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Identity in variationist sociolinguistics

Rob Drummond and Erik Schleef

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the different perspectives on identity within variationist sociolinguistics (henceforth VS). It also discusses some of the central issues within the field pertaining to applied linguistics; in particular, language discrimination and the recent expansion of VS into second language acquisition. VS is a branch of sociolinguistics that focuses on language variation and change. Variationist sociolinguists may investigate variable linguistic features, such as saying \textit{fink} instead of \textit{think}, or the variable use of different varieties, which may be dialects, languages, accents, styles and so on. VS has much to offer applied linguistics as it takes as axiomatic that, in order to understand language fully, we must develop a thorough understanding of categorical, as well as variable, processes.

VS focuses strongly on the use of inferential statistics, the use of recorded speech, and the investigation of social factors in addition to linguistic factors. Variationist sociolinguists share the assumption that variation is not random; it is systematic and structured. Patterns can be found in variation, and it is the goal of VS to determine and describe these patterns and the ways in which they are acquired and used. While a large degree of variation is linguistically constrained, a significant proportion of variation can be attributed to social reasons, and identity may play a crucial role in how language varies and changes. Thus, VS focuses not only on language variation in order to determine how it is structured linguistically and socially and how it is put to use and acquired, but also on what variation may mean to speakers and hearers. This makes it particularly relevant to issues of identity within applied linguistics.

Overview

The review contained within the first section of this chapter will be structured using Eckert’s (2012) three waves of VS. These waves are loosely ordered; therefore, while one is built chronologically onto the other, all three remain very much alive. What makes these three waves interesting to us is that they all differ somewhat in how they view and use the concept of identity; partly as a logical repercussion of their research focus and the level at which they investigate
Identity in variationist sociolinguistics

Identity has been a concern in VS since the inception of the field in the early 1960s (Labov 1963). However, the role played by identity in explaining language variation and change, and, most importantly, how identity is defined, has changed throughout the decades and continues to be at the very centre of contention in VS. To an extent, it has come to highlight and symbolise divisions within the field. Conceptualising these differences as variances of scale is helpful, as relevant theories now exist that allow us to link these different levels of meaning.

The first wave

First-wave variationist sociolinguists focus on documenting language variation and change in communities. They identify variation, determine the linguistic and social constraints of this variation and whether or not the variation is a reflection of language change. The social factors that this type of research may investigate tend to be of a relatively broad, census-type macrosociological nature, such as speaker sex, social class, age and ethnicity. This line of research has laid the conceptual and methodological groundwork that defines VS today. It is based on large-scale surveys of populations, conducted with the goal of statistical representativeness, objectivity and replicability, that result in stratified models of the speech of populations. Seminal studies from this wave focus in particular on urban areas, such as New York (Labov 1966), Detroit (Wolfram 1969), Norwich (Trudgill 1974), Glasgow (Macauley 1977), Sydney (Horvath 1985), Montreal (Thibault and Sankoff 1993) and York (Tagliamonte 1999). Such studies provide us with a bird’s-eye view of variation and information on the social and linguistic spread of language change. However, these studies do not simply give a general impression of variation; they filter their view of it through a particular perspective on social space, focusing on socioeconomic hierarchies and, secondarily, other visible census-type categories (see Eckert 2012: 90; Block, this volume, for more detail on the primacy of socioeconomic status).

Identity is seldom theorised in these studies, and usually not mentioned. The closest we may get to identity are the social categories used as factors in statistical testing. If we were to conceive of these macro-sociological labels as identity labels, they would be reflections of language use, identities that are stable, unified and essential, as they would be based on membership of individuals in specific social categories. Arguments about identity are sometimes made indirectly. That such claims are, in fact, about identity is disputable, but some of the explanations provided for the linguistic behaviour of certain social groups, e.g. individuals in these groups aiming for ‘prestige’, ‘status’ or ‘solidarity’, certainly make assumptions about the kind of people who hold these attitudes. For example, Trudgill (1972) argued that the speech of women in his sample was consistently more standard because of their strong desire for upward mobility and their more pronounced sensitivity to standard pressures. Similarly, he stated that middle-class speakers may adopt working-class innovations because of their association with masculinity. Occasionally, identity concepts are evoked directly; for example, Labov (1972: 70–109) talks about New York City identity in relation to one of his participants. However, it is rare for identity to be linked directly to the kind of large category labels used in these studies. There are very good reasons for this, of which sociolinguists working in a quantitative tradition are normally aware.

