
BOOK REVIEW

BOOK REVIEW of ECKERT, PENELOPE 2018. *MEANING AND LINGUISTIC VARIATION: THE THIRD WAVE IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS*. CAMBRIDGE, U.K., NEW YORK: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS.

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1 Introduction

This book comprises an invaluable source of information on the development of sociolinguistics from its inception in the 1960s through to the present, viewed and filtered through the lens of a most perceptive theorist and practitioner who has been fundamentally committed to the study of linguistic variation throughout that period. It is much more than that however. It also provides a fascinating account of Penelope Eckert's personal journey throughout that time, "an intellectual autobiography" (p. xi) or memoir. Eckert analyses her scholarly development as well as the progress of sociolinguistic theory over the period in terms of a series of three waves. As she says: "I was trained in the First Wave [Labovian social dialectology], participated in the Second Wave [ethnographic studies], and found my center in the Third Wavea theoretical perspective which puts the meaning of variation, in all its dynamism and indeterminacy, at the centre of analysis" (p. xi). And of course, she has not only been there throughout the growth of sociolinguistics as a discipline, she has been a major contributor at every stage, as this book documents so well.

Each chapter is based on her published work and preceded by a very engaging brief personal reflection, positioning it for the reader in her intellectual journey, as well as providing valuable theoretical insights. The first part (the First Wave) comprises two chapters describing Eckert's foray into Romance dialectology, which was to remain a lifelong interest. She describes how she came to focus on an area in the Gascon-speaking Pyrenees and on a dialect of the Occitan language in particular. Chapter 1 provides a wealth of ethnographic and attitudinal detail on the development of the language over centuries, with careful attention to its role (in 1970) as a symbol of solidarity, but also of poverty and isolation, as it was increasingly being displaced by standard French. The chapter also provides an insightful analysis of energetic attempts by members of the political Occitan movement to revitalise Occitan and "reverse the process of economic, linguistic and cultural colonization from the north" (p. 9). There is much here that resonates with efforts to revitalise te reo Maori in New

Zealand, including a discussion of orthographic challenges and the issue of acceptable sources for the new vocabulary needed for technological and educational use, as well as an account of the complex relationship and differing symbolic values of local dialects, regional varieties and a national standard.

1.1 Chapter 2

Chapter 2 focuses on attitudes, examining the significance of stigma and social meaning in the process of language shift. Eckert's goal in the 1980 N.WAVE presentation on which this chapter is based was to challenge the conventional sociolinguistic wisdom of the time which argued that encouraging African-American children to use standard English in school and their AAVE dialect "where it's appropriate" would result in competence in, and respect for, both dialects" (p. 15). But Eckert argues that "diglossia sets up an opposition that stigmatizes the vernacular and the situations in which it is spoken" (p. 15). The chapter supports this claim with detailed exemplification from her Soulatan data (another Occitan dialect). The basic tenets of her argument are that diglossia is "imposed from above" (p. 18) and the functions of the standard (H variety) operate as "a powerful force of assimilation by interacting with and reinforcing social evaluation of the domains in which the two languages are used" (p. 18). The low variety retreats to use in events associated with decreasing power, and the disuse of the language in many domains results in "lexical impoverishment" (p. 22).

As in New Zealand, Occitan children were punished for speaking the low language as Eckert graphically illustrates: "a common practice was to tie a wooden shoe (an albatross of peasantry) around the offender's neck. In U.S. schools, children have been punished for speaking American Indian languages with whipping, having their mouths washed out with soap, and even (as recently as 1970) having their heads flushed in the toilet" (p. 22). The parallels with the situation of Maori as English gradually encroached on domains formerly reserved for the indigenous language are all too clear. Despite its original presentation date, this chapter can usefully promote reflection and discussion among those advocating diglossia as a route to language revitalisation in New Zealand.

2 Part two

Part two (the Second Wave) opens with an account of Eckert's experience of a serious persistent stalker whose death threats meant she was happy to leave New York and take a position at the University of Michigan. The five chapters in this section focus on Eckert's innovative high school research in Detroit high schools. Her initial goal was to investigate how sound change spreads and Michigan provided a context where "a very nice chain shift" was going on right in her own back yard, as she says (p. 30). She was committed to exploring her conviction that sound change conveys social meaning and the "intense identity work that goes on during adolescence" (p. 31) provided the ideal context for investigating this hypothesis. Chapter 3 focusses on the semiotics of clothing at Belten High, one of several Detroit schools where she conducted her extraordinary, ground-breaking field work. The chapter (and the subsequent 1989 book) provide a blueprint for an ethnographic approach to sociolinguistic research, describing, for instance, the correlation between the use of physical space with minute but socially significant difference in clothing (e.g., the precise range of width of the jeans leg). Indexical features such as these proved crucial in separating the different social categories, most significantly the extremes of mainly middle class, school oriented and fashion-conscious Jocks from the mainly working class, school-disaffected, drug-taking and fashion-indifferent Burnouts. The large proportion of the eponymous In-betweens (who do not get much linguistic

attention unfortunately) can be categorised, predictably, by their use of the range of varied features suggested by this label. This detailed fieldwork provided the basis for her subsequent study of the details of sound change which is the focus of the next four chapters.

