Engendering Identities: Pronoun Selection as an Indicator of Salient Intergroup Identities

Miriam Meyerhoff

1. The Problem

Don Hindle's (1979) study of the speech of Carol Myers provided a number of significant findings for the study of variation both within a speech community and within an individual speaker's repertoire. Hindle showed very clearly that community-wide phonological changes were reflected in Myers' stylistic variation (and one of Hindle's other major contributions was to offer an operational definition of formality), such that in her most relaxed or informal setting Myers' speech showed the most reflexes of innovative phonological forms, while in the most formal setting, her speech showed reflexes of more conservative community norms. However, despite the fine phonetic discriminations he made, and despite the fact that he proved a sensitive observer of Carol Myers' social situation, Hindle was left with a puzzle. For one vernacular change, (ay°) (the raising of the diphthong in BITE before voiceless consonants), Myers used more conservative phonological variants at home and with friends, and the most innovative, vernacular forms at the office. This was contrary to the expectation that the more relaxed and informal environment among peers would favor the production of more innovative variants of vowel changes in progress. Since this expectation was borne out for other changes in progress (see Table 1), Hindle looked more closely for potential motivations for this reversal.

1 I am grateful to Gillian Sankoff, Janet Holmes, Howard Giles and the audience at NWAVE 25, University of Nevada, Las Vegas for comments and discussion of the ideas developed here. Warmest thanks to Sharon Tabi for her help with the tape in Bislama. Fieldwork in Vanuatu was supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, grant #5742.
Table 2: Use of non-standard syntactic variants (past tense, multiple negation and deletion of have) among Sydney adolescents when talking with friends (intragroup) and with an interviewer (intergroup) (adapted from Eisikovits 1987: 49-51).

Eisikovits attempts to account for this unexpected data in terms of accommodation theory. Going back to her interviews she finds a qualitative difference in the teenagers' conversations with her. She concludes that "[t]he female informants in this study clearly showed a far greater identification with the female interviewer than the males" (1987: 55), and that the boys' behavior was strategy of divergence from her own, female, middle-class norms.

Similar studies throughout the variationist canon readily come to mind. Orderly patterns of sociolinguistically stratified variation bleed into untidy anomalies or exceptions. Unable to incorporate them into a systemic account of variation, the investigator explains these anomalies as being the result of the speaker's accommodation to or divergence from (a) a social identity of the addressee that the sociolinguist asserts (but does not demonstrate) is most salient for the addressee, or (b) a social role which the sociolinguist infers (but does not demonstrate) the speaker identifies their addressee most with. Nor does the average sociolinguistic study that invokes the notion of accommodative convergence or divergence demonstrate any underlying attitude or social identification of the speaker that would motivate or direct their behavior (Greenwood 1996 is a notable exception). Notwithstanding, the variation is presumed, in this way, to be both seen and accounted for.

This use of communicative accommodation theory (or CAT) (Giles et al. 1973, Bourhis and Giles 1977, Thackerer et al. 1982, Giles and Coupland 1992, Niedzielski and Giles to appear) has some serious critics. William Labov, for instance, has been dismissive of calling it a theory since CAT is not framed in terms that are clearly falsifiable or predictive. Moreover, its use in sociolinguistics has very often been a hand-waving device used at the last minute to give the impression that the investigator has "explained" all observed patterns in their data.

This paper addresses the following question: is accommodation forever destined to be a deus ex machina in sociolinguistics research? Or instead, is sociolinguistics able to provide precisely the sorts of empirical evidence CAT needs to lend weight and precision to its principles and claims?

I believe that there is a role for CAT in the study of language variation and change, because I believe that accommodation principles are the heart of the co-construction and interpretation of social identities. I argue, therefore, for a more rigorous application of accommodation theory in sociolinguistic practice. I will examine in detail a case of communicative divergence and show that the selection of a particular linguistic token plays a constructive role in establishing and defining a relationship between the interlocutors. The task of applying accommodation theory more rigorously in sociolinguistics is by no means impossible, the trick, such as it is, lies in recognising the limits of the different theories and the limits of the numbers.
2. The Data

The data is drawn from recordings of conversational Bislama, the creole spoken in the Republic of Vanuatu, made during nine months of fieldwork in urban and village communities in northern Vanuatu. The data will be used to illustrate two things: one, the manner in which I believe notions of interspeaker accommodation and divergence can and should be used in sociolinguistic analysis. Two, that speaker identity — another theoretical notion much used in current sociolinguistics — is not by definition antithetical to quantitative methods. The process of reflecting and constituting social identities in conversation need not simply be assumed as a theory-internal property of language, but rather can be empirically observed in speakers’ linguistic strategies.

