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## *Interpreting the Meaning of Variation*

Studying the sociolinguistic dynamics of an adolescent community on its own terms requires rethinking aspects of our social theories of variation which by and large have been based on adult speech and adult social categories. Adult patterns of variation, therefore, are viewed, at least implicitly, as a finished product, and the target of development. The focus in the field of variation on adult social constraints in variation has led researchers to think of the child's development of the use of variation in adult terms as well. This view is implicit in variationists' speculations about the age at which children have "complete" control over patterns of variation. This adult focus is arguably a reflection of a general middle-aged bias in social science research (Baltes et al. 1980, Coupland, Coupland and Giles 1991, Eckert 1996b). More benignly, it is an artifact of the available data. Since the age span of adult working life is longer than the age span of children or of retired people, age-representative survey samples yield more sociolinguistic data on speakers in their "productive years" than any other group. And since measures of socioeconomic class are based on school-leaving, employment, adult consumption patterns (Labov 1966), and adult life style (Milroy and Milroy 1992), social theorizing related to variation is most complete for this age group as well. In the same way, to the extent that gender has been theorized in social science and in the study of variation, it too has been viewed in terms of adult experience and often in terms of relation to the means of production and specifically in terms of women's exclusion from the marketplace (Trudgill 1972).

Viewing development from an adult-centered point of view yields a view of development in which socialization is a matter of learning roles, with children sliding easily into the social positions to which they have been exposed (most likely by their parents). No variationist to my knowledge has actually embraced this view of development, but no explicit broadly developmental alternative has been proposed. A view of sociolinguistic develop-

ment that allows the speaker more agency is more likely to view children as actively and creatively coming to terms with the situations in which they find themselves.

### 1.1 A Developmental View of Variation

Most developmental speculation about variation takes the acceleration of vernacular use as evidence that adolescence marks the point at which patterns of variation come into their own as socially meaningful (see Chambers 1995: chapter 4 for a developmental discussion of variation). I would argue, however, that adolescence is not a magical beginning of social consciousness, but a license and an imperative to begin acting on certain kinds of social knowledge that the age cohort has been developing for years. And while adolescent patterns of variation begin to fall into the kinds of global patterns found in the adult population, I would argue that this does not signal a sudden awareness of the social function of variation, but the adaptation of an already robust sociolinguistic competence to a new set of social meanings.

All of childhood is, among other things, about learning to be the next step older. Participation in kid communities requires a continuous learning of new age-appropriate behavior, and age-appropriateness changes rapidly. Social status among one's peers requires demonstrating new "mature" behaviors, a continual move beyond the childish – a need to be age appropriate that amounts to a *developmental imperative* (Eckert 1994). As a result, kids are continually trying on new behaviors and styles, in a continual and conscious production of a new self. This imperative continues throughout life, but is more noticeable in childhood and adolescence, since by adulthood one has learned to be more subtle in one's efforts at self-reconstruction. Linguistic style is an important part of age-appropriate behavior, and sociolinguistic development is a continuous process. But if adolescence has been pinpointed as a turning point in the speaker's sociolinguistic competence, little is known about the development of patterns of variation in childhood that lead up to adolescence.

There has been a relatively small amount of research on children's patterns of variation, at least in comparison with research on older populations, and there has emerged no consensus about the development of sociolinguistic variation. Much of the work on children's patterns of variation has abstracted away from the social, focusing on age limits for the acquisition

of new dialects, on the one hand, and for the development of internal constraints in variation on the other. Since variation affects word classes, locally appropriate patterns of variation depend on locally appropriate underlying forms in the lexicon. Studies that focus on children moving into new dialect areas offer evidence that certain phonological patterns cannot be learned after a fairly young age. Payne's work (1980) in the Philadelphia suburb King of Prussia showed that children moving in from a different dialect area before the age of eight or nine picked up simple local vowel shifts. They did not have the same success, however, at developing the Philadelphia short-*a* pattern, which required complex knowledge of word-class assignment. It appeared that this had to be learned very early, as only children whose parents were from Philadelphia developed this pattern completely. Payne's conclusion was that while children may be able to add lower-level rules until adolescence, they cannot restructure their grammars as readily. Chambers' study (1992) of six Canadian children moving to Britain provided similar evidence of a developmental cutoff. Coming from a Canadian dialect area in which /oh/ and /o/ (*caught* vs. *cot*) are merged, they needed to learn the appropriate lexical assignments to develop the opposition as in the British dialect. In this case, Chambers found a close to perfect development of the opposition in the speech of a nine-year-old, and a sharp decrease in success for speakers over the age of 13.

While these studies tell us important things about phonological development, they do not say much about the kinds of dynamics that are the major preoccupation in studies of adult patterns of sociolinguistic variation. Studies correlating phonological variables with social factors do not deal with word-class assignments, but with phonetic processes that affect those word classes. There is recent evidence (Labov 1989, Roberts 1997, Roberts and Labov 1992, Wolfram 1989) that these processes begin quite early, and that children as young as three exhibit internally systematic patterns of variation in the use of both stable sociolinguistic variables (such as *-ing*, and *t/d* deletion) and in the use of patterns of local variation representing change in progress (such as the raising of short *a* in Philadelphia). These patterns show internal constraints similar to those in the speech of the adult population in their community. Thus variation is built into linguistic competence from the very earliest stages – a finding that is not at all surprising since, as Labov (1989) points out, the input for acquisition is variable.

An understanding of sociolinguistic development requires an understanding of how children come to recognize and produce socially meaningful patterns of variation, and ultimately to alter the rates of this variability over the life course. For kids to recognize that variation carries social

meaning requires that they have the social knowledge necessary to distinguish social patterns of variation. There has been little study of the nature of this knowledge in children.

It is clear that very small children are stylistically active (Andersen 1990). And the well-established fact that kids' major dialect influence is their peers rather than their parents (e.g. Labov 1972b: 304–7) suggests that the development of sociolinguistic competence is not a simple matter of exposure, but that the actual source of the exposure matters. Kids spend plenty of time interacting with their parents and other adults, but it is their peers' patterns that they attend to. From an early age, then, children appear to recognize language patterns as related to their own social possibilities. In order to study the earliest development of sociolinguistic variation, then, it is crucial to understand what would constitute a sociolinguistic variable in a childhood age group, for the focus on adult social practice in the study of variation may well obscure age-specific use and interpretation among children. This requires merging a *developmental* perspective with a *mature-use* perspective (Eckert 1996b) for all age groups. That is, to understand the social use of language, we have to recognize that people are developing language skills throughout life, and that the skills that they exercise at any time in life are geared to that life stage. A child's language is not simply a manifestation of an effort to develop "real" language, but a fully mature linguistic form for that stage of childhood. In the study of variation this is crucial as well, for in view of the importance of the developmental imperative in childhood, issues associated with maturation, and the relation between age-appropriateness and social status at all early ages, are likely to be the ground on which children begin to develop a sense of the relation between linguistic features and social identity and status.

A study of the development of variation might do well to begin with phonological features of baby talk, for baby talk both marks a developmental stage and constitutes an important register (Andersen 1990, Ferguson 1977, Gleason 1973) for a wider age group. Baby talk is clearly linked with small children's social identities, and moving away from being a "baby" is a central social concern for kids. The transition from baby talk as one's sole competence to baby talk as a stylistic device would no doubt tell us volumes about the development of variable communicative competence. It is important to recognize, furthermore, that features of baby talk are not just a kids' resource, but a broader community resource whose value is related to the meaning of childhood in the community. Features of baby talk are not only part of a register for speaking with small children; they are also used among speakers of all ages, including adults, when no children are present. Many

adults use baby talk, for example, when teasing about fear or low pain tolerance, expressing sympathy, talking to animals, or in intimate talk to a lover. These features have clear social meaning, derived from the community's view of children, as aspects of child identity and social relations endure in the linguistic strategies of older people. Rather than look for adult variables in children's speech to assess sociolinguistic competence, then, one might begin a developmental study of variation with a focus on children's linguistic resources, social identities, and strategies, asking how these patterns are transformed into adult strategies. An adult orientation leads the variationist to search children's speech only for variables that have been studied in the adult population, but it is quite clear, as shown by Andersen (1990), that the beginnings of social awareness in language variability lie in other, childhood-specific, linguistic material.

It is also likely that at least some variables studied in the adult community have childhood meaning. If one is to trace an awareness of the social function of variation to the earliest stages, it is important to pull back some from the concentration on peers. Labov has speculated (1990: 219) that mothers play a particular role in the advancement of sound change through their role as primary care-giver. While Labov is focusing on the advancement of female-led sound changes, one might extend this speculation to inquire about mothers' role in kids' learning about the social meaning of variation. The fact that women have a greater stylistic range in variation suggests that they make greater expressive use of variation, and it would be instructive to examine how mothers actually use phonological variables in interactions around children. It is possible that part of women's style involves a generally expressive use of variation, which would emerge in mothers' use of certain variables in phatic and affectionate communication with their children. In this case, very small children may come to recognize a relation between at least some adult phonological variables and certain kinds of social dynamics and relations – indeed, this could be the beginning of an association of certain variables with solidarity.

