THE “VALUE” OF DIALECT AS OBJECT: THE CASE OF APPALACHIAN ENGLISH

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Abstract

This paper focuses on whether the concept of “speech variety” has value as a material-like “object” and whether academic research and outreach study a particular variety can “profit” both community residents using the variety and the academic community valuing the research on it. It examines these issues by exploring how economic processes of “valuation” apply to the discursive circulation of the proper noun Appalachian English and its logotype AE in communities using grammatical forms diagnostic of it. It draws upon ethnographic and interview data from southeastern Kentucky and southwest Virginia communities to argue that linguistic misrecognition of these forms constitute a redirected system of valuation that contradicts and undercuts the overt denotational function of Appalachian English in the academic or popular discursive contexts in which they appear. Examining the pragmatics and semantics of possessive pronoun construction, this paper further concludes that Appalachian English does not and cannot circulate as a valued noun in the existing verbal repertoire of the communities examined. What constitutes acceptable and authoritative knowledge instead becomes “stored” in Appalachian English so that its value is in its potential monopoly of knowledge sparingly distributed under specific protocols distributed by “professionals”.

Keywords: Language awareness, Language and materiality, Appalachian English, Political economy.

In discussing problems surrounding the acceptance and rejection of “dialect awareness program” initiatives on local communities, the prominent sociolinguist Walt Wolfram recently articulated three points that motivate this paper:

- “Communities that have been socialized into believing that their language variety is nothing more than ‘bad speech’ are not particularly eager to celebrate what they view as linguistic inferiority, presenting a significant obstacle for the development of dialect awareness programs” (2002: 3).
- Though we [scholars] have not profited economically, we can hardly claim that we have no profit motive. We have profited greatly from the communities we have researched - with respect to our professional advancement, our publication record, and even in our recognition for proactive involvement with local communities” (2003: 11).
- Even if [dialect awareness programs] may not be as altruistically motivated as I once thought, they still seem to be a worthy endeavor that can profit both the community and the social science researcher in a synergistic way.” (2002: 11-12).

Here Wolfram identifies three intersecting issues relevant to understanding ideologies of political economic language and the linguistic misrecognition issues these ideologies entail:

- 1) whether or not “speech variety” has value or worth as an “object of value” within a socioeconomically-organized community;
- 2) whether academic research and its products and academic outreach and its products organized around discursive circulations of terms for speech varieties can be said to earn a “profit” by their research and outreach;
- 3) and whether these processes of outreach can produce a mutually “profitable” outcome for both residents of communities using the variety and the academic regimes defining and analyzing it .

This paper explores the linguistic implications of these issues by problematizing how the thorny and theoretically complex concept of “valuation” applies to the (non) discursive circulation of the proper noun “*Appalachian English*” within Southern Appalachian communities. My goal here is to argue for a re-assessment of certain linguistic features or discursive forms as integral to the construction of the material elements of socioeconomies. In so doing, I claim, after Bourdieu (1977), that what constitutes the “economic” should be extended to all “goods,” including non-tangible ones, “that present themselves as *rare* and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formulation” (1977: 178). I am also developing Irvine’s (1996 [1989]: 259) observation that “we also need conceptions of economy and of value that are comprehensive enough to include linguistic resources and verbal activities” and Keane’s observation that “things, names, discourses, all circulate” in ways that give discourses “thingy qualities” (2003a, cf.2003b). Most centrally, I also assert Silverstein’s point that the significance of pursuing these issues resides with the recognition that certain kinds of linguistic signs can function as “values constituted by a culturally-local system of validated ownership, alienability, and usufruct” (1984: 1) and that ignoring these functions “at worst, may constitute a real ethnographic misconstrual” (1984: 10). That is, by not developing a set of approaches and methods for describing (or explaining) how language-in-use and material objects-in-circulation can co-participate in a common theory of language and socioeconomics, we may have been overlooking major ways in which an anthropology of language can contribute “to devising new takes on the politics of culture” (Briggs 2002: 494) as a whole.

