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Introduction

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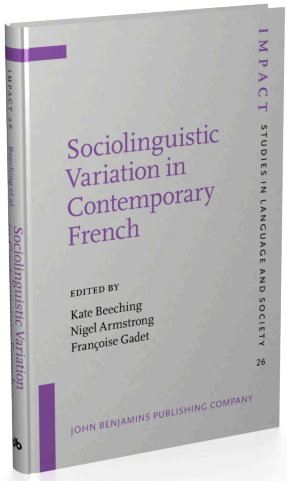

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Introduction

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It may seem surprising, in the 21st. century, to edit a book whose title contains the words 'Sociolinguistic Variation'. After all, a succession of recent works in the constructionist model (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985; Butler, 1990; Rampton, 1995, 2006, Schiffrin, 1996; Mills, 2003 and Coupland, 2007) have roundly criticized quantitative sociolinguistics and the classic Labovian variationist paradigm, suggesting that these approaches project a static conceptualization of the relationship between language and social identity. Viewed through the constructionist lens, variationism and social stratification studies set the identification of social groups with linguistic features in stone. Social identities, it is argued, are, on the contrary, fluid and dynamic, locally situated and constructed. Not only that but speakers consciously 'style' their words and use genres strategically in order to create specific meanings and effects.

In defense of quantitative approaches

Some defense of the notion of 'variation', of social stratification studies and even of quantitative methods appears to be required before introducing the chapters in the volume. Firstly, then, in its defense, it must be pointed out that variationist sociolinguistics, since its earliest days in the 1960s, has been concerned with variation **and change** – there is an explicit recognition that the identification of social groups with language features shifts and that this factor is, indeed, instrumental in language change. The association of variationism with a static conceptualization of the relationship between language forms and social groups appears then to be a fundamental misapprehension of the sociolinguistic enterprise as it was originally conceived. Secondly, when speakers use styles strategically to create specific meanings, such 'styles' evoke either stereotyped or commonly recognized fashions of speaking or salient features of these. If, as Schiffrin (1996: 199) remarks, "identity is neither categorical nor is it fixed: we may act more or less middle-class, more or

less female, and so on, depending on what we are doing and with whom", individuals must have some image of what it is to "act middle-class, female and so on", in other words, they must be tapping into generally recognized features which sum up these categories. On the one hand, speakers may draw on a stereotypical or unreal image of what it is to speak like someone from the Midi, from the *cités* or like a radio or TV presenter. On the other, the features calqued or parodied in styling may be reasonably close to a real representation of the community of speakers thus styled. It seems, then, a reasonable project to find out what linguistic features are indeed used by particular communities of French speakers in different contexts at particular points in time – an area which has not necessarily been comprehensively explored.

The problem of how 'style' might be defined is taken up by Coupland (2007, Chapter 1) and a distinction has to be made between the classic Labovian model (e.g. Labov, 2006: 167) and the interactional view which examines the way in which the linguistic variables associated with a particular context are put to work creatively. In classic variationist sociolinguistics, style is strictly defined by the assumed decreasing levels of formality reflected in individuals' pronunciation of key variables when reading a word-list, reading a text, in a formal interview situation and in informal conversation. The proportion of occurrences of informal forms is, in turn, mirrored in terms of social background – in early studies, both Labov and Trudgill found a correlation between the forms used by the least educated and those used in less formal situations (such as everyday conversation). In other words, in the early variationist studies, the most educated speakers used fewer 'informal' variants overall but they did use informal variants in a graduated manner across the various styles. Interactionists argue that speakers can adjust their language creatively to suggest particular contexts or levels of (in)formality and can do so for expressive effect. These might be termed 'styles of speaking'.

If it is the case, however, that speakers adopt 'styles of speaking', how can the quantitative researcher collect data which is socially or situationally constituted (rather than exhibiting conscious features of style)? Rickford (2001: 16) "cautions against rejecting the more predictable, often automatic, aspects of stylistic variation that are the focus of quantitative studies of variation".

It seems likely that 'styling' is restricted to particular types of public performance, a point raised by Rickford (2001: 230) when he says:

> some verbal (and non-verbal) performances, especially those that involve radio broadcasts, large audiences and public occasions **are** more stylized than others… people in such situations **are** trying more consciously than most of us may do in everyday life, to project personas of various types…. There are undoubtedly parallels to this kind of stylization in one-to-one conversation, but the opportunities and possibilities for it seem to increase as audience size grows.

The data studied in the current volume were, in the vast majority of cases, collected as part of one-to-one conversations and, it might thus be argued, constitute a fruitful hunting-ground for socially constituted as opposed to 'styled' modes of speech.