Significant results in a statistical model often explain only a portion of all variation. In addition, statisticians warn against making unsubstantiated claims about cause and effect. We must not engage in statistically motivated speculations in our quest to uncover identity; our explanation must be based on a principled linguistic or social theory and additional evidence, which may often be found in individual interactions. This is particularly the case since many social categories used are composite indices based on a variety of different factors; for example, when
determining the social class of an individual, occupation, income, educational background and a variety of other factors are often combined. Most importantly, individuals within descriptive categories do not have one unified, stable identity that has an essential link to language. Specific methods would be refined in the second and third waves of VS to home in on whether identity is relevant in a particular data set and, if so, which dimensions of identity are of salience.

The second wave

While the second wave of variationist sociolinguistics also focuses on documenting language variation and change in communities, the focus shifts from macro-sociological categories and interview data to locally relevant groupings and naturally occurring speech. Nonetheless, because studies in this tradition often share the quantitative interest in language with first-wave research in VS, the underlying assumption about identity is one of fixedness and stability. Similarly to the first wave, variable linguistic features are examined as making up and defining varieties, and as marking certain social groups. However, the focus differs in scale. While the underlying concept of identity has not changed considerably from first- to second-wave VS, identity moves to centre stage in the second wave. Second-wave researchers began attributing social agency to the use of vernacular and standard features. The vernacular was often regarded as an expression of identity, particularly local or class identity. This strand received important input from ethnography and, to a lesser extent, social psychology – in particular, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1978), which considers any social group relevant to social identity construction, not limiting itself to macro-sociological categories (see Joseph, this volume). Sociolinguists who make use of ethnography examine how certain linguistic forms are locally meaningful to social groupings that emerge in the fieldwork. These social categories are based on participant observation, rather than pre-formulated frameworks of analysis; they are participant-defined. Thus, rather than imposing identity categories on speakers, ethnographic observation enables us to work with identity categories that emerge from the data and that we know are salient to the speakers themselves at the local level.

For example, Milroy (1980) investigated working-class neighbourhoods in Belfast, Cheshire (1982) researched language variation on an adventure playground in Reading, England, and Gal (1979) investigated language shift in a Hungarian-German bilingual community in Austria. In these studies, the identity labels used are not the traditional macro-sociological categories with which we are so familiar. On the contrary, concepts such as social class and ethnicity were often deconstructed, abandoned or glossed over in favour of exploring the research participants’ social networks. Yet, this research strand left much unspoken about the identities that exist or develop in these networks, and the relationship between identity, social network and the norms and ideologies that were argued to be shared by members of a social network.

The investigation of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) is another qualitative step in discovering norms and ideologies that relate to the social lives of research participants. It represents a shift towards more qualitative examinations of communities, although quantitative statistics often continue to play a role in such research. Drawing on Lave and Wenger’s seminal text, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 464) consider a community of practice to be ‘an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour.’

Thus, this approach focuses on how people use language in different contexts to construct different identities by investigating shared repertoires, values and practices. For example, Eckert
(1989) studied the use of language at a high school in suburban Detroit, where the social order involved two mutually opposed social categories, ‘jocks’ and ‘burnouts’, and whose members behaved linguistically in different ways. Uncovering shared norms and beliefs, regarded as crucial in the construction and expression of identities, through observation or direct elicitation is at the very heart of this practice-based approach.

The third wave
Social meaning, style and stance

While linguistic features index social categories in waves one and two, in third-wave variationist sociolinguistics, linguistic features index social meanings. Moore and Podesva (2009: 448–450) conceptualise social meanings as stances, personal characteristics, personae (e.g. ‘nerd’, ‘jock’) and social types (e.g. ‘middle class’). For example, variation in (ing) has been shown to index specific social meanings, such that singing (rather than singin’) may express articulateness, intelligence, etc. (Campbell-Kibler 2009). Research within the third wave of variation regards language use as not reflecting identities, but rather constituting them through stylistic practice (Eckert 2012: 94), thereby putting a focus on the social meaning of variable features (e.g. Ochs 1992; Agha 2005; Podesva 2007; Eckert 2008; Kiesling 2009). Exploring the social meaning of a feature can help us understand the role language plays in identity construction. Eckert (2012) provides a very telling example of the variety of different meanings of a single feature. In the US, aspiration of /t/ in intervocalic contexts has been found to be relevant in a variety of different enregistered styles; those of ‘geek’ girls (Bucholtz 1996), Orthodox Jews (Benor 2001) and gay men (Podesva 2007). The social meaning of aspirated intervocalic /t/ cannot possibly be related specifically to any of these groups or identities. Instead, the meaning of the feature must relate to something shared by all these; they all exploit indexical values linked to hyperarticulation (i.e. extremely articulate and clear speech).

