

Style and Sociolinguistic Variation

edited by

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2001

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface 10/12pt Times NR MT *System* QuarkXPress™ [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Style and sociolinguistic variation / edited by Penelope Eckert and John R. Rickford.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 59191 0 (hbk.) ISBN 0 521 59789 7 (pbk.)

1. Language and languages. – Variation. 2. Language and languages – Style.

3. Discourse analysis. 4. Sociolinguistics. I. Eckert, Penelope. II. Rickford,
John R., 1949–

P120.V37 S79 2001

417–dc21 00-068947 CIP

ISBN 0 521 59191 0 hardback

ISBN 0 521 59789 7 paperback

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1 “Style” as distinctiveness: the culture and ideology of linguistic differentiation¹

Judith T. Irvine

1 Introduction: style as distinctiveness

“What gives a woman **style**?” asks a recent *New Yorker* advertisement for *The Power of Style*, a book in “the Condé Nast Collection” (the fall collection of fashionable books, perhaps?). The ad continues:

“I’m nothing to look at,” the Duchess of Windsor admitted. Rita de Acosta Lydig paid no attention to what was “in fashion.” Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis had none of the attributes of the ideal American girl, and Diana Vreeland never had money. Yet each of these women had a personal magnetism and allure so strong that she could “dominate a room from a footstool.” How did they do it? And what can you learn from them?

Whatever answers the advertised book may offer to these questions, they are likely to have more to do with the fashion industry’s notions of style than with a sociolinguistic definition. Still, some aspects of the conception of “style” implicit in this ad are worth the sociolinguist’s attention. We ignore the everyday meanings of terminology at our peril; and style in language should not be assumed *a priori* to be an utterly different matter from style in other realms of life. So, if the ad’s discourse represents some popular conception of style, we might draw several inferences about that conception: “style” crucially concerns distinctiveness; though it may characterize an individual, it does so only within a social framework (of witnesses who pay attention); it thus depends upon social evaluation and, perhaps, aesthetics; and it interacts with ideologized representations (the “ideal American girl”; “in fashion”). In this particular ad the ideologized themes revolve around gender, and they implicitly contrast several visions of what female distinctiveness might be based upon.²

¹ This paper is heavily indebted to conversations with Susan Gal (University of Chicago) and to work we have conducted jointly. See Irvine and Gal 2000 and Gal and Irvine 1995.

² Thus the ad denies that money and position play a crucial role in female distinctiveness, instead proposing that distinctiveness lies in some mysterious “personal allure.” The ad also suggests that the most widely available images of a female ideal (“the ideal American girl,” “in fashion”) are actually too common to provide the basis for true distinctiveness, which

The first lesson, then, that I would draw from this excursion into the world of advertising concerns *distinctiveness*. Whatever “styles” are, in language or elsewhere, they are part of a *system of distinction*, in which a style contrasts with other possible styles, and the social meaning signified by the style contrasts with other social meanings. Perhaps this point will seem obvious. Yet, its corollary has sometimes been overlooked: namely, that it is seldom useful to examine a single style in isolation. To describe a style’s characteristics, examining the features that identify it, and to contemplate links between these features and the style’s particular function, is to suppose that function suffices to explain form, without reference to system. The characteristics of a particular style cannot be explained independently of others. Instead, attention must be directed to relationships among styles – to their contrasts, boundaries, and commonalities. What is more important for a sociolinguistic view of style than a particular correlation between form and function – since correlations, as we know, are not explanations and do not identify causes – are the principles and processes of stylistic differentiation within a continuously evolving sociolinguistic system.

The second lesson is that the relationships among styles are ideologically mediated. It is a commonplace in sociolinguistics that ways of speaking index the social formations (groups, categories, personae, activity types, institutional practices, etc.) of which they are characteristic. But an index can only inform social action if it functions as a sign; and a sign requires an interpretant, as Peirce long ago pointed out. That is to say, it must be meaningful to, and at some level understood by, some persons whose actions are informed by it. So these indexes must partake in participants’ understandings of their social world and the semiotic resources available in it. Those understandings are positioned, depending in some measure on the participant’s social position and point of view. They are also culturally variable; that is, they are neither universal nor entirely predictable from social position (such as socioeconomic class) alone, without consideration of local history and tradition.

Finally, this notion of style is connected with aesthetics, an aspect of style some authors have emphasized (see, for example, many of the contributions to that foundational work, *Style in Language* [Sebeok 1960]). I interpret stylistic aesthetics as concerning (among other things) not only distinctiveness, but also the *consistency* of the linguistic features constituting a style. I have discussed this point with regard to Wolof registers (Irvine 1990); I broaden its relevance here. Consistency is hardly all there is to aesthetics, of course. Aesthetic systems are culturally variable and are orga-

footnote 2 (*cont.*)

cannot be found in conformist behavior, even when the conformity is to an ideal. Implicitly, then, the ad identifies three different ideological perspectives – class-based, democratic, and individualist/aesthetic – on feminine “style” and its social setting.

nized around locally relevant principles of value, not all of which are conspicuously connected with sociological forces. Still, one of the things those principles of value do, whatever they may be in the particular case, is to motivate the consistency of stylistic forms.

This broad conception of style as a social semiosis of distinctiveness has some precedents in sociological works which, though they do not focus on language in detail, provide a framework that accommodates linguistic style among other semiotic forms. One such work is Dick Hebdige’s (1979) *Subculture: the meaning of style*, a study of youth subcultures in Britain (Mods, Teddy Boys, punks, Rastas, etc.) and the history of their relationships, in which race relations are deeply embedded. “Style” in this work is broadly conceived: a subculture’s “style” is something distinctive that appears in its members’ dress, posture, argot, musical preferences, even in their focal concerns. “Style” crosscuts these communicative and behavioral modalities and integrates them thematically. Most importantly, Hebdige shows that these styles have a complex relationship. The styles that distinguish these subcultures cannot be understood in isolation from one another; they have a complex history of “dialectical interplay” (p. 57), drawing on portions of each other’s symbolic resources while constructing contrast in other portions.

