

# Style

Language Variation and Identity

Nikolas Coupland

KEY TOPICS IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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## Style: Language Variation and Identity

Style refers to ways of speaking – how speakers use the resource of language variation to make meaning in social encounters. This book develops a coherent theoretical approach to style in sociolinguistics, illustrated with copious examples. It explains how speakers project different social identities and create different social relationships through their style choices, and how speech-style and social context inter-relate. Style therefore refers to the wide range of strategic actions and performances that speakers engage in, to construct themselves and their social lives. Coupland draws on and integrates a wide variety of contemporary sociolinguistic research as well as his own extensive research in this field. The emphasis is on how social meanings are made locally, in specific relationships, genres, groups and cultures, and on studying language variation as part of the analysis of spoken discourse.

NIKOLAS COUPLAND is Professor and Research Director of the Cardiff University Centre for Language and Communication Research. He is a founding co-editor of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*.

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# Style

## Language Variation and Identity

NIKOLAS COUPLAND



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# Contents

*List of figures and tables* vii

*Preface and acknowledgements* ix

*Transcription conventions* xiii

1. Introduction 1
  - 1.1 Locating ‘style’ 1
  - 1.2 Variationism in sociolinguistics 4
  - 1.3 Style in sociolinguistics and in stylistics 9
  - 1.4 Social meaning 18
  - 1.5 Methods and data for researching sociolinguistic style 24
  - 1.6 Style in late-modernity 29
  - 1.7 Later chapters 31
2. Style and meaning in sociolinguistic structure 32
  - 2.1 Stylistic stratification 32
  - 2.2 Limits of the stratification model for style 37
  - 2.3 ‘Standard’ and ‘non-standard’ 42
  - 2.4 ‘Non-standard’ speech as ‘deviation’ 45
  - 2.5 Social structure and social practice 47
3. Style for audiences 54
  - 3.1 Talking heads versus social interaction 54
  - 3.2 Audience design 58
  - 3.3 Communication accommodation theory 62
  - 3.4 Some studies of audience design and speech accommodation 64
  - 3.5 Limits of audience-focused perspectives 74
4. Sociolinguistic resources for styling 82
  - 4.1 Speech repertoires 82
  - 4.2 The ideological basis of variation 85
  - 4.3 Habitus and semantic style 89
  - 4.4 Language attitudes and meanings for variation 93

- 4.5 Metalinguage, critical distance and performativity 99
- 4.6 Sociolinguistic resources? 103
- 5. Styling social identities 106
  - 5.1 Social identity, culture and discourse 106
  - 5.2 Acts of identity 108
  - 5.3 Identity contextualisation processes 111
  - 5.4 Framing social class in the travel agency 115
  - 5.5 Styling place 121
  - 5.6 Voicing ethnicities 126
  - 5.7 Indexing gender and sexuality 132
  - 5.8 Crossing 137
  - 5.9 Omissions 145
- 6. High performance and identity stylisation 146
  - 6.1 Theorising high performance 146
  - 6.2 Stylisation 149
  - 6.3 Decontextualisation 155
  - 6.4 Voicing political antagonism – Nye 156
  - 6.5 Drag and cross-dressing performances 163
  - 6.6 Exposed dialects 171
- 7. Coda: Style and social reality 177
  - 7.1 Change within change 177
  - 7.2 The authentic speaker 180
  - 7.3 The media(tisa)tion of style 184

*References* 189

*Index* 206



# Figures and tables

## Figures:

### The International Phonetic Alphabet

Consonants (Pulmonic)

Vowels *xiv*

Figure 2.1: Class and style stratification for (th) 33

Figure 2.2: Class and style stratification for (r) 34

Figure 2.3: Distributions of variants of (e), (ay) and (wedge)  
among jocks and burnouts, boys and girls 52

Figure 3.1: Percentage of intervocalic /t/ voicing by four  
newsreaders on two New Zealand radio stations,  
YA and ZB 59

Figure 3.2: Sue's convergence on (intervocalic t) voicing to  
five occupation classes of client; input level taken as  
Sue's speech to 'her own class' 73

