21 Communities of Practice

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The notion of the community of practice (CofP) is a comparatively recent addition to the sociolinguistic toolbox, though as we will see in this chapter aspects of its underlying philosophy can be traced to early work in sociolinguistics. The CofP describes an analytical domain, and its use invokes certain principles for, or assumptions about, the proper analysis of variation. The goals associated with the CofP framework require a serious investigation of both the social and the linguistic aspects of sociolinguistics. This chapter will describe the domain, explain its use in terms of its basic associated principles, and show how it has been used to satisfy those goals.

The CofP domain is rather smaller than that usually circumscribed by the term "speech community" (though see Santa Ana and Parodi 1998); crucially, a CofP is defined in terms of the members' subjective experience of the boundaries between their community and other communities. Especially important are the range of activities that members participate in and that contribute to the construction of these boundaries. Analyses of variation based on the CofP emphasize the role of language use and linguistic variation as pre-eminently social practices, and they link the analysis of linguistic variables to speakers' entire range of social practices. In this way, language is understood as but one vehicle by which speakers construct, maintain, or contest the boundaries of social categories and their membership in or exclusion from those categories. The CofP is not a different way of talking about social categories analogous to groups like the middle class. Social categories will certainly have significance at a very local level but they may also have broader significance, recognized by society at large. By focusing on speakers' engagement in a matrix of interrelated social practices, the CofP can provide a framework for understanding both the social and the linguistic facets of sociolinguistic variation.

This chapter is structured as follows. In section 1, I provide an overview of what the CofP is and how it is defined. In order to provide a meaningful context for evaluating what motivates researchers to use the CofP as the basis for analyzing variation, I will show how the CofP functions as an alternative

to other frameworks for the analysis of variation. This shows both the extent to which the CofP provides a novel perspective for understanding the social significance of linguistic variation and change, and the extent to which it codifies existing practices within sociolinguistics, re-emphasizing earlier theoretical and analytical concerns of the field. In section 2, the heart of the chapter, I outline the use of the CofP in the analysis of language variation. The CofP has been applied infrequently to the analysis of language change, but some researchers see it as having potential in this domain too. The case studies selected reveal both the explanatory potential and the explanatory limits of the construct. Finally in section 3, I conclude with some brief remarks on how the goals and results of linguists working with the CofP tie in with theoretical traditions beyond linguistics, such as the fields of anthropology, social psychology and philosophy.

1 Defining the Community of Practice

A concise definition of the CofP is provided by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992a): "A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. . . . practices emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor" (1992a: 464).

In a more detailed exposition, Wenger (1998) uses the CofP to study the duality of participation and reification. Wenger spells out the three criteria (summarized by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet) which must be met in order to talk of a CofP. In the spirit of the CofP itself, they are to an extent mutually dependent, inseparable from one another when it comes to their detailed explication. I will first go over the basic criteria and then discuss in more detail some case studies that illustrate how they are significant.

First, there must be *mutual engagement* of the members. That is, the members of a CofP need to get together in order to engage in their shared practices. Wenger points out (1998: 77, 85) that mutual engagement may be harmonious or conflictual, so a CofP is not necessarily a group of friends or allies. An example of a CofP based on harmonious engagement might be a group of women from different workplaces who regularly get together on Friday evenings, sharing drinks and giving each other a fresh perspective on issues that may have arisen at their respective workplaces. The routines and practices that this CofP converges on might primarily be positive and constructive. You can imagine that such a CofP would be sustained over time because this mutual engagement is so useful to the members' emotional and practical needs.

But less harmonious engagement might also hold. Imagine a group of divisional heads (say, department chairs) who regularly meet in order to discuss their organization's shrinking budget and the allocation of funds in the organization as a whole. This group might be characterized by the continual re-enactment of personal feuds, or repetitions of complaints about undue

favoritism of one group over another. Perhaps some divisional heads constantly stonewall any actions that might advance one of the other divisions. The practices that may evolve in a situation like this might be called unhelpful and may simply perpetuate the existing conflicts, but we could still talk of the group as a CofP as it satisfies the requirement for mutual engagement (and, indeed, the next two criteria to be discussed).

The second criterion for a CofP is that members share some *jointly negotiated enterprise*. Because the enterprise is negotiated, there is some circularity involved in its identification: members get together for some purpose and this purpose is defined through their pursuit of it. It is the pursuit of this enterprise that creates relationships of mutual accountability among the participants (Wenger 1998: 77–8). It is important that this shared enterprise be reasonably specific and not very general or abstract, a position I will motivate more fully below. I have argued (Meyerhoff 1999) that however the enterprise is defined (and Wenger (1998: 84) points out that the members of a CofP themselves may not be able to articulate their shared enterprise) it ought to contribute something meaningful to an understanding of the dynamics of the group involved. Sociolinguists who wish to use the notion of CofP in their analyses have to exercise caution and ensure that as researchers they are not attempting to constitute "CofPs" for which a shared enterprise is explanatorily vacant.

Third, a CofP is characterized by the members' *shared repertoire*. These resources (linguistic or otherwise) are the cumulative result of internal negotiations. An analysis can focus on the variables that members of a CofP are actively negotiating as currency in their CofP. Bucholtz's (1999) discussion of teenage girls does this. Alternatively, an analysis may focus on the outcome of such negotiations, as for example Holmes et al. (1999) do in discussing differences in the practices that have been established as normative for the repertoire of several different workplace CofPs.

