

Transitioning Style: Stylistic Variation in Dynamic Conversational Settings

Studies of intra-speaker language variation have focused largely on the co-variation of linguistic variables and external factors such as topic, audience, situation, and addressee. However, speakers may also take a more proactive role in using language to construct a particular role or identity for specific communicative purposes (Schilling-Estes 1998). Coupland (2001) thus calls for sociolinguists to develop multi-dimensional approaches by considering both the reactive and the proactive motivations for style-shifting. An inclusive, multi-dimensional approach should account more adequately for the ways in which the complex relationship between individual and group both shapes and is shaped by speakers' choice of styles. A crucial, and under-explored, issue in this connection is how style-shifts are actually accomplished and treated as such. What kinds of cues (and how many) are needed to effect a transition from one style to another? Which factors are more determinative: elements in the external environment or speakers' own evaluations of the ongoing speech situation? And what, precisely, are the linguistic correlates of those factors in dynamic conversational settings?

This study explores these questions empirically by examining intra-speaker variation within the context of a single 90-minute sociolinguistic interview with Woody, a 14-year old African American male. Forty minutes into the interview with fieldworkers, two of Woody's close friends arrive and the interview situation shifts to an exclusive conversation among the three teenaged boys, changing the roles of the fieldworkers from *addressees* to *overhearers* (Bell 1984). This unique situation allows us to examine style-shifting in relation to the changing alignments among participants in the interview.

Drawing on several frameworks for analyzing style (Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994, Coupland 2001, Schilling-Estes 1998, 2001), the study examines Woody's use of variables associated with *dialect style* or, in this case, African American English, i.e. third person verbal *-s* absence, copula absence, and postvocalic *r*-vocalization, as well as variables more broadly associated with *attitudinal style*, i.e. lexical choice, intonation, and phonation patterns (Coupland 2001). We compare the use of variables for three parts of the interview: (1) the interview before the arrival of Woody's friends; (2) the transition from interviewers to friends as addressees; and (3) the interaction between Woody and his friends. Studying the distribution of features across these three segments of the speech event, we focus in particular on the transitional phase as a clue to understanding proactive as well as reactive determinants of shifts in style. The transitional phase shows an abrupt shift in some of the attitudinal variables (e.g. phonation, lexical choice, intonation) while the dialect variables (e.g. verbal *-s* absence, *r*-vocalization, copula absence) show a more gradual transition, in effect, showing the leading role of attitudinal variables over dialect variables in the transition. More importantly, we see the significant interactive roles of both attitudinal style and dialect style in transitioning style.

Selected References

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