Bislama, like most Oceanic languages, marks an inclusive and exclusive distinction in the 1p pronouns, i.e. mifala refers to the speaker and some third party, but not the addressee, while yumi refers to the speaker and the addressee (and perhaps some other third party).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st (excl.)</td>
<td>mi</td>
<td>mifala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(incl.)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>yumi</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>yu</td>
<td>yufala</td>
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<td>3rd</td>
<td>hem</td>
<td>olgeta</td>
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Table 3: Singular and plural pronoun contrasts in Bislama today

Technically, inclusion and exclusion are truth conditional. This is shown in example (1), where the speaker corrects herself when she remembers that her addressee once accompanied her on the same interisland shuttle plane.2

(1) Elsina (Santo, F30yr):
yu save from plen mif-
yumi tekem long Ambae
because you know the plane we-
you and I took from Ambae

But in practice there is some confusion about this, as example (2) shows. Lolan uses the inclusive form yumi to establish the orientation for a story she is about to tell, but one of her addressees, Janette, is struggling to remember the event.

(2) Lolan (Malo, F31yr), Janette (Malo, F30yr), Madelin (Malo, F26yr):
J: long naet?
L: yes yes
mi luk hem
hem ya yumi stap ya
mi mi ting se
J: long saed blong opening
   haos blong telefon?
L: no no
a, bringanbae blong ol elda
   um, the bring & buy3 for the
M: bringanbae blong eria elda
   elders
   the bring & buy for the area
   elders
J: wea?
L: no, yu yu no bin kam
   no, you weren’t there
   Lisette i kam
   Lisette came

The confusion here arises because the inclusive form yumi is also widely used metaphorically, a fact that is not commented on in the descriptive grammars of Bislama (Tryon 1987, Crowley 1990). In other words, whether or not the addressee was an actual

2 Examples taken from my database identify speakers by a pseudonym, where they live (Santo, the urban community; Malo, the village community), their sex and age.

3 A “bring and buy” is a fundraising event, often for church or school. Families make food, bring it to a central gathering and people buy their dinner for a small cost from everyone’s contributions.
Engendering Identities

Meyerhoff

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3. The Identities

Responsibility sociolinguistics has always been careful to describe and parameterize variation within a community along dimensions that are most relevant to describe public roles in Vanuatu and in many Pacific cultures. However, differences and responsibilities of women and men are believed to be culturally determined. However, Raelin (1992) noted that the opposition between "mother/daughter" and "father/son" roles is a post-colonial phenomenon in many Pacific cultures. Jolly (1997) discusses changes in women's pre- and post-colonial social roles in Vanuatu.

*This is manifested in rather different public roles in Vanuatu, and the different rights and responsibilities of women and men are believed to be determined by culture. However, differences and responsibilities of women and men are believed to be cultural determined. However, Raelin (1992) noted that the opposition between "mother/daughter" and "father/son" roles is a post-colonial phenomenon in many Pacific cultures. Jolly (1997) discusses changes in women's pre- and post-colonial social roles in Vanuatu.*
each other, even when the conversation topic was highly contrastive of their experiences. Men were much less likely to extend the inclusive form to me, and sometimes, as shown in (3), they went to some effort to avoid it. NP possession in Bislama is marked by a prepositional phrase. In (3), Livai starts to say 'the place of ...', but stops, choosing to recast the utterance in a way that avoids the need to use a pronoun at all.

(3) Livai (Malo, M24yr):

hem i no olsem ples blong it isn't like [our] place
long ples ya this place

Thus, the intergroup boundary between the genders seemed to be sufficiently salient in most conversations that, as (2) showed, when talking amongst themselves women could override other (truth-conditionally more) relevant intergroup distinctions and address their interlocutor in ingroup terms. Conversely, men required some equally strong intergroup identity to override the distinctiveness between themselves and a woman addressee. So, as example (4) shows, when men did address me with the inclusive yumi it was generally when the conversation had shifted to highlight a distinction between the local family groups and some other outgroup.

