

Linking community coherence, individual coherence, and bricolage: The co-occurrence of (r), raised BOUGHT and raised BAD in New York City English



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Abstract

Although most sociolinguists assume that regional varieties are coherent – that features co-occur in the speech of individuals and in the broader sociolinguistic patterns of the speech community – little empirical work has verified this co-occurrence. This paper considers three approaches to the study of co-occurrence – community coherence, individual coherence, and bricolage – for three variables of NYCE. There is community coherence for (r), raised BOUGHT and raised BAD in NYCE, three features which are all in withdrawal in the regional variety. In addition, some speakers, mainly older and younger white New Yorkers, also show individual coherence for these variables, but over 70% of speakers are “incoherent” in their use of the three variables. A bricolage analysis of one speaker’s use of the three variables in micro-interaction reveals a range of co-occurrence strategies, including both alignment and dis-alignment with the traditional social meanings associated with these variables as well as a lack of co-occurrence. These practices highlight the importance of a bricolage perspective in linking individual speaker practice to community-level patterns, and suggest that both views are necessary in understanding how multiple variables co-occur in speech communities.

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1. Introduction

An ongoing debate in sociolinguistic scholarship concerns whether the individual or the group is the appropriate focus for sociolinguistic analysis. In Labovian variationism, the speech community is considered the primary object of interest (Labov, 2001:33–34; Labov, 2006:380). Early variationist works studied large, urban regional varieties (Cedergren, 1973; Labov, 1966; Shuy et al., 1967; Trudgill, 1974) and profiled multiple features from that variety. While some scholars have set out explicitly to investigate the co-occurrence of variables in a speech community (Guy, 2013), more often variationists view the coherence of varieties as axiomatic. I adopt the term *community coherence* to refer to the notion that the features of some variety will co-occur in a socially stratified way in that variety’s speech community. For example, Labov (1966) profiled five phonological features of New York City English (NYCE): variable nonrhoticity in the syllable coda, raised BOUGHT, raised BAD, and the stopping of voiced and voiceless interdental fricatives. The analysis demonstrated community coherence for New Yorkers in showing that subdivisions of the speech community behaved similarly for all the variables; for instance, the middle class used relatively high rates of rhoticity (a prestige variant) and lowered BOUGHT and BAD

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(changes from below that carried stigma). This community coherence, whether assumed or empirically demonstrated, is theoretically central to the descriptions of large urban speech communities that exemplify the program on language variation and change.

Within this program, individual speakers are crucial to analysis, but primarily in the aggregate as representatives of those macro-demographic categories that pattern with linguistic usage (age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status). Labov (1966) also demonstrated that individual speakers mirrored community patterns, shifting their use of NYCE variables in the direction of the prestige variants in more formal contexts. Given this, related to community coherence is the notion of *individual coherence*: that individual users of some variety will produce its features in co-occurrence and reflect the patterns of community coherence. In NYCE, for instance, a higher rate of rhoticity would correlate with a lowered BOUGHT and BAD in a single speaker's overall usage. Fewer studies have demonstrated that individuals utilize multiple features in co-occurrence in ways that mirror community coherence (Guy, 2013); more common is for variationist studies to profile individuals who behave as outliers (Labov, 1966) or are notable as leaders of change (Labov, 2001).

A contrasting perspective on individuals comes from third wave variation scholars (Eckert, 2012), who view speakers as social actors who actively construct their identities through language use. Within this approach, many scholars have investigated the co-occurrence of variables in the construction of individual styles (Barrett, 1999; Bell, 1999; Bucholtz, 1999; Campbell-Kibler, 2011; Coupland, 2007; Podesva, 2007, 2011; Schilling-Estes, 2004; Zhang, 2005). Proponents of the third wave assert that individuals are more than tokens of macro-demographic categories who simply reflect the structure of the speech community. Instead, this research profiles speakers who draw from an available linguistic repertoire (Gumperz, 1964) to adapt, extend, and even subvert the social meanings of variables, in combinations that do not necessarily adhere to community patterns. This practice has been termed *bricolage* (Eckert, 2004; Hebdige, 1979), defined as a process in which “people combine a range of existing resources to construct new meanings or new twists on old meanings” (Eckert, 2004:43). For example, members of the emerging “yuppie” elite in Beijing rarely use local features of Beijing Mandarin (like syllable-final rhotacization and lenition of retroflex obstruent initials) but appropriate the use of full tone from Hong Kong and Taiwan (Zhang, 2005). Zhang argues that the lack of regional variants in combination with the appropriated full tone allow Beijing yuppies to construct a cosmopolitan style that draws its meaning from a contrast with state workers in Beijing, who use the opposite cluster of features. Zhang, like other third wave scholars, centralizes co-occurrence, as manifested through bricolage, in analysis.

Yet because analyses of bricolage often highlight adaptation and subversion, they resist the primacy of individual and community coherence, such that these concepts are potentially at odds in a unified description of a variety. Indeed, the question of whether or not individuals are primarily agentic in their language use is a central tension in current sociolinguistic theory (Bell, 1999:524; Eckert, 2012). In a coherence model, the individuals who make up a speech community use linguistic features in expected ways that reflect principles of sociolinguistic stratification at the community level (Labov, 1972). In a bricolage model, a speaker with agency combines features in idiosyncratic ways to create new social meanings for variables, speakers, and groups of speakers. With respect to regional dialects, third wave variationists have suggested that sociolinguists focus too narrowly on the classic variables from these varieties (Eckert, 2004). As a result, third wave variationists rarely profile speakers of regional dialects using variables from regional dialects as examples of bricolage (although see Podesva (2011)), while Labovian variationists rarely profile processes of bricolage in their descriptions of urban speech communities.

In fact, Eckert (2004, 2012) uses Labov's early study of regional dialect features on Martha's Vineyard to demonstrate the agency of speakers in the construction of style. There, the broader change toward lowering of the centralized diphthongs of /ai/ and /au/ was reversed by residents in order to construct an authentic Islander persona in contrast to the encroachment of mainland tourism (Eckert, 2012). On Martha's Vineyard, speakers worked within their available regional repertoire, increasing their use of the regional variants – not really a picture of subversion. Yet Eckert argues for the agency of these Vineyarders, and for the importance of recognizing the changing social meaning of centralized /ai/ and /au/ from a simple marker of the variety of English spoken on Martha's Vineyard to a higher order indexical that indexes “a particular kind of Vineyarder, foregrounding a particular aspect of island identity” (2012:88). Seen in this example, bricolage has a broad scope, encompassing speakers who use regional dialect features that have moved from a lower order of indexicality (geographic location – Vineyarders vs. non-Vineyarders) to a higher order of indexicality (an island character, the “English fisherfolk” persona (Eckert, 2004:43), placed in contrast to those who orient to the mainland). This is a classic example of *fractal recursivity* (Gal and Irvine, 2000), where a broader distinction is deployed at a local level. On Martha's Vineyard, the importance of establishing a local distinction that accentuated an authentic Vineyard persona resulted in the reversal of the broader sound change away from centralization, such that local social meanings and individual bricolage informed and impacted community change.

In this paper, I consider all three approaches to the study of co-occurrence described above – community coherence, individual coherence, and bricolage – for three variables of NYCE. I demonstrate community coherence for (r), raised BOUGHT and raised BAD in NYCE, three features which are all in withdrawal in the regional variety. I show that some speakers, mainly older and younger white New Yorkers, also show individual coherence for these variables. Finally,

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