Communities of Practice
Penelope Eckert

Abstract

A community of practice is a collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some
common endeavor. Communities of practice emerge in response to common interest or position,
and play an important role in forming their members' participation in, and orientation to, the
world around them. It provides an accountable link, therefore, between the individual, the group,
and place in the broader social order, and it provides a setting in which linguistic practice
emerges as a function of this link. Studies of communities of practice, therefore, have
considerable explanatory power for the broader demographics of language variability.

Key Words: speech community, community of practice, identity, practice, class, gender,
variation, heterogeneity, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, social stratification, social
meaning.

The notion *community of practice* was developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave and
Wenger 1991; Wenger 2000) as the basis of a social theory of learning. A community of practice
is a collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavor: a bowling
team, a book club, a friendship group, a crack house, a nuclear family, a church congregation.
The construct was brought into sociolinguistics (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; Eckert and
McConnell-Ginet 1992) as a way of theorizing language and gender – most particularly, of
responsibly connecting broad categories to on-the-ground social and linguistic practice.

The value of the notion *communities of practice* to Sociolinguistics and Linguistic Anthropology
lies in the fact that it identifies a social grouping not in virtue of shared abstract characteristics
(e.g. class, gender) or simple co-presence (e.g. neighborhood, workplace), but in virtue of shared
practice. In the course of regular joint activity, a community of practice develops ways of dong
things, views, values, power relations, ways of talking. And the participants engage with these
practices in virtue of their place in the community of practice, and of the place of the community
of practice in the larger social order. The community of practice is thus a rich locus for the study
of situated language use, of language change, and of the very process of conventionalization that
underlies both.

Two conditions of a community of practice are crucial in the conventionalization of meaning:
shared experience over time, and a commitment to shared understanding. A community of
practice engages people in mutual sense-making – about the enterprise they're engaged in, about
their respective forms of participation in the enterprise, about their orientation to other
communities of practice and to the world around them more generally. Whether this mutual
sense-making is consensual or conflictual, it is based in a commitment to mutual engagement, and
to mutual understanding of that engagement. Participants in a community of practice collaborate
in placing themselves as a group with respect to the world around them. This includes the
common interpretation of other communities, and of their own practice with respect to those

communities, and ultimately with the development of a style – including a linguistic style – that embodies these interpretations. Time, meanwhile, allows for greater consistency in this endeavor – for more occasions for the repetition of circumstances, situations, and events. It provides opportunities for joint sense-making, and it deepens participants' shared knowledge and sense of predictability. This not only allows meaning to be exercised, but it provides the conditions for setting down convention (Lewis 1969).

The community of practice offers a different perspective from the traditional focus on the *speech community* as an explanatory context for linguistic heterogeneity. The speech community perspective views heterogeneity as based in a geographically defined population, and structured by broad and fundamental social categories, particularly class, gender, age, race and ethnicity. The early survey studies in this tradition (Labov 1966; Wolfram 1969; Trudgill 1974; Macaulay 1977) provided the backbone of variation studies, mapping broad distributions across large urban communities. What these studies could not provide is the link between broad, abstract patterns and the meanings that speakers are constructing in the concrete situated speech that underlies them. The search for local explanations of linguistic variability has spurred a range of ethnographic studies over the years (Labov 1963; Gal 1979; Eckert 2000), and in recent decades the ethnographic trend has intensified. A major challenge in such studies is to find local settings in which speakers engage the most intensely in making sense of their place in the wider social world, and in which they articulate their linguistic behavior with this sense. The construct *community of practice* is a way of locating language use ethnographically so as to create an accountable link between local practice and membership in extra-local and broad categories. What makes a community of practice different from just any group of speakers (e.g. a bunch of kids found hanging out on the street, or a group of undergraduates assembled for an experiment) is not the selection of the speakers so much as the nature of the accountability for this selection. While every community of practice offers a window on the world, the value of this approach relies on the analyst's ability to seek out communities of practice that are particularly salient to the sociolinguistic question being addressed. It is this selection that makes the difference between particularism and a close-up study with far-reaching significance.

Explanation for broad patterns is to be found in speakers' experience, understanding, and linguistic development as they engage in life as members of important overarching categories. A white working class Italian-American woman does not develop her ways of speaking directly from the larger categories *working class*, *Italian-American* and *female*, but from her day-to-day experience as a person who combines those three (and other) memberships. Her experience will be articulated by her participation in activities and communities of practice that are particular to her place in the social order. It is in these communities of practice that she will develop an identity and the linguistic practices to articulate this identity. Thus communities of practice are fundamental loci for the experience of membership in broader social categories – one might say that it is the grounded locus of the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977).

Survey studies show us that working class speakers lead in the adoption of local phonological change. While one can speculate about the motivations for this early adoption on the basis of general knowledge about class, the actual dynamics of social meaning can only be found I direct examination of working class linguistic practice. Ethnographic work in Detroit suburban high schools (Eckert 2000) sought to understand the salience of class in adolescents' day-to-day practice. The study uncovered an opposition between two large communities of practice, the *jocks* and the *burnouts,* that constitute class cultures in the context of the high school. The working class culture of the burnouts and the middle class culture of the jocks are specifically adolescent, and class consciousness and conflict takes the form of a highlighted social opposition in school, and the maximization of resources in constructing the opposition. Linguistic variables, a prime

resource, correlatedsignificantly with participation in these communities of practice, rather than with parents' social class. The jocks' and burnouts' contrasting orientation to such things as school, the urban area, relationships, and the future, provided direct explanations for the burnouts' lead in the adoption of new local changes.

