Girls and grammar: Using ethnography to understand the social meanings of nonstandard English

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A version of this talk will appear as:
Labov’s first principle of sexual differentiation in language use – the finding that “In stable sociolinguistic stratification, men use a higher frequency of nonstandard forms than women” is pervasive in sociolinguistic research. So pervasive, in fact, that Holmes has referred to it as a “sociolinguistic universal”. However, the evidence for women using fewer nonstandard forms than men comes from large quantitative studies of variation which pay little attention to the social practices which differentiate different female communities. Ethnographic studies of language variation have established that female communities actually use a wide range of standard and nonstandard phonological features to construct diverse personae (Eckert 2000; Mendoza-Denton 2008).
Eckert’s ethnographic study of high school students in Detroit examined how two oppositional communities of practice, the Burnouts and the Jocks, used phonological features of the Northern Cities Chain Shift. The social groups were identified through long term ethnographic observation of the school’s social structure, as well as an examination of the differing practices and styles of the study’s participants. Amongst other findings, Eckert showed that female groups defined the envelope of variation for the raising and backing of onsets in vowels in the PRICE lexical set – such that PRICE sounds more like ‘proice’. So, female burnouts led the change, whilst female jocks lagged behind all other social groups. This suggests that, for this variable at least, there is no simple gender pattern applicable to all kinds of female speakers.

Of course, Eckert’s work consider variables which are involved in change in progress, but there is evidence that even very stable phonological variables show greater degrees of gender patterning than have been suggested in previous work.
Hannah Leach’s work has been examining patterns of /h/-dropping in an oral history archive of individuals who worked in the pottery industry in Stoke-on-Trent. Although her work is not pure ethnography, her analysis is ethnographically-informed by knowledge of the pottery industry and the rich interpersonal details contained in the archive recordings. Leach’s work shows that there is very little difference overall in the use of /h/ by gender of speaker: male speakers drop /h/ 74% and female speakers 72% of the time. However, there is a significant interaction between the gender of a speaker and the department in which they worked. Significantly, departments tended to be gender exclusive in the pottery industry. For instance, in Leach’s sample, women either worked in Administration or Decoration, and men did not work in these departments. This figure shows the administrators have much lower rates of /h/-dropping (46%) compared to the decorators, who have 84% /h/-dropping. This difference is evident in the size of the red bars in the figure. Note too, that the use of /h/-dropping by the female Decorators exceeds that found in the male-only departments of Design, Management, and Production. Like Eckert’s work, Leach’s analysis suggests that there is no simple gender pattern applicable to all kinds of female speakers. But, of course, we can only begin to see this if we categorise speakers in more sophisticated ways than are possible in large scale quantitative surveys.
Whilst ethnographic studies have provided evidence of heterogeneity in how females use nonstandard phonological forms, how females use grammatical items is much less well understood. The study of syntactic variation has generally lagged behind the study of phonological variation in all areas of variationist sociolinguistics. One explanation for this has been the suggestion that social meaning attaches to surface, rather than ‘deep’ structures because “[v]ariables take on social meaning in the fast give and take of interaction, as people associate what they articulate and what they hear with aspects of the context” (Eckert & Labov 2017: 481). That is to say, as an aspect of ‘deep structure’, syntax may be less adaptable as a sociolinguistic resource – so much so that, even when social meanings are assigned to grammatical variants ...
... they tend to have “quite fixed social meanings associated with external facts like class and particularly education” (Eckert forthcoming). If the social meanings of nonstandard grammatical forms are more fixed and (by their association with class and education) more overtly stigmatised than those of phonological forms, then we might expect females to use grammatical variation differently from phonological variation.

