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# Affect, Sound Symbolism, and Variation

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## **Abstract**

I will show how two preadolescent girls use the quality of /o/ and of the nucleus of /ay/ to index affect. Most particularly, how they use backed and raised occurrences to express what one might generally (and inadequately) call negative affect, and fronted occurrences to express what one might call sweetness and light, or a kind of childhood innocence. It remains to be seen how this kind of variability patterns in relation to the kinds of variables we're accustomed to studying. At this point, I intend no more than to demonstrate that this is an important area to explore.

# Affect, Sound Symbolism, and Variation

Penelope Eckert

## 1 Introduction

With our focus on sound change in progress and on its travel through the broad social matrix as defined by networks and macro- and micro-sociological categories, we tend to ignore the fact that phonological variability serves a wide range of expressive functions. What follows is a preliminary exploration of the use of variation to index affect. I do this for a variety of reasons. First of all, the exploration of social meaning in variation leads naturally into affective meaning, which in turn raises interesting new questions about the nature of meaning in variation. Second, there are several ways in which affective meaning is inseparable from what variationists generally think of as social meaning. Third, I'm pretty sure that kids first learn about the social use of variation by associating it not primarily with categories of speakers, but with the affect they express. Finally, it is in considering the expression of affect that we confront the issue of the arbitrariness of the sign. In what follows, I will show how two preadolescent girls use the quality of /o/ and of the nucleus of /ay/ to index affect. Most particularly, how they use backed and raised occurrences to express what one might generally (and inadequately) call negative affect, and fronted occurrences to express what one might call sweetness and light, or a kind of childhood innocence. It remains to be seen how this kind of variability patterns in relation to the kinds of variables we're accustomed to studying. At this point, I intend no more than to demonstrate that this is an important area to explore.

## 2 Affect and Sound Symbolism

In her study of children's role playing, Elaine Anderson noted that among other things, children backed and lowered vowels when playing the roles of important men such as doctors and fathers, yielding, for example, yes as [yʌs] and bad as [bad]. While this backing and lowering may be to some extent a side effect of lowering pitch, it's also probable that the backing of the vowel has its own significance. The association between F2 and size has been a well-known kind of phonetic symbolism since Sapir's early experiments (Sapir 1929). Hearing nonsense syllables differing only in the vowel, speakers consistently judged the form with [a] to denote a large object, and the form with [i] to denote a small one. Stanley Newman (1933) soon after expanded on this finding, showing that this relation is continuous: as the vowel becomes more back, the object being denoted is judged to be larger. John Ohala (1994) has associated vowels with higher F2 with a more general *frequency code*, which associates higher frequencies of F0, as well as in consonants and vowels, with smaller size. He argues that the frequency code is universal to vocalizing species, all of which use lower frequencies in agonistic displays to signal larger size. And while there are arguments against the universality of this phenomenon in human languages, there is no question that it is common to many languages, and that as a kind of synesthesia, it lies somewhere between the natural and the conventional.

The opposition between large and small appears to move into the social arena through salient social differences associated with size. Shoko Hamano (1994) shows a relation between the palatalization of Japanese alveolars with childishness and (presumably by extension) immaturity. He then enumerates the additional extended meanings of "instability, unreliability, uncoordinated movement, diversity, excessive energy, noisiness, lack of elegance, and cheapness" (1994:154). In his study of the sound symbolism of Greek [ts] and [dz], Brian Joseph (1994) focuses on a similar extension, positing a *relatedness network* of meanings associated with words containing these segments. This network relates smallness to deformity and what appears to be a more generally

pejorative series ('tight', 'miser', 'sting', 'bite'...). Furthermore, something akin to pejoration surfaces in pairs of words in which the word containing [ts] or [dz] has a 'slangier' or 'more evocative' meaning.

