

19 Language Style as Audience Design

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WHAT IS STYLE?

Language style is one of the most challenging aspects of sociolinguistic variation. The basic principle of language style is that an individual speaker does not always talk in the same way on all occasions. Style means that speakers have alternatives or choices – a ‘*that way*’ which could have been chosen instead of a ‘*this way*’. Speakers talk in different ways in different situations, and these different ways of speaking can carry different social meanings.

Style constitutes one whole dimension of linguistic variation – the range of variation within the speech of an individual speaker. It intersects with what William Labov has called the ‘social’ dimension of variation – differences between the speech of different speakers (see Chapter 2 in this volume). In sum, style involves the ways in which the same speakers talk differently on different occasions rather than the ways in which different speakers talk differently from each other.

STYLE IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

We can distinguish two main approaches to the study of style in sociolinguistics. The first, associated with Dell Hymes (see Chapter 1), encompasses the many ways in which individual speakers can express themselves differently in different situations. This recognizes that style can operate on the full range of linguistic levels – in the phonology or sound system of a language, in its syntax or grammar, in its semantics or the lexicon, and in the wider patterns of speaking across whole discourses and conversations. So style may be expressed in different forms of address, in the use of tag questions such as *isn't it*, in different ways of asking a question, in choosing one word over another, as well as in the ways that different vowels and consonants are pronounced. On the social side, Hymes has proposed a

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wide range of factors that may affect the way an individual talks, including audience, purpose, topic, mode, channel and genre (see Chapter 1).

The second approach to style in sociolinguistics is much more strictly defined on both the social and linguistic dimensions. Labov pioneered in his 1966 New York City study a means of eliciting different styles of speech from people within a single interview. In his recorded interviews, as well as conversing with his informants, he had them carry out a series of language tasks, each of which was designed to focus more and more of the speaker's attention on to their speech. When the speaker talked to someone else rather than the interviewer, or discussed topics which got them particularly involved, they were likely to be paying the least attention to their speech, and Labov called this 'casual' speech. When the speaker was answering questions in typical interview fashion, they would be paying rather more attention to their speech and so produced 'careful' style. When they read aloud a brief passage of a story, they would give still more attention to their pronunciation. Reading out a list of isolated words focused more attention again, and reading a set of minimal pairs – words which differ only by a single sound such as *reader* and *raider* – would make the speaker pay the maximum amount of attention to their speech.

On the social side, therefore, this represents what we might call a minimalist approach, compared with what we might call the 'maximalist' view of the more ethnographic work. Labov has also usually worked with micro aspects of linguistic structure – specific sounds which can alternate as two or more variants of one linguistic 'variable', such as the choice between a 'standard' *-ing* pronunciation and a 'non-standard' *-in*' pronunciation in words such as *leaving* and *building*. These are classed as different ways of saying the same thing, and analyses of such sociolinguistic variables have produced findings which, when graphed, have become classics of the sociolinguistic literature.

Peter Trudgill studied the (ng) variable, and Figure 14.1 on p. 181 of this volume from his work on Norwich English is typical of a social class by style graph. Five social groups are distinguished, ranging from the Lower Working Class to the Upper Middle Class, using four different styles. The pattern of the lines of this graph shows two things. First, as we move from the middle-class groups to the working-class groups the use of the *-in*' variant increases and, conversely, the use of the prestigious *-ing* variant decreases. Secondly, the rise of the lines from word lists to casual speech shows that each group style-shifts towards less *-in*' and more *-ing* with each attention-increasing task in the interview. So all four classes use most *-in*' in casual speech, less in careful speech, still less in the reading passage, and least of all in the word lists.

Labov's techniques for eliciting styles have been used in countless studies in many languages and countries since 1966, and in many cases a similar kind of gradient of style-shifting has been found. However, some of the

subsequent research has had different findings, and some researchers have questioned whether these styles really apply outside the confines of the sociolinguistic interview. Many have also questioned whether attention to speech is the factor which is operating here. Some have found that attention could be directed to producing all levels of linguistic alternatives, not just the more prestigious forms such as *-ing* rather than *-in'*. Isn't it also possible for speakers to attend to their speech and rather consciously sound *more* non-standard?

