

Meaning, Identity, and Interaction

Exciting parallel developments have been made in sociolinguistics and formal semantics, yet these two subfields have had very little contact in the past. This pioneering book bridges this gap, bringing together research and methodologies from both areas of study into a new framework for studying the relation between language, ideologies and the social world. It demonstrates how tools from semantics can be used to formalize theories from sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology and gender studies, and also shows how tools from epistemic game theory can be used to bring those theories in closer line with empirical studies of sociolinguistic variation and identity construction through language. Engaging and accessible, it highlights how a cross-pollination of ideas in sociolinguistics and semantics can open up a completely new empirical domain of research. It is essential reading for sociolinguists interested in meaning, and semanticists and philosophers interested in language in its social context.

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Studies in Language Variation and Change

Series Editor

Sali A. Tagliamonte, University of Toronto

Studies in Language Variation and Change is dedicated to studies of systematic and inherent variation in language, including contemporary or historical sources. It is concerned with the impact of society, geography and culture in so far as they intersect with the structures and processes of language. *Studies in Language Variation and Change* is firmly situated in the variationist sociolinguistic enterprise with its roots in historical linguistics, dialectology, anthropology and importantly in the advancing quantitative methods of the field. The series concentrates on book length syntheses of research that engages with the details of linguistic structure in actual speech production and processing (or writing). It emphasizes replicability of findings, consistent reporting and building critical and substantive explanations out of empirical foundations.

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Meaning, Identity, and Interaction

Sociolinguistic Variation and Change in Game-Theoretic Pragmatics

Heather Burnett

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Series Editor's Preface

Sali A. Tagliamonte

This volume focuses on how language variation works at the interface of semantics and pragmatics with a focus on meaning, identity, and interaction when we humans take the action of using one variant or another. This volume had its beginnings in a fateful email that came to my inbox on June 14, 2014, in which the author introduced herself and said:

Although I am a formally trained syntactician and semanticist . . . I have become more and more interested in the description and modelisation of linguistically and socially conditioned patterns of morpho-syntactic variation, and the contributions that studies of language variation and change within the Variationist framework can make to the construction of linguistic theory.

I was hooked. Heather and I exchanged emails and eventually met in Toronto over coffee. At that time, the focus of our collaboration was to plan an application for a Banting Fellowship for Heather, one of the most prestigious scholarly awards for postdoctoral students in Canada. Two months later, Heather and I were working hard to craft the argumentation of a research project to combine my knowledge of language variation and change and her knowledge of formal linguistic theory. On August 16, 2014, Heather wrote 'Listen, if I get this, there will be many suppers with much wine!' Notice that this is not simply a promise of good things to come, but it shows a shared *joie de vivre*. The timbre of the interaction is underscored by the fact that she uses the jocular discourse pragmatic marker 'listen', indicating that our collaboration had become familiar, and the word 'supper' not 'dinner' is evidence that Heather and I also share a certain place identity.

Heather's application was successful, and she came to Toronto to work in my lab. The goals of our research collaboration were ambitious but practical to use recently developed mathematical models and statistical tools to probe the competing influences on syntactic variation. There were also many evenings with the aforementioned wine, but also repartee, laughter and heated discussion as we worked through many complex things in our research. We pursued a project focused on variation in negation – *I don't know anything vs I know*

nothing – using data from the Ontario Dialects Project combining insights from variationist sociolinguistics as well as formal syntax and linguistic typology. We presented our work to variationists at NWAV (2016) and generativists at DiGS (2016) and a poster at GLOW (2016). Eventually the findings became Burnett, Tagliamonte and Koopman (2018): ‘Soft Syntax and the Evolution of Negative and Polarity Indefinites in the History of English’ that appeared in *Language Variation and Change*.

