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The Social Meaning of Syntax[1]

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The study of syntactic variation has lagged behind the study of phonological variation in sociolinguistics, despite early claims that "[t]he extension of probabilistic considerations from phonology to syntax is not a conceptually difficult jump" (Sankoff 1973:58).[2] Documented 'challenges' to the study of syntactic variation include the increased difficulty in circumscribing a linguistic variable when dealing with levels of the grammar above phonology (Tagliamonte 2012:206–207), and problems of convincingly quantifying syntactic variables which occur less frequently than phonological variables (Rickford et al. 1995:106). Added to this, it has been argued that syntactic variables are less subject to social evaluation than phonological variables (Labov 1993; Labov 2001:28; Levon & Buchstaller 2015) and, even when they are, they tend to have "quite fixed social meanings associated with external facts like class and particularly education" (Eckert 2018:190).

It could be argued that the evolution of third wave sociolinguistics, and its focus on the social meaning of linguistic variation, effectively neutralises the 'challenges' outlined above. Take the heavily debated problem of establishing 'semantic equivalence' for syntactic variables (Lavandera 1978; Labov 1978; Dines 1980; Romaine 1984; Cheshire 1987; Winford 1996; Moore 2012). While it has been considered relatively straightforward to apply the concept of the linguistic variable to phonological variation, it is generally accepted that its application to syntactic variation is problematic on the basis that syntax has pragmatic functions which determine the use of alternative forms. So, how one expresses negation may not just reflect how standard or nonstandard a linguistic form is, but also how emphatic or intense the expression of negation is required to be (Labov 1984; Eckert & Labov 2017:469). In other words, it has been argued that studies of syntactic variation require a consideration of the pragmatic or interactional social meanings entailed in the use of a particular syntactic form, whereas studies of phonological variation do not. However, the move from "a substitution class approach to variation (where variants compete to fill a linguistic 'slot') to a stylistic approach (where the manner and nature of a feature's occurrence may be just as important as its relative frequency)" (Moore 2012:71) problematizes the notion of 'linguistic variable' even when applied to phonological variation. If, as has been argued (Jaffe 2010; Moore & Podesva 2009; Eckert 2016:70), the meanings of linguistic variables are underspecified, then understanding their social meanings requires more than examining alternate forms; we also need to consider how

forms are used in social interaction and as components of styles. In other words, we need to undertake the kind of analysis that has been proposed for syntactic variation. Cheshire (1987:257) has argued that misplaced focus on the linguistic variable has "prevented any real progress being made in our understanding of syntactic variation", but one could argue that the linguistic variable has also retarded our understanding of the social meaning of language variation at all levels of the grammar.[3] For instance, Campbell-Kibler (2011) has shown that the different variants of (-ing) have distinct meanings which don't necessarily operate oppositionally, as one would expect them to if the variants were truly two sides of one 'variable' coin.

A stylistic approach to variation also neutralises the 'challenge' of syntactic forms occurring less frequently than phonological ones. Traditional variationist work has focused on the ways in which linguistic forms are distributed among social groups, and this has implied that social meaning resides in frequency (so a particular form means 'working class' if it is found more frequently in the speech of working class groups). Notwithstanding the issues around equating 'a correlation' with 'a social meaning', several researchers have suggested that, in certain circumstances, infrequency rather than frequency may make a form more noticeable (Hoffman 2004; Buchstaller 2009; Snell 2010; Podesva 2011; Levon & Buchstaller 2015:320). For a theory of social meaning, what matters may not necessarily be how often a form occurs, but the social work it does when it is used; that is to say, its power as a component of style.

