

## Book Review

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*Social Meaning and Linguistic Variation: Theorizing the Third Wave*. By Lauren Hall-Lew, Emma Moore, & Robert Podesva. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (hardcover), 2021. Xiv + 390. ISBN: 9781108471626.

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Sociolinguistics is the study of socially meaningful linguistic variation, and for a while now (though most officially in a 2012 paper), Penny Eckert has referred to three waves in the way that researchers have paired social meaning and variation. In the first wave, variation is correlated with macrosocial categories (i.e., women use more standardized forms than men), and in the second wave, variation is correlated with more locally-meaningful categories (i.e., Burnouts at a Michigan high school in the 1980s use more local forms than Jocks). In both cases, the meaning of a variant is essentially the usage correlation (i.e., released /t/ = female), an “incidental fallout from social space” (Eckert 2012:94). The third wave is distinct from the other approaches in that it centralizes meaning-making, and, in her description, Eckert (2012) outlines a number of tenets about the nature of sociolinguistic meaning that third-wave investigations reveal: meanings are underspecified, combinatorial, mutable, and are both reflected in the stylistic practice of language users, and also shaped by such usage.

This third-wave approach is the focus of this festschrift-esque edited volume, which features research inspired by Eckert. Structurally, the book starts with an introduction by the editors, ends with an afterword by Eckert, and between these points there are fifteen contributed chapters from different sets of authors, many, but not all, of whom worked with Eckert at Stanford University. These authors present independent work that explores the nature of sociolinguistic meaning and the role that such meaning has in speaker perception, stylistic variation, and language change. Critically, the contributions do not simply provide support for Eckert’s (2012) proposals but they build on her work, and with this volume, the third wave feels like it has officially moved out of “its infancy” (p. 88) into a fully blown program with a number of leaders and a range of intellectual directions. In this way the editors Hall-Lew, Moore, and Podesva are undoubtedly successful in having created a volume that will “advance sociolinguistic theory” (1).

In some cases the advances come from vigorously pushing and pulling at core third-wave concepts, and in a particularly well-organized sequence of three chapters

(9, 10, and 11), the “indexical field” gets this treatment. This popular concept was coined by Eckert (2008), and refers to the idea that a variant—for example, word-final /t/-release—can index a variety of ideologically-related meanings (articulate, careful, proper, stiff, exasperated, and dramatic), and a given subset of these meanings can be highlighted as a function of context. In chapter 9, Maegaard and Phrao question whether a variant must have a single indexical field, since their Danish data suggests that the same variant can be interpreted wildly differently depending on perceived speaker ethnicity, and without a clear ideological link between the different meanings. In the following chapter, Gafter argues that yes, in some cases, seemingly incompatible meanings really can come from the same ideologically-linked indexical field. Specifically, he looks at how Mizrahi Jews in Israel use [ʕ]—an ethnically-marked, stigmatized, but also prescriptively correct variant—across stylistic contexts. Gafter makes the case that speakers are not choosing from one of these meanings when using [ʕ] (i.e., Mizrahi or formal) but are drawing on “the entire indexical baggage” (237), in this case “being formal in an authentically Mizrahi way” (238). Finally, Sharma makes the case for deeply personalized indexical fields, where the association between forms and meanings differ across speakers depending on their biographies. The example she explores is how a meaning like “authentic” can be signaled by different variants for different speakers depending on their first dialect. For me, this highlights the work to be done in exploring how indexical fields in production and perception might differ—using my native BATH vowel might reflect authentic, real-talk from me, but could result in my being heard as affected by my US audience—and how much speaker choices are driven by a speaker’s own personal links between form and meaning, as opposed to the links they assume their listeners will make.

In fact, earlier, in chapter 6, Campbell-Kibler presents evidence that indexical links between forms and meaning may not even be shared within the same person, across different sociocognitive tasks. Specifically, she finds that sensitivity to talker gender in a fricative discrimination task (do listeners hear an ambiguous token as /s/ or /ʃ/?) does not correlate with whether the same listener evaluates talkers as more masculine/feminine in a talker evaluation task, nor with how they produce fricatives themselves. That is, speaker perception does not correlate with sound perception, and neither measure correlates with speech production, suggesting that indexicality may be represented or invoked differently across different cognitive mechanisms. This serious consideration of sociolinguistic cognition is also reflected in D’Onofrio’s chapter 7, where she looks at how sociolinguistic perception interacts with memory. She finds evidence that listeners are more likely to make mistakes in a recognition task if the error is consistent with their social expectations for how the speaker sounds (i.e., falsely recalling hearing a word from a speaker because it is produced with an accent consistent with listener expectations for the speaker). This finding adds to work highlighting the complex interplay between raw experience and the filter of stereotypes in indexical representations (cf. Drager & Kirtley 2016).

