involved. The English Language and Literature A level I had taken was relatively new, and the language component had taught me how to precis texts and what kinds of language to use in debates, but I don't remember learning anything about phonetics or grammar or linguistic theory. I'd always enjoyed reading and had done well at writing. I wrote stories and poems, and people said I had a good imagination. I wanted to be a teacher. The only person I knew who had been to university was my sister, who had trained to be an occupational therapist. Both of my parents left school aged fifteen. My mum became an office clerk, but stopped working when my sister was born (she subsequently retrained as a nursery nurse when both me and my sister were at school). My dad had an apprenticeship which trained him as an electrical engineer. He'd wanted to be a teacher. They both valued education enormously and had not wanted to leave school at fifteen. Our house was full of books.

Encouraged by my parents and my school teachers, I thought I was good at literature but, on arriving at university, I quickly learned that I wasn't. Everybody else in the classes seemed to know more than me, and it wasn't just because they had read the texts before (although many of them had). They seemed to understand how the texts connected to history and culture, and they identified references that I missed. The other students also seemed to know how to talk about the texts and how to talk to the lecturers. I wrote copious notes and never missed a class, but the books we read didn't make me feel anything and I only talked in class when I was picked on to answer a question. Then I found it hard to get my words out. I tried to focus on creative writing because I was confident about that, but I was told that my writing was parochial (a word I had to look up) and that the things I wanted to write about weren't relevant. I stopped being confident about it.

The linguistics classes that formed the English Language component of my degree were different. We had done bits of work on grammar at school, but mostly in my French class. I loved the grammar classes at university – there were rules to follow and puzzles to unpick about why certain structures were grammatical and others weren't. The lecturers were interested in – and often pleasantly surprised by – my judgements about which kind of sentences were possible in my dialect. Nobody minded that I transcribed things in my own accent when I learnt the International Phonetic Alphabet in my 'Sounds of English' classes. I loved Old English too because we had to learn the grammar

to understand what we were reading. It was another problem to solve and one that wasn't dependent upon what I did (or, rather, didn't) know about the current zeitgeist (another word I'd learnt in my literature classes).

My inability to engage with the English Literature curriculum was bewildering. I thought I was clever (there are a lot of geeks in this book, and I was one of them) but I felt stupid. It felt personal. It was only in the final year of my degree, when I took a class in Sociolinguistics, that I realised that how I felt in my classes *was* deeply personal. As I learnt about the ways in which my language could be structured by my social class, my gender, and the location of my upbringing, I began to realise that these factors provided a framework for all of my experiences. I wasn't engaged by the literature classes because I didn't have the collection of social assets, including credentials, tastes, style of speech, forms of social engagement (*cultural capital*, Bourdieu & Passeron 1990) to engage with them. I didn't feel like I could talk in class because I knew my style of speaking was different. I didn't know how to position myself as a legitimate participant in the seminar discussion.

My experience of the two components of my degree, English Language and English Literature, illustrate something about what is required for people to adapt and change (and, ultimately 'to learn'). I didn't enjoy my literature classes and I felt like my access to them was inhibited by some deficit in me (the lack of cultural capital). On the other hand, I enjoyed the challenge of the linguistics classes (a subject which was mostly new to everyone in my cohort) and the encouragement of my linguistics lecturers supported me to succeed, despite the fact that I felt like I didn't belong in the university. Three factors determined my success in linguistics: *access* to the university environment, *opportunity* to engage successfully with it (facilitated in a large part by supportive lecturers) and *motivation* to become involved in the institution. As Eckert and Wenger (1993) have noted, all three are necessary to learn successfully (as suggested above, this definition of 'learning' is broader than 'schooling'). Motivation is determined by the individual (although it can be conditioned by other factors, like confidence or sense of legitimacy), whereas access and opportunity can be externally controlled. Sometimes, individuals may want to learn, but they may not have obtained the necessary qualifications to enrol on a particular course, or they may not be able to find a course they can afford, or one which fits around other obligations like caring responsibilities. Sometimes opportunities to learn have gatekeepers who deny access to individuals who aren't considered legitimate. People may not consciously exclude others – there is a long literature describing how implicit biases can affect the decisions people make about who is or isn't the right fit for a job or a place on a course (see Brownstein & Saul 2016 for an overview) – but if individuals are perceived to lack the qualities required of a legitimate participant, then they can be excluded. In their examination of apprenticeships, Lave and Wenger (1991: 37) note that apprentices only learn successfully when they achieve a state of 'legitimate peripheral

participation' (where the peripherality refers, not to position in relation to an abstract group centre, but to 'an opening, a way of gaining access to sources of understanding through growing involvement'). Consequently, what matters in gaining access to a site of learning is the achievement of legitimate status.