Michael Silverstein brought sound symbolism into the realm of sociolinguistic variation, by pointing out its indexical value. Silverstein (1994) discussed a diminutive-augmentative system in Wasco-Wishram that involves both consonants and vowels, and in which, for example, subphonemic fronting and backing of /a/ heightens diminution and augmentation respectively. His observations show a series of meanings as the metaphorical value of smallness and largeness involves a range of oppositions in which the larger term has what I would call a negative force: "intimate;dear" vs. "distanced;off-putting"; "desirable" vs. "to-be-shunned"; "personal" vs "impersonal"; "pleasing;satisfying" vs. "gross;disgusting". Silverstein identifies the larger diminutive-augmentative system as applying not simply to the denotation of lexical items, but as having indexical force as well, as "affectively engaging" smallness and largeness. Thus the use of these consonantal and vocalic variants expresses something about the speaker's attitude or orientation to the lexical item's denotatum. In the case I will discuss below, I would go as far as to say that the indexical value can be completely independent of the denotatum of the lexical item that the phonestheme occurs in.

Meanwhile, it would be unwise to conclude anything on the basis of the fact that Hamano's, Silverstein's and Joseph's extended sets of meanings seem to connect smallness with positive, and largeness with negative, force, and that those I will present below do as well. Silverstein emphasizes the conventional nature of sound symbolism, and the cultural specificity of the meanings it engages. And indeed, the direction of the extension of positive and negative meanings themselves is quite dissimilar from one language to the other. What is compelling is the fact that in all cases there is a field of meanings, not unlike the indexical field I have posited for sociolinguistic variables (Eckert 2008). The relations among meanings in this field are not accidental; they are an indexical order (Silverstein 2003), the result of an accumulation of connections made in discourse over time. Thus they encode ideological issues that are central, and particular, to the community of speakers. In what follows, I will examine a case of sound symbolism as sociolinguistic variation, arguing that the affective force of this sound symbolism is central to ideological issues in the community and inseparable from social categorization. Specifically, I will show how two preadolescent girls front and back /o/ and the nucleus of /ay/ to index a complex but coherent set of meanings and, in Silverstein's terms, affectively engage smallness and largeness. Individual uses, I will argue, emerge from the most salient aspect of size for this age group, which is self-consciously moving from childhood into adolescence.

### **3 The Relation between Affect and the Social**

Since our focus on macro-sociological categories in the study of variation has led us to think in macro-sociological terms about the meaning of variation, it has also led us to think of variation as something speakers acquire as they come to understand the adult social order, in whose terms those categories are defined. But it has been shown that variation is part of children's early language acquisition and that children begin to use variation stylistically very early on (Roberts 1995, 1997, 2002). If we maintained the idea that variables mark macro-sociological categories, then we would expect children to have to learn those categories before they could use or interpret variation appropriately. This dilemma is resolved when we consider that these macro-sociological categories are built upon more local categories and those in turn are built upon more basic social meanings (Eckert 2008), meanings, perhaps, that children begin to encounter quite early on. Elaine Andersen (1990) found that quite young kids use style in role-playing games, varying vowel quality and voice quality, amplitude and pitch as they adopt roles such as doctor, nurse, mother and father. Their stylistic practice shows that they understand the relation between age, gender, profession, family status, and relations of power, and that they are attentive to how these relations play out with respect to salient linguistic features. In other words, children learn very young to

notice differences in linguistic style, as well as to associate them with differences among the people who exhibit them and the ways in which they do so. They learn very early a relation between linguistic form and the issues that are important to them; as these issues move beyond childish concerns, so will their variation.

The importance of affective meaning in variation was forced on me as I tried to understand the patterns of variation in a preadolescent cohort, as this is the age group in which quite childish concerns come up against adolescent concerns. This is the life stage in which small friendship pairs and groups organize into a structured peer-based social order. Here, since an integrated social order is just beginning to form, one doesn't find nice set social categories like those we find for adults, or for those I found in Detroit area high schools. Rather, one finds a social order in the making, a cohort moving from the concerns of little kids to the concerns of teenagers.