Third-wave variationist sociolinguistics (henceforth TWVS) aims to discover the social meanings of a particular variable in context and how this comes about. This requires us to go beyond the social categories to which we linked variation in the first two waves and also beyond the exploration of identity as the reflection of such categories. For the identity concept to be of value to TWVS, it has to be reconceptualised. In TWVS, identities are regarded as being constructed and reconstructed; they are dynamic and changeable. Language and identity cannot be separated or correlated; they are co-constitutive. Agency continues to matter, which Bucholtz and Hall (2010) consider to go beyond individual choice and deliberate action. Identity emerges in a variety of ways, ranging from deliberate action to habitual practice and as the result of interactional processes. Bucholtz and Hall discuss five principles in the study of identity, summarised below:

- Identity emerges in discourse, rather than preceding it.
- Identity includes not only census-type macro-sociological categories, but also local ethnographic and interactional positionings.
- Identity is constituted by means of a variety of indexical processes.
- Identity is not located with the individual; identities are constructed inter-subjectively through a variety of relations.
Identity is partial. It is ‘produced through contextually situated and ideologically informed configurations of self and other’ (ibid.: 25). It shifts continually within interactions and across contexts.

The view that language, along with other social practices, is used to constitute identities, rather than being a reflection of social identities, moves attention away from the study of a single linguistic feature to someone’s language use in combination with other social practices. We can only understand what a single variable feature means by investigating how it is used in identity construction. This also means that a linguistic variable need not always have the same meaning and, equally, that a change in someone’s identity may result in a change in someone’s (linguistic) practice. These assumptions necessitate an important attention shift in TWVS: in order to study and understand identity, we cannot focus solely on one particular linguistic feature. We have to focus on something larger and, for many variationists, this means examining style (Eckert 2000; Moore 2011). For others, the focus is on stance (Ochs 1992; Rauniomaa 2003; Kiesling 2009); that is, ‘evaluative, affective and epistemic orientations in discourse’ (Bucholtz and Hall 2010: 22). Scholars who favour stance focus on conversational acts and how their display of evaluation, affect and epistemic orientation constitute resources in identity construction, while those who prefer to work with the concept of style tend to investigate phonological, grammatical and lexical features below the discourse level (Bucholtz and Hall 2010: 22). Certainly, both traditions are cross-fertilising. In the following, we will focus on style.

In TWVS, styles are often viewed as ‘a socially meaningful clustering of features within and across linguistic levels and modalities’ (Campbell-Kibler et al. 2006). This is important because a clustering of features may be associated with identities – in a broad sense of the word (more on this below). Third-wave research starts frequently with an investigation of styles, rather than individual features. As a result of the association of social meaning with a style, third-wave variationists have extended significantly the scope of investigation to include any kind of linguistic material that helps in the construction of styles, rather than focusing only on changing or stable variable features. An example is Podesva’s (2007) research on white, middle-class gay men, which investigated not only variation in segmental phonology, but also voice and vowel quality, intonation and discourse context. Ethnographic methods and the social-organisational structure of the community of practice continue to represent crucial elements of the study of variation, as does the use of quantitative methods. Yet TWVS has also made increased use of experimental perception methods. Not only does experimental work document the potential social meanings of a particular linguistic feature, it has also demonstrated how social meaning may depend on our perceptions of speakers, listener background and listener language use, context and topic (see e.g. Johnstone and Kiesling 2008; Campbell-Kibler 2009).