In short, the CofP is a domain defined by a process of social learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) originally developed the CofP as a means of describing and understanding how professional communities (tailors or insurance company employees) induct and train new members, and perpetuate set routines for accomplishing specific tasks. It has been suggested that because the CofP is so crucially tied up with the notion of learned social behavior it may be inherently better suited to the study of certain groups or certain periods in peoples' lives than it is for others. As we will see, the CofP framework has frequently and very successfully been employed for the analysis of variation in adolescent groups. Bergvall (1999) wonders whether this represents an intrinsic constraint or limitation on the CofP. She notes that American culture expects adolescents to expend a good deal of time and effort working on their self-image (both through identification with and differentiation from others). She suggests that because of this, the framework of the CofP might transpose more readily into the analysis of variation among this age cohort than it does for variation among other age groups. I think the pattern she has observed is an accident rather than a genuine limitation on the framework, and an alternative explanation

for why the variation found in adolescent groups seems to be particularly amenable to analysis under the CofP framework is discussed below.

We can illustrate the importance of these criteria with some case studies. Castellano (1996) studied the narratives told by women learning or working in skilled trades such as plumbing and carpentry and her work simultaneously shows the significance of mutual engagement and of a shared repertoire. Castellano compared the themes in the narratives that were told by journeywomen in the trades and by trainees. She found that they differed quite markedly: journeywomen told stories that illustrated the perceived importance of forming a community at work, of finding ways to deal with adversity, and of achieving a high level of technical competence. The trainees' stories overlapped with the journeywomen's only on the last topic. This fundamental difference was of more than just descriptive interest. It meant that not only did the groups talk about work issues differently, but this difference affected the journeywomen's ability to successfully induct the trainees into their professions.

Without using the CofP terminology, Castellano traces the difference to the women's membership in very different CofPs, separated by a fundamental lack of mutual engagement. Although the trainees and journeywomen shared some qualities, such as sex and profession (which, we might note, is often taken as an indication of class), other factors set them apart from each other. The journeywomen were generally older, white, and came from middle-class backgrounds. By contrast, the trainees were African-American or Latina, and many were learning their profession after having been enrolled in some form of federal aid program. It was hoped that the training program would be successful because it could build on the qualities that the two groups shared. But Castellano points out that its success was compromised by the fact that before they enrolled in the training program, most of the trainees would seldom have had cause to engage with women like the journeywomen. Their social worlds were sufficiently different that this kept them apart even in the context of their working world. Their membership in quite different CofPs manifested itself in very different linguistic repertoires, as shown by the limited overlap in their workplace narratives. Castellano notes that the journeywomen's narrative themes focused on the need to form communities and fight adversity at work. But these narrative themes can be construed as constructing an identity of self based on victimization or oppression. She suggested that the trainees avoided practices that construct such identities, since one of the focuses of the trainees' mutual engagement was on defining themselves as successes.

The importance of a jointly negotiated enterprise can be illustrated by a case study from Vanuatu (a nation in the southwest Pacific). I examined the distribution of an apology routine in Bislama in northern Vanuatu (Meyerhoff 1999), and noted that there was marked variability in terms of who used the apology routine *sore* "sorry" and for what purpose. Both men and women used it to express regret for a transgression and to say they missed someone, but only women were observed using it to express empathy with another person. Here then we had a clear difference in practice, but I argued against calling women

and men separate CofPs. Although women shared a practice (use of *sore* to show empathy) the criterion of mutual engagement was satisfied only weakly. But even more problematic was the fact that it was impossible to specify what kind of enterprise all the women who were observed using *sore* to express empathy might share. The most one could say is that the women observed using it were engaged in an enterprise of constructing an association between being female and being empathetic. But this would fail to elucidate the relationship between language and its users any further than a simple description of the variation does. To claim that women engage in empathetic practices in order to define themselves as members of the category of women might be a faithful description of the way in which language and society are mutually constitutive, but it brings us no closer to explaining and understanding what it actually means to be a woman in this community nor to understanding the social significance of empathy there. Moreover, defining the enterprise in this way would also ignore the fact that the association between empathy and femaleness (which certainly is part of larger local ideologies about sex roles) is partly constructed by men through their avoidance of the use of *sore* to express empathy.

Since one goal of analysing variation in the CofP framework is to better understand the social meaning of language, I would argue that we need to avoid situations where the closest we can get to defining a shared enterprise is to say that speakers are engaged in "constituting a social category". If the so-called enterprise is specified at such a high level of abstraction we begin to (1) be divorced from the sensitive social goals of the CofP; (2) lose a good deal of the explanatory power of the CofP; and (3) be left with something very little different from established notions such as groups (in intergroup theory) or social strata in the speech community. Consequently, it seems to me that the criterion of a shared, negotiated, and fairly specific enterprise is absolutely crucial.

So we have established that the CofP is about an aggregate of individuals negotiating and learning practices that contribute to the satisfaction of a common goal. These fundamental criteria are associated with even more specific characteristics. Wenger's (1998) lengthy list of such typical features not only helps explain the concept more fully, but it has the added bonus of providing analysts interested in examining variation and change from the CofP perspective with a useful basis for formulating research questions. Wenger (1998: 125–6) suggests that a CofP will be characterized by (among other things):

- the rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation;
- absence of introductory preambles and very quick setup of a problem to be discussed;
- substantial overlap in participants' descriptions of who belongs and mutually defining identities;
- specific tools, representations, and other artefacts, shared stories and inside jokes;
- jargon and shortcuts to communication;
- a shared discourse that reflects a certain perspective on the world.

