


BOOK REVIEW

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EMMA MOORE, *Socio-syntax: Exploring the social life of grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. 256. Hb. £95.

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Drawing on insights from dialectology, discourse analysis, and variationist sociolinguistics, this ambitious new book sets out to provide the first comprehensive account of the social meaning of grammatical variation.

Combining ethnography with detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis, the approach espoused by Moore is most closely allied with scholarship in Third Wave sociolinguistics. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which speakers jointly manipulate the grammatical resources at their disposal to engage in local stylistic practices that create social meaning (12–13) and construct individual and group identities. The focus on the social meaning of grammar, however, by no means implies that structural considerations are relegated to secondary importance. On the contrary, one of the author's central claims is that the syntactic structure of a grammatical form can come with 'in-built dispositions to certain pragmatic functions' (10) and is key to understanding the kinds of social meanings that different syntactic configurations may generate in interactive discourse.

The specific linguistic focus is on four grammatical features: non-standard *were*, negative concord, right dislocation, and tag questions. The array of grammatical features incorporated into the analysis enables the author to probe whether different grammatical forms acquire social meaning in the same way.

The corpus on which the investigation is based was compiled from the speech of twenty-seven female adolescents, aged between thirteen and fifteen, observed and recorded by the author over a two-year period in a predominantly mono-ethnic high school in Bolton in the north-west of England (18). Moore is candid in admitting that in spite of sustained effort, time, and ingenuity, attempts to break into male-dominated adolescent networks were largely unsuccessful (27), effectively limiting the study to female peer groups only. The adolescent sample is subdivided into four groups: the Geeks, the Eden Villagers, the Populars, and the Townies (a splinter group of the Populars), each constituting a community of practice imbued with its own distinctive style.

After establishing the rationale for the investigation (chapter 1), characterizing the process of ethnography (chapter 2), and outlining the framework of analysis



(chapter 3), each of the ensuing four chapters of the book are dedicated to specific linguistic features.

Chapter 4 addresses levelled *were* (e.g. *he were older*, p. 95), a feature which shows a locally persistent pattern of variation, rendering it amenable to indexing place (84). Moore contends that regionally restricted morpholexical variants like levelled *were* have the capacity to attract social meanings embedded in character-type associations (i.e. associations between a variant and the character types perceived to use it, p. 61). In contrast with other social groups, the more socially rebellious Townies significantly increased their use of levelled *were*, an icon of non-standardness, within the course of one year, suggesting that this form is purposefully incorporated into the Townies' stylistic repertoire as part of a bid to project a 'wild, daring ... locally salient persona' (108). A fundamental finding is that none of the Townies who use levelled *were* come from the lowest social class group included in the study (105). This suggests that the use of levelled *were* does not simply mirror an individual's position in the social hierarchy but reflects the speaker's active engagement in the construction of social meaning.

Chapter 5 deals with a shibboleth of prescriptive grammar: negative concord. It is in this chapter that Moore elaborates on the thesis that the syntactic structure of a grammatical form affects the pragmatic functions it can embody. Building on earlier work (e.g. Labov 1972), Moore claims that the postposing of negative indeterminates (e.g. *I didn't do nothing*) can assume an intensifying or emphasizing function. Moore takes care to stress that negative concord will only accrue this function in communities which exhibit VARIABLE use of negative concord AND standard negation (116).

As with levelled *were*, negative concord exhibits sensitivity to social class distinctions, but shows more robust correlations with community of practice membership (124). With its apparent capacity to foreground surprising information, coupled with its class-linked and anti-institutional connotations, the increased frequency with which Townies use negative concord, especially when discussing rebellious and illicit topics, suggests that it is iconically linked with constructing a Townie persona embodying, inter alia, independent and anti-authoritarian stances.

Moore's analysis of negative concord, while compelling, is not without its problems. A case in point concerns the pragmatic functions that this construction putatively encodes. As Cheshire (2005:97) has noted, emphasis and intensity are ill-defined concepts, and it is not clear how those functions were systematically detected by the author. No heuristic or quantitative metric for specifically detecting pragmatic function is adumbrated in the coding protocol (118). The intensifying or emphasizing function of negative concord is largely justified by appealing to precedents in the sociolinguistic literature and by engaging in the critical exegesis of isolated examples culled from the author's data. This raises the all-important question of whether the pragmatic function ascribed by Moore to negative concord could be readily detected EVERY, or, at least, MOST of the time this construction was used by the adolescent peer groups.

Chapter 6 shifts the analytical focus of the investigation to a less salient form of syntactic variation: right dislocation. Moore argues that the social and linguistic constraints governing right dislocation are closely intertwined. Although there are distinctions in the use of right dislocation linked with social class and community of practice, a major difference lies in the TYPE of right dislocation used by speakers (140). Whereas all communities of practice, with the exception of the Townies, make greater use of right-dislocated noun phrase tags (e.g. *they had a massive fight, her mum and dad*, p. 141), the Townies are distinguished by their comparatively greater use of personal pronoun tags containing second-person pronouns in particular (e.g. *you're scary, you*, p. 162). This difference appears to be motivated by the Townies' desire to capitalize on personal pronoun tags to perform particular evaluative functions (e.g. to critically appraise other people's identities and attributes) and to index specific social stances. Crucially, the social distribution of right dislocation seems to be largely driven by the pragmatic functions of different tag types.

In chapter 7, Moore widens the purview of the investigation by looking at the imbrication of phonetic and syntactic variation in tag questions. At the phonetic level, the focus is on the variable realization of word-initial (h) as well as the variable production of word-final (t), subject to glottalling, deletion, or full release. A cornerstone of Moore's analysis is that tag questions have a syntactic shape that renders them favourable to promoting agreement in relation to the propositions they express (179). Additional evidence that tag questions are structurally tailored to conducting agreement in interactive discourse emerges from the finding that interlocutors most frequently agree with the propositions expressed in turn-final tag questions (181). In contrast with the grammatical features investigated in the preceding chapters, it is the Populars who use more tag questions than any other group (179). However, unlike the other linguistic features targeted in the study, there is no discernible link between tag questions and personas or social types.

Interestingly, although the frequency of /h/-dropping and non-standard variants of /t/ show a predictable correlation with adolescents' orientation to the institutional ethos of the school, with the rebellious Townies making greater use of non-standard phonetic variants than other groups, /h/-dropping occurs at elevated rates in tag questions in all groups. Moore proposes that the compatibility between conducting agreement and /h/-dropping is strategically exploited by speakers to position themselves as 'personable and laid-back' (206). This suggestion, though speculative, paves the way to exploring how syntactic and phonetic variation can operate synergistically to produce social meaning.

In the final chapter, Moore summarizes the major findings of the investigation. Of particular importance is Moore's eloquent demonstration that the social meaning of grammatical variation is inextricably linked with the construction of style. As Moore observes (228), 'children design their language to fit their developing personas as they transition from child to adult'. It is unfortunate, then, that speakers'

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capacity to manipulate grammatical variability for interactional and stylistic purposes has been largely neglected in educational policy (228).

Summarizing, I suspect that despite the author's abundant and highly commendable use of quantitative reasoning and statistical tests, hard-core empiricists would wish to see more analytical rigour brought to the investigation of pragmatic function (e.g. in the case of negative concord). But this criticism aside, Moore's book, with its dedicated focus on speakers as stylistic agents, is a landmark study of grammatical variation in spoken English. It is overflowing with ideas that deserve to be tested on other varieties of English as well as other languages.

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