

Socio-syntax

How do we adapt our grammar to communicate social detail? Do all working-class people have a local dialect or are we free to use language in ways that transcend our place in the social hierarchy? Seeking to answer these questions, this pioneering book is the first to exclusively and extensively address the relationship between social meaning and grammatical variation. It demonstrates how we use grammar to communicate alignments and stances *and* to construct our social style or social identity. Based on an ethnographic study of high-school girls in Northern England, it also uses the author's own experiences as a working-class student, to argue for change in how we conceive of grammar and how grammar is taught in schools. Lively and engaging real-life examples from the study are included throughout, bringing to life new contributions to debates in variationist sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropology.

EMMA MOORE is Professor of Sociolinguistics at The University of Sheffield. She was a British Academy Mid-Career Fellow in 2020–2022. Recent publications include *Language and a Sense of Place* (co-edited with Montgomery, 2017) and *Social Meaning and Linguistic Variation* (co-edited with Hall-Lew and Podesva, 2021).

Socio-syntax

Exploring the Social Life of Grammar

Professor Emma Moore

University of Sheffield



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-84397-3 — Socio-syntax
Emma Moore
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108843973

DOI: 10.1017/9781108921299

© Emma Moore 2024

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2024

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Moore, Emma, 1976- author.

Title: Socio-syntax : exploring the social life of grammar / Emma Moore.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University
Press, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023019007 (print) | LCCN 2023019008 (ebook) | ISBN
9781108843973 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108826198 (paperback) | ISBN
9781108921299 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Speech and social status—England. | English language—Syntax.
| English language—Spoken English—England. | English language—Social aspects—
England. | English language—Variation—England. | Working class—England—
Language. | High school girls—England—Language.

Classification: LCC P40.5.S632 G766 2024 (print) | LCC P40.5.S632 (ebook) | DDC
306.442/21042—dc23/eng/20230607

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023019007>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023019008>

ISBN 978-1-108-84397-3 Hardback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will
remain, accurate or appropriate.

For Hilda and Frank Moore,
who wanted more for me and Sarah, and gave
it unconditionally.

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	xii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiv
1 Why Does the Social Meaning of Grammar Matter?	1
1.1 What Is Grammatical Variation?	7
1.2 How Will This Book Examine the Relationship between Grammar and Social Meaning?	10
2 The Social Landscape of Midlan High	15
2.1 Situating Midlan High	17
2.2 Places and Spaces within Midlan High	19
2.3 The Process of Ethnography	20
2.4 The Social Groups at Midlan High	28
2.5 Reflections and Limitations	44
3 How Do We Study the Social Meaning of Grammatical Variation?	46
3.1 Interpreting Social Meaning	49
3.2 Grammatical Variants and the Development of Social Meaning	61
3.3 Types of Grammatical Variant and Types of Social Meaning	67
3.4 Investigating the Social Meaning of Grammar	71
3.5 Establishing Sociolinguistic Meaning	74
4 How Free Are We to Vary the Grammar We Use?	75
4.1 Children and the Acquisition of Local Dialects	77
4.2 Children, Peers and School	80
4.3 Levelled <i>Were</i> at Midlan High	81
4.4 What Constrains Our Use of Grammatical Variation?	105
5 How Do We Use Grammar to Design Our Talk?	111
5.1 The Semantics of Negative Concord	115
5.2 Negative Concord at Midlan High	117
5.3 The Discourse Context of Negative Concord	125
5.4 The Social Meaning of Negative Concord	129
5.5 Highly Stigmatised Grammar, Pragmatics and Social Association	136
	 vii