Of course, how frequency interacts with social meaning is an empirical question, much like whether or not syntactic variation is less meaningful than phonological variation. Commentary suggesting that syntactic variation is less socially meaningful than phonological variation points to three kinds of evidence: (i) that syntactic variables are more sharply socially stratified (and less nuanced) than phonological variables (Cheshire 1999:61), (ii) 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), and (iii) that phonological variation is perceived differently from syntactic variation (Labov 1993; Labov 2001:28; Meyerhoff & Walker 2013; Levon & Buchstaller 2015). The first of these claims is difficult to evaluate, given that it is made on the basis of a very limited analysis of a very limited number of syntactic forms. Cheshire (1987; 1999; 2005) has written substantively on this, pointing out that we simply do not know enough about syntactic variation in speech, given that the study of syntax has followed from written models of grammar. The items selected for observation have tended to be those defined by their relationship with the codified written standard. This means that we have more often analysed the social stratification of syntactic variation that is more morphosyntactic

or lexical in nature (such as tense markers or forms of negation), than we have variation that is more 'purely' syntactic (such as right or left dislocation phenomena). It is hardly surprising that highly codified syntactic items pattern more sharply than those which are less subject to overt prescription. So, it is possible that perceived differences between the social meanings of phonological variation and syntactic variation is a consequence of standardization processes acting more readily on the kind of syntax that has been studied, rather than on any inherent property of syntax itself (as implied by Levon and Buchstaller (2015:323)).

The second and third claims are related. The notion that social meaning attaches less readily to 'deep' structures (what Labov 1993 refers to as "the Interface Principle"), and that syntactic variation is, therefore, less readily perceived, has been problematized by Levon and Buchstaller (2015). They compare perceptions of nonstandard phonetic and syntactic forms and suggest that there is, at best, only a weak version of the Interface Principle (Levon & Buchstaller 2015:337). Furthermore, by comparing perceptions of (th)-fronting and the Northern Subject Rule, they argue that there are factors other than a variable's status as phonological or syntactic that may interact with perception, including its "social history, its contextual relevance, and other social and cognitive constraints" (Levon & Buchstaller 2015:340). Their research is supported by the findings of Smith and Holmes-Elliott (in preparation) who show that speakers style shift differently around two "'entirely structural' variables (Labov 1993) with a set of highly complicated rules of use": speakers from the Scottish community of Buckie use lower rates of negative concord when speaking to a community outsider, but do not use lower rates of *never* for *didn't* when speaking to the same interviewer. Smith and Holmes-Elliott (in preparation) suggest that this difference indicates that the relationship between syntax and the 'sociolinguistic monitor' (the cognitive mechanism which evaluates the social significance of utterances according to Labov et al. (2011)) is more complex than has been suggested.[4] It could also be taken to provide further evidence that our interpretation of social meaning has been too narrow: it is only surprising that negative concord and *never* for *didn't* pattern differently if we expect all syntactic features to index the same kinds of social meaning.

Eckert (2016:69) has noted that first wave variationist studies have tended to assume that "variables all range along a single vector of formality or attention to speech". This assumption is evident in the research on the perception of syntactic variables mentioned above (and in many studies of syntactic variation besides). Following Labov et al. (2011), Levon and Buchstaller (2015) only consider reactions to the dimension of 'professionalism' when analysing the perception of the syntactic variable they test. 'Professionalism' is presumably a proxy for 'ability to use the appropriately formal style of speech'. Similarly, Smith and Holmes (in preparation) more explicitly operationalise style as the ability for speakers to change the way they talk on the

basis of who they are talking to and how much attention they are paying to their speech. So, while these studies imply that syntactic forms have social meaning, the social meanings 'tested' are limited to the single vector identified by Eckert.

