Chapter 7

Conclusions: Style and meaning

This dissertation set out to address a broad research question fundamental to the study of linguistic variation: how is the relationship between linguistic variation and social meanings structured? Within the rich literature on socially marked variation there are insights which begin to answer this question and allow us to make it more specific. The insight fundamental to the field is that at least some variation is patterned relative to social space. Instead of variation being the unpredictable, random portion of language, Labov (1963, 1966) and those that followed him demonstrated that speakers' linguistic behavior correlates with their backgrounds, beliefs and speaking situations.

More recent work has emphasized that variation does not merely reflect social structures but in fact helps to create them (Eckert 2001b; Ochs 1992). Because variation carries social meanings, speakers may use socially loaded linguistic resources to construct the interactions in which they are engaged, their own identities or other social objects. This approach suggests that both speakers and listeners are engaged in the project of construction together (although not necessarily cooperatively). As a result, both of the speaking and listening processes emerge as crucially important for the construction of a specific interaction as well as for the long term shape of socially significant linguistic variation.

Although this theoretical turn places a portion of the burden of social structuring on listeners, it does not explore their task in any depth. Work in the social psychology

of language, on the other hand, has addressed how listeners interpret a variety of linguistic choices, primarily at the level of languages and language varieties (Lambert *et al.* 1965) or paralinguistic cues (Smith *et al.* 1975) and defined sets of features (Erickson *et al.* 1978). Other work has documented the degree to which speakers take their audiences into account when putting together a linguistic performance (Giles and Powesland 1975; Giles and Smith 1979; Bell 1984). This body of work has established the complexity and importance of the listener's task, but very little of it has addressed sociolinguistic variation as such (exceptions include Labov (1966); Plichta and Preston (2005)). This background helps to narrow the previous research question to a more specific one: how does the use of variation influence listener reactions and what factors shape this process?

To address this more specific question, I selected a single variable, the English variable (ING) and investigated its impact on listener perceptions. Drawing on the existing tools in the literature on language attitudes, I used the Matched Guise Technique to examine the influence of (ING) on listener reactions to eight speakers, four men and four women, four from the South and four from the West Coast.

The results showed that (ING) affects perceptions in comprehensible but complicated ways. It changed some perceptions across the board. Speakers were described as more educated when the used *-ing* and were more likely to be described as articulate in those guises as well. (ING) also shifted how two aspects of evaluation interacted with each other. For example, *-in* strengthened the relationship between perceptions of the speaker being casual and being working class. The results also demonstrated the influence of context on the role of (ING), including the speaker, the message content and listener characteristics.

The rest of this chapter will discuss the theoretical impact of these results in more depth. First, I will describe some of the implications of these results for our understanding of the social structuring of linguistic variation. One of these implications concerns how listeners use groupings of features to make sense of linguistic performances by shifting their expectations concerning a single feature on the basis of other linguistic behaviors. This suggests that the construct of individual style is not only a useful way for analysts to consider patterns of co-occurrence but a cognitive reality

that listeners use in interpreting variation. The central portion of the chapter expands this idea, first discussing the theoretical status of style. I will discuss the reactions of the interview participants which show a layered system of markedness and explain its relationship to the notion of individual style. After describing this evidence for the role of style in listening, I will discuss other ways in which this research shed light on the concept of style and describe some of the many questions yet to be answered. This discussion will lead into a broader final discussion of the future work which could build on the beginning represented by the present project.

7.1 Theoretical Implications

This section synthesizes the specific results discussed in earlier chapters into more abstract theoretical lessons. The first is that the process of interpreting a linguistic performance is more complex and involves more agency than is frequently acknowledged. As Chapter 6 showed, listeners are not simple decoding machines recovering meanings encoded by speakers. Instead, listeners engage agentively with their task, attending to different aspects of a performance and interpreting them differently.

Linguists have long marked the potential for disconnect between the impression a speaker wishes to give and the one that a listener actually forms. Laver and Trudgill (1979) adopt the division developed in Lyons (1977) between communicative and informative speech markers. In this terminology **communicative** markers are those which the speaker intends to use, markers which are "meaningful to the sender". **Informative** markers, on the other hand, are those which are "meaningful to the receiver", those which give the listener information whether not the speaker intended to convey it (Laver and Trudgill 1979:4). The evidence for and implications of this agency on the part of the listener are explored in depth in Chapter 6.