1.1 Distinguishing the Community of Practice from other Frameworks

The CofP shares a good deal with the notion of social networks in sociolinguistics (e.g. L. Milroy 1987, J. Milroy 1992, also L. Milroy, this volume). However, Eckert points out (2000: 35) that although variation acquires meaning within dense social networks, the CofP also captures the fact that linguistic variants acquire their meaning beyond dense networks. In addition, members of dense networks and CofPs are characterized by different degrees of agency: one can be a member of a dense network by chance or circumstance, while membership in a CofP is conscious (cf. the characteristic of mutual identification, above). Of course, the notion of simplex vs. multiplex ties in a network does introduce the kind of qualitative measures of relationships that are important to defining a CofP. Milroy (this volume) discusses networks in great detail and readers are encouraged to consult that chapter as a complement to the discussion here.

The CofP differs in more fundamental ways from some pre-existing concepts which have been widely used for analyzing linguistic variation, e.g. the speech community, social networks, and intergroup theory (intergroup theory provides part of the theoretical backdrop for Giles' communicative accommodation theory (e.g. Giles 1973, Gallois et al. 1995) which is perhaps more widely known in sociolinguistics). A sketch of what seem to be the most salient aspects of the CofP setting it apart from the speech community and intergroup theory might focus on the following five features (see also Patrick, this volume, and Kerswill, this volume). Due to space constraints, this will necessarily be brief. The outline that follows builds on the discussion in Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999).

Relationship between an individual's multiplicity of identities

Individuals may belong to or participate in a number of different communities of practice and their memberships are mutually constitutive. The kind of role that they play in a CofP will partly reflect their own personal history and goals, and also the goals of the group that is jointly engaged in those practices.

At different points in time, intergroup theory has postulated different relationships between individuals' group (or social) and personal identities. Tajfel (1978) saw group and personal identities as being part of a single continuum; the continuum expressed his intuition (similar to the stance within the CofP framework) that it is unlikely that any identity is defined wholly in interpersonal or intergroup terms. Subsequent work has expressed this interdependence in other ways. Giles and Coupland (1991) represent group and personal identities as orthogonal to one another; Tajfel's basic intuition about the relationship of the interpersonal and the intergroup is shared, but their fundamental distinctiveness is asserted. Turner, too, sees the personal and the group as distinct bases of self-categorization (Turner 1999).

However, a major difference between the CofP and the other constructs lies in how individual style is conceptualized. The CofP framework sees the larger styling of the self as involving the interplay and resolution of an individual's participation in multiple CofPs (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999: 189), while intergroup theory does not see membership in a group to be necessarily part of a broader enterprise of self-styling. The classic definition of a speech community, of course, says little about the relationship between an individual's personal and group identities. Labov's observation that in New York City it may be difficult "to distinguish . . . a casual salesman from a careful pipefitter" (1972: 240) makes some connection between personal, stylistic variation and social or class-based variation, but there is no onus to explain how the dimensions casual–careful and blue collar–white collar are defined by members of the speech community and how these dimensions might become linked in this way.[1]

Boundaries

Although most of the case studies that follow involve groups in which participation is voluntary, a CofP may not always have members that are actively in control of their membership. For example, the family unit may constitute a CofP (see Hazen, this volume), yet while children are young, the possibilities for opting in and out of membership as parent or child are extremely limited.

The way in which boundaries are maintained can also provide a salient basis for discriminating between the constructs. For instance, competitive opposition to others is a feature of intergroup theory (and critical discourse analysis, discussed further in section 3), but it is not necessarily a feature of the constitution of a CofP. There are some clear examples showing that opposition to other groups is not central to the process of constituting a CofP.

Hall (1996) provides an interesting discussion of how Hindi kinship terms are co-opted by the hijra community in Banaras (northeast India) and are used to denote relationships particular to the hijras' community (hijras are people who were born biologically male but in various ways construct female identites for themselves). So, for example, it is the practice among the hijras to use Hindi /beï/ "daughter" to denote a hijra's disciple. Hijras' practice of metaphorically using these terms is not technically in opposition to the practices of the larger Hindi-speaking community; rather, this practice of lexical appropriation involves mapping from the domain of Hindi usage to a domain constructed by the hijras. (Besnier (1994) makes similar points about lexical appropriation by fakaleitī in Tonga. Fakaleitī are a traditional transgendered category of individuals; comparable categories are found in much of Polynesia.)

Kiesling (2000) also points out that the relationship between language and identity is often an extremely indirect form of indexing (cf. Ochs 1992) through metaphor and irony. Kiesling shows that the value of a heterosexual masculinity is often subtly reified through mocking and allusion in a group of fraternity members.

Nonetheless, it is often through practices that stand in opposition to those of other groups that the boundaries of a CofP are revealed most clearly. Bucholtz (2000) examines the way women strive to define themselves as competent members of the hacker community among computer users using evidence from the discourses these women employ as a way of presenting themselves in the virtual world on-line. Through these practices, the feminist identities they construct for themselves are placed in (sometimes sharp and explicit) contrast to other discourses of feminism and other feminist identities that the hackers wish to set themselves apart from.