Influential at a more theoretical level is Pierre Bourdieu’s work, including his (1984[1979]) book *Distinction*, a study of taste and lifestyle differences in France. Lifestyles, for Bourdieu – and this rubric includes aesthetic preferences and behavioral modalities of many kinds – are part of the “work of representation” in which social relationships are constructed, not just reflected. The “social space,” as he calls it, is “constructed on the basis of principles of differentiation” (1985:196); it is a space of relationships, not of groups. (Bear in mind that socioeconomic classes, e.g., are relational categories, not real groups as social theory defines these; p. 198.) The organization of the social space is displayed in the relations among lifestyles, despite the fact that participants firmly believe many of their preferences are entirely personal (pp. 203–4). Writing on styles as practices of social representation, Bourdieu comments (1985: 204):

All practice is “conspicuous,” visible, whether or not it is performed in order to be seen; it is distinctive, whether or not it springs from the intention of being “conspicuous,” standing out, of distinguishing oneself or behaving with distinction. As such it inevitably functions as a *distinctive sign* . . . The pursuit of distinction – which may be expressed in ways of speaking or the refusal of misalliances – produces separations intended to be perceived or, more precisely, known and recognized, as legitimate differences.

Following these approaches to style, then, I take it that styles in speaking involve the ways speakers, as agents in social (and sociolinguistic) space,

negotiate their positions and goals within a system of distinctions and possibilities. Their acts of speaking are ideologically mediated, since those acts necessarily involve the speaker's understandings of salient social groups, activities, and practices, including forms of talk. Such understandings incorporate evaluations and are weighted by the speaker's social position and interest. They are also affected by differences in speakers' access to relevant practices. Social acts, including acts of speaking, are informed by an ideologized system of representations, and no matter how instrumental they may be to some particular social goal, they also participate in the "work of representation."

A perspective that focuses on language ideology, and on how linguistic practices join in the "work of representation," is shared by a number of current authors (such as Silverstein 1979 and elsewhere, Kroskrity, Schieffelin, and Woolard 1992, Woolard and Schieffelin 1994, Kroskrity 2000, and others). Most sociolinguistic work, too, has appealed to some notion of social evaluation, attitudes, scales of prestige, or schemes of values, and/or has alluded to speakers' conceptions of social identity, and the like. Many sociolinguists, however, have placed those evaluative schemes in the background, as if they could be taken as obvious, or were but one "factor" among many, or, especially, as if they could be read off the distributions of sociolinguistic facts (i.e., as if they needed no independent investigation). By foregrounding ideology I emphasize the need to investigate ideas about language and speakers independently of empirical distributions, and the need to recognize that "attitudes" include participants' basic understandings of what the sociolinguistic system consists of, not just emotional dispositions. Moreover, the categories and behaviors toward which one has these attitudes cannot be assumed to have been established independently of anyone's perception of them.

Here some methodological comments may be in order. If I advocate foregrounding language ideology, am I merely recommending that the sociolinguist observer should ask participants (informants, consultants) what is going on, and rely on their analysis instead of his or her own? Not at all. Although participants are well placed in some respects to offer a sociolinguistic analysis (since participation means close acquaintance with the system), in other respects they are poorly placed to do so (since participation also means interestedness). The reason for calling participants' assumptions and analyses "ideologies" is that ideational schemes, whether about language or other things, have some relationship with point of view – the social position of the viewer, and the practices to which he/she differentially has access – and the viewer's baggage of history and partiality. Such schemes are *partial* in all senses of the word. Any one participant's ideational scheme is not likely to be shared by everyone else; nor is it likely to be

identical with the distributions of behavioral forms which an outsider might observe (see Silverstein 1979). Although ideology cannot simply be considered “false consciousness” (see Eagleton 1991), there will always be some portions of an ideologically pervaded consciousness that would strike someone else, differently positioned, as false.

In short, participants in some community of discourse are not entirely objective observers of each other’s behaviors. Yet, their own acts are deeply influenced by their perceptions and interpretations of those behaviors.³ Language ideologies are therefore to be investigated independently of the distribution of observable sociolinguistic facts, not as a substitute for them. That investigation will require moving beyond the mere recording of informants’ explicit statements of sociolinguistic norms, for beliefs and ideational schemes are not contained only in a person’s explicit assertions of them. Instead, some of the most important and interesting aspects of ideology lie behind the scenes, in assumptions that are taken for granted – that are never explicitly stated in any format that would permit them also to be explicitly denied. As Silverstein (1979 and elsewhere) has suggested, the best place to look for language ideology may lie in the terms and presuppositions of metapragmatic discourse, not just in its assertions.

Applying these ideas to an understanding of “style,” I focus on participants’ ideologizing of sociolinguistic differentiation and distinctiveness, and the processes to which this gives rise.

2 Style, register, and dialect

How does this approach to “style” accord with, or differ from, what the term has meant in linguistics and sociolinguistics heretofore? A conception of style that has provided a starting-point for several other contributors to this volume comes from Labov’s (1966 and other works) discussions of intra-speaker variation in the structured sociolinguistic interview.⁴ Although this definition of style – as an individual speaker’s shifts in details of usage within a very structured, monolingual situation – seems at first glance much narrower than mine, it actually opens a window onto an equally wide sociolinguistic scene. One of the most important findings of

³ A conception such as this is crucial, I believe, if sociolinguistics is to avoid both the Scylla of methodological individualism (as found in extreme rational-actor models that ignore the configuration of inputs to the actor’s choices) and the Charybdis of sociological determinism (as found in models that read individuals’ motivation off observed social distributions of linguistic phenomena, and ignore individuals’ agency).

⁴ As other contributors have also noted, Labov’s discussions of style in his early work went on to interpret intra-speaker variation in terms of degrees of formality in the interview situation – an interpretation that was to be contested, by the 1970s, on several grounds.

early variationist work was the discovery of relationships between intra-individual stylistic variation and inter-group variation, yielding two angles on one and the same sociolinguistic dynamic. There is some reason even within the variationist tradition, therefore, to look for the dynamics of style in this larger picture, as long as one does not lose sight of what individuals do.

Even in linguistics (and sociolinguistics) “style” has meant other things besides intra-speaker variation.⁵ A great many of these are surveyed in a recent work by John Haynes (1995), *Style*, a “practical introduction” to the topic. Haynes avoids trying to define style, instead offering glimpses of the kinds of phenomena linguists have looked at under this rubric. If, as this approach implies, “style” is what students of style examine, it covers a very wide range of phenomena indeed. Apparently, “style” has meant almost anything within a language that could produce differences in and between monologic texts, apart from performance factors in the narrow sense (physical accident, for example), and apart from gross considerations of denotational adequacy.⁶ The kinds of patterning Haynes discusses range from relatively institutionalized variation, at one pole, to kinds of patterning that have more to do with individuals’ creativity and presentation of self, at the other.