To address these issues concerning the valuation of “speech variety,” I first focus on discursive processes of valuation of speech qua speech within southeastern Kentucky, southwestern Virginia, and east Tennessee communities, that is, portions of the U.S. Southern Uplands (or southern Appalachia) where I have collected ethnography of discourse and interview data.¹ Then I relate this discussion to the issues raised at the beginning of this paper to illustrate how linguistic misrecognition (Silverstein 2001)

¹ These data have been collected continuously since 1985. In addition to earlier research in southeastern Kentucky and northeast Tennessee, my position as an associate professor of Appalachian Studies at Virginia Tech since 1993 has permitted me ready access to southwest Virginia communities through relationships with the families of students, through outreach activities, and by simply living in the region. When referring to “region” in the remainder of this paper, I am referring to this area, not the entirety of the southern uplands or what many call Southern Appalachia.

manifested in language awareness and other sociolinguistic outreach programs constitute a redirected system of valuation that contradicts the overt denotational functions of *Appalachian English* as it currently circulates in academic sociolinguists’ oral and mediated discursive practices.

Appalachian English is a neologism coined in the early 1970s by those scholars attracted to the emerging methodologies of sociolinguistics to denote the various phonological, grammatical, and lexical speech patterns found in Appalachia (Hackenburg 1972; Wolfram and Christian 1976; Wolfram 1984). The term *Appalachia* itself emerged as a regional designator of choice through governmental, media, and academic elevation of an erstwhile minor and restricted term to international recognition during the U.S. War on Poverty period of the mid 1960s to mid 1970s. The geographical locales denoted by *Appalachia* were based on geographical, demographic, and economic criteria, but quickly became subject to the auspices of federal, state, and local politically-involved elites jockeying for funding rights with Congress and the Appalachian Regional Commission (Puckett 2000a; Walls 1977). Historically, both *Appalachia* and *Appalachian English* are therefore non-indigenous lexemes not recognized by community residents or, if recognized, used under systems of metapragmatic awareness and linguistic ideological construction that conform to the linguistic ideologies of their communities and networks rather than those of scholars or governmental officials. Currently, *Appalachia* is more widely known and spoken “on the ground” than *Appalachian English* primarily because of the diffusion of Appalachian Studies centers’ curricula and scholarship throughout the region (Puckett 2000a) especially as Appalachian heritage programs in local schools. With few exceptions, these curricula tend not to include material on language, or do so in a general fashion that often emphasizes a romantic ideology affirming a factually erroneous Chaucerian or Elizabethan origin (Montgomery 2004). *Appalachian English* continues to be rarely used, however, except in college or university settings where dialect studies exist, where field samples of speech have been collected, and in restricted portions of the region where university-based dialect awareness outreach programs have received some attention in schools or other community settings. Consequently, *Appalachian English* has almost no value, however constituted, among most regional residents because it doesn’t exist in their lexicon. Nor do the terms for the features of the speech that it denotes (e.g., a-prefixing, double modals, selective copula deletion, or subject-verb non-concord), although an empirical correspondence between what features these terms describe and how they are verbally articulated may (or may not) exist in residents’ speech. Instead, within the verbal repertoires of most rural residents, another set of metapragmatic characterizations of local speech constitute entirely different hierarchies of entailments structuring different ideologies of political economic language under different constructions of language and material relationships.

For example, residents in “Southern Appalachian” rural areas from which I have data engage in a metalanguage that denies speech an abstract metapragmatic designator per se. At best, terms such as “talkin country,” “country talk,” “talkin Southern” “Southern speech” or “Hillbilly talk” are variously and occasionally used to denote *difference* from non-local speech with respect to that of “outsiders” or those living elsewhere, rather than as community-internal metapragmatic designators denoting their speech as a linguistic system. How difference is encoded, however, is highly variable, shifting from referencing “accent” features of what linguists would label as phonological, intonational, or prosodic

variation to “dialect” features of grammatical “deviation” from “correct” language, according to how residents were exposed to language variation by, for the most part, teachers during their K-12 education. For example:

Example 1:²

As far as like people talking . about their talking

I don’t believe so for the most part

Mo . some people may say like uh

Say th . theirs

If they hear someone from out of town ur someone from out of town is like . makes a comment on their . talking they’ll they’ll really like stress the ‘fact that they ‘do have an accent

And they’re kinda proud of it which ya know I I agree with (Troutdale, Grayson County, VA, 20 year old male Nov. 2002)