(4) Obed (Malo, M18yr):

mi no save... I don't know...
hao nao yumi save go how we should do it
blong save kasem wan samting if we want to get something from
long [bles blong oigeta] [the place that belongs to the
people uphill]

4. The Negotiations

That speakers' social identities are negotiated across situations and with different interlocutors is widely accepted in the realms of intercultural communication and social psychology. Ochs (1992), Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) and Cameron (1996) have argued that much sociolinguistic variation is actually an attempt to index social identities by building or maintaining them through speech, and Holmes (to appear) neatly illustrates this with respect to lexical variables that have semantic meaning and phonological variables that have associative meaning. Holmes provides both kinds of examples because, as she points out, there is no inherent meaning associated with a raised, fronted (aw). What it indexes can only be inferred by a distributional correlation with a particular social category. A variable like yumi, however, provides clear semantic cues as to when indexing is going on and what identities are being indexed. This process becomes particularly clear when inclusion is contested by the addressee, as we saw in (2), or problematized by the speaker as we saw in (3).

In this section, I will examine an extended negotiation of the salience of group identities. The topic remains constant throughout the conversation, so the negotiation of identities is done through choice of pronoun. I will show how this negotiation process can be conceptualized within the framework of the model of communication proposed in Meyerhoff and Niedzielski (1994).

In example (5), Vosale and I have been discussing recent changes in how the market is run. Previously, market had started at 4pm on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and run for approximately 24 hours at a time. The newly elected regional council had decided to allow market to start any time on those three days, which created some problems and some opportunities for the village women who took their produce there. On the one hand, market is very lucrative, and longer hours meant more money. On the other hand, longer hours meant an even more exhausting stint (of up to 30 hours) sleeping and working at the trestle tables. Vosale starts out by addressing me with yumi, but changes her choice of pronoun in response to my invariable use of a generic you you.'
Vosale (Malo, F31yr) and Miriam:

V: bae yumi karem ol ting ya
  go long garen
karem ol ting i käm la haos...
M: mo afta tu yu stap long maket
  long wan de mo wan naet
V: yes, be yu stap long maket
  wan de wan naet
be yu karem vatu bigwan
olsem kopra, a...
yes be kopra semak
sapos yumi katem kopra
yumi smokem long hot ea
sapos i kasem tu bag
maet yu no save kasem
fo taosen
M: be long wan dei long maket
  yu save kasem
V: wan de long maket, hemia
  yumi save kasem faef, fo taosen
be yumi go
stap wan dei wan naet wan dei...
  yumi bitim pei blong kopra
...
M: yu yu go wetem
  ol fren blong yu...
V: yes...
sapos mifala fo i gofastaem
  ale i gat tu o tri
  oli oli kam
  ale mifala i stap wet long
  olgeta long Naone Ban

we (incl.) have to bring everything
go to the garden
bring everything home...
and then you're at market
for a day and a night too
yes, but you're at market
a day and a night
but you get as much money as for
copra, eh ...
yes and copra's the same
if we (incl.) cut copra
dry it in hot air
if there's two bags
you might not get
4000 [vatu payment]
but in one day at the market
you can get?
one day at market, yeah
we (incl.) can get 5, 4000...
we (incl.) go
stay a day a night and a day...
we (incl.) get more money
than for [a bag of] copra ...
do you go with your friends?
yes...
if four of us (excl.) go ahead
well, there'll be 2 or 3 others
they come behind
well, we (excl.) wait for them
at Naone Ban

Vosale starts out using the inclusive yumi, the form
appropriate for a conversation between two women, even though
her addressee is an outsider who she knows doesn't have a garden
and who doesn't make her living by selling food at the market.
However, I miss the significance of this and reply with the less
inclusive form, yji, calqued directly from English. Bislama does use
yu generically, though naturally it lacks the inherent connotations
of inclusiveness of yumi. In her next turn, Vosale accommodates
to my behavior and replies with the same form I used. The effect
of undertaking this accommodative gesture is to assert merely that
what we share is a set of communicative norms. Given my
behavior, this is a more pragmatic claim than the shared group
identity asserted by her use of the inclusive yumi.

Shortly after this, however, Vosale reverts to addressing
me with yumi. It seems that she is again trying to affirm the
salience of and inclusiveness inherent in our shared gender identity.
Again, I reply in a way that confuses the interpersonal dimension
of the conversation. It is unclear what I think the most salient
intergroup or interpersonal distinction in our conversation is. For a
third time, Vosale uses the yumi which indicates that the group
membership she perceives is most salient to the conversation is a
shared one, and for a third time, I reply non-inclusively which
suggests that for me the most salient identities in the conversation
are not shared ones. Vosale now appears to give up her initial
hypothesis, and accepts that she is dealing with someone who
views our interaction as an intergroup encounter. This incremental
revision attitudes in the light of disconfirming information through
a process known as 'bookkeeping' has been described by Rothbart
(1981) and Weber and Crocker (1983). In this case, the consequence
is that Vosale switches to the exclusive form, mifala, to wind up
the topic. For the rest of the tape (approximately 45 minutes), she
consistently uses mifala, both when speaking in generalities as at
the start of example (5), and even when other intergroup contrasts
are made salient (circumstances under which I noted that even men
might use the inclusive forms with me). My systematic linguistic
divergence from the social space she has mapped out for us both
eventually leads her to redraw her map of our conversation and to
adjust her linguistic behavior accordingly.

