1 Social Meaning and Linguistic Variation: Theoretical Foundations

Lauren Hall-Lew, Emma Moore, and Robert J. Podesva

1.1 Why Theorize the Third Wave?

The goal of this volume is to advance sociolinguistic theory. It focuses on a growing research area about how social information is encoded in language, known by some as the ‘third wave’ of variationist sociolinguistics (Eckert 2012). While this approach has been growing in popularity in recent years, its aims and assumptions have not been explicitly spelled out. This book will provide empirically motivated, explicit statements about key concepts, their historical development, and their contemporary implementation in third-wave research. Each chapter takes up an important theme for theorizing the third wave and presents new empirical data that sheds light on the topic at hand. The papers collectively make a case for why attending to social meaning is vital to the study of variation while also offering a foundation from which variationists can engage with social meaning in productive ways. We examine variation at a variety of levels of analysis, including phonetics, morphosyntax, and semantics; from multiple analytical perspectives, including language production and perception; across a range of cultural contexts, including Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North America.

Traditional first- and second-wave approaches have treated variation as a window into language change (Weinreich, Labov, & Herzog 1968), and have examined the stratification of variation according to both macrosocial categories (e.g., gender, class) and locally significant categories (e.g., jocks, burnouts). Proponents of a third-wave approach focus on linguistic variation as a resource for taking stances, making social moves, and constructing identity. These social practices are possible only because linguistic variants carry meaning and take on new meanings in situated interaction, and as components of styles. While this term has been used by numerous scholars to refer to a wide array of things (see discussions in Rickford & Eckert 2001; Schilling 2013), we
follow Irvine (2001) in viewing distinctiveness as its defining characteristic. Zhang (this volume) also takes this perspective in defining style as ‘an emergent system of distinction . . . constituted by linguistic and other semiotic resources and practices that make distinction meaningful’. Consequently, a key component of third-wave work is examining how meaning-making operates within stylistic practice.

In this chapter, we provide an overview of the third-wave approach, addressing what we see as its principles and aims. In doing so, we expand on the overview of the third-wave approach as presented in Eckert (2012) and Eckert (2019), while also offering new avenues for research. Our aim is to highlight what the third wave has to offer to a theory of social meaning in language, drawing upon the volume’s chapters to illustrate our discussion. As such, this introduction highlights the content of the volume’s chapters, but it also makes explicit the theoretical perspectives that unite scholars engaged in taking a social-meaning-based approach to variation as evidenced in current work in the field. We thus introduce the contribution of each chapter not through the traditional style (a final subsection with one paragraph dedicated to one or two chapters) but in an integrated way, referring to the chapters to demonstrate the growing diversity of the third-wave approach as well as the fundamental principles that unify their shared perspective.

The volume is structured around three sections. The papers in the first section, Where Is (Social) Meaning?, examine the question of how third-wave research characterizes meaning. It focuses on issues relevant at different levels of linguistic representation, including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics itself. The second section, The Structure of Social Meaning, then takes up the issue of how meaning is structured, taking the indexical field (Eckert 2008) as a starting point. It examines the structure of signs, how social meanings relate to one another, and how conflicts among meanings are resolved. The third section, Meaning and Linguistic Change, considers the role that social meaning might play in processes of language change. While an interest in social meaning developed largely independently of the issue of change (cf. Labov 1963), third-wave variationists have increasingly noted that attending to meaning can help elucidate the question of why linguistic change transpires in the way that it does. This final section will thus bring our volume back into dialogue with the broader field of variationist research. In doing so, it highlights the intersection of first-, second-, and third-wave research.