Levels of identity and indexicality

Identity in TWVS is a relatively broad concept that can be seen to relate to a variety of different levels. This is a useful view to highlight as it allows us to create a link between the three variationist waves, the first two of which show a tendency to focus on one specific identity level. Coupland (2007: 27) argues for macro-, meso- and micro-identity frames, very much in line with Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 592; 2010: 21), whose concept of identity includes ‘(a) macro-level demographic categories; (b) local ethnographically specific cultural positions; and (c) temporary and interactionally-specific stances and participant roles’. Similarly Kiesling (2013: 452) views this particular issue as one of scale: ‘as the scale changes from that of a conversation to
an entire nation, so do the relevant identities’. He offers a similar division into (a) large ‘census’
groups; (b) institutional roles; and (c) stances or positions in interaction. The latter may include
stances such as being knowledgeable, nice and confrontational – notions that, due to their tem-
porary nature, are not usually regarded as identities.

Yet, what this broad conception of identity does not make immediately clear is how (dif-
ferent levels of) identity and variable features are linked. This is where the notion of indexicality
comes in. Indexicality is a mechanism by which semiotic links are created between linguistic
forms and social meanings (Ochs 1992; Silverstein 1985), such that –ing can express intelligence
and articulateness whereas –in expresses casualness. Indexicalities of variants are vague, complex
and contestable. Once a variable has acquired social meanings, speakers can use associations of
these social meanings to create new ones. For example, if a speaker is perceived as casual, she
may also be assumed to be laidback, as the two are ideologically related. However, linguistic and
non-linguistic practices can only create a link for both speaker and hearer if they share a belief
system and recognise its relevance to a particular interaction.

To understand indexicality, we must explore how social meanings come to be associated with
particular linguistic forms, and how indexicality may constitute identities (on a more permanent
basis). This occurs through a variety of different processes (see Bucholtz and Hall’s indexical-
ity principle), some of which are discussed below. Of course, it is possible to express identity
overtly, simply by referring to an identity category and saying ‘I am English’ or ‘Dropping your
itches is sooo working class’. Moreover, identities can be referred to indirectly, for example
through implicature and presupposition. The sentence ‘You know, she wears a track suit and
she’s all like ‘urricanes ’ardly ever ‘appen’ may be considered a statement about the speaker’s
own social class and that of the person to whom they are referring, which is indicated through
stereotypical clothing and h-dropping, a widespread non-standard feature in England associated
with working-class speakers, and a phrase of Eliza Doolittle’s from My Fair Lady. However,
much more is happening in this sentence: (1) the speaker adopts a certain stance and assumes
that the person to whom they are referring also adopts a particular stance on an habitual basis,
and (2) the speaker links certain linguistic and other practices to specific personae and groups.
These are two indexical processes, which we will examine more closely below.

When identity is expressed indirectly, indexicality plays a crucial role in how this is done.
Research that focuses on stance has shed much light on the emergence of indexical links. Many
of the indexical distinctions we make today are based on the work by Silverstein (1985, 2003)
and Ochs (1992). A very important distinction is that made between direct and indirect indexi-
cality. Ochs (1992) argued that direct indexical links are those between language and stances,
social acts and activities. For example, we may use certain language and practice (e.g. by saying
could and please and by smiling: ‘Could I have a small latte, please?’) and by doing so create and
express a particular affective stance, in a specific context. If this stance is ideologically extended
to an identity category, for example women, an indirect indexicality has emerged. This does
not have to happen, but it can if it is repeated often enough. If individuals within a particular
social group repeatedly take a particular stance in particular interactions and contexts, a link
may appear between this stance and the social group, and stances may grow into more enduring
identity structures – a process also known as stance accretion (DuBois 2002; Rauniomaa 2003).

Kiesling (2009) argues that the process of repeatedly taking the same stance is how styles
emerge at individual, local- or macro-group levels. Other researchers use different terminology
to refer to similar processes. For example, Johnstone (2010) makes use of Agha’s (2005) notion
of enregisterment to explain how permanent links emerge between linguistic form and social
identity. Johnstone (2010: 34) argued that Agha’s concept of a register is similar to what Eckert
calls style, with some finer differences: ‘a register may be associated with a situation or a set of social relations rather than or in addition to being associated with a social identity like “jock” or “burnout”’. A form is considered enregistered once it has become part of a register, which emerges only once particular indexicalities are seen to be associated with each other. Thus, a form is considered enregistered when it is associated with a particular style, which in turn is associated with a particular identity. Such an identity can then be used for further indexical work.

