# 17 Sex and Gender in Variationist Research

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Sex, together with social class, age, and ethnicity, is one of the most widely used social demographic categories, and so categorizing individuals into "females" and "males" has long been standard practice in the social sciences. In most variationist research carried out during the 1960s and 1970s the demographic categories were taken for granted, as they were in the social sciences generally. All these categories are now recognized as more complex than their labels would suggest, and as more complex than many sociolinguistic analyses give them credit for (Eckert 1989: 265). None, however, has become so highly charged, politicized, and problematized as sex.

To a large extent this reflects the impact of feminism and feminist theory in virtually all the humanities and social science disciplines. Research on language and gender has tended to follow the general development of feminist thought, moving from an essentialist paradigm where speakers were categorized in terms of their biological sex through a period where the significance of the cultural concept of gender was recognized, together with social psychological dimensions, to a more dynamic social constructionist approach (Holmes 1997: 195–6). In variationist research, ideas about sex and gender have also tended to follow this development, although what could be termed a modified essentialist approach remains dominant in much work. Indeed, for some researchers the only concession to the general heightened awareness of the complexity of the concept has been a simple change in terminology, so that what was once referred to as "sex" is now termed "gender."

The term "sex" has often been used to refer to the physiological distinction between females and males, with "gender" referring to the social and cultural elaboration of the sex difference – a process that restricts our social roles, opportunities, and expectations. Since the process begins at birth, it could be argued that "gender" is the more appropriate term to use for the category than "sex." Both terms are found in the variationist literature, sometimes used in an apparently indiscriminate way, but at other times used to distinguish between biological characteristics and social factors (see, for example, Chambers 1992,

1995). In this chapter I have tried to use "sex" when discussing research that relies on a simplistic classification of speakers into males and females, and "gender" when describing research that takes at least some account of relevant social and cultural factors. Like many writers, however, I have sometimes found myself slipping from one term to the other. It is difficult to keep the two concepts apart, especially when discussing studies that were designed with a gross categorization of individuals by their sex but that are then interpreted in terms of the lifestyles of women and men, or the interaction of sex with other social factors – which means, of course, that the focus has shifted to gender. Current thinking in the humanities accepts, in any case, that the dichotomy between sex and gender cannot be maintained, seeing the body and biological processes as part of cultural histories.

Both sex and gender have been treated as binary categories in sociolinguistic research. Gender differences need not map directly onto the physiological sex differences (see Milroy et al. 1994: 334), but in practice our social lives are organized around the physiological dichotomy to such an extent that a cultural connection has been forged between sex and virtually every other aspect of human experience (Bem 1993: 2). In fact it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise, given the importance of the binary physiological distinction for the procreation of human life. Yet neither sex nor gender are "naturally" binary. Bing and Bergvall (1996: 8–11) describe how in most cultures medical intervention polices the boundaries, to ensure that newborn babies fit neatly into the "female" or "male" physiological categories. They also draw attention to cultures where more than two gender groups, or an ambiguous gender group, are given explicit social recognition.

A current tendency in feminist research is to look for ways to move beyond theorizing in terms of two separate categories. At a time of social change, when the conventional gender roles are being challenged in many western societies, it no longer seems appropriate to work with polarized categories of either "sex" or "gender." As Bergvall and Bing point out (1996: 18): "it would be ironic if feminists interested in language and gender inadvertently reinforced gender polarization and the myths of essential female–male difference." On the other hand, since the binary distinction appears to be a fundamental organizing principle in all societies, we can expect this to guide our evaluations of our own and other's speech and, therefore, to constrain patterns of social and stylistic variation. (Bell's model of the derivation of style from inter-speaker variation can apply to inter-speaker variation in terms of sex just as well as to inter-speaker variation in terms of social class.) This seems a valid argument for continuing to analyze the speech of males on the one hand and females on the other hand. Milroy and Milroy (1997: 53) point out that speaker sex is intended to be a methodological, exploratory variable: in other words, it is a purposely broad, unrefined social variable that can be easily taken into account at the data-collection stage of research. If all researchers categorize speakers in the same, albeit simplistic way, we can ensure replicability and can draw useful comparisons between studies carried out in a range of

communities. Most researchers seem to agree that this methodological procedure will not lead to an explanation of the relation between gender and language variation, and that for this we need to investigate the everyday language use of individual women and men in the local communities where the social construction of gender and other identities takes place. Bergvall (1999) adds that we must also look at forces larger than local communities: at the broadly held social and cultural values, invoked and reified in the national and international media (1999: 289). It is against this backdrop of social stereotypes that any performance of gender is constructed, accommodated to, or resisted (1999: 282). As with any research question, the fullest understanding will come from a combination of methods and approaches.

In this chapter, I will first discuss work that has used "female" and "male" as unanalysed speaker variables. I will then briefly discuss some small-scale investigations that have focused on the way that language and gender interact in specific communities. Finally I will briefly mention the role of sex and gender in the quantitative analysis of pragmatic and syntactic features. This format is intended to give a broad overview of the different ways that researchers have approached the question of sex and gender in the study of language variation and change, and of the advances that have been achieved in our understanding of both sex and gender, and language variation and change.