While many preadolescents have adolescent ambitions, they're still kids. So a girl will show me her sexy lacy bikini underpants, not because they're sexy or because she thinks she looks sexy in them, but because they're a novelty to be contrasted with the "kid pants" she wears most days. And another will come to school with bright red false fingernails, which she enjoys tapping on the desk in the morning, but tears off in annoyance in the afternoon when they get in the way of playing. A sixth grade girl, narrating how she beat up a girl who had made a racist comment, can sound quite tough, yet the excited giggles interspersed in the narrative sound very little-girlish. In fact, her bad girl persona is very much a search for a new kind of excitement, but her experience of the excitement is integrated into a child experience. While this will soon be part of a more serious adolescent excitement with more serious consequences, it is not there yet.

The transition from childhood to adolescence brings together individuals and friendship groups in a cohort-wide consciousness, appropriating social control from adults, and forming a peer-based social order. The data I will present here were gathered during an ethnographic study, in which I closely followed an age cohort in each of two schools in San Jose CA, from the fifth to the eighth grade.<sup>1</sup> Already in fifth grade, a peer-based social order was emerging, as smaller friendship groups formed alliances resulting in a significant mass that dominated space and cohort-wide attention. This "popular crowd" consciously took the lead in the progression towards adolescent sociality, most notably engaging in transactions that constituted a heterosexual market. The crowd brought girls and boys together in a new collaborative enterprise of making and unmaking boy-girl pairs. These pairs were sanctioned by the crowd, and existed primarily for the construction of the crowd; the status as couple was a public, not a private, one. Thus the individual pairs involved did not interact with each other to speak of, and couples not resulting from crowd transactions were illegitimate. Couples played a role in a system of social value, with each pairing-up contributing to the establishment of value for the individuals being paired up, and for the agents who negotiated the pairing, particularly those who had negotiating power with the other gender.

The girls dominated activity in the heterosexual market, as social engineering became a new source of excitement, compensating for the more physical kinds of excitement that were becoming the prerogative of boys and considered childish for girls. The formation of the crowd required alliances among smaller friendship groups, particularly among the girls, whose childhood groups tended to be smaller than the boys'. The process of alliance required groups to winnow out members not wanted by the other group, resulting in considerable exclusionary activity. The result was constant drama, primarily around girls' friendships, but also around heterosexual pairing, with fights within couples a particularly rare and advanced form of drama. And this drama was not simply personal drama, but an essential part of what made one part of the crowd, making emotional display central to the social order. Much of this drama was public: it unfolded in public and it produced information of public interest as the crowd became the center of attention for the cohort. The crowd gained enhanced visibility both through its control of central spaces on the playground, and through its coordinated activities on the playground, in the lunchroom, and in the

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<sup>1</sup>This research was funded by the Spencer Foundation. I was accompanied at Fields Elementary School by Christi Cervantes.

classroom. This created an opposition between people who had one or a few friends and those who claimed everyone in the crowd as their friend. And this visibility put crowd members in a position to do public displays of connections and to achieve symbolic dominance. Engagement in the heterosexual market was also public emotional engagement, and emotional expressions that in earlier life stages had been reserved for other kinds of drama become integral parts of a new, adolescent, heterosexual style.

The crowd emerged as the legitimate social sphere in the cohort, making non-crowd drama and non-crowd couples seem childish. This does not mean that non-crowd kids did not engage in such activities, but their activities had no legitimate status as they were seen as the product of naïve individual actions. But non-crowd girls fought over boys, they teased each other about boys, they told each other's secrets and outed each other's crushes on particular boys. And drama broke out also as some became interested in boys while their friends didn't, as some moved towards adolescence faster or slower than their friends. Some simply entered into the excitement of conflict. Thus, drama and the expression of affect was closely tied to the business of maturation.

I have argued (Eckert 1996) that girls' search for excitement in social engineering and conflict is behind their engagement in flamboyant stylistic practice, hence their lead in the use of innovative variants such as sound changes in progress. Understanding the development of variation in the preadolescent cohort, then, involves understanding how affect interacts with the emergence of the new social order, and how the signs of affective speech (or its lack) interact with other kinds of variables. In what follows, I will show how two girls in the preadolescent cohort made indexical use of sound symbolism. Both girls, one part of the crowd and the other not, are very lively and socially active.