The other results, primarily reported in Chapters 4 and 5, centered around the influence of other aspects of context, those related to the speaker and the speech situation. Social structures co-occur with each other, not only with linguistic structures. As analysts, we tend to treat this fact as a methodological difficulty rather than a theoretical insight. When two social structures co-occur with each other (for

example speaker identity and speech situation) and with a linguistic feature, it is part of the linguist's job to tease out the relationships between the linguistic content and the two social structures as much as possible. We wish to determine which aspects of the variable use derive from the speakers background and which from the speech situation. In doing so, it is easy to focus too heavily on disentangling the relative influences of social structures on language and lose sight of the other relationships involved. It is important to take these into account, both because such structural connections form a part of the larger picture and because speakers and listeners are aware of them. Information about the speaking situation is likely to lead listeners to make deductions regarding the speaker. Conversely, images of particular groups of people include expectations about the kind of speech situations they are likely to engage in.

In this and other ways, listener perceptions are structured by their expectations. Previous work has demonstrated that in some cases expectations may overwhelm direct evidence, such as when visual cues to ethnicity lead listeners to perceive accents they do not otherwise hear (Rubin and Smith 1990; Williams *et al.* 1976). Other expectations may have effects not yet explored. Expectations lead to different arrangements of markedness for different speakers, as less expected forms are more marked than predicted ones. This pattern, which will be discussed in more detail shortly, suggests that the concept of individual style is not only a useful theoretical tool but may reflect an actual cognitive construct used by listeners to help structure their understandings of an utterance.

7.2   Developing an understanding of style

I use the term style to refer to a cluster of linguistic and nonlinguistic resources found in a given performance or across multiple performances and perceived by speaker and/or listener to be a socially coherent set.

This use has little to no relation to that used in Labov (1966), which equates style with the amount of attention the speaker is devoting to standardizing his or her speech. As discussed in Chapter 4, I think that this definition is too restrictive for such

a useful concept as style. Instead, I refer to that as situational formality. There are common themes between that use and my own. The notion of attention paid to speech is one way of capturing the idea that people speak differently in different situations. While I believe that the notion of style must be expanded beyond this, this insight into the influence of situation is an important precursor to flexibly incorporating both inter- and intra-speaker variation into a comprehensive theory of style.

Style is also one of the words frequently used for the more general concept of situation-based variation, as contrasted with speaker-based variation, a phenomenon for which the term **register** is also frequently used (Halliday *et al.* 1964). Whether called register, genre or style, intra-speaker variation is a crucial aspect of linguistic variation. The importance of situational variability may be seen in the discussion of Ochs's model of indirect indexicality in Chapter 1. While some aspects of gender or other identities may be directly linked to language, far more are constituted by particular stances, acts and activities, all of which are given meaning only within specific situations. Conversely, situation-based variation cannot be fully understood with acknowledging the fact that different situations are usually populated (and/or expected to be populated) by different speakers. For this reason it is important to remove the speaker/situation distinction as a primitive of the classification system of style, although not from our awareness as we move forward.

Inter-speaker variation has also been examined under the rubric of style (Sebeok 1960). Much of this work has been done in connection to literary studies, examining the stylistic variations of different authors or schools of literature. In this context, style may be seen in terms of the norm or set of norms and deviations from it, or alternatively as the choices speakers or writers make between equal sets of norms (Hymes 1960; Osgood 1960).

Although issues of style and language have received the most attention from literary studies, sociolinguists have also devoted time and thought to issues involving style. I discussed Bell's work on style as audience design in Chapter 1, which adapts the central ideas of Accomodation Theory into a framework with a greater focus on style as such (Bell 2001; Bell 1984). Coupland (1985); Coupland (2001) uses an understanding of style to connect situational variation with dialect-related variation

and the notion of identity. His approach emphasizes the importance of connecting the sociolinguistic work to current work in social theory and the role of linguistic choices in the production of self.

Irvine (2001) discusses style as a system of distinction, in which speakers use linguistic and other resources to distinguish their identity categories from others. She also emphasizes the importance of language ideologies in mediating these processes of identity construction and distinction. Her discussion underlines the fact that while not all sociolinguistic computations need to take place at the conscious level, speaker/listeners beliefs and ideologies regarding language and social structures largely inform their linguistic behaviors.