## 1 Variation with Speaker Sex

There are a few reports in the research literature of the exclusive use of one phonological variant by women and another by men, for example, Jabeur (1987), Keddad (1989), Mansfield and Trudgill (1994), but it is far more frequent to find sex-preferential variation, where women in a community, say, use one variant more frequently than the men. For example, a large number of sociolinguistic surveys carried out in the English-speaking world have shown that for the (ing) variable (in words such as *running* or *laughing*) men use a higher proportion of the alveolar /n/ variant than women in their social class and, conversely, women use a higher proportion of the velar plosive. It is usual for researchers to see one of the variants as "standard" or overtly prestigious, usually on the grounds that this variant is used with an increased frequency in more formal speech styles. Within this perspective, Labov (1990: 205) finds that the clearest and most consistent results of more than 30 years of sociolinguistic research in the speech community concern the linguistic differentiation of women and men. He summarizes these results in the principles below (1990: 210, 213, 215):

> **Principle I** In stable sociolinguistic stratification, men use a higher frequency of nonstandard forms than women.

**Principle Ia** In change from above, women favour the incoming prestige forms more than men.

**Principle II** In change from below, women are most often the innovators.

Dubois and Horvath (1999) point out that Principle I and its corollary, Principle Ia, concern language spread, whereas Principle II concerns innovation – a change that begins within a speech community. In most cases, they maintain, Principles I and Ia represent the tug-of-war between standard and nonstandard variants: "Principle I is like a lull in the tug-of-war game; for some reason the process has halted. Principle Ia captures the game becoming active once again" (Labov 1999: 309). It is Principles Ia and II that directly relate to language change, then, whereas Principle I represents a more stable state of affairs, albeit possibly a temporary one.

## 2 Stable Sociolinguistic Variables

The finding that women tend to use a higher proportion of the standard variants than men in the same social class (Labov's Principle I) has been of very wide general interest, so much so that it is presented in some textbooks as a fundamental tenet of sociolinguistics. Fasold (1990: 92), for example, refers to this as "the sociolinguistic gender pattern," and Chambers (1995) as "a sociolinguistic verity."

A wide range of explanations have been offered for this distributional pattern, most of which have some element of plausibility. They all, however, necessarily involve a move beyond using speaker sex as a simple exploratory variable, to thinking about the social and cultural behavior of women and men: in other words, to shifting from thinking in terms of speaker sex to thinking about gender. Eckert (1989: 265) has argued strongly that most variationist analyses have fallen short in confusing social meaning with the analyst's demographic abstractions. Further, most writers have offered a single explanation for what must surely be a multifaceted, complex phenomenon (Eckert 1989, James 1996, Cheshire and Gardner-Chloros 1998). For example, Fasold (1990) suggests that women use a higher proportion of standard variants than men because this allows them to sound less local and to have a voice, therefore, with which to protest against the traditional norms that place them in an inferior social position to men. Gordon (1997) presents experimental evidence for a symbolic association between local accents, nonstandard syntax and promiscuity, arguing that middle-class women may avoid using nonstandard forms in order to avoid being associated with this social stereotype. Deuchar (1988) develops an interpretation based on politeness theory, in which women's higher use of standard forms can be seen as a strategy for maintaining face in interactions where women are powerless. Trudgill's (1972) explanation has been very influential: based on evidence from subjective evaluation tests, he argues that women have to acquire social status vicariously, whereas men can acquire it

through their occupational status and earning power. Women are more likely, therefore, to secure and signal their social status through their use of the standard, overtly prestigious variants. The higher proportion of nonstandard variants used by men can then be explained as an orientation not to the overt norms of the community but to the covert prestige of working-class forms, which symbolize the roughness and toughness that is associated both with working-class life and with masculinity.

These are just a few selections from the wide range of interpretations that have been proposed. These, and other suggestions, are discussed and critically assessed by James (1996), Cheshire and Gardner-Chloros (1998) and Romaine (1999). Clearly, the fact that so many different factors can be convincingly argued for indicates that no single interpretation can be possible. James' (1996) review concludes that there is far too much variation across and within different communities for any simple analysis to be viable. As she says, local economic conditions, the employment and educational opportunities available to each sex, social conditions affecting network strengths, the amount of status and respect accorded to women in particular communities and the extent to which they can participate in public life are just some of the factors that may account for the choices that women and men make in the speech forms that they use (1996: 119). The main relevant underlying sociological factor seems to be the relative access to power of women and men (James 1996: 119, Eckert 1989: 256); as James points out, however, the fact that women appear to be universally granted less power than men will certainly not cause all women and men to act alike, given all the other factors that are involved.