## Tables:

Table 3.1: Foxy Boston's vernacular usage in Interviews III and IV 66

Table 3.2: Percentages of less 'standard' variants of five  
sociolinguistic variables in four 'contexts' of  
Sue's travel agency talk 72

Table 4.1: Mean ratings (whole sample, 5,010 informants) of  
34 accents of English according to social  
attractiveness and prestige 98

Table 6.1: Phonetic variables generally distinguishing South  
Wales Valleys English and Received Pronunciation 158



## Preface and acknowledgements

In the new world of sociolinguistics, the simple concept of 'style' has a lot of work to do. The idea of 'stylistic variation' emerged from William Labov's seminal research on urban speech variation and language change, and it existed there in order to make a few key points only. As Labov showed, when we survey how speech varies, we find variation 'within the individual speaker' across contexts of talk, as well as between individuals and groups. Also, when individual people shift their ways of speaking, survey designs suggested that they do it, on the whole, in predictable ways that are amenable to social explanation.

From this initially narrow perspective, crucial as it was in establishing a basic agenda, a sociolinguistics of style has steadily come to prominence as a wide field of research, whether or not researchers use the term 'style' to describe their enterprise. Style used to be a marginal concern in variationist sociolinguistics. Nowadays it points to many of the most challenging aspects of linguistic variation, in questions like these: How does sociolinguistic variation interface with other dimensions of meaning-making in discourse? What stylistic work does variation do for social actors, and how does it blend into wider discursive and socio-cultural processes? Are there new values for variation and for style in the late-modern world?

When we work through issues like these, some important boundaries shift. For one thing, the study of sociolinguistic variation becomes very much wider. The canonical study of language variation and change will always remain a pillar of sociolinguistics, but it need not be an autonomous paradigm. One of my ambitions for the book is to show what variation study is like when it 'goes non-autonomous'. The boundary between 'dialect variation' and the social construction of meaning in discourse starts to collapse. Theories and sensitivities from different parts of sociolinguistics start to coalesce – interactional sociolinguistics, pragmatics, anthropological linguistics and even

conversation analysis do not need to stand outside of variationism, nor it outside them.

My own thinking on sociolinguistic style has spanned two-and-a-half decades, although it remains to be seen whether this particular quantitative index (like some other quantitative measures that come up for review in the book) makes a meaningful difference. I was enthused to write this book mainly because of the acceleration of sociolinguistic interest in things 'stylistic' and 'contextual' and 'socially meaningful' in the last decade, prompted by some remarkable new waves of research. I won't attempt to list the relevant names and paradigms here – they fill out the pages of the book. But I would like to make a few biographical notes, by way of personal acknowledgement.

I had begun writing about style in the late 1970s, when the theme emerged from my doctoral research on sociolinguistic variation in Cardiff, the capital city of Wales. I was fortunate to start long-running dialogues, soon after that, with Allan Bell and Howard Giles. In their own research they developed new relational perspectives on spoken language variation that opened up an entirely new theoretical chapter for sociolinguistics. I continued to collaborate with Howard Giles over many years on various themes that lay at the interface between sociolinguistics and social psychology. I have been fortunate to be able to develop some of that work, more recently, in collaboration with Peter Garrett and Angie Williams in Cardiff, and more recently still with Hywel Bishop.

After some scratchy ink and pen exchanges about his evolving theory of audience design in the very early 1980s, Allan Bell and I maintained close links, latterly in co-editing the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*. That particular collaboration ensured we would have no time to write collaboratively about style, although we had firmly intended to do this. I have no doubt that this book would have been much the better if Allan and I had achieved our aim of writing a similar book together.

