NEEDED RESEARCH
IN AMERICAN DIALECTS

DENNIS R. PRESTON
Michigan State University

Publication of the
American Dialect Society
Number 88

Published by Duke University Press
for the American Dialect Society

Annual Supplement to American Speech
Publication of the American Dialect Society

Ronald R. Butters, Editor, Duke University
Charles E. Carson, Managing Editor, Duke University

Number 88
Copyright © 2003
American Dialect Society
ISBN: 0-8223-6594-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

p. cm. — (Publication of the American Dialect Society ; no. 88)
Annual supplement to American Speech
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-8223-6594-4
I. Preston, Dennis Richard. II. American Speech. III. Series.
PE2841.N44 2003
427'973—dc22 2003062715k

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data available
5. CONVERSATION, TEXT, AND DISCOURSE

BARBARA JOHNSTONE
Carnegie Mellon University

In his 2001 presidential address to the American Dialect Society, Ronald Butters used a narrative of personal experience he had elicited in the course of a sociolinguistic interview to illustrate how a close reading modeled on literary analysis could uncover reasons for a storyteller's linguistic choices that would be missed in a large-scale correlational study with prechosen demographic categories as its primary explanatory variables. Butters (2001, 228) expressed the hope that his address would "suggest to the editors of the next volume of Needed Research that we turn ourselves to issues of discourse as well as the more traditional areas." This chapter takes Butters up on the suggestion.

Indeed, the 1984 edition of Needed Research in American English did not mention work on discourse, text, or conversation. Nor was work in this vein represented, 12 years later, in a book-length overview of research on U.S. English (Schneider 1996). However, research about American English discourse structures, styles, genres, and speech acts, as well as work linking phonetic and grammatical variability with facts about conversation and text, predates even the former of these. The editors of American Speech have commissioned reviews of books about text and talk at least since the mid-1980s; American Speech has been publishing articles about discourse analysis since the late 1980s, and such work had started appearing in other venues long before that. Official recognition by the ADS of discourse analytic work on American English has thus been belated, and there is, in fact, much to report in this chapter.

The chapter proceeds as follows. I first attempt a sketch of work on American English discourse published during the past 20 years. Since this is the first time Needed Research has included this topic, this involves looking back somewhat further in some instances, in order to contextualize more recent work. This research
and others, I focus on linguistic variation that has been linked with region and/or with ethnicity, touching on differences associated with such factors as gender and age only tangentially.

**DISCOURSE IN AMERICAN ENGLISH**

The term *discourse* means different things to different groups of scholars. Linguists have typically used the term in one of two ways. For some, discourse analysis is the study of aspects of linguistic competence that go "beyond the sentence." These discourse analysts are interested in describing what speakers have to know in order not just to generate grammatical, meaningful sentences, but to deploy sentences (and other kinds of utterances) in coherent paragraphs and conversations. Discourse analysts working in this mode tend to focus on describing relatively fixed connections between linguistic strategies and discursive goals. Their descriptions of "rules," "structures," "strategies," or "styles" are both generalizations about recurring ways interlocutors have done things in talk and text and also, often, claims about knowledge or skill interlocutors have to possess prior to engaging in successful interaction.

In order to arrive at generalizations about this layer of competence, these discourse analysts study recorded instances of text and talk—written documents or transcribed speech. This means that their approach inevitably overlaps with a different kind of discourse analysis, in which discourse is defined as "language in use" or "interaction," and the focus is on the processes by which people create coherence and meaningfulness as they interact, rather than on preexisting knowledge of patterns or tactics which they bring to interactions. Various terms have been used in various ways to label this distinction. In the United States, the latter approach is sometimes identified as Conversation Analysis (CA), even though not all its practitioners share the strict ethnomethodological view held by the core practitioners of CA that linguistic interaction can be understood without reference to any preexisting "cultural knowledge" at all.
INTERACTIONAL STYLE. Since the first of these two approaches lends itself more easily to making claims about variation among groups of speakers, much of the work to date on discourse in American English has asked questions about relatively stable, frequently made, conventionalized connections between linguistic strategies and interactional, textual, or semantic effects. Some of the earliest was that of Tannen (1984, 2000), whose research on “conversational style” drew on Gunperz’s (1982a, 1982b) model of “discourse strategies.” In her analysis of a dinner-table conversation involving people from California, Great Britain, and the U.S. East Coast, Tannen (1984) identified contrasting styles of interaction: the New Yorkers’ faster paced, with more questions, overlapping talk, personal narratives, and humorous routines; the others’ involving longer pauses, more distinct turns at talk, and fewer direct questions, personal stories, and repetitions of parts of others’ utterances. These differences she found, contributed to the feeling on the New Yorkers’ part that the others were not doing their share of the conversational work, and to the feeling on the part of the British and Californians that the New Yorkers were dominating the conversation. Though not explicitly focused on regional differences, Tannen’s analysis provides a powerful account of some of the reasons why Americans often characterize urban Northeasterners as “pushy” and Westerners as “laid back,” attributing heavily evaluated psychological causes to what Tannen shows are at least in part just small differences in expectations about conversational timing and the signaling of cooperativeness.

