TILBURG UNIVERSITY

Understanding Society

TilburgPapers in CultureStudies

Paper 47

Language, social categories and interaction

by

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March 2013

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Interaction, indexicality and 'the total linguistic fact'

In the invitation to act as a discussant in this panel session, I have been asked to pay particular attention to the relationship between ethnicity and class, and I'll try to. But to get there, I will have to go through interaction, following Gumperz in trying to understand "how linguistic signs interact with social knowledge in discourse" (1982:29), attending to what Silverstein calls 'the total linguistic fact':

> "[t]he total linguistic fact, the datum for a science of language is irreducibly dialectic in nature. It is an unstable mutual interaction of meaningful sign forms, contextualised to situations of interested human use and mediated by the fact of cultural ideology" (1985:220)

Of course, there's a lot of important sociolinguistic work which doesn't treat signs, interaction and ideology all together at the same time, and correlational research is a prime example. But personally and maybe a bit provocatively, I'd characterise the quantitative perspective as more forensic than ethnographic, and I'd argue that if we're committed to synchronising our analyses with the situated real-time interpretations of participants, or if we're interested in agency as well as structure, or even if we're thinking about educational intervention, then we have to target the TLF.

Now if as a panel we're looking at the role of social categories in language use, this obviously makes indexicality a primary concern. In linguistic anthropology, there are lots of treatments of indexicality tuned to the TLF, but if we take Ochs 1996, then the social categories connoted by linguistic form fit into what Ochs calls 'indexical valence'. 'Indexical valence' refers to the complex associative networks that underpin our expectations that particular kinds of language will be used by particular types of person doing particular kinds of thing in particular types of situation (1996:417-19). Indexical valence is where we can slot in Gumperz's social knowledge and Silverstein's cultural ideology, and it underlines the importance of the participants' wider cultural knowledge, pointing to the fact that the meaning of an utterance is influenced by their knowledge and experience of participation in larger social systems. But at the same time, Ochs insists that you have to consider the ways that people process indexical connections "turn-by-turn, moment-by-moment, in the course of their interaction" (1996:416), and

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> "it is important to distinguish [i] the range of... dimensions
> that a form… *potentially* indexes from [ii] the range of...
> dimensions that a form… *actually* indexes in a particular instance
> of use… When a form is put to use in dialog, the range of...
> dimensions that a particular form indirectly helps to... index is
> configured in a particular way. Not all... meanings are
> necessarily entailed" (1996:418)

So when recipients process indexical signs, they're continually
figuring out exactly <u>what</u> aspects of the indexical valence are
relevant to precisely *which* elements of the interaction. In
addition, Ochs and others insist that indexical signs often evoke
affective and epistemic stances rather than clearly recognisable
social types and social categories, and again, it's impossible to
understand these apart from the very specific interactions in which
they're produced.

Acts of identity?

If you're aiming for the TLF in your analysis of the link between
language and social categories, you have to reckon with interaction,
and this problematises 'identity' as an analytic resource. So for
example, even though Le Page & Tabouret-Keller's 'acts of identity'
theory offers sociolinguistics a marvellous alternative to
structuralism, they developed their approach in the 1970s before
interaction analysis had really got going, and there's nothing in it
to help us get at the discursive nuances of social categorisation.
Okay, if we follow Zimmerman and distinguish between different
scales or layers of identity – if we divide identity up into
interactional, institutional and trans-situational transportable
identities – then we can probably still work with identity as an
analytic resource. But if it's not embedded in quite detailed and
specific contextual analysis, I'm not sure that notions like
'ingroup identity marking' or 'expression of social belonging' tell
us very much. And I don't find them very resonant intuitively
either. Here and now, for example, I'm using my voice to try to
persuade you that I'm serious, competent and heading towards the end
of my paragraph. Okay yes, I'm a white middle-class, middle-aged
male from the south-east of England, but that's not what I'm trying
to tell you.

Social categories and interaction

But if that's the case – if I'm using my voice to try to show I'm
serious, competent etc - what do we do with social categories like
ethnicity, class, gender and generation, how do we understand them?
Well, broadly in line with thinkers like Bourdieu and Williams, I
take embodied beings interacting together in the material
environment as the basic stuff of human life, and I see class,
ethnicity, gender and generation as cultural interpretations, as
second-order abstractions, as ideological stories that people use to
group certain signs, practices and persons together, positioning
them in general social processes, differentiating some from others,
aligning them with particular histories, trajectories and destinies.