### 3.1 Colette

Colette was a quirky hyperactive and fast-talking girl, not part of the popular crowd. She had a couple of close friends and she prided herself on being the funny and aggressive one of the trio. She loved sports and complained vehemently that the boys on her street wouldn't let her play football with them even though, she said, she played better than most of them. She was not part of the popular crowd, and in fifth grade she still engaged in little-girl pursuits, spending her recess time on the jungle gym with her quiet friend Sonja, often using the jungle gym as a vantage point for watching the crowd in the center of the playground. It is also notable that while she loved softball and played in a league every day after school, she did not participate in the co-ed softball game that took place at recess, a game that was owned by the crowd. Colette "liked" boys, and claimed to have started liking boys in second grade:

COL: Second grade I started liking boys. Yeah, cuz, uh, that's when it was. I was in second grade when I started liking bo- boys.

PEN: And do you remember how you started liking boys?

COL: Yeah, cuz I thought they were cute. I'm all, "oh, they're cute" (laugh). Well, not actually I remember, they just started (laugh). I don't know, it just started, like, to come in. Like you say, you say, "oh, he's cute". It just comes into your mind.

However, she'd never had a boyfriend, and her attentions focused primarily on young media stars rather than local boys. When I asked her if she'd liked a lot of boys, she said, "Yes, but mostly JTT", referring to Jonathan Taylor Thomas, child star of *Home Improvement* and *The Lion King* and the heart throb of many of her peers. In sixth grade, Colette came down from the jungle gym and spent more time walking around with her friends, an activity symbolic of the move to adolescent status (Eckert 1996). But her relationships with boys did not fall within the model of the heterosexual market. She never had a boyfriend, and she got considerable excitement from teasing and chasing boys, not something that crowd girls would do, at least not in Colette's "childish" way.

The data in this study consist of many episodes lasting anywhere from five to forty-five minutes, determined by the school schedule and the rhythm of the kids' activity. The episodes include individual and group conversations, and a wide range of interactions among the kids, primarily on the playground. I will focus here on two conversations between Colette and myself, each lasting about ten minutes. The first, which took place in fifth grade, focused on her friends and activities. This was early in our relationship, and while she was quite comfortable with me, she presented herself to me as a "nice" girl, talking about the games she played, her friends, the boys she liked. The only topic in this conversation that had negative content was a brief mention of two girls in her neighborhood that she had stopped having anything to do with, one who got mad for dumb reasons, and one who was a bad influence on her sister. In this conversation, she portrayed herself as a happy, lively tomboy. I call this episode *Nice Colette*. The second episode, in sixth grade, was a conversation about how things had changed since fifth grade. By then she'd known me for well over a year and was completely secure in the conviction that I didn't care whether she was "nice" or not. In this conversation (as in many of our other interactions), she presented herself as a more-savvy sixth grader, full of attitude. When I asked her if she felt different in sixth grade, she said:

COL: Yeah I feel like I'm in more – in power.

PEN: Why?

COL: Cuz I guess kids get afraid of us for some reason. Cuz like we sit under the tree, they ask us sometimes how old we are and I'm all, "we're sixth graders" and then they walk off cuz they get afraid or something.

PEN: Do you like that?

COL: Mm hmm.

PEN: What else is different?

COL: Boys!

PEN: What about boys?

COL: Well all of them are got so ugly. And they're so rude. Like Jack Caldwell. He sits at my table and he's so rude. All the boys are rude here at Fields.

Throughout the conversation, which for lack of a better term I call *Negative Colette*, Colette focused on her struggle with the negative forces of preadolescence, fights with her friends, rude boys, the unfairness of girls' exclusion from football (both casual and professional). I might also have called this episode *Colette with Attitude*, as the negativity unfolded from the topic we started with: how have things changed since fifth grade? She was consciously presenting herself as older, part of the oldest cohort in the school and soon to go to middle school. Having these things to talk about (rude boys, fights over boys with friends, gender exclusion) is in itself evidence of older status and her choice to give a negative slant to just about everything she said therefore was a display of attitude.