Tannen’s work influenced subsequent research that did explicitly attempt to tie regional differences in interactional style with other linguistic, cultural, and historical facts about regional differences in the United States. One such body of work has to do with how interpersonal relations are indexed and negotiated in Southern whites’ discourse. Traditional Southern greetings have often been described as being more elaborate, and more often required, than greetings elsewhere; an early study of them was by Spears (1974). More recently, Coles (1997) found that people in New Orleans can use local-sounding greetings as a way of displaying their identification with people they talk to on the telephone, particularly when the speakers do not know each other, as when they call a radio talk show or speak to the receptionist at a clinic.

Coles also showed how the use of local-sounding forms of address like *babe*, *doll*, and *darling* can function as solidarity-building moves in New Orleans. Forms of address like these have often been described as having more and/or different significance in the Southern United States than elsewhere. For example, using *sir* or *ma’am* to one’s parents, as a required adjunct to the answer to a yes/no question, is a particularly Southern usage. So is the use of *sir* or *ma’am* to peers or to younger people.

In a study based on observation, interviews, and questionnaires, Ching (1987) concluded that the expression of deference is the core function of *sir* and *ma’am* in the South. Other uses were found to include emphasis, and in some contexts, the expression of friendly solidarity. Davies (1997) asked Southerners to comment on uses of *sir* and *ma’am* in the film *The Trip to Bountiful* (1985) while viewing clips from the movie. Like Ching, she found that a central function of the forms was to express deferential or “negative” (Brown and Levinson 1987) politeness, that is, to create and maintain appropriate social distance among speakers so as to avoid imposing on others’ autonomy. In addition, Davies shows how shifts in intonation as one uses *sir* or *ma’am* can foreground other things about speakers’ social relations. For example, shifting to flatter intonation can signal a shift to a less formal footing. She also explores other uses of the terms, including emphasis as well as sarcastic uses.

In a study of Harry Crews’s novel *Body* (1990), working-class white rural Georgians characters were found to use a wide variety of address forms to signal and manipulate social relations, often in quite subtle and strategically ambiguous ways (Johnstone 1992, 1994). Many uses of address forms (which include *son*, *boy*, *bud*, *girl*, *old honey*, and others), particularly to the speaker’s elders, display a sort of ritual deference, but other less ritual, uses can help to defuse social tension by putting on display, at a key moment, the fact that the speaker’s attitude is deferential. Address forms such as these may also appear in bids for dominance or threats of belliger-
ence, as speakers use them to point up the need for deference on their audience's part.

Crews's characters also express deferential negative politeness by means of a range of strategies for linguistic indirectness, including the use of conditional grammar to hedge assertions and requests. Like address terms, conditional structures not only serve to mitigate potential impositions, but also, sometimes, to signal heightened awareness of the social distinctions that make such deference necessary, so they often occur at tense moments and can be an element of a threat, as in "There'll be trouble if you can't learn to keep a civil tongue about my family" (46). Furthermore, frequent markers of evidential uncertainty also serve to hedge speakers' utterances, making them more indirect. Evidentials in the novel are overwhelmingly in the negative (I don't believe, I don't misdoubt, I don't say, I don't know as, I don't know about X). When they are not, their meanings express insecurity (reckon, think, believe, have the feeling, and seem are examples). Evidentials can combine with conditional grammar in expressions like I wouldn't know about X. These evidential predicates protect speakers from the potential social embarrassment of having their claims turn out to be false; they are also deferential, since hedging assertions is one way of avoiding imposing one's version of the world on others.