Another important aspect of the communities of practice approach is its focus on the fluidity of social space and the diversity of experience. The speech community perspective's focus on demographic categories implies a center and a periphery (Rampton 1999). The focus on average behavior for categories suggests a "typical" speaker, erasing the important activity of speakers at the borders of categories. This also produces a static view of the relation between the linguistic and the social, since change tends to come from the borders (Pratt 1988). Studies of communities of practice, therefore, can capture the interaction between social and linguistic change. Qing Zhang, for example (Zhang 2001), has captured the role of stylistic practice among the new Beijing "yuppies" in the development of new dialect features, and Andrew Wong (Wong in press) has traced semantic change in the differential use of the term *tongzhi* 'comrade' between the activist and non-activist gay communities. Mary Bucholtz's study (Bucholtz 1996) of a group of girls who were fashioning themselves as geeks – a persona normally reserved for males – provided direct observation of girls pushing the envelope of gender in their daily linguistic practice.

A community of practice that is central to many of its participants' identity construction is an important locus for the setting down of joint history, allowing for the complex construction of linguistic styles. Such history also sets the stage for change. Emma Moore's study of teenage girls in Northern England (Moore 2003) traced the gradual split of a group of somewhat rebellious "populars" as some of them emerged as the tougher "townies" in their ninth year. In the process, the vernacular speech patterns of the Townies intensified in opposition to those of their more conservative friends.

The enterprise of sociolinguistics (and linguistic anthropology) is to relate ways of speaking to ways of participating in the social world. This is not simply a question of discovering how linguistic form correlates with social structure or activity, but of how social meaning comes to be embedded in language. Meaning is made in the course of local social practice (McConnell-Ginet 1989), and conventionalized on the basis of shared experience and understanding (Lewis 1969). The importance of the community of practice lies in the recognition that identity is not fixed, that convention does not pre-exist use, and that language use is a continual process of learning. The community of practice is a prime locus of this process of identity and linguistic construction.

Communities of practice emerge in response to common interest or position, and play an important role in forming their members' participation in, and orientation to, the world around them. It should be clear that the speech community and the community of practice approaches are both necessary and complementary, and that the value of each depends on having the right abstract categories and finding the communities of practice in which those categories are most salient. In other words, the best analytic process would involve feedback between the two approaches.

References

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bucholtz, M. (1996). Geek the girl: Language, femininity and female nerds. *Gender and belief systems*. N. Warner, J. Ahlers, L. Bilmeset al. Berkeley, Berkeley Women and Language Group**:** 119-132.

Eckert, P. (2000). *Linguistic variation as social practice*. Oxford, Blackwell.

Eckert, P. and S. McConnell-Ginet (1992). Communities of practice: Where language, gender and power all live. *Locating power: Proceedings of the Second Berkeley Women and Language Conferenc*e. K. Hall, M. Buchholtz and B. Moonwomon. Berkeley, Berkeley Women and Language Group, University of California**:** 89-99.

Eckert, P. and S. McConnell-Ginet (1992). "Think practically and look locally: Language and gender as community–based practice." *Annual review of anthropology* **21**: 461-90.

Gal, S. (1979*). Language shift: Social determinants of linguistic change in bilingual Austria*. New York, Academic Press.

Labov, W. (1963). "The social motivation of a sound change." *Word* **18**: 1-42.

Labov, W. (1966). *The Social stratification of english in new york city*. Washington, DC, Center for Applied Linguistics.

Lave, J. and E. Wenger (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Lewis, D. (1969). *Convention*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

Macaulay, R. K. S. (1977). *Language, social class and education: A Glasgow study.* Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Press.

McConnell-Ginet, S. (1989). The sexual (re)production of meaning: A discourse–based theory. *Language, gender and professional writing: Theoretical approaches and guidelines for nonsexist usage*. F. W. Frank and P. A. Treichler. New York, MLA**:** 35-50.

Moore, E. (2003). *Learning style and identity: A sociolinguistic analysis of a Bolton high school*. PhD Thesis, Department of Linguistics. University of Manchester.

Pratt, M. L. (1988). Linguistic utopias. In *The linguistics of writing: Arguments between language and literature*. N. Fabb, D. Attridge, A. Durant and C. MacCabe. New York, Methuen**:** 48-66.

Rampton, B. (1999). *Speech community*. TVU, London, Centre for Applied Linguistic Research.

Trudgill, P. (1974). *The Social Differentiation of English in Norwich*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E. (2000). *Communities of Practice*. New York, Cambridge University Press.

Wolfram, W. (1969). *A Sociolinguistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech*. Washington DC, Center for Applied Linguistics.

Wong, A. (in press). "The Re-Appropriation of Tongzhi.*" Language in society*.

Zhang, Q. (2001). *Changing economics, changing markets: A sociolinguistic study of Chinese yuppies*. PhD Thesis. Linguistics. Stanford University.