

## **Unsettling assumptions: Intersectionality and the categories of linguistic analysis**

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The past 10 years have witnessed an intersectional turn in sociolinguistic research that has unsettled traditional analytic orthodoxies and stimulated an exploration of “the totality of inter-locking social forces that underlie linguistic practice” (Levon 2015). The papers in this panel showcase current work on the cutting-edge of intersectionality research in sociolinguistics. All of the papers in the panel treat social categories as mutually constitutive. Such a perspective rejects a compartmentalized approach to the analysis of sociolinguistic practice- one that sees patterns of language use as bound to discrete categories, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, or sexuality. Instead, the papers all investigate how categories are relationally and dynamically constituted in moments of situated social practice, identifying the ways in which, for example, speakers’ constructions of gender are simultaneously classed, class are simultaneously racialized, and national belonging are simultaneously sexualized. Working at various levels of granularity and deploying both qualitative and quantitative methods, the panel contributions examine sound change, talk-in-interaction, interactional sociolinguistics, multimodality, and pragmatics in a range of international contexts in order to shed light on the complex, and often misleadingly latent, co-dependency of categories in lived experience. In doing so, panel contributions unsettle simple models of indexicality and social meaning that treat linguistic practice as transparently linked to broad social divisions. They also force a discussion about the tension inherent in much sociolinguistic research between our own categories of analysis, on one hand, and the categories of practice that our participants maintain, on the other. Through the panel, we hope to highlight both the affordances and the constraints of intersectionality as a central concept for sociolinguistic research, and to offer concrete examples of how sociolinguistics can help to unpick the workings of intersectionality more broadly.

**Keywords:** indexicality, intersectionality, social practice

## **1. Language, identity and marginalisation: Using interactional sociolinguistics to analyse intersectionality in LGBT youth groups**

*Dr. Lucy Jones*  
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In this paper, I draw on existing approaches to intersectionality as developed for variationist sociolinguistics (e.g. Levon 2015) and consider their application within an interactionist framework. To do so, I present qualitative data emerging from a linguistic ethnography project with four lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth groups in the UK. Participants in this study vary in terms of their age, social class, ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation, and the youth groups are situated in culturally and economically differing cities. My aim is to understand how these intersecting experiences impact on the young people's identity construction.

Taking an intersectional approach necessitates the exploration of how specific combinations of category memberships work to both privilege and marginalise individual people, since structural inequalities related to class, race, gender and so on do not operate in isolation (Yuval-Davies 2006). Rather than assume that all young LGBT people are necessarily marginalised, then, I consider how individuals' relative cultural (dis)advantages inform their experiences of discrimination and, in turn, their articulation of themselves as members of an imagined LGBT community. Through a focus on stance and positionality via discourse analysis, I also demonstrate the crucial role that the young people's membership to particular communities of practice (in the form of the varying youth groups) has in informing their interpretation of 'being LGBT'. Approaching this data from a qualitative perspective, I argue, allows unparalleled insight into the relationships between speakers' various intersecting category memberships and their sense of self.

**Keywords:** age, ethnicity, sexuality, social class

## 2. Evolving intersections: Shifting identities and Northern cities vowels in a Chicago community

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Sociolinguists have begun to problematize the treatment of macro-social categories as pre-defined singularities. This study contributes to this work by examining how intersections of broader categories, social practices and ideological positions condition the reversal of a place-linked sound change in progress — the Northern Cities Vowel Shift (NCS) — in one Chicago community. While the sound change is reversing community-wide in apparent time, the use of NCS-linked features varies at the individual speaker level. Patterns are informed by both structured heterogeneity within macro-social categories, and the evolution of these categories' local meanings over time.

Tokens of 11 NCS-implicated vowel classes were extracted from interviews with 42 White lifelong Chicagoan members of a single neighborhood community. Mixed-effects models were fit on Lobanov-normalized F1 and F2 midpoint measurements. Age effects illustrated significant community-wide reversal of the NCS amongst White speakers in apparent time (all  $p < 0.01$ ).

However, analysis of individual speakers illustrates that use of the NCS is predicted by more particular positionalities couched in sociohistorical context. An ethnoreligious difference in one generation evolved into a salient high school choice difference in later generations, both predicting use of NCS-shifted features. Further, earlier "White Flight"-linked ideologies gave way to a new, neo-liberal White spatial imaginary in the community supporting racialized diversity, also conditioning use of the NCS, even among speakers of the same age group.

Overall, findings suggest that the meaning of Whiteness, locality and its intersection must be interpreted in historical context, and that it applies variably to individuals within the same identity categories, informed by differences in social practices, networks, and ideologies. Reversals of place-based sound changes can thus be driven by shifts in what it means to index local identity altogether, which interface with macro-social identity categories and their intersections in complex and evolving ways.

**Keywords:** age, locality, race, social practices

### 3. Checkpoints of desire: Language and intersectional double binds in Israel/Palestine

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Over fifteen years ago, Cameron and Kulick provocatively suggested that research on language and sexuality, and sociolinguistics more broadly, should engage more thoroughly with the notion of desire. While there has been a burgeoning sociolinguistic literature seeking to map how desire is discursively produced (see e.g. Mortensen 2015, Canakis 2016, VanderStouwe 2019), we still know too little about the ways in which desire may be “inflected by other kinds of salient social differences, for instance those of race, ethnicity, generation, class and culture” (Cameron and Kulick 2003:144; see however Milani 2013 and VanderStouwe 2019). Against this backdrop, the aim of this talk is to draw upon an intersectional framework in order to investigate the role played by a nexus of social categories (ethnicity, religion and culture) in the discursive production of desire that a queer Palestinian man expresses for a Jewish Israeli soldier. Through detailed analysis of a conversation between this man and a Palestinian female friend, we illustrate how desire is interactionally produced and simultaneously blocked by a variety of “checkpoints”. Here sexual attraction, on the one hand, and cultural, ethnic and religious affiliation, on the other, become a zero-sum game, interactionally constructed as incompatible with one another. In the analysis, we also illustrate the role played by Hebrew-Arabic code-switching in this interactional push-and-pull of desire. As a result, the paper hopes not only to offer a fresh intersectional perspective on scholarship on language and desire, but also to unsettle the sexual blindness of much multilingualism scholarship (cf. Cashman 2017 for a notable exception).

