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Editorial

Religious choice, religious commitment, and linguistic variation: Religion as a factor in language variation

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A B S T R A C T

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Sociolinguistic consensus suggests that corpora should be sharable to permit broader comparisons across regions and across social groups. Recent studies of available corpora have shown that one variable rarely made available for sociolinguistic comparison is religion (Yaeger-Dror and Cieri, 2013; Yaeger-Dror, 2014). The present special issue was solicited to demonstrate the importance of religion, and of individual speakers' religious commitment, to the study of sociolinguistic variation. In each study the author finds not only that religion is a meaningful sociolinguistic variable, but that geolinguistic considerations impact on 'religiolinguistic' (Hary and Wein, 2013) choices in intricate ways. Commitment to a specific sub-group within a larger religious denomination is relevant, as is a speaker's religious ideology; while addressee design and social network influences often appear indistinguishable from referee design, the two may be more easily distinguished from each other when religious denomination and ideology are factored into a study.

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1. Previous studies of religion as a variable in linguistic variation and change

In spite of accumulating evidence that 'racial', regional, linguistic and religious heritage and affiliation cannot be considered a single demographic feature, until recently both corpus linguistic studies and sociolinguistic studies generally conflated these into a single [apparent] metadata feature. We are in good company: For example, until the 2010 census, the US government considered 'Latino' from any racial, religious, linguistic and regional heritage designation as a single identification choice, giving responders the choice between identifying as 'Latino' or having any religious or other heritage; linguists have followed demographers' lead, and NPR ('All things considered' 12/3/14) still continues to do so. (See, however, the discussion in Fought, 2006; Bayley, 2014; Münch, forthcoming; Pew, 2014a,b).

Consequently, religion has rarely been coded in corpus or sociolinguistic analyses, although Labov (1966) first made a point of contrasting the Jewish LES [Lower East Side] residents with those of specific regional/linguistic heritages – like Italian or Irish (who share a religious heritage), while Newlin-Łukowicz (2014) includes both Catholic and Jewish Poles in her own NYC study. Certainly since the mid-sixties Fishman's has been a voice in the wilderness (Fishman, 1968; Fishman and García, 2012). However, only in the last 30 years, since the Milroys' first publications on Northern Ireland (e.g., Milroy, 1987), have American sociolinguists begun to analyze how religious preferences may illuminate, and are reflected in speakers' community of practice (Eckert, 2008). Even more recently, a number of authors have begun to discuss the importance of religious affiliation to sociolinguistic choices (e.g., Omoniyi and Fishman, 2006; Benor, 2011; Mukherjee, 2013; Hary and Wein 2013; Yaeger-Dror and Cieri 2013; Yaeger-Dror 2014; David and Powell, 2014; Avineri and Kroskrity, 2014; Zuckerman, 2014; Davis, 2014), and the present volume can be seen in that context.

Based on the evidence, studies which focus on research in volatile sectarian and political communities (like Northern Ireland, the Near East, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent, Indonesia, the Philippines) provide ultrarich sources of data for in depth studies of communal linguistic divergence or nonconvergence which is correlated with religious persuasion;

however, as many of the studies here show (notably those on intrareligious identity management), religious conflict is not a prerequisite for maintenance of strong linguistic identity management between religious subcommunities.

2. The present studies of religion as a variable in linguistic variation and change

In the studies presented here we find that distinctions between (or within) sectarian communities are more salient where there is least interaction among community members from different (sub)religious communities, and more linguistic convergence the more speakers of different sectarian communities interact. We also find evidence of similar changes occurring in quite different and apparently unrelated communities, or of convergence occurring despite linguistic heritage, religious heritage, and political conflict when interaction across religious boundaries is necessary. Each community's situation is unique, but helps provide a broader perspective on the ways in which religious group preferences can impact on speech.