As the Centre for Language and Communication Research at Cardiff University grew and diversified through the 1980s and 1990s, several of my colleagues there were involved in developing new sociolinguistic fields, particularly critical and interactional approaches to language and society. The study of style needed the sorts of insight that they were developing in their own and in our joint research. In particular there has been the formative effect of my many collaborations with Adam Jaworski, for example on metalanguage, sociolinguistic theory and discourse analysis. My other Cardiff colleagues, including Theo van Leeuwen and Joanna Thornborrow, have again been important sources of inspiration. My research collaborations with Justine

Coupland, for example on the theme of discourse and ideology, social identities in later life and on relational talk, have been where I developed most of the ideas behind the present book, although her contributions to this book are far too pervasive to summarise.

Apart from those already mentioned, a long list of people have made very valuable input into my thinking and writing about 'style', whether they recall it or not. No doubt with unintended omissions, let me thank Peter Auer, Mary Bucholtz, Janet Cotterill, Penelope Eckert, Anthea Fraser Gupta, Janet Holmes, Tore Kristiansen, Ben Rampton and John Rickford. Thanks also to Rachel Muntz and Faith Mowbray for their help in connection with the BBC *Voices* research that has a walk-on part in Chapter 4. Reading groups convened by Julia Snell, Emma Moore and Sally Johnson fed back some valuable criticisms on parts of the text. Ayo Banji made extremely helpful input into compiling the Index. Allan Bell, Adam Jaworski and Natalie Schilling-Estes, as well as Rajend Mesthrie, read and commented on the whole manuscript in draft form, for which I am extremely grateful.

I have summarised and rewritten parts of my previously published writing in this book. The main sources in this connection, listed in the References section, are Coupland 1980, 1984, 1985, 1988, 2000b, 2001b, 2001c, 2003, in pressa, in pressb, Coupland and Bishop 2007, Coupland, Garrett and Williams 2005, Coupland and Jaworski 2004. I am particularly grateful to my co-authors for letting me rework some parts of this material here. Figures 2.1 and 2.2 are adapted from Figures 7.23 and 7.11 in Labov (2006).

The disciplinary boundary-shifting that I referred to above has presented me with the problem of knowing where to draw the line around style in this book. I have given most space to those studies of how classical forms of sociolinguistic variation – what most people call accent and dialect features – are worked into discursive social action and where they make meaning at the level of relationships and personal or social identities. As I say later, this is a rather artificial boundary to try to police, because my motivating concerns for the book are social meaning and social identity, much more than sociolinguistic variation itself. For example, I would have liked to include some detail on the discursive management of age-identities in later life (an area of my own my research with Justine Coupland). But this would have taken the book away from indexical meanings linked to the domains of social class, gender and racial/ ethnic identities, which is where style research has been most active to date.

This book can be read as a critique of variationist sociolinguistics. Meaning-making through talk has not been what variationists have

generally tried to explain, although it has seemed to me a strange omission. It is all the more strange when we think of William Labov's commitment to the politics of language variation, his interest from the outset in the social evaluation of varieties, and his ground-breaking work in narrative analysis and interactional ritual. His followers in the field of variationist sociolinguistics have not often been able to maintain that breadth. In order to bridge back into questions of social meaning, I have found it important to challenge some of the assumptions of variationist research. These are mainly its dogged reliance on static social categories, its imputation of identity-values to numerical patterns (quantitative representations of linguistic variation), and its thin account of social contextualisation.

I fully recognise that, and celebrate the fact that, variationist sociolinguistics has taken great strides through keeping within these constraints, when research questions have been formulated at the level of linguistic systems and how they change. But I think we need a sociolinguistics of variation *for people* and *for society*, as well as (not instead of) a sociolinguistics of variation *for language*. 'Sociolinguistic style' has been the rubric under which quite a lot of that extension of the programme has already been achieved, and where further progress is clearly in prospect. 'Stylistics', as a label for a sub-discipline of linguistics, has a dated feel to it, and so does 'style'. But in the context of sociolinguistics, style nevertheless points us to a range of highly contemporary phenomena. We seem to find meaning in our lives nowadays less through the social structures into which we have been socialised, and more through how we deploy and make meaning out of those inherited resources. How social reality is creatively styled is a key sociolinguistic question, and the main question in what follows.