The use of question intonation in assertions, which McLemore (1991) calls "uptalk," has also been identified as Southern, and particularly characteristic of the discourse style of young women (Ching 1982; McLemore 1991), although it appears to have spread rapidly in the United States since these studies in Tennessee and Texas were done. Mitigating the directness of an assertion is among the functions of this feature, too.

Research on American conversational styles has also explored interactional practices associated with ethnic identification. Tannen's (1984) observations about New Yorkers were about Jewish New Yorkers, and that aspect of her study is discussed in greater depth in her article on "New York Jewish Conversational Style" (1981). In a similar vein, Schiffrin (1984) shows that arguments, in the conversations she studied among working-class Jews in Philadelphia, could build "sociability" in an interaction. Scollon and Scollon's (1981) research with Athabaskans in Canada and Alaska explored an interactional style much more attuned to face-saving negative politeness than to the rapport-building, more "in-your-face" positive politeness described by Tannen and Schiffrin. Similar findings are described by Basso (1970). Silence is appropriate until Athabaskans are comfortable together, for example, and it is the responsibility of the higher-status person in an interaction rather than the lower-status one to initiate conversation. Scollon and Scollon describe some of the cross-cultural difficulties such expectations can cause: Athabaskans applying for jobs are reluctant to volunteer how their backgrounds qualify them for the positions, for example, and may come across to Anglo interviewers as apathetic.

There is an extensive body of scholarship about the African American practices of discourse, much of which touches on features of interactional style such as politeness, forms of address, indirectness, and conversational pacing, beginning with work by Abrahams (1962, 1976), Kochman (1972), and Mitchell-Kernan (1979) on such speech events as "signifying," "hoorawing," and "styling out." Kochman (1981) described African Americans' speech styles in aggressive talk, boasting, flirting, and dealing with accusations and personal information. In a recent overview of research on African American discourse styles, Morgan (1998, 251) "locates various [African American] speech genres within a system of social face that is partially constructed through directed and indirect discourse." Interactional practices and styles such as "signifying" or "sounding," "instigating," and "reading" test and reinforce speakers' "cool face," the ability to respond to challenging situations with eloquence, skill, wit, patience, and precise timing. Morgan traces these speech genres, which have in common indirectness and the use of intermediaries, to a set of strategies adapted from African slaves' practices in the face of whites' control over public talk.

DISCOURSE STRUCTURE. In addition to managing their social relations with their interlocutors, communicatively competent speakers must also be able to manage the textual relations among parts
of the conversations, monologues, and written texts they produce. One important body of work on discourse structure has to do with cohesion, the strategies by which speakers and writers show how sentences are semantically linked to other sentences in a text, thus differentiating conversations or paragraphs from lists of random utterances. Work on textual cohesion (Halliday and Hasan 1976), at least in the United States, has tended not to be comparative. Differences in strategies for linking conversational utterances and sentences in text—such as the use of pronouns and other forms of substitution, ellipsis, and repetition on various levels—do not appear to index socially significant differences as often as do differences in linguistic strategies for negotiating social relations. As a result, while particular pronouns and other items which are used for cohesive purposes may be identified with particular regional or ethnic dialects (an obvious example in American English being the second person plural pronoun), general strategies of cohesion are typically associated with languages rather than dialects (as problematic as those categories are). For example, Fellegy (1995) reports on a study of "minimal responses" (forms such as mmmmm, yeah, and right) in American conversations, showing how these forms help structure a conversation by marking boundaries. While the particular forms used for this function clearly can vary across varieties of English (yeah might sound American, at least to some speakers, whereas right or brilliant might sound British), Fellegy does not focus on this aspect of the topic, nor does she suggest that the functions served by such forms might be different in other varieties.

One body of research that does bear, at least indirectly, on ethnic differences in patterns of cohesion has to do with what are sometimes called "rhetorical strategies," particularly those involving the use of syntactic parallelism and other forms of repetition as cohesive devices. For example, Erickson (1984) describes the "rhapsodic" structure of African American boys' conversations, and Gumperz (1982a, 187-203) analyzes African American political oratory, touching both on patterns of repetition and on stylistic shifts among distinct oratorical voices that signal moves from one part of the speech to another.