Because of a lack of studies of social variation among very small children, we so far know little about correlations of variables with social characteristics in this age group. Stratification according to parents' socioeconomic status shows up regularly in the speech of preadolescents (Wolfram 1969, Macaulay 1977, Romaine 1984, Reid 1978), the youngest age group normally included in class stratified samples. However, a distinction must be made between evidence of social variation among children that may reflect simple exposure, as in class or ethnic differences, and evidence of the social use of variation. Evidence of the social use of variation could be found

in gender and in stylistic variation. While small children are commonly exposed to a population that is fairly homogeneous with respect to class and ethnicity, they are generally exposed to both male and female speech patterns and to stylistic variability. Stylistic and gendered patterning of variation, therefore, would indicate a socially based choice. Romaine (1984) provided non-quantitative evidence of stylistic variation in the use of (au) ([aw]~[u]) in the speech of six-year-olds in Edinburgh, and Biondi (1975) found stylistic use of despirantized (th) and (dh) among six-year-old Italian-American children between speech and reading style. Labov (1989) found stylistic variation in the use of t/d deletion and *-ing* by six-, seven- and nine-year-olds. The most robust data on stylistic variation in children, however, begins with the speech of preadolescents, around age ten. Reid (1978) showed variation in two speech styles among 11-year-old boys, in the use of *-ing* and in the use of glottal stop. Romaine's data from Edinburgh (1984) show variation in the use of the same two variables among ten-year-olds, between speech and reading style.

The most robust findings on gender differences in variation are also among older children, beginning at age ten. Romaine (1984) found gender differences in ten-year-olds in Glasgow and Edinburgh, and Macaulay (1977) found gender differences in Glasgow in ten- and 15-year-olds, with a considerably greater difference among the 15-year-olds. Biondi (1975), as well, found gender differences among Italian-American children in Boston. In all these cases, boys were using more non-standard forms than girls. Fischer's study (1958) of a small population of school children is particularly revealing, since it showed a correlation between the reduction of *-ing* (*walking, talking*) and aspects of kids' social practice. Specifically, he found that "model" boys (i.e. teachers' pets) reduced *-ing* less than "typical" boys as well as girls, showing clearly that variation has age-based social meaning for kids. The appropriation of stylistic variables for age-specific use can be seen as evidence that kids live also in the wider world, and are aware of social dynamics in all age groups around them. Purely anecdotal, but clear in its significance, is a quip made by my nephew, Michael Eckert, when he was seven years old. When I inquired how he felt about his family's recent move from an upper middle class suburb to Jersey City, he replied, in his lowest-pitch voice and with great gusto, "I'm the Jersey Jerk and I live in the sewer." This statement of his awareness of the social status of his new residence was delivered in a perfect New Jersey vernacular, completely with fortis (th), fortis word-initial (s), extremely rounded (u), final (r) deletion, and the palatalized retroflex syllabic /r/ in *Jersey* and *jerk* – a New Jersey variable that escapes popular stereotypes.

As kids move towards adolescence, they move from children's linguistic resources to adult resources. One might say that they lay claim to adult linguistic resources, just as they lay claim to aspects of adult identity and to adult prerogatives such as makeup, tobacco, and alcohol. Early on, this is clearly manifested in the increasing and daring use of obscenities and profanity, and adult vernacular expressions (e.g. *dude*). This linguistic behavior attracts adult notice and sanction, associated as it is with issues of control. More standard adult linguistic prerogatives go unsanctioned by adults, but can be sanctioned by kids. Kids' use of certain kinds of adult-like authoritative speech, prissy speech, or bossy speech is frequently ridiculed by their peers for their presumption. Awareness of the social significance of standard speech, therefore, no doubt creeps into kids' linguistic practice quite early on. The notions of vernacular and standard may well emerge in a distinction between child and adult speech, and perhaps between affectionate and angry speech, gathering greater correspondence to global norms in school, where teachers' speech comes to be the ultimate adult speech. Thus while kids may not begin to display a recognition of standard norms in use until they are older (Labov 1964, Chambers 1995: 153ff), they may be developing an understanding of the linguistic market and the relation between linguistic variation and power, quite early on. In elementary schools with a diverse student body, as well, where more standard-speaking kids linguistically resemble the teacher, issues of standard and vernacular can be foregrounded quite early on in relations among kids, and viewed in terms of certain kids' alliances with adults. Ultimately it is relations among kids, and their mutual evaluation of the social significance of the different forms of language available in their environment, that will give rise to a peer-based linguistic market.

The notion *linguistic market* is particularly important to this discussion, because it focuses on the relation between variation and the production of a self in a symbolic economy. Bourdieu and Boltanski (1975) first introduced the notion of a linguistic market, in which the value of a speaker's verbal offerings – the likelihood that these offerings will be heard and heeded – depends on the linguistic variety in which they are encoded. The notion of a linguistic market has a particularly attractive explanatory power in the development of adolescent language, where the production of the self to maximize one's value in the marketplace is so clear. The linguistic market, in fact, is part of a broader symbolic market, and one can see the self as the commodity that is being produced for value in the market. Thus one is both agent and commodity. Bourdieu and Boltanski (1975) speak of only one market – the market controlled by global elites, whose linguistic variety

comes to be known as the legitimate or standard language. This focus on the standard stems from their concern with the concentration of global power, and the control from above of societal material and symbolic resources. While there is a close relation between the linguistic market and class in capitalist industrialized society, it is not clear that class is what kids respond to initially as they develop a sense of the market. Rather, for instance, the power of adults over children may be an initial development of a sense of the relation between power and ways of speaking.

Part of going from being a child to being an adult involves moving from an ascriptive to an achieved place in the world. And part of developing an achieved place in the world is an increasing sense of the self as a commodity on the social market. In some very important sense, social development involves a process of objectification, as one comes to see oneself as having value in a marketplace. We take it for granted that adults see themselves as having value in the employment market, or in the academic market: résumés, transcripts, and letters of recommendation are easily recognized as part of the construction of value. Personal style is also part of this construction. Children begin to recognize the need to produce themselves for the market as they approach adolescence – as they come to see themselves as commodities whose value is determined in a peer-controlled “marketplace of identities.” Most particularly, as they approach adolescence, kids find themselves thrown into a heterosexual market (Thorne 1993, Eckert 1997a), where their value is largely determined by their ability to command alliances with, and attention from, valued members of the other sex. They also find themselves in a related marketplace of popularity, where one’s value depends on access to visibility and contacts. This market begins in late elementary school, where activity unfolds in a safe and stable classroom social unit, under the watchful eye of nurturant teachers. In secondary school, though, where the cohort suddenly expands and where heterosexuality is suddenly licensed, kids find themselves in a more public and competitive context. As they seek a place in the informal social sphere and the extracurricular sphere, and later as they prepare for the college and employment marketplaces, they will have to market themselves in an increasing variety of ways. To the extent that language is part of the packaging of a product for the market, one can expect an explosion of linguistic activity in secondary school.

Secondary school makes the exact dates of the transition from childhood to adolescence official, and provides the institutional structure and resources to organize the transition. In the US, children anticipate entrance into secondary school with a mixture of eagerness and trepidation, as adolescence



brings greater freedom and new opportunities on the one hand, and makes new social demands on the other. One can list any number of changes that accompany the move from elementary school to secondary school – a move from an institution that takes responsibility for its students' development to one that views students' development as their own responsibility. Suddenly students' behavior is viewed as the result of personal choice, their activities are seen as the initiation of a trajectory to adulthood, and their actions are seen as having permanent consequences. Adolescence also brings greater freedom and mobility, and a legitimization, and institutionalization, of heterosexuality. Adolescence is the pivot between childhood and adulthood, between a place in society based on parents' place and one's own. Yet while it is supremely transitional, it is reified as a stage in itself. Adolescence is a way of life that kids fear and anticipate for its own sake, and that they experience very differently depending on their circumstances. Normative adolescence in the US entails engagement in school, a happy-go-lucky social whirl, innocent mischief, and independence from family and material responsibilities – a leisure that is unavailable to most members of the adolescent age group, and a way of life that is distasteful to many. Yet while the social circumstances of adolescence are a recipe for stress, experts commonly attribute the emotional turbulence that marks adolescence for many to biological processes. While the "raging hormones" of puberty may well be a source of difficulty, the social construction of this life stage is sufficiently elaborate to make the effects of biology seem trivial.

Adolescents are very much in the middle. On the one hand, they have pulled away definitively from childhood – on the other hand, they remain under adult control. The age cohort makes sense of itself by constructing difference within, on the one hand, and by opposing itself to the adult and child age groups on the other. The very status of adolescence, with its institutional supports, separates the age group from childhood once and for all. At the same time, the focus on autonomy sets up a new kind of opposition between adolescence and adulthood. Since institutional requirements prevent adolescents from affirming independence from their parents through engagement in the adult world, they must do so through engagement in the adolescent world. While one agenda of adolescence is laying claim to adult prerogatives, the only legitimate way to have a sense of autonomy is to elevate the peer community and culture as an independent form of membership and participation. And the value of such a claim to autonomy depends on the worthiness and autonomy of that adolescent culture. The elaboration of adolescent social practices stems from the need to create a viable alternative to adulthood, making adolescent life both short

and intense – a social hothouse. Symbolic intensity facilitates the rapid social change of adolescence, giving rise to comparably intense preoccupations with clothing and other adornment, style of demeanor and motion, substance use and eating patterns, cars and other forms of consumption, and language use. It should be no surprise, therefore, that adolescents lead all age groups in linguistic innovation.

Ultimately, all of this symbolic activity describes a marketplace of identities, and the patterns of variation are best considered in terms of the adolescent linguistic market. Its relation to the adult linguistic market is complex and transitional, but essential. In adolescence, the market takes on a new sense, as adult class begins to loom. But in elementary school, the relation between adult class, power, and the institution is obscured by relations between children and adults, as power is concentrated in age differences. In secondary school, the relation between the local marketplace of identities, the school, and one's future potential in the adult market becomes manifest. This is both because secondary school is the time when one makes curricular choices that have implications for the next stage beyond high school, and because the institutional structure of the high school provides for relations of institutional power to develop within the peer cohort. Thus aspects of relations between children and adults are transformed into peer relations. This is the point at which the transfer of power begins, from those who dominate in the adult world to the young people who will come to dominate. The linguistic market of childhood, then, begins to merge with the linguistic market of adulthood.