Does the wide range of phenomena assignable to a notion of “style” just represent analytical chaos? On the contrary; I think these phenomena, though various, are interlinked. To sort out the links it is useful to return to basics, and look at some related concepts in our repertoire, particularly *register* and *dialect*.

These concepts come to mind because Haynes points “style” toward variation within the usage of a single speaker or author, and within a single “language” (itself a problematic conception, but space does not permit exploring it here). By excluding variation across users, his discussion of style implicitly reproduces the distinction, drawn decades ago, between

⁵ See the many different definitions of style in the contributions to *Style in Language* (Sebeok 1960), also a conference volume. As Joseph Greenberg pointed out (1960:426) in the concluding discussion, participants in the conference “use the word ‘style’ in different ways . . . [initially] I came to certain pessimistic conclusions which might be stated in the following manner, that it was only the delightful ambiguity of the word ‘style’ that made this conference possible.” Later, Greenberg felt that some higher synthesis might be possible after all: “Let us define style as that set of characteristics by which we distinguish members of one subclass from members of other subclasses, all of which are members of the same general class. This is simply a way of saying that style is diagnostic like a fingerprint” (1960:427). Meanwhile, Roman Jakobson’s famous discussant comments in Sebeok 1960 (“Closing remarks: Linguistics and Poetics”) do not focus on a definition of style at all, but rather assimilate it to a discussion of communicative function.

⁶ That is to say, a change of topic does not necessarily require a change of style; and to some extent you can talk about the “same” thing in more than one style. Style is not the same thing as topic.

dialect and register: that is, between varieties according to users, and varieties according to uses (Halliday 1964; see also Gumperz 1968, on “dialectal” versus “superposed” varieties, for a somewhat similar conception). Styles, Haynes implies, would have something to do with registers. Indeed, *register* being a term originating in British schools of linguistics, some American authors have simply used the term “style” in its place, though “register” is gaining currency in American sociolinguistic parlance today.

In the usage of most linguists, registers are ways of speaking whose grammatical configurations overlap. That is, they are linguistically distinguishable, but only as varieties of one encompassing “language.” Actually, the same could be said for dialects. The definitional difference between dialect and register is functional, rather than formal: which dialect you use indexes your social affiliation with a group of users (especially your locus of origin); which register you use indexes properties of your present situation and social activity (which may be a situation whose character has already been established prior to your speaking, or it may be a situation you are trying to create).

For Halliday, the principal proponent of this notion of “register” in the 1960s and 1970s, the functional distinction seemed to have consequences for registers’ (and dialects’) formal properties. According to him, the registers of a language tend to differ from one another primarily in semantics, whereas the dialects tend to differ from one another in phonetics, phonology, and “lexicogrammar” (Halliday 1978:35). Yet, even if such tendencies can be identified in some cases – perhaps most particularly in types of written texts, insofar as such types are conceived as registers (rather than, say, as genres) – they do not apply conveniently to all. The differences among registers are not actually limited to semantics, however broadly semantics is defined.⁷ There can also be grammatical, phonological, and phonetic differences, and some registers may even be distinguished solely on those bases.

For example, varieties such as Pig Latin, or Cockney rhyming slang, or the many play languages worldwide that rely on syllable-inversions, are evidently *not* semantically distinguished from their ordinary-language counterparts. In these particular examples, what is most important in motivating the use of a special variety is the mere fact of difference – formal distinctiveness from everyday speech – not anything special about its treatment of reference. More than some intrinsic connection with semantics, then, a crucial aspect of the concept of register is that – like “style” – it implies differentiation

⁷ When Halliday (1978:35) says that registers tend to differ in semantics, he adds “and hence in lexicogrammar, and sometimes phonology, as realization of this.” But he does not tell us how this works or why phonological differences should be seen as the “realization” of semantic differences.

within a system. By definition, there must be a *set* of registers among which a speaker's usage alternates, and of which he/she is to some degree aware.

Linguists' conception of dialects, on the other hand, has not necessarily implied user-awareness of a system of alternative varieties. Classically, a dialect has been seen as a variety formed independently of others, under conditions of communicative isolation. A speech community might split, its offshoots migrating in opposite directions and entirely losing touch with one another; their forms of speech could drift apart without anyone's being aware that other dialects even existed. But while the conditions and dynamics of linguistic drift are not to be denied, their applicability may well have been overestimated. Equally relevant, if not more so, are the dynamics of social settings where there is widespread knowledge of a range of dialectal varieties associated with differentiated social groups, even subcommunities, and where such awareness is an inherent part of the mechanism of linguistic differentiation and change. This point is of course crucial to the social motivation of linguistic change as discussed within the Labovian sociolinguistic tradition.

A taxonomic distinction between dialect and register thus has fewer advantages than has sometimes been supposed; and this should come as no surprise, given the findings of Labov and his followers on speech variation and socioeconomic class. In the many cases where the varieties among which a speaker's usage alternates include those associated with other groups (multilingualism, multidialectism) – or echoes thereof, or exaggerated avoidances of them – the taxonomic distinction is necessarily blurred. I shall return to these matters in later pages. Ultimately more useful, however, than pursuing taxonomic concerns, which so often turn out to be chimerical, is an exploration of the principles of differentiation organizing the relationships and distinctiveness of varieties – principles I seek to capture in a conception of “style.”

An advantage of focusing on these principles of sociolinguistic differentiation is that in them, and in their ideological matrix, we may look for the motivation of at least some of the particular linguistic features by which varieties are characterized.⁸ Cockney rhyming-slang, and its relationship to “everyday” speech, provides a case in point. This is one of the examples Halliday drew upon in his (1976) discussion of “anti-languages” – linguistic varieties whose very existence is motivated by an ideology of opposition to a social establishment. Most often used in circumstances where that social opposition is salient, such as prison settings, or in conspiratorial communi-

⁸ See Ervin-Tripp 1972 on the “co-occurrence rules” that describe linkages among linguistic devices in a register.