Consequently, speech (or language for that matter) does not participate in an ideology of political economic language as a consciously-recognized code constituted out of a set of community-recognized defining or diagnosing features. Rather, as indicated by Example 2, it exists as a participant-based, context-specific means of constituting interpersonal histories (Puckett 2002; cf. Becker 1998):

Example 2:

Like I said my granny [great grandmother]

Uhm . she just talked the way she did

An she

Where she lived she didn’t really have a lot a interaction with

People that lived . ‘outside of her community or family

An so

In ‘that way

She. her. the way she talked really didn’t change much from the way I guess her parents talked

And

Because ever everyone around her was the same an

An if she ‘did notice anybody . talking differently

She didn’t acknowledge it

Uhm

² Note on transcription: Transcription conforms to standard American English spelling if there is no phonemic variation in how residents pronounce the word. When such variation exists, spelling will vary to capture it. For example, -ing is transcribed as -in unless the speaker conforms (hypercorrects) to Standard Broadcast American English pronunciation. Speech is transcribed in lines to capture intonation and prosody features. Nonstandard spellings are used to assist in capturing these features (e.g., “you” as “ya”). Periods indicative brief pauses (less than .5 seconds); hesitations and corrections are preserved. Brackets indicate glosses or other information co-occurring at the time of utterance. A presyllabic apostrophe indicates higher than usual stress on that syllable.

[Puckett: uh-hmm]

She there was no distinction between . others

And

‘Her

Like there was with me

How I say I have school talk and . home talk

An then . I guess my grandparents

Are the same way

I’m . they’re probably more aware of it

then my granny was

But at the same time

They talk the way they ‘do

They they don’t really change it

They don’t ‘think about changing it

They don’t really even talk about what other people sound ‘different

Uhm

That’s just the way they are [Washington County, VA, woman resident, age 20, Nov. 2002]

In support of this historically-contextualizing function of language, residents do have a very well developed set of metapragmatic designators for specific discursive practices (e.g., “praisin,” “just talkin,” “preachin,” “braggin,” “prayin”) that construct various types of sociopolitical-economic relations by asserting or reproducing control, authority, and resource access relationships among interlocutors and within residents’ communities and interpersonal networks. Yet by the events, discursive patterning, and participant frameworks they reference, that is their denotation, and by the preferred use of gerunds as metapragmatic designators (e.g. “preachin” or “braggin”), that is, their grammatical categorization, these practices co-participate within a framework of semiotically-constituted behaviors in which verbal signs co-exist or even compete with actions, gestures, posturings, and exchanges or re-arrangements of material objects (e.g., “cutting a shine,” “getting one over on somebody,” “learnin somebody,” and “makin a deal”) (cf. Puckett 2000b). In “learnin somebody” events, for example, directives such as “turn it this way,” deictics such as “here,” and representatives such as “the wood don’t want to work that way” often exhibit weak discursive cohesion, functioning primarily to direct action, clarify it, or as gratuitous glosses on the co-occurring activity. In addition, the prestation of the good or completion of the service resulting from such activity may be done silently, in which case the communicative power of speech is subservient to gesture or action. Commonly, then, conditions of relative presupposition (Silverstein 2001: 386) exist in discursive events that create or reproduce reflexive linking of discourse to material entities in some state of movement, realignment, or change and to the participants engaging in an event in which these entities are co-present. Speech, particularly regularized discursive forms spoken more or less the same way in similar events over time, becomes so presupposedly linked with the interlocutors, their gestures and actions, and the “things” presupposed by the contextual pragmatics that it becomes meaningless, if not impossible, to separate “language” from “self,” from the activities that “selves” engage in, and from the material things that are metonymic icons or indexes of them. In this sense, the “character” of a particular “self”

becomes shaped by specific sets of things, activities, and speech relationships (cf. Keane 2003b: 416). “Self” “is therefore the product of social mediations involving other people and objects of exchange” (Parmentier 1994: 109) within an historical moment and through the values imposed upon these mediations and these objects by verbal means.