The empirical basis of the generalization presented as Labov's Principle I can also be challenged. The generalization is tightly bound to Labov's early definition of the speech community, which in turn depends on a stratificational model of social class. The model is implicit in early work (Milroy 1987), but is explicit in Labov's later writings and is typical of most quantitative research on language in the community, although the actual indicators used to assign social class may vary from one investigation to another (Labov 1990: 209). The concepts of "standard" and "nonstandard" tend to be taken for granted in social dialectology, with "standard" forms corresponding to those used with the greatest frequency by the highest social class in the hierarchy and, as mentioned earlier, used more frequently by all speakers in their more formal speech styles. These "standard" forms are taken as synonymous with the overtly prestigious forms of the speech community: since all members of the speech community are assumed to share a common set of norms and values, they are also assumed to agree on the social evaluation of the standard, or prestige, variants. Indeed, Labov's original definition of the speech community (Labov 1966) was in terms of participation in a set of shared norms. Although early surveys used subjective evaluation tests to determine the forms carrying overt or covert prestige (for example, Labov 1966, Trudgill 1972), such tests have rarely been performed in subsequent work. This is unfortunate, because it is notoriously difficult for researchers to be objective about concepts of "standard"

and "nonstandard" (see, for discussion, Cheshire and Stein 1997) and the related notion of prestige is not uniform in all communities (Milroy 1991). Furthermore the concepts can have different social meanings not only in different communities but also for different groups within what we might think of as the "same" community, as well as within the lives of different individuals (Cheshire and Gardner-Chloros 1998: 28–9).

The criteria used to assign women to the different social classes on the hierarchy have also been challenged (see, for example, Cameron and Coates 1989, Romaine 1999). Romaine (1999: 174) discusses the problems associated with the "patriarchal concept of social class, where the family is the basic unit of analysis, the man is regarded as the head of the household, and his occupation determines the family's social class." Although in more recent work women are classified in terms of their own occupations, several problems remain, especially when individuals do not have occupations outside the home. It can be argued, in fact, that comparisons drawn between women and men in what the analyst assumes to be the same social class will always be false, since women and men do not have equal status with men either inside the home or outside it (Eckert 1989: 255). The power dimension of the relations between the sexes, therefore, means that we can never compare like with like when we try to compare men and women.

These criticisms suggest that the empirical basis for the "sociolinguistic gender pattern" is questionable, to say the least. It is unfortunate that the generalization seems to be passing into the accepted sociolinguistic wisdom, without explicit recognition of the fact that statements involving class, prestige or "standardness" are less objective than has been supposed. What does appear to be uncontroversial is that there are likely to be gross differences between the linguistic behavior of men in a community on the one hand, and women on the other. Given the social and cultural significance of the male–female dichotomy, these differences are likely to be socially evaluated and to have an important role in the relation between social and stylistic variation, as I said earlier (see, again, Bell 1984) and in the social construction of a range of identities. As it stands, this stark generalization does not tell us much, if anything, about the relation between language and gender in social life: but this is not the aim of research carried out in this framework. Rather, the intention is to make replication possible between one study and another and, in this way, to gain the largest possible understanding of the general nature of the language faculty and of the general nature of language change Labov (1990: 11).

## 3 The Role of Women in the Social Mechanism of Language Change

A stratificational model of social class is also typical of much of the research on language change, as is a reliance on notions of prestige and "standardness."

Discussions of Labov's Principle Ia usually point to women leading both in the acquisition of new prestige forms from outside the speech community, and in the elimination of forms that have become stigmatized (Labov 1990: 213, Dubois and Horvath 1999: 299). In fact, the literature contains few examples of the spread of incoming prestige forms. (One relevant instance is Labov's (1966) account of the adoption of the (r)-pronouncing norm in New York City.) Principle Ia, then, is mainly a corollary of Principle I, describing the social redistribution of variants that have become stigmatized. Thus although Principles Ia and II appear contradictory, portraying women as simultaneously conformist (in preferring more overtly prestigious forms) and progressive (in adopting new forms more quickly), they can be reconciled by considering the way in which sound changes typically spread through the speech community.

For cities in the USA at least, a characteristic development of a sound change that begins from below is a curvilinear pattern, with younger speakers in the "interior" social classes (that is, the lower middle and upper working classes) using the new variants most frequently. In the early stages of a change, sex differentiation is relatively small, but it increases as the change becomes older and more established in the community. At this point sex differentiation interacts with other types of social differentiation relevant to the community. As the new forms become more widespread and speakers become consciously aware of them, sex differentiation becomes more marked, most notably in the speech of the second highest status group. There is some disagreement about whether the increasing sex differentiation is due primarily to the linguistic behavior of men or of women: for example, it could be argued that men take the more active role, recognizing that a given variant has become characteristic of female speech and so refraining from using it. However, Labov insists that the empirical evidence from the Philadelphia survey shows that as a rule women are the active agents, and lower-class women in particular. He concludes that "the interaction of sex and social class leave us no choice but to focus on women's behavior, and to assess its effect on linguistic change" (1990: 240).