## 1.2 Class and the Linguistic Market

The jock–burnout opposition that dominates social discourse at Belten High foregrounds conflict models of social class. The continuous juxtaposition of jock and burnout in day-to-day life within a confined environment, and the consequent foregrounding of difference, competition, and conflict, can be seen as providing an early orientation to social class as oppositional. At the same time, there is a sense that the two categories represent the extremes of the school social order, and some students manifest impatience with and resistance to the discourse of opposition altogether. Yet the passionate and concerted work that goes into creating and maintaining mutual opposition in all symbolic realms presents a view of two poles as pulling apart, giving life to the kind of non-consensual view of variation

outlined by Rickford (1986). And it brings to the fore a view of competing markets of identity, and the related (and opposed and competing) linguistic markets.

The view of class stratification of variation in terms of competing linguistic markets hangs somewhat in the limbo of disparate foci of variation studies. Both the standard and the vernacular are associated with maximally engaged populations – but populations engaged in opposing extremes of the social order. The vernacular, the language of locally based communities, is the source of regular sound change; the standard, the language of institutionally based networks, is a locus of resistance to change. The issue of the nature of the dynamics behind linguistic innovation and resistance is at the bottom of a good deal of discussion and disagreement within theories of variation.

Survey studies (e.g. Labov 1966, Trudgill 1974) focusing on the socio-economic and stylistic stratification of variables over large populations imply (whether intentionally or not) a consensual view of language and class. In this view, the standard and vernacular poles, as well as the continuum between, result from a single set of linguistic dynamics. The most extreme version of this view was laid out by Kroch (1978), accounting for social differentiation of variation in terms of mutually opposed forces of innovation and resistance. Innovation, according to Kroch, is an imperative from within the linguistic system, and will proceed in the absence of conscious resistance. The socioeconomic continuum, according to Kroch, is also a continuum of linguistic practice, in which greater socioeconomic status brings greater resistance to change. The stratification of linguistic variables, therefore, simply reflects the stratification of resistance to change. Like the Neogrammarians, Kroch limits linguistic agency to resistance to “natural” linguistic processes. This view is consonant with Labov’s interpretation of the stylistic continuum as a continuum of attention paid to speech. According to Labov, the individual’s speech production is quite automatic at the vernacular end of his or her stylistic continuum, but requires increasing attention and care as production moves toward the standard end. Thus, change is likely to be accelerated when the speaker is distracted from standard norms.

The notion of the standard language market, as introduced into the study of variation by Sankoff and Laberge (1978), complements this view. Basing their work on Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital (1977a, 1977b) and Bourdieu and Boltanski’s work on the linguistic market (1975), the authors show that within a single socioeconomic stratum, speakers’ use of standard variants in Montreal French correlates with their relative engagement in

networks and institutions that require the use of standard varieties. The notion of the market provides an explanation of class stratification that specifically points to the actual situations and interactive needs that lead to the adoption of standard varieties. It also emphasizes the relation of language to the production of the self, and to the individual's own viability in the economic marketplace.

But the focus on the standard as the sole source of conscious norms for the entire speech community is, as many (e.g. Milroy 1980: 101ff) have pointed out, problematic. While Labov's own work in Martha's Vineyard and in New York City (e.g. 1972a, 1972b) is the origin of our understanding that the vernacular has positive value in local communities, his view of style creates mystery about the means by which this value is constructed. While formal style certainly involves greater attention to speech, and while speakers have to pay careful attention when they're speaking in the most extremely standard end of their stylistic repertoire, there is every reason to believe that a similar effort is required at the extremely non-standard end of their repertoire as well. One might consider that the two ends of the continuum require effort motivated by different – and even conflicting – orientations, and that people have to work to ensure their participation in either market. (Also, it is not clear that attention gets paid to speech only when a production effort is required; the intentional stylistic production of variants anywhere along a speaker's continuum could be the result of heightened attention.)

If survey studies of variation have appeared to elevate the standard language as the stylistic target of the entire socioeconomic hierarchy, ethnographic studies such as Labov's Martha's Vineyard study (1972b) and Milroy's study (1980) of working class networks in Belfast focus on the positive local symbolic value of the vernacular. A conflict view of class suggests (see Woolard 1985) that there are alternative linguistic markets, within which forms other than the global standard constitute the norm. The existence of alternative linguistic markets is not necessarily a reason to reject the supremacy of the standard market as constructed by Bourdieu and Boltanski (1975), for the creativity and the force of the vernacular can be seen as a response to relative powerlessness in the face of the standard. This does not nullify the vernacular's linguistic and cultural importance, but locates it in the political economy. The fact that the power of the legitimate market enables it to appropriate the creative products of the vernacular market, as, for instance, in the corporate marketing of hip-hop, underlines the basic relation between the two markets. While agents of the global market may come to the local market to find and exploit creative innova-

tion, this does not enhance the status of local youth culture. In fact, one might say that the ability of the global market to stigmatize local innovation keeps the value of that very innovation sufficiently low to exploit, and even legitimizes only the genius of the global agents who have the “creativity” to recognize “quality” local innovations. Thus local change mediated by global agents can become legitimized as global change. One might even say that the power of the vernacular resides in the recognition of its powerlessness as the vernacular and the standard arise in mutual response and opposition to the potential threat that each poses to the other.

The linguistic market is part of a broader symbolic market, which includes patterns of consumption, demeanor, etc., and the power of the legitimized language in that market lies in the alignment of features of language with features of other symbolic resources. This integration involves a process of essentialization, whereby the properties of the standard language, along with dress, manners, etc., come to be seen as embodiments of cultural value: clarity, logic, elegance. (See Irvine (in press) for a particularly elegant discussion of this aspect of style.) It is the power to define such things as clarity, logic, and elegance that constitutes *hegemony*. The symbolic force of these resources, then, resides in their confounding with characteristics claimed as justification for participation in, and domination of, the legitimate market. Standard language gains its power by virtue of its association with the institutions of societal authority and power, and the nature of standard language is best described in terms of these institutions and their hierarchies. Although Bourdieu focuses on the “true” elites in his examinations of French society, it is perhaps more relevant to focus on the institutions in which access to economic power is constructed. Since it is the belief in the possibility of access that spurs adherence to legitimate norms throughout the population, and since in our society the corporate hierarchy is the legitimate path to mobility, corporate hierarchies are an instructive locus.

The pull of the standard language market is obviously quite heterogeneous. The importance of resembling those above in the hierarchy has been described in detail in the corporate setting (Kanter 1977). This emulation is not of random characteristics, but of an intricate co-construction of symbolic form and legitimation. The fact that those rising to the top of corporate hierarchies gain power over increasingly broad segments of the institution and ultimately of society, and participate in increasingly powerful and cosmopolitan networks, is translated into a belief that their interests represent in some ultimate way those of society at large. Corporate members’ loyalty to the corporate institution requires that they set aside

local or personal interests and that they base their deliberations on the conscientious application of objective, dispassionate reasoning to information from these global, "impersonal" sources. The importance of "rising above" group and personal concerns dictates that corporate players relinquish close local social networks for more scattered networks based on corporate contact. In the corporate context, insofar as the individual's identity is based on his or her institutional role, personal interests are considered to be inseparable from those of the institution. This ideological relinquishing of local allegiances is of course related to a practical necessity: hierarchies are increasingly dominated by geographically diffuse networks, and the requirements for servicing those networks outside of the workplace increasingly militate against locally based personal networks.

Allegiance to corporate cosmopolitan norms emerges in the domination of personal and symbolic behavior by conservative norms. The avoidance of flamboyance and local "fads" conveys sobriety, solidity, responsibility, immunity to casual influence, and the transcendence of personal and local interest for the interests of the more global concerns of the corporation and, by extension, of society as a whole. All of this is reflected in the choice of classic styles of clothing, adornment, home furnishings, and automobiles, all known for their slow, non-faddish rate of change; and involvement in broad-based community organizations, sedate leisure activities, foreign travel, a preference for "classical" forms of entertainment and the unsensationalized press, and the adoption of a standard conservative speech variety.

In keeping with its cosmopolitan status, standard language eschews features identified with specific localities, which are taken as evidence of flightiness and partiality. And in keeping with its educational base, standard language eschews non-standard grammatical forms which are taken as evidence of lack of clear, logical, and hence responsible thought. The standard speech variety also extends far beyond phonology, vocabulary, and grammar. Speech events associated with the accomplishment of institutional tasks reflect the nature of the community within which they take place. Inasmuch as corporate ideology dictates that decisions be based on information from "objective," external sources, and on institutional rather than personal interests, it also dictates that discussions, deliberations, negotiations, and the presentation of their results be presented in language that is relatively abstract, and free of emotional and personal involvement.

Explicit study of the standard language market has focused on institutional engagement, correlating variables with occupations that require

varying amounts of standard language (Kroch and Small 1978, Zhang 1995, Sankoff and Laberge 1978, Sankoff et al. 1989). Indices of socioeconomic status used in survey studies, based primarily on occupation and education, essentially measure the degree of engagement in the standard language market. And the increasing tendency to substitute occupation for complex indices in studies of variation (Labov 1990) reflects the fact that current qualification for, and engagement in, a specific workplace is directly related to one's current use of standard language. Work on the local, vernacular market, on the other hand, has focused on non-institutional forms of engagement, by correlating the use of vernacular variants with indices of engagement in local networks and local cultural practices (Cheshire 1982, Edwards 1991, Knack 1991, Milroy 1980).