NC

July 2006

# Transcription conventions

Where necessary, International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols are used to identify consonant and vowel qualities, as in the following charts (as shown over).

## ***THE INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET***

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## ***EXTRACTS OF TRANSCRIBED CONVERSATION***

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These are numbered consecutively within each chapter. Where possible, I have re-transcribed data extracts from the original sources in the interests of simplicity and consistency. Wherever possible, these transcriptions use orthographic conventions, but with the following additions and deviations:

(.)	a short untimed pause of less than one second
(2.0)	a timed pause, timed in seconds
[quietly]	stage directions and comments on context or spoken delivery
[ ]	between lines of transcript, denotes overlapping speech, showing beginning and end points of overlap
:	lengthened sound
::	more lengthened sound
<u>you</u>	(underlined) said with heavy stress
?	marks question intonation not interrogative syntax
(( ))	inaudible speech sequence or unreliable transcription
italics	sequences of particular analytic interest, explained in the text

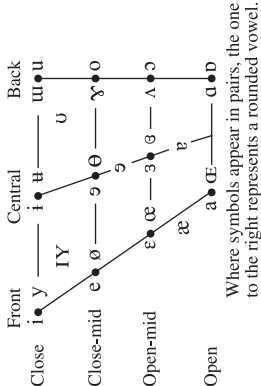
Any other conventions used in particular extracts are explained in the text.

CONSONANTS (PULMONIC)

	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Post alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal
Plosive	p b			t d		ʈ ɖ	c ɟ	k ɡ	q ɢ		ʔ
Nasal	m	ɱ		n		ɳ	ɲ	ŋ	ɴ		
Trill	ʙ			ʀ					ʀ		
Tap or Flap				ɾ		ɽ					
Fricative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ	ħ	h ɦ
Lateral fricative				ɬ ɮ							
Approximant		ʋ		ɹ		ɻ	j	ɰ			
Lateral approximant				l		ɭ	ʎ	ʟ			

Where symbols appear in pairs, the one to the right represents a voiced consonant. Shaded areas denote articulations judged impossible.

VOWELS





# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 LOCATING 'STYLE'

---

'Style' refers to a way of doing something. Think of architectural styles and the striking rustic style of house-building in rural Sweden. That particular style – what allows us to call it a style – is an assemblage of design choices. It involves the use of timber frames, a distinctively tiered roofline, a red cedar wood stain and so on. We can place this style. It belongs somewhere, even if the style is lifted out of its home territory and used somewhere else. It has a social meaning. The same is true for styles in all other life-domains. Cultural resonances of time, place and people attach to styles of dress and personal appearance in general, to styles in the making of material goods, to styles of social and institutional practice, perhaps even to styles of thinking. We could use David Machin and Theo van Leeuwen's (2005) idea of 'social style' to cover all these. The world is full of social styles.

Part of our social competence is being able to understand these indexical links – how a style marks out or indexes a social difference – and to read their meanings. The irony is that, if we ourselves are closely embedded in a particular social style, we may not recognise that style's distinctiveness. Reading the meaning of a style is inherently a contrastive exercise. You have to find those red cedar buildings 'different' in order to see them as having some stylistic significance. This is the old principle of meaning depending on some sort of choice being available. But style isn't difference alone. When we use the term 'style' we are usually attending to some aesthetic dimension of difference. Styles involve a degree of crafting, and this is why the word 'style' leaks into expressions like 'having style', 'being in style' or 'being stylish'. The aesthetic qualities of styles relate, as in the case of the Swedish red cedar buildings, to a process of design, however naturalised that process and its results might have become in our experience. We talk about 'style' rather than 'difference' when we

are aware of some holistic properties of a practice or its product. A style will 'hang together' in some coherent manner. Engagement with style and styles, both in production and reception, will usually imply a certain interpretive depth and complexity. Although we are considering 'style' as a noun at this point, when we refer to 'a style' and to 'styles' (plural), and giving styles a quality of 'thing-ness', the idea of style demands more of a process perspective. I think we are mainly interested in styles (noun) for how they have come to be and for how people 'style' (verb) meaning into the social world. 'Styling' – the activation of stylistic meaning – therefore becomes an important concept in this book.