This marks a change from the focus in early work in social dialectology, where social class was seen as the primary variable, and speaker sex was treated very much as a side issue. This did not always, in fact, produce the best fit with the data, as Coates (1986) has shown. Coates regraphed data from several classic sociolinguistic surveys, demonstrating that the linguistic variation patterned with the sex of speakers at least as well as, and sometimes better than, their social class. Class was still a determining factor, but women from the working classes and the middle classes behaved more similarly to each other than to men from the same social class as themselves (see also Horvath 1985).

The Milroys have long argued that sex differentiation may be prior to social class differentiation in driving language change (see, for example, Milroy 1992, Milroy and Milroy 1993, 1997, Milroy et al. 1994). In particular they maintain that it is misleading to say that women favor prestige forms: rather, women create the prestige forms in the sense that the forms they use become overtly

prestigious in the community. Persuasive evidence for this comes from Milroy et al.'s (1994) review of a number of investigations into the spread of the glottal stop as a variant of word final and medial /t/ (in words such as *but* and *butter*) in urban British English. T-glottaling has been a socially stigmatized pronunciation, but a number of recent, separate, studies in different parts of the country show that its spread is associated particularly with the speech of middle-class women. In some phonetic environments – notably intervocalically in word final position (as in *not enough*) – the glottal stop is becoming established as characteristic of Received Pronunciation (Milroy et al. 1994: 329). This sociolinguistic pattern, then, goes against Labov's Principle II, because women are leading in the use of what is – or was – a socially stigmatized form. Milroy et al. argue that the geographically widespread glottal variant is a supra-local form, and that if any generalizations are to be made, it is that women are instrumental in the spread of forms of this kind. Male speakers, on the other hand, are associated with more localized patterns of variation and change. This can be seen from the male preference in Tyneside for glottalized variants of (p), (t) and (k), or in Coleraine for a flapped variant of (t).

"Standard" or "prestige" forms are often supra-local forms, so this generalization can include Labov's Principle I. It can also incorporate research findings from cultures where the standard variety and the prestige variety are not identical. In diglossic Arabic-speaking cultures, for example, the high prestige of classical Arabic means that non-classical forms are generally considered "nonstandard." However Haeri (1994) shows that variation in the Arabic spoken in Cairo can be analyzed without recourse to classical Arabic, and that women can then be seen as orienting to a supra-local "standard" Cairene Arabic in the same way that women in urban centers in the West orient to a standard variety. Milroy et al. (1994: 352) conclude that "the partial identity of supra-local and prestige norms in Western industrialized countries may have led us to the wrong generalization."

A generalization in terms of supra-local forms can also cover a difference noted by Labov (1990) between changes led by women, such as the chain shifts occurring in several northern cities in the USA, and the relatively small number of changes that have been found to be led by men, such as the centralization of /ay/ and /aw/ in Martha's Vineyard (Labov 1963) or the rounding of /o/ in Norwich (Trudgill 1974). The changes led by men are linguistically isolated, in that they do not rotate the vowel system, like the chain shifts; but they are also geographically isolated, occurring in one locality only. Chambers (1992) has proposed a generalization along similar lines. He explains the fact that in many studies women have been found to have a wider range of style-shifting than men by noting that the women in these studies frequently have a greater range of social contacts, extending over a wider geographical range. He formulates a "gender-based variability hypothesis" to account for this, and presents this alongside a "sex-based variability hypothesis" which claims that females have a neurological verbal advantage over males (1992: 204).

Woods (1997) adds a further dimension to a generalization in terms of supra-local forms. She notes that women's behavior in face-to-face communication has been shown to be more cooperative and listener-oriented than men's, and that women construct interaction around the objectives of providing support and solidarity. These preferred discourse strategies make them more likely, then, to accommodate to speakers of other dialects and to subsequently introduce new phonological features into their own speech communities.

Formulating generalizations that incorporate the results of an increasing number of empirical investigations is the mark of a mature discipline. Indeed, Kuiper (1998) has argued that it is time to go still further, producing hypotheses that can be put to the test in future studies. The central place given to sex differentiation in these generalizations shows the importance that this social variable has assumed in our attempts to understand the social mechanism of sound change. It is important to recall, however, that no single factor can account for variation in the linguistic behavior of men and women in all communities. This is the case both for stable sociolinguistic variables and for features involved in ongoing language change. Eckert (1989: 206) has made this point strongly, arguing that generalizations about the relation between sound change and gender are best deferred until more communities have been examined in a way that takes account of the sociocultural contexts in which women and men live (though in her 1999 paper with McConnell-Ginet she suggests that work carried out within a Community of Practice perspective – see below – may suggest new generalizations and more adequate explanations; see 1999: 200). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 468) argue for a view of language and gender that sees each as jointly constructed in the everyday social practices of particular local communities: this type of explanation, they say, "will require a significant leap beyond the correlational and class-based modes of explanation used so far" (1992: 469). Others, however, take a more moderate view. Holmes (1998: 106), for example, argues that the fact that there are limits on the applicability of generalizations should not blind us to their immense value: "We should be concerned with refining generalisations, rigorously confining the area to which they apply, but we should not regard them as useless when exceptions are identified".