Colette's pronunciation of /o/ and /ay/ in these two episodes differs dramatically, with *Negative Colette* using significantly more backed (and raised) values than *Nice Colette*. Figures 1 and 2 are F1–F2 plots of all measurable tokens<sup>2</sup> of /ay/ and /o/ in these two episodes. The squares represent *Nice Colette* and the triangles represent *Negative Colette*, showing that *Negative Colette* uses significantly more high and back pronunciations of both vowels than *Nice Colette*.

These aggregated data are based on the general tone of the two conversations, the positive "nice girl" tone of the first, and the more savvy tone of the second. The stark nature of the use of vowel quality is even clearer when we focus on individual passages. Early on in the first episode, I asked Colette if she had any friends who were boys. She told me about one boy that she knew:

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<sup>2</sup>Measurable tokens are a minimum of 50 ms long, and sufficiently free of playground noise to yield a clear measurement.

One that I really know is **Josh** and we – we give him **rides** after school.

Everything in this passage exudes sweetness and light, with an emphasis on relationships in the neighborhood, and Colette’s mother’s care for Josh, a neighborhood child. In sixth grade, though, Josh became a problem. Colette had a crush on him, and complained about his new bad behavior: he was rude and he often acted like a jerk. He was also the source of conflict with her best friend, who also had a crush on him. In what follows, she told me about one particular occasion on which she and her friend got into a fight over him and everything in her style as she talked about the stupid cause of her fight with her friend exuded annoyance with herself, her friend, and Josh:

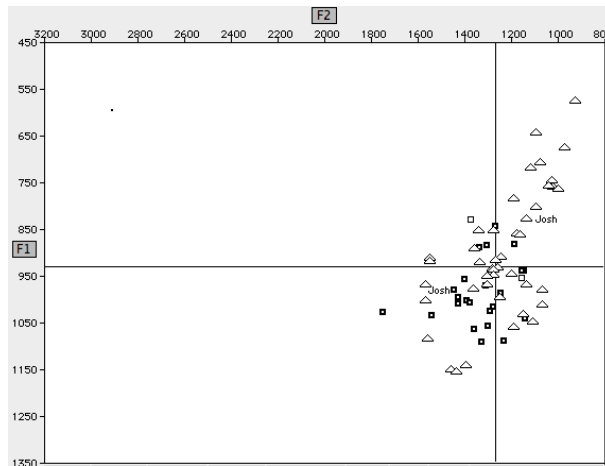


Figure 1. F1–F2 plot of /o/ in *Nice* (squares) and *Negative Colette* (triangles).

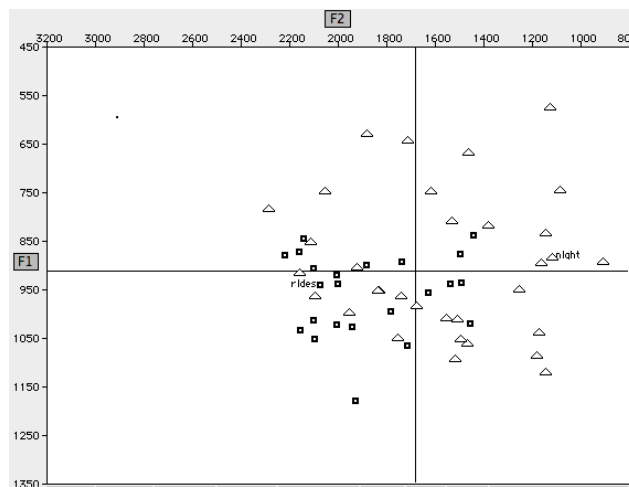


Figure 2. F1–F2 plot for the nucleus of /ay/ in *Nice* (squares) and *Negative Colette* (triangles).

We got in this mad because of **Josh** or something and um the next day cuz she was spending the **night** I’m all “wait a minute why should we get mad over a stupid boy!”



Colette's pronunciations of /o/ in *Josh* in the two conversations are labeled in Figure 1, and her pronunciations of /ay/ in *rides* and *night* are labeled in Figure 2. In both cases, the trajectory towards the back of vowel space from *Nice Colette* to *Negative Colette* is striking. In the case of /ay/, the trajectory spans just about the entire /ay/ vowel space.