viii	Contents	
6	Does Everyone Use Grammar to Make Social Meaning?	138
6.1	What Types of Right Dislocation Are Possible?	140
6.2	What Are the Functions of Right Dislocation?	143
6.3	How Were Right-dislocated Tags Analysed?	149
6.4	How Are Right-dislocated Tags Distributed at Midlan High?	151
6.5	How Are Personal Pronoun Tags Distributed at Midlan High?	157
6.6	The Social and Interactional Functions of Right Dislocation	160
6.7	What Is the Relationship between Form, Frequency and Function?	167
6.8	Syntactic Variables, Semantics and Social Meaning	168
7	How Does Grammar Combine with Other Elements of Language?	171
7.1	The Tag Questions Dataset	174
7.2	How Are Tag Questions Distributed at Midlan High?	175
7.3	How Do Tag Questions Vary at the Discourse Level?	179
7.4	How Do Tag Questions Vary in Their Linguistic Content?	186
7.5	Summary: How Do Tag Questions Vary?	190
7.6	Tag Questions and Social Meaning	195
7.7	Do Tag Questions Have Character-type Social Meanings?	204
8	What Does It Mean to View Grammar as a Fluid, Flexible Social Resource?	207
8.1	What Are the Key Findings of This Study?	210
8.2	What Are the Wider Implications of Foregrounding the Social Meanings of Grammar?	223
8.3	The Educational Consequence of Recognising the Social Meaning of Grammar	225
8.4	Final Words	232
	<i>References</i>	233
	<i>Index</i>	253

Figures

2.1 The location of Bolton, in relation to the city of Manchester, the county of Greater Manchester, and the rest of England, Scotland and Wales. (This work is based on data provided through EDINA UKBORDERS with the support of the ESRC and JISC and uses boundary material which is copyright of the Crown. © Crown Copyright/database right 2017. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service.)	page 17
3.1 The three components of a sign, using the example of coat-wearing at Midlan High.	49
3.2 A hypothetical indexical field for the tag question <i>innit</i> . [Grey cogs indicate stance-related social meanings and black cogs indicate character-type social meanings (with persona-linked meanings in small capitals, and social-type meanings in italicised small capitals).]	57
3.3 Type SM: Trajectory of social meaning rooted in semantics.	61
3.4 Type CT: Trajectory of social meaning derived from a character-type index.	62
3.5 Type SS: Trajectory of social meaning derived from sound symbolism.	62
3.6 A simplified representation of inter-related social meanings of <i>innit</i> .	67
4.1 Distribution of levelled <i>were</i> by social class.	89
4.2 Distribution of levelled <i>were</i> by parental place of birth.	90
4.3 Distribution of levelled <i>were</i> by community of practice.	91
4.4 Average distribution of levelled <i>were</i> by year of recording.	93
4.5 Average distribution of levelled <i>were</i> by year of recording for each community of practice.	93
4.6 Pairwise comparisons of EMMs between the levels in the clause-type factor group.	101
4.7 Pairwise comparisons of EMMs between the levels in the subject-type factor group.	102

x	List of Figures	
4.8	Pairwise comparisons of EMMs between the levels in the community of practice factor group.	103
4.9	Pairwise comparisons of EMMs between the levels in the social class factor group.	104
4.10	Pairwise comparisons of EMMs between the levels in the community of practice factor group, by year of recording.	104
4.11	The Townies' use of levelled <i>were</i> over time.	107
4.12	A hypothetical indexical field of levelled <i>were</i> , showing how social meaning may develop for an individual over time.	109
5.1	Mean use of negative concord over time, by community of practice.	120
5.2	Distribution of negative concord according to community of practice. Bars show group means; circles show individual speakers.	121
5.3	Distribution of negative concord by social class membership. Bars show group means; circles show individual speakers.	122
5.4	Raw frequencies of topics discussed in the instances of postverbal negation with indeterminates, by community of practice.	125
5.5	Percentage distribution of topic for instances of standard negation (e.g., <i>I don't like anything</i>), by community of practice.	126
5.6	Percentage distribution of topic for instances of negative concord (e.g., <i>I don't like nothing</i>), by community of practice.	127
5.7	A hypothetical indexical field of negative concord, showing how social meaning may be rooted in semantics (black circle), association with character types (dark grey circle), and embodiment of character types in local space.	133
6.1	Frequency of right dislocation by social class. Each dot represents one individual. Bars represent group averages.	151
6.2	Frequency of right dislocation by community of practice. Each dot represents one individual. Bars represent group averages.	153
6.3	Use of right dislocation by tag type for each community of practice.	154
6.4	Use of right-dislocated personal pronoun tags by community of practice.	156
6.5	Distribution of verb processes by personal pronoun type.	157
6.6	Distribution of stance according to personal pronoun types.	159
6.7	Distribution of right-dislocated tag types for the two outliers in the analysis (Michelle, Geek, and Georgia, Popular).	163