The consequences of this are apparent in Smith and Holmes-Elliott's inability to explain the 'curious' finding that there is no gender differentiation in how Buckie speakers use negative concord (the form differs according to interlocutor, but not speaker gender). If the single vector of formality or attention to speech is taken to be the way in which community members internalise the class-stratified pattern of variation (Eckert 2016:69), then we are forced to assume that the linguistic forms avoided in more formal interaction are stigmatized because of their association with the lower social classes. Viewed through the traditional variationist lens, then, where nonstandard equals 'stigmatized' and standard equals 'prestigious', it is difficult to explain the gender patterns in Smith and Holmes-Elliott's data. This is especially the case when we consider that negative concord is "arguably the most common stigmatized variable in the English language" (Eckert 2000:216), and women have been found to avoid stable stigmatized variables more than men (Labov 1990). However, viewed from a stylistic perspective, where the social meaning of linguistic forms depend upon the manner in which they are used and the practice they entail, we might simply conclude that, whatever the social meanings of negative concord are in Buckie, this form is not (or at least not solely) linked to stigma. For instance, it could be that negative concord indexes familiarity or in-community status or, more likely, some other social meaning that it is only appropriate to express when in familiar company.

The conflation of 'nonstandard' and stigmatized' is particularly unhelpful when studying syntactic variation. As implied above, many un(der)-examined syntactic items could be described as 'nonstandard' (by virtue of their divergence from written standards) but they are not necessarily used to distinguish socially-stratified social groups in ways that are easily linked to stigma and prestige. For instance, Cheshire (1999:74–76) suggests that 'lone wh-clauses' (wh-clauses that occur as independent constructions in a single speaker's turn) have distinct discourse functions: they enable "a speaker to simultaneously propose a topic and invite other speakers to take it up". It is unlikely that these kind of constructions are broadly socially-stratified in the way that, say, the use of /h/-dropping is. Nonetheless, we might expect them to show some correlation with the kind of speakers who attempt to control the conversational floor. Much of the early language and gender research noted that men tend to dominate conversations in this way (see, for instance, Maltz and Borker (1983)) and, indeed, Cheshire (2000) found that lone wh-clauses were used almost exclusively by male speakers. But the 'almost' is important here. Male speakers do not use these forms by virtue of their gender identity *per se*, but because the relative societal status of males and females makes males more

apt to employ this discourse function than females. Importantly, Cheshire's data suggests that use of lone wh-clauses is not about their 'stigma' or 'prestige', but about how useful they are pragmatically to particular social groups.

Of course, the view that features index pragmatic function directly, and social category indirectly is longstanding (introduced by Ochs (1992), but elaborated since by, for instance, Eckert (2008)). It also has a long history in the debate about how to study syntactic variables. For instance, Cheshire (2005) discusses Macaulay's (1991) finding that *get*-passives occur almost exclusively with animate subjects and that these are more frequent in the speech of working-class participants. She notes that "[o]ne factor affecting the use of the *get*-passive, then, is quite simply, what speakers choose to talk about" (Cheshire 2005:99). It is only recently that we have seen calls to incorporate this kind of analysis into variationist understandings of the social meaning of phonological variables. As Eckert (2016:80) has observed "one does not have to go to syntax to see the pragmatic potential of variation". She goes on to discuss how phonetic variables can encode the expression of emotion and that "[a]ffect interacts with, is part of the construction of, macrosocial categories, as certain populations find themselves in particular affective states more often" (Eckert 2016:80).[5]

In sum, many of the difficulties in conducting studies of syntactic variation become irrelevant when we take a stylistic approach to the study of language variation. Furthermore, it also appears that the dynamic and integrative approaches that have been suggested to study syntactic variation are equally necessary when taking a stylistic approach to the social meaning of phonological variation. Nonetheless, there are clearly differences between phonology and syntax. As Eckert (2018:190) has pointed out, differences in segmental size and availability mean that syntactic features are different from phonological features.[6] Eckert and Labov (2017:483) have also argued that "low frequency and sparse distribution" prevent linguistic variables from developing social meaning. While the discussion above points out that higher frequencies do not necessarily result in more noticeable social meaning, more frequent phenomena clearly have more opportunities to develop social meaning in the first place, and to change social meanings in the long term. Eckert (2018) has also pointed to the embodied quality of phonetic features which gives them potential to become sound symbolic resources. This, too, clearly differentiates them from syntactic features.