Of course, these meta-level accounts feed back into ordinary life and among other things, they're central to politics. In fact in our descriptions of people interacting together, we can actually document the ways in which these representations and narratives vary in their accuracy, prominence, influence and normative force at different times in different places. Certainly, there are important differences in what these ideological interpretations thematise:

> "Class is a social category which refers to the lived relationships surrounding social arrangements of production, exchange, distribution and consumption… 'Race' and ethnicity are social categories used to explain a highly complex set of territorial relationships; these involve conquests of some territorial groups by others, the historical development of nation states, and associated migrations of people around the globe… Gender is a social category which refers to lived relationships between women and men; gender relations are those by means of which sexual divisions and definitions of masculinity and feminity are constructed, organised and maintained… Age as a dimension of inequality relates to social categories derived from the organisation of the life course and lived relationships between people socially located as being in different age-groups" (Bradley 1996:19-20)

But there's a shared commitment to seeing ideological interpretations feeding off and into practical activity in the material world when Barth talks about ethnic differentiation and boundary maintenance (1969), when Thompson talks about the need to study class "in the medium of *time* – that is, in action and reaction, change and conflict", and when Butler describes gender as "the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being".

Beyond fluidism & 'complex intersections' of class, ethnicity, gender etc

Now if we situate social categories in the total linguistic fact, treating them as vital but still second-order interpretations of human interaction, then the relationship between these axes of differentiation is a lot less perplexing than it is if you're working in the quantitative tradition. If your methods commit you to running through a set of two-, three- or four-way comparisons, looking to see whether differences in linguistic form correlate with difference in age, gender, region, ethnicity or class, then there's a risk that you either find nothing, or you end up trying to pin down *which* social categories count most, by how much. And if these are the empirical tools-and-materials you're working with, then it's easy to lapse into fluidism, ending your work with generalisations about identities being multiple, fluid and contingent, maybe adding in some programmatic commitment to further research on how the intersections of class, race and gender work out in particular situations. Personally, I'm not sure how productive this is, and it's certainly very different from TLF analysis in at least two respects.

First, instead of seeing empirical patterns disappear between your fingers as your correlations fail to hit the t-values where you can start to talk about statistical significance, the reality of the particular episodes you're looking at becomes more and more vivid as you layer your contextual, sequential, pragmatic, lexico-grammatical and phonological analyses into a TLF description, and in fact you become more and more confident of the facticity of the style or register you're looking at as the co-occurrence patterns begin to coalesce semi-predictably in multi-semiotic ensembles. Second, when it comes to the links between linguistic form and social category membership – class, ethnicity, gender etc - you actually expect ambivalence and indeterminacy, partly because these categorisations often don't matter to the participants there-and-then, and partly because when they do matter, their indexical valence is itself open to local negotiation and dispute, in ways we see very tangibly if we follow the interaction's sequential unfolding. Yes when you do follow the intricate unfolding of socially situated activity, sometimes you can see people shifting into identity positions that no one had anticipated. But rather than looking like the creative freewheeling consumption of identities evoked in fluidist multi-identity rhetorics, this looks much more like what Fred Erickson calls 'wiggle-room', people finding just a little bit of space for innovation within what's otherwise often experienced as the crushing weight of social expectation/social structure.

Retreat from the macro? Interaction analysis among other methods

Now I'm talking here about the intensive analysis of specific episodes rather than survey research, and I'm treating class, gender, ethnicity and generation as contestable interpretations rather than as background factsheet variables that convert people into representative speakers in a systematic sample. So in a context like this, you'd be perfectly entitled to ask whether this is a retreat from the macro, whether this is a worm's eye view that's blind to everything that's happening elsewhere.
    Well yes, I agree that in this kind of analysis, you don't get the really very important panorama that's now emerging in the coordinated accumulation of findings from projects like SUF, UPUS and publications like the ones Svendsen, Nortier and Quist have been editing, and I agree that it's absolutely vital to know where your informants are coming from. Still I'd like to try to make the case for the intensive TLF analysis, initially in terms of seeing the macro-in-the-micro, finding the universe-in-a-grain-of-sand, and then eventually, by spelling out the TLF's implications for naming what the ways of talking that we're all actually looking at.
    So to begin with, does too much micro-analysis make you blind? Well first, if you're working with spontaneous speech data, there's none of the selective focusing or the in-principle exclusions that get built into structured elicitation methods. So if you suddenly find there's a social label, a racist comment or a reference-to-public-events that you hadn't expected to find in the episode you're looking at, you *address* it, you see how it fares, how the participants process it, whether and how it affects your understanding of the thing you're most interested in.