The processes by which values are imposed, however, are not static nor *necessarily* presupposed. Instead, valuation, and its implications for constitution of self, is most basically signaled by the pragmatic and metapragmatic meanings of attributive possessive pronouns (e.g., “my pocketbook” or “our land”). Patterned variation in possessive pronoun usages introduce both regularity and predictability, as well as innovation and novelty in how behaviors and things are merged with singular or plural “selves,” thus providing a means for introducing contingency into processes of self-identity reproduction and formation, contingencies that allow for variation in how these relationships can be valued.

Possessive pronoun constructions establish clear referential and deictic relationships between human “selves” and possessed entities denoted. Regularities in their semantic and pragmatic patterning in actual instances of use create a metapragmatic transparency, or “unavoidable referentiality” (Silverstein 2001: 386) into the localized system of discursive “valuation” of tangible or intangible, human or non-human “objects” in these communities, whether it be by use, by ownership, by commoditization, or by birthright.

Contingency and transparency are most salient within the everyday communications of residents where social relationships receive the most attention and effort. As would be expected, the majority of quotidian discourse is on local topics in which nouns and pronouns references local entities, people, activities, or places familiar to interlocutors. In most naturally-occurring utterances attributive possessives therefore reference actual or believed to be actual people, activities, or things empirically known or readily accessible to interlocutors. Pragmatically, they vary in patterned ways according to the intersecting contextual features of alienability, gender, and task/event (Puckett 2000b) and in terms of regularity in form, function, and reference across speech events and participant frameworks. These features combine in complex ways to assign value to the possessed noun contributing significantly to the processes of “self” construction that, in turn, assist in constituting a view of speech as an inalienable instrument for realizing these constructions. The dominant result of continuous engagement of these processes is the value given to one’s “name,” a value that has direct political economic impact in terms of access to tangible and intangible resources, integration into community life, and rights to control or authority relations. Inalienable constructions signal relationships so bound to a “self” that the boundaries between self and object or “other” are merged, at least until some life condition changes (e.g., loss of a limb in an accident, divorce, or disclaiming of kinship relationship). Inalienable possessives are recognized by the nearly invariant tokens of [possessor + possessed noun(s)] in routine, everyday discourse. For example, nouns such as “parents,” “dad,” “mom,” and other kin terms, body parts (e.g., “arm,” “head,” or “blood”) occur as possessed nouns except in unusual or novel discursive contexts.

Alienable possessive constructions indicate that the referenced item can be separated from the “self” referenced by the possessor noun and perhaps, depending on the utterance and discursive semantics and pragmatics, purchased, sold, or traded. Alienable possessive constructions using specific possessed nouns can, however, become closely associated with specific individuals such that they assume nearly inalienable status. For example, phrases such as “his hat,” “her pocketbook,” or “his dog” can be regularized across

discursive events such that they become obligatorily possessed when referencing the item and the individual.

Similarly, certain frequently-used nouns are routinely possessed according to the gender of the possessor. Phrases such as “her car,” “his truck,” “her kitchen,” and “his gun” demonstrate clear gender differentiation in conversational discourse. A man may say “it’s in the kitchen” whereas a woman will say “its in my kitchen.”

Finally, for the purposes here, first names are productive means of recasting the possessive construction system. Aunts, uncles, cousins, or other more distant kin can be alienated by use of first name, nickname, or a more formal term or reference. In the close-knit communities of the southern mountains, these mechanisms serve to distance individuals from a “self.” These distancing choices assist greatly in constructing local socio-political economies by constructing somewhat autonomous selves who can then use their discursive resources to assert role and status rather than interpersonal relationships with interlocutors. Contrastively, the use of first names in possessive constructions such as “my Judy” (mother referencing her daughter) or “her Bill” (speaker referencing a woman’s husband) function in part to combine the distancing function of names with the merging process of possession.

Attributive possessive constructions can also be highly productive in creating novel relationships between possessor and possessed noun(s) and what they denote. Most rural southern Mountain residents are activity-oriented, organizing their daily labor around the completion of tasks captured linguistically by a highly productive system of gerunds (e.g., “cookin,” “cleanin,” “workin,” “haulin coal,” “huntin,” and “prayin”). Within these activity frameworks, the temporary use or control of an object, or the co-operative labor in the case of a person, is linguistically expressed through the use of attributive possessive constructions. Phrases such as “my butter,” “my pencil,” and “his socket wrench” do not necessarily indicate ownership through gift, barter, or purchase, but simply an occasion of use or, in the case phrases such as “my teacher” or “my boss,” a temporary co-operative work relationship. Of course, if the use relationship continues over time, the possessive construction may become regularized and assume pragmatic features of inalienability (Puckett 2000b).

