A Brief History of Style, and its Contribution to 21st-century Sociolinguistic Theory

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Style has moved to the centre of sociolinguistic theorization in the 21st century. This paper examines the field's developing treatment of style through fifty years and four phases. It interprets our shifting concepts of the underlying language/society relationship in terms of the social-theoretic dynamics of structure and agency. It then proposes a way ahead drawing on Bakhtin's principle of the Dialogicality of language.

The first phase, at least in variationist sociolinguistics, was Labov's operationalization (1966) of style as a reflex of attention paid to speech. The approach was correlational, where social structure conditions individuals' linguistic repertoires. It reflects the dominance of the structural-functionalist social theory of the time.

In the second phase, some researchers began to take style itself as the direct focus of study (e.g. Bell 1982, Coupland 1984, Hindle 1979). Their data sources diversified from everyday conversation into media language. Some drew on sociopsychological explanations such as accommodation theory (Giles & Powesland 1975, Trudgill 1981). Bell's Audience Design framework (1984, Rickford & McNair-Knox 1994) theorized style as largely a response to hearers.

The third phase followed the increasing dominance of the constructivist paradigm in the 1990s, which swung the emphasis away from structure and towards agency. Schilling-Estes (1998) and Coupland (2001) stressed speakers' agentive strategies, and Bell foregrounded the 'initiative' dimension of style (2001). Silverstein's concept of indexicality (1979) was adopted to interpret the social meanings of linguistic features. Analytical approaches broadened beyond the linguistic to include the multimodal. These shifts were part of what Eckert (2012) historicized as a 'Third Wave' of variation studies, and predominated through the first decade of the 21st century.

We are now moving into a fourth phase which is informed but not controlled by agentive approaches to style. It recognizes that we must simultaneously take account of the structural factors which shape and circumscribe the ways speakers use

language. It both builds on what we have learned about speaker proactivity in linguistic self-presentation, and incorporates the role of external forces in shaping sociolinguistic identities.

I will evidence the four phases by focusing on their different treatments of sociolinguistic stereotypes. For Labov in the 1960s, stereotype variables were deceptive emblems of language variation, although salient to public consciousness. In phase 2, Coupland studied one such variable in the speech of a radio presenter (1985), and Bell analysed the identity work accomplished by stereotype usage in advertisements (1992). Moving into phase 3, some dialect studies examined how stock phrases are used to represent a defining feature of a variety such as *dahntahn* for Pittsburgh English (Johnstone 2014).

A systematic study of an unsystematic corpus of such stock phrases in English shows that they have both describable linguistic regularity and salient sociocultural dimensions. Their operation requires us to consider the sociolinguistics of structure as well as of agency. A satisfying sociolinguistic theory for the 21st century will need to fuse both dimensions. To achieve that it can build on Bakhtin's tenet that Dialogicality is inherent in the character of language in society.

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