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Book Review



Irene Theodoropoulou

Sociolinguistics of Style and Social Class in Contemporary Athens (Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture, 57). Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 2014. Pp. xiv + 240.

This study examines the Greek language as used by residents of the Western (DP) and Northern (VP) suburbs of Athens. Theodoropoulou offers an original theoretical perspective and draws on a wide range of data—from ethnographic interviews to popular literature, television, hip-hop, and Facebook—to document special features and discourses characteristic of speech styles identified with VP and DP. These features and discourses are discussed in relation to three orders of indexicality across genres.

Theodoropoulou places her work in the third wave of sociolinguistics. The first wave, exemplified by Labov, looked at variability in relation to major demographic categories and showed the socioeconomic motivation of sound change, originating in the local upper working class. First wave studies saw vernacular usage as indexing peer group status, and generally conveying positive value—Trudgill (1972), for example, saw the spread of vernacular innovations to the middle-class as driven by the identification of middle-class men with working-class masculinity.

The second wave studied both standard and vernacular forms, using ethnographic methods to relate variation to local social categories. Holmquist (1985) correlates the transition of peasant villagers in the Pyrenées from traditional agriculture into modern economy with the adoption of standard forms, with women most readily adopting standard forms. Eckert (2000) studies variation in relation to the polar social categories of predominantly middle-class “jocks” and working-class “burnouts” in suburban Detroit schools.

Third wave sociolinguistics, where Theodoropoulou situates her work, moves away from the focus on class and social categories, and sees variation as a social semiotic system defined by indexical mutability. Campbell-Kibler

(2007), for example, focuses on the contrast of velar and apical realizations of ING (*walking* vs. *walkin'*) as indexing education, intelligence, formality, articulateness, or the lack thereof. In this approach, the emphasis is on individuals and their linguistic choices, hence the centrality of style. For Theodoropoulou, style does not merely reflect social identity: "Style constructs identity because it is a recognizable and trendy word, which people can both reflect upon (e.g., I always try to be in style) and also employ as a powerful set of semiotic devices, including appearance, lifestylistic practices and, not least, language, through which people can operate in a given society" (15).

Central to the third wave approach is the concept of indexicality, developed by Silverstein (2003). For Silverstein, indexical order relates "the micro-social to the macro-social frames of analysis of any sociolinguistic phenomenon." Theodoropoulou focuses on popular culture genres in order to avoid what she considers the abstraction of Silverstein's model. She looks for the sweeping up of styles characteristic of higher order indexicality "in people's extravagant performances of popular culture stylistic features and their meanings" in the construction of VP and DP identities, "by either enhancing or, more often than not, undermining the established styling of these identities," and in people's "ability to comment on the actual content of these identities" (29–30). For Theodoropoulou, style and identity are polarities of a continuum corresponding to the micro-social and the macro-social respectively; style constructs identity by means of indexicality. Her model combines Coupland's (2007) "resource and contextualization" model with the "identities in interaction" model of Bucholtz and Hall (2005). Coupland understands the resources available to speakers as sociolinguistic, communicative, and performative. These resources are always manifest in specific contexts marked by targeting, framing, voicing, keying and loading. Coupland's emphasis on the performativity of style is applied in relation to the five principles Bucholtz and Hall (2005) identify as basic to identity analysis: emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality, and partialness. These categories are basic to Theodoropoulou's model of interior indexicality (indexicality within a genre); the exposition of the book progresses along the continuum from style to identity according to Theodoropoulou's classification of exterior indexicality (indexicality across genres): chapter three focuses on the social meanings attached to stylistic features, the institutionalized performances of popular culture; chapter four shifts the focus to people's high performances; and chapter five deals with speakers' explicit, metapragmatic reflections on the meaning of social class.

Theodoropoulou's analysis is based on a broad range of data, from conversation, interviews, and popular culture. This includes participant observation of four groups of three young adults from Kifisia in the VP (her own culture

of origin) and of four corresponding groups of three from Peristeri in the DP, complemented by discourse-centered online ethnography.