2.1 Chapter 4

Chapter 4 opens with her interesting claim that the usefulness of the concept of “social networks as conduits for sound change decreases with social distance” (p. 40). While social networks are useful in accounting for exposure to change between cities, Eckert argues they have limited value in a small intensely interacting community such as a high school (though she subsequently uses the concept in her detailed analysis of the different ways in which Jocks and Burnouts “seek independence from adults” (p. 47)). Once the change is part of a speaker’s dialect, having been adopted from a larger community along with a grasp of its social significance, the movements involved are relatively minor intensifications or mitigations of a process the individuals are already involved in (p. 40).

This chapter also explores the hypothesis that North American adolescents are influenced not so much by their family’s socioeconomic status as by the social pressure to develop an independent social identity. In this process, peer pressure replaces parental influence both socially and linguistically. Exploring in detail the sociolinguistic complexity of this widely recognised social phenomenon comprised a pioneering contribution at the time (though Eckert credits Labov’s (1963) Martha’s Vineyard study as the first sociolinguistic study of the relationship between of social meaning and sound change). The chapter includes a wealth of ethnographic detail based on participant observation and interview data which differentiates the career-oriented and relatively conformist Jocks from the more adventurous and mobile Burnouts. Eckert describes how their very different expected future trajectories influence their attitudes to school and to their peers (pp. 54–55).

Eckert notes that the development of adolescent social structure and a distinctive social identity provide major motivations for phonological change (p. 56), and she describes how social categories play a role in this process by focussing on the backing and lowering o(uh) [ʌ] a step in the Northern Cities Chain Shift. Her analyses demonstrate that individual adolescent social identity, in the form of orientation to Jocks, Burnout or In-betweens, rather than the social class membership of their parents “is a powerful determinant of phonological variation” (p. 60). The Burnouts with their greater orientation to urban culture overwhelmingly lead this sound change. Eckert addresses some meaty sociolinguistic issues in the discussion of why and how this Burnout-led change spreads via the In-Betweens to the Jocks in due course, as well as the complexities of “sex differentiation in phonological variation” (p. 63). As many sociolinguistic studies have demonstrated girls “are constrained to exert considerable effort in the symbolic sphere and to pay particular attention to their place in the social system”. The Detroit Jocks and Burnout girls are no exception. Finally, this chapter articulates clearly the advantages of detailed ethnographically-based sociolinguistic research in demonstrating the complexity of the relationship between social categories and linguistic behaviour and the insights concerning the why and how of social change that result from identifying the intervening variables. This chapter is arguably the most valuable in providing concise, concentrated access to Eckert’s major contribution to the Second Wave.

2.2 Chapter 5

In Chapter 5 Eckert provides some insights about the track she took from working with the big social categories (class, ethnicity, gender) of First Wave big picture variationist linguistics to

perceiving the sociolinguistic significance of local dynamic interaction at borders and boundaries. The chapter critiques the speech community concept with its assumptions of homogeneity and shared attitudes, and considers the importance of border interactions in introducing extra-local variation and accounting for linguistic innovation. In other words, here she attempts to link the global to the local. Drawing on her wider Detroit high school data, she describes the Burnouts' activities as involving a "network of arteries and meeting places where kids from all around the area explore the conurbation and seek each other out" (p. 73). This chapter explores the value of the semiotic processes identified by Gal and Irvine (1995), namely "erasure, "recursivity" and "iconization", and demonstrates their value in accounting for the linguistic behaviour of the Jocks and Burnouts in her data. Using them, Eckert addresses the challenge of explaining the process of language change in progress.

