

Meaning and Linguistic Variation

Linguistic styles, particularly variations in pronunciation, carry a wide range of meaning – from speakers’ socioeconomic class to their mood or stance in the moment. This book examines the development of the study of sociolinguistic variation, from early demographic studies to a focus on the construction of social meaning in stylistic practice. It traces the development of the “Third Wave” approach to sociolinguistic variation, uncovering the stylistic practices that underlie broad societal patterns of change. Eckert charts the development of her thinking and of the emergence of a theoretical community around the “Third Wave” approach to social meaning. Featuring new material alongside earlier seminal work, it provides a coherent account of the social meaning of linguistic variation.

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The Third Wave in Sociolinguistics

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Dedication

My senior year in high school, my French class had a substitute teacher for one week. He told us he didn't know any French, but that he was a linguist and could help us with whatever we were working on. We said we were struggling with irregular verbs. He had us read him the paradigms and then said, "Those aren't irregular." That day I learned about stress-based vowel alternations, and from then on my dream was to be a linguist. I will never know who he was. I've tried to find out, but I will never forget him. The principal told me that on his way home after his dissertation fieldwork on an Apache reservation, an automobile accident had killed his wife and his child and destroyed his notes. He was substitute teaching as he tried to get his life back together, but he gave up and committed suicide soon after. This book is dedicated to his memory, and to the life that he and his family never had.

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Preface: The Ant's Eye View

I have always been an ant in an intellectual world that favors the bird's eye view. My development as a linguist has been a gradual recognition that this is not a deficit.

What follows is something like an intellectual autobiography, tracing the development of my engagement with the social meaning of variation and the emergence of the Third Wave of variation study. It is a somewhat personal account, because intellectual development is highly personal, intertwined with relationships and personal change. My academic life has not been easy, thanks to a great extent to a fairly paralyzing case of impostor syndrome. And if all my years of teaching have taught me one thing, it's how prevalent that syndrome is in academics, how much damage it does, and how important it is to talk about it. While I won't bare my soul or offer personal tidbits that are not clearly relevant to my linguistics, there will be some embarrassing stuff in the following pages and I hope it will be of use to some readers.

In a 2005 LSA plenary, which later appeared in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (Eckert 2012), I traced the development of variation studies as a series of three waves: a First Wave of urban survey studies, a Second Wave of ethnographic studies of local dynamics, and a Third Wave in which the focus turned to the meaning of variation. I was trained in the First Wave, participated in the Second Wave, and found my center in the Third Wave. The Third Wave is not "a" theory but a theoretical perspective that puts the meaning of variation, in all its dynamism and indeterminacy, at the center of analysis. And it locates meaning not in the individual variable so much as in stylistic practice. The unfortunate aspect of the wave metaphor is that it has often been taken to mean that each wave supersedes the previous one. I would say that each wave refines aspects of the previous one, but it has always been clear that the basic ideas of each wave have always been implicit in the earlier waves. I have often said that the Martha's Vineyard study (Labov 1963) was the first Third Wave study, and certainly discourses of agency as well as of social meaning were around from the start, in conversations if not in writings. Trudgill's (1972) notion of covert prestige, based in notions of working-class male toughness, was certainly what one would call an example of indexical order (Silverstein 2003). And the

accumulation of evidence in each wave made more work possible in the next. At the same time, while Labov's (1966) move to large-scale survey methods was the obvious next step (and, by virtue of its focus on class, pretty radical at the time), it ended up overshadowing – even suppressing – the insights of the Martha's Vineyard study. The Third Wave has picked up this thread.

The skeleton of this book is a series of papers that I think best illustrate my thinking over time. Some of these papers have been buried in obscure volumes, because I've never had a particularly effective publication strategy. Some of them were also written long after my thoughts had moved on, so the papers in this volume follow the chronology of my thought, not of their publication. I confess that the prose in the earlier papers makes me cringe. Too many paragraphs begin with *whereas*, *while*, *although* ... as if I was trying to be fancy by talking backwards. I think my writing improved along with my confidence that what I had to say was good enough that I could write it in my own voice. The book is in three parts, following what I see as three main phases in my development as a linguist: graduate school and my work on Gascon, my work in the Second Wave, centered on my study of Jocks and Burnouts, and my work in the Third Wave, which developed after I came to Stanford.

Acknowledgments

Since this book is about my entire career as a linguist, it is in itself a long acknowledgment. I've read acknowledgments that list dozens of people, and the more people one lists the more people one is likely to accidentally leave out. So while there have been many wonderful people in my life, each one bringing something different, I am keeping it simple.

I have a great and satisfyingly weird family, and I just hope that the world remains a reasonable place for the future of my wonderfully quirky grand-nephews, Owen and Noel Eckert. I'm grateful for the twenty-eight years that I shared with Ivan Sag, who was not only a wonderful life partner, but showed me how to believe in myself as a linguist. And although I no longer work on Gascon, my connection to Gascony is now forty-eight years old and deep, as is my love for four very special Gascons whom I consider my extended family – Gisèle, Bernard and Patricia Rumeau, and the late Sylvestre (Steve) Novak. Bill Labov has been in my life for fifty-four years, and I appreciate him more every day. His fascination with people and his love of fieldwork was what first drew me to him, and his friendship and kindness have drawn me closer over the years.

I became an ethnographer at Michigan, and it was at Michigan that I realized that my future lay in incorporating Anthropology into my work on variation. I'm grateful for the support and friendship of my colleagues in the Anthropology Department, particularly Rob Burling, Conrad Kottak and Skip Rappaport. Miyako Inoue is particularly special to me – brilliant and ridiculously modest, she has been my constant guide in the theoretical landscape of Linguistic Anthropology, and a most beloved friend. And Sally McConnell-Ginet's collaboration and friendship have been a complete gift. Now that we're no longer working together, I miss that sense of being part of a "with," but the closeness will always be there. Nik Coupland has always been both generous and inspiring from afar, and there are very few ideas in this book that he had not already had.

Fieldwork has always been my main inspiration, and I'm grateful to the many people who have allowed me into their lives – the people of Soulan, the administrators, teachers and students of Belten High and other high schools

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in the Detroit suburbs, and of Fields and Steps Elementary schools. And I'm unspeakably grateful for my years in the Stanford Linguistics Department, which is not only an unusually civil department, but the only Linguistics department I know of that has been truly serious about breaking down subdisciplinary boundaries. Where else could this community that has come to call itself the Third Wave have happened? I'm grateful to each and every one of the students that has contributed to this wave, both for the intellectual stimulation and for their trust, love and companionship. I've gotten to work with so many amazing students – in my twenty-eight years at Stanford, I've been on something like forty dissertation committees, of which I've chaired or co-chaired twenty-two. Each one of these has been an honor and an adventure, and many of these students remain close friends as well as colleagues. One of them, Rob Podesva, is now my very creative and wonderful colleague, and will carry on and continue to transform the sociolinguistics program at Stanford as I follow John Rickford into retirement. I've been very lucky.

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