

## **Indexing authenticity: Perspectives from linguistics and anthropology**

Authenticity has received a lot of attention within the scientific domain. In the vast philosophical literature, the issue of authenticity is usually treated from a binary perspective, i.e. by comparing ‘the original’ to ‘the copy’ in terms of mimetic features, e.g. asking whether an interpretation sticks to the author’s intentions or whether or not it is true to the original historical, social or cultural context (Kant 1999 [1791]). What we gather from this last argument is a *relational* concept of authenticity which can account for the manifold ways in which a speaker or agent can be authentic in a given situation in relation to a particular aspect of his or her environment, conceived in a broad sense.

In anthropology, Lévi-Strauss (1976) distinguishes ‘levels of authenticity’ which have a constitutive function for all forms of social life. Being authentic describes types of (inter-) personal contact that is direct and emergent in face-to-face interaction, but is not governed by social institutions or forms of media. Arguably, all individuals seek for some forms of authenticity at different points of their lives. The role of the ‘context’ in human interaction, whether it is social, cultural or stylistic in nature, is crucial in producing or failing to produce authenticity. Coupland makes a point about this quest of individuals for authenticity: “Authenticity matters. It remains a quality of experience that we actively seek out, in most domains of life, material and social. [...] We value authenticity and we tend to be critical of pseudo-authenticity.” (2003: 417) Traditionally, anthropology was concerned with small-scale communities in local settings based on which Lévi-Strauss submitted his view on authenticity. From Lévi-Strauss onwards, an anthropology of globalisation has developed in which some sociolinguists such as Coupland or Blommaert have tried to define authenticity for speakers living in a globalised world. Clearly, the size of the communities researched and the degree of mediation in human communication differ between Lévi-Strauss and sociolinguists interested in globalisation, but we assume that there is a similar underlying structure that is functioning independently of the size or the type of speaker group. From this we see an important link between linguistics and anthropology. The striving for some sort of authenticity seems to be a prominent (if not anthropologically universal) feature of people’s social behaviour, fulfilling a social-regulative function. If the individuals of a society were not ‘authentic’ in a minimal sense to the different domains and levels of the social system and the ‘web of cultural meanings’ (Geertz 1973), various forms of cultural learning and mimetic practices, the conservation of traditional values and norms as well as the prediction of the behaviour of social agents would not be possible (Strathern 2004). For our

purposes, an important question is how the social functioning of authenticity as a driving force of individuals' behaviour and its evaluation according to cultural contexts is mediated by and expressed in language. We take the clarification of this issue to be an eminent task for research in sociolinguistics, especially since, with few exceptions (Coupland 2010, 2003; Bucholtz 2003; Eckert 2003), the problem of authenticity has not been analysed carefully in sociolinguistic theoretical discussions, though it has been a concern within linguistic anthropology (Bucholtz & Hall 2004; Ochs 2004).

**Guiding question 1:**

*How can we best define what it means to be authentic in language production?*

The following concern formulated by Coupland echoes the issues we wish to raise in the proposed conference about *linguistic authenticity*: “To what extent is it tenable to think of language use as being constrained by people’s (authentic) membership of social groups (what Eckert called ‘ingrained behavior’), as opposed to the social construction of personal, relation and social meanings in discourse?” (Coupland 2010: 1) Some sociolinguists recognise the importance of the many ways in which authenticity can be assigned to speakers or groups of speakers. As Coupland states: “To be authentic, a thing has to be original in some important social or cultural matrix” (2003: 419). The layers of such a matrix are addressed by speakers in various situationally embedded ways and on various ‘orders of indexicality’. Indexicality, in linguistics, is the property of linguistic elements to index (to point to) certain non-linguistic entities, and can be seen as related to deixis. In sociolinguistics, these indexed entities are usually social meanings, indexed by sociolinguistic variables. The concept, initially proposed by Peirce (1932), has been extended notably by Silverstein (2003) who has worked extensively on the anthropology of language use. Silverstein conceptualises several orders of indexicality: a first-order pragmatic level, a second-order metapragmatic level, and even higher-order, conventionalised discourse levels. Extensions of the basic indexicality framework include Eckert (2003), who proposes an indexical field that covers the range of social meanings which a particular linguistic variable indexes.