Nonetheless, if our goal is to uncover the social meaning of linguistic features by studying how language is vivified in linguistic practice then we also need to think about the way in which phonetic and phonological variation is embedded in syntactic structure. More specifically, we need to consider how grammatical levels work synergistically to convey social meaning (Moore & Podesva 2009:449). 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". That is to say, speakers utter phonological features in the context of syntactic constructions, and listeners perceive them within syntactic frames. The dearth of research on syntactic variation has meant that we are a long way from understanding how grammatical levels might work in this co-dependent way to affect social meaning. To advance research on social meaning, the study of syntactic variation is no longer avoidable: if we want to understand how phonological variation is embedded in practice, then we need to pay more attention to syntax because "syntactic variation and syntactic change are intimately and inextricably part of the social construction of discourse" (Cheshire, Kerswill & Williams 2005:141).

Having argued for the place of syntax in a study of social meaning, the remainder of this paper will provide an example of how an integrated analysis might work in practice. Despite arguing for a more expansive approach to the study of syntax which incorporates less familiar syntactic features, I focus here on perhaps one of the most well-studied linguistic features, negative concord. This is deliberate because, while there have been studies which show that less conventional syntactic features can carry social meaning (in addition to those studies discussed above, see, for instance see Carter and McCarthy (1999) on *get*-passives; Macaulay (1989), Cheshire (2005), and Moore and Snell (2011) on right dislocated tags; and Moore and Podesva (2009) on tag questions), there have been few studies which interrogate the more nuanced social meanings of an established 'variable' like negative concord. Furthermore, to my knowledge, there are no studies which consider how negative concord varies according to the content of talk, nor are there any studies which consider how it varies in-step with phonological features. Of course, Eckert (2000) presents an analysis that considers how negative concord and a number of phonological variables shape community of practice styles. However, this analysis does not examine how negative concord 'houses' phonetics and phonology in ways which affect the meaning potentials of the forms involved. In this paper, I will consider how phonological features clustered together within units of negative concord, rather than analysing whether or not negative concord is simply found in the same corpus as specific phonological variables. In this way, I aim to gain a better understanding of how phonology and syntax work synergistically and in-step to communicate social meaning.

Data and Methodology

My data come from a two year ethnography of 39 female adolescents at a high school, which I call Midlan High. Midlan High is situated in the town of Bolton, in the northwest of England, as

shown in Figure 1. Bolton was traditionally part of the county of Lancashire, but since 1974, it has been in the county of Greater Manchester.

Figure 1. The location of Bolton relative to Greater Manchester (the bolded outline), the city of Manchester, and the rest of England (This work is based on data provided through EDINA UKBORDERS with the support of the ESRC and JISC and uses boundary material which is copyright of the Crown. © Crown Copyright/database right 2017. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service.)

The fieldwork location was a school situated in a predominantly upper working class/lower middle class 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 and 14-15 at completion. I gathered approximately 50 hours of recordings, with each recording 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 data comprises a 262,000-word corpus, and 196,400 words of fieldwork notes.

My ethnography identified four communities of practice (CofPs). These ranged from the most rebellious and anti-school Townies to the elitist and trendy pro-school Eden Village clique. The social groups are broadly arranged on a pro-school to anti-school continuum (as is typical of school ethnographies), although this is something of a simplification. The social groupings also reflect distinct social practices which include ways of dressing, activities both within and outwith school and, as I will show, ways of speaking. The styles of the groups are summarised (necessarily rather superficially) in Figure 2 (see Moore (2003) for a more detailed description of these CofPs). 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 my ethnographic observations of these CofPs, I also collected information on the girls' postcode areas, parental education, and parental occupation, and this information was used to create a social class index.