However, this claim is difficult to evaluate, given the lack of work on the social embedding of grammatical variation. Understanding the social meanings of grammatical variation requires the kind of ethnographic examination of language in use that we have seen for phonological variation. The limited previous work of this kind has suggested that individuals are able to vary at least some aspects of syntax to communicate more nuanced social meaning beyond class and education.
For instance, Snell (2009, 2010) undertook an ethnographic study of nine- to ten-year-old children in two socially-differentiated primary schools in Teesside, north-east England. Snell’s research has mostly focused on class differences, rather than gender differences (with good reason, as I believe that she’s going to explain in the next talk). But her study shows how grammatical variables are used by speakers in ‘stylised’ interactional performances. So, while WC kids tend to use possessive ‘me’ (e.g. *Me pencil’s up me jumper*) more frequently than MC kids, they also tended to use possessive ‘me’ “when articulating stances of negative affect or transgression, often tempered by playfulness or a lack of commitment to the utterance.” (Snell 2010: 647). Consequently her work suggests that grammatical variables can have quite nuanced social meanings that may link to class and education, but may be independent from them too.
Snell's work highlights the power of ethnography in understanding grammatical variation. But it also highlights that it is not enough to simply look at how grammar correlates with local practice-based social categories. It is also essential to consider the pragmatic function of syntactic variables. That is to say, what does the structure of a syntactic item allow it to communicate? Snell's work suggests that whether or not one uses possessive *me* does not just reflect how standard or nonstandard a linguistic form is, but also how playful or transgressive the expression of possession is required to be. There is also another important difference between phonological and grammatical variation. In spoken language, grammatical variables will always also contain phonological detail. That is to say, phonetic and phonological variation is embedded in syntactic structure. As Eckert and Labov (2017:485) note “the realization of a phonological variable is a short (and frequent) event in a syntactic series of events”. Speakers utter phonological features in the context of syntactic constructions, and listeners perceive phonological detail within syntactic frames. Therefore, to fully understand the social meaning of syntactic variation, we need to consider ...
... who uses a particular form, what they use the form to do, and how they combine its articulation with variable features of phonology. That is to say, we can't just correlate variants with social categories; we also need to consider how forms are used in social interaction and as components of styles.

I'll attempt to provide this kind of holistic analysis in this paper and, in doing so, demonstrate that female speakers are perhaps even more heterogeneous than has been shown in sociolinguistic accounts which only consider phonological variation.

In order to show how this kind of analysis can change our understanding of the social meaning of syntax, I deliberately focus on a well-studied nonstandard grammatical item: negative concord
In order to analyse negative concord, I analyse tokens of negation with postverbal indeterminates, distinguishing between nonstandard sentences where both the verb and the indeterminate are negated (so negative concord) and standard sentences where only the verb is negated.

There is of course a third option for negating a sentence like *I said something*:* I said nothing*. However, my own data (and the research of others, including Labov 1972 and Burnett et al. 2018) suggests that these forms function differently, so I do not consider them here. I can talk about this more in the question session if you’d like further clarification.
Negative concord has been described as “arguably the most common stigmatized variable in the English language” (Eckert 2000: 216). Consequently, it is unsurprising that language variation and change research has shown a strong correlation between this form and social class, such that it is more frequently found in the speech of lower social classes.

The form has also been found more frequently in the speech of social groups characterised as ‘delinquent’ by Jenny Cheshire and Penny Eckert, suggesting that negative concord enters into and is affected by sociolinguistic practice in more localised and specific ways.
To explore the social meanings of negative concord, I analysed 547 tokens of negation with postverbal indeterminates in data from an ethnography of 39 adolescent girls in a school – Midlan High – in a north-west English town. The ethnography was completed between 1999-2002. I have approximately 50 hours of recordings, a 262,000-word corpus, and over 196,400 words of fieldwork notes. I’ll show how this data provides support for the importance of understanding the local social context in which linguistic forms occur. I will also show how social practice correlates with the use of this form more robustly than the expected correlation with class. I will then move on to provide an analysis of the phonological features which tend to co-occur with negative concord, to show how the social meaning of negative concord is layered across co-varying linguistic features.
The school in my study is situated in Bolton, in the northwest of England. Bolton is in the county of Greater Manchester.
The fieldwork location was a school situated in a predominantly UWC/MC area of Bolton. However, the school’s catchment area extended into less affluent areas as well. The students were aged 12-13 at start of study & 14-15 at completion and I gathered approximately 50 hours of recordings, each involving 1-4 girls. The recordings took place only after I had been attending school for six months. During the fieldwork, I would go into the school at lunchtime and hang around with the kids, doing whatever they were doing, and networking around the cohort to ensure I spent time with a range of different students. After hanging out with a group for a while, I would ask them if they minded being recorded. My data collection did not follow an interview regime. I typically recorded groups chatting together and the recordings tend to reflect group dynamics and practices.
My ethnography identified four communities of practice. These ranged from the most rebellious and anti-school Townies to the elitist and trendy pro-school Eden Village clique. The social groupings reflect different orientations to school and distinct social practices which include ways of dressing, activities both within and outwith school and, as I will show, ways of speaking. At the outset of my study, the Populars and the Townies were one social group, but as my project continued, the Townies broke off from the Populars as they started to engage in more risky social activities like drug-taking and sex.

In addition to these social groups, I also collected information on the girls’ postcode areas, parental education, and parental occupation, and used this information to create a social class index.