A consistent thread in Eckert’s work has been the role of more sound-symbolic, non-arbitrary meanings of certain variants (Eckert 2010; D’Onofrio & Eckert 2021), and two chapters in the volume engage substantially with the non-arbitrary meanings

of sounds. Podesva (chapter 16) asks us to seriously consider the body as a source of language meaning and language change, showing how oral postures like smiling or an open-jaw setting correlate with pronunciation variation. Conversely, Drager, Hardeman-Guthrie, Shutz, and Chik (chapter 8) challenge one of the most famous iconic form-meaning pairs in linguistics—low pitch and larger body size (Ohala 1994)—by manipulating pitch in samples of talkers from Hawai‘i, and playing them to Hawaiian listeners. They generally find that their male talkers are heard as larger in the *high* pitch conditions, reflecting how associations between pitch and size are culturally specific. But they also show that in manipulating pitch, they manipulate the whole stylistic perception of the talker: across pitch conditions, listeners do not simply perceive the same sort of person with a larger/smaller body, but paint entirely different images of the who they are listening to when pitch changes. This emphasizes Eckert’s (2008) point that context is incredibly important for variant interpretation.

While Eckert’s studies have often investigated speech sounds, she has always shown interest in variation across multiple levels of linguistic structure (e.g., Eckert 2000, 2019), and three chapters (3, 4, and 5) in the book have a non-phonetic/non-phonological focus: Moore looks at syntactic variation in British English (negative concord), Beltrama and Staum Cassasanto look at intensifiers in Italian and English (*-issimo, totally*), and Acton looks at definites in English (*that one; the Americans*). In different ways, each of these chapters highlights how the social meaning of a variant can be tied to its referential meaning or pragmatic function; for example, talkers using intensifiers (which reference extremity on a scale) are rated as more exciting and outgoing, and the association between the form and meaning here is arguably iconic. These chapters not only show parallels around sociolinguistic meaning across linguistic structures, but also offer unique insights into how form-meaning associations can be created and evoked. For example, Acton’s sociopragmatic principles (107-114) offer a formal description of how socioindexical inference happens, emphasizing the role of available alternatives of expression/pronunciation.

In my understanding, one criticism of third-wave approaches has centered on the (ir)relevancy of this very localized look at variant meaning in the broader and more long-term study of language change (Eckert 2008:453-454). While sociolinguistic work needn’t have implications for sound change to be valuable, four chapters in this volume make cases for the critical role of social meaning in sound change: Hall-Lew, Cardoso, and Davies (chapter 2) look at a vowel merger in San Francisco; Zhang (chapter 12) explores the emergence of the “Cosmopolitan Mandarin” persona and associated linguistic style in China; Starr (chapter 14) looks at changing COT-CAUGHT-COURT realizations in Singaporean English; and Podesva (chapter 16) looks at GOAT-fronting in Californian English. Taken together, these chapters demonstrate that language change happens because of stylistic, persona, and/or indexical changes, in ways that cannot be separated from societal change more broadly. As Zhang puts it, “[Changing] interpretations and evaluations of the content and form of change as well as the changing beliefs about social and linguistic normativity fundamentally shape the process of sociolinguistic change” (287). It is hard to overestimate the significance of this perspective to our understanding of sound change, because it almost flips a first

wave assumption that “linguistic change [emerges] from pressures within the linguistic system” (Eckert 2012:90). However, rather than dismissing the other waves, Hall-Lew, Cardoso, and Davies highlight the importance of combining first, second, and third wave analyses in understanding language change: “The first and second-wave studies give us the data to ask the question, and the third-wave approach gives us the theory to answer it” (47).

The remaining two chapters challenge other classic assumptions in the sociolinguistic literature. In her study of Danish teens in Vollmose (on the island of Funen), a poorer area of Denmark with a large number of second- and third-generation immigrants, Quist (chapter 13) finds that the speakers draw on a pool of linguistic features in constructing individual identities, critically mixing “ethnolectal” features with local Funen features and standardized West Danish forms. She argues that a classic analysis of ethnolects that only looked for ethnolectal features would not only have been inaccurate and missed the complexity of the linguistic practice of these young people, but would problematically stress the isolation of the community, when in reality, most communities are in contact with, and have relationships to, other communities.