Basis for defining membership in the salient group

The membership and boundaries of a CofP, including whether an individual is a core or peripheral member, are defined on the basis of criteria that are subjectively salient to the members themselves and membership is reciprocally recognized. Membership in a speech community can be defined on externally salient criteria, such as whether or not one lives in a particular region or town. However, it is worth noting that Labov (1972) gave a prominent place to subjective factors too, defining membership in a speech community by shared evaluations of norms. Others' uses of the term have sometimes relied more on externally defined or objective criteria (see Hudson 1980: 25–6 for examples).

Experimental exploration of intergroup principles often arbitrarily assigns participants to a group (e.g. Billig and Tajfel 1973) or highlights characteristics of the participants in the hope that subjects will share the exprimenters' intuition about the salience of those characteristics. Some work on intergroup theory attempts to blend participants' subjective group membership with externally salient criteria (e.g. Noels et al. 1999).

Member's shared goals

A fundamental difference between the CofP, the speech community and intergroup theory lies in the nature of goals shared by co-members. By definition, participants in a CofP are engaged in the satisfaction of some jointly negotiated enterprise. No such requirement exists for defining members of a speech community or of groups in the framework of intergroup theory.

A decision to use the CofP as the basis for analyzing variation does not mean that it is inevitably to be preferred over other frameworks. Eckert (2000) makes it clear that its introduction constitutes an addition to the tool chest, not an attempt to throw out the old tools. The value of the CofP lies in the social information which it highlights and which other constructs may, by virtue of the features just discussed, miss. It explicitly focuses on (1) individuals' social mobility and (2) the negotiated nature of social identities, thereby elucidating ties between abstract social categories and the social groups that people are members of on an everyday basis (Eckert 2000: 40–1). Insightful generalizations involving a social category like gender "are most likely to emerge when

gender is examined . . . in interaction with other social variables" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999: 191).

In the next section, I look at how an analysis of variation that integrates social and linguistic practice helps shape a more textured analysis of abstract categories like gender that we might be interested in.

2 The Community of Practice in the Analysis of Variation and Change

Undoubtedly, the most exemplary exponent and user of the CofP in sociolinguistics has been Penelope Eckert. Not only did Eckert co-author (with Sally McConnell-Ginet) the paper that introduced the term "community of practice" to most sociolinguists (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992a, 1992b; see also the developments in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999) but in addition she has done more than any one other linguist to show how contextualizing linguistic variation within a larger picture of individuals' social behavior enriches the overall analysis. What makes Eckert's body of work particularly valuable is the fact that she so comprehensively satisfies two important goals for any sociolinguist.

First, she demonstrates how analyzing variation within speakers' CofPs advances the sociolinguist's goal of better understanding the social significance of linguistic variation. Eckert shows how linguistic variation fits coherently into the picture of speakers' broader social patterns. The analysis of variation does not occur independently of the analysis of other social facts, because the sociolinguistic variants themselves do not exist independently of other behavioral variants. An important corollary of this is that linguistic style shifting is neither a function of the attention speakers pay to their speech (cf. Labov 1972), nor of their attention to social characteristics of the addressee or audience (cf. Giles' 1973; Gallois et al.'s 1995 accommodation theory, and Bell 1984). Instead, linguistic style is part and parcel of speakers' work to construct a social identity (or identities), which is meaningful to themselves and to others.

The second task that Eckert tackles is answering the question: how best to understand the relation between variation at the level of the individual and variation across large and heterogeneous groups? Her work on variation neatly illustrates how macro-level categories like social class emerge, are sometimes contested and sometimes maintained, through the actions of individuals (see Bucholtz 2000, discussed above, for a good example of such contestation). Variation "has to do with concrete places, people, styles, and issues. At the same time, these concrete local things are what constitute broad cultural categories such as gender, class, ethnicity, region" (Eckert 2000: 4). The meanings associated with variants at the most local level do not, Eckert points out, emerge "with no relation to larger social patterns" (2000: 24).

One hazard of focusing on practices in highly local groups like CofPs is that it potentially leads to positions of extreme relativism, for instance, as Dubois and Horvath (1999) suggest, generating results that cannot be used for further generalization. However, by grounding the use of the CofP in the broader goals of sociolinguistics, Eckert shows that the CofP framework is not necessarily a Trojan Horse for extreme relativism.

Eckert conducted her research in four high schools in the suburbs of Detroit. Because she wanted to avoid being caught up in the institution of school and the power hierarchies associated with being an adult in the adolescent world of high school, she chose not go into classrooms and not to use teachers as intermediaries in her research. (Recognizing that this left her out of a lot of the important social practices in which kids participate, Eckert has negotiated ways to observe students in class as well as out in her current research in California; see Eckert 1996, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999).

Instead, she wandered the corridors and the courtyards of the school, watching who talked to whom, who wore what and who avoided or congregated in different spaces. In other words, she observed patterns of mutual engagement and shared repertoires and practices (both verbal and non-verbal). Gradually, she got to know the students and started out by asking them if they would agree to chat about themselves and who their friends were while she tape-recorded the conversation. The taped conversations were supplemented by observations and note-taking about practices as diverse as what kinds of jeans the students wore, how they carried their cigarettes (if they smoked), whether they walked across or around the school's central courtyard and what other school activities (academic, athletic, social) they participated in. With some of the students she had further follow-up conversations, so the amount of speech, and to a large extent the topics covered, were not controlled by Eckert.

