

Attribute networking: A technique for modeling locally perceived categories
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Many variationists who seek a connection between linguistic practice and social structure have recognized the flaws of traditional socioeconomic scales, which treat social class as an aggregate of various objective factors (e.g. Woolard 1985, Rickford 1986, Milroy & Milroy 1992). The social networks approach (L. Milroy 1987) sidesteps many of these flaws by uncovering local social structures and linking them to community-wide social and economic patterns (e.g. Eckert 2000). Insofar as they emerge from processes of social practice, social networks are locally-relevant groups rather than artificially imposed categories.

A significant remaining issue is how local social structures emerge from macro-level socioeconomic structures, and what kind of social theory can show this link (Milroy & Milroy 1992). How do macro-level structures determine the everyday negotiation—linguistic and non-linguistic—of local social identity?

I propose a broadly-applicable technique called *attribute networking* for finding concrete, locally relevant connections between linguistic variation and social structure. It operates on the basis of two assumptions. First, local social networks emerge not directly from macro-level structures but from speakers' perceptions of aspects of personal identity or cultural practices that are bound to positions in social space (Bourdieu 1979). Second, for the purposes of sociolinguistics, class and class consciousness are indistinguishable: speakers' perceptions of social boundaries, not objective socioeconomic facts, interact with linguistic variation.

Attribute networking is grounded in network theory (Wasserman & Faust 1994) but does not involve *social* networks: instead of people, the basic units are personal attributes that community members consider relevant to social classification; instead of personal relationships, the ties between attributes reflect the likelihood of their co-occurrence, from the perspective of community members. Node characteristics such as degree and network characteristics such as density, centrality, and multiplexity, are thus defined with respect to personal attributes, not community members. (Bi-)components of attributes define perceived social categories.

Attribute networking has three main advantages: 1) It identifies fluid systems of social categories that are real in practice, as social networks are, and that reflect community members' perceptions of local "class" boundaries without relying on an objective definition of class. 2) It facilitates the description of class as a process of specific social practices to which linguistic variation can be linked. 3) It contributes to an understanding of what type of social theory is needed to account for the interaction of linguistic variables with socioeconomic phenomena because the personal attributes that form categories may be—and in my case study, often are—reflections of macro-level structures.

I demonstrate how attribute networking can relate linguistic variation to social practice using a selection of 15 speakers and approximately 15 hours of conversational data from my larger study of Worthington, Ohio. I construct attribute networks using data from ethnographic interviews and model them using the network software Ucinet (Borgotti et.al. 2002). Speakers are assigned positions in the system of categories based on proximity to prototypes, and their linguistic performance with respect to both phonological and morphosyntactic variables is examined in view of their positions in the system of categories.

Keywords: social class, networks

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