Their value is perhaps best shown in studies carried out in communities that differ from the large urban centers that have tended to dominate the literature. For example, Cravens and Giannelli (1995) tested Labov's Principles against data from Bibbiena, a small town in central Italy where the socioeconomic differentiation takes a different form from the urban centers of the USA. They find that previous findings from the US concerning gender- and class-based parameters of change are borne out in essence, but only once sufficient detail has been teased out (Cravens and Giannelli 1995: 282). Dubois and Horvath (1999), on the other hand, find the Principles are not confirmed by their analysis of changes in Cajun English in rural areas of Louisiana. This leads them to examine in detail the different sociolinguistic settings in which language change takes place for different generations in the community, as we will see in the following section.

## 4 Variation with Gender

Operationalizing the category of speaker sex in a simple undifferentiated way, then, has allowed quantitative studies to be replicated across a range of communities. It has also allowed increasingly general statements to be formulated about the nature of the sex differentiation that has been observed. Of equal importance, however, are careful, detailed ethnographic studies within specific communities, which can look beyond the conventional social categories of class, sex, age, and ethnic group, and take into account other social categories that may be more meaningful to speakers themselves.

For example, for the young Latino adults that Fought (1999) investigated in a western suburb of Los Angeles, the social category that was most relevant was gang-membership. All the young people she interviewed had been obliged to make a choice at some point about whether or not they would be a gang member (1999: 9). Fought found significant patterns of /u/-fronting which did not fit the curvilinear pattern of social class variation that Labov (1990, 1994) predicts for a change from below. Instead, there was a complex interaction between social class, gender, and gang membership. Social class did not correlate with /u/-fronting for non-gang women, who all showed some degree of fronting. For gang-affiliated women, however, (which included women who had some connection with the gang, even if they did not participate in gang activities) social class was crucial in predicting variation, with the middle-class women fronting most. For men, the social class factor correlated with the degree of /u/-fronting, whether or not they were gang-affiliated; and the effect of gang affiliation overall was stronger for them than it was for women.

Fought explains that /u/-fronting is associated more with the middle classes and with non-gang speakers; conversely, a lack of /u/-fronting is associated with the lower classes and with gang-affiliated speakers. For women, societal pressures to be "good" dovetail well with non-gang status and with the conservative norms of middle-class membership. For men, on the other hand, the societal pressures are to be tough rather than to be good, and these pressures are maximally strong in the Latino community. Gang membership emphasizes exactly these qualities, so it may be more difficult for men to express their dissociation from the gang linguistically, even if they have chosen not to be gang members. The correlation with social class for men reflects the greater association with toughness for working-class males: a point made by Trudgill (1972).

Eckert (1988) also correlated linguistic variation with the social categories that were relevant to the adolescents themselves, rather than using only the conventional social demographic categories. Through long-term participant observation she studied adolescent speech in a high school in suburban Detroit. There were three adolescent categories: Jocks, who were more oriented to the school and school-based activities, Burnouts, who were more oriented to the values perceived as associated with the more exciting life of the city center,

and the self-styled In-betweens. These categories were better predictors of variation in the realization of certain vowels than was the social class to which individual speakers could be assigned on the basis of their parents' socioeconomic characteristics (Eckert 1988).

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) paper has been extremely influential in language and gender research. They argue for a more dynamic view of gender. Instead of seeing gender as something static that speakers "have", that can be analyzed either in isolation from other aspects of social identity, or in interaction with them, it is something that we "do" or "perform" in a complex array of social practices. Following Wenger (1988), they use the concept of a Community of Practice to refer to an "aggregate of people who come together and mutually engage in an endeavour" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464). In the course of this engagement shared ways of doing things, shared values, beliefs, and ways of talking emerge. Eckert (2000) and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1999) see the Jocks and the Burnouts as Communities of Practice, and use the concept to analyze the spread of sound changes from the Burnout group to the Jocks. By looking in detail at the Burnout individuals who used the newer changes most frequently, Eckert was able to observe the early stages of extensions to the ongoing Northern Cities vowel shift. Eckert also showed that sex differentiation did not take the same form for all variables involved in ongoing sound changes: overall, variation correlated better with group membership for girls than for boys, but more so for some variables and in different ways for different variables. This clearly demonstrates that the sex of speakers is not directly related to linguistic behavior, but reflects complex social practice. The fact that the girls were exploiting the variation in the system to display their category identities through language more than the boys were is "the adolescent manifestation of the broader generalization that women, deprived of real power, must claim status through the symbols of social membership" (Eckert 2000: 265). This is reminiscent of the point made by Trudgill (1972) to explain the "sociolinguistic gender pattern", as Eckert points out; in her view, however, Trudgill's argument did not go far enough.

The research of both Eckert and Fought, then, takes up points made by Trudgill (1972) in his suggested explanation for the greater use by women of the prestige forms in the speech community. But the ethnographic methods adopted by Eckert and Fought allow them to investigate different aspects of the complexities of the relation between linguistic variation and gender, and to consider the implications for the spread of the changes in progress. In each case relevant social categories were identified for the speakers which differed between the communities, and which had more significance for some speakers than others; and Eckert was able to operationalize the concept of "performing" gender through social practice, and to relate this to patterns of variation and change.