In some other studies of variation an attempt is made to control the topics covered; when researchers make this effort it is usually because they believe it will enable them to isolate the effects of specific, objectively identified social variables. That is, they hope that by controlling variation in the topics speakers discuss, they will strengthen any subsequent claims about the effects attributable to differences in, for example, speakers' class or sex. Controlling content and amount of speech is not a concern for the analyst working with CofPs. The CofP is not intended to be treated as an independent variable, like class or ethnicity in other studies. Rather, by studying the ways in which the students participated in a variety of social practices, the CofPs that Eckert identified ultimately help to shed light on the meaning of more objectively identifiable social categories like class and gender. In this way, she shows that the use of CofPs in the analysis of variation and change is not "to dispense with global categories, but to attach them to personal and community experience in such a way that the structure of variation makes everyday sense" (Eckert 2000: 222).

In one respect, what Eckert is saying here is that this approach to data collection and analysis is a constructive response to the feeling that the way social dialectologists often divide up a "speech community", masks salient

aspects of individual variation. Horvath (1985), for example, reanalyzed some of Labov's (1972) data from the New York City survey and showed that generalizations about style based on speaker sex masked some men's adherence to more standard-like norms. She noted that this meant that some salient information about the social factors defining the notion of a "standard" was missed. Similarly, in a study of the English spoken in Porirua (New Zealand), it was found that grouping all women together on the basis of sex (or even separating them on the basis of ethnicity) obscured the influence of social contact between some young Pakeha (European) women with Maori or Polynesian men. Linguistic practices (variables) generally found more often in the speech of Maori men were more likely to be a part of the young Pakeha women's repertoire than of older Pakeha women's speaking styles (Holmes 1997; Meyerhoff 1994).

In the course of her investigations (interviews with 200 students, eventually culled to 69 for detailed analysis) Eckert found, for instance, that in the Detroit suburbs, adolescents formed three major groups while in high school: jocks, who identified with school values and participated most actively in the activities sponsored by the high school; and burnouts, whose most significant social ties and aspirations were often shared with the urban and more working-class culture of Detroit city, and who chose not to participate in the activities that generally measure success in school. Finally, there were a large number of students who defined themselves negatively in terms of these polarized groups. The so-called "in-betweens" participated to a greater or lesser extent in the school-based activities associated with the jocks, and the external activities (such as cruising certain areas between their home suburb and Detroit) associated with burnouts. The heart of Eckert's most recent work (Eckert 2000) lies in elucidating the complex relationship between individuals' participation in practices associated with these groups – their shared repertoire of social practices defining them as more or less prototypical or core members of those groups – and their linguistic practices. The links she establishes shed light on the process by which other, larger social categories such as gender are understood and maintained or contested.

The high schools Eckert studied were located in an area in which a major vowel shift is taking place (for information on the Northern Cities Chain Shift, see Gordon, this volume). She examined both the relative frequency with which the teenagers she interviewed used innovative and conservative variants of the vowels undergoing the shift, and also the same teenagers' participation in practices that serve as other indices of social innovation or conservatism. By employing this bifurcated approach, Eckert could show that the high school students who used the most innovative forms of newer variables in the vowel shift (backing of the vowels in *cut* and *bet* and raising of the nucleus in *bite*) were also the speakers who participated in other social practices that positioned them beyond the pale of conservative norms of the school (and sometimes the wider community too). These were, in many cases, the so-called "burned out burnout" girls, that is, girls who were identified as extreme exemplars of the

social category of burnouts. Eckert found that their linguistic flamboyance (i.e. their more frequent use of innovative variants of the newer variables) was accompanied by other flamboyant displays. In addition to the way they talked, their makeup, clothes and ways of finding fun outside of school also indicated their distance from, or rejection of, conservative norms. In other words, having a cutting edge personal style was linked to being the kind of person who defines and leads in the diffusion of linguistic innovations.

Similarly, Eckert (1996) discusses the social significance of emphatic, low, back tokens of short *a* before nasals. Use of this variant before nasals sets Latina girls in northern California apart from the non-Latino tendency to raise short *a* in this environment. But Eckert noted that the girl who produced the most extreme forms of this variant also tended to engage in other behaviors which established her as a leader in other domains, particularly as being savvy and forward with boys. In this case, you could say that the shared enterprise of the CofP lies in defining the social roles of trend-setter, follower or those who opt out and the hierarchy attendant on that social structure.

Of course, these indicators are not equally salient or meaningful to all observers. But within the larger community of practice of the Detroit high school or the California elementary school their significance was clear. There, both the fact that some speakers actively participate in even the incipient changes of a vowel shift, and that others choose not to participate in the shifts until they have acquired significance in the community/ies outside the school, are understood as part of a more general pattern of participation in practices that confer status or prestige in the school or the society in which the school is located.

Use of the CofP framework allows this nexus to be highlighted. It also enables us to focus on the way an innovation is coined, crystallized and begins to spread because it focuses on the negotiation of meaning based on individual praxis.

In the same spirit, Mendoza-Denton (1997) and Bucholtz (1999) have found the CofP framework useful for studying how linguistic variation relates to other practices in which adolescents participate, shaping their personal and group identity in school and beyond. Mendoza-Denton showed that the extent to which speakers participate in vowel shifts taking place in California is but one way of demonstrating their social position in wider social networks. Selection of linguistic variants correlates with speakers' dress and fashion sensibilities and their decision to be involved in different local gangs.