The local marketplace, in which local rights and privileges are controlled (local jobs, renting and buying homes, goods sold and exchanged locally, use of public space), is opposed to a non-local marketplace in which generalized resources are controlled (certain kinds of technical knowledge, goods sold on the open market). As generalized resources are controlled from outside, locally based networks excluded from the corporate marketplace must struggle to maintain control of local resources. Since maintenance of control of local resources is frequently essential to the survival of the local group in the face of corporate control, this struggle can involve a conscious opposition to the global marketplace. Just as the kinds of resources controlled in the corporate and the local marketplaces are mutually opposed, so are the qualifications for access to them. Membership in the local community can bring access to resources either through contact with those in direct control of purely local resources, or through local brokers who can bring contact with those in control of higher-level resources. Such resources, depending on the community, can range from personal protection to the satisfaction of material needs (housing, jobs, material support), to information (not only local information but information about public services and the broader marketplace), to services (protection, legal aid, practical help of various sorts). Unlike the corporate marketplace, in which membership is normatively controlled through impersonal and external qualifications, the local marketplace is highly personal, and membership can be consciously ascriptive. Having been born in the neighborhood is a more clearly acceptable boast or claim of membership in the local marketplace than is being the child of a professional in professional networks. (And while this may frequently not, in fact, be the case, it is a necessary public claim in a society built on the promise of universal meritocratic opportunity for mobility.)

And whereas the corporate marketplace is socially and geographically diffuse insofar as it is controlled by broad networks, the local marketplace is highly focused (Milroy 1980). Local networks are based directly in the area that they control, and their social power stems not so much from breadth of membership and contacts as from density and closeness of control. The symbolic capital of the local marketplace stands in clear opposition to that of the corporate marketplace, as the value of any symbolic behavior in the local context is enhanced by its clear local association. The term “local” does not simply apply to geography but to specific social groups and locally based categories. If the local marketplace in Detroit is dominated by auto workers, local symbols will include not simply geographic reference but reference to the auto industry, and if the local marketplace is dominated by a specific ethnic group, local forms will derive from the ethnic repertoire.

Local identity is the cornerstone of Labov’s study of Martha’s Vineyard (1972b), in which he established a relation between the centralization of the nucleus in (ay) and (aw) and speakers’ orientation to the island. Specifically, he found that centralization was associated with the old autonomous island fishing economy, which was being threatened by the incursion of a mainland-dependent summer and tourist economy. There are several aspects of this local identity that are worth noting. Most simply, local identity can be defined in terms of loyalty to the local community, both in a concrete sense of orientation to local networks and in orientation to the local community in a more abstract sense. But in addition, Labov makes it clear that local identity is not simply defined spatially or even in a socially abstract sense, but in the interaction between place and the human life that unfolds there. The nucleus raisers of Martha’s Vineyard had in common not simply co-presence, but co-participation in a community united by interest, activity, and point of view. They were identified by a combination of attitudinal and demographic features – a community oriented to shared and concrete everyday practice. One might expect that the centralization of the nucleus on the Vineyard gained its social significance in the myriad and varied interactions through which islanders engaged in locally based activity and sharing of interests, and in a mutual contrast and engagement with the culture and speech of people with conflicting interests. The local, then, is defined simultaneously in terms of shared location and a shared belief about what it means to be from that location. The Martha’s Vineyard study above all illustrates most clearly and dramatically the relation between specific local meaning and place in the global society.



The competition for control of resources between localized and non-localized groups suffices in itself as motivation for the development and constant renewal of opposed linguistic norms, each set of which uniquely qualifies its users for participation in its own marketplace to the very extent to which it disqualifies them in the other. Milroy's study (1980) of local working class networks in Belfast emphasizes the relation between local solidarity and the use of the local vernacular. One of the most salient aspects of these networks is their local base, thus uniting local loyalty and loyalty to the friendship, family, and work network. This, according to Milroy, maximizes pressure for dialect conformity.

While the standard language market is relatively monolithic, the vernacular market is anything but. Invariability is the symbolic touchstone of the standard, while distinctiveness among local groups is essential to the workings of the vernacular. If the opposition between vernacular and standard is an important factor in the difference between the two, this is accomplished through a differentiation among vernaculars as well. It is only to the extent that the local vernacular is truly local that it will be valuable to the community – and localness is not generic, but stands in opposition to other locals. In urban areas, most particularly, local groups have to compete for rare resources. While people may gather in neighborhoods with people similar to them, these neighborhoods are not isolated from each other. If the life of the group depends on maintaining its own way of speaking, this way of speaking has to set them aside from the next group. This also is illustrated in the data from Labov's Martha's Vineyard study, in which it emerges that centralization is associated with a particular *kind* of local identity – one of several somewhat distinct and even competing local identities. While Labov focused on the opposition between the mainland and the long-standing community of English origin that had dominated the island economy for generations, he also raised the issue of two other ethnic groups on the island who might contest this local "Yankee" hegemony. These other groups were the original inhabitants of the island, a community of Native Americans, locally referred to as the "Gay Head Indians" on the one hand, and on the other, a community of Portuguese descent dating back several generations.

While the islanders of English descent lead in the centralization of (ay), the Native American islanders take quite an overwhelming lead in the centralization of (aw). The English and the Native Americans constitute distinct communities, both of which make strong claims to local authenticity, and both of which perceive a conflict between their claims. Indeed, Labov reports conflict between the communities around the very issue of the native

status of the Gay Head community. Thus in this case, status – or perhaps power – involves relative rights to define what constitutes “island culture.” One might speculate that the extreme values produced by the English and Native American populations – the English for (ay) and the Native Americans for (aw) – reflect distinct uses of nucleus centralization. While the centralization of the nuclei of these diphthongs may be a general local linguistic resource, its specific symbolic value can be differentiated through the balance between the two diphthongs. It is quite possible, then, that these diphthongs, both of which are clearly identified with Martha’s Vineyard, are serving for the expression and construction not only of a specific kind of local identity but of competing local identities.

Labov’s analysis shows two sets of norms pulling away from each other: mainland-oriented islanders moving in the direction of a lowered nucleus, and island-oriented islanders responding to this trend by reversing the change and moving in the other direction. This paints a very clear picture of the oppositional relation between vernacular and standard language as embedded in conflict between the local and the global. The social significance of (ay) and (aw) in Martha’s Vineyard is not purely local – it is not something that arose in that specific context with no relation to larger social patterns beyond the Vineyard. On the contrary, the relation of the local economy to the global appears to be crucial to the local meanings on the Vineyard, and individuals and small groups align themselves in relation to the global issue through its local instantiation. In Martha’s Vineyard it is the tourist trade that presents the global threat, and the locally run fishing trade that represents local power. It is various groups’ relations to the tourist and the fishing trade that give local life to more global issues of power. Furthermore, and central to the argument in this book, every nuance of social relations and practices within, among, and beyond those groups is material for the construction of linguistic identities. The very personal is constructed within the communal, and the meanings associated with variation are inseparable not only from their relations to the political economy, but from the personalities of the local individuals who populate that economy. The sociolinguist trying to connect larger societal patterns of variation with the linguistic dynamics of Martha’s Vineyard must connect the larger political economy with local dynamics and meanings, and ultimately with individuals.

All of this conflict is located quite squarely within what one would have to call the same speech community, for the social values of the two treatments of centralization lie precisely in their relation to local conflict. If the speech community construct is to have any explanatory power for variation, it will, as Rickford (1986) has pointed out, have to encompass this kind of

conflict. Labov's observation of the dominance of Yankee identity on the island, and of the other groups' orientation to Yankee island culture, is clearly based on an important social and linguistic reality: that status and power involve symbolic domination. By virtue of their dominant status, the Yankees are in a position to define for others what constitutes "island culture." Thus the notion of the speech community will have to encompass a multitude of conflicting norms and kinds of power.

### 1.3 Liminality

By positing a vernacular market in opposition to the standard language market, sociolinguists have found a powerful explanation for the survival of vernaculars in the face of pressure from the standard, and for the initiation of change in the vernacular. However, the notion of conflicting markets, suggesting a pull in opposite linguistic directions, leaves a problem for the dominant view of variation, in which the socioeconomic stratification of variation is essentially seamless. If the standard language market resides in upper middle class networks, institutions, and communities, and the vernacular resides in the networks, institutions, and communities of the working class, then what of the people in between? The notion of conflicting markets could also be seen as justifying a view of variation as alternation between distinct dialects.

The evidence from community studies of variation (particularly Labov 1966, Trudgill 1974) points both to conflicting linguistic markets and to a class continuum of variation. There is evidence of a "seam" between the working and the upper middle class, suggesting that the two ends of the linguistic continuum exert powerful opposing pulls, aligned as they are with powerful resources and ideologies. People negotiating their way around the regions between the two ends are simultaneously where they are – somewhere in between – and differentially oriented to one market or the other. I hasten to qualify that the standard and vernacular markets do not reside at the extreme ends of the socioeconomic continuum – the upper and the lower class – but at the extremes of engagement in what one might call "popular culture." The lower class is excluded from engagement in popular culture, and the true upper class excludes itself. The standard language market is located in upper middle class institutions, while the vernacular market is located in vital and residence-based working class communities. The socioeconomic in-betweens are the people, by and large, who fall into

the lower middle class, and the lower middle class emerges on the one hand as a middle place in a sociolinguistic continuum from working to upper middle class, and on the other hand as pulled between two linguistic markets. Trudgill's data (1974) show a considerable divide between the speech of the upper working class and the lower middle class. This is particularly evidenced in Labov's discovery (1966) of a lower middle class crossover in New York City sound changes in progress. This crossover is quite complete: the careful speech of the aggregated lower middle class is more standard than that of the next higher group, the upper middle class, and more vernacular than that of the next lower group, the working class. Stated more dramatically, for the three variables representing change in progress in New York City, (eh), (oh), and (r), the entire stylistic range of the lower middle class spans almost the entire local range of variability (Labov 1972b: 125–9).

