

The individual in the semiotic landscape

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Labov has long claimed (e.g. 2014) that the individual is not a suitable object of linguistic study, because the speech patterns of the individual cannot be understood independently of those of the community. I carry this claim further, with the extreme proposal that change spreads by virtue of its role in a system of social meaning, and meaning is not constructed by individuals. I challenge two dominant assumptions in the study of variation and change: (1) that sound change is autonomous, and (2) that it spreads from individual to individual, by imitation and in isolation. Rather, change spreads by virtue of its incorporation into a semiotic landscape, in which non-referential material is recruited into signs articulating social distinctions. Participation in this landscape connects the individual to the immediate community and to the larger social order. More accurately, the landscape is a localization of the social order (Appadurai 1996). I will provide evidence of this process, based on ethnographic data on two chain shifts in progress – the Northern Cities Shift and the California Shift.

We tend to treat a sound change as having a life of its own, whether alone or in the company of related sounds, as in a chain shift. But a sound change, or even an entire shift, does not occur on its own in speech; it occurs in the company of other variables, specifically as a component not just of a dialect but of a style. And while style has commonly been treated as ancillary to language, it is in fact central, as language is not simply a referential system but quite centrally an expressive one. While a sound change may originate as a perturbation in the signifier of a referential sign, its spread depends on its own enregisterment (Agha 2003) as a sign. In some cases, systemic factors offer up changes, which are then recruited into ideological projects. In other cases, in what are commonly referred to as changes from above, ideological projects go looking for linguistic material. In all cases, the resulting variability moves through the population by virtue of its utility in social projects.

It has been customary to view variables as gaining meaning from macro-social structure. But while macro-social categories such as class and gender classify individuals in broad strokes, they abstract over a range of globally constrained but locally constructed practices and potentials. Linguistic correlations with membership in such categories are not direct reflections of these abstract structures, but the result of behavior patterned by the constraints that this structure imposes on social life across the social order. The resulting patterns are a reflection of ideological differences both major and minor, ultimately local manifestations of global issues. The regular class stratification of changes in progress, and the common female lead in change are indications of the realization of class and gender on the ground. So while the spread of change takes a common macro-social direction, ethnographic work (e.g. Eckert 2000, 2011; Podesva 2011) shows that change does not take a “straight path”, but is taken up in virtue of its semiotic potential.

The landscape is an imagined array of social types, distinguished on the basis of social issues and grounding linguistic variability in ideology. It is through participation in this landscape that

individual speakers produce and perceive – and accelerate – changes in progress. Speakers engage in stylistic practice to construct personae in the moment, based on the range of possibilities offered in the landscape. Thus the adoption of a change is a performative act, not necessarily a conscious one, by which the individual resolves his or her immediate place in the social landscape. The landscape is structured by stylistic landmarks in the form of what Agha (2003) calls Characterological Figures. These figures are widely conventionalized stereotypes (e.g. *Valley Girl*, *Hippy*, *Cholo*) that articulate social distinctions specific to time and place. The speaker, a stylistic agent, parses figures in the landscape relating linguistic differences to social differences. Thus change doesn't just "arrive" at a speaker; it is already there in the landscape, and speakers adopt it if it is useful.

So what role can the individual play? Those who have been found to be leaders in sound change (e.g. Labov 2001) do not determine the direction of change, but accelerate it in their extreme stylistic activity. An individual may bring something completely different into the community, but it will have to take on community meaning to spread. Needless to say, those who are less sensitive to social or linguistic nuance will play minimal role in the structuring of the landscape. And the leaders in change will be those who are both sensitive and sufficiently significant in the landscape to motivate others. And while a given individual might actually imitate another individual, this is probably the rare case, and in fact likely to be someone with little semiotic power.

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