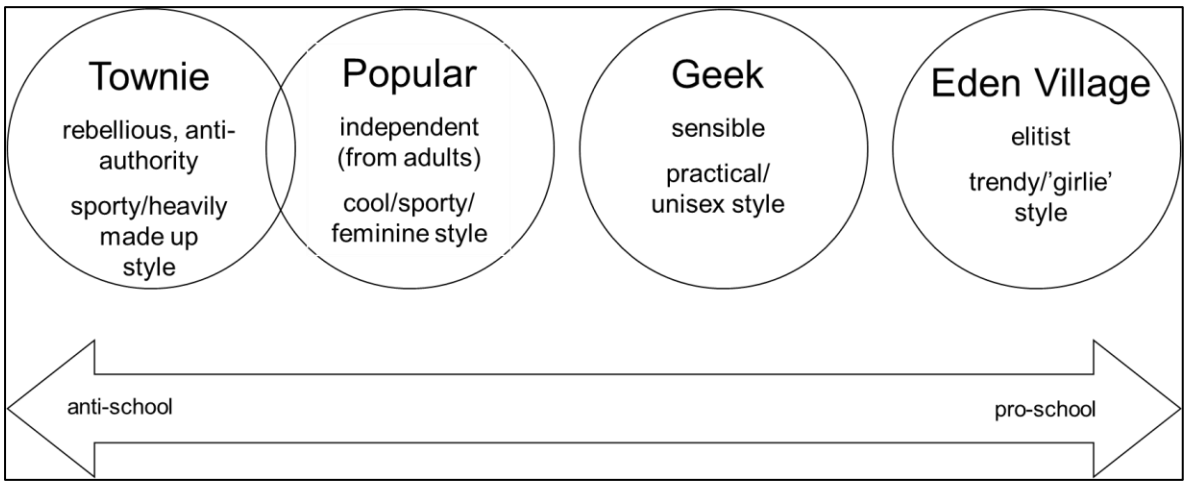

Figure 2. The Communities of Practice at Midlan High

As discussed above, my analysis will study the occurrence of negative concord. As Hughes et al. (2005:25–26) observe, there are three main ways to negate a sentence such as *I said something* in English English. These are shown below.

Type 1: The verb can be negated, e.g. *I* ***didn't*** *say anything*

Type 2: The postverbal indeterminate can be negated,[7] e.g. *I said* ***nothing***

Type 3: Both verb and indeterminate can be negated, e.g. *I **didn't** say **nothing***

Type 3 is an example of negative concord (also referred to as multiple negation, or double negatives). It is ungrammatical in Standard British English, but grammatical in several nonstandard varieties of British English. Table 1 shows how these three types are distributed across the CofPs at Midlan High. Notice that, whilst the frequency of Type 1 and 3 seem to be affected by CofP membership, all social groups use a remarkably similar proportion of Type 2 variants.

Table 1. Distribution of sentential negation types at Midlan High by CofP

	Type 1:		**Type 2:**		**Type 3:**	
	I didn't say anything		**I said nothing**		**I didn't say nothing**	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Eden Village	69	71.2	27	28.1	0	-
Geek	233	77.7	63	21.0	4	1.3
Popular	141	69.5	47	23.4	15	7.4
Townie	47	43.9	22	20.6	38	35.5

Labov (1972a:782) says of Type 2 that "in most cases, the operation of negative postposing produces a marked form". Given the discussion above, I would not wish to propose that any of these types are simply different "ways of saying the same thing" (Labov 1972b:323), but the quantitative data in Table 1 suggests that, however Type 2 forms function, they do not serve to differentiate the CofPs at Midlan High. Consequently, Type 2 forms were excluded from this analysis, which compares 547 tokens of Type 1 and Type 3 negation.

Each token of negation was coded for a number of linguistic factors, namely, the form of the indeterminate, the verb, the form of the negative element, the position of the indeterminate, the total number of indeterminates in the negated sentence, and the clause type. Given the focus of this paper and space constraints I will say no more about the distribution of these linguistic factors, other than to comment that the linguistic effects in this dataset were comparable with those found in previous studies. A more detailed account of the linguistic constraints can be found in Moore (2003).