There is an interpretation of this pattern that suggests that the lower middle class constitutes the buffer between the opposed linguistic markets, demonstrating a tension between participation in the standard and the vernacular markets. In one sense, the lower middle class is a residual category in schemes of socioeconomic stratification, which has led Milroy and Milroy (1992) to explore life modes as an alternative to the hierarchical and continuous model of social organization. At best, by stratificational schemes, the lower middle class is extremely heterogeneous in comparison with the working class on the one hand and the upper middle class on the other, certainly in relation to the linguistic market. Labov's description (1966: 142) of the occupational class strata is as follows:

Upper class	First rate professional, manager, official, or proprietor of a large business
Upper middle class	Careermen in professions, managerial, official, or large business positions
Lower middle class	Semi-professionals, petty businessmen, white collar, foremen, and craftsmen
Working class	Operatives: blue collar workers at the mercy of the labor market
Lower class	Laborers: last to be hired and first to be fired. Frequent job shifts

Professionals, managers, etc., are pretty uniformly engaged in the standard language market. Many of these are people whose job qualifications are not simply their knowledge and skills, but their demeanor – their persona – their

ability to convey a sense of stability and status. Blue collar workers, on the other hand, are hired for their knowledge and skills (although their knowledge is frequently downplayed), and their general demeanor (within reasonable limits) is not part of their job qualification. On the contrary, a blue collar worker's ability to convey an image of physical engagement is more important, as well as an image of engagement in the local marketplace and an ability to command resources in that marketplace. But the employment categories listed as lower middle class are much more diverse. Petty businesspeople cater to a clientele – and that clientele may be a working class neighborhood, a lower middle class neighborhood, an upper middle class neighborhood, or a larger business. People in service businesses, such as plumbing, building, auto mechanics, can have very different relations to the linguistic market as well. Contractors are valued both for their ability to appear intelligent and trustworthy to their clients, and for their ability (as well as the client's perception of that ability) to work local resources. Clerical workers can do clerical work in a factory, a plumbing firm, a bank, or a law office (Sankoff et al. 1989). They can be in a back room processing claims, filing, or entering data – or in the front office serving as a crucial interface with the public. Another source of diversity is the relation between home and work. Traditionally, the ranks of the lower middle class are filled with upwardly mobile people with working class backgrounds. This means not only that many will be coming to their adult statuses from a vernacular childhood, but that they may well be coming to work each day from a working class home, whether with parents or with a working class spouse. This range of variation could, then, be a reflection of the linguistic versatility required for the range of communities that many lower middle class people participate in.

The linguistic behavior of the lower middle class no doubt reflects their pivotal position between the working class and the middle class – a position that goes back to the very origins of this class. The lower middle class arose with the growth of capitalism in the nineteenth century (Mayer 1975), when the separation of commerce from manufacturing gave rise to a rapidly expanding clerical class, many of whose members emerged from the working class with the help of free education. In commerce, a rapidly expanding class of clerks and sales representatives worked daily with the established middle class, and, more crucially, frequently represented them in the marketplace. Their literate and numerate skills, therefore, were useless without the appropriate dress, demeanor, and speech.

Since the office worker's contact with the upper middle class took place in the limited context of work, and since this undoubtedly did not involve

much conversation off the topic of the business at hand, he (and I use the pronoun advisedly in reference to the nineteenth century) had a real need for information about upper middle class behavior and lifestyles. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, the self-help industry arose, and filling this need for information became a lucrative business. These purveyors packaged information about culture, dress, and language, and marketed it in a range of widely disseminated publications. Ultimately, this developed into a style of its own, much scorned in the nineteenth century for its hypercorrectness, and nowadays emerging in the recent “dress for success” movement that has gotten so many women into business suits and ties.

The lower middle class has always been characterized by insecurity in the marketplace – an insecurity that merges the social and the material. In times of scarcity, the members of the lower middle class have traditionally been the first to lose their jobs, and according to Mayer (1975: 432) their very existence was defined as liminal:

In social terms, the lower middle class is valued for being the shock absorber that helps brake the eruptions of the underlying strata. A buffer between capital and labor, or between landlord and peasant, it also serves as a bridge and mediator between them. Moreover, the petite bourgeoisie is the preeminent channel for social mobility: skilled manual workers can and do move into it from below while from within its bulging ranks it raises its own spiralists to higher rungs on the income and status ladder. This lower middle class also serves as a net that cushions the fall of the skidders and superannuated of both the higher middle class and the *grande bourgeoisie*.

The tenuousness of their position and the importance of acquired symbolic capital to gaining and retaining that position make the clerk class supremely insecure. According to Lockwood (1989: 31), the linguistic hypercorrection of the middle class is as old as the clerical profession, and has been built into the job structure of this profession and others like it:

Because of the actual conditions of their employment, the dress, speech and outward mannerisms of clerical gentlemanliness were often an exaggerated and perverted form of the real thing.

The lower middle class has an ambivalent relation to the working class. Arising from this class, and feeling most acutely the difference between manual labor and desk work, the lower middle class is put in the position of rejecting its roots. As history shows, this is an extremely precarious posi-

tion, for the vagaries of the economy may at any time throw members of the lower middle class back where they came from. Sandwiched between denial and promise, the lower middle class is outward-directed, based on an ambivalent and tenuous relationship with those above and with those below. The two surrounding classes, on the other hand, experience no such ambivalence, as their relation to the economy is unambiguous.

The lower middle class shares its liminality with two other large societal groups: adolescents and females. The lower middle class, like the adolescent age group, has been ridiculed virtually since its inception – and in fact, the adolescent life stage and the lower middle class arose in about the same historical period. Women have been around longer. But all three groups are ridiculed at least in part because of their flamboyant symbolization. It is not insignificant that the early sociological work on class stratification, upon which Labov bases his 1966 analysis, viewed the labor force as male, and that their class descriptions are based on the kinds of jobs that men occupy. The workplace has carved a place for women, particularly in the lower middle class, that maintains their traditional marginalization in relation to the economy. Teller jobs nowadays, like secretarial jobs, are serving as entry-level jobs for women into banking and business; there are other paths for men. And in many of the jobs that women fill – particularly secretarial jobs – there is no set public description. This maintains secretaries in an undefined position, leaving room for women to be expected to perform the roles of general go-fer, or office wife. At the same time, it prevents their experience on the job from proving qualification for other jobs. This means that women's careers do not have the kinds of trajectories implied in male-based studies of work, and it also means that the individual woman's relation to linguistic marketplaces cannot be ascertained by her job title.

Comparisons have been drawn between the speech of the lower middle class and that of women (e.g. Labov, *in press*). Women, like the lower middle class, show a particularly wide stylistic range; and like the lower middle class, women are the common leaders in sound change. There is little question that at least part of the explanation is the fact that women share the liminality of the lower middle class. Trudgill (1972) has speculated that because women have not traditionally been able to achieve mobility on the basis of their work in the job market, they have had to rely on the development of symbolic capital. But in the job market as well, women overwhelmingly have had access primarily to jobs as “technicians of language” (Sankoff et al. 1989), or jobs that require the projection of a persona – usually an upper middle class persona, but in any case involving linguistic

self-management. Teaching school has been a traditional means for upward mobility for women. And women's traditional entry-level white collar jobs have been as front people, whether as receptionists, hostesses, switchboard operators, or secretaries – all requiring standard language skills if they are in mainstream workplaces.

But gender dynamics in language do not lie simply in differential employment opportunity. They lie in the very broad-based differences in ranges of possibilities in everyday life. These differences are fundamental in society – at least as fundamental as class if not more. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that gender is at least as important a social constraint on variation as class. But class and gender differences are quite essentially of different orders. Gender differences do not involve the same segregation in familiar situations that class differences do; on the contrary, male and female in our society not only grow up together in the same families, they go to school together, most of them work and/or play together, and they are expected to become selectively intimate with each other. At the same time, they are expected to be globally different from each other – sufficiently different that if men and women think to compare themselves with members of a different socioeconomic class, they will compare themselves with members of their own gender. If they compete with others, it is generally with members of their own gender. Males and females, above all, have radically different possibilities in the world, and when they do have similar possibilities, they are expected to pursue those possibilities differently. Thus if one can expect to find major gender differences in speech, one cannot expect them to be so much in global differences between male and female, as in differences in the qualities that differentiate *within* gender groups (see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992).

#### 1.4 The Speech Community

Sociolinguists use the concept of *speech community* to delimit the social locus of their account of language use. Because sociolinguists' treatment of language focuses on its heterogeneity, they seek a unit of analysis at a level of social aggregation at which it can be said that the heterogeneity is organized. Labov's treatment (1966) of all of New York City as a single speech community is based ultimately on a notion of shared social meaning. Labov (1966: 8) viewed the social stratification of variables in New York as consti-



tuting a set of class-based contrasts, whose meanings can only be understood within the context of the full set of contrasts (or at least a range of the full set):

For a working class New Yorker, the social significance of the speech forms that he uses, in so far as they contain the variables in question, is that they are not the forms used by middle class speakers, and not the forms used by upper middle class speakers. The existence of these contrasting units within the system presupposes the acquaintance of the speaker with the habits of other speakers.