The definition used here is inherited from a school of style begun by the California Style Collective (1993), who defined style as "a clustering of linguistic resources and an association of that clustering with an identifiable aspect of social practice" (California Style Collective 1993:14). This clustering may take place over a range of dimensions, although that paper tackled what is perhaps the most difficult one, time. By examining the speech of a single individual over the course of an interview, they sought to identify points at which tokens of multiple different variables co-occurred together to create an intensification of a particular kind of "California white girl" style. This definition of style embodies a claim which has yet to be fully tested: that such clusters exist, may be empirically established and correspond in a meaningful way to socially coherent stylistic packages. In speaking of style, then, I am not referring to a predetermined theoretical construct, but rather to a field of inquiry—one whose investigation is only beginning.

Up until this point, this notion of style as a cluster of resources has existed as an observation made by linguists and other scholars. Researchers into language and social structure, particularly variation, have engaged with style as a way of capturing the distribution of meaningful variation. Results from my study, however, suggest that style may exist as a way for listeners (and therefore speakers) to understand variation and organize its social baggage. The support for this lies in the layered nature of the markedness divisions exhibited by the interview participants. The next section documents this system of markedness.

7.3 Markedness

As discussed in Chapter 1, part of the structure of linguistic variation is the assignment of markedness to the variants of a given variable. Listeners may believe one variant is less noticeable overall or more natural for a particular speaker or in a particular situation. This belief will influence the ways in which listeners build stories around a speaker's motivations and thus how they ultimately interpret a performance. It is important to note that the type of markedness I am discussing is an ideological phenomenon, rather than a linguistic one. There may, in fact, be ways in which it affects actual linguistic choices, but the data here do not address that. This data comes exclusively from qualitative results and deals with how listeners conceptualize the use of (ING). It does not necessarily reflect how of the variable might be used or perceived. What it does reflect is the ideologies listeners bring to the task of language use and interpretation.

The most widespread ideology of markedness was a basic privileging of *-ing* as the normal form of the variable, casting *-in* as the marked version. This may be seen in the ways that participants in the group interviews conceptualized my questions regarding the effect of (ING). It was common for listeners to interpret the question in terms of their opinions of the *-in* form, assuming that the *-ing* form, being the correct one, had no intrinsic meaning. Another form of this ideology was the most common articulation of the variable by participants in the interviews, "dropping one's G's", in which the *-ing* variant reflects the true pronunciation of the word in question, including a necessary segment, the "G". Both of these phenomena construct *-ing* as a natural or normal way of talking and *-in* as an unusual variation. The phrase itself was extremely common in the group interviews, as in (39). In addition, listeners at times associated the *-in* variant with other forms of variation that involve deletions or failure to "pronounce all of the words", as shown in (40).

(39) **Jill:** Well the thing is, in my own experience sometimes we drop the G just because we're so comfortable, we're laid-back and relaxed, that's why we don't say the G, so it doesn't really indicate anything like that about education.

Group 22, Stanford. In response to Bonnie, recording: seniors, comparison phase.

(40) **Karen:** Right right it's not like she usually goes around saying you know I'm
tearin' stuff. You know (laughter) well what are you doing? I'm tearing.

   ???: (laughter)

   Karen: She would say the G usually. So then it was ok. Cause it was the
context- it was- it was the right context to leave it out.

   (pause)

   Karen: Yeah, part of the rest of her speech just she kind of sounds um she
yeah just the way she spoke. She pretty much pronounced every single
word fully usually. Um, and then this was just, I seriously think it was
just like the situation the story she was telling she was just going so fast
you know if I get really excited and tell a story I'll leave off the ends of
some words and stuff.

   Group 5, Stanford. In response to Elizabeth, recording: hair, comparison phase.

Not only does this structure the interpretations of actual instances of use of (ING),
but it has implications for how listeners interpret the speech of speakers for whom
they feel *-in* is more appropriate or natural. For these speakers, there is no truly
unmarked variant, since they must choose between an inherently marked option and
one which is at odds with the rest of their linguistic performance.

   The most basic level at which we can see markedness is the degree to which
each variant is considered open for comment or discussion. The structure of the
interview emphasized the variable as composed of two equally possible variants. The
order in which the variants were presented changed from speaker to speaker and in
conducting the interviews, I took care to present a relatively neutral stance on the
variants, although in an effort to be understandable, I was myself guilty of referencing
the description "dropping one's G's" in many of my explanations. In many cases, the
participants responded in kind, comparing the two options presented and discussing
the differences between them. In other cases participants responded in ways that
presupposed that *-ing* was the natural form and *-in* the variation, as in (41). These
kinds of responses did not appear in the other direction.

