

Critical Inquiry in Language Studies: *An International Journal*

Media & Book Reviews

Style: Language Variation and Identity

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Cambridge

Cambridge University Press

2007

Pp. vii + 224

ISBN 978-0-521-85303-3 (hdk)

ISBN 978-0-521-61814-4 (pbk)

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Nikolas Coupland's book *Style: Language Variation and Identity* from the Cambridge series Key Topics in Sociolinguistics is an excellent source book, which offers valuable insights into the field of sociolinguistics. Coupland presents readers with not only an extensive review on the notion of style within language variation research but also a critical evaluation of variationist sociolinguistics. Based on critical analysis of previous research, the author identifies a need for: "a different perspective in order to begin to open up the account of social meaning-making through variation" (p. 49). This need results from the fact that the traditional variationist method does not aim to capture the social processes of speaking and of making meaning in context. In this respect, according to Coupland, looking at language variation "in its primary ecosystem of discursive meaning" should be the priority of sociolinguists, so as to gain insights into "variation in the context of social interaction" (p. 9).

This book is a commendable contribution to current literature on sociolinguistics with its comprehensive overview of traditional to modern approaches of language variation. After discussing the historical domination of quantitative studies on sociolinguistics, influenced especially by Labov's (2001) work in which surveys were conducted to examine the stylistic

variation, Coupland offers an alternative approach in which he underlines the social meaning of language variations. More specifically, starting from Labov's (2001) idea of 'stylistic variation' and his approach of 'variationist sociolinguistics', Coupland attempts to put forward what variationist sociolinguistics "has not achieved, particularly in relation to the notion of style and the active dimension of styling" (p. 5). In this respect, the book and its underlying argument are well structured and supported by wide-reaching discussions on the notion of style within the framework of variationist sociolinguistics and sociolinguistics stylistic.

According to Coupland, the main difference between his approach of sociolinguistics stylistic and variationist sociolinguistics lies in the fact that Labov (2001) does not use the term "style" as what Coupland calls as "social style" but rather as "social variation". For Coupland, Labov's (2001) definition of stylistic variation implies "'intra-individual' speech -variation 'within the speech of individuals'" (p. 7). In other terms, Labov (2001) was interested in "what happens when an individual speaker delivers a version of a social style in a range of particular speech situations" (p.7). As a result, Coupland's main argument against variationist sociolinguistics is:

Variationist sociolinguistics has worked with a limited idea of social context—and styling is precisely the contextualization of social styles. The survey designs of variationist research, which have been remarkably successful in revealing broad patterns of linguistic diversity and change, have not encouraged us to understand what people meaningfully achieve through linguistic variation. Variationist sociolinguistics has produced impressive descriptions of social styles, but without affording much priority to contextual styling. (p. 5)

Coupland perceives audience design and accommodation theory as situated one step further away from traditional variationist sociolinguistics, since they take into consideration the "audience" as a starting point. With respect to these two theories, the author posits that "variation in speech style can be explained as speakers/communicators designing their speech/communicative output in relation to their audiences" (p.54). After describing each perspective in detail by drawing from politeness theory and the notion of face, as well as conversational and discourse analysis, the author notes the following merits of these perspectives:

They capture a generalization that potentially links variation research through to more general interests in the study of language in society and in discourse analysis—the interpersonal and interactional grounding of language in social life. (p.74).

Yet Coupland argues that these two approaches, due to their reliance on quantitative analysis oriented towards linear scales of variance, are insufficient in exploring “social meaning intensity.” For this reason, Coupland’s core position is that identity and audience should be treated together “if we approach style as the deploying and making of social meaning in evolving discursive contexts” (p.81).

In this respect, Coupland re-conceptualizes “styling” as “creative design potential for speaking,” where “being aware of meaning making and actively constricting social contexts are the socio-cognitive resources for using variation” (p. 105). Nourished by the idea of ethnography of communication developed by Hymes and Gumperz (1972), Coupland proposes an “‘active contextualization’ perspective on social style” (p. 7) which requires examining variation in the context of social interaction so as to understand “language variation in its primary ecosystem of discursive meaning” (p. 9). In this respect, Coupland, on the cover page of the book, defines style as “the wide range of strategic actions and performances that speakers engage in, to construct themselves and their social lives” through which people make social meanings—“multi-dimensional evaluative constructs built up around language varieties that speakers can bring to bear in discourse” (p. 104).

One of the strengths of the book is that it presents a wide range of contemporary ideas in critical sociolinguistics. Speech communities, speech repertoire, communities of practice, politeness theory, language ideology, language variation, language attitude, and speech act theory are some of the key concepts discussed in *Style: Language variation and identity*. This wide array of concepts speaks to the density and richness of the book in providing an excellent sourcebook on style, language variation, and identity. Although Coupland deftly brings all these concepts together in a coherent manner, the density of the book might cause frustration for some readers who are not familiar with these contemporary ideas, Labov’s work (2001), and stylistic variation. I would suggest Coupland’s book to those who are at least somewhat familiar with the work of Labov, Goffman, Bourdieu, and Bell.

Also, a glossary at the end of the book to define key concepts would have been a useful addition.

Coupland's book consists of seven chapters, each chapter building on the discussion presented in the previous chapter. In Chapter 1, Coupland introduces us to the concept of style. He then goes on to discuss variationist sociolinguistics and its general approach to style, followed by the early history of research on stylistic variation. Chapter 2 presents early research on style within variationist sociolinguistics, which emphasizes "organized difference, structured heterogeneity, in language" (p. 32) so as to understand linguistic diversity. In Chapter 3, Coupland takes one step further from the structuralist approach to stylist variation to audience design and accommodation theory. Chapter 4 is where the author tries to answer the question: "where do social meanings come from and what sort of resource do they constitute for styling?" (p. 81). This is the chapter where he discusses the notion of style and the sociolinguistic resources of styling with respect to social meaning making. In this respect, Chapter 5 and 6 comprise the heart of Coupland's book since they introduce and elaborate on the process of 'creative contextualization of social meanings' through which speakers perform 'acts of identity'. Finally, with Chapter 7, Coupland concludes his discussion of language variation and style by presenting readers with a final overview of the book's main arguments, which revolve around "the social contextualization of variation in discourse and the making of local meanings from sociolinguistic resources" (p. 184). The author suggests that the following quote from Weber provides a comprehensive summary of what sociolinguistics stylistic is all about:

Meaning and stylistic effect are not fixed and stable, and cannot be dug out of the text as in an archeological approach, but they have to be seen as a potential which is actualized in a (real) reader's mind, the product of dialogic interaction between author, the author's context of production, the text, the reader and the readers' context of reception—where context includes all sorts of historical, cultural and intertextual factors. (Weber 1996b, p. 3; as cited in Coupland, 2007)

Style: Language variation and identity constitutes a formidable foundation for research on language variation with extensive examples of speech style variation from different English-speaking communities. Coupland's approach of sociolinguistic stylistic to styling as a social practice forces readers to appreciate the role of style with respect to a wide range of social

meanings, designs and outcomes. To summarize, Coupland's book is a valuable addition to the existing literature and a good source book with detailed references that allow for further reading on sociolinguistics and variation research.

References

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