This system of contrastive social meaning is more commonly viewed in terms of shared norms (e.g. Labov 1972b: 120–1) as they are reflected in style shifting and subjective evaluation tests, and Labov's focus on norms has attracted criticism (e.g. Romaine 1982) on the grounds that speech communities can involve multiple and competing norms. The issue of norms is a delicate one, because there is a gray area between prescriptive norms and use norms. Strictly speaking, norms define normal behavior. Within the context of variationist sociolinguistics, we might take this to be the speaker's output in his or her most "usual" situations. Since every speaker's normal behavior is situationally determined, one might prefer to think in terms of a range of situated use norms (or what Hymes refers to in a broader sense as norms of interaction). Since use norms are socially stratified, and participation in the speech community involves the recognition of differential use norms and of the social groups they are associated with, one might consider that community norms include norms of "recognition." Finally, participation in a community also tends to involve norms of "interpretation" (Hymes 1972), which assign value to different ways of speaking. For example, a matched guise test that assigns job qualification (Labov 1966) to people on the basis of their speech reflects first and foremost norms of recognition of the relation between speech and social position. However, a matched guise that assigns personal characteristics (e.g. Lambert et al. 1960) to speakers (such as friendliness, trustworthiness, likeability) on the basis of their speech elicits norms of interpretation, focusing test subjects on their personal attitudes towards the people who occupy different social positions. This difference is central to Rickford's (1986) analysis of contrast in the Cane Walk speech community. While the members of the Estate Class and the Non Estate Class are united in their recognition of how people in different kinds of jobs are likely to speak, they are opposed both in their under-

standing of the causal relation between speech and job status, and in the ways of speaking that they evaluate positively. This picture is complicated by the fact that in a stratified society, the conflict of opposing loyalties does not rule out a common recognition of differential global status. In other words, the consensual and conflict models of social class are not entirely incompatible – upward (economic) mobility and class loyalty frequently go together as well – and the tension between the two may be an important source of complex social meaning.

If the speech community is to be the major explanatory social unit for the interpretation of the social meaning of variation, it must also be the major social unit for the construction of that meaning. The members of a speech community may agree on which particular demographic group or set of groups a speaker is likely to belong to – that is, the speaker's social address. But the meaning of variables lies in speakers' and hearers' relations to, and beliefs about, those groups. Thus norms of recognition point to, but do not constitute, social meaning. The speaker's day-to-day experience, particularly as a child or preadolescent, does not usually provide for the regular comparison of his or her own speech with that of a broad social spectrum. Rather, the speaker builds outward from local experience, gradually contextualizing family and neighborhood speech within a fitfully expanding sample that may include teachers, pediatricians, social workers, merchants, parents' friends, kids from other neighborhoods, etc. And those people may be friendly, cranky, bossy, fun, intellectual, tough, or snooty. Thus, although New York's upper middle class and working class will share the observation that richer and more educated people use more postvocalic /r/, the real associations with /r/ usage will be radically different, depending on their contact with those richer and more educated people, their feelings about being richer and more educated, about acting that way, and about those who are less rich and educated, etc. One might say that each individual has a hypothesis about the significance of r-fulness and r-lessness, and what brings together all the hypotheses in a community is the speakers' ability to coordinate their behavior – to make reliable sense of each other. This sense-making requires face-to-face interaction and a commitment to mutual interpretation. It is this emphasis on mutuality that distinguishes ethnographic approaches to the speech community (Gumperz 1962, Hymes 1972, Milroy 1980). Most particularly, studies of the ethnography of speaking focus on a level of language organization that is based in an intimate level of mutual understanding. Attending to how varieties are actually implemented on a day-to-day basis, these studies seek a unit that can encompass, and in terms of which one can explain, regular face-to-face interaction (Hymes 1974: 51, Blom and Gumperz 1972). Anthropolog-

ical linguists focus more on the community aspect of speech community, not because people get together only to “do” language, but because language is a resource for doing other things.

## 1.5 An Issue of Boundaries

Since the study to be presented here is based in a school, defining the school as a speech community would yield an integrated background against which to make sense of the linguistic dynamics I have observed. The definition of the school as a speech community would seem to justify limiting my population to the school, and explaining the linguistic data in terms of that population. It would embody a claim that the school has a particular status in relation to the organization of language use among its population. On the other hand, I could define Belten’s catchment area as a neighborhood-based speech community, and justify the school as the site of my research on the pure grounds that it offers an age-limited sample of the community at large. Or I could define Neartown as a speech community and justify Belten High as the site of the research on the grounds that Belten’s student population is ethnically and socioeconomically representative of the town at large. But what of the larger suburban, or even urban-Suburban continuum in terms of which Neartown makes sense of itself? The issue of delimitation is as old as the study of dialectology. But meaning is constructed at many levels of social organization. Rickford (1986) has discussed the problem of boundaries and subsumption in the definition of the speech community, pointing out that there are important shared norms (at least of recognition) that link the speakers of Cane Walk to larger communities and ultimately to all of Guyana. The claim that the social unit that defines one’s sociolinguistic sample constitutes a speech community, then, is above all a way of placing the study itself rather than the speakers. The designation *speech community* confers on an aggregate of people the judgment that they constitute a sufficiently mutual sense-making unit that important aspects of linguistic organization are embedded in their social practice. Whether New York City, Cane Walk, or Belten High constitute speech communities depends on whether the structure of those aggregates has explanatory power for the use of language. The definition of a particular speech community is, above all, a way of defining both the limitations and the broader implications of the study, for in carefully articulating what this unit accounts for in the lives of the speakers it delineates, one can also articulate what it does not account

for. It is not enough to describe a speech community as an isolated unit, for no community is isolable; the description of a speech community is most importantly an account of that community's linguistic place in the wider society. An account of a speech community, then, will optimally account for the articulation between the internal dynamics of the speech community and its relation to other localities, as exemplified by ethnographic studies such as Gal's (1979) study of language shift in Austria and Blom and Gumperz' (1972) study of code switching in Norway, which are based on accounts of opportunities and networks outside of the local community. Only in this way can we explain both why people within the community speak differently from each other, and how linguistic influence flows in and out of the community.

## 1.6 Communities of Practice

The term *speech community* tends to imply a coalescence of residence and daily activity, but speakers move around both inside and outside the community. Since if we focus on a community as a static unit, we ultimately preclude change, it is essential to view communities as social creations. As Milroy and Milroy have emphasized (1992: 2), quoting Mitchell (1986: 74), "a fundamental postulate of network analyses is that individuals create personal communities that provide them with a meaningful framework for solving the problems of their day-to-day existence." Day-to-day problems change, as do people, and few residential communities in the industrial world circumscribe their members' lives. Thus if dense and multiplex networks enforce conformity to the vernacular, as shown by Milroy (1980), they do so by consolidating symbolic resources, making the same resources appropriate in multiple settings. But networks are only more or less dense or multiplex, and "leakage" is no doubt crucial to the formation of the vernacular. For while people may concentrate their social and linguistic activity, they also get around, engaging in a variety of endeavors and in a variety of communities.

To the extent that linguistic influence is associated with the making of social meaning, it is to be found in groupings of people who are mutually engaged in the construction of new meaning. The co-construction of linguistic change and social meaning will take place in just those interactions in which social identity is at issue – in which speakers are constructing new nuances of meaning; not simply reconfirming the old. Meaning is made as

people jointly construct relations through the development of a mutual view of, and relation to, the communities and people around them. This meaning-making takes place in myriad contacts and associations both within and beyond dense networks. To capture the process of meaning-making, we need to focus on a level of social organization at which individual and group identities are being co-constructed, and in which we can observe the emergence of symbolic processes that tie individuals to groups, and groups to the social context in which they gain meaning.

Lave and Wenger's construct *community of practice* (Lave and Wenger 1991 and Wenger 1998) is just such a level of social organization. A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around some enterprise. United by this common enterprise, people come to develop and share ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values – in short, practices – as a function of their joint engagement in activity. Simultaneously, social relations form around the activities and activities form around relationships. Particular kinds of knowledge, expertise, and forms of participation become part of individuals' identities and places in the community. It is not the assemblage or the purpose that defines the community of practice; rather, a community of practice is simultaneously defined by its membership and the shared practice in which that membership engages. The value of the construct *community of practice* is in the focus it affords on the mutually constitutive nature of individual, group, activity, and meaning.

In many cases it is easy to identify the common endeavor that assembles a community of practice: a garage band, a day care cooperative, a research group, a kindergarten class. That endeavor develops a life of its own as local practices develop around it, transforming the enterprise, the activity, and knowledge. The practices that emerge as a rock 'n roll band works together include such things as the choice of songs the band plays, the kind of music, a view of its place in the wider landscape of music, an attitude towards other kinds of music, the band's "sound" and the contribution of each instrument to that sound, ways of dressing, ways of getting and choosing gigs, ways of performing and behaving on gigs, ways of developing new songs and rehearsing, ways of behaving and talking in encounters with band members and when representing the band. This practice is one that develops – it grows out of the band's mutual engagement in being *that particular* band. The individual musicians, through their particular forms of participation, simultaneously construct identities of participation in that band. At the same time, that process of construction, engaged in jointly by the various members of the band, yields a band – or a

community of practice – with a particular character. The character of that band in turn enters into the individual members' interactions with people outside the band, in the members' personae at work, at home, and at other bands' gigs.