Similar insights have been made in VS work conducted by Eckert and associates using the concept of style as a repertoire of linguistic forms with specific social meanings. Here, the focus is on a set of linguistic forms becoming associated with specific personae, groups, social characteristics, etc. For example, a particular population may stand out (in a particular context) and one or more linguistic or non-linguistic features of that population may grab people’s attention. Once such a link between feature and population is created, the feature can index the population on its own, without the linguistic context. It can then be used to position the population ideologically in a variety of ways; for example, by invoking the attributes or stereotypes of this population or by associating or disassociating oneself with/from the population, similar to the h-dropping example above. Repeating these ‘indexical acts’ (Eckert 2012: 94) results in conventionalisation of the index; that is, the link between linguistic forms and social meaning. These may be personal characteristics, personae or social types that constitute an identity.

The type of indexical complexity described in the last few paragraphs leads Eckert (2012: 94) to argue that indexical order progresses in multiple directions, rather than in a linear fashion. Meanings comprise what Eckert (2008) refers to as an indexical field: ‘a constellation of ideologically linked meanings, any region of which can be invoked in context’ (Eckert 2012: 94). Thus, social context always interacts with indexicalities and helps create them: who is uttering what, where, when and to whom influences the particular indexicalities that emerge. The concept of the indexical field is useful because it highlights how speakers and hearers make use of multifaceted social meanings in interaction. The different levels of indexicality are related ideologically, and meanings often involve various levels simultaneously. Variables can index what Kiesling (2013) calls ideological bundles, involving not only macrosociological categories, such as ‘man’, but also practices and stances, roles and attitudes associated with masculinity in a particular culture. Separating these different meanings does not make much sense, and the indexical field makes this point very well.

Figures 3.1 and 3.2 present examples of such indexical fields for two variants of (t). These fields, which could just as well have been merged into one for the variable (t), indicate many potential social meanings of intervocalic [t] and t-glottalling in Greater Manchester, England. The results are based on data obtained from a perception survey, in which participants heard audio stimuli that were manipulated by cross-splicing to differ only in the occurrence of [t] and [ʔ]. Respondents were then asked to rate stimuli on a series of scales. The fields show the multiplicity of potential meanings of the variable, ranging from social characteristics to social groups. These social meanings may ultimately be exploited by speakers to constitute a variety of different identities, as the variable is used in context-specific styles where meanings are specified and identities are co-constructed.

In the following section, we will explore how the three waves of VS have influenced areas relevant to applied linguistics, and demonstrate that a significant amount of research is situated in the first and second-wave tradition. Occasionally, third-wave concerns are echoed in applied linguistics in that identity may be viewed as dynamic and constructed; however, the complexities of the social meanings of linguistic features, styles or stances are rarely explored in much detail.
Figure 3.1 Possible indexical field for intervocalic [t]

- more hard-working
- more intelligent
- more snob-like
- more reliable
- more correct
- more articulate
- more educated
- more teacher-like
- less common
- older
- less student-like
- [t]
- less casual
- richer
- less urban
- less Northern
- less laidback
- more Chorlton
- less working class
- less Moss Side
- less Salford
- less Manchester

Figure 3.2 Possible indexical field for intervocalic t-glottalling

- less hard-working
- less intelligent
- less snob-like
- less reliable
- less correct
- less articulate
- less educated
- less teacher-like
- more common
- younger
- [?]
- more casual
- less rich
- more urban
- more Northern
- more laidback
- less Chorlton
- more working class
- more Moss Side
- more Salford
- more Manchester
Issues and ongoing debates

This section explores the various ways in which research methods and findings from variationist work on identity can inform areas of applied linguistics that do not take language variation and change itself as their primary focus. It will begin by looking at issues of dialect prejudice before moving on to explore second language acquisition (SLA) and language teaching.

Accent and dialect discrimination

An important area of applied linguistics with regard to variationist approaches to identity is that of linguistic prejudice, and accent and dialect discrimination. First and second-wave research in this area has contributed substantially to discredit deficit models of language; specifically, regarding the status of African-American English (Morgan 1994; Rickford 1997), bilingual speech (García 1984; Zentella 1997) and working-class speech (Trudgill 1975). Very positive results have been achieved with programmes that develop language awareness materials for non-linguists in various locations (e.g. Reaser and Adger 2007). However, the two studies to be reviewed here can be regarded as adopting a third-wave variationist approach to identity in the way that identities are seen as being enacted and performed moment by moment, and data are gathered through ethnographic techniques.