Clearly the value of F2 participates in an opposition between positive (high F2) and negative (low F2) affect. But this is an inadequate characterization, which will have to be fleshed out through more careful study. At the moment, it seems clear that the fronted variants are associated with a kind of childlike innocence, while the backed variants are associated with a more complex set of meanings having to do with issues of adolescence. The conflicts she brings up center on issues related to adolescence, and while she talks about them in an overwhelmingly negative tone, she's clearly enjoying it. In other words, the negativity is as much about her status as someone who has these things to complain about as about her actual complaints.

A lot happens over the summer between fifth and sixth grades, and one might ask how much the difference between these two recordings is a result of change in Colette's speech over all, how much is a result of changes in our relationship, and how much simply the mood she was in at the time. In fact, these three possible factors are not only indistinguishable but inseparable. The cohort's relationship with me cannot be separated from their progress through elementary school, and indeed having an ethnographer chronicling their move from childhood to adolescence was part of that progress. Ours was one of the many relationships that changed as Colette moved towards adolescence, and her sixth grade status, her choice to be recorded at this particular moment, her mood at this particular moment, and her choice to express this mood are quite inseparable.

### 3.2 Rachel

The two speech samples I have examined for Colette are clearly different in affective tone throughout, and I have been able to show an overall effect of general tone on vowel quality. Rachel is a different story, complicating both the meanings of these variables and the analytic possibilities. Rachel was a lively and prominent member of the crowd, and a drama queen. A central part of her identity in the cohort was her immaturity. She was young for her grade, an enthusiastic participant in the heterosexual market, and prone to emotional displays. Her drama was a foregrounded playground attraction as she was constantly fighting and making up with her friends or with boys. She commonly acted put-upon, presenting a "poor me" persona, whether it was because her boyfriend wasn't cooperating or because her friends were angry at her for doing something rude. Her stylistic shifts were constant and striking, mixing a childish persona with displays of anger, poor me, and gloomy tales, and interrupting conversation to yell at someone. As a result, her episodes don't separate well along the lines of Colette's, but show swings throughout. Her use of F2 in /o/ and /ay/ shows up big stylistic moves in single lexical items, which are often drawn out, emphasizing the vowel quality. As a result, so far my study of her use of these two resources remains in a kind of particularistic limbo. Nonetheless, it is a limbo that we need to deal with, and by presenting data about Rachel I'm also presenting an analytic problem to be solved.

One particularly dramatic use of a backed nucleus in /ay/ was in Rachel's short narrative about running into a teenage "gang" guy. Here the affect is fear, and she told this in a trembly, ominous voice, lengthening the vowel in *cry* to 382 ms:

He's all "hey I know you" I'm all "oh **gosh** I wanna run I wanna run." I almost like I w-felt like I wanna **cry** so bad because he was near me. I thought like maybe, you know, he'd try to jump me or you know, cuz I was like really close to him. I was like this close to you.

The light circles in Figure 3 show all the measurable occurrences of /ay/ in the episode in which this narrative occurred. The black triangle marks the position of the nucleus in this occurrence of *cry*, the only occurrence of *cry* in the episode. For purposes of comparison, I have included (as bolded circles) four other occurrences of *cry*- from a different episode, in which she tells me about a boy in her class who cries a lot. These tokens occur as she presents herself as his defender, as the only kid in the class who sympathizes and who understands why he cries. The nucleus of /ay/ in the scary gang guy passage is considerably farther back than the nuclei of the other occurrences of /ay/, and of other occurrences of the same lexical item.

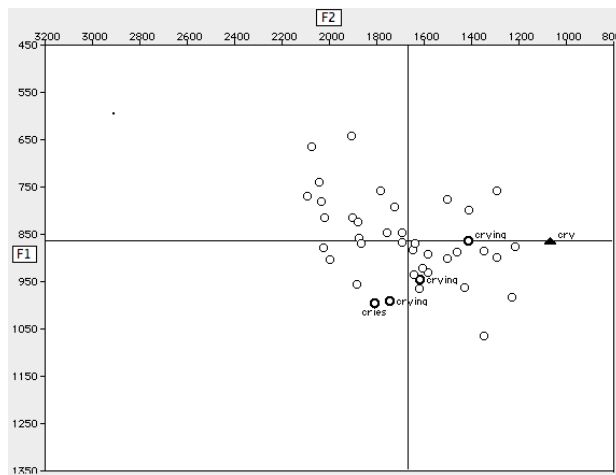


Figure 3. F1–F2 plot for Rachel’s /ay/ nucleus.