Another influential research tradition bearing on variation in discourse structure has to do with narrative. Labov's (Labov and Waletzky 1967; Labov 1972) analysis of the structure of oral narratives of personal experience showed how narrators guide their audiences through stories by means of grammatical choices that signal the functional status of each clause as part of the narrative core or as introductory "abstract," scene-setting "orientation," "evaluation" of the events' significance, and concluding "coda." This analysis was not explicitly comparative; in fact, it was described with reference to narratives by speakers whose dialects were otherwise quite different.

The fact that Labov was able to describe personal-experience stories by white New Englanders and African American boys in New York in the same way raises the issue of variability in narrative structure. If the structure of narrative is dictated by semantic and interactional function (such that, for example, orientation is necessary so that people can understand subsequent references to place and characters, and evaluation is necessary so that people will keep listening), might interactions differ across groups in ways that would affect the structure of narrative? On the other hand, might it be the case that the kinds of linguistic differences that construct and index social differences do not occur on the level of discourse structure, but on other levels, such as phonology and lexis? The point has frequently been made that not all situations require the kind of "fully developed" narratives Labov's sociolinguistic interviewing elicited. But while anthropologists and linguists have paid considerable attention to variability in how narratives function for different groups of North Americans (see below), there has been relatively little work exploring correlations between formal variation in narrative structure and ethnicity and region. (One exception is McLeod-Porter 1991.)

A series of studies published in American Speech (Blyth, Rechtenwald, and Wang 1990; Ronaine and Lange 1991; Ferrara and Bell 1995) has traced the development and spread of new ways of performing one of the many "discourse marking" functions (Schiffrin 1987) that are required in narrative: signaling when clauses in narrative are to be taken as the words of others. These
discourse markers, called "quotatives," include the older say and go (along with a large number of more semantically loaded verbs such as yell, whisper, aver, and so on) and newer forms such as be like.

Referring and Acting. The strategies a speaker chooses for making a story, a conversation, or a paragraph cohesive may reflect the speaker's ideas about how language works and how the world works in general. They may also reflect his or her particular goals for the utterance or conversation at hand. In other words, cohesive strategies may be related to referential strategies (what world is to be evoked, created, and/or portrayed) and to purposive strategies (what particular speech acts and more global communicative actions are to be accomplished). For example, African American orators' reliance on repetition as a primary cohesive device can be related to the way preaching and other forms of public address are conceived of in the African American tradition. When meaning is thought to be created interactively, and when persuasion is thought to be accomplished through poetic allusion and aesthetic resonance as well as through logic, then repetition within and across speakers and the signaling of structure via shifts in style make particularly good sense.

This way of imagining what oratory is for and how persuasion works has been traced to oral genres from West Africa (Pitts 1989) and the African diaspora (Edwards 1989). Labov (1972, 201-40) compares the expository styles of a lower- and a middle-class African American, showing (among other things) that the middle-class speaker makes less effective use of on-the-spot strategies for stitching oral discourse together than the lower-class speaker does, with the result that his response to the question both speakers were asked is both less cohesive and less persuasive, even by formal, syllogistic standards for persuasive discourse. In research on the history of Virginia and North Carolina tobacco auctioneers' chants, Kuiper (Kuiper and Tillis 1985; Kuiper 1992) traces prosodic aspects of this oral genre to the African American oratorical tradition; other aspects of the genre are traced to traditions from England.

Characteristics of Native Americans' expository styles have also been related to world and purpose: Bartelt (1993) explores how a number of features of Apacheans' oral discourse (in English), such as repetition and the use of categorizations such as "Europeans" and "Americans" and other terms such as "Indian" and "north" and "south" that retain special cultural meaning, may come together to signal, create, and reinforce a new kind of intertribal consciousness among Native Americans at contemporary urban festivals called powwows. Echoing Scollon and Scollon (1981) and others who have studied unwritten traditional discourse practices among many groups, Bartelt also suggests a link between "redundancy" as a cohesive and stylistic device and "orality" as a characteristic of the speakers' epistemological world. (Tannen 1988 and others suggest, on the other hand, that characteristics of oral discourse may at least sometimes be more a result of functional demands imposed by face-to-face, real-time interaction than a result of "oral" culture or epistemology.)