Because of the relatively structured nature of negation, certain phonological and lexical items are likely to occur in tokens of negation with postverbal indeterminates. Consequently, in addition to coding occurrences of negation, I also considered where the following occurred within the coded tokens: occurrences of word-final and word-medial /t/, (h)-dropping, (th)-fronting, word-final (ing), and one morpho-lexical form: the occurrence of nonstandard contracted verb forms. So, in an example like *her mum dint say anything to her*, I was able to code for the following:

(i) word-final /t/ in the word 'dint' (a contracted form of 'didn't'). Although there are several ways in which this variable can be realised, I distinguished 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);
(ii) whether /h/ was realised or not in words like 'her';
(iii) whether 'th' is realised as /θ/ or /f/ in the word 'anything';
(iv) whether 'ing' is realised as /ŋ/ or /n/ in the word 'anything';
(v) whether the verb was realised as a nonstandard contracted form, such as 'dint' for 'didn't'.

Obviously not all of these features 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 (i)-(v) across all of the speakers' tokens. The addition of this analysis meant that it was possible to consider how negative concord occurred alongside other linguistic features. This allowed me to consider how language forms actually clustered together in chunks of talk, rather than them simply being found in the same corpus. I outline the results of this analysis in the next section.

Results and Discussion

Correlates of Negative Concord

Eckert (2000:216) has described negative concord as "almost a touchstone variation", given how common and stigmatized it is across varieties of English. 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 (Labov 1972a; Cheshire 1982; Eckert 2000; Smith 2001; Anderwald 2005; Childs 2017). This relationship with social class status is also evident to some extent in my data from Midlan High. Figure 3 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.

