

On Indeterminacy in the Social Meaning of Variation

Robert J. Podesva* and Elaine Chunt†

*Georgetown University and †University of South Carolina, Columbia

Recent research assumes that sociolinguistic variation creates and carries social meaning rather than merely reflecting membership in large-scale demographic categories (e.g., Eckert 2000, Moore 2003, Zhang 2005). Yet researchers sometimes take the social meanings of variables for granted, without recognizing their indeterminate nature; linguistic forms that are ostensibly 'the same' can carry different nuances of meaning across communities and contexts. Such indeterminacy is due to ambiguity, resulting from competing ideologies, and underspecification, as meanings overlap only partially across different communities.

Here we present a framework for conceptualizing how the indeterminacy of social meaning is resolved, or sometimes left unresolved for social effect. We apply the framework to our own data, collected in a range of local contexts (in a Texas high school and among gay professionals) and public forums (in the speeches of U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and in the stand-up acts of Korean American comedian Margaret Cho).

We suggest that meanings are resolved in context, which has linguistic, situational, and interactional dimensions. Regarding LINGUISTIC context, forms do not occur in isolation, but alongside other variables, each contributing its own meaning to a style. While the social meanings of variables constituting a gay man's style may be vague on their own – 'prissy' (strongly released stops), 'informal' (frequent (-t/d) deletion), and 'expressive' (falsetto) – together they compose a diva style. Further, SITUATIONS inspire and constrain linguistic practice. In a clinical setting, the same gay man assembles different meanings – 'competent' (more frequent released stops) and 'non-threatening' (rising intonation) – to create a caring doctor persona. Finally, speakers negotiate meanings in INTERACTION, creating intersubjectivity and circulating/calibrating ideologies. In conversations among Korean American youths, for example, rising intonation can be interpreted as constituting a preppy 'white girl' style or one mocking the same style. The ambiguity is resolved *after* the rising intonation is assigned a new meaning, and crucially, such assignments of meaning are achieved collaboratively.

In addition, we argue that meanings need not always be resolved, as speakers can exploit indeterminacy to index multiple meanings simultaneously. Condoleezza Rice exhibits glottalization of word-final (-d), a variable which can index either an African American or Southern U.S. identity (Fasold 1981), an ambiguity which may enable Rice to demonstrate a linguistic affiliation with either the African American or the Southern populations of the U.S. In contrast, a linguistic form can index multiple meanings simultaneously. Margaret Cho's Mock Asian style is both racist and subversive, and both meanings must be noted in order to comprehend her social commentary.

While foregrounding indeterminacy may seem to complicate variationist analyses, we hope that our framework elucidates the relevant dimensions of context and will ultimately facilitate the interpretation of variation.