Maybe more fundamentally, second, you don't just look at single episodes in isolation. If you're doing micro-ethnography, you spend time in the fieldsite, you record a range of different episodes, and as you move from one to the next in your analysis, you start to see some recognisable patterns and genres. At one level, this is just an extension of what I said earlier about the facticity, the substantiality, of social practice - you often start to see signs and actions coming together with a regularity you could call institutional, and you get past the stage where your own unfamiliarity makes everything seems innovative, gradually retuning your own perceptions to what is and isn't seen as creative by people on the ground. At another level, when you're looking across a set of episodes, working on a range of different signs and practices, you gradually start to discern the pervasive, recurring influence of quite simple cultural templates, quite rudimentary socio-cognitive structures that seem to form the presuppositional base for a host of otherwise quite elaborate activities. In contexts like the ones we're talking about in this panel, two of these pervasive templates seem to be particularly important: on the one hand, the inside/outside, here/there, foreign/local binary commonly associated with migration and ethnicity, and on the other, the high/low, mind/body, reason/emotion linked to social class stratification.

   Of course there are a number of different ways of getting at ideological structures like these. Listener evaluation studies are particularly good at showing how the social meaning potential of different styles is shaped by these binaries, and here and in studies using a range of different methods, we're now getting a very clear picture of quite a general expansion in the indexical valence of urban neighbourhood styles: what were once treated as migrant ethnic styles are increasingly construed as in class terms as well. In central Oslo, Aarsæther & Nistov's informants now see this style as the opposite of West End posh; in Copenhagen, Madsen's informants are associating the historically racialised term 'integrated' with traditionally very classed values – politeness, reason, education; and I'm fairly sure that when Bodén finds white Swedes talking multi-ethnolect in Stockholm, and when Marzo and Ceuleers say that *cité* is now seen as local, there's a class dimension there too.

   Well, if there's so much research now offering a triangulated view of these developments, is it just some kind of obsessive methodological sectarianism that's driving my attention to interaction analysis? I don't think so, because there's still one very important point to make.

Uncategorised practices and the problem of naming

When people from non-minority backgrounds start using other-ethnic-speech forms, so that there are changes in the social distribution and in the symbolic valuation of originally migrant speech forms, this is often based in shared neighbourhood experience, where solidarities emerge from common activities, common problems, pleasures and expectations. These alignments and accommodations emerge in everyday practice, and quite a lot of this happens without being explicitly identified, named or discussed. In fact you can sometimes observe these realignments happening in spontaneous speech stylisation. So for example when you hear an adolescent say

something in exaggerated Cockney and then repeat exactly the same thing in Creole a couple of minutes later, there are clues to the socio-symbolic convergence of these two styles in the functional equivalence (Rampton 2006:298-301). Similarly, you can see some kind of complicated convergence in the indexical valence of posh and foreign when they're both used ironically to perform a very non-cool, school-enthusiastic persona oriented to the high and polite (Rampton 2011:1246-7). In cases like these, I'd suggest, we're getting *in vivo* glimpses of revaluations and realignments that are often hinted rather than declared, that are often tacit rather than explicitly stated, and this is where we need to be careful with the names and classifications that we elicit from informants.

Now I'm not saying that classifications, names and the narratives they imply don't affect a style's social meaning potential, and in Agha's TLF-oriented theory of register, for example, metalinguistic practices like naming play an important role in the constitution of a style. Indeed, in the papers we've heard today, as well as in research like Bijvoet and Fraurud's, we find a fascinating plurality of labels, and the labelling is itself a very revealing socio-ideological practice. But as I've emphasised throughout, there's far more involved in the emergence and development of a style than naming alone, and sometimes the explications that we elicit from our informants are quite misleading. As Hewitt pointed out quite a long time ago, young people can be "especially vulnerable to... ready-made, culturally available opinions and attitudes" and these may seriously misrepresent the "tentatively developed interactive cultural forms in which [sociolinguistic relations] are acted out rather than clearly articulated" (1986:7).