I coded the 547 tokens of negative concord for a number of linguistic factors, and can discuss these further in questions if required, but I will be focusing on the results of my social analysis in this paper so do not mention these results further here.
This figure shows the percentage use of negative concord for each speaker in my sample. Each speaker is represented by a symbol which indicates their social class status according to the key underneath the graph.

The graph shows a correspondence to some extent. Those with the highest social class cluster at the lower end of the scale, as shown by the white squares. However, the other social class groups are more variably distributed across the scale. The four highest users of negative concord include speakers from classes II, III, and IV.

If we look at the results by community of practice, we find some clearer patterns.
Like the previous graph, this figure shows the percentage use of negative concord for each speaker in my sample. But here, each speaker is represented by a symbol which indicates their CofP membership according to the key underneath the graph. With a few anomalies, this graph more clearly shows a progression across the CofPs, with EV girls using no negative concord, Geeks largely also using none, with two exceptions, Populars split between those who have no use and those who have a moderate use, and Townies, who have the highest use of negative concord across the sample.

This suggests that there is a more robust correlation between negative concord and social practice, than between negative concord and social class.

The correlation between CofP and negative concord use and the distinct social practices of each social group suggests that the social meanings of negative concord may correlate with the persona styles of those speakers who make most use of the form. Consequently, for the remainder of the talk, I will focus only on the data from the 10 speakers who show variable use of negative concord. That is, the speakers situated here on this graph, who come from the Geek, Popular and Townie social groups.

Recall earlier that previous studies of negative concord suggest a correlation between use of negative concord and delinquent adolescent groups. Given what I’ve said so far, this would seem to be true in my
study, given that the Townies are simultaneously the group who most frequently use negative concord, and most frequently and consistently engage in risky and illegal social practices such as drinking, taking drugs, having underage sex with older boys, and partying. But there is also evidence that talk about delinquent behaviour occasions more negative concord irrespective of social group.
These figures display the proportion of negative concord used by each group according to topic. Overall, when using negation with postverbal indeterminates, the girls in the study talked about relationships with boys, delinquent behaviour (this included illegal activities and other forms of misbehaviour), behaviour which wasn't delinquent (for instance, going shopping or engaging in a hobby) and school. There were also some tokens of negation which were occasioned by the current interaction and did not fit into any of the other categories (for instance, arguing with a peer about where to sit during the recording). The orange colour is % of standard negation, and the blue is % of negative concord.

Whilst the figures should be judged cautiously due to the low counts for some topics, they nonetheless indicate that there is more negative concord in talk about delinquent behaviour and boys than there is in talk about non-delinquent behaviour, irrespective of social group. So, it would seem that negative concord might not just link to social meaning associated with class, and social group, but it might also index forms of social practice too. This is reflected in how the form correlates with content of talk as well as speaker identity.

However, it’s important to note that these figures disguise the extent to which different groups talk about different things.
As this figure shows, the Geeks and the Populars talk about nondelinquent topics much more than the Townies do, as shown by the difference in the size of the grey bars. And although it looks like the Populars and the Townies talk about delinquent topics the same amount (as shown by the orange bars), note how much the Townies talk about boys (the blue bars) compared to the Populars. Given that most of the Townies’ talk about boys involved talk about underage sex, whereas the Populars only ever talked about boys in relation to their attraction to them, the Townies talk about boys also involves discussion of a particular kind of delinquent behaviour.
Where does this leave us with respect to the potential social meanings of negative concord?

The patterns so far suggest that there may be an indexical relation between negative concord and delinquency (and, indeed, any number of social properties or stances that are ideologically associated with delinquency). The Townies increased use of this form most likely arises from the fact that they are the delinquent group, par excellence.
Negative concord & delinquency

- Burnett (2015, 2017): marked neg patterns are favoured when negs communicate more than a neutral stance (e.g. ‘insistence’)
- Labov (1972: 381): negative sentences can be evaluative
- Labov (1984): multiple negative markers can be intensifying
- Giora (2006: 992-4): negation can be emphatic

But what is it about negative concord that allows it to operate as an index of delinquency? Recent work by Burnett (2015, 2017) on negative concord in Montreal French highlights the correlation between the syntactic properties of negative concord across Gallo-Romance languages and its interpretative properties. She finds that marked negation patterns are favoured when negations communicate more than a neutral stance. She identifies meanings such as ‘insistence’. Similarly, Labov (1972:381; 1984) has noted that negative sentences can be evaluative and that the multiple negative markers can be intensifying. Others have also noted the emphatic functions of negation (Giora 2006:992-4). Consequently, we might assume that speakers call for intensity at moments of emphasis – when an utterance requires enhancement or discourse prominence, particularly in its communication of the speaker’s point of view.
Consider this extract from an interaction involving a Townie girl, Amanda, who is discussing how teachers treat kids who are in the group considered to have the weakest academic abilities. Notice the two instances of negative concord, which are bolded in the text. [PLAY EXTRACT]

