Review

Semantic Variation: Meaning in society and in sociolinguistics
Ruqaiya Hasan (2009)

Reviewed by Jay Lemke

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Ruqaiya Hasan and her collaborators (notably Carmel Cloran) conducted a series of large-scale studies of differences in patterns of conversation between young children and their mothers and teachers across social class lines. The results of these carefully done and highly significant studies were published in a variety of different venues and not gathered together until the recent publication of this volume edited by Jonathan Webster.

The results of this work were at least twofold. First, it established in great detail and with high statistical significance that across social class lines there were major differences in how mothers and young children from working class vs middle class families framed questions and answers, commands and requests, and grounds and reasons in casual conversation in normal settings. And second, it showed that the usual mode of teachers' talk with these children was if anything an exaggerated version of the typical middle-class ways of meaning.

The theoretical significance goes well beyond even these important results. Educationally, and in terms of social policy, it faces us with the truth of Basil Bernstein's hypothesis of many years ago that ways of meaning differ significantly across social class positions, and that home and school, functioning as critical settings for socialization, tend to inculcate these ways of meaning and then evaluate and classify them in ways that lead to or at least significantly

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support the realities of social class differentiation and hierarchization in modern societies (Bernstein, 1971). Linguistically and sociologically, Hasan argues from her data, variation in meaning making must be considered an integral if not the primary factor in our understanding of the role of language in the constitution of social structure.

Are these unsurprising claims? Or do they imply a substantial shift from accepted wisdom in education and sociolinguistics? Looking back to the time of the original studies and the majority of the publications included in the volume (1987–1993), I think it was certainly the case that Basil Bernstein's thesis about language and education was still an unwelcome one, especially in the United States. And the dominant view of the proper concerns of sociolinguistics, following Labov (1972), excluded variation in meaning to focus on phonological and presumptively meaning-neutral grammatical features.

In both cases egalitarian and progressive impulses did not want to re-open the possibility of 'deficit' interpretations of data on linguistic variation that could be construed as evidence that Other people's children were incapable of the kinds of thinking that the dominant social class valued and which were the prerequisites of professional career success. As Hasan shows in many carefully reasoned theoretical arguments across the chapters of this volume, their cautions were misplaced and misleading on a number of grounds.

First, what the data actually show is not that the meaning constructions typical in middle-class families' discourse are never made or cannot be made by those in the working class homes, but rather that they are much less frequent; they are dispreferred. Second, the notion that discourse is a reflection of mental processes which are separate from and prior to language ignores the constitutive role that language as a semiotic resource plays in the development of what Lev Vygotsky (who saw this early on, and whom Hasan refers to regularly in her arguments) called the 'higher mental functions'. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, analysis of linguistic variation at the grammatical and phonological levels is simply incomplete and insufficient to give an account of the relationship between that variation and differences in social positioning.

These are of course complex issues, and I am giving a somewhat oversimplified summary. What Hasan offers in this volume is no less than an alternative sociolinguistic theory, one built on the social semiotic approach to language of Michael Halliday (1978), and Bernstein's sociological analysis of class differences in linguistic meaning making patterns. The theory links register variation, i.e. differences with regard to setting, to classic Labovian user-difference variational analysis, and does so at the level of meaning. To accomplish this Hasan introduces paradigmatic systems of meaning features, *semantic networks*, where the feature selections, clause by clause, are related to the socially

relevant features of the setting (the activity, the social relationships, the mode of linguistic/semiotic contact) and are in turn realized by grammatical features in the discourse. The social system is represented by the kinds of such settings that people in a community recognize, and there is significant sociological variation (across class, gender, age, etc.) in what settings are recognized and what kinds of meanings are considered appropriate to them.

The power of this model is amply demonstrated by the detailed statistical analyses of the frequencies and correlations of the meaning network features, and the use of principal components analysis to show the separation between the patterns typical in the LAP vs HAP mothers and children, and the teachers' discourse. The results have statistical significance probabilities far better than the 0.01 error level. LAP and HAP are Hasan's acronyms for her social class categories, based empirically on data about the relatively low- vs high 'autonomy' of the family's primary wage-earner in his occupation. Seeing the cluster plots, with the L's to one side and the H's or T's on the other, with tiny overlaps, is among the most persuasive quantitative data I have seen in a sociological study. Hasan admires and emulates Labov's methodological canons, if not his theoretical dispositions. Choose the right features in the right settings, and social variation becomes undeniable.