Contrasting narrative styles are also linked to contrasting worlds evoked and created in narrative and contrasting purposes for narrating. Polanyi's (1981, 1985) analysis of American personal experience stories draws on Labov's structural-functional analysis of oral narrative in identifying recurring features of American narrative plots. Polanyi shows how constructing "adequate paraphrases" of conversational stories by Americans can be a way of arriving at the basic propositions that express their beliefs about the world. Linde (1993) also uses structural analysis of recorded and transcribed stories as a basis for generalizing about the underlying plots of Americans' stories. Like Polanyi's, Linde's work does not focus explicitly on one or another group of Americans or variety of American English, though both base their analysis on stories told mainly by middle-class white Americans.

Other work on narrative has tried to link aspects of form with observations about the ideas and purposes of subsets of Americans. Among the earliest work by ethnographers of communication were studies of the functions of narrative and speech events in which narrative was central (Darnell 1974), and ethnographers have continued to explore the uses of narrative in various parts of North America (see, e.g., Scollon and Scollon 1981 and Patrick and Payne-Jackson 1990). Scollon and Scollon (1981) claim, for
example, that for Athabaskans, experiences and stories about them are the primary source of knowledge, as reality is socially constructed through narrative. (This claim has been made more generally about “oral” cultures by scholars such as Goody and Watt 1968 and Ong 1982).

In a study of the forms and functions of personal storytelling in Indiana (Johnstone 1990a, 1990b), I suggested that these Midwesterners’ characteristically mnemonic, nonparticipatory, highly detailed narratives could be seen to reflect (and help construct) regional ideas about what language is for (in essence, to reflect reality) and who is responsible for meaning (generally, the speaker). In the city I studied, as in others, sharing stories and ways of telling stories is one way in which community and a common sense of place are evoked and constructed in discourse. Etter-Lewis (1993) discusses life stories of professional African American women with an eye to connecting their referential goals (what they want to say about themselves and about life) with the structure of their stories. Bauman (1986) discusses stories and storytelling events as they serve to negotiate social relations in Texas. Shuman (1986) examines the use of stories by urban adolescents. Rissman (1988) compares narratives by an Anglo American woman and a Puerto Rican, pointing out that social class and ethnicity both help account for the women’s different experiences and different ways of recounting them.

Learning to narrate means learning to evoke, create, and share physical, social, and moral environments in talk. Thus describing how children learn to tell stories in different cultural and discursive traditions is a way of seeing how and why variation in discourse structure and style comes to be linked to variation in how people fundamentally imagine the world. Heath (1989) contrasts language socialization practices in a working-class African American neighborhood in the Appalachian piedmont with those in a similar white neighborhood, describing differences in such things as how children are encouraged to construct and perform narratives. For the literatist white parents, narratives were thought to be factual recountings of events in the service of moral lessons; in the African American community, children were rewarded for compelling, entertaining fantasy based only loosely on personal experience. These differences in what stories were expected to be about and accomplish in interaction had ramifications for their tellers’ linguistic choices on all levels.

Another research tradition that connects variation in discourse with variation in speakers’ purposes is the quantitative study of genre associated with Biber and his colleagues. In an article in American Speech called “A Textual Comparison of British and American Writing,” Biber (1987) shows that British and American writers in a variety of genres differ systematically with respect to linguistic features that suggest interactivity and contextual situatedness versus editing and contextual abstractness. American writing is, on the whole, more colloquial, more interactive, and more tolerant of nominal style and technical jargon than is British writing in the same genres. (For a historical study of genre and language use in early American English, see Devitt 1989.)

Finally, research on the performance and function of speech acts has also explored or at least touched on peculiarities of American varieties. A great deal of research in the tradition of “contrastive pragmatics” (Wolfson 1982; Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989) has explored how Americans (usually college students) do, or report that they would do, such things as responding to compliments (Herbert 1986), often comparing this group with people from other countries. Studies situated in applied linguistics and second-language acquisition often identify competence in performing speech acts like complimenting, requesting, and apologizing as more or less parallel to the kinds of competence that are involved in producing grammatical utterances: in other words, as skills that could (and should) be taught in ESL classes. As more ethnographically minded work shows, however, differences in the linguistic details of questions, requests, and so on can arise from differences in social and linguistic ideologies: in other words, differences in how people imagine the social world and the workings of language. For example, Heath (1989) contrasted the kinds of questions working-class white and African American parents asked their children in the communities she studied. In many ways, she found, white parents’ questions were
oriented toward teaching children to participate in conversational interactions and to categorize things correctly, whereas African American parents' questions reflected their belief that children learn language on their own and need only to be encouraged to be creative, flexible contributors to interactions. In her study of an Appalachian coalfield community, Puckett (2000) showed how control of land and labor are negotiated via ways of ordering, requesting, and responding. For example, she explores why these Appalachians often seem, to outsiders, unwilling to ask for things, linking this reticence with their sense of social and material rights and obligations.