Table 1.1. *Javanese “language levels” or “speech styles” (Errington 1988:90–1)*

| | | | | | |
|---------------|------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------|
| <i>KRAMA:</i> | 1. <i>menapa</i> | <i>nandalem</i> | <i>mundhut</i> | <i>sekul</i> | <i>semanten</i> |
| | 2. <i>menapa</i> | <i>panjenengan</i> | <i>mendhet</i> | <i>sekul</i> | <i>semanten</i> |
| <i>MADYA:</i> | 3. <i>napa</i> | <i>sampéyan</i> | <i>mendhet</i> | <i>sekul</i> | <i>semonten</i> |
| | 4. <i>napa</i> | <i>sampéyan</i> | <i>njupuk</i> | <i>sega</i> | <i>semonten</i> |
| <i>NGOKO:</i> | 5. <i>apa</i> | <i>sliramu</i> | <i>mundhut</i> | <i>sega</i> | <i>semono</i> |
| | 6. <i>apa</i> | <i>kowé</i> | <i>njupuk</i> | <i>sega</i> | <i>semono</i> |
| Gloss: | Question- marker | you | take | rice | that much |
| Translation: | Did you take that much rice? | | | | |

cation among members of underground groups, the “anti-language” itself is constructed via some sort of linguistic inversion, or antinomy, or other principle of opposition to a variety considered representative of the to-be-counteracted establishment.

In “anti-languages,” as also in Pig Latin, the principles of differentiation which motivate the internal consistency of each variety are quite simple. In other cases, however, other kinds of principles and more complex relationships might be involved. Consider, for example, the so-called “language levels” in Javanese, registers among which speakers choose depending on their assessment of a situation. (Errington 1988, the main source on which I draw, calls them “speech styles.”) The “levels” are illustrated primarily in sets of lexical alternants (see table 1.1), although their differences are actually not only lexical.⁹

The differences among these styles, and the rationales for choosing one or another style, are conceived (by users)¹⁰ in terms of ideas about affectivity and social hierarchy. The “higher,” more “refined” styles, called *krama*, are considered to be depersonalized, flat-affect, and regulated by an ethic of proper order, peace, and calm. In them one “does not express one’s own feelings” (Wolff and Poedjosoedarmo 1982:41). The lower, “coarser” levels (called *ngoko*), in contrast, are the “language . . . one loses one’s temper in” (Errington 1984:9). Actually, the point is considered to lie not so much in one’s own feelings as in one’s addressee’s sensibilities. A high-ranking

⁹ Although the Javanese “language levels” are often described as differing mainly in lexicon (sets of lexical alternants) and in some special affixes, Errington (1984:9) has pointed out that they also differ in prosody and morphophonemics, although these aspects have been little studied.

¹⁰ The principal sources of information on the cultural background and the pragmatics of this Javanese system have been the Javanese traditional elite, the *priyayi*. It is *priyayi* understandings of their sociolinguistic system that are described by Errington (1988) and Geertz (1960), for instance. That these elite views, or some aspects of them, may be partial, in both senses of that term, is obvious.

addressee is supposed to be relatively disengaged from worldly concerns and to “need” protection from vulgarity and stormy emotion. Supposedly, it is because a speaker recognizes the importance of showing respect for those “needs,” that he or she refrains from expressing strong feelings to exalted interlocutors.¹¹

This principle of differentiation, conceived as concerning coarseness and refinement, organizes not only the prosodic differences among the styles, but, evidently, at least some of the differences among the lexical alternants. The more “refined” alternants tend to draw on loan words or loan morphemes taken from Sanskrit sacred texts, and they bring some of that aura of sacredness and learnedness along with them into the Javanese construction. Semantically, too, the more “refined” alternants reflect the ideology of “elevated” speech, in that they are relatively abstract and vague, less explicitly engaged with the messy details of worldly existence than are their low-style counterparts. Thus an ideological principle relating rank to refinement recruits at least some of the linguistic characteristics that differentiate the styles, and recruits them consistently, whether they be prosodic or lexical.

Now, notice that although the Javanese speaker’s choice among language levels is governed by situational factors, in particular the relationships among a situation’s personnel and the appropriateness of displaying affect in their presence and in the course of that situation’s activities, there is also a sense in which the levels distinguish categories of speakers. It has been claimed (Geertz 1960) that the members of different Javanese social ranks also differ significantly in the range of varieties they control within the total repertoire, the traditional elite controlling a larger range, including the more “refined” levels especially associated with their high rank, while the “coarser” levels are associated with the peasantry. To speak in a “refined” manner is not only to show respect for an addressee’s emotional delicacy; it is also to display one’s own knowledgeable ability, pragmatic sensitivity, and refinement. As images of “refinement” and affective display, then, the language levels evoke both the situations characteristically connected with such responses and the persons characteristically manifesting them.

Finally, notice that Javanese “language levels” admit internal variation. As table 1.1 shows, there are sublevels distinguishable within the three major levels, according to similar principles of contrast. (The middle level, *madya*, is in fact a kind of compromise constructed on the basis of the principal opposition between *alus* “refined” and *kasar* “coarse” ingredients.) And there are also further subtleties of style admitted by the structure of the system, although complicated by a distinction between addressee and referent honorifics, among other things. Those participant-role complex-

¹¹ I owe this point to Michael Silverstein (p.c.).

ities aside, the principles of differentiation that organize this system provide several degrees of difference, with varieties distinguishing groups and situations as well as intra-speaker variation according to addressee and mood.

The Javanese case thus illustrates an ideologized, culture-specific principle of stylistic differentiation that motivates some of the linguistic characteristics of Javanese styles and provides various degrees of differentiation. The case also illustrates how the distinction between dialect and register, whether or not it offers a valuable analytical starting point, becomes more complicated as soon as one looks more closely at a particular speech community and repertoire. Some of the reasons for this have to do with the cultural structuring, and consequent creative deployment, of “voices” associated with social groups such as the Javanese elite and peasantry. Images of persons considered typical of those groups – and the personalities, moods, behavior, activities, and settings, characteristically associated with them – are rationalized and organized in a cultural/ideological system, so that those images become available as a frame of reference within which speakers create performances and within which audiences interpret them. This system informs the style-switching in which all speakers engage. To put this another way: one of the many methods people have for differentiating situations and displaying attitudes is to draw on (or carefully avoid) the “voices” of others, or what they assume those voices to be.

