

A historical perspective on the study of social meaning

In recent studies of sociolinguistic variation much attention has been focused on how social meaning is made, negotiated, and contested in situated practices in the immediate context(s) under study. This study proposes a historical perspective on examining the social meaning of linguistic variables. Drawing in part from the Bakhtinian dialogic view of language, this paper argues that meaning making is not bounded within the immediate context. It is a cumulative process through which a salient sociolinguistic variable takes on and extends its meaning potential. The accumulated social-cultural associations that the variable brings with it constitute potential for and constraints on its reemployment in the immediate present and future contexts. Hence, examining past uses of a linguistic variable reveals how social meaning accumulates through its socially charged life in the local community. Taking into account the social history of a linguistic variable helps achieve a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of its (re)use in present and future contexts.

The empirical case presented here focuses on the dialectal feature of rhotacization, a salient sociolinguistic variable in Beijing Mandarin. Rhotacization is the addition of the retroflex approximant [ʝ] to the final syllable of a word. For example, the word ‘flower’ can be realized as hua [hua] without rhotacization, or as huar [huaʝ] with rhotacization. It is represented orthographically as the character 儿. Drawing on data from literary works categorized as “Beijing Flavor Literature” and writings of literary and cultural critics of Beijing literature and culture from the late 18th century to the late 20th century, the study presents snapshots of the social history of rhotacization. Analysis reveals several processes through which rhotacization extends its meaning potential: (1) as a direct index of the locality of Beijing and Beijing accent, (2) as an emblem of a unique Beijing style, (3) as naturally associated with a well-known urban character type, the “Beijing smooth operator”, and a set of “smoothness”-related urban social characteristics.

Findings from the social history of rhotacization help explain the differential use of this variable by a group of native Beijing professionals working for international businesses. It is one of the linguistic resources employed by the professionals to construct a new cosmopolitan professional identity. The reemployment of rhotacization by the professionals does not erase its social history. They are engaged in a dialogue with traces of its past. An understanding of the accumulated social-cultural associations of rhotacization proves crucial to explaining why the male professionals have a greater leeway whereas their female counterparts are more restricted in the use of the rhotacized variant. This study shows that a historical perspective that takes into account the social history of a linguistic variable is indispensable to developing a more sophisticated approach to the study of the social meaning of variation.

Word count: 456