2.3 Chapter 6

The introduction to chapter 6 provides very interesting personal background details on how Penelope Eckert ended up working with the anthropologist Jean Lave and computer scientist Etienne Wenger at the Institute for Research on Learning (IRL) in Palo Alto. Her commitment to ethnography and search for explanations (in direct contradiction to the then current conventional wisdom in social dialectology which valued quantitative analysis) led her to establish solid links with the interdisciplinary IRL team. From this emerged the influential Communities of Practice (CofP) concept which she perceived as providing a means to establish a systematic connection between macro-social categories (class, gender, ethnicity, age) and practices (including linguistic practices) on the ground. She relates the CofP concept to Anthony Giddens' (1979) theory of social reproduction to explain how the practices of individual agents "reproduce the conditions that make the activities possible" (Giddens 1979, p. 2), while Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus*, the individual's internalisation of the social, based on early childhood experience, shapes "the individual's understandings, beliefs, and actions" (p. 84). The CofP then developed as a powerful framework for explaining the different orientations, beliefs, and ways of seeing the world of the Jocks and the Burnouts. And it also laid the groundwork for further deconstruction of macro-social categories. Hence she notes that sociolinguists have deconstructed macro-categories such as class and ethnicity, pointing to the relation between language use and such influences as social practices, social networks, symbolic capital and social identity construction, but points out that the same has not been true for age or gender.

The main article introduced by this fascinating theoretical preamble in chapter 6 focusses on "Sex and gender differences in variation" (pp. 86–107). First published in 1989, this article pioneered research deconstructing gender as a social category, and raised awareness of its complexities as well as the different ideological constraints experienced by women and men in different sociocultural contexts. Although I do not agree with the interpretation of Australian Question Intonation as a confirmation-seeking strategy associated with subordination (p. 94), since our analyses suggest that such devices may also signal affiliation and solidarity (see Britain, 1992; Warren, 2016), there can be no doubt about other aspects of Eckert's skilled, perceptive analyses, apparent throughout the chapter. Questioning widely accepted explanations for distinctive patterns in women's linguistic behaviour proffered by Trudgill (1972) and Labov (1984), she states "I can see no independent reason to seek explanations for women's behaviour in prestige" (p. 91). The article argues that "gender does not have a uniform effect on linguistic behaviour" (p. 94) and that social practices need to be given attention. Ultimately, Eckert argues here that it is power rather than gender that can best account for sex differences in language use (p. 98). Drawing on the Detroit adolescent data, she demonstrates the complexity of demographic categories, such as class and gender, as instantiated

linguistically in social interaction. And she concludes that her analyses support the argument that “women, deprived of access to real power, must claim status through the use of symbols of social membership” (p. 107). Her postscript to this chapter is a searingly honest admission that by subsequently avoiding engaging with those who disagreed with her views, she wasted a lot of time. However, fuelled by her analyses of sociolinguistic gender variation, she then turned her attention to style as “structured co-occurrence of features” (p. 109), the topic of Chapter 7.

2.4 Chapter 7

Focussing on a specific case study, Chapter 7 provides a graphic illustration of Butler’s (1993) theory of performativity, demonstrating not only how the gender order constrains gender performance but also how “small performative innovations” can “accumulate to bring about change in the social order” (p. 122). The content of this chapter is the introduction to a paper presented by Eckert and colleagues at the 1993 NWAV Conference. Eckert describes it as “the perspective on style that gave rise to the Third Wave” (p. 109). It includes a very detailed and effective series of vignettes illustrating Eckert’s insightful point that the “construction of style is a process of bricolage: a stylistic agent appropriates resources from a broad sociolinguistic landscape, recombining them to make a distinctive style” (p. 118). A particularly striking example of this process reported by Eckert was the pegging of *blue* jeans by two Preppies to indicate *partial* orientation to another group who pegged *black* jeans (pp. 112–113). As this example suggests, the main focus of the vignettes is clothes, make-up and non-verbal behaviour rather than language. The chapter also describes Eckert’s field work in an elementary school with particularly vivid (and amusing) examples of how she had integrated so thoroughly that she was treated just like the other students. “My entire lunch table ...had to pick up trash in the playground one day because I failed to stop talking when the principal flashed the lunchtime lights” (p. 114). Details such as these immensely enhanced my enjoyment of this book.

3 Part 3

The four meaty chapters in part 3 document Eckert’s central contribution to the Third Wave of developments in variationist sociolinguistics, largely she indicates, through her role in establishing the Style, Language and Ideology Cooperative/Collaborative (SLIC). The section opens with material that Eckert was invited to write as a response to Don Kulick’s paper calling for a focus on desire in the study of language and sexuality, and more generally for a shift to the study of “culturally grounded semiotic practices” (p. 126). In the process, she produced something she describes as reading like a “Third Wave manifesto” (p. 126). She argues for a focus on the social nature of desire while acknowledging the relevance of identity categories as “the background against which all kinds of [social] meaning can be made” (p. 128).