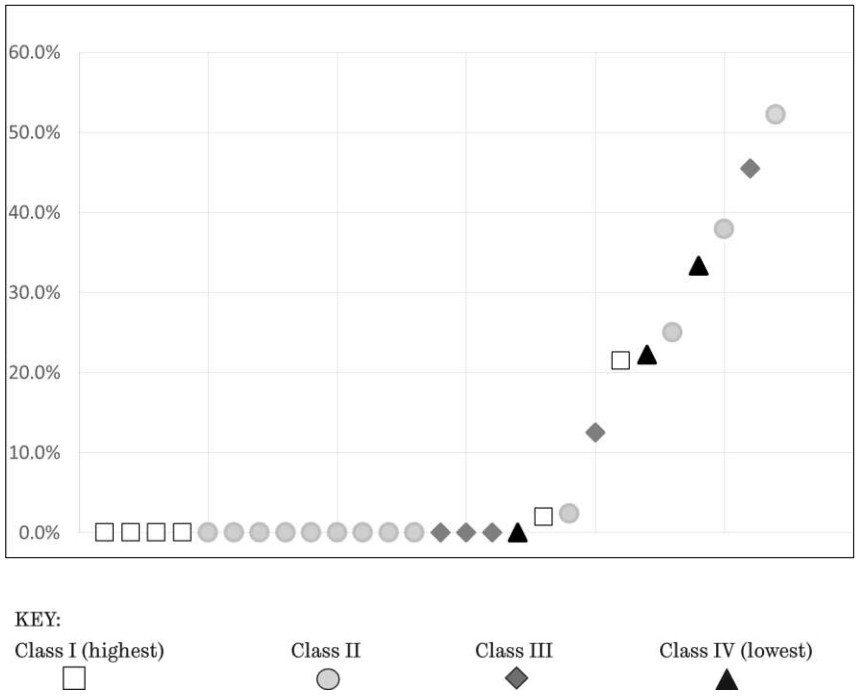

Figure 3. Negative concord by social class

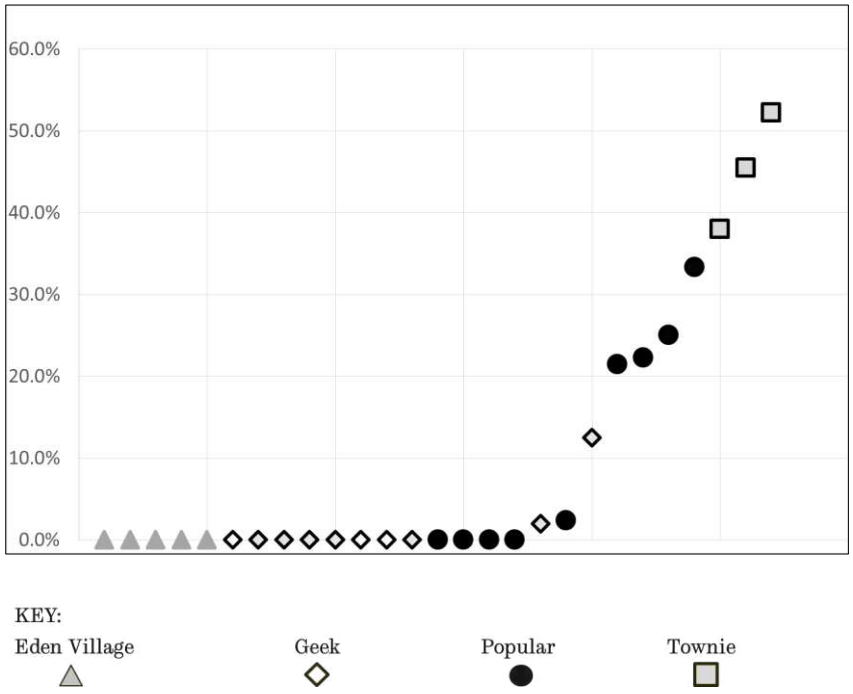

Figure 4. Negative concord by CofP

Figure 3 shows that those with the highest social class cluster at the lower end of the scale, as shown by the white squares. However, the social class pattern is not consistent across the scale. Social classes II, III, and IV are distributed across the scale, and the four highest users of negative concord include speakers from all three of these classes.

In addition to a correlation with social class, Cheshire (1982) and Eckert (2000) have also found negative concord to occur more frequently in the speech of social groups characterised as 'delinquent'. These studies suggest that, while negative concord has a strong correlation with social class, the form enters into and is affected by sociolinguistic practice in more localised and specific ways. This finding is also evident in the Midlan High data. Figure 4 again shows the percentage use of negative concord for each speaker, but here each speaker is represented by a symbol which indicates their CofP membership. With a few anomalies, this graph 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. A comparison of Figures 3 and 4 suggests that there is a more robust correlation between negative concord and social practice than between negative concord and social class.

Figure 4 corroborates the earlier finding that negative concord correlates with adolescent groups who are considered to exhibit 'delinquent' behaviour. The Townies are simultaneously the group who most frequently use negative concord, and most frequently and consistently engage in risky and illegal social activities 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. The graphs in Figure 5 display the proportion of negative concord by topic for the 10 speakers who show variable use of negative concord. Overall, when using negative concord, 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 circumstances of the recording situation itself (for instance, arguing with a peer about where to sit during the recording). These were labelled 'current interaction'. In Figure 5, grey indicates percentage of standard negation, and black indicates percentage of negative concord. As Eden Village speakers are categorical in using only standard forms of negation with postverbal indeterminates, there is no graph for this CofP.