In the remainder of this chapter, we present the fundamentals of an approach to variation that centres on social meaning. We start by outlining what social meaning is and discussing how the connections between variable linguistic forms and their social meanings arise. Section 1.3 turns its attention to linguistic form. In particular, we underscore the centrality of markedness and offer
thoughts on how a form’s domain of linguistic representation (e.g., syntax vs phonetics) may bear on its social meaning. While Sections 1.2 and 1.3 focus on meaning and form, respectively, Section 1.4 discusses the nature of the association between the two, highlighting the properties of underspecification and multiplicity. Section 1.5 theorizes how to conceptualize the emergence of meaning when considering multiple forms at once, as opposed to single linguistic features in isolation. Section 1.6 takes up the practical question of how one goes about studying social meaning; we review a number of approaches and identify their strengths and drawbacks. Finally, we conclude by offering some thoughts on where the study of social meaning might be headed. Our goal for this chapter is neither to enforce a status quo nor prescribe a path forward, but rather to establish a common ground from which a variety of sociolinguists can set out on new explorations.

1.2 What Is Social Meaning?

Meg and Kim are talking about where they shop for clothes with a group of their friends. Kim says she shops at a high end department store, and several other girls say they do too. Meg turns to look at the fieldworker recording their interaction and says, ‘They’re all posh, these, aren’t they?’ Kim changes the subject.

From ‘Midlan High’ School fieldwork, see Moore, this volume

Social meaning is the set of inferences that can be drawn on the basis of how language is used in a specific interaction. That set of inferences may be linked to the pragmatic function of the utterance itself (Acton, this volume; Beltrama & Staum Casasanto, this volume). In the interaction above, Meg uses a right dislocated tag (the demonstrative pronoun these, which is co-referential with subject they in the preceding clause) and a tag question (‘aren’t they?’). We know that structures that occur at the right periphery of the clause, like right dislocation and tag questions, can be focusing and, as such, they can have expressive, evaluative and/or affective functions (Ashby 1988; Fretheim 1995; Lambrecht 2001). Research on tag questions has also suggested that their status – as part way between a declarative and a question – gives them a conducive function (Hudson 1975); they simultaneously express the speaker’s viewpoint, while encouraging a specific response to it (Kimps 2007: 272). So we might draw inferences based on the construction of the linguistic item we hear: in this case, that Meg is being evaluative and attempting to conduce agreement around the evaluation.

But we do not just draw inferences by reading the pragmatics of a construction. We also rely on inferences about the sort of person who produces the utterance, the situation they are in, the nature of the relationship between interlocutors, the speaker’s orientation to the content of the talk, and more. So, in the interaction above, Meg’s utterance gains social meaning if you
know that, while Kim and Meg have been friends since the first year of school, Meg has recently been spending time with another group of girls who have a reputation for being more wild, daring, and rebellious than girls like Kim. This has created tension between Meg and Kim as they begin to explore their emerging differentiation. This distancing is evident in the distinction between Meg and Kim’s social practice, but it’s also there in Meg’s orientation to her talk: in the deixis of they and these, in the labelling of Kim and her friends as ‘posh’ (a pejorative term linked to the practices of those associated with higher social classes), and, as mentioned, in Meg’s efforts to conduce the fieldworker to align with her viewpoint.

Unlike semantically based inferences, the inferences drawn about social meaning are inherently indeterminate (Podesva 2007; Eckert 2008; Maegaard & Pharao, this volume; Gafter, this volume). While the syntax of right dislocated tags might make them focusing and/or evaluative, they are not inherently negatively evaluative or directly indexical of a rebellious style of speech. The ability to read Meg’s right dislocated tag in this way comes from its stylistic framing: the syntactic configuration, the lexis, the phonology, and everything that we know about the interaction and its participants. Yet, neither researchers nor language users attend to all components of social meaning at the same time: variationist studies often focus on how a single variant works in a specific social interaction, and there is evidence that the disparate experiences of individual language users makes them pay attention to different aspects of language (e.g., Hay et al. 2006; D’Onofrio, this volume; Drager et al., this volume). The computational complexity of interpreting social meaning in any given interaction makes the enterprise of third-wave sociolinguistics challenging, but also an area ripe with possibilities for new research directions.

