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## Editorial

# Religious choice, religious commitment, and linguistic variation: Religion as a factor in language variation

*Special issue of Language and Communication*



## A B S T R A C T

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Sociolinguistic consensus suggests that corpora should be sharable to permit broader comparisons across regions and across social groups. Recent studies of available corpora have shown that one variable rarely made available for sociolinguistic comparison is religion (Yaeger-Dror and Cieri, 2013; Yaeger-Dror, 2014). The present special issue was solicited to demonstrate the importance of religion, and of individual speakers' religious commitment, to the study of sociolinguistic variation. In each study the author finds not only that religion is a meaningful sociolinguistic variable, but that geolinguistic considerations impact on 'religiolinguistic' (Hary and Wein, 2013) choices in intricate ways. Commitment to a specific sub-group within a larger religious denomination is relevant, as is a speaker's religious ideology; while addressee design and social network influences often appear indistinguishable from referee design, the two may be more easily distinguished from each other when religious denomination and ideology are factored into a study.

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## 1. Previous studies of religion as a variable in linguistic variation and change

In spite of accumulating evidence that 'racial', regional, linguistic and religious heritage and affiliation cannot be considered a single demographic feature, until recently both corpus linguistic studies and sociolinguistic studies generally conflated these into a single [apparent] metadata feature. We are in good company: For example, until the 2010 census, the US government considered 'Latino' from any racial, religious, linguistic and regional heritage designation as a single identification choice, giving responders the choice between identifying as 'Latino' or having any religious or other heritage; linguists have followed demographers' lead, and NPR ('All things considered' 12/3/14) still continues to do so. (See, however, the discussion in Fought, 2006; Bayley, 2014; Münch, forthcoming; Pew, 2014a,b).

Consequently, religion has rarely been coded in corpus or sociolinguistic analyses, although Labov (1966) first made a point of contrasting the Jewish LES [Lower East Side] residents with those of specific regional/linguistic heritages – like Italian or Irish (who share a religious heritage), while Newlin-Łukowicz (2014) includes both Catholic and Jewish Poles in her own NYC study. Certainly since the mid-sixties Fishman's has been a voice in the wilderness (Fishman, 1968; Fishman and García, 2012). However, only in the last 30 years, since the Milroys' first publications on Northern Ireland (e.g., Milroy, 1987), have American sociolinguists begun to analyze how religious preferences may illuminate, and are reflected in speakers' community of practice (Eckert, 2008). Even more recently, a number of authors have begun to discuss the importance of religious affiliation to sociolinguistic choices (e.g., Omoniyi and Fishman, 2006; Benor, 2011; Mukherjee, 2013; Hary and Wein 2013; Yaeger-Dror and Cieri 2013; Yaeger-Dror 2014; David and Powell, 2014; Avineri and Kroskrity, 2014; Zuckerman, 2014; Davis, 2014), and the present volume can be seen in that context.

Based on the evidence, studies which focus on research in volatile sectarian and political communities (like Northern Ireland, the Near East, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent, Indonesia, the Philippines) provide ultrarich sources of data for in depth studies of communal linguistic divergence or nonconvergence which is correlated with religious persuasion;

however, as many of the studies here show (notably those on intrareligious identity management), religious conflict is not a prerequisite for maintenance of strong linguistic identity management between religious subcommunities.

## 2. The present studies of religion as a variable in linguistic variation and change

In the studies presented here we find that distinctions between (or within) sectarian communities are more salient where there is least interaction among community members from different (sub)religious communities, and more linguistic convergence the more speakers of different sectarian communities interact. We also find evidence of similar changes occurring in quite different and apparently unrelated communities, or of convergence occurring despite linguistic heritage, religious heritage, and political conflict when interaction across religious boundaries is necessary. Each community's situation is unique, but helps provide a broader perspective on the ways in which religious group preferences can impact on speech.

The papers in this volume focus on evidence that religious heritage must be considered separately from other sources of community identity, and in tandem with these other causes of community self-identification if we are to understand the causes of linguistic variation within a given community. While modes of expression (or 'voicing' Davis, 2014) is not proposed as a religious-shibboleth in any of the present studies, there is evidence here of variation in language choice, dialect choice and lexical choice turning on one's chosen religion, and degree of self identification with a religious (sub)community within the larger community; linguistic choices may reflect shared ideological commitment to a 'right way' to talk. In a few cases historical forces are assumed to have initiated specific religious group distinctions, which then persist, but most of the studies here demonstrate that even when there is no historical pattern of distinctiveness within groups, religious community distinctions are relevant to linguistic variation and change and should not be ignored.

