

Locating Language in Identity

Barbara Johnstone

1 Introduction

How do linguistic forms and patterns come to be associated with identities? What is it about the social practice we call language that enables linguistic forms to point to ‘social meanings’ like identity without necessarily referring to them? This chapter explores these questions. I describe how links between forms and social meanings are made, often fleetingly, in interaction and how such links can sometimes stabilize and coalesce into styles of discourse associated with identities. In the process, I discuss four key concepts: *indexicality*, *reflexivity*, *metapragmatics*, and *enregisterment*. I first show how the concept of indexicality helps account for the way in which linguistic forms and social meanings are related (section 2). In section 3, I discuss reflexivity and metapragmatics, the general and more specific mechanisms that allow indexical relationships to be created. Section 4 sketches how indexical form--social meaning links can stabilize, becoming reusable and accreting into sets of links sometimes called styles. For this, I draw on the concept of enregisterment.

My exposition of these concepts follows current thought in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, and readers of this chapter should come to be able to use the terms the way many students of language and identity use them. However, I end the chapter, in section

5, with a critique of this way of thinking about meaning, suggesting that if we take the ideas of indexicality, reflexivity, metapragmatics, and enregisterment seriously we should be drawn to a way of thinking about language that does not distinguish ‘social’ or ‘pragmatic’ meaning from meaning of any other sort.

2. Meaning and indexicality

For most of its history, linguistics has focused on denotation, or the relationship between linguistic signs and things in the world. From the point of view of denotation, it has typically been thought that the meaning of a sentence can be recovered by parsing its structure and looking up its words in a mental dictionary. This level of meaning is thought not to vary across contexts; a sentence means the same thing, on this abstract level, no matter who utters it, in what situation.


Clearly, though, what a sentence is actually taken to mean does vary according to the context in which it is uttered. A sentence that would be appropriate if uttered in one context can seem rude or crazy in another. To account for this, philosophers and linguists began to develop theories of ‘pragmatic’ meaning (see, for example, Levinson 1983) that purport to account for how people actually interpret each others’ utterances. There are many versions of pragmatic theory, but the basic notion is that speakers and hearers add a layer of calculations about the context on top of calculations about lexical and structural meaning that are needed to figure out the utterance’s ‘literal,’ denotational meaning. For example, according to Speech Act theory (Searle 1969), in order to decide whether ‘It’s

'chilly in here' is to be taken as a request to close a window or simply an assertion of fact, the addressee makes calculations about whether the speaker would benefit from the addressee's taking action, whether the addressee is able to take action, whether the speaker really desires the action (or, alternatively, is being ironic), and so on.

Whether or not one person can request another's compliance in the first place has to do with power relations associated with culture- and situation-specific identities. It is easier for a superior to make a request of a social inferior than the other way around, and social superiority and inferiority are connected with identities like boss, teacher, sergeant, and sometimes 'male' or 'white' versus identities like employee, student, private, or 'female' or 'black.' It is easier to make a request of someone socially closer than someone socially more distant, and social closeness is connected with identities like spouse, neighbor, and friend. And some individuals are more intimidating, some more approachable. So linguists need a way of thinking about how social and personal identities and linguistic forms are related.

Sociolinguists have, in fact, talked about 'social meaning' for some time. Beginning in the 1960s, William Labov's research (Labov, 1963) showed how facts about speakers' identities could be correlated with how they talked in various situations. Since then, new ways of thinking about identity and new reasons for talking about it have deepened our understanding of what language can accomplish in addition to denotation and pragmatic illocution. We know, for example, that when a person says 'It's chilly in here' she is not only uttering a string of words that can be heard as having a literal, denotative, meaning

and that are aimed at accomplishing some pragmatic action, but she is also displaying something, potentially, about what sort of a person she is (or what sort of persona she is adopting) in the situation at hand, and we know that this display is essential to the work the utterance does in the interaction. However, sociolinguists have only fairly recently started to ask exactly what ‘social meaning’ is and how linguistic forms acquire meanings of this sort.