Meanings are also made indeterminate by the simple fact that the kinds of inferences that might be drawn are manifold. For example, language users make inferences about stance, which refers to those meanings that are constructed around evaluation of some object of talk and the alignment between interlocutors (Du Bois 2007). So too do they make inferences about persona, or the characterological traits interactants evoke through situated linguistic practice. At the same time, social types are related to larger ideological constructs like class, ethnicity, and gender (see Moore & Podesva 2009).

It is also the case that different components of a construction (like right dislocation) might link to different levels of meaning. So, while Meg’s use of deixis in they and these clearly portrays her stance towards Kim (and the other girls in the interaction), the simple fact that right dislocation is more commonly used by kids who are engaged in anti-school practices at her school might cause us to note something about her persona (although, of course, how frequency interacts with meaning is a complex question; see Hay, Jannedy, & Mendoza-Denton 1999; Snell 2010). Likewise, Meg’s pejorative use of the word posh...
might lead us to recognize disassociation from a higher-class social type. Note that all of these meanings are contextual: how we understand the deixis in *they* and *these* requires us to understand who Meg is talking about and to; linking right dislocation to a persona type relies on our knowledge of the system of distinction she is embedded in; and her use of the word *posh* is triggered by her alignment in a specific discussion about taste and economic capital.

Each of these linguistic artifacts (deixis, right dislocation, use of ‘posh’) function as signs by Saussure’s (1916) definition, in that they encompass a linguistic form that is associated with a meaning. However, following Peirce (1895), Silverstein (1976, 2003), Eckert (2016), and Gal (2016), we might highlight the interpretative element of this process: signs are associated with meanings, but the precise meaning is an artifact of an interpretative process, and one that is ideologically mediated. For example, Gafter (this volume) shows that pharyngeal phonemes in Hebrew can signify any one of a range of potentially conflicting social meanings (historical and prescriptive accuracy; Mizrahi ethnicity; low socioeconomic status; Arabic first language). The social meaning(s) that listeners arrive at, however vaguely, can only be determined in the moment of use, dependent on the particular ideologies made relevant in context. That is to say that, while all linguistic forms have the potential to signify social meaning, a form only does so when our system of ideas and beliefs creates a link between the form and a type of social meaning (such as stance, persona, or social type). This is the process of *indexicality*, as articulated in linguistic anthropology.

At its core, indexicality is a process of association, where a linguistic form points to some dimension of its conventional context of use (e.g., Silverstein 1976, 2003; Ochs 1992). In many variationist approaches to indexicality, the relevant dimension of context is the typical user of a particular form. For example, in suburban Detroit, negative concord has the potential to index burnout identity, as burnouts use the form more often than their jock peers. But associations with social types or social groups is just one of many dimensions of context, any of which could emerge as relevant. Another relevant dimension could be the kind of stances typically taken while using a form. The same feature, negative concord, can be indexically associated with the rebellious stances that its users typically take while using it (Eckert 2000; see also Moore, this volume). Whatever type of social meaning we study, indexicality stands as a core concept in theorizing social meaning, as it represents one of the primary means through which the connection between a linguistic form and its social interpretation arises.