A number of correlational studies suggest that gender has more relevance for individuals at some stages of their lives than others. Habbick's (1991) analysis of /u/-fronting and other vowel changes in Farmer City, Illinois, shows that

although adolescent social categories (here, Burnouts and Rednecks) correlated better than gender with the frequency of /u/-fronting for younger speakers, gender was a more significant factor for older speakers in the community, for whom the adolescent categories were no longer relevant. Nichols' (1983) analysis of the use of features of Gullah Creole in parts of the southeastern USA showed that older women were the heaviest users of Gullah whereas younger speakers, both male and female, used a higher proportion of standard English variants. Nichols linked this distribution to occupation: younger people tended to work in white collar jobs and service occupations, where they came into contact with speakers of standard English, whereas older women held domestic or agricultural positions. Older men, who also used a relatively high proportion of Gullah forms, tended to work in the construction industry. This time, then, a detailed small-scale study provides a balance to generalizations appealing to geographical mobility and the use of supra-local forms: here it is the younger generation, both female and male, who use the supra-local forms.

Dubois and Horvath (1999) showed how the significance of gender varied across three generations of Cajun individuals. Sociohistorical changes in the community affected the social and economic roles of Cajun men and women at specific historical moments. Thus the mandation of English as the language of education was an important determinant of the linguistic behavior of the older generation; local industrialization affected the language of middle-aged speakers; and the so-called Cajun Renaissance influenced the younger generation. As a result, the interaction of gender and social network varied at different points in historical time, with different effects on linguistic variation for different generations.

Studies such as these make it possible to gain some understanding of the way that gender is constructed in specific communities, and of some of the relevant interactions between gender and other social factors. We can therefore begin to gain a better idea of the role of gender in the social mechanism of language change in these communities. Clearly, however, detailed investigations of this kind cannot be used to draw cross-community comparisons (see Labov 1990). Dubois and Horvath (1999), whilst acknowledging the importance of Eckert's "landmark study" (1989: 289), point out that the disadvantages of an ethnographic approach undermine the original goal of the study of language change in progress. If a range of social classes is not studied, there is no way of knowing how locally specified social groups fit in with the rest of the speech community. Without a range of age groups, it is impossible to investigate what should be the focus of investigation – the origin and spread of a linguistic change through a speech community. This will not matter for research that is less concerned with language change than with, say, the expression of a range of social identities through language, or with the "performance" and construction of gender in social practice. But for research that shares the original aims set out for the study of language in its social context, what is needed, Dubois and Horvath argue (1999: 291), are alternative approaches which do not give up the benefits of large-scale studies but that are "more sensitive to Eckert's

call for a deeper understanding of the social categories that we work with" (1999: 310). They see the ethnographic approach as an important adjunct for urban surveys rather than as a replacement for them: urban survey methods need to be supplemented by detailed social analysis. Their solution for their own research was to refer to the general social science research literature on Cajun communities and to ensure that their sociolinguistic interviews elicited relevant aspects of the speakers' life histories. They observed the community during the data collection process; and they were able to consult the replies given to an extensive questionnaire that had been used in a previous sociological survey.

Few researchers are fortunate enough to be able to access a pre-existing sociological survey in this way, though it may be possible to elicit individual life histories during recorded interview sessions. Other types of compromise are also possible. For example, Cheshire et al. (1999) used an "ethnographic interview" with groups of adolescents in three English towns to obtain information not only on life histories but also about the adolescents' lifestyles and their orientation to different kinds of youth culture. Although our explorations of the social variables in this study are necessarily more limited than would be possible with a full ethnographic study, the structured approach does allow some comparisons to be drawn between the three towns.

Small-scale studies, then, have shown that the complexity of the relation between linguistic variation and gender cannot be captured by a single generalization based on a division into "females" and "males." Yet despite the apparent incompatibility between small studies and large-scale urban surveys, and despite Cameron's assertion that the category of gender does not lend itself well to the conventional models of the speech community (Cameron 1996: 34), recent research is trying to find compromise positions, as we have seen.

## 5 Gender from a Social Psychological Perspective

Whereas variationist research has, until recently, treated social categories as if they were static, correlating them with a speaker's overall frequency of use of a specific variant, the approach of social psychologists fits better with a view of gender as a dynamic construct, with individuals "performing" or creating different aspects of their social identities in different situations, or at different moments within a single interaction. This approach is more difficult to marry with quantitative analysis, but some researchers have attempted to do so.