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6 In subsequent conversations, inclusive forms were used again.
5. The Conclusions

My goal in this paper has been to pin down with some confidence the apparently evanescent link between speakers' identities and their linguistic behavior. What I hope I have shown is that by using reliable data, this can be done with as much confidence for linguistic variables as it can for non-linguistic variables such as dress style. I have argued that "reliable data", in this case, means variables that possess some inherent meaning. I have tried to indicate the very creative way in which speakers may use a linguistic variable to negotiate and construct social and personal identities through convergent or divergent behavior. Holmes (to appear) has made the point that the investigation of these sorts of variables is essential in order to strengthen our claims about the significance of, e.g. phonological, variables that are not inherently meaningful. I have tried to show that this kind of work is methodologically realistic, as well as being theoretically desirable.

Thus, there is a place for communicative accommodation within the practice of sociolinguistics, and it can directly assist in our analyses of variation. However, it is important to remember that the principles of accommodation are only substantive when measured against patterns of variation. Interpreting apparent strategies of accommodation depends on knowing a good deal about the general social and communicative norms of the interlocutors, as well as paying attention to sometimes subtle semantic cues in the language itself.

In return, accommodation theory has much to offer sociolinguistics. It focuses our attention on the points in an interaction where identity and interspeaker relations are disputed or actively (co-)constructed. Communicative accommodation need not simply be a last ditch save of messy data, which it so often is in sociolinguistics, but in order for it to avoid this fate, it is up to linguists to apply its principles with rigor, and not hindsight.

References


Fought this volume


An important secondary question, though, is whether the social factors traditionally used in studies of majority sound change, such as age, gender, and social class, are sufficient for an explanation of sociolinguistic variation in this community. There has been an increasing focus on the use of ethnographic techniques in sociolinguistics. As Eckert (1991:213) observes: “The use of ethnography in the study of variation allows the researcher to discover the social groups, categories and divisions particular to the community in question, and to explore their relation to linguistic form.” Eckert’s own work has shown the importance of non-traditional social categories, namely the categories of adolescent “jocks” and “burnouts” (e.g. Eckert 1987, Eckert 1991). And Mendoza-Denton 1995 explores the role of membership in different gangs. The use of community-specific categories is not new. As early as Labov’s 1972 study in Harlem, for example, there was evidence that gang membership can play an important role in sociolinguistic variation. However, there are still many sociolinguistic studies in which the external factors are selected on the basis of tradition, rather than on observation of the community’s social structure.

2. Social Groups

2.1. Gang-related Groups

Among the Latino young adults, several non-traditional social categories came up again and again as ways of identifying themselves and others. In many ways the most intriguing of these, and certainly the most salient in the media, is the category of gang member (also gang-banger, gangster or cholo/chola). But equally important are the relationships non-gang members have to the gangs. First of all, several students were described to me as “not a gang member but he knows them.” It was clear from looking at several of these cases that know means something specific in this type of context. Everyone at this small school, for example, “knows” everyone else in the usual sense, i.e., knows their name and a little about them. This specialized use of know means something like “have a connection with,” or “sometimes spend...
I. Introduction

Carmen Fought

Minority Community
A Majority Sound Change in A

Los Angeles: California Anglo-Dialect Play any role in the Chicano English of the
main question I will address is whether the sounds of the
which is a variety of the dialect known as Chicano English. The
speakers, and in both English and Spanish
monolingual English speakers, and in both English and Spanish
the main focus of this study is the Los Angeles neighborhood of
and learning of disadvantaged communities at the English high school. I
 had focused on the English speech of the
They have reported that minority groups do not participate in the
Community of English and Spanish speakers, such as Pico-17,
local dialect terms by minority speakers, such as Pico-17.
However, there are some studies that do show the use of
loosen the main focus of this study is the Los Angeles neighborhood of
in the main focus of this study is the Los Angeles neighborhood of
change characteristics of the minority community.

Many of the important theoretical developments in sociolinguistics

1. Majority Sound Change in A

Minority Community

A Majority Sound Change in A

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