This general account of style can of course be applied to *linguistic* forms and processes too. We are all familiar with the idea of linguistic style, and most people will think first of language in literary style. Literary style relates to the crafting of linguistic text in literary genres and to an aesthetic interpretation of text. This book is about *style in speech* and about *ways of speaking*, not about literary style, although it would be wrong to force these areas of study too far apart. The book is about style in the specific research context of sociolinguistics, where concepts very similar to 'social style' have been established for several decades. The general sociolinguistic term used to refer to ways of speaking that are indexically linked to social groups, times and places is *dialects*. Dialects are social styles. Some dialects are in fact rather like red cedar timber buildings, redolent with meaningful associations of rurality and linked to particular geographical places. They have strong cultural associations, especially when we look at them contrastively. Dialectologists have traditionally looked for boundaries between dialect regions, and traced the evolution of dialects over time and the consequences of dialects coming into contact with each other (Chambers and Trudgill 1999).

We are likely to think of dialects in this sense as being the social styles of yesteryear, largely out of step with the social circumstances of contemporary life. But dialect differences are of course a characteristic of modern life too. Dialects are evolving social styles and they can be read for their contemporary as well as their historical associations – associations with particular places (geographical dialects) and with particular social groups (social dialects). Dramas associated with dialect are played out as much in cities as in rural enclaves, and sociolinguistics for several decades has enthusiastically teased out the complexities of language variation in urban settings. The human and linguistic density of cities invites an analysis in terms of 'structured difference'. Cities challenge the view that one discrete social

style (e.g. a dialect) is associated with one place, which was the basic assumption in the analysis of rural dialects. It has become the norm to consider cities as sociolinguistic systems that organise linguistic variation in complex ways. But understanding the social structuring of styles, even in the sophisticated manner of urban sociolinguistics, is not enough in itself. We need to understand how people *use* or *enact* or *perform* social styles for a range of symbolic purposes. Social styles (including dialect styles) are a resource for people to make many different sorts of personal and interpersonal meaning. As I suggested might be generally true for intellectual interest in style, what matters for linguistic style is more to do with process than with product, more to do with use than with structure. Stylistic analysis is the analysis of how style resources are put to work creatively. Analysing linguistic style again needs to include an aesthetic dimension. It is to do with designs in talk and the fashioning and understanding of social meanings.

So this is not a book about dialectology either. My starting point is certainly the sociolinguistics of dialect, as it has been carried forward by variationist sociolinguistics in the tradition of William Labov's research. This is where the term 'style' was first used in sociolinguistics, and one of my aims for the book is to map out the main steps that sociolinguists have taken using the concept of style. This will initially be a critical review, focusing on the limited horizons of style research in variationist sociolinguistics. The positive case to be made, however, is that, under the general rubric of style, sociolinguistics can and should move on from the documenting of social styles or dialects themselves. It should incorporate the priorities I have just sketched – analysing the creative, design-oriented processes through which social styles are activated in talk and, in that process, remade or reshaped. This means focusing on particular moments and contexts of speaking where people use social styles as resources for meaning-making. It means adding a more active and verbal dimension ('styling social meaning') to sociolinguistic accounts of dialect ('describing social styles').

To set the scene for later arguments and debates, several core concepts need to be explored in this introductory chapter. First we need to consider variationist sociolinguistics and its general approach to style. Then we will look back at the early history of stylistics (the general field of research on style in linguistics), to appreciate the climate in which sociolinguistics first came to the idea of style. The idea of social meaning then comes up for initial scrutiny. Looking ahead to the more contemporary research that this book mainly deals with, we

will then consider research methods and the sorts of sociolinguistic data that we can deal with under the heading of style research. The wider relevance of style to contemporary social life, which can be characterised by the term ‘late-modernity’, is then reviewed. Finally in this chapter, I give a short preview of the structure of the rest of the book.