3.1 Chapter 8

This chapter (8) provides a great deal of challenging theoretical discussion, addressing issues such as how semiotic resources are used in identity production, and examining the connections between sexuality, the sexual order, and the gender order. Eckert’s observations of the activity of adolescents around forming boy-girl couples provide rich material for this discussion. The chapter moves on to examine concepts such as agency, authenticity and acts of identity, and she provides an especially interesting critique of the centrality of the “vernacular” in

variationist sociolinguistics, albeit presenting “something of a caricature” in the process, as she acknowledges (p. 139). She suggests that a pre-occupation with phonology, and especially with accounting for the processes of sound change, has led variationists to neglect other important aspects of sociolinguistic identity construction. I found it a challenging chapter, both in its intent and for the reader. Unsurprisingly, I wholeheartedly subscribe to the suggestion that we need to broaden the linguistic focus to encompass syntax, lexis and discourse.

3.2 Chapter 9

Chapter 9 develops the argument that qualitative research has an important role in variationist sociolinguistics. It presents her influential paper “Variation and the indexical field” in which she argues that the meanings of variables are fluid and constitute an indexical field, “a constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable” (p. 144). We have found this article immensely useful in our own research (e.g., Holmes, Marra and Vine, 2011), as it lucidly discusses and illustrates the value of indexical features as explanatory concepts in sociolinguistic research.

3.3 Chapter 10 and 11

Ethnolects are the focus of Chapter 10 and Eckert elegantly deconstructs the concept to demonstrate that “ethnically distinct ways of speaking emerge out of shared social practices, in interaction with each other, and have indexical values that are associated not simply with ethnicity but with those shared practices as well” (p. 167). The process of indexicality is skilfully illustrated with a range of examples including a discussion of how Chicano, German and Cajun communities variably use /dh/ [ð] stopping to index gang affiliation, hard work or for social capital. The Californian vowel shift also features in his chapter, a shift where front vowels are moving in just the opposite direction to that traditionally noted for New Zealand English (e.g., /bæt/ “bet”).¹ This rich chapter includes discussion and exemplification of age, gender, topic and activity on stylistic performance and clearly demonstrates “the subtleties of indexicality” (p. 185).

The final short chapter identifies some possible future directions. Eckert says she regrets the “reification of waves” since the image constructs “intellectual and social boundaries where there can be none” (p. 192). But waves are fluid and always in motion, so I think her fears are needless. I am confident interdisciplinary boundaries will continue to be productively breached as Eckert’s work has amply and fruitfully demonstrated.

4 Concluding Remarks

For me some of the most valuable sections of this book were the personal and scholarly reflections that introduced each article. The value of hindsight is clear here, and the reader benefits from Eckert’s mature reflection on the innovative pathways she forged because she believed so passionately in the importance of the approach she was taking, despite the fact that it challenged the conventional sociolinguistic wisdom of the time. Interestingly, although she devotes substantial space throughout this book to respectfully challenging Labov’s big picture focus, and to arguing the case for attention to the subtleties of stylistic practices and performance, one cannot but be aware of the long shadow his work casts, and indeed she regularly acknowledges its importance as the sociolinguistic landscape within which subtleties of style are accomplished.

Inevitably there is repetition in a book which is a compilation of Eckert's work based on a series of published articles and conference papers drawing predominantly on her ethnographic work in Detroit high schools. The ethnographic detail is needed to comprehend the complex arguments in each chapter. This is a familiar problem which our Language in the Workplace Project team regularly faces: the need to describe the basic methodology and background details when drawing on the same database but analysing some new aspect or exploring a new concept or theoretical perspective.

I am not a good proof-reader (as my colleagues will testify) but I did notice one grammatical glitch worth fixing up when the book is reprinted. On page 92, a reference beginning with "And see Guy ...", needs incorporating into the sentence. Meyerhoff (2019) also notes some glitches with graphs which she suggests the publishers should attend to. I strongly recommend Meyerhoff's substantial review article to readers interested in the theoretical implications of Eckert's intellectual memoir and its deeper significance in exploring the relationship between variationist sociolinguistic analysis and the construction of social meaning.

Lastly, although I had read much of this work before in different publication outlets, I found invaluable the experience of reading it as an integrated collection, enhanced by Eckert's wonderfully perceptive reflections. There is much here to inspire New Zealand sociolinguistic researchers. We have very little New Zealand ethnographic research involving school pupils of any age (though see King, 2011), and Eckert's work strongly suggests this is a rich field for the study of the construction of distinctive styles, as well as for research on language change in progress. It is hard for me to imagine anything like the frenzied activities of the pre-adolescent American "heterosexual crowd" (p. 115) that Eckert's work so graphically depicts, but without sociolinguistic research it is impossible to be confident that a New Zealand version of these activities does not exist. In sum, I strongly recommend this book to all sociolinguists and ethnographers as a source of rich theoretical insights as well as an energising incentive to further New Zealand sociolinguistic research.

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NOTES

¹ Though Miriam Meyerhoff notes (personal communication) that young Auckland speakers in her recently collected data are reversing that direction and lowering DRESS and TRAP.