AUDIENCE DESIGN

One critique and development of earlier sociolinguistic approaches to style was the Audience Design framework outlined in Bell (1984). I proposed that style shift occurs primarily in response to the speaker's audience rather than to amount of attention or other factors. This approach grew out of one particular study on style. While researching the language of radio news in New Zealand, I came across an unanticipated situation which proved to be tailored to locating and explaining style shift (Bell 1991). The organization of the New Zealand public broadcasting system at the time meant that two of the radio stations being studied both originated centrally in the same suite of studios. The same individual newsreaders could be heard reading news bulletins on both of these networks. Station YA was 'National Radio', the prestige service of New Zealand's public corporation radio. It had an audience with higher social status than the audience for station ZB, which was one of a network of local community stations.

Figure 19.1 shows the percentage of intervocalic /t/ voicing for four newsreaders recorded on both these stations. When it occurs between two vowels, usually voiceless /t/ can be pronounced like a voiced /d/, making

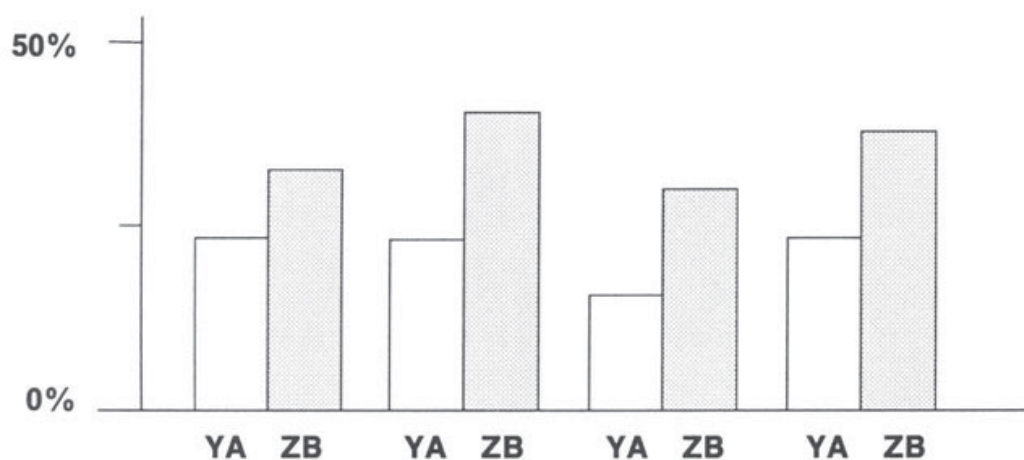


Figure 19.1: Percentage of intervocalic /t/ voicing by four newscasters on two New Zealand radio stations, YA and ZB (from Bell 1982: 162)

words such as *writer* and *latter* sound like *rider* and *ladder*. The six newsreaders shifted on average 20 per cent between YA and ZB. Single newsreaders heard on two different stations showed a remarkable and consistent ability to make considerable style shifts to suit the audience. These switches between stations were at times very rapid: at off-peak hours a single newsreader might alternate between YA and ZB news with as little as ten minutes between bulletins on the different stations.

What could be the cause of these shifts? There is after all just one individual speaker producing two divergent styles. The institution is the same in both cases. The topic mix of the news is similar (in some cases, even the actual scripted news stories are the same). The studio setting is the same. And there is no reason to suppose that the amount of attention paid to speech is being systematically varied. Of all the factors we might suggest as possible influences on news style, only the audience correlated with these shifts.