The concept of register, then, although initially defined in terms of situation rather than person or group, in fact draws on cultural images of persons as well as situations and activities. The reverse is also the case. Social dialects, no matter how they come into existence, may become imagined as connected with focal individuals and scenes, or with characteristic activities and ways of being; and in consequence they may be drawn upon (or imitated by persons outside the group-of-reference) to display attitudes or define situations. “Dialects” and “registers” are intimately connected.

Where does this leave style? With that term, I suggest, one places less emphasis on a variety as object-in-itself and more emphasis on processes of distinction, which operate on many levels, from the gross to the subtle. Research on “registers” has often concerned relatively stable, institutionalized patterns and varieties, perhaps having explicit names within their communities of use, and/or being connected with institutionalized situations, occupations, and the like (“sports announcer talk,” for instance). Style includes these, but it also includes the more subtle ways individuals navigate among available varieties and try to perform a coherent representation of a distinctive self – a self that may be in turn subdividable into a differentiated system of aspects-of-self. Perhaps there is another difference too: whereas dialect and register, at least as sociolinguists ordinarily identify them, point to linguistic phenomena only, style involves principles of distinctiveness

that may extend beyond the linguistic system to other aspects of comportment that are semiotically organized.

This notion of style rests on the possibility that the same, or at least similar, principles of distinctiveness may be invoked at the personal level as at the institutional. This is so, I suggest, because of the specific ways in which ideologies of linguistic differentiation systematize and rationalize relationships between linguistic phenomena and social formations.

The next section will elaborate and illustrate this point. Pursuing the specific semiotic processes through which ideologies of linguistic differentiation work, I propose a model of how social semiosis exploits available linguistic features (as *differentiae*), and how stylistic distinctiveness becomes available for creative deployment and interpretation.

3 Ideologies of differentiation: semiotic processes

In a 1992 paper on dialect variation in eastern Europe, Susan Gal suggested that to understand the variation and the linguistic changes occurring in the region she described, one must “pay close attention to a cultural system, to a set of ideas or ideologies about the nature of social value and the role of language in producing that value.” Having done so, she noted, it turned out that “quite similar sociolinguistic processes can be found in village India, among the Wolof of Senegal . . . and in what Eric Wolf has called the really dark continent: Europe” (Gal 1992:2). The ethnographic research she had done in eastern Europe and I had done among Wolof in west Africa, though conducted in very different locales, language families, and social settings, revealed some interesting resemblances among the principles that organized the differentiation of linguistic varieties and subvarieties.

Comparing our observations, and focusing on the cultural ideas that interpret, rationalize, and locate – perhaps even generate – linguistic differences in a local social field, we found that in these two sociolinguistic systems the particular content of those ideas happened to be similar. In both systems, morally loaded notions opposing austerity to exuberant display served as an organizing principle linking linguistic differentiation with social distinctiveness at many levels, rationalizing (for participants) the differences between locally available ways of speaking (registers, subregisters, dialects, even whole languages). The point is not that an ideology of linguistic differentiation always operates with this particular axis of contrast. Indeed, the above-mentioned Javanese case is rather different. What the serendipitous similarity suggested to us was, instead, that it would be worthwhile to undertake a broader exploration of how linguistic ideologies organize and rationalize sociolinguistic distinctiveness.

We undertook to explore that question in a joint project, currently under-

way, on which I shall draw in the remainder of this paper. Though we have examined a large number of cases, historical as well as contemporary, I limit the present discussion to the two ethnographic cases we started with. It is important to note, however, that we believe we are looking at a very general kind of phenomenon.

In brief, the findings illustrated in these cases are the following. (1) The linguistic phenomena that constitute registers and styles, as forms of linguistic distinctiveness, have a consistency that derives, in some degree, from local ideologies of language – principles of distinctiveness that link language differences with social meanings. (2) Ideologies of linguistic differentiation interpret the sociolinguistic phenomena within their view via (we argue) three semiotic processes, which we have called iconization, recursivity, and erasure.¹²

Iconization is a semiotic process that transforms the sign relationship between linguistic features and the social images to which they are linked. Linguistic differences appear to be iconic representations of the social contrasts they index – as if a linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a social group’s inherent nature or essence. The ideological representation – itself a sign – operates in terms of images; it picks out qualities supposedly shared by the social image and the linguistic features (or rather, an image of such features), binding these images together. Their connection thus appears to be necessary, perhaps even “natural,” because of the supposedly shared qualities. In this way iconization entails the attribution of cause and necessity to a connection (between linguistic behaviors and social categories – of people or activities) that may be only historical, contingent, or conventional.

Recursivity involves the projection of an opposition, salient at one level of relationship, onto some other level. It is the process by which meaningful distinctions (between groups, or between linguistic varieties, etc.) are reproduced within each side of a dichotomy or partition, creating subcategories and subvarieties; or, conversely, by which intra-group oppositions may be projected outward onto inter-group relations, creating supercategories that include both sides but oppose them to something else. This is the process that links subtle forms of distinctiveness with broader contrasts and oppositions. Iconicity is involved here too, since the secondary, projected opposition stands in an iconic relationship to the original or primary one.

Erasure, meanwhile, is the process in which an ideology simplifies the sociolinguistic field. Attending to one dimension of distinctiveness, it ignores another, thereby rendering some sociolinguistic phenomena (or

¹² In earlier presentations we have called the first of these processes iconicity, but that word seems better suited to the result of the process than to the process itself.

persons or activities) invisible. So, for example, a social group, or a language, may be imagined as homogeneous, its internal variation disregarded or explained away. Again, iconization may be involved, since the aspects of the sociolinguistic scene not picked out in the iconizing process are precisely the ones most likely to seem to disappear.¹³

In the hope that examples will illustrate and clarify these points, I turn to our ethnographic cases, in which the three processes apply.

3.1 *Speech varieties in a Wolof village (Senegal)*

The first example comes from a rural Wolof community in Senegal, which I visited for ethnographic and linguistic research (most extensively in the 1970s).¹⁴ There, villagers identified two salient styles of speaking which they associated with opposite social groups in Wolof society: the high-ranking *gээр* (“nobles”), and the low-ranking *gewel* (“griots,” a bardic caste). The system of ranks (known as “castes” in the ethnographic literature on the region) among Wolof includes many more categories than just these two; but, in these villagers’ view, the contrast between (high) noble and (low) griot epitomized the principle of hierarchical differentiation as it relates to the activity of speaking.