Interested in challenging prevailing views of working-class children’s non-standard language, Snell (2013) describes an ethnographic research project carried out in two primary schools in Teesside, north-east England. She questions both the deficit approach (that non-standard dialects are inferior to standard English) and the difference approach (that while non-standard dialects are different from standard English, they are just as systematic and logical as standardised varieties) by arguing that trying to delineate boundaries of dialects to enable these descriptions is not an accurate reflection of how language is used in context. Instead, she makes the case for a repertoire approach to the variation at work, examining the use of non-standard first-person objective singular *us* (‘give us me shoe back’). She illustrates how the use of the variant can be interpreted not simply as a straightforward alternative to standard *me*; rather, it has indexical meanings related to solidarity, alignment and group identity.

The manner in which Snell is able to make this argument relies largely on the methodology she employs. The use of interactional data, rather than overreliance on abstracted decontextualised linguistic variables, enables her to illustrate the complex mixing of language features in the speakers’ repertoire. In doing so, she is able to make a compelling case for viewing the working-class children that she describes as multi-skilled language users. She ends by highlighting the need for further research into issues of linguistic insecurity and identity conflict within education.

The UrBEn-ID project (Drummond and Dray) addresses these issues in an ongoing study into the ways in which identities are performed and negotiated in the speech and social practices of 14 to 16-year-olds in inner-city Manchester, England. In addition to describing the language of a section of twenty-first century urban youth, its aim is to challenge the narratives in British politics and mainstream media, which so often stigmatise some young people as uneducated or unemployable because of the way they speak. At the same time, it allows us to explore with young people the role that language plays in the ways in which they are perceived. Adolescence is a crucial time in the construction of identity, and the project is able to track this process through ethnographic observation, interactional discourse analysis and sociophonetic analysis of the speech of young people, many of whom have been excluded from mainstream school, as they negotiate their way through their educational environment.
At the time of writing this chapter, the project is in its early stages, yet certain aspects of language practice are already becoming apparent. For example, echoing Snell’s (2013) argument, it is neither possible nor desirable to identify the linguistic practices of these young people as constituting one or other variety, as the linguistic features are used in ways that simply do not match the patterns expected by those outside these young people’s immediate social groups. Most conspicuously, assumed constraints of ethnicity are being challenged by the young people, both in terms of the use and the understanding of what are often thought to be ethnically salient variants. In turn, this challenges widely held views on issues of identity, especially with regard to the notion of authenticity or who ‘can’ say what.

These two studies (Snell 2013) and the UrBEn-ID project serve as examples of several others that could be mentioned here (see e.g. Rampton 2006; Preece 2010).

**Acquisition of variation**

Variationist research within second language acquisition (SLA) is usually regarded as addressing two different types of variation: the first looks at linguistic competence, or the acquisition and use of ‘correct’ L2 variants versus ‘incorrect’ L1-influenced variants; while the second explores sociolinguistic competence, or the acquisition of native-speaker patterns of variability. Linguistic competence has been referred to as ‘the vertical continuum’ (e.g. Adamson and Regan 1991) or ‘type 1 variation’ (Mougeon et al. 2004), and sociolinguistic competence as ‘the horizontal continuum’ or ‘type 2 variation’. Whilst the two types are distinct in some respects, it should be borne in mind that the differences are not quite so clear-cut, as the two types of competence are often intertwined. This becomes especially clear when we consider that sociolinguistic competence is simply not possible without some degree of linguistic competence. Here, the focus is very much on research into type 2 variation, as this is where issues of identity are most likely to emerge. In fact, as Figure 3.3 illustrates, the precise focus for this section is on the small overlapping space of SLA research, variationist research and identity research.

![Figure 3.3 Intersections of research on SLA, language variation and identity](image-url)
As it happens, this overlapping space is somewhat smaller than one might anticipate, given the otherwise social focus of type 2 variation research. Moreover, much of it represents quite a traditional view of identity, which is far more in accordance with first and second-wave variationist work. The focus is on individual linguistic features being seen as representing a particular demographic category, with little attention paid to the possible interaction of other aspects of linguistic or non-linguistic practice in constructing identity. But often these observations can be seen as providing a crucial link to current discussions of identity, by beginning to highlight the agentive nature of the language/identity relationship.