The research for these studies have been carried out in the Indian subcontinent (Kulkarni-Joshi, 2015), in the Near East (Holes, 2015; Germanos & Miller, 2015), in Europe (Avineri, 2015) as well as the US (Assouline, 2015; Avineri, 2015; Baker-Smemoe & Bowie, 2015; Keiser, 2015) and Canada (Rosen-Skriver, 2015). While each group studied reveals distinct patterns of behavior, in each case, the fieldwork protocol included religious choice as a relevant communal variable, and each study permits a new perspective on the forces underlying variation and change within a community being studied.

We hope these studies will help lead to a broader understanding of the importance of religious choices in speakers' 'communities of practice', and in speakers' linguistic ideologies, creating a framework in which future research protocols will be more likely to consider such information; this in turn will permit more accurate analysis of the linguistic parameters correlated with such variation, as well as the conditions under which religious choices influence (or fail to influence) speech.

#1 An earlier study in **Kupwar** (Gumperz and Wilson, 1971) demonstrated that despite the fact that Kupwar is a small, rural, multi-religious, multi-lingual border community, in the 1960's [i.e. soon after the linguistic reorganization of India] religious groups within the community retained their heritage language in the private domain; in the public domain, the new state language was also used. Kulkarni-Joshi's updated research (2015) demonstrates how the various religious groups have responded to the privileging of the state language: some groups (Jains and Hindu-Lingayats) uncoupled the tie between language and religious identity; others (especially Muslim women) still maintain language as an important marker of religious identity. The lower caste Hindus, who arguably had the most to gain by rejecting their heritage religious affiliation and the linguistic choices which marked that affiliation, have distanced themselves from the Hindu religion and embraced the standard variety of the state language. Differences remain among the religious communities, but the most obvious trend appears to be one of convergence toward a local linguistic norm, even among the more privileged groups in the local community.

#2. As expected, Near Eastern communities also provide rich data for such studies: The recent research documenting continuing divergence (Avineri and Kroskrity, 2014), or lack of convergence (Holes, Germanos and Miller, 2015) among speakers from different religious subgroups reflects the severe restrictions against social contacts across religious boundaries in the Near East.

Holes also finds that an author's ideological commitments can warp his conclusions. His article demonstrates that we are ill-advised to accept the results of previous research on socially-sensitive topics without paying close attention to authors' motivation, research agenda and methodology. Any study not buttressed by analysis of speech from actual interaction with a number of community members is at best of anecdotal interest to our development of a model of language variation; social biases lead even an apparent 'expert' to draw conclusions which the informed reader knows to be useless; those with no frame of reference for judging such work should ignore it.

The Germanos & Miller paper presents an overview of results from many studies which have been published about the language × religion interface in Arabic-speaking communities. The authors discuss the published evidence for variation in North Africa, where they conclude that divergence between dialects has been maintained over the last millenium. We thus infer that over the last several centuries relatively little communication has taken place between 'neighbors' from different religious groups; certainly the communication which has taken place has not led to convergence.<sup>1</sup>

As the authors state "two important developments have been brought by historical dialectology and sociolinguistics: the first one is the importance of taking into account the historical background in order to explain synchronic variation; the second one is the role of contact/networking for explaining different paces of change." Indeed, recent work, like that reported

<sup>1</sup> An obvious contrast in the literature is provided by Becker (2014a,b,c), and other recent studies, which reveal that 21st century Lower East Side residents of NYC are converging on a less parochial norm with shared loss of NYC idiosyncratic features (Labov 1966/2006, 2001, 2013).

here or in the other recent special issues cited here, is needed to help clarify the degree to which linguistic change can be historically traced: The extent to which divergence is ‘merely’ a reflection of the extreme isolation of speakers of different religions from each other, and the extent to which it reflects an ideological commitment to distinctiveness, can only be answered by future studies.

As the Germanos and Miller paper concludes “History of migration and settlement as well as *types of social contacts and networks* [italics: myd] have proved to be important factors for explaining the very diverse contemporary situations. Religious affiliation alone is not and has not been a key factor of major linguistic differentiation ...it is always linked with other social factors.” Many studies tacitly assume a simplistic understanding of ‘exemplar dynamics’ (Pierrehumbert, 2006). Speakers’ linguistic experience is assumed to determine the outer envelope of linguistic possibilities: one acquires the language variety that one is exposed to in childhood and adolescence. Numerous studies of personal networks have demonstrated a detailed interplay between the use of given linguistic features by an individual and the usage of those features by that individual’s preferred interlocutors. This influence can *prima facie* be referred to as evidence for the ‘exemplar’ model. It is that link with the nexus of social network [Milroy, 1987; Pierrehumbert, 2006], local ideology and prestige [Giles, 1973, 1977, 1979; Bourhis and Giles, 1977] in such complicated social contexts that we hope future research can exploit to determine their relative importance to actual language variation and change.