My argument here (for more detail see Irvine 1989 and 1990) is that the linguistic differences between these ways of speaking are motivated by an ideology of language that connects social identity with verbal conduct – as if that conduct displayed social essences iconically. Moreover, the principles of stylistic differentiation operate on many different levels, from gross contrasts to subtle ones (recursivity).

In the traditions of Wolof village society, differences in rank are an acknowledged value that organizes all sorts of social activities and interactions, ranging from economic specializations and exchange, to the regulation of marriage, and including social contact and talk. Social organization, as conceived in this cultural framework, depends upon the differentiation of persons and their behavior. Wolof consultants drew a broad contrast between gravity and exuberance in behavior, and explained it in terms of a contrast between laconic and impulsive temperaments. The central idea is

¹³ So although I have listed three semiotic processes, in a sense they are all aspects of the same one, iconization. Notice that most discussions of iconicity in language have focused solely on iconic relationships between the linguistic sign and its referent. Here, instead, iconicity concerns relationships between the sign and its conditions of production (i.e. its speakers, or the activities or scenes in which it is characteristically uttered). See Irvine and Gal 2000.

¹⁴ Senegal today has been drawn more into a transnational sphere, with diasporan populations living in Paris and New York, than was the case at the time of my original fieldwork. Urban varieties of Wolof have changed and are probably more influential on the rural scene than they were at that time. The system I describe has been partially reconfigured.

that people are inherently dissimilar, having different constitutions (and physical ingredients, which were sometimes described in terms of the viscosity of bodily fluids). These different constitutions govern their possessors’ feelings and motivations and make them behave in dissimilar ways. Thus villagers “explained” differences in caste-linked modes of conduct and rationalized caste inequality, since conduct has moral implications and the caste hierarchy is based on supposed moral distinctions.

Among the lower-ranking castes, the griots in particular have the image of high affectivity and excitability. They are seen – by themselves as well as by others – as somewhat volatile and theatrical personalities, endowed with energy and rhetorical skills, and most especially as people who excite others with whom they interact. The highest-ranking nobles, meanwhile, are conventionally associated with stability, but also with lethargy and blandness. Their restraint (*kersa*) may “make them reluctant to say bad things,” as some villagers said, but (they continued) it also makes them reluctant to say or do much of anything. It takes a griot to make life interesting and attractive and to keep the high nobles awake. Once roused, kings and chiefs may be moved to great deeds – the greater because of the seriousness and weightiness of their personalities, and the many dependents whom they command – but griots are needed to stir them to that point. The griots’ main services, therefore, lie in their ability to stir others, including their ability to convey a noble patron’s ideas energetically and persuasively to his public (since he would be too torpid, or too removed, to convey them himself).

The ideology that contrasts these social images is, I have suggested (Irvine 1990), what motivates the particular linguistic contrasts distinguishing the two styles of speaking my consultants identified: “griot speech” and “noble speech.” The “griot” style can be summarized as involving affectively charged, elaborated, aesthetically polished, supportive repetition (the idea of repetition deriving from the griot’s role as “transmitter” of the high-ranking patron’s ideas, which are sometimes initially whispered or conveyed to the griot in private, then repeated elaborately by the griot in public). The “noble” style, in contrast, is the style of the laconic, restrained, torpid or cautious speaker who lacks special rhetorical skills or fluency. Linguistically, the relevant contrasts are found in all aspects of verbal performance, from prosody, phonetics, morphology, and sentence structure to turn-taking and the management of conversational discourse. (See tables 1.2, 1.3, 1.4.)

The most extreme version of “griot talk” is displayed in the griot’s public performances: loud, rapid oratory accompanied by emphatic gestures; pitch mostly high, but including sharp pitch contours; sentence constructions that contain many morphological and syntactic devices for emphasis, intensification, and repetitive parallelisms; and vivid vocabulary, especially

Table 1.2. *Wolof style contrasts in prosody*
(Irvine 1990)

| | <i>waxu géér</i> | <i>waxu gewel</i> |
|---------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| pitch | low | high |
| volume | soft | loud |
| tempo | slow | fast |
| voice | breathy | clear |
| contour | pitch nucleus last | pitch nucleus first |
| dynamic range | narrow | wide |

Table 1.3. *Wolof style contrasts in phonology* (Irvine 1990)

| Style: | “Noble speech” | “Griot speech” |
|---|--|--|
| Feature contrasts: | <p>Contrasts in vowel length and consonant length not clearly maintained</p> <p>Non-nasal stops affricated and/or prenasalized, e.g.: [p] → [ɸ], [b] → [β], [mb], [mβ]</p> <p>“Breathy” or “creaky” (laryngealized) articulation of voiced stops</p> | <p>Contrasts in vowel length and consonant length clearly maintained</p> <p>Stops in stressed syllables, and all “fortis” stops, energetically articulated</p> <p>Voicing contrasts in syllable-initial consonants, and all “fortis” stops, clearly maintained</p> |
| Stressed/unstressed syllables and elisions: | <p>Stresses not clearly marked (little difference between stressed and unstressed syllables)</p> | <p>Stressed syllables clearly articulated. Elisions in unstressed syllables:</p> <p>(1) “Lenis” final stop → 0</p> <p>(2) Unstressed CV# → C#</p> <p>(3) Initial [k] → [ʔ]</p> |
| Vowel height: | <p>Some lowering of vowels?</p> | <p>Some fronting and raising of vowels, especially before palatal glides</p> |

regarding details of sound, motion, and feeling. The extreme of “noble talk,” on the other hand – apart from silence – is represented by a laconic, slow, low-pitched drawl or mumbling, with simple or even incomplete sentence structures. Prosodic contrasts between the styles are conspicuous and salient to consultants, while phonological aspects of stylistic differentiation are less available to conscious contemplation. Yet the two kinds of contrast (prosodic and phonological) are closely linked. The “noble” style’s mumbled drawl neutralizes features of vowel and consonant length and some distinctions between stops and continuants, as opposed to the “griot”

