Language & Communication 35 (2014) 1–8

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Language & Communication

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

Editorial

New perspectives on linguistic variation and ethnic identity in North America

1. Introduction

In the years since the first studies of ethnicity and linguistic variation (Blanc, 1964; Labov et al., 1968; Labov, 1972; Gumperz, 1964, 1971; Giles, 1979), analytic approaches to ethnic identity have evolved considerably. Recent rethinking of the concept of *ethnolect* (Benor, 2010; Eckert, 2008a; Jaspers, 2008; Wolfram, 2007) reflects a revolution in the theoretical approach to the study of social identity and language. Just as we now recognize that factors such as region, sex, age, and socioeconomic status do not distinguish subcommunities as categorically as early studies appeared to show (Labov, 2001; Guy, 2013), we also now recognize that ethnicity is also not monolithic or static. Current scholarship proposes a reformulation of methodologies (see Yaeger-Dror and Cieri, 2013, and references), research questions, and analytic perspectives. The present special issue is another such example. The papers show that an individual's ethnic self-presentation can be highly layered and complex: not only is there tremendous diversity among members of 'the same ethnic group', but one's presentation of self may vary remarkably even within the bounds of a single interaction. This special issue offers both methodological and theoretical suggestions for approaching the complexities of analyzing language and ethnicity in contemporary North American cities.

Despite drawing on a range of different methods, each of the papers in this special issue considers the range of linguistic variability among members of a single, census-defined group, rather than only drawing comparisons between groups. Some (Nagy et al.; Wagner) bring this intragroup approach to more than one group, while others (Becker) consider intraspeaker variation (a decision which is itself impossible from a perspective that frames an individual's ethnic identity as singular and static). Within the context of previous literature (e.g., Reyes and Lo, 2009; Yaeger-Dror, 1993; Fought, 1999; Eckert, 2008a; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Hoffman and Walker, 2010), the focus on variation within a group or individual reveals that orientation to ethnic identity is linked to linguistic behavior in complex ways. All of the papers explore individuals' evolving or varied presentations of self, shown either through their active identity management in relation to the wider community (Fix; Nagy et al.; Wagner; Wong and Hall-Lew) or (additionally) in relation to their immediate interlocutors (Becker; Noels). The papers consider the impact of these influences on language variation, raising concerns that complicate contemporary models of language and ethnicity in sociolinguistics.

Many North American cities have undergone major demographic shifts since World War II (see Hall-Lew, 2010; Yaeger-Dror and Thomas, 2010), most relevantly with respect to ethnicity. As a result, current variationist scholarship on speech patterns in these urban spaces must grapple with this socially salient and complex variable, one consequence of which is the challenge of representing that complexity in quantitative modeling. This special issue represents a collection of diverse answers to the question of how to build statistical models that encompass the complexities of speaker ethnicity and phonetic variation. The studies represent analyses of current primary data, collected by the authors in fieldwork projects undertaken between 2005 and 2012. The papers cover five urban locations in North America: Columbus, New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Toronto. Together, the studies highlight one broadly shared finding: the emergence of more fluid and layered understandings of what constitutes ethnic identity, and how speakers negotiate their own and others' images of their various identities. This insight complicates the analytical concept of 'ethnolect' and has major implications for how future researchers approach variationist analysis in North American cities. However, one unfortunate weakness of the present collection is that this small set of papers underestimates the true complexity of 'ethnic identity'. For example, even limiting the definition of 'ethnicity' to racial or regional heritage, one of the glaring absences here is a discussion centered on Latino/Latina identities, which have been especially foundational to the body of research problematizing the ethnolect concept (Toribio, 2000, 2003; Fought, 2006; Eckert, 2008a; Jaspers, 2008; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Bayley, forthcoming; Otheguy et al., 2007). No Native American or First Nations groups are represented here (but see, e.g., Dannenberg and Wolfram, 1998), nor are many other groups (but see, e.g., Ito 2010; Reyes and Lo 2009; Blake 2010). There is also no

0271-5309/$ - see front matter
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2013.11.001

representation of 'ethnicity' based on religious heritage (but see, e.g., Benor, 2010). While classic studies of language and ethnicity have sporadically considered the sociolinguistic importance of religious heritage as an 'ethnic' designation (e.g., Blanc, 1964; Labov, 1966; Gumperz, 1971; Milroy, 1980), more recent studies have considered the relative salience of religious, local, and regional heritage, and have demonstrated that these factors provide and entail competing linguistic identities (Kulkarni-Joshi, 2013; Yaeger-Dror, 1993, in preparation; Miller, 2007; Al-Wer and De Jong, 2009; Mukherjee, 2013). However, the present papers do consider groups which have received relatively little attention in variationist sociolinguistics, for example Chinese Americans (Wong and Hall-Lew (2014) see also Starr, 2010; Wong, 2010) and Chinese-, Polish-, and Italian Canadians (Nagy et al., 2014; see also Hoffman and Walker, 2010), as well as white women with strong African American social ties (Fix, 2014; see also Sweetland, 2002).