**Keywords:** culture, desire, ethnicity, religion

#### **4. Intersectionality in interaction or an interactional approach to intersectionality: The case of Greek LGBT groups**

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Sociolinguistic research of the last decades has been more and more attentive to theories of identity and perception/positioning of the self. This is crucially reflected in Levon's (2015) call for the integration of intersectionality theory in language-based accounts of 'identity', putting forward variation analysis. In the present paper, I attempt to take this integration a step further; moving beyond linguistic variation, I focus on the discursive construction of intersectional experience in talk.

Examples will be used from eight group discussions among LGBT people in Greece. Heterosexuality, along with normative ideas around genders, is linked to popular Greek national discourses, which creates a perceived normative conflict for non-heterosexual Greek people. Focusing on how the latter position themselves in talk-in-interaction, I investigate the ways in which they actively negotiate and (re)construct such normatively conflicting categories. I argue for the potential of an interactional, micro-analytic approach, one that can capture the subtle ways in which meaning is locally assigned to intersecting social categories for various (interactional and other) goals. Such an approach, I suggest, can shed light on the variability of intersections between categories (i.e. incompatibility, causality, coexistence), but also the contextualized meaning-making of these intersections per se.

To this goal, I include Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) (Stokoe 2012) as a useful tool for the investigation of 'members' methodical practices in describing the world' through categories (Fitzgerald et al., 2009: 47). A 'collection of categories', in MCA's terms, effectively reflects a 'collection' of aspects that compose the self and, as such, has a lot to reveal about the intersectional experience of the speaker. Ultimately, it can point towards new analytical and theoretical directions, which can address some of the limitations of both intersectionality theory (see Levon 2015) and sociolinguistic accounts of 'identity', by capturing the sensitive, context-dependent emergence of social meaning in talk.

**Keywords:** identity, intersectional experience, membership categorization, sexuality

**5. Interdiscursive intersections:  
Social class, citizenship and migration in YouTube comments**

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YouTube's comment feature provides the affordance of persistent interdiscursivity, as commenters can build on and intensify public debates using utterances that remain visible over time. Responding to an episode of *Benefits Street*, a British post-reality TV documentary about welfare (or 'benefits') recipients, commenters draw on and reinforce well-established discourses of social class, welfare, citizenship, and migration to invoke two opposing characters: 'the British citizen on welfare' and 'the migrant'. These polarised and polarising stereotypes help to shape and reinforce neoliberal, post-welfare ideologies, by painting welfare as stultifying, and precarious mobility as motivational.

Though the data is explicitly about class and welfare, an intersectional approach allows for these more nuanced findings. The episode the comments engage with was broadcast years before the EU Referendum and does not mention immigration, yet many commenters assume that the unemployed protagonists are Brexit voters who blame immigrants for their plight. These 'British citizens on welfare' are believed to be privileged, entitled, lazy and demotivated – stereotypical work-shy 'skivers'. Commenters typically construct immigrants, on the other hand, as model neoliberal 'strivers' – entrepreneurial, hardworking, and upwardly mobile – despite the poverty and hardship migrants often face.

Analysing the ways these tropes and categories intersect in the comments provides insight into the process of political polarisation in digital discourse. When sketching two opposing characters, certain connotations are effected, for example, 'welfare as privilege' and 'migration as rebranding'. As the perception of social cohesion is integral to support for the welfare state, these polarising stereotypes can bring material consequences. An intersectional lens helps bring these multi-faceted issues into focus.

Keywords: citizenship, interdiscursivity, migration, social class

## 6. “That’s good, that”: Examining the social meaning of syntax at the intersection of class, practice and pragmatics

*Prof. Emma Moore  
University of Sheffield*

It has been argued that syntactic variables are more sharply stratified than phonological variables (Labov 1993; Labov 2001:28) and that they have “quite fixed social meanings associated with external facts like class and particularly education” (Eckert 2018: 190). However, these claims are based on limited analysis of a limited number of variables (Cheshire 1987; 1999; 2005); the variables typically analysed tend to be highly codified and stigmatized. Furthermore, few variationist studies of syntax have considered how social class might intersect with other social factors. Consequently, the nature of the variables studied, and the manner of their study, may have skewed our understanding of the relationship between syntax and social meaning.

In order to gain a more complete picture of the social meaning potential of syntax, this paper uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques to analyse how a more ‘purely’ syntactic variable, right dislocation (RD) (I hate that, me) varies in data collected during a two year ethnography of adolescents at a British high school. Whilst the quantitative analysis shows a correlation with social class, the correlation with community of practice (CofP) is more stark. Furthermore, analysis of the pragmatic function of RD reveals that these forms can function to communicate subtle discourse meanings. Differences in frequencies between CofPs reflect “what speakers choose to talk about” (Cheshire 2005: 99) and how they talk about it (i.e. the extent to which they exploit the pragmatic inference potential of RD).

By using pragmatic analysis to examine the inferences communicated by RD and by using ethnographic data to examine the intersection between social class and social practice, this study reveals multiple indexical links between a syntactic item and a range of social meanings. This has implications for our understanding of intersecting social categories, and the characterisation of the social meanings of syntax.

**Keywords:** community of practice, pragmatics, social class, syntax