Bucholtz (1999) shows how a small group of determinedly uncool girls differentiate themselves from the other kids in their high school through a range of social practices. These girls fail to participate quite so actively in the ongoing California vowel shifts (especially fronting of the vowels in *boot* and *boat*). This sets them off from cool students, who use fronted variants much more frequently, and the girls she studied bolstered their distance from whatever defines coolness by developing a repertoire of other practices that cool students seldom participate in, e.g. demonstrating a taste for reading and verbal play.

Studies of the phenomenon known as "crossing" (after Rampton 1995) have frequently been conducted with a sensibility close to that underlying the CofP even if the researchers do not themselves invoke the term CofP. Cutler (1996), for instance, is a case study of Mike, a white New York teenager who (with a group of friends, who are also white) consciously adopts the vocabulary and (with more limited success) the phonology and syntax associated with black hip-hop culture. Cutler places Mike's linguistic behavior in the context of other practices that indicate an affiliation with or desire to be identified with hip-hop culture, such as the clothes the group members wear, the music they listen to, and some of the ways they occupy themselves as a group in their spare time.

Fought (1999a, 1999b) examines variation in the English of Hispanic high school students in Los Angeles. She presents her study in a classic quantitative paradigm, yet when she analyzes patterns of variation she locates frequent use of, e.g., a fronted *boot* vowel (1999a) or negative concord (1999b), in the context of other social information. She shows that the teenagers who form groups solely based on their linguistic behavior also group together through their participation in other practices. These practices cohere more meaningfully among the teenagers themselves than they do in the wider community. Amongst these teenagers, Fought found that their regular mutual engagement led to a focus on distinctions that depended on the extent to which individuals participated in gang-related activities or were members of graffiti tagging crews. Fought also found that another salient group in the high school was teenagers who were parents. This group, largely invisible beyond the high school CofP, worked actively to construct an identity distinct from other groups in the school. They succeeded in this by negotiating distinct patterns of social behavior and by actively highlighting their special interests and concerns (which they discussed openly with Fought) but they also, less consciously, patterned together in their use of the linguistic variables examined. That is, their shared repertoire helped satisfy a (conscious or unconscious) goal of setting themselves apart from the other groups in the high school.

Although the CofP may seem to apply most productively to the analysis of variation among adolescents (we noted earlier Bergvall's (1999) suggestion that this related to the importance of developing self-image for this group), there is no inherent reason why its usefulness should be limited to this age group. It may prove to be true, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet suggest (1999: 189), that some of the CofPs we belong to in our youth have especially strong and perseverative effects on our verbal styling, but the business of constructing a social identity for ourselves hardly finishes after adolescence. Throughout adulthood, we continue to participate in a variety of CofPs (both as expert, core members and peripheral, neophyte members). These present the possibility of strengthening existing identifications and redefining ourselves with new ones as Wenger's (1998) and Holmes' (1998, 2000) workplace studies so clearly demonstrate.

A major benefit of the recent interest in the notion of the CofP is that it restores an emphasis on relating large-scale, quantitative analyses to the

micro-level practices of the groups of speakers being studied, very much in the spirit of Labov's analysis of variation on Martha's Vineyard (1972). Dubois and Horvath's (1998, 1999) discussion of language variation among Louisiana Cajuns is particularly compelling because of the way they approach this synthesis. They link speakers' use of variants of the (th) and (dh) variables and voiceless stops with their participation in other social practices. Users of variants that are strongly indexed as Cajun also engage in other practices marked as Cajun, such as learning and playing Cajun music, or maintaining a household where tasks and roles are divided along traditional Cajun lines (Dubois and Horvath 1999).

Their work also reminds us that practices pursued within a CofP may be reinforced by external factors such as others' expectations. They point out that being identified as "Cajun" in Lousisiana nowadays sometimes translates into important economic opportunities in an otherwise depressed region. So using variants that are strong markers of Cajun-ness and playing Cajun music help define a speaker as authentically Cajun, but ironically the significance of these practices as *ingroup* markers has been ratcheted up by *external* factors such as the rewards of catering to tourists' expectations or demands (Dubois and Horvath 1998).

To date, the CofP as a domain of analysis has been adopted most wholeheartedly by researchers working on language and gender, and a survey of the proceedings from the Berkeley Women and Language Group conferences shows that the CofP has broad currency in the study of gender (a number of the studies in these collections explore the cultural construction of gender via practices that are not linguistic; see also *Language in Society*, vol. 28, no. 2, and Bucholtz et al. 1999). I think there are a number of reasons for the apparent specialization of the CofP in language and gender studies. As is often the case, the reasons have perhaps as much to do with the history of the science as the philosophical underpinnings of the theory. Historically, the CofP was first introduced to sociolinguists in the context of language and gender research (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992a, 1992b). Presented to this audience, the CofP gained a sympathetic ear; the CofP was attractive to gender researchers because it provides a useful framework for exploring gender as a learned (and consequently, mutable) social category, rather than a categorial primitive. This perspective is enticing for gender theorists for several reasons. First, it immediately foregrounds the likelihood of there being considerable differences in how the notion of "being a woman" or "being a man" is constructed among any aggregate of individuals. Second, it makes clear the possibility or even inevitability of these notions being constructed differently across a person's life span, through participation in different practices.[2] Third, cross-cultural variability in what constitutes gendered practices is also highlighted.