The band itself will be part of other communities of practice, as will its members separately and severally. Each of the members of the band belongs to a variety of communities of practice that don't necessarily have anything to do with music: face-to-face communities such as families, churches, condo associations, crack houses, PTAs. These communities of practice may be more or less overlapping, more or less interacting, more or less consonant. In some cases, the practices may conflict seriously, leaving the individual with the problem of arriving at some resolution – whether it involves emphasizing conflict or minimizing it. The handling of this affects the individual's place in each community of practice, and thereby affects each community of practice. The forms that individuals' participation takes in various communities of practice may be quite different – in some cases they may participate quite marginally while they may be central to others; and while they may be disengaged in some, their participation in others may be a central part of their life. The individual's identity emerges in the process of articulation and resolution of participation in all of these communities of practice, and each community of practice's identity emerges through its participants' joint engagement in this process.

When describing social networks, analysts specify particular kinds of ties: ties that frequently represent co-participation in a community of practice. A multiplex network cluster is a cluster whose members' communities of practice overlap significantly. Linguistic homogeneity within these clusters, then, is a function of continual mutual engagement in practice. An important part of community practice, and particularly important to the study of variation, is meaning-making. An illustration of this process occurred during a group interview that Sue Uhland and I did in a northern California community in 1985 with seven high school students who constituted a self-conscious community of practice. They had defined themselves as a "subculture," based on a style, set of values, and a currently popular music genre called "dirge." They quite consciously distinguished themselves from the predominant social categories in the high school – preppies and stoners, the local equivalents of jocks and burnouts – and they particularly abhorred what they saw as the snobbishness and class-consciousness of many kids in their affluent high school. And although dirge music and style were related to punk and new wave, these kids distinguished themselves carefully from those two styles. As we sat around the table in a coffee house near the high

school, they described their style, its origins, and the values that underlay it. Among these values were a commitment to egalitarianism, fighting racism and elitism, and openness to new ideas. At one point, a girl whom I shall call Jane showed me a picture of her sister that she kept in her wallet. Hanging from the wallet was a short chain with a skull, and another skull was drawn on the leather of the wallet. I commented on the skull, and it became clear that the skull was a key symbol as the entire group showed me their other skulls, worn on the person in the form of rings, pins, tattoos, etc. So I asked, "What does it mean?" Jane said, "Death." The others nodded their heads gravely in assent. After a pause, though, a boy whom I will call Charles looked confused and said, "But I thought it meant 'pirates.'"

There ensued a discussion of the relation between death and pirates in their symbolic practice. The group concluded that of course they weren't really embracing death, after all they were fairly happy kids. But talking about and focusing on death was a particular form of resistance for white middle class teenagers, not unlike the resistance that pirates represented for them. In other words, in focusing on death, they were setting themselves aside from the norms for white middle class adolescents in just the way pirates set themselves aside from the norms of law-abiding society. A pretty sophisticated discussion, and a sophisticated conclusion that on the one hand allowed Charles's belief to be included and on the other renegotiated the meaning of the skull. Symbols don't always get negotiated so overtly, but this was a rare opportunity to see the workings of the social construction of meaning.

The way in which the initial difference in belief was resolved was specific to the social practice of that particular small community – and was an explicit exercise of the norms of egalitarianism and mutual respect that inform that practice. Other things could have happened. Charles could have been declared wrong, or he could have been declared right and Jane wrong. And while one might claim that the outcome would be determined on the basis of the objective merits of each idea, such a claim would be naive at best, and naive not only in considering a group of kids negotiating something as fluid as a group symbol, but naive as well in considering scientific discourse (Traweek 1988). If the social relations in this community of practice had been hierarchical, it is likely that the resolution of the disagreement would have been otherwise – that the participants' relative "meaning-making" rights would have driven the process of negotiation. It is apparent that the effort to resolve the differing views was in the interests of maintaining the community – not just keeping the community together, but

maintaining a particular set of relations and rights of participation in the community.

The quite abstract process of constructing meaning in variation may seem quite distinct from the negotiation of the meaning of a skull and crossbones. However, the conscious, overt negotiation of meaning can be suggestive of the mechanisms at work in variation which is, arguably, constructed more on the fly and less subject to conscious manipulation. The fact that variables are tiny elements that occur over and over in the stream of speech, and that speakers do not have the time to monitor each occurrence of a variable, does not mean that there is no such control. Rather, there may be situations and events in which variation is foregrounded, and in which new elements of variable style take root. But furthermore, it is clear that certain people have greater rights for making meaning with variation: certain speakers appear to be trendsetters.

It is possible for an outsider to enter a community of practice and immediately assume significant meaning-making rights; and it is possible for an outsider to enter a community of practice with very lowly rights. This will depend on the community's assessment of that individual's potential, which to a great extent may derive from an assessment of the individual's participation in other communities of practice. Just such a dynamic was observed in Tway's study (1975) of lexical change in a porcelain factory, where individuals bringing their reputations to new units were in a position to bring new names for old things as well. A kid who hangs out with "cool" people is likely to be viewed as a reliable source of stylistic information. Kids will pick up new forms from others not simply on the basis of their status, but on the basis of their assessment of that person's meaningful connection to statusful communities of practice. Kids moving into secondary school who already know older kids there experience a rise in status among their peers, to the extent that these contacts provide valued knowledge and access in that setting. A newcomer from Detroit will have status among burnouts to a great extent in virtue of his or her connection to, and knowledge of, the urban center. As elements of style move across boundaries, it is within communities of practice that people make sense of them. It is within the community of practice that speakers are evaluated, that their differences are given meaning; it is from the perspective of the community of practice that the world takes form and that others are placed within it. Relatively close ties, therefore, can be an important source of meaning. Milroy and Milroy (1985) focus on weak ties as a source of linguistic innovation across community boundaries, and repeated casual contact in public settings are certainly an important point of contact among local groups. I would claim that



the linguistic influence in such contacts, however, depends on the perceived identity of the speakers, hence of the social significance of their speech features – a perception which is in turn mediated by the hearer’s closer contacts.

For the kids in the small Dirge community of practice, the mutual construction of identity, and the reification of aspects of mutual practice in symbols like the skull and crossbones, second-hand clothing, and spiked hair, was a centrally important enterprise at the time. They had to articulate their engagement in that peer community with their simultaneous engagement in other communities of practice such as their families and their classes in school. Dirge was no doubt not equally important to them all, nor were the friendships within the group. Closely connected to their face-to-face engagement in their local community of practice was their alignment with other fans of dirge music and with their complex relation to local fans of related punk and new wave music. Thus the construction of identity and the symbolic activity within this group tied them to each other in relation to larger structures and ideologies. The Dirge group came together no doubt through a complex set of circumstances, part of which involved a mutual response to the dominant values in the school. Ultimately, the formation of this group was a mutual response to the situation they found themselves in, a way of dealing with their lives at that time. And the extent to which they engaged in the construction of joint symbols was a function of the importance of participation to them at that time.

Viewing speakers in terms of the communities of practice that they participate in recognizes the fluidity and complexity of identity and social participation, pulling us away from a tendency to “pigeon-hole” speakers. At the same time, communities of practice don’t form freely and randomly in social space. The kinds of situations that people find themselves in, their needs, the kinds of responses they tend to have to these situations and needs, and the kinds of people and resources available to engage in these responses with, will vary depending on where they live in society. And it is the collection of types of communities of practice at different places in society that ultimately constitutes the assemblage of practice that is viewed as class culture, ethnic culture, gender practice, etc.

Thus while every individual participates in multiple communities of practice, there is nothing random about this multiplicity. People’s access and exposure to, need for, and interest in different communities of practice are related to where they find themselves in the world, as embodied in such things as class, age, ethnicity, and gender. In general, working class people are more likely than middle class people to be members of unions, bowling

teams, and close-knit neighborhoods. Middle class people, in turn, are more likely to be members of tennis clubs, orchestras, professional organizations. Men are more likely than women to be members of the Lions Club, football teams, armies, and boards of directors, while women are more likely to be members of secretarial pools, aerobics classes, the League of Women Voters. And, as will become clear in chapter 6, it is not surprising that in the high school, middle class kids are more likely to be jocks, while working class kids are more likely to be burnouts.

The relation between participation in communities of practice and social categories is also manifest in differential forms of participation within the same communities of practice. In communities of practice that involve both women and men, both working class and middle class people, and people of different ethnicities, these groups may tend to have different forms of participation, different meaning-making rights, different degrees of centrality. There will also be differences in the way in which people articulate their multiple memberships. A male executive is more likely to find more opportunities to discuss his leisure activities at work than a female executive, and executives will gain greater professional points by displaying family pictures prominently in their work spaces than will secretaries or factory workers. Ultimately, categories such as age, class, ethnicity, and gender are produced and reproduced in their differential forms of participation in communities of practice. And these categories are not produced separately, but co-produced. A secretary's inability to be heard in the workplace is simultaneously related to her femaleness and her socioeconomic status. And the common practice of secretaries making and serving coffee in the workplace is a clear carry-over of forms of participation from another community of practice – the family, and perhaps a reminder that much of the world continues to consider the family to be her primary and legitimate community of practice.

Analysis in terms of communities of practice is closely related to network analyses. Labov's Cobras and Jets (1972a) constitute tight communities of practice, and Cheshire's kids in the park (1982) may constitute a loosely articulated community of practice. And in fact, both studies emphasize common practice in explaining linguistic behavior. The community of practice is also inherent in Milroy and Milroy's adaptation (1992) of Højrup's life-mode analysis in the construction of a model that encompasses class and social network. I introduce the concept *community of practice* not because I believe that it will replace current constructs so much as because it focuses on the day-to-day social membership and mobility of the individual, and on the co-construction of individual and community identity. In this way, it

ties social meaning to the grounded social aggregate at the same time that it ties the grounded aggregate to abstract social structures.