Attitudes towards the locale and the local variety or alignment with the host culture have been identified as important factors that influence the acquisition of variation (Sharma 2005; Drummond 2012; Schleef forthcoming). For example, Sharma (2005) demonstrated that the use of phonological variables among speakers of Indian heritage in the United States did not correlate with proficiency, but rather with their degree of alignment with American culture. We have found similar examples of an attitude–identity connection, which hints at an agentive aspect, in our own studies. For example, Drummond’s (2012) study of Polish migrants in Manchester, England, found that those speakers who were planning on returning to Poland were less likely to use the most L2/local-influenced variant [n] than those intent on staying in the UK (when compared with all possible (ing) variants), and more likely to use the most L1-influenced variant [ŋ] (when compared with the other non-standard yet local variant [ŋɡ]). Drummond argues that the [ŋ] variant could be seen as indexing a degree of allegiance or connection with the L1 culture, albeit in a limited way. The lack of any ethnographic observation and the reliance on traditional sociolinguistic methods meant that further interpretation was impossible, but undoubtedly it is an interesting area for further exploration. Moreover, Schleef (forthcoming) examines the use of a particular variant in the possible performance of identity, by focusing on t-glottalling in the speech of migrant teenagers in London. He finds that, at around the same time (approximately two years), native constraint hierarchies for t-glottalling are acquired by migrants; (t) also begins to become available to be used as a stylistic resource in combination with other features. It is through this stylistic practice that Schleef is able to identify the performance of distinct identities.

Further exploration is required in L2 variation studies on identity. In their recent chapter on ‘Sociolinguistics and second language acquisition’, Howard et al. (2012: 354) identify one area of interest for future research as being the degree to which acquired gendered variants reflect a ‘specific and conscious attempt to “do” gender in the L2, by expressing and creating a sense of gendered identity’, thereby suggesting this has not been addressed sufficiently to date. Indeed, increased focus on this agentive aspect of SLA would demonstrate a highly significant step closer to more recent work in (L1) variation and identity. In fact, despite the rather traditional research described by Howard et al., this step has already been taken by some researchers interested in L2 variation and identity, some of which dates back to the early 2000s. This work stems from the understanding that it is simply not the case that SLA is a straightforward process of acquiring ‘target language x’: how can it be, when, like any language, target language x is inherently variable? Hansen Edwards (2008: 251) emphasises this point, highlighting the fact that L2 learners are socially motivated active agents in their language use, choices and targets for acquisition. Similarly, Ehrlich (1997: 440) accentuates the importance of viewing language learners not as ‘idealised, abstract learners’, but as individuals responsible for their own social positioning in the target culture.

Both viewpoints resonate strongly with third-wave variationist ideas, where identity is seen as something that can be performed and negotiated in all its fluidity and multiplicity, moment
Identity in variationist sociolinguistics

by moment. A further example can be found in the work conducted by Ohara (2001) into the performance of L2 gendered speech by American English speakers learning Japanese. What makes this especially interesting is the fact that the study looked at pitch (a high-pitched voice is a central feature of femininity in Japanese), a linguistic feature that has often been ignored in VS (but see Podesva 2007). Ohara’s study is fascinating in that it explores what happens when an aspect of L2 identity that is expected (in the sense of effective sociolinguistic acquisition) to be acquired is resisted on the basis that it represents an undesirable aspect of L1 identity for the individuals in question. In this instance, two English/Japanese bilinguals consciously avoided the use of feminine pitch variation, despite their awareness of its role.

This conscious avoidance of acquisition or use of particular features leads us neatly into questions of the desirability of native-like performance in a second language. Often an assumed goal in language teaching, this degree of proficiency is, in reality, far from straightforward from a social perspective, with issues of identity playing a central role. It is an issue for both variationist and non-variationist L2 research, as achieving native-like competence in a language involves travelling the full extent of both the linguistic and the sociolinguistic competence continua mentioned above. Here, the focus will be on particular pieces of research that have demonstrated how a variationist-influenced (or variationist-applicable) understanding of L2 proficiency has dealt with issues of identity.