Chapter three establishes the dominant stereotypes corresponding to first-order indexicality. Popular culture, Theodoropoulou argues, is dominant in the everyday practices of her subjects; she pays accordingly close attention to the representation of VP and DP styles in popular culture, focusing on television comedies, hip-hop music and chick-lit novels. VP and DP speech styles generally correspond to stereotypes of rich and poor. Sociolinguistic resources typical of the VP include code-switching to English, slang disparaging the status and manners of DP people, irony, and VP politeness with extensive use of “please” and “thank you” those of the DP include swear words, disparaging sociability and intelligence of VP people, palatalization of /l/ and /n/, use of “the unvoiced dental /t/ instead of the voiced /ð/ as in οἱ ἀνδρες”,¹ and what the author calls DP politeness without “please,” omission of the preposition + determiner in formulations of motion towards, and use of creaky voice. Contrasting areas of communicative competence include VP careful articulation, nasalization, and gossip disguised as sympathy; DP markers include loudness and use of the second personal singular. Performativity in the VP is marked by native-sounding pronunciation of foreign words, where speakers who have not integrated into the VP are recognizable by their pronunciation of foreign words.

Chapter four, entitled “Athenian suburbanites’ double-voiced performances as identity-work”, examines actual conversations. Theodoropoulou elaborates on Bakhtin’s category of double-voicing, the appropriation by an animator of the words of another speaker to underline the distinction between the original speaker’s perspective and that of the animator (100). Theodoropoulou’s examples of double-voicing include stylization (denaturalisation, irony, and alazony) and mocking parody. Marina, a BP resident, uses creaky voice and omission of the preposition + determiner in formulations of motion to stylize a person whose speech betrays his DP origins; for Theodoropoulou, this denaturalizes both the man’s DP identity and Marina’s VP identity. Marina also exhibits irony in a mock-serious key by means of her own self-stylization, creating a critical distance from her interlocutors, and alazony in her depiction of the snobbishness of one of her BP acquaintance towards DP residents. Parody is exhibited by Elpida, a DP resident who mocks the snobbishness of a schoolteacher from

1 This quote, from Table 3.2 (p. 96), likely refers to variation between the pronunciation signaled by the orthographic representation <άντρες> (pronounced [andres], with a voiced stop [d]) and that signaled by the orthographic representation <άνδρες> (pronounced [anðres], with a voiced fricative [ð]).

the BP, exemplified by her habits of knocking on a table, stretching vowels, and Greek pronunciation of a French word. Through stylization and parody, participants employ first order indexicals as second order indexicals, but in performing second order indexicals they construct inauthentic and thus new strategic social meanings of VP and DP speech styles, which themselves index inauthentic VP and DP social identities (135).

Chapter five focuses on third order indexicality: popular literature accounts of social class in the DP and VP. Here Theodoropoulou complicates the stereotypical image of wealthy northern and poor western suburbs. This discussion is based not on socioeconomic analysis but on how class is represented in popular culture and in ethnographic interviews. While the VP are characterized by the newly rich, and the DP by working class populations, there is a DP middle class and a new-poor class in the VP. Of particular interest is table 5–2, which lists qualities DP speakers identify with their region by contrast with the BP, such as support, respect, solidarity, mutual help, friendliness, etc. These qualities are more frequently cited by DP men than women, “a fact that indexes their increased proclivity towards and their strong bond with their local culture” (182). Theodoropoulou identifies a group common to both regions, the precariat or the generation of 700 Euros (G700), a social and cultural formation of educated but low-earning workers. Discussion of social class is oriented by structures of feeling oriented towards contrasting binaries, past-present in the VP and local-global in the DP.

Theodoropoulou’s work demonstrates how popular media stereotypes of DP and VP speech styles resonate in the conversation of her subjects. She shows how complex social meanings, structured by indexicality, can mediate style and identity. This is a stimulating and scholarly addition to the sociolinguistic literature, and a compelling elaboration of popular attitudes to the abiding class stratification of Greek society.

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