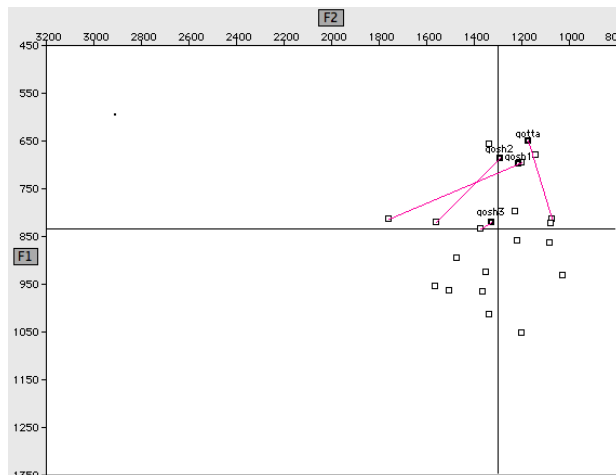


Figure 4. Rachel’s /o/ with dramatic glides (highlighted square is the nucleus).

Rachel also used /o/ to signal affect. But while Colette used a backed monophthong, Rachel produced a falling and opening diphthong beginning at a high back position. Figure 4 shows all occurrences of /o/ in this episode, most of which are monophthongal. Three words in this episode are diphthongs, and all three are associated with clear negative affect. These tokens are labeled in Figure 4, with two points in the trajectory of the vowel shown; the highlighted square represents a point 10 ms into the vowel, while the light square represents the midpoint of the vowel.

The first of these occurrences of *gosh*, marked *gosh1*, is the one occurring in the “scary guy” passage. It is 250 ms long, and shows a trajectory from the high back quadrant of the /o/ space to the front of the space. There are two other occurrences of *gosh* in this conversation, one of which shows the same pattern. *Gosh2*, which is 449 ms long, occurred as Rachel was complaining about how one boy was sometimes mean:

I’m like “Tad can I sit down?” He’s like “no go find your own seat.” Then I’m like “**Gosh**” and he’s like “I’m just joking, Rachel, you can sit down.” Like “Yeah, whatever”. He’s just like being mean. I don’t know what his problem is or what.

There is one more occurrence of *gosh* in this conversation. *Gosh3* is part of a dramatic utterance, but in this case the affect is completely positive. In this utterance, it is *oh* that is lengthened (528 ms) for dramatic effect, while the vowel in *gosh* is only 141 ms seconds long. I have shown the trajectory for this vowel in the same way as the other two occurrences of *gosh*, and this occurrence is clearly monophthongal. As we were talking, the mother of a friend of Rachel’s walked by carrying her daughter’s costumes for the class play, and Rachel proudly exclaimed about how many changes of costume this girl had to make in the course of the play:

**Oh my gosh** she has- she has like a whole lot of dresses. She needs like eight dresses.

The shortness of this vowel does not account for its lack of diphthongization. The third diphthongal occurrence of /o/ in this conversation occurs in *gotta*, and while the vowel is only 134 ms long, it shows a dramatic trajectory from high back to low back. This occurred as Rachel told the sad story of her grandmother’s lung cancer:

And she got lung cancer. Like, um, few months ago. And then I said, “Grandma, you **gotta** stop. Please just do it for me.”

Rachel’s backed vowels show an additional set of meanings to Colette’s; sadness and poutiness are central to Rachel’s persona, foregrounding the little girl. I would venture that this is a primary source of the negative affect associated with vowel backing, and that the lip spreading and rounding that accompany fronting and backing bear a synesthetic relation to smiling and frowning. In Rachel’s case, these little girl expressions are very much part of an adolescent persona, as she often couches her “poor me” complaints in adult discourses of heterosexuality. One day on the playground, for example, she sent one of the boys to look for someone she wanted to yell at. When he didn’t come back, she said, “Why isn’t Jim coming back? Stupid. See? That’s just like uh men. They don’t come back when you want them to. They don’t listen they don’t – they’re a big blob.”

