Irene Theodoropoulou


This study examines the Greek language as used by residents of the Western (DP) and Northern (VP) suburbs of Athens. Theodoropoulou offers an original theoretical perspective and draws on a wide range of data—from ethnographic interviews to popular literature, television, hip-hop, and Facebook—to document special features and discourses characteristic of speech styles identified with VP and DP. These features and discourses are discussed in relation to three orders of indexicality across genres.

Theodoropoulou places her work in the third wave of sociolinguistics. The first wave, exemplified by Labov, looked at variability in relation to major demographic categories and showed the socioeconomic motivation of sound change, originating in the local upper working class. First wave studies saw vernacular usage as indexing peer group status, and generally conveying positive value—Trudgill (1972), for example, saw the spread of vernacular innovations to the middle-class as driven by the identification of middle-class men with working-class masculinity.

The second wave studied both standard and vernacular forms, using ethnographic methods to relate variation to local social categories. Holmquist (1985) correlates the transition of peasant villagers in the Pyrenees from traditional agriculture into modern economy with the adoption of standard forms, with women most readily adopting standard forms. Eckert (2000) studies variation in relation to the polar social categories of predominantly middle-class “jocks” and working-class “burnouts” in suburban Detroit schools.

Third wave sociolinguistics, where Theodoropoulou situates her work, moves away from the focus on class and social categories, and sees variation as a social semiotic system defined by indexical mutability. Campbell-Kibler
(2007), for example, focuses on the contrast of velar and apical realizations of ING (walking vs. walkin’) as indexing education, intelligence, formality, articulateness, or the lack thereof. In this approach, the emphasis is on individuals and their linguistic choices, hence the centrality of style. For Theodoropoulou, style does not merely reflect social identity: “Style constructs identity because it is a recognizable and trendy word, which people can both reflect upon (e.g., I always try to be in style) and also employ as a powerful set of semiotic devices, including appearance, lifestylistic practices and, not least, language, through which people can operate in a given society” (15).

Central to the third wave approach is the concept of indexicality, developed by Silverstein (2003). For Silverstein, indexical order relates “the micro-social to the macro-social frames of analysis of any sociolinguistic phenomenon.” Theodoropoulou focuses on popular culture genres in order to avoid what she considers the abstraction of Silverstein’s model. She looks for the sweeping up of styles characteristic of higher order indexicality “in people’s extravagant performances of popular culture stylistic features and their meanings” in the construction of VP and DP identities, “by either enhancing or, more often than not, undermining the established styling of these identities,” and in people’s “ability to comment on the actual content of these identities” (29–30). For Theodoropoulou, style and identity are polarities of a continuum corresponding to the micro-social and the macro-social respectively; style constructs identity by means of indexicality. Her model combines Coupland’s (2007) “resource and contextualization” model with the “identities in interaction” model of Bucholtz and Hall (2005). Coupland understands the resources available to speakers as sociolinguistic, communicative, and performative. These resources are always manifest in specific contexts marked by targeting, framing, voicing, keying and loading. Coupland’s emphasis on the performativity of style is applied in relation to the five principles Bucholtz and Hall (2005) identify as basic to identity analysis: emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality, and partialness. These categories are basic to Theodoropoulou’s model of interior indexicality (indexicality within a genre); the exposition of the book progresses along the continuum from style to identity according to Theodoropoulou’s classification of exterior indexicality (indexicality across genres): chapter three focuses on the social meanings attached to stylistic features, the institutionalized performances of popular culture; chapter four shifts the focus to people’s high performances; and chapter five deals with speakers’ explicit, metapragmatic reflections on the meaning of social class.

Theodoropoulou’s analysis is based on a broad range of data, from conversation, interviews, and popular culture. This includes participant observation of four groups of three young adults from Kifisia in the VP (her own culture