Indexicality is central to third-wave research. One of the foundational concepts is Silverstein’s (2003: 194) *indexical order*, which refers to the degree of ideological complexity of a linguistic form, where change to that complexity is ‘always already immanent’. Sociolinguists have built on the
concept of the indexical order in different ways. On the one hand, Johnstone et al. (2006) describe it as a hierarchical process such that the social meanings of language are initially unconscious but may, over time, become stereotypical. This process is imagined as operating as a movement through structured (and temporally dependent) orders of indexicality that can be related to Labov’s (1972) description of variables as indicators, markers, and stereotypes. Importantly, in this model of indexicality, the social meanings identified are almost exclusively related to the main correlations measured in first- and second-wave research (e.g., persona types, such as ‘Pittsburghers’, or social types, such as ‘working class’). In order to understand the ways in which persona and social type are embodied (and constructed) in interaction, others have invoked a more fluid indexical field (Eckert 2008; Moore and Podesva 2009)—a semiotic space where potential meanings co-exist, but in which specific social meanings are only activated by the existence of co-occurring associations and/or certain ideological conditions. So, to go back to the previous example, and drawing on the relationship between stance and social meaning (see Kiesling 2009), if one is attending to Meg’s negative stance towards Kim, then this might facilitate an indexical link to a persona type which frequently makes negative and face-threatening evaluations (so a Townie persona in Meg’s school rather than a Popular one). But the indexical relationship might also operate from macro to micro. For instance, Meg’s use of right dislocation might be interpreted as constitutive of a working-class social type (by someone unfamiliar with the local dynamics of the discourse in which it appears). This might lead to certain stances being assumed which reflect ideologies about how working-class people present themselves (e.g., as brash and direct). As Gal and Irvine (1995: 995) note, there is no ‘view from nowhere’, and where we are standing determines what we perceive.

The indeterminacy of social meaning can lead to a number of different indexical paths. Indexical relationships can be transformed into iconic ones (Irvine & Gal 2000) through a process of iconization, whereby the indexical link comes to be ‘as if the linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a social group’s inherent nature or essence’ (Irvine 2001: 35). Iconic relations between form and meaning are grounded in local ideology, and, in so being, they can erase the indexical orders through which a form’s social meaning has developed. Zhang (2005; this volume), for example, details how rhoticity in Beijing Mandarin is iconized as an ‘oily’ sound befitting the ‘smooth operator’ persona and their slippery qualities. Similarly, a speaker’s small body is iconic of high fundamental frequency (f0, the acoustic correlate of pitch), given dominant ideologies of gender and age. In both of these cases, the forms (rhoticity and f0) can index a wide range of stances, but the iconic meanings serve to erase alternative inferences. Importantly, the process of iconization is culturally specific, as illustrated by Drager et al. (this volume), who argue for an
iconic relationship between pitch and body size that challenges dominant Western ideologies. Their data from Hawai‘i demonstrate that a higher f0 is associated with larger body size, and that this association depends on the listener’s concurrent perception of the speakers’ ethnicity. This shows that even these iconic relations are ideologized and conventionalized.

Whereas indexical meaning points to dimensions of the context in which forms are used, and iconic meaning obscures the arbitrariness of such connections, semantic meaning refers to ‘the content conventionally associated with words’ (Beltrama & Staum Casasanto, this volume), presenting another path along which lexical and morphosyntactic forms can come to be connected to social meanings. In their work on the social meaning of the Italian intensifier, -issimo, Beltrama and Staum Casasanto show that listeners draw stronger social inferences when the intensifier is used on nouns (e.g., gelati-issimo). Importantly, listeners hear speakers as strikingly more outgoing, more excitable, and friendlier when they use -issimo in these contexts. Beltrama and Staum Casasanto suggest that these social meanings are not independent of the fact that the linguistic structure in question is an intensifier. In other words, the conventional semantic meaning of intensification bleeds into social interpretations of the speakers, or the social meaning.

Finally, the link between form and social meaning also derives from the points of contrast between alternatives, or systems of distinctiveness (Irvine 2001). That is, the use of any given form may give rise to a particular interpretation specifically because it was used instead of another form that might have been used in the same discourse/pragmatic context. In our example, for example, Meg’s ‘these’ positions her very differently in relation to Kim and her friends than ‘these girls’ would have. In interpreting the utterance, Meg’s interlocutor might reasonably conclude that Meg is disaligning with Kim and her shopping preferences – not because ‘these’ on its own is inherently impersonal, but because it is less personal than ‘these girls’ would have been. Acton (this volume) explains that an approach to social meaning based on alternatives grew out of similar concepts in the fields of pragmatics and sociolinguistic variation, and goes on to offer an extended analysis of demonstratives like the one briefly discussed here.