And in this case it is social variation in what kinds of meanings are made and how, in functionally identical settings, by individuals who are all capable of and who mostly do construct the same range of meaning features, but not in the same combinations, nor with the same frequency. Three to 5-year-old children are seen to be already converging with their mothers' discourse patterns in terms of clusters of semantic features. Teachers are found to be using extreme versions of the middle-class (HAP) patterns, while the children stick with their home patterns. With some caution Hasan compares these patterns to Bourdieu's (1990) *habitus*: dispositions to prefer particular discourse styles in particular settings, mostly unconsciously.

Without attempting a chapter by chapter overview, let me note that the first two chapters set out the basic theory and methodology, and the last two were written substantially later than the other research papers (in 2001, 2004). In between, we find detailed arguments and analyses of data regarding the semantic framing of mothers' questions and children's answers, comparison of children's questions' features to mothers', comparison of teachers' features to HAP vs LAP mothers', the cross-class comparison for forms of command, request, and other behavior-controlling expressions by mothers, and the significant work on modes of argumentation and rationality, reasons and groundings, again showing semantic variation between HAP and LAP mothers in dialogue with their children. In chapter 10, we also get some evidence of semantic variation by gender of the children. There is a CD-ROM disk included with

the printed volume that contains what you might normally expect to find in an Appendix, such as transcription conventions and data samples, though the data samples here are very extensive because of the capacity of the medium. There is also a multi-author article that discusses the history of semantic networks, and a discussion of Cloran's work on rhetorical units.

What are the implications? For sociolinguistics, a greatly expanded domain of inquiry, focusing far more on meaning features. In chapter 1, Hasan develops several lists of research issues entailed by the conceptual model she is presenting and using. These include inquiries into recognition criteria for situation types, matters of speaker judgment regarding appropriateness of both meaning-types and verbal expressions to a situation, identity and role relationships as mediated by language, the reasons for semantic variation across class or gender in the same situation type, the role of institutions in constituting and maintaining such variation, the grounds of classification of situation types, the variations in ways of making and acknowledging the very fact of contact or interaction with another, both face to face and in new media, and a host of others.

I believe that these are all issues in which many sociolinguists and most students of the role of language in society are intensely interested, but what has often been lacking have been the tools to tackle the problems. Some of those tools are demonstrated in this volume, and others could be readily developed from the conceptual model presented.

And what of the implications for education and social policy? Here, I think, we have to go beyond Hasan's work in this volume, but take into account the findings and the general theoretical stance she presents. What happens later in the life of these children? Does schooling as we now practice it allow the LAP children to add middle-class meaning making patterns to their repertoires? To become bi-sociolectal, as it were? In some cases, yes, but by no means is this so in most cases. It can happen, it just usually does not. Nor is it an explicit goal of schooling to achieve this. Nor are teachers trained in methods of supporting it as a goal.

Projects using closely related models, such as that of James Martin, concerning the ways language supports middle-class modes of discourse at the transition from primary to secondary education (Macken *et al.*, 1989) have had some success in explicitly teaching genres of academically valued *writing* to students whose home discourse patterns provide little scaffolding for such practices.

Hasan's model of the societal side of the socio-linguistic interface is formally complete for its purpose in her work. In principle any and every combination of socially meaningful activities, relationships, and modes of communicative contact, all the doing that makes up a living society, has a place in the

model. But of course a living society is far more than what happens in it on the scale of activities. There is also its material infrastructure, its systems of power relationships maintained across activities and longer timescales, and all the institutions within which identities and roles across which semantic variation develops are formed. Moreover, there are the cultural systems of values and feelings, emotional-affective habits, which we talk about in language, and which language overlays with cultural meanings that interpenetrate and become in time inseparable from the feelings themselves, but which remain rooted in pre-semiotic physiological processes. I don't think we doubt that how young people *feel* about a social practice or pattern of language use makes a major difference in how receptive or eager they might be to add it to their own repertoires if it is made available through schooling.