In a given instance of use, then, attributive possessives will pragmatically signal a specific combination of all of these features such that the referential functions of the possessive construction are “contextualized” (Bauman and Briggs 1990) to signify a specific set of meanings within a communicative event. These contextualizations, in turn, both presuppose and creatively entail how an “object” referenced discursively circulates, under Fajans (1993) distinction that circulation is based upon the transference of values or valued qualities rather than necessarily upon the exchange of property. For regularized uses for objects, these patterns of circulation can infuse the possessed nouns with heirloom “value” (Graeber 2001: 105) ; for humans, indisputed value of a known and (un)worthy ancestry. In both cases, the objects referenced become markers of individualized identity within a larger sphere of group recognition.

The result of these circulations of “values” constituted through the pragmatics of possessive constructions-in-use is in the construction and reproduction of a “personalized” or “self”-identification system of valuation . For this reason, linguistic awareness of a language as “language” is mis recognized by many residents. Instead, verbal utterances are components in the (inter)actional contexts where they co-participate with other

communitive modes to constitute locally-valued personhood, character, and identities - that is, "selves." Central to constructing how these multiple modes of communication are to be interpreted are the ways in which possessives bond things and activities to these selves within larger communicative contexts (e.g., "shoutin," "makin a deal," "just talkin," or "preachin") in which speech functions. Speech is therefore seen as a transparent means for accomplishing these tasks. As noted in Example 2, "there was no distinction between . others [speech] And 'Her" and "They don't really even talk about what other people sound 'different."

Consequently, responses such as "They [scholars] would have to talk like they're one of *their own*." [Lee County, VA, male resident, 20, Nov. 200] to my queries about the potential success of dialect awareness programs, are not simplistic statements concerning "insider" and "outsider" membership in a community. Nor do they entail just mastery of lexical, grammatical, intonational, and phonological differences in speech patterns, although these indexical markers of local membership are critical. Rather, they express the metapragmatic interconnections signaled by pragmatically-appropriate uses of possessive pronouns within the communicative practices in which they are embedded. These uses, in turn, replicate (after Urban 1996) or transpose (after Shoaps 2002) discursive forms that reproduce or create values for tangible and intangible objects, objects that are closely bound to persons.

Returning then to the issues offered at the beginning of this presentation, we can see a number of problems with misrecognition regarding outreach programs that rely upon the application of "speech variety" as a concept, at least in terms of the use of *Appalachian English* and what it denotes. First, at the level of a system of language per se, a nearly unbreachable divide exists between circulation of *Appalachian English* within academic regimes of valuation and dominant metapragmatic systems of linguistic awareness in communities. *Appalachian English* indexically presupposes existence of speech qua speech, apart from analytically autonomous of other social interactional phenomena. Wolfram's claim that "Communities . . . have been socialized into believing that their language *variety* is nothing more than 'bad speech'" erases complex pragmatic and metapragmatic entailments that speciate discourse at the local level into practices that exclude discussions of "talk about their talking" (Example 1), a phrase containing a possessive construction that in itself pragmatically conveys the issues raised here.

Even under conditions of correction in local schools, teachers, if they comment at all on students' talk, work to "correct" various shibboleths such as "aint" or double negatives in their writing, not necessarily in their speech, acknowledging, if not rigorously supporting, Finegan's arguments concerning the underlying moral imperatives dominating the prescriptivist stance toward "correct" English permeating most American public schools (1980: 48; see also Jaffe, this volume). They commonly avoid any systemic approach to changing grammatical patterns that would constitute recognition of a variant speech variety as a distinct variety. They may also note variation in "accent," or phonological or intonational patterns than vary from "correct" or "proper" speech, but again offer no ways of talking about "dialect" or "variety." Consequently, the dominant pattern of merging discursive practices into action frameworks is retained at the expense of nominalization of language as code (i.e., variety). Indeed, residents creatively apply these ideologies of language in their innovative creation of metapragmatic designators such as "home talk" and "school talk" (Example 2) in which residents discriminate between the action of talking at

school versus the ways they interact with others at home.