Looking beyond this particular study, it seemed clear that the same regularities which were amplified in the media context are also operating in face-to-face communication. In mass communication, a broadcaster's individual style is routinely subordinated to a shared station style whose character can only be explained in terms of its target audience. When we look at ordinary conversation, we can also see the important effect that an audience has on a speaker's style, although the impact is less obvious than for broadcasters. In particular, we know that mass communicators are under considerable pressure to win the approval of their audience in order to maintain their audience size or market share. In ordinary conversation the urge to gain the approval of one's audience is similar in kind although less in degree.

The audience design framework was developed to account for these patterns in face-to-face as well as mass communication. The main points can be summarized like this:

1. *Style is what an individual speaker does with a language in relation to other people.* The basic tenet of audience design is that style is oriented to people rather than to mechanisms such as attention. Style is essentially a social thing. It marks interpersonal and intergroup relations. It is interactive – and active. Although audience design and its hypotheses are based on evidence behind this proposition, this is really a premise rather than a hypothesis. Our view of style is ultimately derived from our view of the nature of human persons. Behind audience design there lies a strong and quite general claim that the character of (intra-speaker) style shift derives at a deep level from the nature of (inter-speaker) language differences between people.

2. *Style derives its meaning from the association of linguistic features with particular social groups.* The social evaluation of a group is transferred to the linguistic features that are associated with that group. The link between

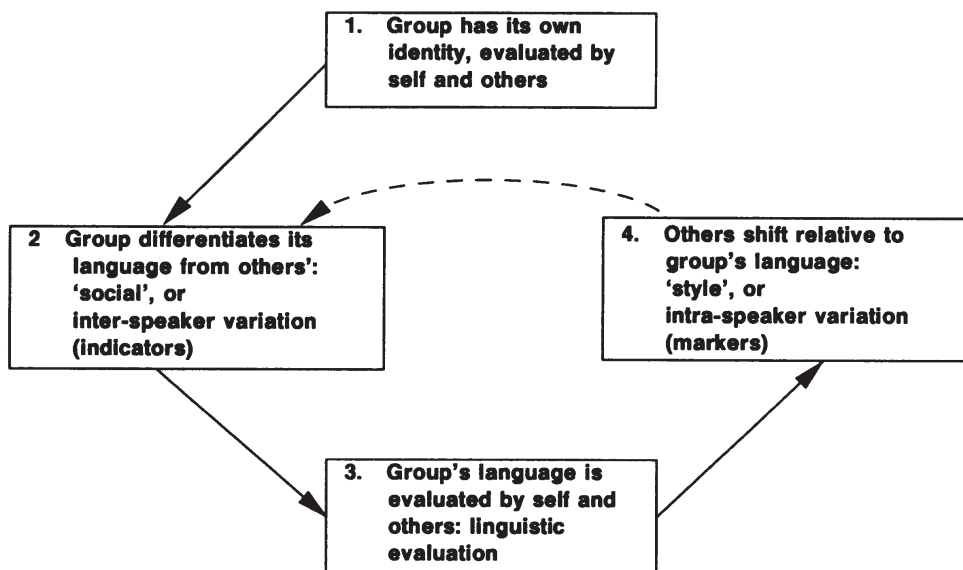


Figure 19.2: The derivation of style from inter-speaker variation

differences in the language of different groups ('social' variation in Labov's terms) and within the language of individual speakers (stylistic variation) is made by society's evaluation of the group's language (Figure 19.2). Sociolinguists have noted this at least since Ferguson and Gumperz (1960). Evaluation of a linguistic variable and style shift of that variable are reciprocal, as Labov (1972) demonstrated in identifying these 'marker' variables. Evaluation is always associated with style shift, and style shift with evaluation. Those few variables which do not show style shift (indicators) are also not evaluated in the speech community. Stylistic meaning therefore has what we can call a normative basis. A particular style is *normally* associated with a particular group or situation, and therefore carries with it the flavour of those associations.