However, our intention is not for this volume to represent the entire range of issues involving language and ethnicity in contemporary North America, much less beyond, but rather to serve as a call for similarly detailed studies in these and other communities. There appear to be both similarities and differences between the observations made for North American communities as compared those in other parts of the world. Some of the analytical insights that appear in this volume are highly reminiscent of sociolinguistic studies of intragroup variation outside of North America (e.g., Sharma, 2011, 2012). At the same time, much recent work in urban Western Europe has documented the rise in "multiethnic" or "multicultural" linguistic repertoires or varieties (see Quist, 2008; Svendsen and Røyneland, 2008; Wiese, 2009; Cheshire et al., 2011; Kerswill, 2013), which is a phenomenon not yet studied (or even documented) in North America. If these cases of *superdiversity* (Blommaert et al., 2011) are not present in the same way in the demographically diverse cities studied here, one obvious question is what accounts for such a marked difference between North American, Western European, and other urban contexts. The present volume assembles a modest representation of the current state of the study linguistic variation and racial or regional heritage variation in North America, in order to narrow the focus for purposes of a fruitful discussion. We anticipate that future work will broaden the focus to a more varied set of situations and a larger sociolinguistic context.

One strength of the present issue is that the individual papers each present contrasting yet complementary methodologies for determining the significance of social information on linguistic production. Several draw on ethnography to provide 'on the ground' detail about how larger social structures are maintained and how larger social changes progress. The studies consider the linguistic varieties available in each context, including the dominant local norms, the relevant regional varieties, and any ethnic indexical meanings in each community. Each study explores a range of potentially relevant demographic factors, including the role of immigrant generation, years of residence in the community, and the demographic composition of the community. (See also: Aoyama et al., 2008; Flege, 2002; Flege et al., 2006; Ito, 2010.) These factors augment the already complex set of 'classic' sociolinguistic variables such as speaker age, sex, social status, and education (e.g., Labov, 2010). The papers pay particular attention to attitudinal and identity factors that reflect speaker ties to the multiple communities to which they belong. In documenting and analyzing the relationship between local and 'global' patterns of language use, these papers initiate a wider conversation concerning ideological forces which maintain social borders and reflect identity in a late modern world. Noels' contribution provides a complementary cornucopia of methods used by social psychologists to study the same factors.

2. Sociolinguistics and the representation of ethnic identity

The papers present new linguistic data from ethnically complex urban locations across North America and serve as examples of how linguists and social psychologists represent speakers' sense of ethnic identity. As Bourdieu (1991, p. 221) noted, "Struggles over ethnic or regional identity. . .are a particular case of the different struggles over classifications." While Bourdieu was referring to broader lived experiences, these "struggles" can also be seen in how sociolinguists make methodological decisions; decisions which ultimately feed back into broader identity discourses. In this way, the papers in this issue join other recent work (Eckert, 2008a; Jaspers, 2008) in taking a critical, reflexive approach toward the analyst's representation of the ethnic identities of the speakers in their research.

The need for this concern becomes most acute when linguists aim to build complex statistical models testing identity factors as predictors of language use. While one of the most exciting aspects of variationist sociolinguists is the rapidly growing sophistication of quantitative methods, Noels' paper demonstrates the fact that sociolinguists are simultaneously confronted with a growing sophistication in theories of ethnic identity that highlight its myriad complexities. Noels' paper has presented us with evidence that social psychologists have a number of theoretical perspectives from which to view a speaker's perception of ethnic identity, and that specific qualitative and quantitative tools can be 'borrowed' from their toolboxes, to evaluate speakers' sense of identity from a given perspective. As we make operational choices in how to reduce identity factors to quantitative vectors, these become choices in the extent to which we choose to simplify that more fluid and complex reality. While the papers in this special issue make those choices differently, all share an interest in these challenges, addressing them either by discussing how best to reduce 'ethnicity' to one or more discrete factors, or how best to justify the inclusion or exclusion of community members represented in a speaker set, or both. Making these decisions is a more challenging task today than it ever has been in North American sociolinguistics, but in all cases the papers seek to define identity with explicit reference to what those identities mean to the speakers themselves and to the communities in which they live. While the papers here take very different approaches to these issues, they each offer useful ways forward toward more adequate analyses of multivalent social variation.