In chapter 15, Tamminga explores co-variation amongst six sound variables undergoing change in Philadelphia. The way that we word core sociolinguistic principles (e.g., *women use stable standardized forms more than men* and *women lead sound change* [Labov 2001:261-293]) assumes that a speaker who is advanced in one sound change would also be advanced in another; put another way, that being a linguistic innovator is a general trait of a talker, or groups of talkers. In this chapter, which is part of a larger project looking at innovators, Tamminga shows that an even more basic assumption does not really hold, that, within speakers, innovative/non-standard variant usage would covary across time. For example, we would predict that in periods of conversation when a speaker is using their most standard TOOTH vowel, they are also using their most standard MOUTH, PRICE, and GOAT vowels. Instead, she finds that “apparent microcovariation is very much the exception rather than the norm” (353), forcing us to face the stylistic independence of different non-standard and/or innovate variants.

While it wasn’t a central point of the book, the volume also includes methodological advances. Tamminga demonstrates how a specific type of statistical modeling—Generalized Additive Mixed Models (GAMMs)—can be used to quantify a number of aspects of stylistic variation: differences across speakers in how much they vary their speech within an interview (cf. D’Onofrio & Stecker 2022), the extremity and frequency of stylistic shifts, and correlations between shifts across different variables. Podesva’s work incorporates video to look at GOAT-fronting in smiled versus non-smiled utterances, reflecting a broader body of exciting work from his lab incorporating video into sociolinguistic analysis (e.g., Voigt, Podesva & Jurafsky 2014). Drager, Hardeman-Guthrie, Shutz, and Chik combine tag clouds with the matched guise technique to show the complexity and contextual dependence of indexical fields.

Editor introductions are sometimes simply brief summaries of the following chapters—that is, they can be a little skippable. In this one, however, the editors provide an overview of key concepts in the third wave, explaining the questions that have arisen from centering the social meaning of variables, and glossing terms like

“indexical fields,” “indexical orders,” “bricolage,” and “enregisterment.” The authors also nod to other open issues in third-wave studies that aren’t directly addressed in the volume, such as a more critical evaluation of the sociolinguistic variable as a construct, and the definition of a sign. In these ways the introduction is valuable both as a prelude to the other chapters but also as a stand-alone introduction to the third wave.

While each of the chapters can be read on their own, I think the work has value as a volume for anyone wanting to get a sense of current “Big Questions” in sociolinguistics, useful for researchers and teachers. I can easily imagine a graduate-level course built around this textbook (paired with papers by Eckert) or a reading group working through the chapters together for inspiration and debate.

For anyone keeping up with the featured authors, not all of the data presented is clearly new, or, at least, some of the new data is very close to data presented in existing publications. But one advantage of the volume is that, free from some of the constraints of the traditional journal article, the authors have the space to get a little more candid and risky in their thoughts and predictions. For example, Tamminga argues that while it “may sound outdated to some ears,” the idea that prestige drives style-shifting “has quietly persisted alongside the stylistic turn of the third wave” (342). Podesva is bold in his claim that “a non-trivial number of a linguistic variant’s social meanings derives from embodied practice” (379), and Hall-Lew, Cardoso, and Davies are blunt in the answer-question conclusion to their chapter: “Why does a sound change spread faster among one group of people than another? Because sound changes undergo changes in indexicality as well as changes in form” (47).

The freedom the authors have is also true in terms of the tone of the writing—the papers often feel relatively chatty—fitting for a volume honoring Penny Eckert, who has dismissed “trying to be fancy by talking backwards” (Eckert 2018:xii). This may contribute to the other sense of chattiness I get from the volume, that of a multidirectional discourse. At times I felt like I was sitting in on a conversation between really smart and thoughtful people.

Eckert displays her own guilelessness in her afterword, which is short but as thought-provoking as the rest of the volume. She takes the opportunity to talk about the third wave, highlighting how a focus on meaning showed up in earlier work than her own, and emphasizing (again) that the third wave does not replace the first and second waves, but rather represents a different level of analysis that is necessarily in conversation with those other levels.

Despite her humility, no one can deny Eckert’s “profound influence” (vii) on the field. This is very clear in terms of the points she has made and the constructs she has named. But I also think that this book shows it is true in terms of her intellectual approach. The third wave of sociolinguistics is about meaning making, and meaning making is “the pattern-seeking activity that is central to human life” (386). The contributing authors push for theory that is both logically and empirically robust, but that doesn’t forget the humans that use the language we study.

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