

This paper, based on ethnographic research in an upper-Midwest farming community, takes up a life-course view to show how variation is critical to older people's identity work. Researchers focusing on language in old age have looked at older people's discourse in conversations with peers, younger people and doctors (Coupland and Coupland 1991; Hamilton 1998). In variation studies, older people are included to represent earlier stages of language change. This paper looks at the social meaning of two sociolinguistic variables among older people who are regulars in an age-homogeneous context, a Senior Citizens' Center. I argue that linguistic variability does important social work here, maintaining its power to construct a person's status and style when other such resources have faded with age and economic decline.

Variation data are drawn from tape-recorded interviews (with 36 men and women, aged 65 to 99), conducted during an ethnographic study of the local elderly population. The two variables are fortition of (th), and monophthongization of (ow). I use VARBRUL regression analyses to examine the variables' correlations with speakers' achievements and status at different life stages. Several speakers' social status has been radically reduced in old age. However, not surprisingly, the variables correlate most strongly with a speaker's status during her working years. The variable (ow) includes diphthongal and monophthongal variants and an in-gliding or 'reverse' diphthong. Among men and women, the reverse diphthong and (th)-fortition correlate with less education, but also with a speakers' adulthood spent on a small farm. Speakers who grew their farms into large businesses tend to use the more mainstream variants of both variables. Affiliation with language background and ethnic heritage as developed in adulthood was also significant. Speakers using German into adulthood (N=2) have the highest rates of fortition, but whether German or English was the L1, speakers who expressed disdain for the influence of German on the local cultural landscape showed the lowest fortition rates.

Status does not become unimportant in old age; participants often referenced status differences related to local economic and cultural capital. However, many had a smaller repertoire with which to display and reproduce those differences. They no longer owned land or may have gone bankrupt; some lived in subsidized housing and ate subsidized meals; and frailty limited their participation in socially meaningful activities. Status-marking resources available to them included language, hairstyles, seating arrangements, leisure activities and participation in the heterosexual market. Among those, linguistic variation stands out as indexing the community standing they enjoyed as younger adults.

Shifts in the political and economic landscape of agriculture at the national and local level (USDA 1993; Danbom 1995) have diminished the social status that some speakers can claim for themselves in the local context. However, perhaps the greater force in individual speakers' lives has been time; old age and concomitant frailty may level the apparent status hierarchy for many except the wealthiest. In this economic and social context, a speaker's linguistic repertoire gains importance as symbolic capital indexing a locally-based social status established earlier in life.