One influential model of this process begins with the concept of *indexicality*. The idea of indexicality originates with American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (pronounced ‘purse’). Peirce distinguished among three ways in which phenomena (including linguistic ones) could be taken as meaningful signs. A phenomenon can be taken as an iconic sign if it resembles what it is taken to mean. When  is used to refer to a pencil, it is functioning as an iconic sign. A sign is *symbolic* if it is related to its meaning by convention rather than by resemblance. The word *pencil* is functioning as a symbol when it is taken to refer to a pencil, and because the sign does not resemble its referent, the word *pencil* can also be used for other things that may or may not actually involve a pencil: you can ‘pencil someone in’ for an appointment via keyboard or pen rather than by using a pencil. A sign is *indexical* if it is related to its meaning by virtue of co-occurring with the thing it is taken to mean. When we hear thunder, we often experience lightening, rain and a darkening sky, so the sound of thunder may lead us to expect a storm. Because the sound of thunder evokes storminess in this way, thunder noise can be used to evoke a storm in a staged play. Likewise, if hearing a word pronounced a particular way is experienced in connection with a particular style of dress or grooming, a

particular set of social alignments, or a particular social activity, that pronunciation may evoke and/or create a social identity. The relationship between the pronunciation and the identity is an *indexical* relationship; we can say that the pronunciation *indexes* the identity; the pronunciation can be called an *indexical* (or an *index*) when it serves this purpose. Just as pronunciations can index identities, by virtue of being experienced together with other evidence of them, so can any other kind of linguistic form: words, phrases, grammatical patterns, patterns of discourse, even linguistic consistency or inconsistency over a lifetime (Johnstone forthcoming).

According to the linguistic anthropologists who first brought the concept of indexicality into sociolinguistics (Ochs 1992, Silverstein 2003), indexical relationships between linguistic form and social meaning can emerge at various levels of abstraction. Few, if any, linguistic forms exclusively index one particular social identity. For example, with relation to gendered identities, ‘many of the linguistic features that in the literature are associated primarily with either men or women have as their core social meaning a particular affective stance’ (Ochs 1992, 341) like toughness or softness. In some societies, styles of linguistic politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987), that is, how people attend to their addressees’ face needs, can come to index gender. Language that comes to seem gendered in a particular sociocultural milieu arises out of contexts in which people use certain linguistic forms in the process of performing particular pragmatic, interactional practices. The same observations apply to how identities other than gendered ones are indexed. Figure 1 sketches how indexical meanings can be layered and provides several examples.

	A linguistic form is used by a particular person in performing an ...	interactional, pragmatic activity, which can then come to index a ...	social identity
Ochs's (1992) terms		'direct indexicality'	'indirect indexicality'
Silverstein's (2003) terms	' <i>n</i> -th-order indexicality'	' <i>n</i> +1-th order indexicality'	'(<i>n</i> +1)+1-th order indexicality'
examples	A mother uses 'baby talk' (raised pitch, simplified words, etc.).	This comes to be heard as accommodating a child's (perceived) needs and wants,	which comes to index the social identity of caregiver to children (example from Ochs 1992).
	A person with a Greek name uses high rising tone on word-final <i>-er</i> .	This comes to be heard as projecting forceful solidarity, as someone with relatively little power in Australian society,	which comes to index the social identity of recent immigrant (example from Kiesling 2005)
	A person from Pittsburgh monophthongizes /aw/.	This comes to be heard as speaking casually, showing solidarity with neighbors,	which comes to index the social identity of authentic Pittsburgher (example from Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson 2006)

Figure 1: Indexicality is layered

Indexical forms can both evoke and construct identities, and they always potentially do both. Thus any of the indexical relationships described in the right-most column of Figure 1 can themselves become tools for pragmatic, interactional practices that index other social identities. For example, if a woman uses baby talk in a romantic situation it might then index femininity; if an Australian used features of 'wogspeak' to parody an immigrant it might index a political affiliation. Every *n*+1-th-order index, in Silverstein's terms, can itself function as an *n*-th-order index when the context that the form

presupposes (e.g. mother speaking to child) gets evoked in order to shape (Silverstein uses ‘entail’) a new identity (e.g. feminine flirt).