   In this interchange about one of the Southern speakers, the first speaker signals
a gentle assumption that she expected the *-ing* guise to be the more appropriate
sounding one, by marking her first sentence with "actually". The second speaker

takes it further, in both of his turns indicating his surprise that the *-in* version was not in fact objectionable. In the final line, his use of "if anything" gives a sense of the strength of his assumption, even in the midst of a conversation in which all four listeners agreed that the *-in* variant was more natural to the speech of the speaker, he still marked that variant as the deviant one.

(41) **Tracey:** It seems like actually, the second one seems more natural to her the rest of her, you know, speech. Because the *-ing* sounds really forced. And the rest of the converesation.

    Carlos: Yeah. I didn't, um, really it didn't sound that bad. The second recording. It wasn't like [startling?] it was like it was pretty moderate.

    (pause)

    Amy: I think the *-in* marched her, the *-in* matched her [??]. I thought it was more natural.

    Amelia: Well I think her accent's so heavy that the one thing doesn't make that big of a difference.

    Carlos: Yeah, if anything it would just make it sound weird.

    Group 7, Stanford. In response to Tricia, recording: work-school, comparison phase.

Later in that same interview, Amelia became more explicit about her assignment of markedness for (ING). She refers to the use of *-in* as a "speech quirk". After some discussion, she produced *yeah* as another example of such a quirk. This example underlines the fact that this assignment is more a matter of ideology than linguistic distribution. "Yeah" is an extremely common word and not one limited to a small group of speakers. Nonetheless, as an "incorrect" variant, for Amelia, at least, it occupies a marked position ideologically.

(42) **Amelia:** Um, the *-in* didn't sound to weird but I wouldn't, like if I were talking to her I would just think that she had that one speech quirk. But it wouldn't sound like too weird.

    Moderator: If you were talking to her would it- the other speech quirks that she doesn't have, if that makes any -

    Amelia: She doesn't have any

    Moderator: What kinds of things like one might expect to go with that that you're not- I'm curious what you're contrast it with.

Amelia: Oh, um, she's just got that one speech quirk.

Moderator: Like what are the other things that you're noticing that she doesn't have or what kinds of things would you associate with-

Amelia: Well I guess I'd expect to hear (pause) like yeah instead of yes.

Group 7, Stanford. In response to Elizabeth, recording: discussion, comparison phase.

As a result of being the more marked variant, *-in* also qualifies as a linguistic behavior for which explanations can be offered. It was extremely common for participants to identify a given variant as more natural or appropriate to the speech of the given speaker. However, in the cases where speakers used *-in* although they might be expected to use *-ing*, participants were able to offer mitigating circumstances or explanations for why they might have done so, as (40) above shows.

It is impossible to disentangle the assumptions marking *-in* as the more marked of the two variants from the ideologies which mark it as the incorrect one. Many of the listeners who participated in my study seemed to honestly feel that *-ing* was the normal pronunciation of such words. Others may have been aligning more towards an ideology that *-ing* was the correct pronunciation, regardless of their own usage patterns. Some of the strategies that speakers use to explain uses of *-in* reflects this. Although the ideology establishing *-ing* as the default is highly prevalent, this does not mean that all listeners subscribe to it. The context of the interviews is likely to have had an important influence on the relative strengths with which the various ideologies were presented. Nearly all of the contextual factors present the interviews favored *-ing* as the more appropriate variant: the interviews were being conducted by a linguist, on university campuses, in a situation where listeners were asked to explicitly evaluate speakers on the basis of their speech. Although I was careful to present the task as a general one, steering away from questions of correctness, many listeners were likely to interpret it in that light.

There are also indications of a competing ideology, in which *-ing* is aligned with effort and so is more marked than in the other scheme. This does not result in *-in* becoming unmarked, but rather a choice of least resistance, contrasting with the formality and effort of *-ing*. In this case, listeners may discuss reasons which might cause speakers to make the effort to pronounce things properly. In example

(43), two listeners speculate on the rationale of the laid-back sounding speaker using *-ing*, drawing on both issues of discourse construction and social motivations. (44) aligns *-ing* explicitly with "making an effort". This ideology is also likely to have regional associations, as reflected in one respondent in Fought (2002) who labeled the Northeast United States as having *more pronunciation.*

(43) **Tamika:** When he was describing- I guess, well, yeah, when he was describing all the actions he has to do when going to the movies that's sort of when you want to make a list and you want it to have it I guess when you're talking to somebody [??] you seem to enunciate your ideas better getting up, leaving, and whatnot so I could see him saying the i-n-g in that context.