DISCOURSE AND AMERICAN ENGLISH

The work summarized in the preceding section describes patterns of discourse in American English. Current work is supplementing this with a move toward linking facts about American English on all levels with facts about discourse. This corresponds with a general tendency away from seeing "discourse" simply as another level of linguistic structure and/or another set of linguistic habits or strategies, toward seeing "discourse" as the process in which the repeatable patterns and strategies that are portrayed in descriptions of "languages" and "dialects" emerge and exploring how this process works. This trend can be seen in several overlapping areas of endeavor, which I will very briefly describe and exemplify in what follows.

INCREASED ATTENTION TO PRAGMATIC CORRELATES OF VARIATION. Studies of phonological, lexical, and morphosyntactic features that differ among American dialects are increasingly likely to explore their distribution not just by asking who uses them (men or women, older people or younger, whites or African Americans, and so on) and in what regions, but also by asking what functions these features serve in conversations and texts. For example, Mishoe and Montgomery (1994) show that the lack of historical evidence about multiple modal constructions (might could and other such combinations) in North and South Carolina probably has to do with the fact that multiple modals tend to occur in situations where face-saving is particularly important: face-to-face encounters in which indirectness and negotiation are at a premium. These are often family and service encounters and thus tend not to be the sorts of conversations that get preserved in historical records. In an analysis of a judge's uses of more standard-sounding you versus more regionally marked ya'll, Ching (2001) finds that the use of one or the other pronoun depends in part on the genre of the speech and on more particular features of the context. For example, ya'll (this is Ching's spelling of the form) can be used to establish plurality, then be followed by you, and sometimes the use of ya'll can serve as a politeness strategy.

INCREASED ATTENTION TO STRATEGIC USES OF REGIONAL AND SOCIAL VARIATION. American dialectology was traditionally oriented to the description and documentation of older forms of folk speech, and the people who were most likely to be studied in projects like the dialect atlas surveys were likely to live in fairly homogeneous communities and to be relatively immobile socially and geographically. This meant that speaking in a particular dialect could easily be seen as a more or less automatic consequence of being from a certain place and being born into a certain ethnic group. Now, in the context of increasingly visible social and geographical mobility and economic and cultural homogenization, dialectologists and sociolinguists are becoming more and more attuned to the ways in which ways of speaking associated with region and ethnicity can function as strategic, rhetorical resources for constructing and expressing relationships and identities.

For example, Eckert's (1996, 2000) work in suburban Detroit shows that high-school students who raise the nucleus in the diphthong /ay/ more are more likely than others to orient to a local identity rather than to the larger world represented by official school activities. This association between raised /ay/ and local identity arises and is reinforced when members of the "burnout" group use this variant in particular communicative situations, such as talk about getting in trouble. Schilling-Estes (2000) explores how shifting degrees of r-lessness in a conversation between an
African American and a Lumbee (a North Carolina Native American) track their negotiation and renegotiation of ethnic boundaries. In Texas, Bailey and his colleagues (Bailey 1991; Bailey et al. 1993) show that monophthongization of /ay/ can be correlated with the strength of a person's affiliation with the region, and in several case studies I have explored how ways of talking and writing that sound rural, Southern, and/or feminine can function strategically for Texas women (Johnstone 1995, 1998, 1999; Johnstone and Bean 1997).