Acquisition of native-like performance

Piller (2002) describes the experiences of expert L2 users (German-English bilingual couples) in relation to the concept of ‘passing’; in this context, this refers to the experience of passing as (being believed to be) a native speaker. In doing so, she echoes third-wave variationist interpretations of identity and agency by reporting her participants’ views that ‘passing is an act, something they do, a performance that may be put on or sustained for a limited period only’ (Piller 2002: 191). Indeed, there is such a degree of awareness of passing that several participants report taking pride in the length of time they can sustain the performance. Sociolinguistic competence is key to this practice, with Piller noting the strategic use of stereotypical variants in constructing identities. In some ways, the (over)use of particular variants could be seen as hypercorrection; however, Piller argues that it is precisely these stereotypical markers that help create the insider status. This relates back to the point made earlier about not assuming L2 learners to be passive recipients of the target language/variety. As Piller makes clear in her criticism of previous research into passing, which so often focuses only on L2 users of a standard variety, the reality is that the actual speakers are likely to choose non-standard varieties on which to model their speech; moreover, it is this much more realistic form of passing that ‘entails both pronunciation skills and sociolinguistic knowledge’ (Piller 2002: 200).

In direct contrast to the practice of passing, another area of variationist-related work into L2 identity is that of individuals who consciously avoid acquiring and/or performing native-like proficiency so as to reinforce and maintain their L1 identities. Gatbonton et al. (2005: 492) examined the tension that exists when an individual in an L2 context faces social forces of inclusion and exclusion from both L1 and L2 groups, resulting in the pressure to ‘enhance or suppress one of their two identities by manipulating their language’. They reported on two studies: one exploring Francophone learners of English in 1970s Quebec, and the other looking at Chinese learners of English in Montreal in the 2000s. Both studies revealed a relationship between the speakers’ accents and their affiliation to their home ethnic group; namely, ‘the more learners sound like the speakers of their target language, the less they are perceived by their peers to be
loyal to their own group’ (ibid.: 504). Gatbonton et al. identify three possibilities as speakers balance the ‘costs and rewards’ of allying with one or other group. Option one is to attempt to achieve as high L2 proficiency as possible, thus gaining access to resources controlled by the target group; option two is the opposite – to aim low in order to maintain and strengthen loyalty to the home group, resulting in a lack of incentive to improve the L2 any further; and option three is somewhere in between, where learners strive for high attainment but ‘retain ways of manipulating their pronunciation to clearly signal where their loyalties lie’ (p. 506). It is this third option that resonates most strongly with issues of language variation in terms of speakers targeting individual linguistic features, in order to align themselves with one or either social group.

Summary

VS has come a long way since its inception in the 1960s. The field continues to maintain a strong focus on how variation is constrained linguistically and socially, as well as how changes progress in time and space. However, the roles of social meaning and identity have changed dramatically over the decades. Variation is not simply the consequence of a speaker’s membership of a social group. Speakers actively create linguistic styles as they construct and reconstruct their identities. There is a general consensus that simple social categories and quantitative work can only tell us so much. Uncovering the social meanings of variable features and styles, in addition to how these are related ideologically, is regarded as an important step in the investigation of language variation and change. This new focus in TWVS is in parallel with an extension of the methods used. Combinations of qualitative and quantitative work, very much in line with the different levels of identity outlined above, is increasingly becoming best practice in sociolinguistic research. With regard to language and identity, the next step in applied sociolinguistics is to find ways to implement these concerns more broadly and harmonise research frameworks with applied linguistics. This will necessarily entail a stronger focus on social meaning. There are ample opportunities for very useful research – in particular, in the area of acquisition of variation. How is social meaning acquired? How does this acquisition progress, and what repercussions do answers to these questions have for theories of language change and language learning? These questions may necessitate quantitative research; but more importantly, they require the detailed exploration of the social meaning of variation in the moment-to-moment development of practices and interaction.

Related topics

Historical perspectives on language and identity; Positioning language and identity: poststructuralist perspectives; Language and identity in linguistic ethnography; Language and gender identities; Class in language and identity research; An identity transformation? Social class, language prejudice and the erasure of multilingual capital in higher education; Styling and identity in a second language; Identity in language learning and teaching: research agendas for the future.

Further reading

Eckert, P. (2012). ‘Three waves of variation study: the emergence of meaning in the study of sociolinguistic variation’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41: 87–100. (This is an overview of the three waves of VS with a focus on style.)


**References**


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