Both instances of negative concord emphasise surprising information – that teachers don’t punish disobedient students, and that Amanda did not learn anything in a situation intended for learning. The talk here references delinquency and the use of negative concord indicates how intensifying linguistic strategies might be useful in this context. After all, reporting delinquency entails provision of some kind of surprising or remarkable information – given that it involves the subversion of normative expectations. So, it may be that high levels of negative concord occur in talk about delinquency because such talk requires strategies that permit the emphasis of unexpected information.
Negative concord & delinquency

they don’t[?] give you DTs or noth[f]ing[n] like that[?]


Notice too, that the instances of negative concord also contain multiple vernacular phonetic features.
Given this, I now move on to a consideration of how negative concord occurs alongside other linguistic variables. To do this, I analysed what other nonstandard features occurred in the precise sentence in which the token of negation with a postverbal indeterminate occurred. This ensured that I was analysing where features actually clustered together in chunks of talk, rather than them simply being found in the same corpus.

Because of the relatively structured nature of negation, certain variables are likely to occur in tokens of negation. So, in an example like this one: *Her mum dint say anything to her*, I was able to code for ..
Co-occurring variables

- Word-final and word-medial /t/, distinguishing between a fully released alveolar plosive and any other nonstandard form (which was most typically a glottal, but could also be a deleted or palatalized form).
Co-occurring variables

- Word-final and word-medial /t/
- (h)-dropping

Her mum dint say anything to her.

- Presence or absence of word-initial /h/.
Co-occurring variables

- Word-final and word-medial /t/
- (h)-dropping
- (th)-fronting

Her mum dint say anything to her.

- (th)-fronting, so whether ‘th’ is realised as /θ/ or /f/
Co-occurring variables

- Word-final and word-medial /t/
- (h)-dropping
- (th)-fronting
- Word-final (ing)

Her mum didn't say anything to her.

- word-final (ing), so whether ‘ing’ is realised with an alveolar nasal or a velar nasal
- And nonstandard contracted verb form

Obviously not all of these variables were present in every sentence containing negation with a postverbal indeterminate but, given that each speaker had several tokens, it was possible to produce a frequency for each variable across all of the speakers' tokens.

I'm going to show you a series of graphs which show the percentage of co-occurring nonstandard variants found in negative sentences for each social group. They are quite complicated so I'm going to talk you through one in detail before comparing it with other social groups. Here is the graph from the Geeks.
The type of variant is shown along the bottom. And the percentage of use is on the vertical axis.

The hatched bars show tokens of standard negation and the solid bars show tokens of negative concord. So, this green hatched bar shows that, in the Geeks’ dataset, there are 28 instances of standard negation which contain tokens of word-initial /h/. In these 28 instances, 16 (or 57% of) /h/s were dropped.
The solid green line shows that the geeks only had one instance of negative concord containing a word-initial /h/ and, in this one instance, they dropped the /h/. This means they dropped /h/ 100% of the time when using negative concord. But – of course, this finding is not very robust, because negative concord and word-initial /h/ only co-occurred once.

However, the patterns across the co-occuring variants are suggestive.
Notice that the Geeks are more likely to use a higher proportion of nonstandard variants of word-initial /h/, word-final (-ing) and contracted verb forms when using negative concord, than when using standard negation. This can be seen by the taller solid bars compared to the hatched bars.

The data from the Populants and the Townies show this pattern more robustly because they have more instances of negative concord.
Here is the data from the Geeks, the Popular and the Townies shown together. Notice the tendency for the solid bars to be higher than the hatched bars across all three figures. That is to say, all groups seem to use a higher proportion of co-occurring nonstandard variants when using negative concord, than when using standard negation. This can be seen by relative height differences of the solid and hatched bars for each individual nonstandard variant. This is especially consistent across all three groups for contracted verb forms and /h/-dropping.
While word-final (ing) also patterns as expected, the differences are very small. All three groups tend to use nonstandard forms all the time, irrespective of whether or not they are using negative concord. Similarly, nonstandard pronunciations of /t/ pattern very closely for the Townies (so not much difference by negation type), and actually pattern in the opposite direction for the Geeks and the Populars (so more nonstandard /t/ in standard negation than negative concord). So, while all groups seem to use a higher proportion of co-occurring nonstandard variants when using negative concord, this pattern is less remarkable for (ing), and less consistent for /t/, than it is for some of the other variants.