Table 1.4. *Wolof style contrasts in morphology and syntax (Irvine 1990)*

| Style: | “Noble speech” | “Griot speech” |
|--|---|---|
| Emphatic devices: | Unmarked order of basic constituents (SVO); sparse use of markers | Left dislocations; cleft sentences; heavy use of focus markers (subject focus, object focus, and “explicative” verbal auxiliary) |
| | Sparse use of spatial deictics and determinants | Frequent use of spatial deictics, especially their “emphatic” forms |
| | Sparse use of modifiers | Heavier use of modifiers; ideophones (intensifiers); more use of verb–complement construction <i>né</i> ____, which often conveys details of sound and motion |
| Parallelism: | Little use of parallelism | Repetitive and parallel constructions (e.g., parallel clauses) |
| | Few reduplicated forms, especially in verbs; no novel constructions using morphological reduplication | Frequent use of morphological reduplication, especially in verbs, including novel word-formations |
| Disfluencies – morphology: (see Irvine 1978) | (1) choice of noun class marker “wrong” or semantically neutral (2) avoidance of class markers when possible (3) incomplete or inconsistent concord | (1) “Correct” class markers, following principles of consonant harmony and/or semantic subtlety (2) Inclusion of class markers, when optional (2) Complete and consistent concord |
| Disfluencies – syntax: | Incomplete sentence structures. False starts | Well-formed sentence structures |

style’s shotgun articulation that preserves those feature distinctions but highlights consonants at the expense of vowels. And so on.

Notice, first of all, the way in which an ideology of language “explains” the form of linguistic differentiation of these styles by associating it with essentialized social differences. The linguistic contrasts that differentiate the styles are not arbitrary; instead, they are motivated by a language ideology contrasting the laconic and austere with the impulsive and elaborated, and conceiving these qualities as deriving from

the supposedly differentiated temperaments of their speakers. This is what I mean by iconization: in the rural Wolof-speakers' ideology, the contrasting linguistic behaviors are made to appear to be iconic representations – depicting the social relations they index. Linguistic features occurring at many levels of linguistic organization are vertically integrated along an ideological axis that contrasts them, along with their associated social images, according to the temperaments that supposedly “cause” the differentiation. And the linguistic differentiae themselves offer linguistic images that (iconically) share qualities with the social images they represent. Thus, for example, the linguistic image of the slow speaker coincides with the image of a person supposedly slow to act and slow to change allegiances, while the dynamic speaker is supposedly fast-moving, emotionally volatile, and changeable.

Second, we find here another common consequence of an ideology of contrasts: the fractal or segmentary replication of the same axis of contrast at different levels of inclusiveness. Despite the labels Wolof villagers assigned to these ways of speaking, actual speech in this Wolof community does not sort out into two utterly distinct types, but rather into a stylistic continuum. It is true that the poles of the continuum, i.e. the most extreme versions of the styles, are linked to the utterances of griots and high nobles on large-scale public occasions. Apart from those polarizing scenes, however, any speaker, no matter what his or her caste, may use either a noble-like or a griot-like style, depending on the circumstances. So while a local ideology of language links these styles with the social categories of noble and griot – caste categories whose membership is permanent, non-overlapping, and ranked on an absolute scale – in practice the styles are drawn upon by everyone. Two persons who belong to one and the same caste will differentiate their speech along the same stylistic axis that differentiates castes from each other, in order to represent subtler differences of rank (such as lineage seniority), or to define an activity, such as petitioning, that is reminiscent of inter-caste relations. The linguistic differentiae they deploy to do this echo the differentiae of caste-linked styles, but to a lesser degree, the differences of pitch, tempo, fluency, and so on being somewhat narrower (see Irvine 1990 for transcript examples). In short, there is not just one social boundary or distinction that is relevant here, but, instead, a scheme of sociolinguistic differentiation that semiotically organizes relationships at many levels. This is what I mean by recursivity. The recursive structure serves to organize many situations, and many aspects of talk, even when the stylistic contrasts are subtle.

Finally, notice that the ideology of these contrasts, in emphasizing a binary opposition and focusing on a particular level of social organization (here, the level of caste relations) ignores relationships and social categories

that do not fit. The metapragmatic labels for these ways of speaking, in attributing them to permanent and exclusive social categories, disregard the (recursive) practices that distribute their use throughout Wolof society. Moreover, Wolof society includes not only nobles and griots, but also other “artisan” castes and, especially, the descendants of persons of slave status. Yet, the linguistic ideology described here erases slaves from the picture, ignoring their differences from griots (and nobles). There is no comparable notion of a “slave” style of talk co-ordinate with the other styles. These disregardings are what I mean by erasure. A linguistic ideology is a totalizing vision in which some groups (or activities, or varieties) become invisible and inaudible. The descendants of slaves, in rural Wolof society, are accorded no voice.¹⁵

The process of erasure is of course a crucial reason why a language ideology, whether discovered in informants’ explicit statements and explanations or otherwise deduced, is not identical with an outside observer’s analysis. The language ideology does not offer a complete picture (or explanation) of a sociolinguistic scene, in spite of motivating important portions of it.

3.2 *Bóly: linguistic differentiation in eastern Europe*

My second illustration, drawn from Gal’s ethnographic and linguistic research (Gal 1992), concerns linguistic differences in Europe that have most often been called “geographic” or “social dialects.” The site is a community in a region of southern Hungary that includes a sizeable population of German-speakers. In a context where Hungarian and standard German are also to be found, two named rural varieties of German are associated with different social categories. Although the epoch in which this system seems to have been most firmly established and elaborated is the inter-war years, families in the village today can still identify themselves with one or the other social category, and they still reproduce the relevant linguistic distinctions in the course of daily life.¹⁶

Though space does not permit more than the briefest sketch of these sociolinguistic distinctions, we shall see that they involve processes (axes) of distinction surprisingly similar to the Wolof case. Thus the semiotic processes discussed in this paper do not concern only exotic locales; nor do they concern only systems incorporating some traditionally ascriptive

¹⁵ Many of them, not sharing the whole of the ideology described here, have moved away from communities like this one.

¹⁶ Today it is the older generation (those who grew up in the inter-war years or earlier) for whom the system is most meaningful. It is they who are best able to assign everybody in town to one category or another, who reproduce the system most conspicuously in their own speech, and who remind others of its relevance and specifics.

Table 1.5. *Some lexical differences*

| <i>Handwerkerisch</i> | <i>Bäuerisch</i> | |
|-----------------------|------------------|------------|
| <i>Kersche</i> | <i>Kirschen</i> | “cherries” |
| <i>Zimmer</i> | <i>Stube</i> | “room” |
| <i>zu Hause</i> | <i>Ham</i> | “home” |

social hierarchy. The German distinctions are not linked to some taken-for-granted system of social ranking. Although differences of status and rank are not irrelevant to the German case – the ideologies are not utterly egalitarian – the basis of rank is contested.