Increased attention to the functions of discourse about variation. For critical theorists, "discourses" are repeated ways of talking, linked to ways of imagining the world, which circulate in society via networks of power, causing people to think that the familiar way to describe, explain, and otherwise think about things is the "true" or "natural" way. Research on folk-linguistic attitudes and beliefs about regional and ethnic variation (see Preston’s chapter in this volume) has extensively described popular discourses about variation in the United States. Lippi-Green’s (1997) work on imitations of and discourse about nonstandard English and foreign accents in the media, the workplace, and the school shows how sociolinguistic “realism” may mask a variety of political and educational agendas. Others have explored how Anglo Americans use “junk” or “mock” Spanish: expressions like numero uno or hasta la vista (Hill 1993, 1995) and how white supremacists promulgate racism through written representations of African American English on the Internet (Ronkin and Karn 1999). In addition to serving such ideological purposes in public life and the expression of personal and communal identity, representations of speech may play a role in language change, as part of the discursive process through which certain forms come to have heightened perceptual saliency and clearly elaborated, focused symbolic connections to place, ethnicity, and other elements of social meaning (Johnstone 2000a; 2000b).

Increased attention to the implications of method. American dialectologists and sociolinguists have become more and more reflexive about our own discourse, about our objects of study, and in our research methods. We have begun to wonder to what extent we create categories such as “American English,” “AAVE,” or “Southern speech” in the process of drawing boundaries around our research sites and populations, and we have become more self-conscious about how our data-collection techniques (which almost always involve conversation) may affect our data. For example, Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994) and Cukor-Avila (2000) have shown that characteristics of interviewers can influence the speech of interviewees in ways that have not always been acknowledged. In addition to Cukor-Avila’s, two other essays in the Diamond Anniversary volume of American Speech (Fuller 2000; Simon and Murray 2000) also urge us to consider the ways in which people act out and negotiate identities in the course of sociolinguistic interviews and underline the importance of considering the features in which we are interested in their particular, situated discursive contexts.

The Next Twenty Years

These summaries of past and current work suggest many directions for future research on discourse in American English and discourses about American English. The traditional focus of the American Dialect Society on region, enriched by sociolinguists’ insights about the linguistic importance of ethnicity, class, age, and gender, will no doubt continue to structure many important inquiries into variation in conversation and text. But the significance of place in Americans’ lives continues to evolve. Being located in the same physical place is less and less a prerequisite for mutual influence, as virtual places supplement geographical ones as sites for linguistic interaction. A person’s regional identity is more and more a matter of choice, and, as cities and regions race to attract both global industry and local tourism, North Americans are required to think about, talk about, and orient to places in multiple competing ways. The significance of ethnicity, gender, and other resources for identity is also evolving. For various historical and theoretical reasons, it is no longer as easy as it once was to categorize people as “white,” “Asian,” or “African American,” “male” or
"female," or to predict how such categorizations will be reflected in their speech and writing.

New contexts for discourse in American English are also likely to encourage new lines of research. Emerging genres in new media are raising new questions: How do Americans talk in e-mail? in synchronous electronic chat? to artificially intelligent interlocutors such as talking robots? Along what lines do Americans differentiate themselves from other Americans, and how do individuals vary their discourse from situation to situation, as they do such things? American dialectologists and sociolinguists are paying increasing attention to the fact that style, however defined, plays a key role in accounting for variation. Individuals use language differently on different occasions, this be because their purposes are different, because their audiences are different, because they are projecting different identities or some combination of these factors and others (Biber and Finegan 1994; Eckert and Rickford 2001).

These developments mean that research about American discourse will need to evolve, too. Some U.S. regions, such as the South or Appalachia, continue to have strong identities, and it will continue to be interesting and important to see how features of discourse and discourses about language and place are implicated in these identities. Likewise, some kinds of ethnic and other social differentiation continue to be pervasive and very likely to be correlated with variation in discourse structure and style, and describing those patterns of variation continues to be crucial both descriptively, to enlarge our understanding of the things North Americans do with language, and, practically, to reduce misunderstanding of one group by another.

It will also be important, however, to do newer kinds of analysis that start with particular speakers, conversations, or texts rather than with predefined groups of speakers, regions in North America, or genres of discourse, working outward to see how features of interactional style, discourse structure, and ways of referring and acting get associated with places, ethnic categories, genders, or age groups, and with situations and purposes, and how such features work as resources for individual "acts of identity" (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985; Johnstone 1996) in particular instances. In this sort of work, discourse analysis—the close, systematic unpacking of particular texts and transcripts—is increasingly likely to be the analytical method of choice.

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