

“I could not understand a *word!*”: Narrating regional dialect

Geographic mobility associated with the globalizing economy results at the same time in the collapse of distinctions among regional varieties (Trudgill 1986, Milroy 2002, Auer, Hinskens, and Kerswill 2005) and in increased popular attention to regional variation (Beal 1999, Johnstone and Baumgardt 2004, Johnstone, Andrus, and Danielson 2006). This is because the social and economic conditions that cause people to speak more alike are, paradoxically, the same as those that give rise to the activities in which “dialects” are constructed as shared representations of ways of talking linked to places. To explore one such activity, this paper employs a Proppian (Propp, 1968) analysis of “narratives of linguistic encounter”: personal-experience stories about newcomers’ first encounters with Pittsburghers’ speech and Pittsburghers’ encounters with other ways of speaking and recognition by fellow Pittsburghers during travels elsewhere. The corpus of narratives was assembled from over 100 sociolinguistic interviews as well as ethnographic field notes and media sources, in the course of more than 8 years of participant observation.

Drawing on work by Silverstein (1995, 2003), Agha (2003), and others on “enregisterment,” or the discursive processes through which sets of linguistic forms get linked ideologically with social and personal identities, I argue that circulating narrative plots help to create shared orientations to particular sets of nonstandard linguistic features and link these sets of features indexically with region. I suggest that personal-experience narrative is a particularly good vehicle for the ideological differentiation of ways of speaking from one another (Gal & Irvine, 1995), because conversational narrative requires evaluative techniques (Labov, 1972) such as hyperbole. For example, in outsiders’ and Pittsburghers’ stories alike, communicative difficulty is often hyperbolically represented as communicative failure (“I could not understand a *word* they were saying!”), and interlocutors are often represented as failing to do normal kinds of interpretive work when confronted with small linguistic differences. (For example, a roommate reacts to the narrator’s saying her shirt “needs ironed” not with the sort of second-assessment move -- “Yes, it sure does” or “Oh, no, it doesn’t” -- that would be expected as the second part of this adjacency pair [Heritage 2002, Pomerantz 1984] but by pointing out that the phrase “isn’t proper English.”)

In keeping with the conference focus on interdisciplinary approaches to language variation, the paper argues for the relevance of linguistic-anthropological theory and discourse analytic method to questions about language change, vernacular normativity (Wolfram, 2003) and dialect endangerment in the US that are at the center of variationist sociolinguistic inquiry.

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