Although we have identified four ways that the connection between a linguistic form and its social meaning(s) are forged, we do not wish to suggest that these operate independently of one another. Zhang’s (this volume) discussion of erhua and retroflex initials illustrates this point well; although there is something iconic about the surface realization of retroflexion, meaning also arises from listeners’ recognition of the fact that another form could have been uttered. And even when linguistic forms are highly iconized qualia, or sensuous qualities (Gal 2013: 32) ‘[s]uch terms always occur in contrast sets’. For instance, when certain types of political discourse are described as ‘plain’
1.3 How Does the Form Affect Social Meaning?

What do we currently understand about how the form (or ‘sign vehicle’) itself affects the social meaning? As Acton (this volume) notes, the markedness of a form is key to social meaning. Here, markedness relates to occurrences of a form which are more noticeable — perhaps because they are less frequent, or because they violate dominant social norms, or require more interpretive effort. Hence, markedness alludes to asymmetry between linguistic variants. The markedness of a form is fundamental to understanding its social meaning, because more marked forms are more likely to accrue meaning than less marked forms. This is exemplified by Silverstein’s (2003) analysis of the tu/vous distinction. A speaker’s choice to use vous for ‘you’ in French is ideologized as ‘marked or elevated in value’, whereas tu is ideologized as ‘neutral’ (Silverstein 2003: 209). This markedness arises from a construal in person reference, from ‘literal’ (e.g., surface form of 2nd person plural used for 2nd person singular) to ‘figurative’ (e.g., surface form of 2nd person plural used for 2nd person singular). This creates an asymmetry, which is then ideologized as marking social value: first deference, then honorification. Markedness may also arise from a mismatch between underlying semantic meaning and grammatical formulation. For instance, Beltrama and Staum Casasanto (this volume) show that listeners have to rely on pragmatic inference to decode intensifiers like ‘totally’ when they are used with non-gradable predicates. Intensifiers typically have semantic meaning related to reaching the top, or at least the very high region, of a bounded scale. In Beltrama and Staum Casasanto’s study, listeners generally perceived speakers using totally as excitable. However the degree to which a speaker sounds excitable depends upon whether or not they use totally with predicates that are graded (e.g., the bus was totally full) or non-gradable (e.g., she was totally born twenty years ago). In this comparison, the non-gradable predicate is more marked because we have to work harder to understand the pragmatics: because we can’t ‘a little bit’ born twenty years ago, we understand the use of totally to reflect the speaker’s attitude to being born twenty years ago, rather than the extent to which they were actually born twenty years ago.

The precise nature of the relation between markedness and meaning is yet to be fully theorized, in part because markedness itself may derive from different sources. For example, one way in which a variant might be more marked is if it occurs with low frequency. But what constitutes ‘low frequency’ differs with respect to the speaker, listener, or interactional context. For example, among all the readers of this chapter, there will be many who find the right dislocation in
‘They’re all posh, these’ to be marked, but there will be some for whom it is less marked than other syntactic alternatives. As another example, Hall-Lew, Cardoso, and Davies’ and Starr’s papers (this volume) both detail changes in markedness over the course of a community sound change, showing how frequency-based markedness can shift between generations, in dialogue with the community’s changing structure.

