

The cognitive coherence of sociolects: How do speakers handle multiple sociolinguistic variables?

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Abstract

Sociolinguistic variables have social evaluations and are used at different rates by different speakers. Variants become indexical of social traits and social identities, and are taken as defining 'sociolects' associated with identifiable groups: e.g., 'working class speech', 'African-American English'. But since every speech community has many sociolinguistic variables, do the multiple variables cohere in forming sociolects? Thus if each variable has a variant considered 'working class', do working class speakers use all such variants simultaneously? Lectoral coherence would imply that variables are correlated; if they are not, the cognitive and social reality of the 'sociolect' is problematic.

This paper investigates intercorrelations among two phonological and two syntactic sociolinguistic variables in 20 speakers of Brazilian Portuguese. The results show considerable cross-variable correlation, but much of it may be explained by structural or grammatical coherence. There is some evidence of socially-motivated coherence, involving gender as well as status differentiation. Female speakers show stronger correlation among variables than males, while non-standard phonology seems to be indexical of male identity. The conclusion is that some sociolectal cohesion does exist, but it may be weaker and more multidimensional, than is commonly assumed. Future work on lects should problematize their coherence.

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1. Introduction

A fundamental discovery of sociolinguistic research is social stratification: in many, perhaps all, societies, the prestige forms of sociolinguistic variables are used more by higher status speakers, in a roughly linear and typically monotonic correlation. Several lines of evidence show that speakers in such communities have cognitive awareness of these patterns. In their own behavior speakers manipulate their use of sociolinguistic variables for stylistic ends (using more prestige variants typically indicates a more careful speaking style); thus in careful styles, Labov (1966) finds New Yorkers increase their use of coda /r/ and Trudgill (1974) finds Norwich speakers increase their velar articulations of –ing forms, while Bell (1984) shows New Zealand broadcasters using different variants for different audiences. In their evaluation of the behavior of others (e.g., in subjective reaction tests) hearers assign status rankings to talkers in accordance with the use of such variants (voices utilizing prestige varieties or variants receive higher rankings on status scales); thus Lambert et al. (1960) showed Montrealers downgrading voices speaking French, and Guy and Vonwiller (1984) found Australians assign lower status ratings to speakers who use rising terminal intonations in declaratives. Finally, for many variables, speakers have overt evaluations of which variant is standard or 'correct'; thus English speakers explicitly condemn

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'dropping the g' (pronouncing the –ing suffix with /n/) and Caribbean Spanish speakers critique 'comiendo la s' (literally 'eating the s', i.e., deleting final /s/).

Given this observation of stratified sociolinguistic variation, it is common practice to reify the various strata as distinctive sociolects: thus we encounter labels like 'working class' or 'middle class speech', 'broad Australian' and 'general Australian', RP vs. Cockney, etc. Similarly, styles are reified as identifiable varieties: 'casual style' vs. 'careful style.' This usage is not restricted to linguists; popular and spontaneous commentary on social variety also appear to involve holistic perceptions of ways of speaking associated with particular social groups. However, 'folk linguistic' assessments of language varieties introduce a range of additional questions that will not be examined here, such as the existence of stereotypes, differences in social saliency among different variables, etc. (cf. [Niedzelski and Preston, 2003](#)).

The issue that I focus on here is that such reified social varieties will necessarily encompass multiple sociolinguistic variables. Every speech community known to sociolinguistic research has at least several linguistic elements that are socially stratified and stylistically variable. For example, Labov's classic description of social stratification in New York (1966) describes five major socially stratified phonological variables: coda /r/ presence or absence, raising of the nucleus of /æ/ and /oh/, and affrication and/or stopping of the interdental fricatives (TH, DH); it also gives briefer accounts of six other variables. In each case, the variants favored by higher status speakers are also favored by all speakers in their more careful speech styles. Given that each of these variables shows correlations with class and speech style, it is reasonable to expect that they correlate with each other, so that each sociolect would be characterized by a cluster of variables; working class speakers, for example, should use relatively high rates of /r/ vocalization, /æh, oh/ raising, and (TH, DH) fortition, all at the same time. Similarly, when varying their speech styles, speakers might be expected to synchronize their choices on all of these variables at the same time. If sociolects are indeed socially and cognitively coherent varieties, we should expect some degree of correlation among the different variables present in a community.

In this respect, sociolects are conceptualized as being analogous to languages or dialects. A language consists of a cluster of linguistic properties occurring together in the collective usage of a speech community; similarly, regional dialects are typically identifiable by the simultaneous occurrence of lexical, phonological, and morphosyntactic characteristics. When bilingual or bidialectal speakers switch between the varieties they command, they typically do so holistically, using, for example, Spanish words, syntax and phonology all at once, not mixing and matching at will. If social varieties have a similar coherence, the variables that characterize them should exhibit some kind of binding force, a pattern of correlation or clustered usage.

However, it is also clear that many variables in speech communities index other social meanings and characteristics in addition to, or instead of, social and stylistic stratification. Variables that are involved in linguistic change are often strongly correlated with age (cf. [Sankoff and Blondeau, 2007](#); [Labov, 1966, 2001](#)). Other variables have been shown to be indexical, either directly or mediated through other social meanings, of gender ([Eckert, 1990](#)), peer-group affiliations ([Mendoza-Denton, 2008](#); [Eckert, 1989](#)), learnedness ([Benor, 2001](#); [Bucholtz, 1999](#)), and so on. This suggests appreciably richer and more complex associations among the multiple variables present in any speech community, where each variable might, in principle have a distinct and unique set of indexical associations, without necessarily showing correlations in usage with other variables. From this perspective, speakers might be expected to pick and choose among variants in their repertoire to construct social meanings and identities (cf. [Eckert, 2008](#) on 'bricolage').

Sociolectal coherence is therefore potentially disrupted by the diversity of associations between variables and social meanings and identities. Classic findings showing social stratification of linguistic variables, and the practice of reifying named sociolects like RP or 'middle class speech', imply that stratified variables should be correlated in usage, but if each variable has its own social history and interpretation, correlations among variables are not necessarily expected, at least on a broad scale. This raises questions about some common assumptions about how class, style, and speaker identity are reflected and constructed in speech. What would it mean to encounter a speaker who uses the prestige forms of variables A, C, and E, while using the nonstandard variants of variables B, D, and F? How can speakers reliably indicate their speech style or their social identity while using high rates of some prestige variants and low rates of others?

Answers to such questions will most likely require empirical investigation of multiple variables. Curiously, there is a dearth of research in the field that addresses whether clustering of variables actually occurs in the behavior of individuals. Labov pioneered the study of this question in his 1966 work, but his focus there was the vowel systems, which have a relatively tight structural organization with the result that change in one vowel will commonly affect neighboring vowels, often producing chain shifts. In such cases, the covariation observed is attributed more to phonetic principles (cf. [Labov's three principles of chain-shifting, 1994](#)), than to sociolectal cohesion. Aside from such sociophonetic work on vowel quality, sociolinguistic studies tend to focus on single variables, or if they look at multiple variables, they do so one variable at a time. In this paper I make the clustering question the central focus, by examining four variables in Brazilian Portuguese (BP) simultaneously, to look at whether they covary in the speech of 20 subjects from Rio de Janeiro ([Guy, 1980](#)). Each of the variables involves alternation between a socially favored 'standard' alternant, and a stigmatized nonstandard alternant. They all appear to be diachronically stable, in the sense that there is no evidence of a community-wide change in favor of one or the other alternant.

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