## 1.2 VARIATIONISM IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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Sociolinguistics is, as they say, a broad church. The blander definitions of sociolinguistics refer to studying language ‘in society’ or language ‘in its social context’. Other definitions focus on studying linguistic diversity or language variation. What these simple definitions have in common is that they give priority to language, then add some summary idea of what aspect of language is to be given priority (its variability) or what sort of data is to be given priority (social manifestations of language). Definitions like these have to be understood historically. It was once important to stress ‘social contexts’ in defining sociolinguistic priorities in order to challenge types of linguistics where actual occurrences of spoken language were not given priority. Even though most people would agree that using language is an inherently social process, sociolinguists needed to make a case for observing language as it is used in everyday life and for not relying on intuited or fabricated instances of language. Stressing variability has been important in order to resist the ideological assumption that what matters in language is linguistic uniformity and ‘standardness’. William Labov used the notion of *secular linguistics* to describe his approach to language variation and change. The idea was that studying variable language forms, ‘non-standard’ as well as ‘standard’ forms, challenges what we might think of as the high priesthood of theoretical linguistics and its reliance on idealised linguistic data. It also challenges the belief that ‘standard’ language is more orderly and more worthwhile than ‘non-standard’ language.

But the study of language variation and change has been in the mainstream of sociolinguistics for four decades. *Variationist* sociolinguistics, as the approach developed by Labov is generally called, has developed its own powerful principles of theory and method (Chambers 1995/2003; Labov 1966, 1972a, 1972b, 1994, 2001a; Chambers, Trudgill and Schilling-Estes 2004). In this book I intend to take the considerable achievements of variationist sociolinguistics for granted, and to ask what it has *not* achieved, particularly in relation to

the notion of style and the active dimension of styling. So, as I have mentioned, my orientation is a critical one, although I intend it to be constructively so. The negative part of my argument is that variationist sociolinguistics has worked with a limited idea of social context – and styling is precisely the *contextualisation* of social styles. The survey designs of variationist research, which have been remarkably successful in revealing broad patterns of linguistic diversity and change, have not encouraged us to understand what people meaningfully achieve through linguistic variation. Variationist sociolinguistics has produced impressive descriptions of social styles, but without affording much priority to contextual styling.

What then are the general features of the variationist approach? Sociolinguistic surveys of language variation give us detailed descriptions of how linguistic details of regional and social accents and dialects are distributed. ('Dialect' is a general term for socially and geographically linked speech variation, and 'accent' refers to pronunciation aspects of dialect.) Speakers are not fully consistent in how they use accent or dialect features. Their speech will often, for example, show a mixture of 'standard' and 'non-standard' forms of the same speech feature. Nor are individuals within any particular social category identical in their speech. So the sort of truth generated in variationist research is necessarily one based in generalisations and statistical tendencies. These are 'probabilistic' truths, expressing degrees of relative similarity and dissimilarity within and across groups of speakers and social situations. The convention is to produce averaged statistical values (e.g. percentages of people's use of a particular linguistic feature in a particular social situation, or factor loadings in statistical tests) to represent patterns of linguistic variation. So, accent variation between two different groups of speakers is usually represented as the difference between one statistical value (perhaps a percentage) and another.

Variationist research has very expertly shown that 'speaking differently' has to be defined in several stages. Stage one is typically to identify a group of people who share a geographical characteristic, such as living in the Midlands city of Birmingham in England, or for that matter Birmingham in Alabama in the Southern USA. Within this territory or 'community' of people who have lived in the city for all or most of their lives, sub-groups are identified based on social criteria. This sort of classification isolates, to take a random example, the category of 'young females in Birmingham with working-class jobs', distinguishing them from other social categories. In a second stage, the research samples the speech of the different groups, usually through

extended one-to-one sociolinguistic interviews. The researcher then counts how often a particular speech feature is used.