Second, whether academic research and its products circulate to earn a "profit" introduces another dimension to issues of "valuation" of *Appalachian English* as a linguistic "object." Here, the set of interlocking participant networks of academics and publics receptive to their arguments generate discursive forms and exchange contexts that validate authenticated users of the term *Appalachian English* with authority. This authority, in turn, allows them to literally market and exchange *Appalachian English* as used in academically-appropriate discursive practices (frequently mediated) for prestige, for salary-producing positions, and for monetary profit. In this sense, the reflexive processes for valuating *Appalachian English* approximate the kinds of political control and outright exercises of power that Breslau defines as "regimes of knowledge." Such regimes institutionalize routine results of social science research into a set of bureaucracies, jobs, activities, even laws (for example, the body of scholarship that pits *Appalachian English* and the grammatical forms it denotes against an American Standard English and its legal rights of preference) so that a given system of research practices and objects of knowledge (i.e. knowledge regime) embeds power relations in "reality" itself (Breslau 1998: 11), that is, in the referential functions of language. What constitutes acceptable and authoritative knowledge, mediated by discursive practices, becomes "stored" in *Appalachian English* as its value in a potential monopoly of knowledge sparingly distributed under specific protocols distributed by "professionals."

This complex of valuation leads us into the last issue discussed here, that is, whether processes of research based on "speech variety" assumptions and denotations produce a mutually "profitable" outcome for communities and academic regimes. This issue orients around what constitutes a "profitable outcome." Wolfram notes that one positive outcome comes from the insights academics and their argumentative and analytical rigor bring to popular ideologies of various speech varieties. They can "counter popular beliefs about the systematic patterning of vernacular dialects and the logic of these dialects in the name of the principle of error correction" (2002: 11). He later notes that these "popular beliefs" may include counter and unsubstantiated "folk" claims for "our speech" or express racist or sexist attitudes. (2002: 13). Certainly these claims have transparent merit when dealing with articulated ideologies of language for various speech varieties, that is, when there is a clear set of metalingual discursive elements for talking about talk (e.g. the commentators in Hutcheson 2002).

Let me suggest, however, that these assertions may have two major and significant types of impact on the "profit" potential for communities, at least those conforming to the discursive system for constituting "selves" outlined here. First, when systems of linguistic valuation vary dramatically, as they do in many rural Southern Appalachian communities, from those offered by dialect awareness models and other approaches to applications of speech variety arguments in communities, then imposition of an *Appalachian English* regime of knowledge *as currently constituted* has the potential to erase the historical contextualization of selves in relation to others in relation to things in relation to historically-grounded activities within communities. Local systems of valuation that, in turn, constitute an ideology of political economic language and the empowerment relations this ideology constitutes, will be reconfigured dramatically, if not lost, as local speech becomes redefined abstractly and as an entity that can be separated from self for analysis and preservation. The focus of these programs on preserving heritage and pride in local

speech - as it is currently applied - can become more erosive than efficacious, reproducing a hegemonic iconicity with earlier displacing and historically-alienating folklife (Whisnant 1987) and craft (Becker 1998) movements. While a market-place or prestige-based “profit” system may benefit, the self-valuation system based on creating interactive and interpersonally-shared local histories will lose.

Second, when those outreach programs based on the concept of “speech variety” engage in processes of “error correction” based on metapragmatic or metalingual commentary on local speech by some local residents, then processes of misrecognition are amplified and, in fact, reconstituted by the “professionals” as misconstruals because they are pragmatically disconnected from the system of metapragmatic entailments at the community level that infuse them with culturally-validated meanings. Without a more complete understanding of how the metapragmatic hierarchy constitutes “value,” these encounters obfuscate rather than identify problematic areas where mutual “profitability” can be constructed, profitability that can assist the researcher in seeing “the error in trying to investigate the salient by projection from the obvious” (Silverstein 2001: 401) and the resident in making “valued” choices in how to produce, circulate, distribute, and consume their linguistic resources.

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