Abby: Yeah I agree with you I think the i-n-g puts more emphasis on the the list that he's talking about and that's what he wants clearly emphasized, it's such a hassle for him to get up.

Group 19, Duke. In response to Ivan, recording: movies, comparison phase.

(44) **Rachel:** It was harder to tell the difference for her because for the first case, you could tell the difference more because she had a Southern accent, but at the same time, she was saying *-ing* so you could tell that she was, it sounded more like she was making an effort, even though she still had that accent.

Group 15, Duke. In response to Elizabeth, recording: family, comparison phase.

There are a number of ways in which these two systems of ideology may coexist. First of all, comments regarding the effort required to produce *-ing* tend to occur for a limited set of speakers, namely those for whom the listener describes *-in* as the more natural one. This suggests that listeners are not solely bringing their own ideologies regarding the structure of (ING) to the task, but also using various cues from speakers to deduce what forms they might be likely to use. This context then helps them determine the social meaning of the forms that they do actually employ. These ideologies may also be unevenly distributed across listeners, so that listeners who themselves favor one or the other variant in most of their everyday speech are more likely to see that variant as normal.

Despite this alternative, for the most part the listeners in my study overwhelmingly marked *-ing* as the default or more natural variant of (ING) and saw *-in* as

deviating from both normal and correct modes of speech. This overall impression of markedness contrasts with more specific expectations regarding individual speakers. In particular, as discussed in Chapter 5, interview participants displayed extremely consistent expectations regarding what speakers used *-ing* and which used *-in*, on the basis of their regional accents.

Despite the wording of my questions, many listeners interpreted the discussion of the (ING) to be a question of which variant sounded most natural in the context of a given speaker's performance. The responses to this unasked question were extraordinarily consistent. Interview participants almost universally described the West Coast speakers as likely to use *-ing* in their everyday speech, while they described *-in* as the more natural form for the Southerners. This pattern held regardless of whether the participants were describing a given Southern speaker as educated or uneducated. This ideology of naturalness was explored in more detail in Chapter 5 and may be seen in example (17), repeated here as (45).

(45) **Sally:** The second one sounded more natural.

    Moderator: Okay.

    ???: Yeah.

    Sarah: I agree.

    Tom: It was kind of like the same situation as Tricia. Just went with how she speaks better.

    Moderator: Okay.

    Tom: It's natural.

    Group 14, UNC Chapel Hill. In response to Bonnie, recording: classes, comparison phase.

The concept of markedness refers to a system of expectations. Most of the interview participants in my study maintained different expectations regarding the use of (ING) at different levels. As university students engaged in the standard language market, they shared ideologies that *-ing* was the correct pronunciation for the variable and that as the correct way of speaking it was also the normal one. They also maintained expectations regarding specific speakers, which in some cases were

diametrically opposite to the general ones. In the case of speakers with audible Southern accents, interview participants saw *-in* as the expected and therefore unmarked version.

This pattern has both practical and theoretical repercussions. On the practical side, it speaks to the sociolinguistic quandary nonstandard speakers may find themselves in. The Southern speakers in my study, speaking to their peers, are faced with the choice of either employing a variant seen as natural to their speech but marked as incorrect and uneducated. Alternatively, they could use another variant which is generally seen as correct but unusual (and potentially inappropriate) in their speech. These conflicting expectations create a difficult situation, without even taking into account issues such as ability or personal attachment.

The theoretical repercussions of this markedness pattern go to the heart of the discussions in this chapter. Not only do the interview participants have general expectations regarding which variant of (ING) is more worthy of notice, they have a set of specific expectations related to regional accent. This behavior shows that listeners take the entirety of a speaker's performance into account at least when ideologically contemplating the meaning of a given variant. The statistical results from the survey data discussed in the previous chapters suggests that this behavior is not limited to ideological speculation, but in fact reflects actual methods of interpretation as well.

7.4 What we know about style

The discussion above indicates that style may be a cognitive construct, in addition to being a useful analytical tool for understanding the distribution of linguistic features. This section briefly touches on each of the pieces of information regarding the nature of style that can be drawn from the results of this study. The recurring question in this discussion is how, exactly, listeners form or update a social model of an individual and a speaking situation on the basis of a linguistic performance. One possibility

would be for them to take each linguistic and extralinguistic trait (or each trait above a certain threshold level of salience) and "translate" it into its social meaning. Under such a model, listeners would then combine the social meanings derived from each resource into an overall package, coming up with an evaluation of the speaker.