Heather stayed in Toronto only six months, because she was all too soon recruited by Anne Abeillé to work in the Laboratoire de Linguistique Formelle (LLF) at the CNRS at the Université de Paris. However, those months of working together laid the foundation for intellectual synergy as we met at one conference or another in subsequent years and continued our social practices and repartee. Then, in June 2018, Heather and I were both invited to teach at a summer school in Potsdam called the Limits of Variability in Language: Cognitive, Grammatical, and Social Aspects. I did the morning lecture which was followed by Heather's lecture, and I sat in on every class. Heather is a vibrant teacher who puts passion into her presentations, and she is always brimming with ideas and energy. Over the course of the week, Heather detailed her new research programme and introduced game-theoretic methods for studying language – complete with cartoons, political commentary and personal anecdotes. I was impressed with how Heather's thinking had developed since leaving Toronto, and I was not surprised to learn she had met and engaged with scholars like Penny Eckert, Debbie Cameron and Sally McConnell-Ginet, leading thinkers in the study of social meaning in language.

At the end of the week-long summer school, I pointed out to Heather that she was setting the agenda for a ground-breaking research programme that would launch the study of language variation and change into an entirely new landscape, and I convinced her to write this book.

As the chapters in Heather's book build from formal semantics into Third Wave sociolinguistics, game theory comes in to support the development of what she refers to as ‘materialist semantics’, a way to analyse social meaning that includes ‘not only economic conditions, but also social, cultural and health-related conditions’, in other words the impact of behaviour and outcomes, not simply mental representation (p. 20). The case studies of (1) slurs for dykes and lesbians and (2) grammatical gender in the Assemblée Nationale of France (the French House of Representatives) provide unexpected and surprisingly fruitful examples of how the materialist semantics approach can be applied to real-world situations. By the end of the book, readers will come to understand the utility of methods from formal semantics and pragmatics, particularly model-theoretic semantics and game theory, to the analysis of sociolinguistic variation and identity construction through language. Heather paves the way forward for readers to build their own analyses out of the rich social and political forces influencing language use in interaction.

Meaning, Identity and Interaction: Sociolinguistic Variation and Change in Game-Theoretic Pragmatics lays out a programmatic new field of socio-semantics. When we use language, we are taking actions that have impact. Studying them using formal semantic techniques will enable readers to more fully understand how the choice of variants affects non-linguistic actions and their interpretation, including sociopolitical views, insights that could have profoundly important repercussions for the future of our world.

Preface

This book is my attempt to get a handle on something that has puzzled me since before I knew what linguistics was: how we use our language to ‘be’ different people in different situations, and how who people think we are affects how they treat us.

When I was a teenager, I worked in a store in Ottawa, Canada that was located in a relatively bilingual (English–French) part of the city. The owner of the store, JP,¹ was a francophone from Ottawa, and, like many Franco-Ontarians, when he spoke English, it was almost impossible to tell that it wasn’t his native language. Most of the customers were English-speaking, but a large minority were francophones who understandably preferred to be served in French. As such, most of my fellow sales associates were bilingual, although some of the anglophones didn’t speak French.

The store was (and still is) a truly independent small business that had been started in the 1970s by JP’s mother selling sporting goods from her basement. When JP took over the business some years later, it grew enormously, and it is currently one of the largest sports supply stores in Eastern Ontario. Undoubtedly, one of the reasons for the store’s great success was JP’s personality. He was a very serious, formal man: a fair, but demanding boss who wouldn’t hesitate to chew you out for tiny mistakes or make you clean the bathroom if the store was empty because he ‘wasn’t paying you to hang around’. I found him extremely intimidating, despite the fact that, from what I understand, JP liked me: I could serve customers in both English and French (so I was good value for the money) and I would actually show up for my shifts, usually on time (so I was responsible). As the owner of the store, JP had complete authority over how it was run, and this authority was enacted almost exclusively in English. Since I had anglophone colleagues who didn’t speak French, all public announcements had to be made in English, but one thing that I found strange was that he would sometimes berate my francophone colleagues in English. *They’re both French*, I thought, *why aren’t they speaking French?* It seemed to

¹ Names have been changed.

me at the time that English lent an extra little bit of seriousness or professional authority to what JP was saying. I came to the same conclusion while puzzling over the guidelines about how to answer the phone: if you wanted to answer the phone in English, you had to say the full long name of the store, plus *How may I help you?*; whereas, if you answered in French, you were allowed to simply say a shortened version and *Bonjour*. Since I found the English version to be a bit of a tongue twister, even though it was my native language, I always used the French version. Although I had to admit that the English one sounded much more ‘professional’.