#3. The two studies on Yiddish present a radically different perspective within which religious community convergence is limited by speakers’ heritage region: Avineri’s article considers an analysis of language attitudes and language choice in several ideological and pedagogical contexts, while discussing recent research on Yiddish. While the other studies in the issue focus primarily on language use, Avineri’s article concentrates on the importance of ideological commitment, emphasizing the extent to which ideological referee-designed positions can vary, ultimately playing a central role in language patterns in diverse communities of practice and revealing that the impetus for revival of a moribund language need not require ideological commitment to an ethnolinguistically vital (Giles, 1977) community of users.

In fact, while some communities studied are committed to a re-vitalization of their ethnic heritage, other communities of language adopters are motivated by ideology. She shows the extent to which radically different linguistic heritage and ideologies can lead to parallel pedagogical outcomes. The various studies she reviews consider the attitudes of students, and how these attitudes have led to language learning. Future research might well study the extent to which these different communities of learners differ in their ultimate language facility, and whether that is related to their diverse motivations, or more narrowly limited to the ethnolinguistic vitality factors isolated by Giles’ earlier work. In the case of Yiddish: Do they maintain the use of Yiddish, and pass it along to the next generation, and if so, which factors most influence the likelihood of language retention by the speakers themselves, or into following generations? The information gleaned from such a study could benefit future work in language revival. Like Holes’ article, Avineri’s emphasizes the importance of the analysis of actual language behavior in conjunction with the analysis of attitudinal and motivational factors, for an improved understanding of variation in language use.

Assouline also studies a community of Yiddish speakers; she considers lexical diffusion (Phillips, 2011) in Yiddish vowel phonology within a small community of speakers, in a narrowly defined discourse context: Within the community, the Rebbe’s phonology differs from the congregants’ heritage dialect phonology; convergence toward the phonology of the community rabbi is much stronger for religiously important lexical items than for common words with little specific religious import, even if they were initially borrowed from Hebrew. It is clear that lexical diffusion favors the Rebbe’s dialect more in ‘open class’ lexicon, in Hebrew or Aramaic loan words, in lexical fields related to religious practice, while the heritage-dialect Yiddish vowel phonology is preferred for less ‘learned’ lexicon. It is obvious that there is a major ideological component inevitable in referee-designed accommodation.

#4. Keiser’s paper focuses on Anabaptist and Lutheran communities which have retained ‘Pennsylvania German’ (PG) as their primary language into the 21st century, despite the fact that the larger speech community [the United States] favors ‘melting pot’ convergence and conformity to the dominant linguistic norm, and the fact that most speakers are now balanced bilinguals. The focus of Keiser’s paper is on the ideological commitment which the PG-speaking communities infer to be at the root of specific linguistic choices.

The most conservative group in Lancaster County appears to have a lower rate of lexical borrowing from English than other groups in the study, and several generations after the groups arrived in Lancaster County, they retain these lexical distinctions between their own groups, while they have all converged on sociophonetic parameters. Given that lexical choice is potentially more ‘conscious’ than sociophonetic choices, the retention of lexical distinctions between two PG varieties in Lancaster County, combined with the groups’ loss of phonological contrast with English, may well be indicative of speakers’ lingering wish to distinguish themselves from religiously ‘different’ communities with whom they are in frequent contact. The language-maintenance of these religious communities over several generations reflects their isolation from the larger community – an isolation more extreme [we may infer] than that of religious communities which diverge from the dominant linguistic norm only in sociophonetic detail. Keiser’s most surprising conclusion is that the groups’ ideological commitment to ‘humility’ leads to divergent outcomes: both convergence with and divergence from the dominant linguistic norm are rationalized as evidence of **humility**.

#5. As other recent studies have shown, even where sectarian influences are less obvious, speakers may reveal sectarian bias: Rosen and Skriver consider the phonology of Southern Albertan Mormons who have multiplex social networks, with the women’s networks being even more tightly knit than the men’s, with fewer network ties with members of the larger Southern Alberta community, and more input from their older local and Salt Lake City area female relatives. The authors demonstrate that local phonological change is consistently less advanced in the Mormon community than among other S.