3. Creating indexicality: Reflexivity and metapragmatics

How do indexical meanings get attached to linguistic forms? In other words, how do *correlations* between form and context become *indexical relationships* between form and context? How do people come to share the idea that, in the U.S. people who pronounce /æ/ as [a] in some contexts sound upper-class? How do we learn that words like *heretofore* are examples of ‘legalese’? How does *wicked*, used as an adverbial intensifier in phrases like *wicked good*, get associated with New Englanders, and how does *hella*, used the same way, get associated with Northern California youth? The answer is surprisingly simple: people learn to hear linguistic variants as having indexical meaning by being told that they do, and they continue to share ideas about indexical meaning as long as they keep telling each other about them.

On the most general level, we are able to tell each other about the indexical meanings of linguistic forms because language is *reflexive*—language is always about itself, no matter what else it is also about. Every utterance is an example of how an utterance can be structured, how it can sound, and what it can accomplish. Every time we say something we are potentially modeling to our hearers how someone with the identities that are being oriented to at the moment would say it. As Talbot Taylor puts it, ‘We ourselves are the

sources of our own verbal regularity' by virtue of 'the normative character of the situated events of linguistic production' (Taylor 1997, 165).

More specifically, connections between linguistic form and indexical meaning can be highlighted as people interact. These strategies are sometimes referred to under the rubric of *metapragmatics* (Silverstein 1993, Agha 2006). Metapragmatics encompasses all the ways in which an utterance can be *framed* (Goffman 1986[1974], Tannen 1993) or *contextualized* (Gumperz 1982), that is, linked with a particular context. Forms can be metapragmatically linked with social identities explicitly, in utterances like 'You know you're from Maine if you say *wicked* instead of *very*' or 'She sounds like such a nerd.' Slightly less direct metapragmatic links can also involve words or phrases that refer to social identities. For example, in answer to a question about a clematis vine, the pronunciations [klɪmæDɪs] and [klɪmDɪs] were suggested. A third pronunciation was introduced by another speaker, who said 'It's [klɪmaDɪs] if you're in the garden club.' With this move, she linked the pronunciation [klɪmaDɪs] with a social identity (being 'in the garden club') associated with expertise in the area of plant-name pronunciation but also with the upper-class snobbery that can be evoked in the U.S. by pronouncing words in the BATH class with [a] rather than [æ].

But not all metapragmatic framing occurs explicitly, as talk about talk. 'Text-metricity' is perhaps the most basic metapragmatic practice. The idea of text-metricity originated with linguist and philologist Roman Jakobson (1960), who pointed out that, in traditional poetic language in Europe and elsewhere, terms with similar meanings appear in parallel

places. Parallelism is the reuse of similar or the same structure. Rhyme and meter are common types of parallelism in traditional poetry; grammatical parallelism is common in oratory. Parallelism provides a frame in which the item or items that differ from line to line are highlighted and semantically juxtaposed. Because the items occur in the same context, we are led to compare or contrast them. As Tannen (1987) points out, people also do this collaboratively in spontaneous everyday talk, re-using bits of others' sounds and grammar and so making the places where their contributions differ stand out.

Variation in the context of repetition is arguably the most fundamental human meaning-making practice (Koch 1984, Johnstone 1994). And just as text-metricity can draw on and create links between denotational meanings (connecting love with doves on countless greeting cards, for example, by using the words *love* and *dove* as a rhyming pair), it can create indexical links between form and social meaning. Think again about the 'clematis' example above. Here is the interchange:

Ruth: What's that one called?