My interactions with JP were limited to my role as his employee and took place almost always in English. This is why it was so shocking to me when I would catch a glimpse of who he was when he was not being my boss. JP was openly gay and his partner, David, was a clothing designer. Both JP and David were active in local LGBT parties and politics, and the store proudly featured a tiny rainbow flag near the cash register, which was very radical for 1990s suburban Ottawa. David would occasionally stop by the store and JP would often talk to him in French on one of the landlines. And when JP talked to David, his whole demeanor, especially his voice, would change: the tough no-nonsense businessman that I knew would turn into a sweet, almost boyish guy. I remember one time I walked into the basement where JP was talking with David on the phone, and, from eavesdropping, I gathered that David was informing JP that they would not be going to the Melissa Etheridge concert for Pride the next week. JP was a bit upset and communicated both his disappointment and his acceptance to David using a soft, almost sultry tone of voice, saying *Ok, mais moi je voulais voir Melissa Etheridge ...* At this point, JP noticed me staring at him open-mouthed. His face hardened into something more familiar, and he said (in English): *Go away and get back to work!*

Although the separation between JP’s ‘work’ persona and his ‘private’ persona was the most extreme, there were times when he would seem to undergo a similar transformation at the store. For more complicated equipment fittings, customers would have to make an appointment in advance, and although we sales associates would generally be the ones assigned to serve these customers, there would occasionally be extra special francophone clients who would be served by JP himself. One of the other ways that we knew that these were special customers, who should be treated with kid gloves, is that JP would start talking to them in (what seemed to me) a very strange way. Once again, his whole personality changed and, in this context, he would become almost jovial. He would joke around, laugh, and use all sorts of words that I had never heard before. I remember being particularly intrigued by JP’s pronunciation of *moi* and *toi* as *moé* and *toé*, wondering why on earth he was talking like that. Later, after studying French linguistics, I would learn that these were all what

sociolinguists call ‘vernacular’ features of Laurentian French,² and, at least in JP’s case, these were reserved for friends of the family and people who had been coming to the store since it was in his mother’s basement.

All of this variation in JP’s language was very puzzling to me at 16, but of course his behaviour is reasonably well understood by sociolinguists.³ What is much less well understood are the nitty-gritty details of how exactly using English vs French, the tone of *Melissa Etheridge*, and referring to oneself as *moé* instead of *moi* contribute to constructing a particular persona, a particular identity, in an interaction. The idea at the heart of this work is that, at some abstract level, identity construction through language works similarly to other kinds of linguistic communication, and therefore the formal models that researchers in semantics and pragmatics have found useful for studying propositional communication can be fruitfully adapted to identity construction. The kinds of formal models of communication that I have found to be the most enlightening are game-theoretic ones, and these are the kinds of models that I will develop through the course of this book.

This book wouldn’t have been possible without the help of an enormous number of people. First and foremost, my editor, Sali Tagliamonte. I came to Sali in 2014 with some vague ideas about quantitative variation in negative expressions and formal syntactic theory, and together we collaborated on a project which would become the focus of a Banting postdoctoral fellowship in 2015. Many of the ideas developed in this work got their start while I was in Toronto, and it is safe to say that most of what I know about language variation and change, I learned from Sali. The research programme developed in this book represents a significant departure from my previous work, which had been on vagueness, distributivity, and adjective semantics. As such, moving from working on ‘classic’ topics in natural language semantics to (to put it mildly) less classical topics represented a great risk to my career, particularly at the point where I first started. Suffice to say not all reactions from my colleagues were positive, and there was a point at which that, after three years as a postdoc, I seriously considered abandoning this line of work, either to move to something more marketable, or to give up linguistics altogether. But through all this, Sali was constantly encouraging me, telling me that what I was trying to do was important and interesting, and that I had to continue. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that my research and indeed my whole career would have been very different (much worse!) without Sali.

² Laurentian French is the variety of Canadian French that has its roots in the seventeenth century French colony along the St Lawrence river (see Côté, 2012, among others). It is the variety spoken in Québec and Eastern Ontario, as well as in parts of Western Canada and New England.

