

Socio-pragmatic development through the Study of Phonetics: Lessons from the Ethnographic Enterprise

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Recent studies focusing on learner acquisition of sociolinguistic variables in French (Bayley and Regan, 2004; Dewaele, 2004; Howard, 2006) have primarily understood stylistic variation as a one-dimensional scale of formality. There is no doubt that such studies comprise a rich and growing body of research within SLA, providing convincing evidence that contact with native speakers tends to result in the language learner's greater approximation to vernacular patterns of variation (not unlike those uncovered by Labov (1966) on the Lower East Side of New York).

Nevertheless, style, as it has recently been articulated by certain sociolinguists (Auer, 2007; Coupland, 2007; Eckert, 2000; Podesva, 2008) working within what Eckert (2003) has called "third wave variation studies", refers to ways of speaking which are comprised of linguistic forms that, when articulated in local contexts, construct fluid social meanings. Proponents of such a multiplex view have expressed the importance of employing ethnographic methods to get at the meanings that particular variables index and the ways in which social actors understand and use them.

This paper explores the difficulties and potential benefits of drawing on this latter constructionist notion of stylistic variation in research on French SLA, in particular as a renewed way of broaching the subject of identity. Identity is conceived here not just as identification with a given target language group, but as a dynamic process of distinction. I will present my findings from an informal study of an advanced-level undergraduate phonetics course in which students themselves undertook ethnographic studies as a means of understanding how stylistic variation functions. Such projects opened up the possibility of their own stylistic experimentation and, in turn, their socio-pragmatic development.

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