

Bricks and bricolage: The question of sociolinguistic coherence

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Contemporary sociolinguistic scholarship entertains two, somewhat contradictory, models of the social distribution of linguistic variants. The speech community model emphasizes coherence – shared norms imply that speakers vary together by style, status, etc. – while the identity construction model emphasizes individual agency, and asserts that speakers do bricolage, assembling their social personae out of the variables at hand, evoking distinctive indexicalities. The contradiction between these approaches lies in whether clusters of speakers who constitute a community coherently use a set of variants defining a sociolinguistic variety, or whether individuals use idiosyncratic sets of variants. For example, given that th-stopping, r-vocalization, and raised /oh/ are all socially stratified in New York City, do higher status individuals systematically use low rates of all three variants at once, or do they pick and choose among these variants? This is analogous to the dialectological question of whether isoglosses cluster. Highly correlated (i.e., clustered) variables can metaphorically be taken as the component bricks of a coherent linguistic edifice, while uncorrelated variables should imply distinctive indexicalities and idiosyncratic patterns of bricolage. This paper will present data from several recent studies of English, Spanish, and Portuguese that address these issues by examining the covariation among multiple sociolinguistic variables – both syntactic and phonological – present in the respective communities.