The two linguistic varieties in this German/Hungarian community are locally named *Handwerkerisch* and *Bäuerisch* (or, *Schwäbisch*). As their names indicate, members of the community conceive of them as associated with artisans and with farmers, respectively. The differences between the varieties are to be found in every part of the linguistic system (Gal 1992). Phonologically they involve different frequencies of variants within a shared set of variables (concerning, e.g., the raising of back vowels, as in *komm* versus *kumm*); different frequencies of use of patterns of verbal morphology and word order; different lexical sets, some items of which overlap with Standard German (see table 1.5); and contrasts in other aspects of discourse, such as in titles, greetings, and storytelling practices. There are also differences in the extent of overlap with other regional dialects, and in the frequency of borrowing: *Handwerkerisch* contains many more forms that overlap with other regions, especially with Viennese German; and it borrows forms from Viennese German, from Hungarian, and sometimes from Standard German, relatively freely (except if such forms happen to be found in *Bäuerisch* as well, for maintaining the distinctiveness of the *Handwerkerisch* style is paramount).

Though these varieties are locally conceived as characterizing distinct social groups, it turns out that in fact all speakers are bidialectal, and acquire both varieties in childhood. The two social categories, artisans and farmers, do not (and did not) occupy separate neighborhoods, nor have they been distinguishable in financial wealth, for each category includes relatively rich and poor families. Children’s play groups are mixed, as are adult friendship networks. Yet, adults belong to formal organizations, established in Bóly at the end of the nineteenth century (on the model of *vereine* in Germany), that segregate the two categories; and until the postwar period, village politics maintained the distinction by guaranteeing equal representation on the village council, and strict alternation in the

mayor’s position. In family settings especially, but also elsewhere, discussion of the distinctive speech, behavior, and moral values proper to the two categories explicitly regiments children’s affiliation and the contexts of adults’ usage.

The difference between these varieties, especially for older people who remember the period when they were most elaborated and most socially relevant, is locally understood as a difference in basic values and lifestyle. The farmers, who based their conception of social status on agricultural real estate and its prudent management, valued restraint, conservatism, and austerity; the artisans, on the other hand, based their values on education, cosmopolitanism (especially oriented toward Vienna, long a source of professional expertise in their crafts), and the display of acquired skill. The farmers’ principles of frugality and their sober aesthetic thus contrasted with the artisans’ “refined,” cosmopolitan, innovative orientation – their aesthetic of display, elaboration, elegance, and worldly sophistication. The two categories differed, therefore, not only in the predominant choice of styles but in the principle by which styles were chosen or produced, and which extended far beyond the linguistic into many other aspects of comportment and material surroundings, such as dress, housing and furniture styles, dance styles, investment choices, and so forth. Indeed, with respect to each other the two social groups practiced a stylistic differentiation, linguistically and otherwise, that (a few decades ago especially) exaggerated the opposition between them.

To members of both social categories, the linguistic differences between the two varieties of German are interpreted iconically as evidence of a difference in their speakers’ values. For instance, the Handwerkers’ more innovative linguistic forms, larger repertoire, and more frequent display of stylistic range (including code-switching with standard German and Hungarian) could be seen as evidence of their love of display and opulent decoration, and, when viewed from the farmers’ perspective, revealed their failure to maintain frugality and tradition in language as elsewhere. Yet, just as in the Senegalese case, the contrast between groups also serves to contrast situations associated with the two categories respectively, or with their values. Talk in the village wine-cellars, for example – a local institution of long standing, and connected with tradition and farm products – favored B \ddot{a} uerisch no matter who the speaker might be. And farmers occasionally shifted to the Handwerkerisch style to show, in argument perhaps, that they were actually just as *gebildet* (“educated”) as any artisan.

Thus the two German dialects in B \ddot{o} ly reflect a principle of differentiation that provided not fixed linguistic practices, but a dichotomy that can be applied recursively at varying levels of contrast, or used as a frame to interpret difference. People in both categories have access to speech forms

characteristic of both sides of the contrast. Even within the everyday interactions of a single speaker, the opposition of artisan and farmer – and the contrasts of activity and aesthetics that it summarized – could be called on and be recursively reproduced for social effect, distinguishing situations, moods, and aspects of the self. The recursive process even applies to a projection of these local oppositions onto a broader regional and national opposition, when villagers in Bóly (and elsewhere in the south of Hungary) compared German and Hungarian as languages, and German-speakers and Hungarian-speakers as ethnic groups, along moral, aesthetic, and affective dimensions that were the same as those they had discussed in interpreting the local scene.

Finally, this case demonstrates as well the semiotic process of erasure. For by defining the major cultural opposition in the village as that between artisans and farmers, the ideology described here effectively elides the substantial differences in wealth and position within each category. In the past especially, this erasure worked through institutions such as the voluntary associations, where the forms of membership evoked internal homogeneity, denying difference. But it worked as well through the everyday practice of linguistic differentiation, which provided no separate style of speaking for rich as opposed to poor; powerful as opposed to powerless. The ideology underlying this principle of distinctiveness helped create the illusion of homogeneity within the categories it defined.

4 Conclusion

My purpose in this paper has been to try to consider linguistic style as a truly sociolinguistic phenomenon, an organization of distinctiveness that operates on a linguistic plane yet is constitutive of social distinctiveness as it does so. It has now often been noted that linguistic differentiation is not a simple reflection of social differentiation (or vice versa), because linguistic and social oppositions are not separate orders of phenomena. As Ferguson (1994:19) writes, “language phenomena are themselves sociocultural phenomena and are in part constitutive of the very social groups recognized by the participants or identified by analysts.” It is that mediating recognition and identification, together with its ideological frameworks and pressures, whose relationship with processes of stylistic differentiation I have sought to explore.

In consequence, I have found it important to place less emphasis on the specific features of a style (or register, or variety, etc.) and more on the contrasts and relationships between styles. And I have found it helpful not to try to identify “style” with some particular level of differentiation, but to focus on the differentiating process – axes of distinctiveness that organize

differentiation at many levels. “Style,” as distinctiveness, is a creative process (recall the notion of style as connected with fashion, with which I began this paper); it will not be tied down to a predetermined structure. Yet its principles must be coherent if they are to be meaningful, as representations of social groups, activities, practices, and selves.