Acquiring new language styles or adapting how we use language in our day-to-day interactions is a form of learning too. Consequently, if we want to understand why people use the language they do, we need to understand what they have been able to learn and the extent to which they are able to modify that learning. Social class is a place to start – it is central to the social order (Eckert 2019b: 2) and gives us access to certain linguistic variants and styles – but social class is not the place to stop. Opportunities and motivations shape what we learn too. Precisely how they do so will be explored in this book.

So this is a book about social class that is not about social class. In addition to using language to index certain social qualities, we also use language to undertake social action. Whilst we might infer something about a speaker's social background from how they speak, a speaker's utterance may also communicate more nuanced social detail. It might communicate subtle information about when a person is speaking, what their preferences are, what their alignment is to what they are saying, and what their feelings are about who they are saying it to. Whether or not a speaker uses a particular linguistic form may be guided by these consideration as well as, or even in spite of, their social background.

Consider Extract 1.1. It comes from a conversation between me and two girls who feature heavily in this book, Georgia and Jennifer. They are discussing Georgia's relationships with boys.

Extract 1.1[1]

1	E	Who's Danny?
2	J	Her boyfriend.
3	G	It's not. [(INAUDIBLE)]
4	J	[It used to be Mike.] But now she likes Danny.
5		
6	G	Mike was.. a bad, bad mistake for me. We were –
7	J	Oh, she's talking all heartache. Can you tell? It's like,
8		[(SIGHS AND MOCK SWOONS)].
9	G	[It's cos my cold's coming back!]
10	EM	[(LAUGHS)]
11		
12	L	No, he were bad, though, weren't he?

(Georgia and Jennifer, 48A:402–415)

[1] In all extracts, transcription conventions have been kept to a minimum for clarity. Non-speech is shown in round brackets (e.g. '(LAUGHS)'). Transcriber comments/notes are shown in arrowed brackets (e.g. '<content omitted>'). The first instance of overlap in a turn is marked by single square brackets (e.g. '[ ]'); subsequent overlap in the same turn is marked by double square brackets (e.g. '[[ ]]'). Latching is shown using '='. Line spaces are used to distinguish overlap from the surrounding discourse.

To understand the meaning of these utterances, we need to be able to decode the content conventionally associated with the words that are used and the way they are structured. For instance, to understand the sentence 'he were bad, though, weren't he?' on l. 12, we need to know that *he* refers to Georgia's ex-boyfriend, that *were* is a localised variant of past-tense third-person singular BE, and that the verb BE can depict a state or condition (importantly, we don't need to describe grammar in this way to understand it). We also need to know that *bad* is a word used to describe something that is not good and *though* is typically used to qualify something said previously (in this case, Georgia is qualifying why her ex-boyfriend was a bad mistake). It's also necessary to know that these words are assembled to make a declarative statement, 'he were bad, though', and a tag question, 'weren't he?', following the conventions of English. Decoding this information gives us the *semantic meaning* of Georgia's utterance: it enables us to perceive the reality and truth about what she is attempting to describe. But we don't just use language to decode propositions or truth conditions. Our understanding of Georgia's utterance also relies upon our ability to understand meanings that are not abstractly entailed by the words and structures she uses. Some meanings are recoverable from the fact that words and structures are used in particular ways at particular moments of interaction. For instance, we might wonder why Georgia uttered a tag question at this point in the discourse. We'll learn much more about tag questions in Chapter 7 but, for now, it is enough to note that their structure invites an interlocutor to attend to the proposition expressed in the preceding declarative statement. Unlike regular questions, they rarely constitute requests for truth-conditional information; Georgia is not asking whether Mike is bad news – she knows full well that he is. Rather than establishing whether her statement is true or false, her tag question seems to be seeking to establish that this is an opinion shared with Jennifer. It is seeking to establish common ground.