What do we need to know about this sociocultural-institutional-affective complex and its internal conflicts and tensions in order to be able to take what Hasan tells us about the integration of linguistic meaning making with it in order to level the playing field with regard to semantic variation? Indeed we might wonder whether we ought to even attempt this. Hasan chides Bourdieu for looking only at the sense in which cross-class variation in linguistic habitus is consequential because of the power and preferences of the social elite for historically arbitrary variants. Rather like Labov, Bourdieu is thinking mainly of phonological and minor grammatical differences among dialects, whose importance is greatly exaggerated by dominant linguistic attitudes (Bourdieu, 1991). Hasan however recognizes, following Halliday, that some class-linked meaning-making patterns, such as the use of nominalizations in scientific and technical reasoning, have direct use-value, historically sedimented into our socio-economic system, and not simply the arbitrary 'exchange value' examined by Bourdieu.

So, helping young people add registers, genres, and coding orientations with substantial social prestige and practical use-value to their repertoires is not simply *embourgeoisement*. Neither is it just another effort to erase working class culture and replace it with something 'better'. Rather, it offers something of real value: opportunities and means of making different kinds of meanings, meanings that matter both socially and in operating the machinery of modern society and its material infrastructure.

So we should, and we can, and the work of functionally oriented social linguists like Hasan, Halliday, Martin, and many others can tell us what the semantic variations are that matter, how they are constituted in grammar and speech acts, and in what activities and practices they function. What I think we need to understand better in order to succeed on behalf of those who want to master these forms of meaning making is the resistance and the obstacles that social structure places in the way. Affective discomfort and disinclination.

Contrary value judgments. Strong links with personal and group identity. Prior and persistent sociolinguistic habitus.

Note that I am conflating here issues of coding orientation (Bernstein's term, but I mean by it semantic variation as described by Hasan) with issues of register and genre: the tendency to make meanings in particular ways in a given situation type, with particular kinds of meanings made. I do so because I believe Hasan's work shows how tightly interconnected these are. Following Vygotsky and many years of research on 'learning through language', we know that the internalization of culturally salient meanings arises from social inter-action with those already more enculturated, with the interaction being sig-nificantly mediated by language. And where the linguistic varieties and habits of speaking do not comfortably match, the chances for successful learning are diminished. When these phenomena remain unconscious there is little to be done. Research can bring them to our attention and give us useful descriptions of what is going on. But then what?

An easy misreading of variation studies leads to reification of contrasting varieties. Hasan's work helpfully goes beyond the original Bernstein thesis in part by elucidating the component features of the LAP vs HAP patterns, so that we can see them not as two monolithic and opposed speech varieties, but as a host of correlated features, as tendencies in a high-dimensional space of possibilities and variations, which are correlated with a single binary on the social side (high vs low job autonomy, the chosen stand-in marker for social class). One could apply this same decompositional procedure to the notion of social class itself (or gender, sexual orientation, etc.). All our simple social classifications can be decomposed into the many, correlated but not uniformly solidary features by which we recognize social variation. Indeed in his book *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1979) takes steps in this direction. Such a move may well be subversive of political solidarity among those on the downside of invidious binaristic attitudes (i.e. working class people, women, gays and les-bians, etc.). Still, it gives a better account of the richness of human diversity and the historical contingency of the 'packages' of features that do often go together, but do not have to do so, however much a particular ideology may demand that they must.

It ought to be far easier to extend repertoires of meaning making practices if we weaken the 'strong classification' (in Bernstein's terms) of both class and coding orientation. (Likewise for 'race', ethnicity, religious differences, gender, sexuality, and even age as stage of life or generation.) Dialectologists long ago took this step, even if it never penetrated our popular discourse. Halliday has indicated how this can be done with the notion of 'context of situation', and in a way what I am proposing here is that Hasan's work points us toward making the same move with respect to 'context of culture'.

If you want to engage with expanding our understanding of the role of language in society, if you wish to help move education in directions more democratically supportive of all students, if you want to re-think the proper scope of sociolinguistics or develop better ways of framing the relation between meaning and language, then I think you ought to make it a priority to read this book.

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Book reviewed

Hasan, R. (2009) *Semantic Variation: Meaning in Society and in Sociolinguistics*. Equinox Publishing Ltd. xiv + 484 pp.