In such a scenario, one would expect that the meaning of individual traits, such as (ING), would remain the same at least across speakers and different utterances, although not necessarily across listeners. The results presented in this dissertation show that the contribution of a single variable is not constant but is influenced by other aspects of a linguistic performance. In other words, this simple additive model is not adequate.

The discussion of listener agency in Chapter 6 supports the notion that style and other aspects of sociolinguistic meaning are constructed intersubjectively. While speakers have an intended style, listeners are in no way bound to limit their interpretations to this image, even if they were capable of reproducing it exactly. Conversely, as listeners form these interpretations and reflect them (to some extent) back, speakers need not wholly adopt the views of others regarding their own performances. At no point is the social value of a given style fixed. Speakers and listeners continue to contest each other's interpretations and performances as they pursue their social goals.

Another important point is that sociolinguistic meaning cannot be divorced from the content of the linguistic utterances it is attached to. It is common for sociolinguistic variation to be described as the ways in which speakers may say "the same thing" in different ways. But much of the time different linguistic resources are used precisely because they enhance the effect of saying different things. In addition, different people are likely to say different things and speakers make choices not only about how to say something but also what to say. What someone says and how they say it are intimately linked and it is impossible to study one without the other. Any conception of style must include not only an accounting of linguistic resources and their social correlates but also the linguistic and nonlinguistic aspects of content to which they are attached.

7.5 Questions to be answered

At this point in the study of style, the open questions vastly outnumber the things that are known. This section highlights some important questions in the hopes of encouraging work which seeks their answers. My interest is in the social, linguistic and cognitive structures involved in evaluating social meaning and the role that style plays within them. At most, the work described in this dissertation has succeeded in establishing that such structures exist and that style is implicated in them. This leaves virtually the entire task of tracing these structures and the processes that maintain them as an open field for exciting new work.

The first such question concerns the granularity of stylistic clustering. The patterns displayed by the listeners in my study suggests that they are making reference to some linguistic structures while assigning meaning to others. It is not clear whether all linguistic qualities have the ability to influence the impact of all others or whether there is a ranking based on salience, perceived immutability or other factors. I have suggested that part of this mechanism involves grouping linguistic behaviors into styles to make them easier to recognize. If this is the case, it raises the question whether stylistic packages involve all recognized traits in a given performance or subsets which may be combined with each other. If styles do have a cognitive reality, what are the relationships between a given style and the linguistic resources with which it is associated? Are these relationships the same for different variables, or are variables at, for example, different levels of conscious awareness grouped into stylistic categories differently?

Another of the central questions is how conscious speakers and listeners are of the variables or stylistic clusters of variables to which they're responding. Similarly, we don't know how conscious they are of the reasoning processes through which variation is employed and interpreted. The role of consciousness at both of these levels has yet to be established, although there are some useful things we can say at this point. It is relatively unusual in the literature to find explicit discussions of the role of conscious or rational thought in sociolinguistic calculations. It is important to remember that the social calculations performed by speakers and listeners are not

necessarily conscious. If they were, this would perhaps limit the social calculations which would be possible in real time. We know from cognitive linguistics and many other cognitive domains that people are capable of rapid and complex computations, although for the most part these are not driven by conscious, rational thought.

The data presented here show that listeners are capable of producing extremely complex social judgments in reaction to brief linguistic samples. It is possible that this complexity is entirely or partly a result of the fact that listeners were explicitly prompted to produce social judgments and were given as much time as they needed to perform the task. Certainly more evidence is needed to discover whether the patterns on covered in this study reflect those which occur in real social situations. But given the simplified social setting and task used in my study, it would be surprising if the results represented an increase rather than a decrease in social complexity as compared to real situations.

Work in other fields has also suggested that much of the social reasoning people perform on a day-to-day basis is not explicitly conscious or rational. For example, Lee (2002) demonstrated that the multiple speaker effect holds even under situations where conscious calculation should eliminate it. The multiple speaker effect is a pattern in which listeners are more likely to believe a statement if they hear it repeated by different people. Lee's work shows that this effect holds for automatically generated synthesized speech, even when listeners are explicitly instructed as to the nature of synthesized speech and are instructed to maintain that image of the artificial nature of the speech in their mind while performing the judgment task. This result suggests that at least some social calculations are performed in ways that are not related to conscious effort.