Alberta speakers, and less advanced for the women than for the men [whose social networks are more diverse]: the younger Mormons' lack of (æ)-raising reflects the constraints on their social network imposed by community norms, with divergence of phonology correlated with both sectarian and sex-role differences... Just as the Belfast Catholic men's phonology is most tightly constrained, because of network ties (Milroy, 1987), the younger Mormon women of Southern Alberta, whose social networks are most constrained, have retained their grandmothers' sociophonetic patterns! The extent to which social networks and 'exemplar' dynamics are sufficient to create this pattern, or whether the younger women are actively refereeing their speech patterns, with a Utah-dialect model in mind will be left to future analysis.

Baker-Smemoe & Bowie (2015) also show that Active-Mormons' phonology differs systematically from nonobservant Mormons' as well as from local nonMormons'. They point out that "... linguistic differences between active and inactive Mormons seem to reflect the linguistic effects of choices made later in life." These results are consistent with their earlier work (Baker and Bowie, 2010), as well as with Mallinson and Childs (2007), and Alam and Stuart-Smith (in press) which also document degree of religious commitment as an influence on language variation; similarly Bourhis et al. (2009), and Hall-Lew et al. (2012), document the influence of political ideology on sociophonetic variation. While providing strong evidence for change-past-adolescence reflecting social networking patterns, these results do not guarantee that any ideological component is necessary, but post-adolescent phonological change may permit the conclusion that the linguistic adaptations – like those in Alberta and Skver – are traceable to referee design, and suggest that further studies will improve our understanding of the relative importance of 'exemplar dynamics' and ideological commitment as influences on dialect variation and change.

### 3. Conclusion

One major difference of opinion – and study presupposition – within the field of sociolinguistics is based on consideration of the influence of propinquity [implied by work on social networks (Milroy, 1987), as well as by work in exemplar theory (Pierrehumbert, 2006)] and that of social psychological motivation (Giles et al., 1977; Preston, 2002; Hinskins et al., 2005; Campbell-Kibler, 2009; Llamas and Watt, 2009; Cutler, 2010; Drager et al. 2010; Thøgersen and Phraao, 2013). While it is not always feasible to tease apart these sources of linguistic variation, future studies can take advantage of recent studies like these to maximize the opportunity to distinguish between these theoretical claims. One of the hopes for this issue was that future work will permit us to distinguish among these sources of variation, to draw broader conclusions for an understanding of the underlying influences on language variation and change.

These studies provide an amazing array of different conclusions from which we can draw a broader understanding of factors influencing language variation. We hope they can convince future researchers to include religion as well as other demographic variables in their research protocol, rather than assume that EITHER religion OR some specific other factor should be annotated. As a result, further expansions in our understanding of language variation will be made possible. We hope this special issue will remind us that questions about religious affiliation are appropriate, even necessary, for an accurate appraisal of a speakers' linguistic choices, and that appropriate demographic coding will lead to new theoretical insights.

While social networks, undoubtedly play a major role in determining variation, attitudinal factors also play a significant role, with certain features 'indexing' commitment to a specific social group, or to a specific ideology (e.g., 'humility'); these might be better understood if we consider them to be prompted by social psychological causes (Giles and Ogay, 2006; Giles et al., 1977), with specific 'indexical' choices influencing these patterns (as we might conclude from Miller et al., 2007, or the work reported in this volume).

Correlating sociophonetic variation with both appropriate attitudinal data and social network patterns should help estimate whether observed convergence toward or within any specific social community is motivated by positive affiliation with that group or merely reflects the more passive accommodative tendencies hypothesized by Pierrehumbert (2006), Hay et al. (2006) or Trudgill (1986, 2008). We also propose including appropriate attitudinal questions (such as those discussed in Nagy et al. (2014), Bourhis et al. (1997), Abrams et al. (2009)) into the protocol for sociolinguistic fieldwork to permit more accurate appraisal of the relative influence of propinquity (or exemplar dynamics) and intergroup attitudes on divergent and convergent tendencies in a given speech community. Only with such evidence in hand can we estimate the relative importance of exemplar dynamics and indexicality on linguistic variation.

Each of the papers in the volume provides a specific perspective on ways in which religious community – as a community of practice or as a focus for ideological linguistic choices – impacts on language variation within the community. Some of the papers present evidence that the religious community provides the primary focus of identity management, while others demonstrate that, in fact, often historical-geographical linguistic community ties actually have created critical social bonds, which are now reinterpreted as socio-religious choices.

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