³ See, for example, Heller (1992) on the use of English vs French at work in Québec and Ontario, Podesva (2007) on gay men changing their persona and language in their personal life compared to their work life, and Morin (2002); Côté (2012) on the properties and history of many (more or less) vernacular features of Laurentian French (Québec).

This book is largely a modified and expanded version of my 2019 ‘Habilitation à diriger des recherches’ (HDR) thesis, which I defended at the Université de Paris under the supervision of my colleague Jonathan Ginzburg. Jonathan was an excellent ‘garant’, helping me both on the administrative side and on the intellectual side of the HDR process, providing many insightful comments on the manuscript and highlighting exciting paths to pursue in the future. The rest of my HDR committee was Deborah Cameron, Penelope Eckert, Paul Égré, Michael Franke, Erez Levon and Devyani Sharma, who all gave invaluable feedback both on the thesis and at the defense. In consultation with Jonathan, I had chosen this particular committee not only for their expertise on the subject matter, but also because they were people with whom I had worked closely on these topics in the past couple of years. Both Michael Franke and Devyani Sharma gave me crucial input on the theoretical ‘core’ of this work: the 2019 *Linguistics & Philosophy* article and the 2017 *Journal of Sociolinguistics* article, respectively. And so they deserve credit for a number of aspects of the models presented here. Paul Égré has been a great mentor to me since I was a student, and it gave me enormous pleasure to discuss these completely new things with him this year. Erez Levon has been one of my constant interlocutors on language, gender, and sexuality. No doubt his influence can be seen across all chapters of this book, and I thank him for his friendship, his patience, and his indulgence of all my naive questions.

Of course, nothing in this book would be possible without Penny Eckert. I mean this in two ways: from an intellectual point of view, one of Penny’s many contributions to theoretical sociolinguistics is the idea that the social meaning of sociolinguistic variants is what drives their use and is what creates the patterns of social stratification that we find in variationist corpora. Although social meaning had been studied elsewhere in sociolinguistics and in linguistic anthropology, it was Penny who demonstrated the pertinence of this idea for variationism. Traditionally, the variationist method starts from the identification of the sociolinguistic variable, which has generally been considered to be ‘two ways of saying the same thing’.⁴ However, even in the early days of variationist sociolinguistics, questions arose as to how exactly to define ‘same thing’ and whether or not semantic equivalence was actually the right notion (see Lavandera, 1978; Sankoff and Thibault, 1981; Romaine, 1984, among others). For one thing, although identifying meaning equivalence is usually trivial in the case of sociophonetic variation, it is far from easy in most if not all cases of syntactic variation, where alternative constructions usually show some differences in pragmatics or connotation. This being said, studies of Montréal from the 1970s already showed that syntactic variation displays

⁴ See Tagliamonte (2012) for a description of the variationist method, and pp.16–18 for a discussion of debates surrounding the definition of the sociolinguistic variable.

the same kinds of class-based social stratificational patterns as phonetic variation,⁵ and Tagliamonte and D'Arcy (2009) show that this appears to hold for age-based stratification as well. So we have empirical arguments that phonetic and syntactic variation are the same kind of beast, yet syntactic variants often mean slightly different things. As I see it, Penny's main insight into this question is to 'bite the bullet', so to speak, and give up semantic equivalence even for sociophonetic variation. Rather, it is not in spite of meaning differences between variants, but rather because of them that we find the stratificational patterns that we do: sociolinguistic variants have different social or pragmatic meanings, and people in different social circumstances will use those meanings to interact with their interlocutors in different ways. This idea, which I take to be at the heart of the Third Wave, solves an important problem for variationist sociolinguistics but it also has an important consequence for the field of semantics. As a speaker of Canadian French, I had always been interested in sociolinguistic variation and change but as a student and later as a young researcher in semantics, I never thought it was possible to have my own work contribute to it. If you could only start a variationist study once you found two alternatives that were semantically equivalent, then by definition the study of variationist sociolinguistics would start where the study of semantics ended. However, the Third Wave shows that there is a place for semanticists in the field of language variation and change, and I hope that this book succeeds in showing some of the contributions that this integration can yield.