That Georgia's utterance includes a tag question, as opposed to being a simple declarative, could be interpreted as marked. The markedness of an utterance can help us to determine what a speaker is inferring beyond what is said in a purely semantic-referential way (Horn 2004; Acton 2019). This is *pragmatic meaning*: it requires us to consider what is implied or presupposed by an utterance, beyond its referential content. Utterances may be marked for many reasons: they may require more interpretative effort, or they may indicate something about a speaker's alignment with the content of their talk. In Extract 1.1, the syntactic configuration of the tag question (as opposed to a less marked form) may serve to emphasise Georgia's evaluation of Mike and conduce agreement around this evaluation. If people in our speech community use a lot of tag questions in this way, it may be that we will come to associate tag questions with especially evaluative personality types.

But utterances can be marked for reasons beyond the interpretative effort required to decode them. They may be heard less frequently than alternative

utterances, or they may violate dominant social norms. In constructing the tag question on l. 12 of Extract 1.1, Georgia uses a form of verbal agreement that differs from standard English: 'he *were* bad, though, *weren't* he?'. I've previously referred to this variant as nonstandard *were* (Moore 2010), but to avoid unnecessarily stigmatizing variants that differ from the standard, I refer to it here as levelled *were* – to reflect how the use of *were* is levelled across all persons in the past tense. We'll learn a lot more about it in Chapter 4, but for now, it is sufficient to observe that it is not a speech error, but a local variant that is common in Georgia's dialect. The *were* has the same semantic referential meaning as the *was* in 'he *was* bad' and '*wasn't* he', in that they are alternative ways of marking past-tense third-person BE. But does Georgia's use of *were* have any other kind of meaning? Acton (2021) has argued that utterances can gain meaning from their sociohistorical use. That is to say, we may infer something about an utterance based upon what we associate it with and our beliefs about this association. For instance, levelled *were* is more frequently used by people in lower-social-class groups. If a listener is aware of this association they may decode Georgia's use of levelled *were* as a symbol of working-class status or, at least, as a symbol of her alignment with working-class practice. In turn, the listener may infer that Georgia has any number of social characteristics that are associated with working-class status. These might include traits like resilience, toughness, or friendliness, dependent upon the listener's precise beliefs about working-class people. In this way, levelled *were* may index *social meaning* associated with being working class, i.e., being resilient, tough or friendly. I define 'social meaning' as what can be inferred about a person's interactional position or character on the basis of how they use language in a specific interaction. This is distinct from pragmatic meaning, which I define as what is implied or presupposed by an utterance, beyond its referential content. Acton (2021) argues that social meaning is a form of pragmatic meaning (see also Hall-Lew, Moore & Podesva 2021), however, it is important to note that whilst all kinds of social meaning entail pragmatic meaning (as defined above), pragmatic meaning does not necessarily entail all kinds of social meaning. For instance, it is possible to presuppose something about a person's interactional position *without* presupposing something about their character. The range of meanings that different grammatical variants can carry, and how these meanings are generated, will be a central concern of this book. In Chapter 3, we further explore different levels of meaning and consider how social meanings develop by exploring issues of ideology and indexicality. For now, it is important to note that the term 'grammar' can encapsulate a wide range of different variants. If we are to understand how social meaning attaches to grammatical variants, we need to be explicit about how we define those variants. In the next section, grammatical variation, and the range of grammatical forms that can vary, is more precisely defined.

1.1 What Is Grammatical Variation?

Grammar is the way in which we structure our utterances by (i) combining meaningful units of language (morphemes) into words and (ii) putting strings of words into interpretable units (clauses). In sociolinguistics, grammatical variation is often referred to as 'morphosyntactic' or just 'syntactic' variation, but these labels can depict a broad and diverse range of linguistic units. Table 1.1 provides a simplified representation of some of the types of grammatical variation discussed by sociolinguists (Romaine 1984: 419; Winford 1984: 272; Cheshire 1987: 261–262).