The papers in this volume focus on evidence that religious heritage must be considered separately from other sources of community identity, and in tandem with these other causes of community self-identification if we are to understand the causes of linguistic variation within a given community. While modes of expression (or 'voicing' Davis, 2014) is not proposed as a religious-shibboleth in any of the present studies, there is evidence here of variation in language choice, dialect choice and lexical choice turning on one's chosen religion, and degree of self identification with a religious (sub)community within the larger community; linguistic choices may reflect shared ideological commitment to a 'right way' to talk. In a few cases historical forces are assumed to have initiated specific religious group distinctions, which then persist, but most of the studies here demonstrate that even when there is no historical pattern of distinctiveness within groups, religious community distinctions are relevant to linguistic variation and change and should not be ignored.

The research for these studies have been carried out in the Indian subcontinent (Kulkarni-Joshi, 2015), in the Near East (Holes, 2015; Germanos & Miller, 2015), in Europe (Avineri, 2015) as well as the US (Assouline, 2015; Avineri, 2015; Baker-Smemoe & Bowie, 2015; Keiser, 2015) and Canada (Rosen-Skriver, 2015). While each group studied reveals distinct patterns of behavior, in each case, the fieldwork protocol included religious choice as a relevant communal variable, and each study permits a new perspective on the forces underlying variation and change within a community being studied.

We hope these studies will help lead to a broader understanding of the importance of religious choices in speakers' 'communities of practice', and in speakers' linguistic ideologies, creating a framework in which future research protocols will be more likely to consider such information; this in turn will permit more accurate analysis of the linguistic parameters correlated with such variation, as well as the conditions under which religious choices influence (or fail to influence) speech.

#1 An earlier study in **Kupwar** (Gumperz and Wilson, 1971) demonstrated that despite the fact that Kupwar is a small, rural, multi-religious, multi-lingual border community, in the 1960's [i.e. soon after the linguistic reorganization of India] religious groups within the community retained their heritage language in the private domain; in the public domain, the new state language was also used. Kulkarni-Joshi's updated research (2015) demonstrates how the various religious groups have responded to the privileging of the state language: some groups (Jains and Hindu-Lingayats) uncoupled the tie between language and religious identity; others (especially Muslim women) still maintain language as an important marker of religious identity. The lower caste Hindus, who arguably had the most to gain by rejecting their heritage religious affiliation and the linguistic choices which marked that affiliation, have distanced themselves from the Hindu religion and embraced the standard variety of the state language. Differences remain among the religious communities, but the most obvious trend appears to be one of convergence toward a local linguistic norm, even among the more privileged groups in the local community.

#2. As expected, Near Eastern communities also provide rich data for such studies: The recent research documenting continuing divergence (Avineri and Kroskrity, 2014), or lack of convergence (Holes, Germanos and Miller, 2015) among speakers from different religious subgroups reflects the severe restrictions against social contacts across religious boundaries in the Near East.

Holes also finds that an author's ideological commitments can warp his conclusions. His article demonstrates that we are ill-advised to accept the results of previous research on socially-sensitive topics without paying close attention to authors' motivation, research agenda and methodology. Any study not buttressed by analysis of speech from actual interaction with a number of community members is at best of anecdotal interest to our development of a model of language variation; social biases lead even an apparent 'expert' to draw conclusions which the informed reader knows to be useless; those with no frame of reference for judging such work should ignore it.

The Germanos & Miller paper presents an overview of results from many studies which have been published about the language × religion interface in Arabic-speaking communities. The authors discuss the published evidence for variation in North Africa, where they conclude that divergence between dialects has been maintained over the last millenium. We thus infer that over the last several centuries relatively little communication has taken place between 'neighbors' from different religious groups; certainly the communication which has taken place has not led to convergence.¹

As the authors state "two important developments have been brought by historical dialectology and sociolinguistics: the first one is the importance of taking into account the historical background in order to explain synchronic variation; the second one is the role of contact/networking for explaining different paces of change." Indeed, recent work, like that reported

¹ An obvious contrast in the literature is provided by Becker (2014a,b,c), and other recent studies, which reveal that 21st century Lower East Side residents of NYC are converging on a less parochial norm with shared loss of NYC idiosyncratic features (Labov 1966/2006, 2001, 2013).

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