In theory, there is no reason why these advantages should not be as attractive to researchers on the linguistic construction of age and aging, or ethnicity, but in fact, less research has focused on these constructs within the CofP framework (though some studies investigating the linguistic construction of

ethnicity were mentioned above; cf. also Foster 1995). Of course, since a tenet of the CofP approach is that categories like "Japanese," "woman" or "grandparent" cannot be handled atomistically, even a study focusing principally on gendered practices inevitably tells you something about what it might mean to be, e.g., a Hispanic teenage mother with former gang affiliations (as Fought's work does).

Again, it is perhaps a historical accident that relatively little work within the CofP framework has studied the social construction of age and how this relates to agism. There is a vigorous and extremely productive program among social psychologists examining these topics but the focus of these studies is rather different to the focus you would expect to find if CofPs were taken as the starting point for analysis. The social psychology research has focused on how people talk to the elderly, and how they interpret the utterances of older speakers (or apparently older speakers, in the case of matched guise experiments). A number of studies (e.g. Ryan et al. 1995, Giles et al. 1994, Harwood and Giles 1996, Harwood 2000) have examined patronizing modes of talk directed at elders, younger people's interpretations of such patronizing talk, and younger people's attitudes towards talk produced by elders. This research strongly suggests that what these patronizing speech patterns do is construct an identity for the elderly that associates age with qualities such as confusion, incompetence, enfeeblement, and asexuality.

In other words, this research takes the reverse perspective of the CofP. Instead of foregrounding speaker agency and the relationship between the social construction of *self* through speech (and other) behaviors, this research scrutinizes on how *others* construct identities for us.

Even though the CofP highlights speaker agency (by contrast with, e.g., the speech community), some interesting work has been done within the CofP framework exploring how individuals' identities interact with and may be shaped by other CofPs. Freed (1999) looks at how pregnant women (who do not constitute a CofP themselves by all three criteria), struggle to develop individual identities for themselves and their pregnancies in the face of contact with the practices of members of other CofPs, such as doctors and midwives. Their practices attempt to impose certain standards or reify norms related to more general ideologies about pregnancy and pregnant women on the trajectory of individual women's experiences. Freed's study draws attention to the fact that practices engaged in by members of a CofP may be contentious and externally problematized (as the individual women she interviewed attempted to problematize and oppose practices they encountered by the people caring for them). I think the resistance Freed documents shows how important the work of maintaining boundaries is for a strong and vital CofP like doctors.

In a similar vein, Ehrlich (1999) looks at how the communicative practices, or shared repertoire, which members of a sexual harassment tribunal engage in, manage to compete with the way two female university students represent experiences in which they were the victims of date rape. The tribunal members' discursive practices constructed an alternative view of the women's roles.

Because the tribunal members shared certain assumptions (cf. Wenger's characteristic features of a CofP, above) about what constitutes reasonable behavior under the circumstances of the complaints, and because the tribunal members shared questioning practices that reified these assumptions, they managed to effectively recast the salient identity of the women complainants as architects of their own misfortune, not as victims of fear and assault.

Up to this point, this part of the chapter has principally dwelt on how the CofP informs the analysis of variation. I turn briefly now to discuss its usefulness in the longitudinal analysis of language change.

As has already been intimated, Eckert (2000) provides perhaps the clearest exposition of how the CofP framework can inform the study of language change. She proposes that synchronic, individual variation is transformed, or mapped, into community-wide, diachronic processes of change. Eckert hypothesizes that as the fact that these linguistic variables have social significance crystallizes, they become available to be transformed into indices of categories that are salient in the wider communities affected by the NCCS. So, for example, because use of backed variants of the vowel in *bet* comes to be associated with burnouts in the high school CofP, and because the jocks' reaction to this is to begin to use lowered variants of the *bet* vowel (Eckert 2000: 120–1), the variable becomes marked as one whose variants are socially salient. Ultimately, as this significance becomes more widely recognized, or as the high school students mature and disperse into other CofPs as adults, the variants may map onto social categories that are more salient in the larger speceh community, such as regional origin, class, or ethnicity. This is how Eckert shows that the description of micro-level stylistic innovations is essential for an understanding of the macro-level phenomena of linguistic change.

Riley (1996), too, looks at language change, and her analysis is sympathetic with the CofP. She outlines a situation of language simplification and incipient language loss in the Marquesas (southeast Pacific). Her work there shows that shifts in social practices are having an effect on the linguistic landscape. Marquesan is increasingly being marginalized as a language of the home, instead acquiring status as a men's argot.[3] In the Marquesas, Riley reports that women are using Marquesan in an increasingly restricted set of interactional domains. More and more, they use French, which they see as giving their children a head start in future competition for socially and economically rewarding occupations. Younger girls are also actively contributing to the shift towards French, because they tend to be oriented more towards school (which is conducted in French) than boys are (though the outcome is a somewhat creolized form of the language. See Sankoff, this volume, for more on creolization and language change). Boys, on the other hand, continue to have to participate in some of the practices and routines that traditionally defined a masculine identity, and these activities also give them greater exposure to Marquesan. Since the language continues to be used more generally as a means of communication by men, and because it has also acquired an association with gendered exclusion, this means that girls and boys have quite different

competency in Marquesan. This, in turn, has social effects. Most older members of the community have limited or no French. With girls choosing to target French and being excluded from practices that foster competency in Marquesan, this means that girls' interactions with older members of the community are increasingly problematic and subject to miscommunication.