It is not equally easy to identify sociolinguistic variation across these different grammatical types. To evaluate why one linguistic variant is used over another, sociolinguists have endeavoured to decipher the linguistic choices available for communicating a given state of affairs (Labov 1978: 5). This is a relatively straightforward process if we can easily determine the alternative forms and compare their social value. For linguistic units like phonemes, identifying alternatives requires us to know which phonemes can denote which sounds. For instance, in British English, there are – broadly speaking – four different ways to pronounce the 'th' sound in a word like *thing*:

Example 1.1 [θ] (the most 'standard' pronunciation: 'thing');

Example 1.2 [f] (found in many different varieties; e.g., Levon & Fox (2014): 'fing');

Example 1.3 [t] (often attributed to young people in urban multicultural communities; e.g., Drummond (2018a): 'ting');

Example 1.4 [h] (in certain Scottish communities; e.g., Stuart-Smith *et al.* (2007): 'hing').

Table 1.1 *Types of grammatical variation studied by sociolinguists*

Type of variable	Example	Example study
Morphophonemic	Definite article reduction: where *the* is pronounced as, e.g., [t] or [θ] ('I went t' shop', 'The bird lives in th'oak tree')	Tagliamonte & Roeder (2009)
Morpholexical	Negation with deleted auxiliary in Scots, e.g., *I na like it* ('I don't like it').	Smith & Durham (2019: 136–148)
Morphosyntactic	Negative concord: where both verb and indeterminate are negated but only one would be negated in Standard English, e.g., *I didn't do nothing* ('I didn't do anything').	Burnett *et al.* (2018)
Syntactic	Variation in the strategies used to mark discourse new entities, e.g., *my friend went to a garden centre* vs. *it was a garden centre that my friend went to* (where 'garden centre' is discourse new – i.e., it hasn't been mentioned in the preceding discourse).	Cheshire (2005a)

It is easy to see the four forms in Examples 1.1–1.4 as alternatives because, whichever of them occurs, the same word is still articulated. They are, quite literally, alternative ways of referencing the same *thing* (Winford 1984: 269). Importantly, the forms in Examples 1.1–1.4 have no inherent value in themselves. They reference a sign vehicle ('th'), but not because they have any underlying properties that intrinsically mean 'th'; they are arbitrary pairings of sound and sign vehicle (Romaine 1984: 410). This arbitrariness frees phonemes up to be carriers of social meaning. Although not all alternates necessarily carry social meaning, if forms are used variably in discourse and across communities of speakers, they are potential carriers of social meaning. In the absence of any intrinsic meaning, linguistic variants like those in Examples 1.1–1.4 can take on social meanings via associations with who uses them and when.

However, unlike phonetic variants, grammatical constructions are composed of contentful morphemes and words. And the way in which these are ordered determines how constructions function. For instance, in the expression *Georgia's boyfriend*, the word 'Georgia's' is comprised of the proper name 'Georgia' and the morpheme 's', which denote a person and her possession of 'a boyfriend', respectively. Similarly, in a sentence like *He were bad,* the verb *were* denotes 'being', but its form also references tense (past) and person (third person in Georgia's usage). Furthermore, there are grammatical rules about where *were* can appear in the string of words that contain it.

Nonetheless, some grammatical variants involve alterations in what is produced in a clearly circumscribed linguistic 'slot'. For instance, in the case of Definite Article Reduction (DAR), we are dealing with different ways in which the word *the* is articulated. Similarly, with morpholexical variants, like the use of *na* in Scots, there may be a simple process of deletion at work, rather than an alternation or substitution of linguistic form(s) (Smith 2001). To some extent this makes these types of grammatical variants similar to phonetic variants in that it is a discrete and isolatable unit that varies (i.e., internal word structure or lexeme) rather than any kind of complex syntactic structure. However, the lower we get down Table 1.1, the harder it is to determine what 'slot' the variation falls into, and what the linguistic alternatives to a particular form might be. It also becomes more difficult to talk about the semantic equivalence of anything we might consider to be an alternative. If we think about morphosyntactic variation, this, by definition, involves some kind of structural alternation to form. For instance, with negative concord, there is repetition of negation via the use of multiple negative particles. Although, early on, Labov (1978: 5) argued that negative concord is 'by definition multiple negation with the same truth value as single negation', elsewhere, he has argued that the repetition of negative particles is intensifying (Labov 1984; Eckert & Labov 2017: 469) – something that could be argued to affect

the state of affairs that is communicated. If negative concord communicates something different to standard negation by virtue of its grammatical structure, it becomes more difficult to think about standard negation and negative concord as functioning as simple linguistic alternatives.

