SOUNDING LIKE YOU? WHAT FOR?

Linguistic Accommodation at the Crossroad of Social Categories and Individual Agency

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“Speech convergence phenomena are motivated by an individual’s motivation to be socially accepted or identify with a particular social group.”

Giles and Coupland (1991: 71–72)
Questions

- Social motivations for such a phonetic convergence?
- What kind of social phenomena are at stake?

Linguistic accommodation in the light of social theories
Tension between social categories and individuals
From **social groups** to **social categories**

Social categories are the results of social operations structuring a society.
“Reality almost always appears as a continuum” (Martin 2002)

The distinction between categories is the result of a social activity
Social groups are not different entities coexisting, but they exist in contrast to each other.
Structuralism in linguistics:
- contrasts linguistic units (phonemes)

--> Structuralism

Structuralism in sociology:
- contrast human groups

--> Materialism
“When structuralist principles are expended to social notions, it becomes far more massive. Instead of $a$ and $é$, it is about men and women, kings and servants.”

(Benveniste, 1974. Problèmes de linguistique générale 2, p. 18)
SPEECH:
Applying a theoretical modelization on a continuous phonetic reality
(cf. emic/etic relation)

SOCIAL:
Also applying a social modelization on a continuous human reality.
Not «just» a theoretical proposition
Class

- Lower vs. Upper Classes
- Middle class
- Upper-middle class
- new bourgeoisie
- etc.
Class

- A continuum
- A contrast

The two poles of a continuum
Gender & Sex

Why some physiological features are convoked to socially distinguish between humans while others are not?

No ontological link between the social organization and the physiology of individuals
Gender & Sex

Some physiological or behavioral features
- are symbolically fulfilled with meaning
- result in a certain repartition of social roles
Gender & Sex
Gender & Sex
Race

Race is not linked to our skin color, but to our social experience of reality.

Consequences on how we socialize
Race

The example of Rachel Dolezal:
Race

People perform their race
Social categories are:

simultaneously real and abstract

Concrete consequences  Enforce a continuous reality
Intersectionality

Each individual belongs to different categories

Social categories are like the coordinates of a multidimensional social map.
Intersectionality

Intersectionality is not a cumulative process.

Gender, Class, Race, Age, Religion, Sexuality, Validity, etc.
Consubstantiality & Coextensivity

D. Kergoat, 2012. Se battre, disent-elles...

- Consubstantiality

“Social relationships form a nub which cannot be sequenced at the level of social practices, except in the perspective of analytic sociology”.
Intersectionality

Consubstantiality & Coextensivity


- Coextensivity

“When deploying themselves, social relationships of class, gender and race reproduce themselves and mutually co-produce each others ”.
Agency & Identity

Judith Butler, 1990. *Gender Trouble*

The example of the drag queen

No original
We are all performing our gender roles

Rather than being a fixed attribute in a person, gender is a fluid variable which shifts and changes in different contexts and at different times.
Agency:

- We are subject to power
- We are agent, « subject »

Social categories precede us but we are active in our positioning towards social categories.
“Gender identity is “a stylized repetition of acts [...] so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief”

(Butler, 1990. Gender Trouble)
Social meaning emerges from **coherent social practices**

Coherence is ensured by repetition
There is no pre-discursive identity (Dorlin 2008)

“If gender is constructed, it is not necessarily constructed by an ‘I’ or a ‘we’ who stands before that construction in any spatial or temporal sense of ‘before.’ Indeed, it is unclear that there can be an ‘I’ or a “we” who had not been submitted, subjected to gender, where gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being . . . the ‘I’ neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within the matrix of gender relations themselves”

(Butler, 1993. *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of Sex*)
The signification of our performance, of our activities may only arise in the process of our interaction.

“A gender identity is always the result of an interactive work between the one who emits gender cues and the one who perceives it.”

(Kessler & McKenna 1978: 136)
Agency & Identity

Social activity at the crossroad of:

1) Our identity strategies,

2) The representation we have of the others and of other's representation,

3) The social categories existing in a society, or a given social group.
Agency & Identity

Tabouret-Keller & Le Page (1985):

Identity as the gap an individual maintains with a group, and the consequent dynamics of distancing or merging.

Acts of Identity
Agency & Identity

“Linguistic elements are not only attribute of groups or communities, they are in themselves the means individuals simultaneously say their own identity and identify to others.”

(Tabouret-Keller & Le Page, 1985)
Social categories:

- Contrastive poles we apply on a continuous reality.
- They constraint us to coherent behaviors and social practices.
- They are not always predictable:
  - one can negotiate the categories we are assigned to,
  - one cannot predict where will be the border,
  - one cannot predict which social category will be reinforced or negotiated during an interaction.
Identity, Social Categories & Accommodation Theory

Social categories:
- Individuals do not fit the core of the stereotype of their social category.
- Different categories interact with each other (intersectionality)

Identity:
- The common ground for a theory of the subject and of social categories.
Speech convergence / divergence:

A social strategy to situating, or positioning oneself within a contrasted social space framed with complex domination relationships.
An example

A female displaying speech convergence towards a male interlocutor

What motivation to join which social categories?
An example

- to become a male
- to be more masculine
- to be included in a situational group within males speak more
- to align with what is perceived as the dominant subgroup
  - Professional prestige
  - Nationality
  - Language spoken
  - Other
- Gender cooperation
- To obtain a better face, through a positive evaluation of her interlocutor’s persona?
An example

Phonetic convergence ≠ Social convergence
An example

A female displaying speech convergence towards a MACHO male interlocutor

- To behave more masculine to challenge his authority

Phonetic convergence = high social divergence
An example

A female displaying speech convergence towards a female interlocutor

- Cooperation (symmetric relationship)
- Alignment (from a higher position)
- Alignment (from a lower position)
- Could also diverge to index differences regarding other social categories (age, professional status, class, sexuality, etc.)
An example

Converging is not identifying

To converge or to diverge is a full part of our social activity, as subject with agency
Conclusion

Speakers converge or diverge with other people, not with sounds.

Through accommodation, speakers act, perform their identity on a multiple social scale.
Social categories are not factors of variation. The variation is the very making of the categories.

Accommodation is one of the social practices constituting social agency.
THANK YOU