Simon (2000) has also begun to explore the use of the CofP construct in a historical case of language loss. She examines the shift to English by several immigrant communities who moved to Michigan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seeking work in the copper mines. It remains to be seen whether the CofP contributes much insight into the interaction of social and linguistic processes when researchers are restricted to using archival materials.

3 The Community of Practice in Broader Perspective

In the previous sections, I canvassed some aspects of the speech community, social networks, and intergroup theory that the CofP stands as an alternative to. In this final section, I attempt to place the CofP in a somewhat broader perspective, showing how the concerns and research questions of the CofP are a link in a much longer chain of humanist theory and discourse. I hope that by explaining the origins and current uses of the CofP, I can also indicate the potential that the construct might have for the future.

Similarities with a number of theories and methodologies in the social sciences are immediately apparent. Clearly, the CofP approach is much influenced by the methods and sensibilities of (linguistic) anthropology. In addition, the centrality it places on the notion of shared experience and negotiated social meaning shares a good deal with theories of language in some other fields, for example, some of the theories of intercultural communication such as Cronen's Co-ordinated Management of Meaning (Cronen et al. 1988) or Gudykunst's (1995) Uncertainty Reduction Theory. Latour and Woolgar (1979) also emphasizes the manner in which meaning is derived through practices, with the provocative addendum that inanimate objects centrally involved in social practices might also be considered participants. But the CofP has even deeper roots in the history of the humanities.

In some respects, the emphasis on analyzing language within a very local, practice-based framework as an alternative to large-scale, quantitative studies of the speech community is the daughter of a tension between positivism and relativism that goes back to at least the seventeenth century. Berlin (1997a) discusses a number of features of the Counter-Enlightenment movement that took hold in Europe in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. There are some remarkable similarities between the discourse emerging out of

the tension between the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment philosophers and some of the discussion born of the tension between the more positivist (quantitative) approaches to sociolinguistics and the more relativistic (qualitative) approaches. Tensions between the Enlightenment ideal of establishing an objective and universal means of expressing human experience and the Counter-Enlightenment's rejection of this as a goal – its emphasis instead on the situated and particular nature of human behavior – seem similar to discussions among sociolinguists about what kind of information is forfeited by different approaches to the study of variation. The challenge for sociolinguistics is the one that the Counter-Enlightenment movement chose not to accept: how to specify the manner in which the particular becomes or relates to the general or universal. As Eckert and Dubois and Horvath have shown, we can begin to meet the task if we employ a catholic enough approach.

Berlin credits the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (1688–1744) with having been the first to seriously explore these differences and it was Vico too who appears to have first perceived the long-term significance of them. Vico held that knowledge of what happened, to what, and in what order, may constitute a sufficient and necessary method for understanding the natural sciences, but he claimed that when you come to try and understand things that relate to humans, individuals, and societies, such disembodied knowledge is no longer sufficient. Vico argued that in order to understand events that occur at the human level, the researcher must foster a degree of empathy with the subject of her or his investigation. This methodological distinction may have been original to Vico, and Vico's observation of this distinction may date the start of separate empirical paths of development for the sciences and the humanities (Berlin 1997b: 357). Vico clearly saw the study of language as falling into the latter category, which he called New Science. "Language . . . [is a form] of self-expression, of wishing to convey what one is and strives for", according to Vico (Berlin 1997a: 246–7). Consequently, no matter how superficially similar cultures might appear, or how similar groups' practices within a culture might appear, Vico believed that cross-comparison was not possible.[4]

Each culture or set of practices was the unique product of the unique circumstances in which it arose. In order to understand a culture or a set of practices, Vico believed it was first and foremost necessary to gain a full understanding of the historical and contemporary setting in which the object of study played itself out. One might say, it is necessary to gain a full understanding of the community in which any given practice acquires meaning.

So by way of conclusion, let me suggest that the CofP, as an attempt to inform the general through the study of the particular, is not only an attempt to theorize the social as fully as the linguistic; it is also an attempt to achieve something more fundamental and more ambitious. To the extent that it successfully provides a model for satisfying all goals for the study of variation and change, it offers the hope of successfully bridging a rift between western scientific approaches that, arguably, has yawned for several hundred years.

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NOTES

1 Santa Ana and Parodi's (1998) notion of nested speech communities attempts to marry speakers' multiplicity of identities with the basic notion of the speech community, thereby bringing the intent (if not the terminology) of speech community theory and the praxis-based theory of the CofP closer together (see Patrick, this volume).
2 The possibility or even likelihood of such change across the life span presents a potential challenge to the notion of studying change through the apparent-time construct. However, the validity of the apparent-time construct for some variables does not mean all variables are necessarily amenable to this form of analysis (see Bailey, this volume).
3 Riley's work is reminiscent of Nichols' (1983) on women's shift away from Gullah and toward English on a Georgia island community and Gal's (1979) on the community-wide shift from Hungarian to German in an Austrian village.
4 A major implication of Vico's position for linguists is that he rejected entirely the notion that one could describe the world in some purely logical form – language for Vico was quintessentially a product of the users and their environment (Berlin 1997a: 248). Gottfried Herder made similar arguments. Like Vico, Herder stressed that in order to truly understand something we have to understand the basis of its uniqueness and singularity. To do so, requires a degree of empathy (or *Einfühlung*) that is generally excluded or marginalized from positivist modes of inquiry (Berlin 1997a: 253).

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