The markedness of form can be due to factors other than frequency, and these are also relative. Research like Drager et al.’s (this volume) shows how the connection between the sign vehicle (low pitch) and the sign object (sassy, arrogant) is mediated by the perceived persona (gay cis man; Hawaiian ethnicity). Of course, this perception might vary. D’Onofrio’s paper (this volume), also shows how the markedness of vowel perception depends on the listener’s cognitive representation of the kind of speaker they are listening to, and this representation may be dynamically updated based on immediately prior experiences. The markedness of a form will also be influenced by the markedness of the other forms with which it co-occurs, as demonstrated, among others, by Maegaard’s and Pharao’s analysis of segmental and prosodic variation (this volume). While this kind of markedness may be in part due to a kind of frequency effect – for example, the listener’s personal experience of a given frequency relative to a type of speaker, or the forms with which it co-occurs – markedness may also be related to features of the form itself. For example, Podesva’s analysis of vowel fronting (this volume) shows the greater stylistic potential of those variants that are realized with jaw lowering, perhaps because of the context-specific indexicalities of an open-jaw articulatory posture and the markedness of this posture. The manifestation of markedness may also differ, in part, between levels of linguistic representation, given differences between the frequency and distribution of phonetic and phonological variation on the one hand and morphological, lexical, and syntactic variation on the other, and their abilities to allow for and constrain different kinds of stylistic expression. The relevant aspects of linguistic structure that contribute to the markedness of phonetic or phonological features will typically differ from those that condition morphological or syntactic features. For example, Starr’s study (this volume) of low back vowel realization depends on marked differences between Singaporean forms and British form on the one hand and American forms on the other, along with the phonological contrasts between different low back vowels that differ by variety. In contrast, Acton’s analysis (this volume) depends on the relevant dimension of markedness for different demonstratives is whether or not anthropomorphization is part of the demonstrative’s semantic entailment.

Beyond differences in markedness, the effect of form on social meaning differs more generally with respect to the level of linguistic representation. One key difference is between variables capable of scalar variation, on the one hand,
and variables that are only discrete. For variables with a scalar dimension, meaning may map onto only parts of the scale (Podesva & Van Hofwegen 2016; Dickson & Hall-Lew 2017; D’Onofrio 2018). Furthermore, that form–meaning relationship may also differ from, or augment, the form–meaning relationship for the same variable at a discrete level. Podesva (2006), for example, shows how presence of a released word-final /t/ is recruited for stancetaking in one domain (i.e., precision), while variation in the phonetic realization of that variant can be recruited for other kinds of stancetaking (i.e., only long, intense releases index prissiness). Debates about the semiotic potential of discrete (or ‘digital’) signs, on the one hand, and continuous (or ‘analog’) signs, on the other, goes back to at least Lévi-Strauss (1969: 28; see Chandler 2017: 184), with the classical distinction framing the continuous as more ‘natural’ or ‘authentic’ than the latter. Nowadays, the important semiotic distinction between the two is rather that discrete signs ‘impose digital order on what we often experience as a dynamic and seamless flux’ whereas continuous signs ‘can signify infinite subtleties’ which ‘blend into one another’ (Chandler 2017: 184). Consequently, the socioindexical analysis that is possible for any given study is in part dictated by the linguistic variable in question.

Another general difference between levels of linguistic representation is that while social meaning in the sound domain is likely to be iconic (either from the start or eventually), it has been argued that the meanings of morphosyntactic variation are typically understood in relation to standardness (e.g., delinquent, tough) (Eckert 2019). Morphosyntactic variables (at least those typically studied by variationists) also tend to be more sharply stratified than phonological ones (Cheshire 1999: 61), and this patterning may limit the range of social meanings they can acquire. For instance, if a form – such as nonstandard were (e.g., ‘I were really happy’) – correlates strongly with working class speakers, then this may constrain the social meanings it can develop (such that its social meanings are linked to attributes which are also indexically linked to the working class, like ‘toughness’ or ‘resilience’). On the other hand, if a phonetic variable can be used in a scalar way, then there is more potential for it to signify a wider range of social meanings. So, while word-final /t/ release might correlate with higher social class groups, the ability to produce long, intense releases exploits articulatory movement to communicate affect. Eckert (2019) describes a ‘cline of interiority’ with variables capable of indexing internal, personal affective states at one end, and those which most typically index external public social facts at the other. However, the extent to which this cline of interiority maps onto different levels of linguistic representation remains an open question, especially given that variationist research on the social meanings of syntax lags behind understanding of the social meanings of phonetic and phonology (see Acton, Beltrama, & Staum Casasanto, and Moore, this volume).