As we move to the bottom of Table 1.1, the effects of grammatical configuration make it even more difficult to discern what counts as viable alternatives. The syntactic example in Table 1.1 references a study by Cheshire (2005a), who observed variation in how speakers introduce something new into their discourse. Imagine an interaction, where a garden centre is mentioned for the first time. There are many ways of introducing this discourse new entity. These could include the following:

Example 1.5 *it was a garden centre that my friend went to*

Example 1.6 *a garden centre, that was where my friend went to*

Example 1.7 *my friend went to a garden centre*

Examples 1.5 and 1.6 are both marked ways of highlighting that the garden centre is a discourse new entity. Example 1.5 uses an existential construction (*it was a garden centre that my friend went to*), and Example 1.6 has a left-dislocated component (*a garden centre, that was where my friend went to*). Cheshire found that the type of marked strategies illustrated in Examples 1.5 and 1.6 were used in similar ways (to highlight new information) by all speakers irrespective of their social background. However, most commonly, speakers didn't explicitly mark discourse new items – instead simply presenting them as bare noun phrases as in Example 1.7: *my friend went to a garden centre.* Unlike the marked discourse new strategies, the use of bare noun phrases did pattern sociolinguistically – with girls and working-class speakers more likely to use examples like those in Example 1.7 than boys and middle-class speakers. Cheshire argues that this is because boys and middle-class speakers tend to use marked discourse new strategies to highlight the discourse moments when key, factual, information is revealed, whereas girls and working-class speakers tend to be more focused on the affective content of their discourse, rather than its information structure.

Cheshire's study shows that decoding the social meaning of syntactic variants requires us to focus on the function of expressions rather than their form. In Cheshire's study, there is no clear 'linguistic slot' that bare noun phrases or marked discourse new entities fill. What makes these two strategies alternates is that they are both ways to present discourse new information. Furthermore, when Cheshire compares these forms, she finds that the sociolinguistic variation is rooted in pragmatics – it occurs where speakers are communicating different messages about their orientation to the discourse

and their interlocutors. Unlike phonological variants, syntax can come with in-built dispositions to certain pragmatic functions. For instance, many of the constructions that Cheshire identifies as marking discourse new entities avoid placing the grammatical subject of the main clause in an initial position in the utterance. This violates the general principle of given-before-new information (Cheshire 2005a: 486). Consequently, the syntactic configuration itself (placing the new information at the beginning of the utterance) facilitates the articulation of certain pragmatic inferences (in this case, Cheshire's analysis suggests that the speaker is focused on communicating new, key, factual, referential information rather than on building interactional rapport).

The ability for syntactic constructions to encode pragmatic meaning by virtue of their grammatical configuration makes them quite different from phonological variants. It is a difference that has long been recognised (Lavandera 1978; Dines 1980; Romaine 1984; Cheshire 1987, 1999, 2005a; Cameron & Schwenter 2013), but the focus on phonetics and phonology in sociolinguistics has hindered our understanding of the relationship between grammatical variation and social meaning. In the next section, I outline the way in which this book attempts to explore the relationship between grammatical variation and social meaning.

1.2 How Will This Book Examine the Relationship between Grammar and Social Meaning?

So far, the vast majority of work on grammatical variation in sociolinguistics has focused on morpholexical and morphosyntactic variation. This work has been important in demonstrating how these types of grammatical variable correlate with macrosocial categories such as social class, gender, age and ethnicity (see Tagliamonte 2012 for an overview). However, the extent to which grammatical variation can encode these and other types of social meaning remains unclear. For this reason, the social meanings associated with different types of grammatical variable will be explored in Chapters 4–7, which form the analysis chapters in this volume. In order to increase our understanding of a wider range of grammatical variables, Chapters 4 and 5 will apply new methods to the study of traditional morpholexical and morphosyntactic variables, whereas Chapters 6 and 7 will focus on less frequently studied and more 'purely' syntactic phenomenon.

The research that has been undertaken on morpholexical and morphosyntactic variation has suggested that these variables are less subject to social evaluation than phonological variables (Labov 1993; Labov 2001: 28; Levon & Buchstaller 2015) and that the types of social meaning they index are more restricted than those typically found for phonological alternatives (Eckert 2019a: 758–759). In particular, it has been suggested that, because these