List of Figures	xi
6.8 Use of first-person pronoun tags as a proportion of all personal pronoun tags, over time.	165
6.9 Use of second- and third-person pronoun tags as a proportion of all personal pronoun tags, over time.	166
7.1 Frequency of tag questions by social class. Each dot represents one individual. Bars represent group means.	176
7.2 Frequency of tag questions by community of practice. Each dot represents one individual. Bars represent group means.	177
7.3 Use of tag questions over time, by community of practice.	178
7.4 Proportional differences in the type of response to turn-final tags, by social group.	181
7.5 Proportional differences in the type of response to turn-medial tags, by social group.	182
7.6 Proportional occurrence of overlap with tag question usage, by social group.	183
7.7 Topic of talk used in tag questions by social group.	185
7.8 Use of personal pronouns in tag questions, by social group.	186
7.9 Proportion of /h/-dropping within tag questions, by social group.	188
7.10 Proportion of /t/ variants, by social group.	189
7.11 Use of morphosyntax within tag questions, by social group.	189
7.12 Populards' use of tag questions over time. Smoothies are shown in black.	202
7.13 Responses to turn-final tags in Year 10.	203
7.14 Responses to turn-medial tags in Year 10.	203
8.1 Type CT: Trajectory of social meaning derived from a character-type index.	221
8.2 Type SM: Trajectory of social meaning rooted in semantics.	222

Tables

1.1 Types of grammatical variation studied by sociolinguists	page 7
2.1 Participants included in the linguistic analysis, by social group	28
2.2 Number of words included in the corpus for the data analysis, by social group	29
3.1 Types of grammatical variation	68
4.1 Agreement patterns for past tense BE in English, with example clauses	82
4.2 Distribution of levelled <i>were</i> by social class	89
4.3 Distribution of levelled <i>were</i> by parental place of birth	90
4.4 Distribution of levelled <i>were</i> by community of practice	91
4.5 Distribution of levelled <i>were</i> by year of recording	92
4.6 Linguistic factors considered in the analysis of levelled <i>were</i> at Midlan High	95
4.7 Results of the generalised linear mixed-effects modelling for use of levelled <i>were</i>	99
5.1 Results indicating the effect of indefinite type on the occurrence of negative concord (Fisher’s Exact, two-sided, $p = 0.004$)	118
5.2 Results indicating the effect of negative element on the occurrence of negative concord (Chi-square, $\chi^2(3) = 8.36$, $p = 0.004$)	119
5.3 Results indicating the effect of position of the indeterminate on the occurrence of negative concord (Chi-square, $\chi^2(1) = 5.64$, $p = 0.018$)	119
5.4 Use of negative concord by community of practice	120
5.5 Use of negative concord by social class	122
5.6 Use of negative concord by parental place of birth	123
6.1 Types of right dislocation found in British English	141
6.2 Verb process types used in the analysis of personal pronoun tags according to Halliday (1985)	150
6.3 Evaluative stances expressed in the context of right dislocation use	150

List of Tables	xiii
6.4 Log likelihood comparisons for social class groups	152
6.5 Distribution of right dislocation at Midlan High by tag type	154
7.1 Significant pairwise log likelihood comparisons with the High social class group	177
7.2 Significant pairwise log likelihood comparisons for communities of practice	178
8.1 Types of grammatical variation and their likely trajectories of social meaning	220

Acknowledgements

This book started as a conversation with one of my wonderful PhD supervisors, the much-missed Richard Hogg. I was complaining to him about the dominant depiction of working-class people: as unfulfilled, feckless and ignorant, with brutal family lives and hopeless futures. Sociolinguists did not seek to perpetuate these stereotypes, but the social meanings relied on to explain patterns of variation (that working-class speech was ‘tough’, ‘rough’ and ‘masculine’) did little to challenge the dominant narrative. Everything felt a little one-sided: it wasn’t that people didn’t perceive working-class speech in these ways, rather that it was just one way of perceiving working-class speech. Richard pointed me to sociological literature that more richly nuanced the heterogeneity of working-class existence and then, one day, he handed me Penny Eckert’s *Linguistic Variation as Social Practice*. In a typically understated Richard way, he said, ‘I think you might like to read this.’

The world shifted on its axis and – perhaps for the first time – I started to see how I could bring my own life experience with me into academia. It has been a long journey, though – it’s taken me twenty years to write this book. I write about the reasons for this in the book itself – something I couldn’t have done twenty, even ten, years ago – so I won’t reiterate them here. Instead, I use this space to thank the people who helped me to do it.