Anne: That's called	[kl̩mæ̩D̩s] or		depending how you pronounce it.
	[kl̩m̩D̩s],		
Bess: It's	[kl̩ma̩D̩s]		if you're in the garden club.
	<i>pronunciation</i>		<i>identity attribution</i>

Anne and Bess's contributions, framed in parallel structures, collaboratively set up two slots: a slot for possible pronunciations of the name of the vine, and a slot for attributing pronunciations to personas. Anne's generic *you* suggests that the alternative pronunciations she proposes are in free variation ('depending how you pronounce it'). Bess is able to take advantage of the metrical structure that has been set up to link a third alternative to a stereotypical persona, the knowledgeable but snobbish garden club member. (Note how this move also positions Bess as an expert, but without linking her own identity to the garden club stereotype.)

If we think of 'text' more inclusively (as any strip of interaction rather than only a verbal exchange) and extend the notion of parallelism to include more loosely structured juxtapositions, we can use the idea of text-metricity as a cover concept for other ways of linking linguistic forms and social identities. 'Interactional texts' are more often than not multimodal, involving verbal discourse but also modes of dress, carriage, or gesture. A person who uses a particular form while looking a particular way can link the linguistic form to the look, if co-participants are able to attend to the form and make the link. Written texts and pictures can also help link linguistic form and social identity, as when a folk dictionary of 'Pittsburghese' is illustrated with sketches of working-class men doing things like napping on the 'cahch ('couch')' or cheering for the 'Stillers ('Steelers').'

4. Stabilizing indexicality through enregisterment

Consider the *clematis* example once again. I claimed that Bess's proffered pronunciation, explicitly linked by Bess with garden club members, also sounded upper class by virtue of an already circulating way of indexing upper-class identity by means of pronunciation in the U.S. In other words, I described not just a momentary linking of linguistic form and social identity in a particular interaction ([kl̩ma̩D̩s] ↔ garden club member), but also a fairly stable, familiar, re-usable way of indexing class, namely by pronouncing words like *clematis* (or *class*) with [a] rather than the usual (in North America) [æ]. How do linguistic forms get linked with social identities in more permanent ways like this?

To talk about this, it is useful to use Asif Agha's (2003, 2006) concept of 'enregisterment.' 'Registers,' for Agha 'are cultural models of action that link diverse behavioral signs to enactable effects, including images of persona, interpersonal relationship, and type of conduct' (Agha 2006, 145). (Note that Agha uses the term *register* much more broadly than do many linguists.) Registers are like what Eckert (2000) calls 'styles,' although a register may be associated with a situation or a set of social relations rather than or in addition to being associated with a social identity like 'jock' or 'burnout.' A register emerges when a number of indexical relationships begin to be seen as related; a particular linguistic form (or nonlinguistic sign) is 'enregistered' when it becomes included in a register. To see how this can work, we need to take a historical perspective on indexicality.

In Pittsburgh, a post-industrial U.S. city, various nonstandard English forms can be heard, for various historical reasons (see Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson 2006). Until the

1960s, the use of these forms could have been correlated with a person's being from the Pittsburgh area, and they were more likely in males' speech than in females' (Johnstone, Bhasin and Wittkofski 2002, Kiesling and Wisnosky 2003). However, very few Pittsburghers noticed these correlations and were thus able to associate them with identities. Only when the right historical, geographical, and ideological conditions were in place, beginning in the 1960s, did most members of this speech community become able to notice these correlations between form and identity. They became able to notice the correlations and interpret them as indexical relations because of metapragmatic activities that called attention to the correlations and imbued them with meaning, in contexts such as moving into jobs where speaking 'correctly' was required, traveling on holiday and returning with stories about other people's reactions to their speech, seeing newspaper articles that described the oddities of the local 'dialect.'

Pittsburghers could then begin to vary the usage of regional forms in their own speech, depending on what they need to accomplish or were heard as accomplishing in interaction: whether they were trying to sound more local or more supra-local, more careful or more relaxed, more working-class or less so. In other words, at this stage local features began to function as $n+1$ -th-order indexicals, assigned 'an ethno-metapragmatically driven native interpretation' (Silverstein 2003, 212), that is, a meaning in terms of one or more native ideologies (including the idea that certain people speak more correctly than others and the idea that class and speech are related). As Pittsburgh-area linguistic forms became enregistered, linked with styles of speech associated with identities, and they could be used to create contexts for those styles. For

example, a person could make use of a feature correlated with being working class in order to create rapport with a working-class speaker or annoy an English teacher.