A different issue is the degree to which speakers are conscious of a given variable, such as (ING). In this case, they need not be consciously considering it as they evaluate the given performance or make their own linguistic choices, but in a larger sense they may be aware of as a linguistic trait. There is more evidence regarding this kind of consciousness than the other. (ING) falls on the more conscious end of this continuum, being a linguistic stereotype (Labov 1966), that is a linguistic variable which is culturally acknowledged to the extent of having a specific term ("dropping

one's G's") to refer to it. Given that the research here addresses only this one variable, it remains an open question how important its high level of cultural salience is to the results described here. It is possible that the impact of (ING) on listener perceptions resulted wholly or in part from its status as a linguistic stereotype. In the pilot study, (ING) impacted more ratings and with larger effect sizes then the other variable, /t/ release, a variable with less conscious cultural capital. Because these were the only two variables addressed in the pilot study, however, it is not clear whether this difference is idiosyncratic to the two of them or reflective of their relative salience.

Variables which are less consciously available may have similar effects as (ING) and differ merely in their ideological salience. On the other hand, it may be that some level of conscious awareness of social meaning is necessary for interpretation. It may be that some variables carry meaning only within the context of a larger stylistic package or through other indirect channels.

7.6 Future directions

While I hope that the work presented in this dissertation provides new understandings into the structure of socially meaningful variation, its primary goal is to open new fields of study. To this end, this final section touches on some of the many possibilities opened by this research. Some of these are topics which were necessarily neglected in this project, due to time or other resource constraints, while others are completely new projects inspired by the results. I will first discuss open questions raised regarding the structure of (ING) itself, then turn to the possibilities for asking questions about different kinds of variables or in different kinds of settings.

The most obvious set of questions left unanswered by this work are those deliberately set aside in the process of developing the methodology. Of these, the one of perhaps greatest concern to linguists is that of internal constraints. As mentioned in Chapter 3, when creating the stimuli for the experiments described here, I neglected internal constraints and other aspects of linguistic structure. Although a great deal of work has been done on (ING) from a sociolinguistic point of view, there is not a

great deal of knowledge about the phonetic differences between the two (or occasion-ally three) variants. This makes it difficult to account for such potential differences when constructing perception tasks. Both perception and production studies could investigate the distribution of vowel qualities across the variants. Given that differ-ent communities may have slightly different distributions of vowels with each variant, it is possible that some of the social baggage connected to (ING) in the large-scale is tied up with the pronunciation of each variant, particularly the vowels involved. It would be interesting to repeat a study of this kind, including more examples of each variant to discover if and how the phonetic attributes of a given token influence its meaning. Such work obviously should not be limited only to (ING). Interest in socio-phonetic work has been peaking in recent years and such a close study of the relationship between small phonetic cues and larger, more familiar variables would be fascinating.

Another question centering around the phonetic attributes of individual tokens is the role of the suprasegmental cues such as length, also discussed in Chapter 3. The social meaning associated with each variant leads each to appear more often in slightly different kinds of speech. In my data, tokens of -*in* tended to be somewhat shorter than those of -*ing*. Because this was not the focus of my study, I did not discover whether this was a constraint on the variants themselves or whether it was a result of -*in* appearing in faster speech. These two explanations are not mutually exclusive but likely to each support the other. This makes it difficult to establish exactly what would constitute a minimal pair for this variable. Because lengths of individual tokens may vary in any case, depending on a variety of contextual factors, there is no standard length that is appropriate to create two paired examples. Another interesting study would compare tokens of -*in* and -*ing* (or, obviously, variants of another variable) with different lengths, to determine how length affects percepts of both variants. Not every variable will have length as a particularly salient feature (although many will). But other continuous characteristics such as intensity and pitch are also likely to be worth exploring.

Moving to a slightly larger scale, another next step would be similar experiments using speech produced in different settings. Although the participants in my study

did not always identify the speech setting as an interview, they consistently described the recordings as speakers talking to someone whom they knew, but not well. The recordings strongly predicted the general conversational frame. This may have made it difficult for (ING) (or any other manipulation one might make) to influence listener interpretations of the context. There are two tactics needed to address this limitation. One is to carry out similar studies but with speech from a range of contexts. It would also be useful to study speech samples which are less marked for particular speech activities or speaker/addressee relationships. One possibility is to collect large quantities of naturally-occurring speech, then select set phrases such as "How are you feeling?" and other conventional politenesses. By using commonly-occurring preset phrases, we restrict the speech act of each example to a quickly identifiable one but may open the door regarding speech settings. Another advantage to using preset phrases is that it would allow us to examine the effects of different presentations of the same words by collecting naturally occurring tokens which are lexically identical or similar.

