Themed panel proposal: Indexicality in Interaction

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Participants

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Description

Research on the social meaning of linguistic variables shows that variables are semiotic indexes of socially recognizable categories, personas, and styles (Eckert 2003; Mendoza-Denton 2002). Variables gain their semiotic force through their indexical association with particular social groups or types, an association that may be forged through ideology, practice, or both (Silverstein 2003). An indexical approach to variation requires close attention to the details of interactional context for it is there that linguistic variables acquire social meaning. Ochs (1992) argues that indexes do not map directly onto social groups; rather, indexical relations are first established between linguistic forms and momentary interactional stances such as forcefulness or nonchalance (direct indexicality), and these stances then come to be associated with the social groups believed most likely to take such stances (indirect indexicality).

In keeping with the conference theme, “Micro and Macro Connections,” this panel points the way toward an interactionally grounded approach to the social meaning of linguistic variation. A double panel is requested in order to permit in-depth exploration of this fundamental sociolinguistic issue; there are six papers with time for discussion after each. The panel is structured around three main themes that foreground the interdependence of the micro and the macro in sociolinguistics: (1) methodology and theoretical modeling in the study of indexicality and variation in interaction; (2) the analysis of stance taking as the indexical basis of more enduring linguistic and social styles; and (3) the broader social meanings that indexical relations create and exploit as part of the discursive construction of society and culture.

The panel opens with Mendoza-Denton’s programmatic statement concerning the interactional basis of linguistic variation. Arguing for the necessity of developing statistically informed models of real-time variation in interaction, she surveys a set of pioneering studies within sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and conversation analysis that offer tools and techniques to help achieve this goal. Drawing on videotaped data of political speech in Arizona, Mendoza-
Denton identifies some of the central conceptual and methodological challenges and consequences of such a research program.

The second paper, by Schilling-Estes, focuses on a key sociolinguistic methodology, the research interview, and calls for models of stylistic variation that are more attentive to the interview as a social context. Her analysis of a range of sociolinguistic and sociological interviews collected in the Southeastern United States reveals that traditional variationist approaches to style cannot account for the range of intraspeaker stylistic practices that emerge within interviews. She argues for the continuing relevance of interview methodologies in analyzing the stylistic deployment of variable in interaction.

Kiesling and Eberhardt offer an empirical test of the “stance hypothesis,” the claim that stances are the building blocks of style. Based on the results of two different studies, one an analysis of a multiparty conversation in Pittsburgh and the other an investigation of ethnolinguistic identity in Sydney, they find that an appeal to stance provides an explanation for apparently anomalous style shifting, and that an ethnolinguistic marker may be associated with a specific interactional stance. They conclude that a weak version of the stance hypothesis is well supported.

Chun’s paper explores two types of indexes, conventionalized and emergent, that speakers may exploit in interaction. Drawing on ethnographic sociolinguistic data from a Texas high school, Chun shows how a culturally recognizable persona, the “prep,” may be mocked by outgroup members in part through the use of directly indexical resources, in part through indirectly indexical resources, and in part through the temporary resignification of nonconventionalized resources within discourse.

Bucholtz examines the process of indexical inversion (Inoue 2004), whereby naturalized associations between an indexical form and a sociocultural style are used to promote specific language ideologies. The paper focuses on the indexicality of a Mexican Spanish slang term, güey, which is often glossed as ‘dude’. Through an analysis of media representations of güey as well as the term’s use among Mexican immigrant youth in California, Bucholtz argues that indexical inversion promotes cultural ideologies of gender and language and places alternative gender styles under erasure.

Finally, Coupland’s paper addresses the broad cultural and metacultural reach of indexicality through his analysis of the creation of a new postindustrial community identity. His examination of the popular host of a Welsh call-in radio show, Chris Needs, documents the wide variety of styles, stances, and personas taken up by Needs within discourse. Coupland demonstrates that it is through projecting an untraditional and nonauthenticated style of local Welsh identity that Needs creates a “caringly subversive” view of traditional Welshness and thus a new basis for community.

References


[898 words excluding references]