As in the cases of sound symbolism discussed above, the meanings of fronting and backing of these low vowels constitute a range, or field, of affect that is both coherent and culturally specific. The meanings in play here emerge from a particular life stage in a particular environment. Growing up is a preoccupation for all children in this society, and the difference between children and preadolescents is a primary concern for this population. Behavior considered childlike is highly stigmatized; the accusation that one still watches the TV show *Barney* is among the most stinging of insults. And during preadolescence, physical growth takes on new significance, as now boys are supposed to become taller than girls, as kids begin to face puberty, and as kids begin to monitor their bodies more generally. And the social growth that is inseparable from this physical growth involves a new participation in social markets, most particularly the sexual market. The scariness and excitement of these developments is intensified by institutional transitions as they move first to being the oldest (and biggest) in the elementary school, and then as they move to middle school where they will be the youngest (and smallest). In the process, differences emerge within the cohort in the speed with which one moves towards adolescence. These differences involve disagreements about when and how it’s appropriate to begin engaging in adolescent

activities, but they also involve differences in entitlement. One cannot successfully perform adolescence without the support of the crowd, so the hierarchical arrangements involved in the formation of the crowd bring a new kind of power dynamic into the cohort. The fact that members of the crowd generally get more adult attention than others in school, and that school personnel recognize their emerging social status, contributes to the force of the social hierarchy. Thus the choice to not perform adolescence blocks one from achieving social status, as does the lack of choice for those who are not entitled to do it.

#### 4 Conclusion

This has been a preliminary exploration of the role of affect in the social meaning of variation, and of the role of phonetic symbolism in this process. Rachel and Colette clearly back /o/ and /ay/ to show a broad range of negative feelings including fear, sadness, annoyance, victimization and so on. The difficulty with working with meanings of this sort is that interpreting mood and categorizing tokens becomes deeply subjective. The analyst must decide both what emotions are being expressed, and when they are being expressed. If this is done while listening to the speech, the enterprise runs the risk of becoming circular, since the sound of the style itself, including the variable in question, affects the hearer's judgment. The topic alone is certainly not adequate for classifying affect, for one can talk about the same thing in quite different keys. The alternative is to engage in textual analysis, treating every single use of a variable as a stylistic move. This is not a reason to abandon the enterprise, but a challenge to face.

An important contribution of this enterprise to the more general understanding of variation lies in the relation between affect and the kinds of social categorizations that variationists normally trade in. Colette and Rachel are not simply expressing affect, but constructing their emerging adolescent personae. And while I emphasize that affect is probably the prime kind of meaning of variation in childhood, I believe that it remains important throughout life. Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) underlines the fact that social position constrains an individual's experiences, giving rise to a particular view of the world, interpretation of events, and dispositions for acting in the world. The local orientation of working class speakers, expressed in the use of local vernacular forms, is not simply an artifact of life, but rather it is engrained in a person's belief and emotional systems through life experience. This experience is shaped by aspects of social position such as class, gender, generation and ethnicity. One important aspect of habitus is the emotional responses that devolve from, and contribute to, social position. In the aggregate, African American people have a practical and emotional experience of racism that white people do not; women have a feeling of physical vulnerability that men do not. In other words, emotional makeup is not independent of one's place in the social order. Aspects of our affective expression are learned as well. Women, for example, are expected to cry at sad events while men are expected not to. Appropriate crying behavior (both crying and not crying) is learned quite young, as is the appropriate expression of anger and fear. And in the population under consideration here, girls are expected to engage in social drama while boys are expected not to. There's little question that this plays an important role in females' statistical lead in the use of innovative forms. We can no doubt expect to find different affective expressions across macrosociological categories. How to trace these expressions in the study of variation is an interesting, but still quite open, question.

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