Richard Hogg and David Denison kept me afloat at university. They were also the perfect double-act (Richard was a bit anarchic, David was steady) and they were both patient, encouraging, thoughtful and inventive in finding ways to keep me engaged. I don’t think we ever talked explicitly about how university made me feel but you seemed to know what I needed. You were generous (especially with the KitKats, David), and continued to support, encourage and cheer-lead, even when I chose sociolinguistics over historical linguistics. I now realise how significant this was, given how some top linguistics departments perceived sociolinguistics in the 1990s.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Penny Eckert changed my life. I read her book and Richard encouraged me to email her. Knowing very little about me, Penny invited me to meet her at UKLVC2 in Essex. I was terrified. I drove

there (scared the whole time that I was going to run out of petrol as there was a petrol shortage at the time), spent two hours talking to Penny, stayed one night, and drove home. I wasn't even brave enough to attend the conference properly in case someone asked me what I did or what I thought. For some reason best known to Penny, she then invited me to attend Stanford as a visiting scholar. I spent April–June 2001 in the Linguistics department. It was an opportunity of a lifetime. I learnt so much in those three months, and not just about linguistics and anthropology. Thank you, Penny, for showing me a different world, being my fiercest critic, and becoming a valued friend. Thank you also for not flinching (too much) when I asked you to cook that very expensive tuna steak 'well done' when I stayed with you and Ivan that time.

Stanford introduced me to some brilliant minds who continue to challenge what I think and how I articulate it. Rob Podesva, I love you, and I forgive you for only accepting me into your cool gang in the last month of that first Stanford visit. You've made up for it since. Thank you for working with me on my tag question data, which was published as Moore and Podesva (2009). The UK has wonderful minds too. My friend and colleague, the brilliant Sarah Spencer, continues to provide tea and thoughtful, perceptive insights. Thank you to you, and to Julia Snell, for challenging me to properly articulate the theory, and for being my working-class allies. Julia, thank you for working with me on my right-dislocation data, which was published as Moore and Snell (2011). Jenny Cheshire helped me in many different ways as I was working on this book. I think I may have finally read everything that you've ever written and the seeds of what I say in this book were planted in your brilliant work on morphosyntax and discourse. I've tried really hard to show where you led the way in the following pages – but everyone should just read everything you've written for themselves.

I wouldn't be an academic without the funding I received as a graduate student from the AHRC. The writing of this book was supported by a British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship which bought me out of teaching and admin and allowed me to focus solely on writing and speaking to people about my ideas. It was a huge privilege that I am very grateful to have received. Helen Barton and Izzie Collins at Cambridge University Press have been helpful, encouraging and – most importantly – patient. The reviewers of the book proposal and the final manuscript were clearly not of the 'Reviewer 2'-type and provided thoughtful, useful and articulate feedback. Holly Dann and Sarah Tasker got all of my data into LaBB-CAT, and Holly, in typically affable and calm fashion, supported my mangled attempts to use R. I really have had some of the most wonderful postgraduate students, who have taught me a great deal.

Marie Feltham saved me twice. Once as a young lecturer, out of my depth in a new job, in a new city; and once during the COVID-19 pandemic when I was trying to write this book. Marie: thank you for helping me to realise that

happiness is a choice, and that being a perfectionist can be a superpower if used well. You only have to read this bit of the book.

To Mum and Dad, Hilda and Frank Moore, and my sister, Sarah: I know you don't always know what I'm doing or why I'm doing it, but I love you so much for always doing everything you can to help me all the same. Chris, thank you for helping me to build a life where it is possible to raise a wonderful, quirky, happy child, whilst also spending hours in the attic writing a book. I love that we are a pair of equals and an equal match. Lara, thank you for being patient when I've been in the attic and you wanted to play, and for coming in for impromptu cuddles. You really are the best chimp, and I love our little family more than anything.

Finally, as Penny Eckert once said to me, you can theorise all you like, but it's the data that matters. My data came from some amazing young women, who allowed me to step into their lives. To be honest, you were often slightly terrifying, but always uplifting. I imagine that you scarcely remember those months when that weird woman came into your school and tagged along at lunchtime. Thank you for trusting me. I've worked really hard to try and make you sound like the real, interesting and engaging people you were. Your words are important and they can make a difference.