

Talking Preppy: Indeterminacies of style, structure and social meaning

Sociolinguists typically acknowledge the tenuous link between stylistic structure and social meaning. Recognizing that communities differ with respect to the indexical value of what may appear to be the same feature (Eckert 2004), they highlight the role of context in determining how structural features are interpreted. Consequently, researchers have often studied meanings within the context of a specific locality, examining the meanings of style features as they are reflected in patterns of variation among local community members. In this paper, I suggest that, in addition to identifying such patterns among local speakers, a fuller understanding of stylistic meaning must also consider meaning-making processes at the level of interaction; it is at this level of analysis that the creation of links between linguistic structure and social meaning are most readily apparent.

This paper suggests that while styles are immensely meaningful tools for defining speaker relations and creating social distinctions (Irvine 2001), the specific social meanings of styles, like linguistic resources more generally, are sometimes indeterminate (Dore and McDermott 1982) because of the potential for multiple interpretations of a single structural feature. My analysis explores the ways in which speakers handle such indeterminacies of style. Drawing on recorded interactions obtained during 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork at a Texas high school, this paper explores Asian American students' uses of a stereotypical Prep style, associated with wealthy white girls in the local community. It addresses how stylistic meanings of preppiness emerge within interactional moments; the social meanings of stylistic features are thus contingent consequences of interaction rather than based on a fixed set of Prep style features.

My analysis involves several brief examples of interaction that illustrate the multiple and ambiguous meanings of what may potentially be identified, and sometimes eventually becomes identified, as part of a local Prep style. In one example, a girl's utterance—characterized by a high and rising pitch pattern—is mocked by her friend and implicitly identified as belonging to the Prep style. Although the assignment of stylistic meaning is initially challenged by the mocked speaker, provoking explicit negotiation between the two girls, both girls ultimately accept the mocker's indexical assignment, demonstrating that indexical meanings can be assigned and reassigned to structural features even after the moment of utterance. My analysis explores the implications of such negotiated moments as well as moments in which ambiguities and multiplicities may be left unaddressed. In addition to investigating such recontextualizations of stylistic features, this paper addresses general factors that give rise to ambiguities of social meaning, including the co-existence of multiple language ideologies as well as speakers' ambiguous footings (Goffman 1981) when employing particular stylistic elements.

The social meaning of stylistic elements does not necessitate explicit negotiation, given that style features, which often co-occur with other features of the same style, can have sufficiently recognizable indexical values. Such features thus evoke a clear stereotypical persona. However, I suggest that the potential for indeterminacy and negotiation always

exists, and such aspects of stylistic practice can be visible in specific moments of discourse.

References

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