For example, Takano (1998) analyzed variation in ellipsis of the postpositional particles *-wa* and *-ga* in informal spoken Japanese. Previous research had found that these particles were ellipted more frequently by women than by men, but Takano's research design allowed her to show that the frequency of ellipsis depended on whether conversations took place in mixed-sex groups, cross-sex dyads or same-sex dyads. Sex differentiation was greatest in the

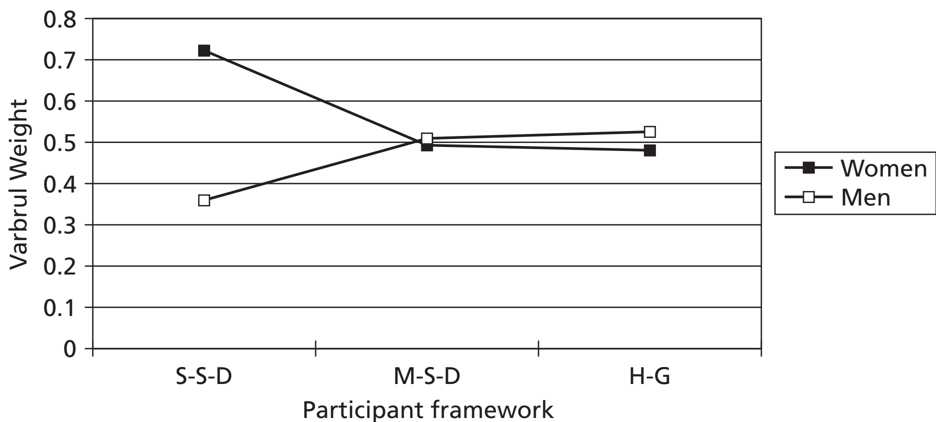


**Figure 17.1** Mutual convergence in particle ellipsis across three participant frameworks

same-sex dyads: women talking to women ellipted the particles significantly more frequently than men talking to men. As figure 17.1 shows, in cross-sex interactions the rate of ellipsis amongst men increased, whereas the rate of ellipsis amongst women decreased, with the result that in this conversational context there was virtually no difference between their frequencies of ellipsis.

Takano argues that gender as a social division is most evident in single-sex interactions, where speakers use gender-linked linguistic differentiation to maintain in-group norms. In mixed-sex interactions the speakers' gender identity becomes less salient, and mutual accommodation occurs. This has been a recurrent finding in experimental research from social psychologists working within the framework of communicative accommodation theory (see, for example, Hogg 1985, Mulac et al. 1988), although other social factors may affect the salience of gender identity rather than other social identities in a specific interaction (see, for discussion, Meyerhoff 1996: 207–11, Cheshire and Gardner-Chloros 1998: 10–11, Takano 1998: 296–7). Takano argues that integrating intra-speaker variability into the quantitative paradigm will result in a more adequate sociolinguistic theory (1998: 317). It can also inform methodology: for example, this could usefully be taken into account when designing sociolinguistic interviews. These are typical situations where Communicative Accommodation Theory predicts communicative divergence, because interviewer and interviewee share a complementary relationship where their social roles are discrepant (Thakerar et al. 1982). In these situations individuals can gain communicative confidence by diverging stylistically from the "outgroup" represented by their interlocutor and by emphasizing the prototypical linguistic behavior of the group with which they identify (Giles and Coupland 1991: 83).

Meyerhoff (1996) also discusses the potential of a social psychological framework for incorporating a more dynamic concept of gender into variationist

analyses. Individuals can be seen as possessing many different identities, some personal and some social, whose salience in different communicative events varies depending on a range of non-linguistic variables. As Meyerhoff points out (1996: 207), the kinds of variables that social psychology research has found to influence the salience of gender identity in an interaction are precisely those that sociolinguists have found to be important; and she discusses a range of variationist studies that can be interpreted within a dynamic social psychological framework.

## 6 Gender from a Discourse Analysis Approach

A social constructionist approach based on discourse analysis can also incorporate a dynamic conception of gender into the quantitative paradigm. The approach depends on the idea that although sounds are inherently meaningless, they can derive social significance from their distributional patterns, becoming associated with the culturally-recognized attributes of the social groups who use them most frequently. Thus, if a particular variant is used more often by women, it may become associated with the expression of femininity and be used to construct a stereotypically "female" identity in discourse contexts where this aspect of the speaker's identity is salient (Holmes 1997: 216). Similarly, if a variant is associated with the working classes, it may index various culturally-recognized attributes of working-class culture (Kiesling 1998: 94).

Holmes (1997) shows how one woman constructs a stereotypical gender identity for herself on one occasion in a conversational narrative, presenting herself through her story as a good mother and dutiful daughter. She does this partly through the content of her story, but she also expresses this conservative gender identity through her use of phonological variants which are more frequent in New Zealand women's speech than men's. For example, she uses the standard realization of the (ing) variable and the conservative aspirated variant of intervocalic /t/. She also uses pragmatic particles and attenuators such as *you know* and *sort of* with affective meaning, a use which is also favoured by women (Holmes 1995). Thus the speaker constructs a conservative feminine gender identity in this instance through a combination of phonological choices, lexical selections and her use of pragmatic devices, as well as through the topic and structure of the narrative she chooses to recount (1995: 217). Holmes also shows how a range of different masculine identities is constructed through the linguistic choices made in the dialogue of an advertisement. Some of these identities are stereotypically masculine, but one is a more "feminine" powerless, polite identity.