3. *Speakers design their style primarily for and in response to their audience.* This is the heart of audience design. Style shift occurs primarily in response to a change in the speaker's audience. Audience design is generally manifested in a speaker shifting their style to be more like that of the person they are talking to – this is 'convergence' in the terms of the Speech/Communication Accommodation Theory developed by Giles and associates (see Chapter 18). Response is the primary mode of style shift. Style is a responsive phenomenon, but it is actively so, not passive.

This can be seen in a study of the speech of a travel agent carried out by Coupland (1984). Coupland recorded an assistant in a travel agency in conversation with a wide social range of clients. He quantified the assistant's level for the intervocalic (t) voicing variable when speaking to different groups of clients, and compared that with the levels the clients use in their own speech. Figure 19.3 shows how the travel assistant accommodates

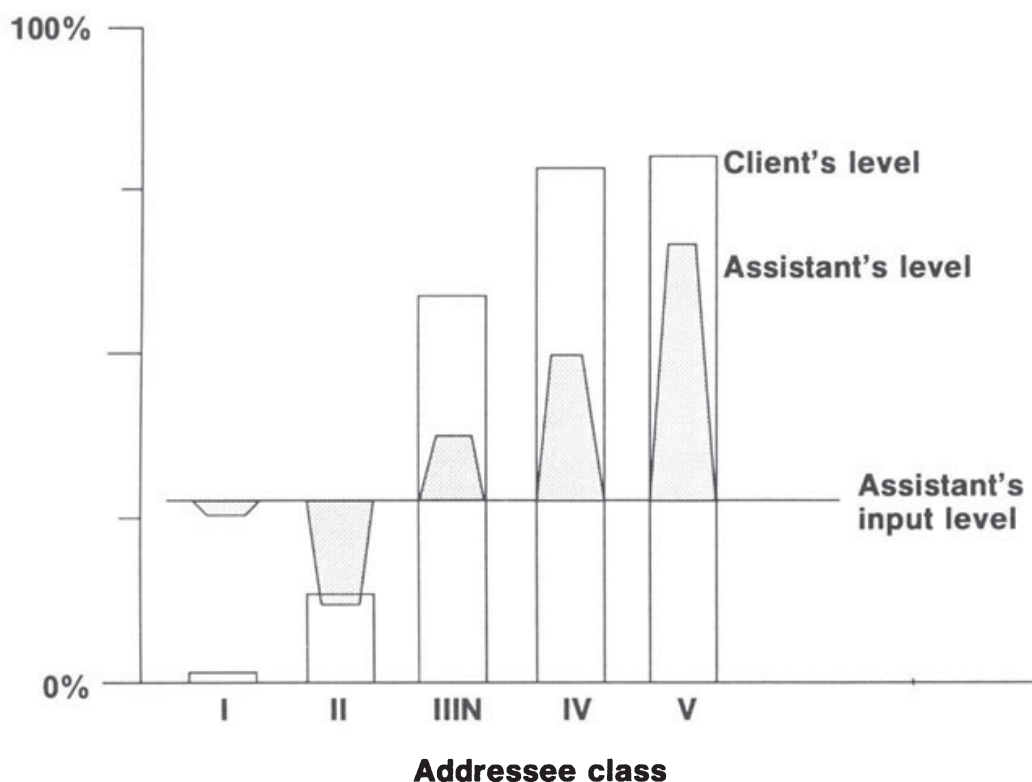


Figure 19.3: Travel assistant's convergence on intervocalic (t) voicing variable to five occupational classes of clients. Input level taken as assistant's speech to own class. IIIIN (derived from Coupland 1984: Figure 4).

towards the clients' own levels of (t) voicing, shifting to more (t) voicing for lower-class clients who use more voicing themselves, and to less (t) voicing with higher-class clients. In this style shift she goes on average at least half-way to meet her clients.