Even if the situational constraints were expanded significantly, the task of judging an unfamiliar speaker is likely to place much of the emphasis on the character of the speaker and to deemphasize the context of speaking. It is tempting to consider how to construct studies which move the field past this first social interaction. This is a challenge, since it would be difficult to obtain a sufficient number of people familiar with a speaker to perform adequate statistics on. One possibility would be to collect judgments regarding speakers which listeners have come to know, but not well. Listeners could be exposed to information about a given speaker and examples of their behavior on a variety of occasions. If sufficiently skillful actors were used, short vignettes or even a longer movie may be possible. After such exposure and "character development", listeners might have developed enough of a linguistic and social model for the given character to be able to shift their social calculations from those of a stranger to something further on in a social interaction. A different approach might be to use manipulated stimuli from speakers that are already known to the listeners. In this case, it would be easiest to use examples drawn from relative celebrities, either at a local (community leader) or global level (politicians, famous actors, etc.). Using

this latter approach, it is likely to be difficult to enlist the aid of a given speaker in constructing stimuli. Depending on the specific variables under investigation, it could be possible to manipulate publicly available clips. In this case, of course, listeners would not be reacting on the basis of intimate knowledge of the speaker, but on a general publicly available face. Nonetheless, this represents a different social activity from that generally investigated and one which potentially offers rich results. It would of course be possible to collect speech from an individual, not public figure, alter them and collect responses from the person's friends and acquaintances. In this case, the listener pool is not likely to be large enough for a full-scale survey and statistically reliable results but still might offer useful insight.

Despite the need to ultimately move the study of listener perceptions beyond the moment the first meeting, it is likely that much of the field will remain at that social moment for a while longer. Indeed, there is still much to explore about the process of evaluating a new interlocutor. Many speaker attributes, including basic demographics, were controlled in this study and are worthy of serious investigation. As mentioned in both Chapter 2 and 4, (ING) seems to have different patterns of use by Black and White speakers. Interactions between the race of the speaker and that of the listener are likely to be particularly revealing both regarding the variable itself and the larger social processes involved in understanding variation. Similarly, both the production literature and the work presented here revealed important connections between (ING) and class. Both the speakers and listeners used here came from a very limited slice of society in terms of class, education and age, although the listeners in my study did not always perceive the speakers as such. Sampling other populations for both speakers and listeners is another step towards a fuller understanding of (ING) in particular and variation in general.

Much of the results from the current study emphasized the regional divide between the American South and the rest of the U.S.. Interrogating that divide more specifically would be interesting, as would expanding the regional divisions at play. In particular, the notion of accent has emerged as an important one. Because the Southern speakers in my study are the only clear representatives of accent as such, Southernness and accented speech were confounded. Including other forms of marked

speech would help to explore this terrain more thoroughly. Given the alignment of Southern accented speech with the country, stigmatized urban accents would be particularly interesting, for example those from Boston and New York.

Apart from changing the actual characteristics of the speakers, another option would be to change the information given to listeners regarding the speakers and the speaking situation. This information may help to structure the interpretations they give. By changing it, we may learn about the role of contextual information in much more detail than by merely attempting to track the contextual information that listeners construct for themselves. Listeners could be provided with fictional biographies for specific speakers giving them high or low competence overall or in the topic at hand. Similarly, recordings could be presented as excerpted from formal or informal speech situations, lecture or conversation among colleagues.

These are only a handful of the open avenues suggested by the techniques and results described here. In addition to these more specific uses, the real strength of this approach will come when combining it with other methodologies in multi-pronged studies.

7.7 Summary

This chapter has considered the theoretical implications of the work presented in this dissertation. It has argued that style is a crucial construct for understanding how speakers and listeners use linguistic variation to conduct their social business. In addition, I have identified a set of insights into style and described the much larger set of open questions remaining. Finally, I have described some of the many ways in which the work presented here could be expanded upon.

This study has examined the ways in which a single variable, the English variable (ING), influences listener social perceptions of speakers. It has shown that this influence differs depending on qualities of the speaker, the content of their message, the speaking situation and the listener. Not only do speakers and listeners construct their relative standing, identities and social activities between them, but by using linguistic variation in this endeavor, they create and maintain socially meaningful links

to variation as well. Finally, this work has demonstrated that the notion of style, defined as a clustering of resources identified as a socially coherent set, is a central tool to listeners understanding linguistic variation.