Kiesling (1998) also combines a quantitative analysis of the (ing) variable with a qualitative discourse analysis, this time of individual fraternity men speaking at a weekly meeting. Again, the men construct a range of identities through their discourse. Kiesling assumes that because (ing) is an old and

stable sociolinguistic marker, its possible meanings are varied and complexly inter-related (1998: 93). The /n/ variant can therefore have a range of social meanings, though all are culturally-recognized attributes of the working-class group with which the variant is associated. They include, for example, "rebellious," "hardworking," "casual," and "confrontational." Like Holmes, Kiesling sees these identities as constructed not only through the realization of (ing) – in this case, as the alveolar variant rather than the velar variant on which Holmes focuses – but through the co-occurrence of this feature with other sociolinguistic variables, such as multiple negation, as well as other aspects of discourse form and structure. Kiesling stresses that the variable alone has no "meaning" as such: "meaning" comes about "only when an identity takes shape through the tension between text and content and the negotiation between speaker and hearer" (1998: 94).

Investigating how individuals express or construct their gender identities in specific interactions in particular social contexts, then, is a way of going beyond a simple binary classification; and it makes it possible to integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches within a single analysis.

## 7 Beyond Phonological Variation

As we have seen, although sounds are inherently meaningless they can acquire social significance through their habitual associations with specific social groups. But features that have an intrinsic meaning can also acquire social significance. Tag questions or pragmatic particles have a "core" meaning related to their lexical content or discourse function, but they also express different social meanings such as assertiveness, rapport, or tentativeness, which emerge in the discourse context. These social meanings may be sex differentiated, with men in English-speaking societies using the forms mainly with referential meaning and women using them mainly with affective meaning (Holmes 1995). In cultures where the expression of solidarity is culturally valued, such as Indonesian cultures (Wouk 1999) there may be little or no sex differentiation in the use of such forms. For English speakers, however, they may become "gendered" through their association with male or female speakers, and they can then be used to construct different identities, as Holmes and Kiesling have shown.

A wide range of forms can acquire social significance in this way, if they occur frequently enough to become associated with certain groups. High Rising Terminal contours, for example, have a positive politeness function as an important part of their interactional meaning, and are used more frequently by Pakeha women than by men in Porirua, New Zealand (Britain 1992) and in Sydney (Guy et al. 1986). (In the New Zealand research they were also used more frequently by Maori speakers, another social group that values the expression of solidarity and rapport.)

It is important to remember, however, that not all women prefer affective meanings, or speak in a cooperative speech style; and that those who do, do not always do so. The same applies to men and their apparent preference for referential meanings, and to the patterns of sex differentiation discussed earlier. Situations where there is no sex differentiation can be very revealing: Freed and Greenwood (1996), for example, found no differences in the use of *you know* and questions between women and men participating in the same type of conversational activity in a controlled experimental setting. They conclude that it is the specific requirements of the type of talk in which speakers are engaged that motivate the use of these features, not the sex or gender of the individual speaker: a conclusion that points to an interpretation in terms of Community of Practice. Thus the points made above about generalizations concerning the sociolinguistic gender pattern and the role of women and men in sound change apply equally to generalizations about conversational style. In both cases it is important to take account of the overlap between women's and men's behavior as well as the differentiation.

There has been relatively little research to date on syntactic variation and its relation to sex and gender. However, when a sex difference in the use of a specific construction is identified, it can point to further ways in which speakers construct a gendered identity in discourse. For example, lone *wh*-clauses with no accompanying main clause (such as *when we went to the Isle of Wight*) were used almost exclusively by male speakers in adolescent conversations that I recorded in Reading, England. Further analysis revealed that these clauses were used as attempted story openers, to introduce narratives whose function was to initiate "joint remembering" among groups of male friends and thereby to create a sense of group identity. The girls constructed more individual friendship identities through their narratives, and their narrative styles differed from the boys'. The syntactic constructions used as story openers were a preliminary indication of these friendship patterns though, again, there were overlaps in the usage of the girls and the boys (Cheshire 1999, 2000).

Syntactic constructions, of course, are likely to have many different discourse functions, only some of which may be used in the construction or performance of gender. There is no reason to suppose that syntactic features will follow similar patterns of variation to phonological variables, because they are unlikely to occur frequently enough to become habitually associated with the speech of either women or men.

## 8 Conclusion

We have seen that the place of sex and gender in variationist research has moved from a position where it was hardly taken into account at all, to a position where many consider it the main social factor driving variation and change. Approaches to the analysis of sex and gender have tended to mirror

those adopted in neighboring disciplines, and have been influenced by the development of feminist theory. Although there has been controversy and disagreement between scholars, on the whole this has been productive. It has led to a respect for diverse approaches and to a realization that there is much to be learned from attempting to integrate them. Not only has this led to a richer understanding of the relation between sex and gender, and language variation and change; it has also shown how other social dimensions might be similarly explored, and how aspects of social theory might be profitably incorporated into the variationist enterprise.

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