Comparing the three social groups also highlights another notable finding.
The Townies just generally employ a high use of nonstandard variants across the board. Irrespective of whether or not they are doing negative concord they always use 60% or more of each nonstandard form. This line shows 60% use of a nonstandard variant, and notice how much of the Townies’ data is above this line compared with that of the Geeks and the Populars. In particular, note how infrequently the Geeks, and even the Populars use (th)-fronting compared to the Townies. The Townies use of this form reaches 100% in negative concord and 77% even in standard negation. Compare this with the Populars use of just 33% of (th)-fronting in negative concord.
To summarise, the analysis of co-occurring variables revealed the following: both nonst. /t/ and (ing) occur frequently, but pattern less consistently with type of negation; on the other hand, /h/-dropping and contracted verb forms do seem to occur more frequently with negative concord; similarly, (th)-fronting also occurs more frequently with negative concord, but the Townies use this form much more frequently than any other group.

What does this analysis of co-occurring variables add to our understanding of the social meanings of the linguistic forms I’ve discussed in this paper? I have characterised all of the variables I’ve discussed so far in terms of ‘standard vs. nonstandard’. But the fact that vernacular variants of /t/ and (ing) are used at high frequencies even by a social group as linguistically conservative as the Geeks, and even in standard negation, suggests that their potential social meanings are not ideologically linked to the same stigmatised associations that negative concord seems to index. It may well be that they have social meanings associated with dimensions of affect rather than prestige, and that the tendency to express these dimensions runs across all of the speakers in my sample irrespective of social group. It’s notable, for instance, that my recordings situate all speakers as self-reflexive, open, and laidback. This, of course, would require more data and analysis to verify, but the importance of affect has been demonstrated in Penny Eckert’s most recent work on sound symbolic resources.
On the other hand, that all groups have a high use of contracted verb forms and /h/-dropping when using negative concord, and that, for the Geeks at least, this contrasts with the frequency of these forms in standard negation suggests that the meaning potentials of these forms are compatible with the meaning potentials of negative concord. That is to say, it is likely that they have meanings that are compatible with delinquency or, at least, those stances and alignments ideologically related to delinquency. This could include, for instance, being tough, being cool, being fearless, being reckless, or being outspoken.

That (th)-fronting also seems to pattern in this direction means that the same is probably true for this form too. However, the fact that the Townies use this form so much more than the other social groups suggests that there is something more extreme in its meaning potential, and perhaps that its use may be more risky because of these more extreme associations. It may not be a coincidence that, of all of the forms studied, (th)-fronting is most likely the newest, and, given claims made in the sociolinguistic literature about youth norms in the early 2000s, it was likely a relatively new change in progress in this community when the data was collected. In this sense, it is not surprising that we find it being used by the Townies to add layers to their linguistic repertoire. After all, this is the group who split off from the Populares in their pursuit of newer, more daring, more rebellious practices.
In this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate how the social meaning of a syntactic form, negative concord, is constructed via its occurrence in certain topics of talk, and how its emphatic or intensifying functions make it apt for these contexts. I have also shown how its use is localised to the social practices of a particular community precisely because of its functions and associated social meaning. I have also demonstrated that, as a syntactic construction, negative concord can also enter into symbiotic relationships with co-varying linguistic features in ways which allow meaning to be layered. Of course, this is not to say that the social meanings of the co-varying forms I have considered are directly equivalent. But I have shown that it is possible to observe where parallel meanings exist across distinct variables by exploring where linguistic forms (namely, contracted verb forms, /h/-dropping, and (th)-fronting) vary in step with a stable entity like negative concord.
The fact that syntactic items like negative concord must co-occur with phonological variables in spoken discourse (by the very nature of their structure) may be useful to our understanding of the social meaning of linguistic variation more generally. If the social meaning of syntactic variables can be discerned from the discourse context, then we can use this to start examining the meaning potentials of the phonological forms which vary in-step with them. I’m not sure that this potential has been fully recognised in research on social meaning because of the focus on phonological variables at the expense of other levels of the grammar.
And, finally, this analysis has suggested that, if we are to gain better understandings of how language functions socially, we need richer ethnographies of language use and more integrated forms of linguistic analysis. This will help us to understand how language operates holistically in interaction to communicate social meaning. This understanding is particularly important for language and gender research where we seek to provide more complex accounts of what women (and men) do with language. My analysis has suggested that what determines how females use language is not gender per se, but interactional goals. And where different groups of females have different goals, we should expect to find language variation, rather than be surprised by it.
References


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