This has major implications for what we ourselves decide to call the speech styles we're studying. It's fairly obvious that we can't adopt the names that informants use when they're racist terms like 'Kanaksprache', 'Perker' or 'Paki-language'. But more importantly, we need a formulation that remains open to the shifting social meaning potentials that emerge from the complex dialectic of linguistic, interactional and ideological processes at play in these styles. I don't think we get that openness from at least two of the labels that researchers have been using. On the one hand, 'ethnolect' and 'multi-ethnolect' shut out the dynamics of class (*and* gender) that more and more scholars can see in this kind of speech, and on the other, 'youth language' ignores the fact that it's also available for use by adults (see Møller 2009, Cheshire et al 2011:165, Rampton 2011). In fact in view of my criticism of the factsheet variable approach to class, ethnicity, gender etc, I wouldn't advise naming these styles on whatever demographic we happen to think is most important to their distribution at any given time (see Madsen 2011).

Instead, I think we need a more encompassing term, and there are at least three reasons why I think we'd do best if we just talk about 'contemporary urban vernaculars'.

Contemporary urban vernaculars

First of all, if there is one constant in all of the cases we've heard about, it's the contrastive importance of the narratives and normative regimes associated with the national standard languages in

the situations where these style develop. We're all talking about speech which pretty much the opposite of standard, and the (anglophone) sociolinguistic term for this is 'vernacular'.

Second, 'contemporary urban vernaculars' guarantees a properly historical perspective on these styles. A term like this pushes us to consider exactly how far the styles we're looking at now are similar or different from the non-standard styles that pre-dated migration, and it's also a salutary reminder that amidst all the forms we identify as new, there is also often an abundance of quite traditional non-standard speech in multi-ethnic networks.

Third, 'contemporary urban vernacular' has the advantage of terminological simplicity over more complicated formulations like 'late modern youth style'. More than that, if we accommodate these ways of speaking in an accessible and widely known term like 'vernacular', we can also normalise the kind of urban heteroglossia we're examining, moving it out of the 'marked' margins, not just in sociolinguistic study but also in public discourse. Yes as a scholar, it's quite nice to have a new and different specialist area, but as Gal and Irvine have documented in some detail, it's not necessarily much fun for our subjects if power/knowledge regimes keep them perpetually zoned off from everyone else.

So just to end, here's what I'd expect to cover in the contemporary urban vernaculars in Britain:

i) a hybrid combination of linguistic forms – "a bedrock of traditional working class English, elements of language from parental 'homelands', elements of Jamaican Creole speech... and elements of Standard English" (Harris 2008:14)
ii) variation from locality to locality, responsive to differences both in the 'bedrock' of traditional working class English – Cockney, Brummie, Geordie, Glaswegian etc – and in the local migrant diaspora/heritage languages (Punjabi, Bengali, Turkish, Polish etc);
iii) social and individual variation involving both 'broad' and 'light' uses and users, as situations and biographical trajectories draw people towards other styles in the polycentric environment to different degrees
iv) stylisation, crossing and a range of meta-pragmatic practices alongside routine speech, as well as fragmentary appropriations of other registers/styles/ languages in the environment.

At a more abstract level, I'd define 'contemporary urban vernaculars' as:

- sets of linguistic forms and enregistering practices (including crossing and stylisation) that
  o have emerged, are sustained and are felt to be distinctive in ethnically mixed urban neighbourhoods shaped by immigration and class stratification,
  o that are seen as connected-but-distinct from the locality's migrant languages, its traditional non-standard dialect, its national standard and its adult second language speaker styles, as well as from the prestige counter-standard styles circulating in (sometimes global) popular culture,

and, we should add,

- that are often widely noted and enregistered beyond their localities of origin, represented in media and popular culture as well as in the informal speech of people outside.

You can find a more elaborate argument in favour of 'contemporary urban vernaculars' in Rampton at press 2011.

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