

Style shifting as a stance-based phenomenon: A conversational case study

This paper focuses on the conversational roots of style by analyzing how one speaker shifts her use of three variables in a single conversation among peers in a community of practice.

Intraspeaker shifts in three segments of an hour-long conversation are shown to be aligned with shifts in interpersonal stance and footing (Goffman 1981). The data come from a single conversation among eight women who work in similar positions, but different departments, in a large, bureaucratic organization in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They regularly meet to support each other and ‘gossip’ about the people in their departments, and thus form a pre-existing community of practice embedded within a larger speech community. Each woman was recorded on a separate track. The three variables are local linguistic features, and ‘Anne’ is a native of Pittsburgh. The variables are:

1. (aw) – the monophthongization of /aw/;
2. (ay) – the monophthongization of /ay/; and
3. (l-voc) – the vocalization of /l/ word-finally.

These variables differ as to awareness in the speech community: (aw) is heavily stereotyped, (ay) has less widespread awareness, and few Pittsburghers are aware of (l-voc).

The three variables are used by Anne to help take up different stances in three conversational episodes: *knowledgeable expert*, *unknowledgeable questioner*, and *gossip*. Stance is demonstrated through the analysis of footing (Anne’s role as principal or author) and epistemic markers. Anne’s use of (aw) and (ay) is significantly higher in the latter two episodes than in the first, while her use of (l-voc) varies little, but is higher in the second episode. These results show that Anne is using these three linguistic variables in different degrees to help construct her stances, and that the variables do not all create social meaning along the same dimension.

The data are supplemented by individual sociolinguistic interviews with the women in the conversation. These interviews provide more data on each woman’s production of these variables in another context. In addition, in these interviews the same conversational episodes were played for each woman and her reactions about ‘what was going on’ were elicited. This method provides a triangulation for the discourse analytic arguments for stance: The other speakers characterize Anne’s stances in these sections in a similar way as found in the discourse analysis.

Style is therefore shown to have its primary location in the stances speakers take in conversations. Speakers use linguistic variables (along with other linguistic resources) to create stances in conversation, and it is these stances, and their regularization, that we measure when we measure style. This view thus builds on other views that understand style as variation related to speech event contexts (such as topic and audience), and those approaches which consider style to be a process of bricolage. This paper shows that these perspectives can be united by understanding style as originating in the stances speakers take to one another in conversation.

Reference

Goffman, Erving. 1981. Footing. In *Forms of Talk*, pp. 124-159. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.