



## City Research Online

### City, University of London Institutional Repository

---

**Citation:** Alderton, R. (2023). Social meaning and linguistic variation: Theorizing the third wave. *Language in Society*, doi: 10.1017/S0047404523000696

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

---

**Permanent repository link:** <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/31558/>

**Link to published version:** <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404523000696>

**Copyright:** City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

**Reuse:** Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

LAUREN HALL-LEW, EMMA MOORE & ROBERT J. PODESVA (eds.), *Social meaning and linguistic variation: Theorizing the third wave*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. 406. Hb. £95.

Reviewed by ROY ALDERTON  
*Department of Language and Communication Science, City, University of London*  
*Northampton Square*  
*London EC1V 0HB*  
*United Kingdom*  
*roy.alderton@city.ac.uk*

The goal of this book, as spelt out in its first sentence, is ‘to advance sociolinguistic theory’. It does this by offering a collection of empirical studies that each addresses an important theoretical question related to the ‘third wave’ of sociolinguistics associated with Eckert (2012). The result is a detailed examination of various aspects of social meaning, including clear theoretical claims that can serve as both a reference for the present and a challenge for critique in the future.

The opening chapter, by the collection’s editors, explains the theoretical foundations of third-wave sociolinguistics. The editors achieve this by taking one extract of speech from Moore’s ethnographic data from Bolton and using it as a platform for a detailed analysis that employs all the key concepts from the field, such as indexicality, style and enregisterment. They deftly demonstrate how the sometimes-bewildering array of ideas and theorists related to the third wave fit together and can be applied to linguistic data. This chapter serves as a useful refresher for readers who are familiar with the literature, though those looking for a *Bluffer’s Guide* to social meaning may find the pace too fast; the literature review in Moore and Podesva (2009) is a better place to start.

The rest of the book is split into three parts of five empirical chapters each. Part I asks ‘Where Is (Social) Meaning?’, with each contribution responding based on a different level of linguistic structure. Hall-Lew, Cardoso and Davies concentrate on phonetics and phonology, employing methods associated with each ‘wave’ of variationist sociolinguistics. Their analysis of age, gender and ethnicity culminates in a proposed timeline of indexicality for a sound change in San Francisco over five decades, which parallels concurrent social change in the community. Phonological variables are also studied by Moore, but her focus is on how their co-occurrence with a grammatical variable (negative concord in Bolton English) can be deployed stylistically. She closely considers the context of how the features are used, including the topic of the interaction and speakers’ communities of practice, arguing that not all non-standard forms index ‘stigmatised’ social meanings.

The next two chapters in this part both interrogate the ‘meaning’ aspect of social meaning. Beltrama and Staum Casasanto compare perceptions of intensifiers in English and Italian, finding remarkable cross-linguistic similarities in social meanings for the semantically equivalent constructions *totally* and *-issimo*. Acton, meanwhile, draws links between third-wave sociolinguistics and pragmatics by examining how English definites, such as *this one* and *the*-plurals, are employed to create distance between the speaker and others. By integrating third-wave ideas such as markedness and iconicity in their semantic and pragmatic analyses, both chapters demonstrate the potential that these disciplines offer to variationist sociolinguistics and vice versa.

The final chapter in this section addresses the place of social meaning in cognitive, rather than linguistic, structure. Campbell-Kibler uses three experiments testing the link between gender and English [s] realisation to investigate whether the association between speech production and identity, as well as the mutual influences of social perception and speech perception on one another, all depend on the same cognitive structure. Her findings suggest that this is not the case, prompting a re-examination of methodological and theoretical conventions in sociolinguistic perception. Overall, it is clear from this part of the book that the variationist enterprise will advance by seriously considering how social meaning emerges at the interface between different levels of linguistic structure. One area

not given a dedicated treatment here is the social meanings of lexis, which would be good to see in a second edition.

Part II, on 'The Structure of Social Meaning', begins with three chapters on speech perception experiments. D'Onofrio examines how the combination of TRAP-backing in California English and a 'business professional' persona affects recognition memory. Her findings suggest that listeners exposed to sociolinguistically congruent social information and phonetic stimuli are biased to recall these associations when processing new utterances. Personae also play a role in Drager et al.'s study of the perception of fundamental frequency in Hawaii English, where word clouds are employed alongside quantitative methods to generate detailed perceptual impressions of different guises. The findings question the long-standing association between low pitch and large body size thanks to a complex interplay between ethnicity, gender and local stereotypes in Hawaii. Similarly, Maegaard and Phrao's investigation of the indexical fields of fronted [s] in varieties of Copenhagen Danish emphasises the role of the social and linguistic context in activating social meanings in perception. Specifically, the presence or absence of surrounding segmental and prosodic features may boost or block the traits linked to a particular guise, demonstrating the co-constitutive nature of social meaning.

