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Jane Q. Student

Dr. Ted Seuss

Linguistics 312

June 23, 2009

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Forming Identity: A Linguistic Endeavor

In his work entitled *Act of Identity*, Le Page remarked upon how we try to mirror our speech patterns to those in the groups with which we want to identify (Auer 4). This means that sometimes we wish that we could be a member of a certain social group, and language is one way to gain entry into such groups, because sharing a common way of speaking with a group of people shows that you have a bond with them.

This study found that some of the informants' speech would shift towards what the

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thought the pronunciations of the interviewer would be. This was especially true of 18-24 year old age group who had completed high school or some college. This is consistent with Cheshire's study, which found that young males, especially, want to gain inclusion into certain social groups (Cheshire 99).

In her article "Adolescent Social Structure and the Spread of Linguistic Change," Eckert talks about the idea that, as American children grow up, they feel a push to leave the social group that is their family, and how this separation is a vulnerable time for them (186). It is at this point in their development, and due to this feeling of vulnerability, that they try to form a close bond with another social group, made of their peers – "...older children acquire the dialect of their peers rather than their parents" (185). Unlike some others, Eckert found that, in this case, people's sense of belonging in a group influences their speech more than their socio-economic status does, saying, "...where individual adolescent identity conflicts with parents'

socioeconomic class, speech patterns will conform not to parents' class, but to the individual's independent social identity" (186).

Interestingly, Eckert discusses how students' socio-economic status affects their speech. Eckert describes "Jocks," or students who are involved in activities at their school, and who plan to move on to higher education, and "Burnouts," or students who have not been expected to prepare for college, and therefore place more of an importance on connecting with their peers than their teachers. The Burnouts' speech may reflect this in that they do not try to speak to their teachers as politely as the Jocks, and tend to use more slang as a way of feeling a connection to their peers, through whom they might get jobs after leaving high school (196). The Jocks' lifestyle, on the other hand, hinges on going to college. Jocks feel pressure to take advantage of school facilities and supplies to take part in various after-school activities, which they view as an important component to list on college applications. Speaking the language of their teachers can help them secure the necessary supplies and trust to engage in these extra-curricular activities.

Brian D. Joseph talks about how Eckert:

explores in some ethnographic detail such expressive use of variation in the construction of gender and class identities of an adolescent population. In such a view, change is a social by-product of the complex interplay of social groups involved in defining themselves and their communities in relation to local and global linguistic markets. (389)

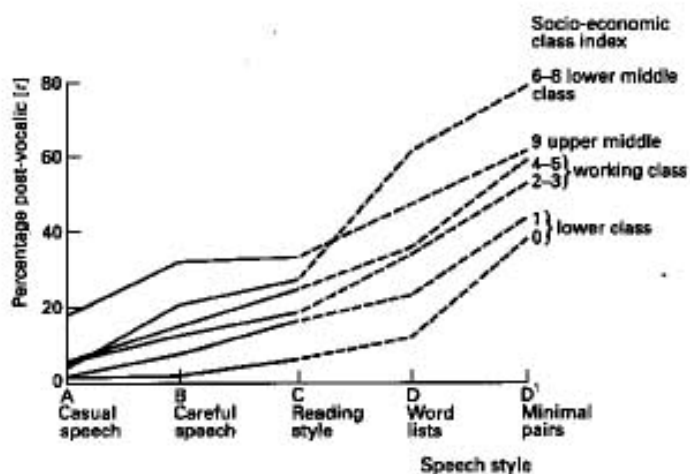
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Other authors had a variety of opinions about how gender affects the likelihood that an individual will feel compelled to fit in with a particular social group. Cheshire's study of adolescents in Reading supports the idea that adolescent males are the most likely to change their speech patterns in order to fit in with their chosen social group (Cheshire 101). Labov found,

however, that women are more likely than men to experience linguistic insecurity, which would lead them to model the speech of the interviewer or to use the more standard forms of words, as they did in the “Negative can in Tyneside English” study (Graddol, Leith and Swann 252).

Labov’s article “The Social Stratification of (r) in New York City Department Stores” explores the difference between how adult employees of department stores talked to other employees (presumably of the same socio-economic levels), and how they talked to customers (who appeared mostly to be of the same or higher socio-economic status than the employee). Results indicated that the relational closeness between the employee and the customer was only important insofar as making a sale was concerned. Labov found that younger employees in even the most prestigious department store tended to use the pronunciation pattern that most characterizes their region, that is, r-less pronunciation (Labov, *Social Stratification* 59). Figure 1, from the Sociolinguistic website of the Universitat Rovira I Virgili (a university in Spain) shows how people from different socio-economic backgrounds pronounced ‘r’ in different contexts.



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Fig. 1. Speech Style. Pronunciation of ‘r’ in different contexts.

Because these groups of people are consciously trying to pronounce the 'r' sound in the contexts where they know they are being studied (e.g., the minimal pairs), we can see here this paper's initial idea, from Le Page, about how language is one way to gain entry into social groups because sharing a common way of speaking with a group of people shows that you have a bond with them.

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Works Cited

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