Sociolinguistic research within the indexicality framework can be seen as being situated in the ‘third wave’ of sociolinguistics, in that it is interested in stylistic variation as a ‘resource for the construction of social meaning’ (Eckert 2005). Indexicality has been used for analyses of gender (Ochs 2003), discourse analysis (Blommaert 2007), and local-dialect stereotypes (Johnstone & Kiesling 2008). In all of these, indexicality is presented as a new analytical tool that has a lot to offer to complement previous approaches. In Johnstone & Kiesling (2008), for instance, the pronunciation of the diphthong in words like *house* as a monophthong [a:] by residents of Pittsburgh, often described as a local feature, is in fact shown to be perceived with a much wider array of attitudes than traditional sociolinguistic approaches would suggest: the disjunction between individual production and

perception, coupled with speakers' own reflections on the variable, offer insights into the layered nature of indexical processes operating in spoken interaction, as well as into the multiplicity of social meanings indexed by a same variable. We wish to investigate such complexities on the basis of empirical findings from different geographical and medial settings and therefore invite speakers with expertise in the sociolinguistics of particular regions.

**Guiding question 2:**

*What properties can we assign to linguistic authenticity and from whose perspective is it evaluated?*

Any form of authenticity, be it intra-speaker or inter-speaker, is subject to evaluation. Performed authenticity, for instance, involves the perspective of a speaker as the original author or performer of their communicative intentions, while an interpreted authenticity would represent an act of speech evaluated by an external source. The use of stylistic resources is closely connected to this issue of authenticity: whether performed or interpreted, speech is faithful to formal (or standard) vs. informal (or non-standard) contexts. Clearly, authenticity expresses itself in language use, similar to what Coupland calls "the discursive construction of authenticity and inauthenticity" (2010: 6). Authentication as the performative dimension of authenticity, then, is "a discursive process, rather than authenticity as a claimed or experienced quality of language or culture, can then be taken up analytically as one dimension of a set of intersubjective 'tactics', through which people can make claims about their own or others' statuses as authentic or inauthentic members of social groups." (Coupland 2010: 6) Authenticity is however not purely discursive. It also resides in the representation, construction, experimentation and/or performance of identity. This connection between authenticity and (personal as well as socio-cultural) identity will be a theoretical focus of the conference, for the discussion of which we would like to invite theoretically oriented linguists as well as linguistic anthropologists.

**Guiding question 3:**

*Since authenticity is often closely linked to the notion of 'place', another question we wish to address is how we can think of different situational frameworks of linguistic authenticity.*

Obviously, there is the traditional, 'natural', local environment, but also other non-geographical loci such as media communication, online chat forums, etc. One could claim that any geographical context in which languages were 'born' is the place where the most authentic languages are generated and conserved. This is reminiscent of a classic assumption within (variationist) sociolinguistics that vernacular speakers are the best representatives of linguistic authenticity. Blommaert states that

sociolinguistics has tended to focus on “static variation, on local distribution of varieties” (2010: 1). In the Labovian sense, authenticity correlates with geographically and socially demarcated linguistic communities, in which authentic speech behaviour manifests itself along a stylistic continuum. However, linguistic authenticity can also emerge in non-territorialised loci, such as in computer-mediated communication: “Language and discourses move around, but they do so between spaces that are full of rules, norms, customs and conventions.” (Blommaert 2010: 80) With mobile languages, norms must be re-localised too and re-interpreted in relation to the required linguistic practices, communicative intentions and the speakers themselves. In both geographical and non-geographical contexts of language use, we may argue that speakers belong to a *community of practice* insofar as they come together to fulfil the same communicative functions and language practices. What matters to both types of contexts are internal norms deployed (and shared) by the speakers, employing what Coupland calls “speech style as an anchor for solidarity and local affiliation” (2003: 420).

Authenticity would thus be about deploying linguistic resources in many different (extra- or paralinguistic) contexts such as local, mobile, variable, and normative contexts. If authenticity has to be created in language production with reference to some extra-linguistic reality, one theoretically fruitful way to describe this is in terms of indexicality. Here, Johnstone & Kiesling (2008) is particularly relevant to the indexing of authenticity with respect to locality. In traditional sociolinguistics, local-dialect stereotypes are typically taken for granted as universally recognised. This was shown, in the Pittsburgh study mentioned above, as being an oversimplification, with respondents assigning different meanings to /au/-monophthongisation. Thus while one Pittsburgher may indeed use the variable to index ‘localness’, another may use a different variable, and hearers (whether themselves ‘authentic’ Pittsburghers or not) may or may not recognise the social meaning ‘localness’ ostensibly indexed. We wish to combine the linguistic findings on such indexing with the ‘shifting contexts’ (Strathern 1995) thematised in anthropological accounts of the relationship between local, global and medial in specific socio-cultural settings in order to develop a better understanding of the concept of ‘place’ in the production of (linguistic) authenticity.

## Summary

In sum, one of the aims of the conference dealing with the issues presented above is to elucidate the relationship between linguistic performances and social meanings by applying a relational concept of authenticity to different levels of indexicality. By combining the indexicality framework with a situationally embedded notion of authenticity, we wish to further sociolinguistic research in the direction of a theoretically informed linguistic anthropology.

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