Contradictory social meanings are addressed directly in Gafter's contribution on the production of pharyngeals in Hebrew. The association of these consonants with both Mizrahi Jews on the one hand and L1 Arabic speakers on the other creates fertile ground for ideologically motivated stylistic practice, which is evident in speech data from Israeli reality TV. Gafter exploits the affordances of Eckert's (2008) indexical field to account for these disparate social meanings. In the final chapter of Part II, Sharma explores the role of speakers' biographies as a site for the emergence of social meaning by examining the speech of Indian migrants to the US and UK. Her analysis shows how migrants' language experiences may lead them to reinterpret the social meanings of non-standard local dialect variants and their own L1-influenced features in ways that diverge sharply from the surrounding host community. Overall, this part of the book underscores the complex, variable and dynamic nature of social meaning, and hence the wide variety of methods that can (and should) be used to study it.

Much of the data in Part III of the collection, 'Meaning and Linguistic Change', are from places that have experienced considerable societal change in recent years. Zhang's chapter shows that social meaning emerges from both social and linguistic change and is mediated by ideologies towards change, focusing on how a distinctive new 'Cosmopolitan Mandarin' style has developed and become socially enregistered amid rapid social change in China. Similarly, urban European multi-ethnolects are often conceived of as 'new varieties', yet Quist's chapter on the Danish spoken in ethnically diverse and dynamic Vollsmose serves as a helpful reminder that such varieties do not exist in isolation. Rather, they interact with the standard variety and existing local dialects, producing combinations of features that index different personae which reflect different orientations towards authority and the community. A strong sense of place also features in Starr's analysis of language change in Singaporean English. On the surface, Singaporeans may appear to be blending American and British English features, yet Starr's consideration of speakers' orientations towards local character types illuminates the role of local identity in language change, while also critiquing the assumed influence of an 'exo-normative standard' on World Englishes.

The final two empirical chapters use innovative methods to model change over time. Tamminga uses generalised additive mixed models (GAMMs) to observe individual Philadelphia English speakers' productions of six vowels over the course of 30-minute conversations. This allows her to identify specific moments in interactions when phonetically extreme variants of multiple vowels co-occur; such a tool shows great potential for analysing micro-level sociolinguistic variation. Podesva, meanwhile, measures speakers' facial expressions during vowel production in order to examine articulatory-acoustic relationships in California English sound changes. He examines the link between smiling and vowel fronting, as well as that between an open jaw setting and vowel lowering, emphasising how social meaning may literally be embodied in speakers' physiological behaviour.

The book is capped off by a short afterword by Eckert, who clarifies some of the controversies generated by her notion of the third wave, both in terms of its tenets as well as its very distinctiveness. One criticism she addresses is the accusation that the third wave somehow contradicts earlier variationist work, yet it is clear throughout the preceding chapters that third-wave ideas and methods

complement those of other traditions. Indeed, one of the book's strengths is the breadth and depth of theoretical and methodological coverage, with multiple aspects of social meaning undergoing forensic examination. The fact that every chapter makes a substantive theoretical contribution to our understanding of social meaning based on empirical data ensures that the authors' claims are both convincing and testable.

In terms of weaknesses, variationist sociolinguistics has been much chided for its Anglo-centrism (Adli & Guy 2022), which is apparent here: English is a primary language of study in 11 of the 15 main chapters (including three on California English). Also, readers experienced with the third-wave literature will likely feel a sense of familiarity throughout, as some of the data and variables studied have a long publication history. Overall, however, this is an excellent volume of data-driven research that helps answer cutting-edge questions relating to social meaning, which should inspire a new generation of sociolinguists to advance our understanding of the topic in the future.

## References

- Adli, Aria & Guy, Gregory R. (2022). Globalising the study of language variation and change: A manifesto on cross-cultural sociolinguistics. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 16(5-6):e12452.
- Eckert, Penelope (2008). Variation and the indexical field. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 12(4):453-476.
- Eckert, Penelope (2012). Three waves of variation study: The emergence of meaning in the study of sociolinguistic variation. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41:87-100.
- Moore, Emma & Podesva, Robert J. (2009). Style, indexicality, and the social meaning of tag questions. *Language in Society* 38(4):447-485.