The second way in which this book wouldn't have been possible without Penny is personal. I met her at the 2015 LSA summer institute, right when I was starting to become more serious about variation. Knowing nothing about sociolinguistics except what had been studied in (French) Canada, I was not familiar with her Jocks and Burnouts study, nor her work on the California vowel system. What I did know, however, was her work on Gascon, and I was very excited to see what we would learn in 'the Gascon woman's introduction to sociolinguistics course. For me, this course was a revelation, especially because, as I described above, Penny's perspective provided a path towards the unification of sociolinguistics and semantics. I was very lucky to keep in touch with her after the institute ended and got to spend more time learning from her during her Labex professorship in Paris in 2015 and during my CSLI fellowship at Stanford in 2016.⁶ Although I imagine that initially the project must have seemed very bizarre, she was encouraging from the very start, and our long conversations have contributed to developing and refining not only the social theoretic aspects in this work, but also the details of the game-theoretic models.

⁵ See, for example, Sankoff and Cedergren (1972) and the papers in Sankoff (1978).

⁶ And I am also extremely grateful to Dan Lassiter for inviting me to Stanford, and for many helpful discussions about the material in this book.

Another person who has had an enormous influence on this work is Debbie Cameron. In an area where differentialist and essentialist views abound, Debbie's work on language and gender develops a framework of analysis in which men and women's language use is a product of speakers' strategic reasoning about the interaction situations that they are in. When gender differences between men and women arise (which she shows is far less often than we naively think), they can generally be explained by how language is related to ideologies, and how those ideologies sustain power differences between men and women, which then creates different material conditions for people of different genders. In this way, Debbie presents a political foundation for a theory of gender and language, and this political foundation is at the heart of the 'materialist semantics' for social meaning that I develop. Like Penny, Debbie has also influenced me on a personal level. It may sound hyperbolic, but meeting Debbie at a conference in 2018 was quite life changing. I have learned so much from her in such a short time, and I am continually amazed by her brilliance, kindness, generosity, and overall awesomeness.

Another person who I would like to mention at this point is Sally McConnell-Ginet. I met Sally only recently, but I have known her work for many years, long before I started working on the social aspects of language. Even as a student, I was so impressed that she could use the skills that we learned in our formal semantics training to study how language reflects and contributes to constructing gender relations in our communities. I had always hoped that we would meet sometime at some semantics conference, and I would get a chance to talk with her. Sadly this never happened on its own: I guess the East Coast/West Coast semantics circles are sufficiently separate that we never managed to be in the same time at the same place. Finally, I decided that enough was enough and tentatively sent a preliminary version of what is now Chapter 5 to her via email in 2018, and, when she responded to my email with thought-provoking comments, I invited her to Paris in 2019. I'm so happy that we managed to finally meet because it has been such a pleasure to interact with Sally in the past year, and I am excited to continue doing so in the future.

A final person to whom this book owes a great deal is Joan Bresnan. In some sense it represents the culmination of a line of work that began when I met Joan in Paris in 2013. She was a Labex professor at Paris Diderot where she gave a course on the research that she and her colleagues have been conducting on syntactic variation and probabilistic grammars. The vision that she developed during that month, one in which formal grammars for syntactic phenomena could embrace variability instead of trying to minimize it, was very foreign to me ... but it was also very exciting! I would like to thank Joan for the hours that she spent with me and my questions in Paris. Hopefully what I have written here is a bit more developed and a bit less naive.

Of course, the research presented here would never have been possible if I had not had such a stimulating, supportive work environment as the Laboratoire de Linguistique Formelle (LLF) at the CNRS and the Université de Paris. I am eternally grateful to Anne Abeillé, who recruited me and who directed the lab when I first arrived, and to Olivier Bonami, the current head, for giving me everything that a young researcher needs to blossom: guidance, encouragement, funding (for postdocs, conferences, experiments, etc.), and also autonomy. I would especially like to thank Olivier for . . . everything: being a wonderful boss, mentor, collaborator (in both scientific and administrative matters), and friend. During 2019, I was associate director of LLF and, while the job was stressful at times, being Olivier's adjointe was always a positive, enriching experience. I would also like to thank the CNRS for giving me my first permanent job. Given that this work doesn't neatly fit in to traditional subfields of linguistics, I'm pretty sure that I would never have been able to do it if I had been hired somewhere else as, say, a professor of semantics.

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