## 1.7 Variation, Style and the Making of Social Meaning

As the following chapters will show, the jocks and the burnouts constitute communities of practice that have emerged within, and in response to, the school's institutional structure. The two communities of practice represent the extremes of orientation to the school, hence the extremes of local social possibility, and differences in foregrounded practices are rich with social meaning. Intensely engaged in affirming their places in the world, and in maintaining their mutual opposition, the jocks and the burnouts construct and continually refine styles that both distinguish them from each other and relate them to other communities of practice whether in school or out. In turn, these highlighted extreme styles serve as touchstones for the rest of the school population, which together constitutes a vast and diverse social and stylistic landscape.

Style is at the same time an individual and communal endeavor. It is a tangible means of negotiating one's meaning in the world. And it relies on, and contributes to, the styles and meanings of groups and categories in the world. The burned-out burnout style of Judy and her friends has meaning in relation to other major styles in the school: jock style, punk style, teacher style, etc.; and in relation to the common burnout style. At the same time, elements of their style, such as their fringed rawhide boots, point away from school altogether and towards a "country" milieu. Judy's own personal style is also her individual production, as she negotiates her own place in her group and in relation to others outside the group. This stylistic orientation is not simply to groups or categories, but to specific embodiments – whether in individuals, groups, or abstractions – of such things as Detroit, danger, trouble, friendship, family, school. Stylistic production is, in other words, the terrain for the negotiation of social meaning, and identity.

I view identity as one's "meaning in the world." A person's place in relation to other people, a person's perspective on the rest of the world, a person's understanding of his or her value to others – all of these are integral to the individual's experience of the self, and are constructed in collaboration with others as those others engage in the same construction for themselves. The individual's engagement in the world is a constant process of identity construction – one might most profitably think of identity as a

process of engagement (and disengagement) – and the study of meaning in sociolinguistic variation is a study of the relation between variation and identity. While the ethnographer does not have access to identity, we do have access to some of the practices that people attend to in working out their meaning in the community. Individual identity is not constructed in a vacuum; it is co-constructed with group identities.

The process of making meaning in the world, then, can be seen in the meanings being constructed in and around communities of practice. In the course of joint engagement, activity is structured and made meaningful through the continual joint recognition of salience. As they facilitate community activity, abstractions, material artifacts, symbols, repeated actions, verbalizations, specialized lexical items, and so on become part of the joint way of doing things. They mark, or reify (Wenger, 1998), the special nature of community activity. Tied as they are to community practice, they can serve simultaneously as symbols of community membership and as a basis for the further building of joint meaning and activity. These reifications are constructed in the course of activity within a community, to serve the purposes of that community – to allow members to do the work of the community. Communities of all kinds (including scientific ones) develop, change, and perhaps even progress through the sharing, manipulation, working, and reworking of reifications. These reifications are not usually built of new material, but are an elevation of some aspect of the everyday. Styles, and components of styles, are just such reifications. And so are social categories.

The jock–burnout opposition elevates aspects of school orientation to hegemonic status, separating the world into school-oriented and school-alienated people. This opposition overwhelmingly overshadows differences in other realms – there are no school-wide categorizations that divide people on the basis of such things as artistic interest, food preferences, or religiosity. While a number of burnouts are interested in music and the visual arts, the relation forged in the school between artistic activity and school orientation precludes the development of an “artistic set” that would include burnouts. It is not an accident that those who are most active in the school’s prestigious choir are commonly called “choir jocks.”

Individual identity is constructed in relation to the meanings that are being constructed in the world – in relation to categorizations such as jocks and burnouts, whether it’s in affinity to one or the other, in fighting association with either, or in turning away to incorporate artistic interest, food preferences, or religion. Social meaning and identity have to do with people’s forms of engagement in communities of practice and in the world

at large. It has to do with engagement in the day-to-day social practice that makes communities what they are and that articulates those communities with others and ultimately with what we call society. The individual's identity is carved through his or her forms of participation in the group, and the group's identity is carved through the interplay of the individual forms of participation that constitute its life. And both individual and group identities are in continual construction, continual change, continual refinement.

People call upon symbolic material of all kinds to mark their progress in this joint process of construction. The negotiation of the meaning of these symbols becomes overt only when aspects of meaning become reified – when they become touchstones, or landmarks, in the process of construction. At that point, speakers can point to social meaning – they can identify others as jocks or burnouts, as elite or working class, educated or not, prissy or tough. Our understanding of sociolinguistic variation is full of such touchstones – invariant *be*, negative concord, reduction of *-ing* all have quite well-defined significance within a widely defined speech community. Others, on the other hand, do not become overtly meaningful, but remain fluid – a resource for working out subtle aspects of human relations and identity. It is not always a matter of associating a linguistic form with an existing meaning, but to craft subtly new meaning through the innovative use of linguistic form. In this way, the construction of social meaning and the construction of language are one and the same. Variation does not simply reflect a ready-made social meaning; it is part of the means by which that meaning emerges. A study of social meaning in variation, then, cannot view speakers as incidental users of a linguistic system, but must view them as agents in the continual construction and reproduction of that system. Social meaning in variation is not a static set of associations between internal linguistic variables and external social variables; it is continually created through the joint linguistic and social engagement of speakers as they navigate their ways through life.

The view of variation that I present here is not new; rather, it hangs suspended in our intellectual practice. The first modern quantitative study of variation, Labov's study of Martha's Vineyard (first published in 1963), correlated linguistic variants with a variety of categorizations that quite explicitly represented different orientations and forms of engagement in the community. These orientations and forms of engagement were not static, but embodied an increasing concern for self-determination with respect to the mainland. Labov's analysis of the reversal of the lowering of the nucleus in (ay) clearly showed the inextricable link between local social change and

local linguistic change. The many studies of variation that followed the Martha's Vineyard study have recognized social categories as stand-ins for social practice, and have appealed to practice to explain large-scale correlations. One could say that the study of variation is implicitly a study of social practice, but it is built on a theory of structure. Since structure and not practice has been the primary object of study, data on variation do not include robust accounts of practice. Thus when practice is frequently invoked as explanation, for instance to account for the lower middle class crossover (Labov 1966) or for gender differences (Trudgill 1974) found in survey studies, the explanation is not based on an examination of practice in that community, but on general accounts of class-related or gender-related practice. Furthermore, since the theory is based primarily on structure, there is no obvious place to put practice other than as an epiphenomenon on the structure. My aim in this discussion is to make explicit what has been implicit in much of the work on variation, in an attempt to resolve some problematic issues in the relation between social and linguistic theory. Above all, it is an attempt to incorporate a broader view of change into the account of variation, treating language as a process that is actually inseparable from social process. This requires a different view of the social locus of linguistic organization. Current treatments of variation stretch out time, emphasizing the continual minute process of change in everyday language use. But by not focusing simultaneously on the minute process of social change in everyday life, it essentially divorces language from society. To the extent that we study variation for an *in vivo* observation of the internal processes of linguistic change, the details of the social embedding of variation can be backgrounded. The moment we focus, however, on the social meaning of variation, and on the social organization of the spread of change, we need to take seriously the co-construction of language and society.

This leads to an essential change in the view of the speaker, following Milroy (1980), who has emphasized the importance of the individual speaker in the study of variation. The tradition in the study of variation has been to reject the individual as a unit of analysis, seeking significance in groups of speakers judged to be similar according to selected criteria. The individual is thus valued as a representative of a group or category. That group or category is at the same time elevated as the carrier of social meaning, reducing the speaker to a performer of group norms, what Giddens (1979) colorfully terms a "cultural dope." With a speaker whose primary motivation is appropriateness, social meaning in variation is purely indexical of, and derived from correlation with, social address. Speakers'

agency is limited to making false or wishful claims about their address, or perhaps to expressing solidarity with or distance from their interlocutors' addresses (e.g. Bell 1984). What remains beyond the speaker's reach is the actual relation between social address and variable. Yet the meanings of variables do change, and meanings of the kind that Labov found in Martha's Vineyard are far more complex and more timely than indices of social address. And it is this timeliness that is at the center of the making of meaning – the view of speakers as moving through life, making a place for themselves, sometimes accommodating, sometimes struggling, changing things, keeping things the same.

The view of the speaker as cultural dope requires not only that the speaker not be an agent, and that the meaning of variables have a timeless quality, but also that the central dynamic of speech and communication be sameness. The emphasis on the social as exclusively communal in the study of variation has encouraged variationists to reject the individual as a unit of analysis, precluding any realistically situated subject. A theory of practice will focus on how the positioning of the subject in society produces – and is reproduced by – linguistic practice. The validity of the study of the individual subject will be in the rethinking of the relation between the individual and the community, and of the relation between structure and practice.

It is impossible for a social theory of language to view *langue* as a pre-existing convention, for a social theory of language must be about the process of conventionalization. By the same token, it is impossible for a social theory of language to view the individual speaker's competence as a simple internalization of convention. Convention and individual competences are mutually produced and reproduced in practice, thus linguistic practice is not simply the consensual use of a common system. Convention is not a thing but a process, and the possibility of convention resides in speakers' ability to hypothesize about others' behavior and to take interpretable action, along with a commitment to doing so within a particular social unit. Our speaker, or speaking subject, can not be a clone but must be an agent in a process of convention-making.