Coupland (2007: 5) concedes, moreover, that, though they have not encouraged us to understand what people meaningfully achieve through linguistic variation, "the survey designs of variationist research … have been remarkably successful in revealing broad patterns of linguistic diversity and change". Tagliamonte (2001: 730) concurs with this when she points out that "when the goal of research is to gauge and model the individual and combinatory effects of multidimensional internal linguistic factors alongside broadly defined external factors, a quantitative approach is particularly useful".

Without over-simplifying what are extremely complex relations and inter-relations between form, context and the individual, the chapters in this volume hope to make a real contribution to discerning the broad patterns of linguistic patterning in contemporary French, looking more closely at what linguistic variation might mean and at how it is acquired in learners of French as a second language.

Overview of the volume

The volume is divided into three main sections addressing issues in variation and change in contemporary French at the phonological, syntactic and lexico-semantic/pragmatic levels of linguistic analysis, respectively. Written entirely in English it will appeal to (socio-)linguists with an interest in contemporary French as well as to post-graduate students of French and specialists in the field.

In introductions to the three main sections, the co-editors of the volume contribute overviews of their respective areas of expertise, namely phonological variation and leveling in hexagonal[1] French and elsewhere, syntactic and stylistic variation and lexical variation and semantic change. These set the scene for the more focused studies presented in the individual chapters. A unifying theme of the volume is the role of external sociolinguistic factors in both variation and change.

From a diatopic perspective, varieties of French in France, Belgium, Switzerland, Africa and Canada are considered, mainly with respect to phonological variation (Section I) but also with respect to syntactic and lexical features (Knutsen in Section II on French in the Ivory Coast; Dostie in Section III on Canadian French).

1. The term "L'Hexagone" is often used to denote France, because of its geographical shape; hexagonal French refers then to the variety spoken in France (rather than that of Belgium, Switzerland and so on).

The intersection between social factors and phonological change is explored in Armstrong and Boughton's chapter on dialect leveling in hexagonal French. Hambye's paper on word final consonant devoicing in Belgium is original in highlighting diastratic as well as regional factors, while variation with age is the focus of both Violin-Wigent's and Pustka's papers on the phonological features of Southern France. Miller's study of style-shifting in Swiss French is unique in the volume in focusing on prosody and finally, a contrast between English and French is drawn in Pooley's review of the impact of an influx of immigrants on local varieties. Many of these studies paint a similar overall picture: that European French is undergoing standardization or is tending towards a supra-local norm, a norm which is not necessarily that of classical standard French but has currency over the region as a whole and is not restricted to one locality.

Sociostylistic and syntactic features are the focus of a number of the papers in Section II. Bilger and Tyne's study of syntax across speech styles in UK anglophone learners focuses on the use of *parce que* while Rossi-Gensane compares the use of non-standard non-finite forms in the spoken language, in newspapers and in novels. Knutsen examines relative clauses in the French spoken in the Ivory Coast, while Buson traces the perceptions of pre-teenagers with respect to stylistic variation and relates these to social class.

Finally, in Section III, we look at the impact of social and stylistic factors in lexical variation and semantic change. Dostie looks at diatopic variation, suggesting that the degree of pragmaticalization of discourse markers in Quebec French may vary from one region to another. Beeching, on the other hand, examines the extent to which sociosituational variation has contributed to the rise in distributional frequency and pragmaticalization of discourse-marking *bon* in modern hexagonal French. The social and economic factors behind the shift in meaning of *fortuné* from 'luck' to 'wealth', along with the resistance to change evident in metalinguistic works across the centuries, form the subject of Courbon's highly detailed study of this lexical item which concludes the volume.

In a volume of this scope one cannot hope to give comprehensive coverage of the array of phonological, syntactic and lexical features which underpin sociolinguistic variation in contemporary French. We hope, however, to have given some flavor of the richness afforded by the language in all its variety and to have pinpointed areas of particular contemporary significance.

My heartfelt thanks go to the many people who have made this volume possible, the authors themselves, the co-editors, who wrote the Introductions to each sub-section and who provided much useful comment on the shape of the volume, and on the contributions themselves, to Richard Waltereit for accepting the invitation to co-author the introduction to the section on Lexical Variation and Semantic Change, to the anonymous reviewers of each chapter and of the volume as a whole.

I acknowledge my indebtedness, too, to the Research Committee of the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences of the University of the West of England, Bristol, for granting me the Research Leave which permitted me to honor my editorial duties and to complete my own contribution to this collection.

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