4. *Audience design applies to all codes and levels of a language repertoire, monolingual and multilingual.* Audience design does not refer only to quantitative style shift of individual sociolinguistic variables such as (ng). Within a single language, it involves features such as choice of personal pronouns or address terms (Ervin-Tripp 1972) and politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987), as well as quantitative style-shifting. Audience design also applies to all codes and repertoires within a speech community, including the switch from one complete language to another in bilingual situations (see Chapter 28). It has long been recognized that the processes which make a monolingual shift styles are the same as those which make a bilingual switch languages. Where a monolingual speaker of English will make quantitative shifts on a number of linguistic variables when talking to a stranger rather than to a family member, a bilingual speaker in parts of Scotland, for example, will shift from talking Gaelic to a family member into English to address a stranger.

5. *Variation on the style dimension within the speech of a single speaker derives from and echoes the variation which exists between speakers on the 'social' dimension.* This style axiom (Bell 1984: 151) claims that the inter-relation between intra-speaker style shift and inter-speaker dialect differences is a derivation. The axiom refers both to the historical origins of styles, and to the present basis on which styles carry social meaning. That is, distinct styles originated in past differences in the language of different groups. And styles carry a particular social meaning now in the present because of their association with the language of particular groups.

The style axiom encapsulates the often-noted fact that the same linguistic variables operate simultaneously on both social and stylistic dimensions, so that for one isolated variable it may be difficult to distinguish a 'casual salesman from a careful pipefitter' (Labov 1972: 240). It also reflects the quantitative relationship of the social and stylistic dimensions: the maximum style shift on graphs such as Figure 14.1 in Chapter 14 (i.e. Trudgill's (ng)) is usually less than the maximum difference between social groups. On Trudgill's graph, the greatest style shift is by the Upper Working Class and is about 80 per cent, while the maximum difference between the different classes is some 95 per cent in style B.

6. *Speakers show a fine-grained ability to design their style for a range of different addressees, and to a lesser degree for other audience members.* These are the classic findings of Giles's accommodation model (e.g. Giles and Powesland 1975; see Chapter 18). In its essence, speech accommodation theory proposed that speakers accommodate their speech style to their hearers in order to win approval. Although the theory was extensively expanded and revised during the 1980s, its principal insight has been that speakers respond primarily to their audience in designing their talk. As well as changing the way they talk when addressing different people, there is good evidence that speakers can make even finer shifts to cater to a range of different people within their audience.

Not all audience members are equally important. We can distinguish and rank their roles according to whether or not they are known, ratified or addressed by the speaker. We can picture them as occupying concentric circles, each one more distant from the speaker (Figure 19.4). The main character in the audience is the second person, the *addressee*, who is known, ratified and addressed. Among the other, third persons who may be present, the *auditors* are known and ratified interlocutors within the group. Third parties whom the speaker knows to be there, but who are not ratified as part of the group, are *overhearers*. And other parties whose presence the speaker does not even know about are *eavesdroppers*.

Speakers are able to subtly adjust their style when a stranger joins a group and becomes an 'auditor' – present in the group but not directly addressed. They even respond to the presence of an overhearer who is within earshot

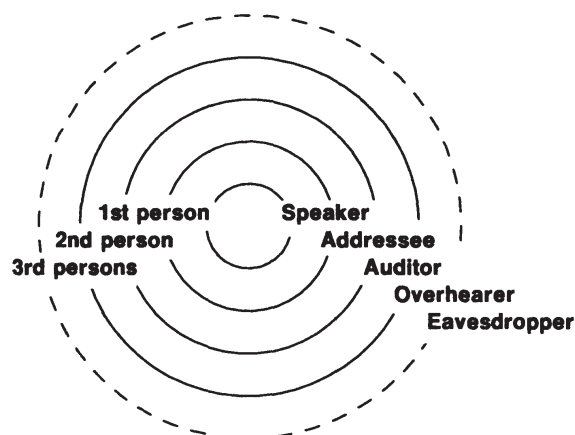


Figure 19.4: Persons and roles in the speech situation

but is not part of the speaker's conversational circle. In a bilingual community in Hungary, for instance, the arrival of a monolingual German speaker at an Hungarian-speaking inn can be enough to make the conversation switch into German (Gal 1979). The switch between different languages is a much more obvious manifestation of overhearer design than the quantitative style shifts within the same language by a monolingual speaker, but the process is basically the same.