As this example suggests, an n -th-order indexical can have meaning along a variety of ideological dimensions: the same form can be enregistered in multiple ways. Different members of a community, differently placed by class, education, gender, mobility, and the like, can use locally-available features to do different kinds of social work and can hear them as doing different kinds of work. (For example, women may be more likely to hear local features as sloppy, ugly, and uneducated, lining them up with one end of an ideological cline of correctness; men may be more likely to hear local features as suggesting localness, solidarity, friendliness, or masculinity, lining them up with one end of an ideological cline from self to other.)

The same process can recur. A feature with $n+1$ -th order meaning for some people may, for them or for others, come to be enregistered in terms of a new ideological schema. For example, because particular variants are correlated, in some Pittsburghers' experience, with being working-class and male, a subset of these features has come to be enregistered as indexing the persona of the authentic Pittsburgher. The ideological schemata in play here include the idea that places have dialects and that the most authentic Pittsburghers are working-class men. People who want to create the sense that they are authentic Pittsburghers can use this register of features to set the scene, and people whose perceptions are shaped according to an ideological cline of authenticity may hear people using these features as authentic Pittsburghers (whether or not the people they hear are

using the features for this purpose; cf. Johnstone and Kiselring 2008). The forms that have been resemioticized (given new meaning) in this way are, from an analyst's-eye perspective, now $(n+1) + 1$ -th order indexicals.

The process of re-enregisterment can continue indefinitely. For example, if it is noticed that Pittsburghers are people who talk about 'Pittsburghese' (as intense media coverage of the topic has made increasingly likely), and if people associate cities that have dialects with the post-industrial 'rust belt' and cities that do not (or are thought not to) have dialects with the new economy, then forms hearable in Pittsburgh have come to have indexical meaning on yet another level.

5. 'Social meaning' or 'meaning'?

Stepping back to look at the process as a whole, it becomes evident that what we are describing here is not simply 'social meaning' but meaning in general. A few suggestions will have to sketch this possibility here. Words acquire meanings by virtue of being used together with their referents (a child sees Daddy and hears 'Daddy's here') or (in some sociocultural settings) explicitly juxtaposed with them in repeated metapragmatic activities like labeling or definition. ('What's that? /A fire engine. /Very good!'). Like meanings associated with identities, words can be said to be 'enregistered' in terms of ideological structures. (These have been called 'cognitive metaphors' in some accounts; cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Once a word is learned, it can sometimes be

detached from its indexical anchoring in a context and treated as if it had meaning outside of any context. If this happens, we may think of the word, originally a context-tied indexical, as a conventional, ‘arbitrary’ symbol. (Our tendency to do this is arguably tied to our literacy.) All linguistic signs are ‘mixed’ in Peirce’s sense, consisting, to varying degrees, of indexical, symbolic, and iconic elements (Clark 1997, 590-92).

Grammar, likewise, according to contemporary functional and interactional theories, consists of enregistered sets of structural patterns encountered in juxtaposition with their function. As Joan Bybee puts it (2006, 714; see also Becker 1979, Hopper 1988, Johnstone 1996), grammar is ‘the cognitive organization of one’s experiences with language,’ and ‘the apparent structure emerges from the repetition of many local events.’ ‘Local events’—the interactions in which actual bits of language and other behaviors are taken as meaningful, and meanings come to stabilize—are always social (Ochs, Schegloff and Thompson 1996). Discourse is a continual process of mutual coordination in making sense of the world; ‘languages,’ ‘grammars,’ and ‘identities’ emerge in the course of this process, as humans’ reflexivity—our ability to see what people do as an illustration of how to do it, and to arrange things in ways that encourage others to attend to these illustrations—links together sets of actions, linguistic and otherwise, into registers of conduct. From this perspective, the difference between the effects of identity and other aspects of meaning we might think of as ‘social’ as opposed to ‘pragmatic’ or ‘denotational’ meaning collapses.

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