For example, in the English Birmingham, the issue might be how often each speaker pronounces the diphthong vowel in words like *right* and *time* with a phonetically backed and rounded starting point. In this example, the local Birmingham pronunciation [ɔɪ] is in opposition to [aɪ] which is the less localised and more 'standard' variant in England. Phonetic forms occupying intermediate positions between these variants might also be recognised. Variant forms of sociolinguistic variables tend to be influenced by the details of their linguistic placement. For pronunciation variables (linked specifically to a speaker's accent, then), the positions that different pronunciation forms occupy in the stream of speech-sounds, and the sets of words that they occur in, are factors that are likely to impact on the frequency with which they are used. These patterns might affect everyone's speech. A typical finding would then be that most speakers in the sample would in fact use a mixture of different pronunciation forms – e.g. using both 'standard' and 'non-standard' variants of this sociolinguistic variable (ai). But overall frequencies of use would very probably differ across speakers and sub-groups when statistical averages are taken.

At the end of the process of categorising and counting the distribution of various linguistic variants in a body of data, a type of statistical truth would emerge. It might allow us to say that, overall, Birmingham speech does indeed have some distinctive tendencies of pronunciation – different from the speech of other regions and from 'standard English' pronunciation. That is, descriptively speaking, Birmingham speech is a relatively distinctive social style. The descriptive evidence would go some way towards distinguishing the city as a 'speech community', even though the 'standard', less-localised forms of speech crop up in Birmingham too. But people living outside the city would use some of the local or 'non-standard' feature less often than those living in the city, or not at all. Looking at how speech is socially organised within the city, we would probably be able to say that the speech of particular social sub-groups in Birmingham differs in some statistical respects. Perhaps, overall, women in Birmingham use the [ɔɪ] feature in words like *right* and *time* less often than men do. Perhaps women with more prestigious jobs use it less than women with low-prestige jobs. So there are social styles, at least in a quantitative sense, associated with these groups too.

Labov, however, doesn't use the term 'style' in this sense. He refers to what I am calling 'social styles' of speech simply as 'social variation'. He reserves the terms 'style' and 'stylistic variation' for a further

sort of language variation that can be detected in sociolinguistic interviews (e.g. Labov 1972b). This is when he is able to show that, again in a statistical sense, individual people speak ‘less carefully’ at some points in an interview than they do at other points. When they are being ‘less careful’ or more relaxed they will typically use features of the local style more frequently than in their supposedly normal interview speech. In this way Labov introduced the idea of ‘stylistic variation’ to refer to ‘intra-individual’ speech variation – variation ‘within the speech of single individuals’. This became a very familiar claim in community-based studies of language variation and change, and we will look at it in much more detail in Chapter 2. But it is important to note that, although Labov is mainly concerned with social style at a community level, his original insight about stylistic processes related to the individual speaker and to particular social contexts of speaking. That is, he was interested in what happens when an individual speaker delivers a version of a social style in a range of particular speaking situations. This proves to have been a seminal insight. As we shall see, however, the survey methods that Labov pioneered tend not to give priority to the local processes through which this happens. They orient much more to styles than they do to styling. The convention of basing variationist research on speech in interviews clearly limits the range of social contexts in which styling can be observed and analysed.

Several other sociolinguistic traditions, beyond variationism, are fully sensitive to contextualisation processes and have been so from the earliest days of sociolinguistics. The ‘active contextualisation’ perspective on social style that I am arguing for in this book is already established in other parts of sociolinguistics, and was central to Dell Hymes, John Gumperz and others’ conception of the *ethnography of speaking* (Hymes 1962, 1996; Bauman and Sherzer 1989; Gumperz and Hymes 1972). The theoretical tension that we have to deal with in later chapters is in fact well summed up by the contrasting implications of the terms ‘speech’ and ‘speaking’. The variationist study of social styles/ dialects has oriented to speech and to speech data, when it also needs to orient to speaking and to the styling of meaning in social interaction. This is not an oversight or even a limitation of variationist sociolinguistics in its own terms. Variationism has simply set itself other primary objectives, linked to understanding language systems and how they change, rather than understanding social action and interaction through language. The objectifying priorities of variationist sociolinguistics show through in much of its core terminology. The word ‘variation’ itself implies an analyst’s viewpoint,