7. *Style shifts according to topic or setting derive their meaning and direction of shift from the underlying association of topics or settings with typical audience members.* This tentative hypothesis suggests that when speakers shift their style because of a change of topic, this is an echo of the kind of shift that occurs when a speaker style-shifts in response to the kind of addressee a particular topic is associated with. It implies that we talk about education in a style that echoes how we talk to a teacher, or about work in a style that echoes how we talk to the boss. Thus Coupland's study mentioned above also found that the travel agent shifted her style significantly between work-related topics and other topics.

8. *As well as the 'responsive' dimension of style, there is the 'initiative' dimension.* Here the style shift itself *initiates* a change in the situation rather than *resulting* from such a change.

Sociolinguists have drawn attention to this distinction at least since Blom and Gumperz (1972). In responsive style shift, there is a regular association between language and social situation. The entry of outsiders to a local group, for example, triggers a switch from local dialect to standard speech. These situational shifts reflect the speech community's norms of what is appropriate speech for certain audiences. Initiative style trades on such regular associations, infusing the flavour of one setting into a different context. Here language becomes an independent variable which itself shapes the situation. So we find bilingual speakers who switch out of their usual

home language into the prestige language of the wider community in order to clinch an argument with a family member. In initiative style shift, the individual speaker makes creative use of language resources often from beyond the immediate speech community, such as distant dialects, or stretches those resources in novel directions. Literary examples of this kind of 'stylization' (Bakhtin 1981) are well known in the use that J. R. R. Tolkien and James Joyce, for example, have made of other dialects or languages to create their own unique voices.

9. *Initiative style shifts are in essence 'referee design', by which the linguistic features associated with a group can be used to express identification with that group.* Initiative style shifts derive their force and their direction of shift from their underlying association with kinds of persons or groups. They focus on an absent reference group rather than the present addressee, for example by adopting a non-native accent. Referees are third persons who are not physically present at an interaction but who are so salient for a speaker that they influence style even in their absence. Initiative style shift is essentially a redefinition by the speaker of their own identity in relation to their audience. So in many New Zealand television commercials, non-New Zealand accents are used in order to call up desirable associations with aristocracy through use of British Received Pronunciation, or with the streetwise wheeler-dealer through imitation of Cockney (Bell 1992). Trudgill's study of the accents of pop singers (see Chapter 20) shows how British singers have adopted features of American English in order to associate with the prestige of American popular music. They have also been known to adopt British working-class features in singing music (such as punk) which is associated with the values of that class.

CONCLUSION

The study of style has had a chequered career in sociolinguistics. In 1972 Labov wrote that 'the most immediate problem to be solved in the attack on sociolinguistic structure is the quantification of the dimension of style'. However, in the intervening years there has been much less study of stylistic variation than of variation between different groups of speakers. Style is attracting more interest again, and as the American scholars Rickford and McNair-Knox have written (1994: 52): 'With respect to theory development, stylistic variation seems to offer more potential for the integration of past findings and the establishment of productive research agendas than virtually any other area in sociolinguistics.'

Style research seems to be taking two directions. One of these is manifested in the work of Finegan and Biber (1994), whose 'multi-dimensional' approach developed as an alternative to the one I have taken

above. The other direction responds to criticisms of both attention and audience factors as inadequate to account for the pervasiveness of initiative style and for the fact that language is not just a reflection of social structure. Recent critical social theorizing stresses that language is not independent of society. The linguistic and the social are not two cleanly separate dimensions, and language constitutes social reality as well as reflecting it. Identity may be revealed and expressed by language on its own, as for instance when we can tell what kind of person a speaker is just from hearing them on the radio, with no other clues to their character. This approach promises new insights into the nature of sociolinguistic style (Coupland 1997).

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