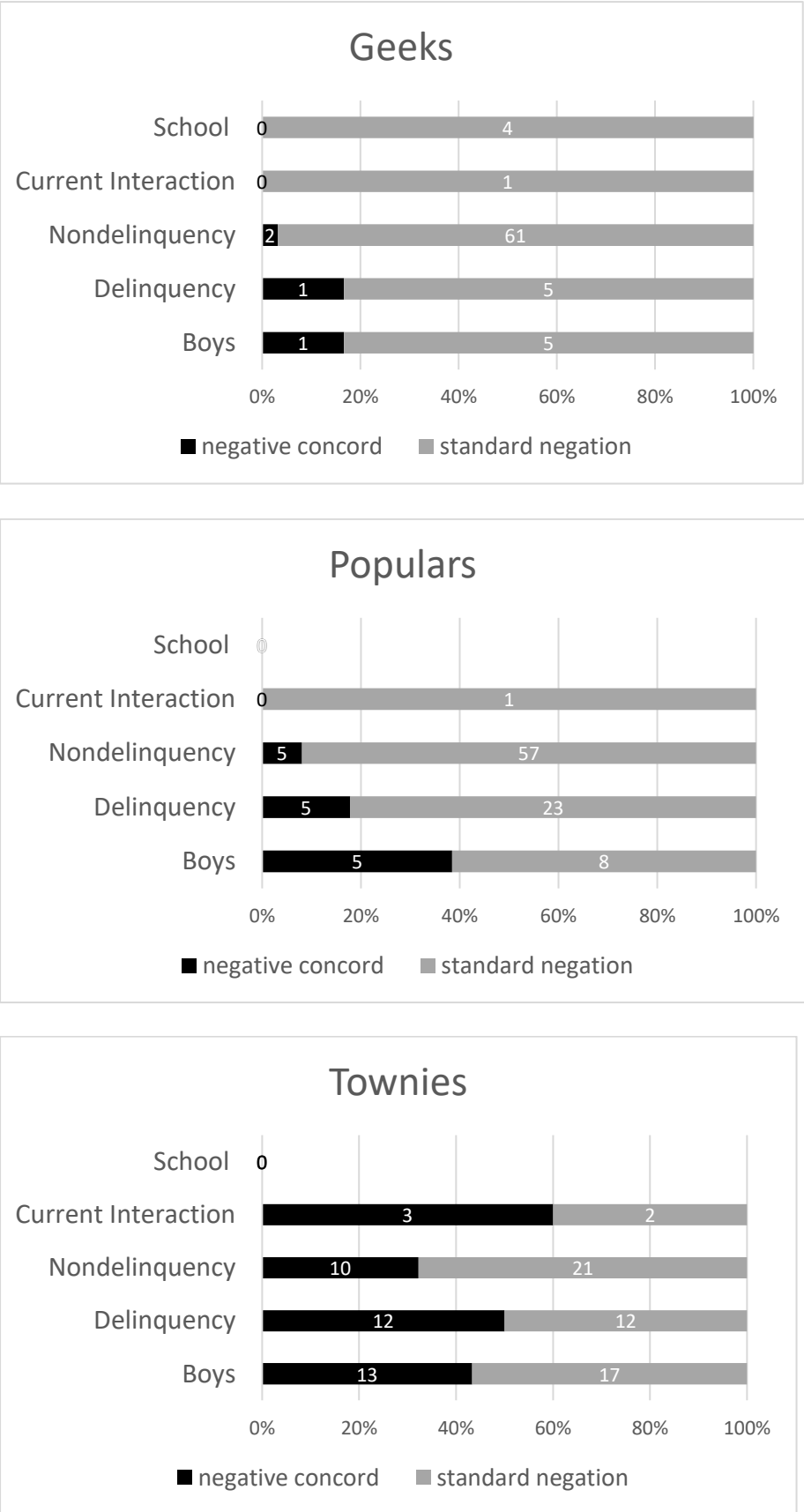

Figure 5. The proportion of negative concord by topic for each CofP. [Raw Ns are given within each bar.]

Whilst the graphs in Figure 5 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. However, it's important to note that these figures disguise the extent to which different groups talk about different things.[8] Figure 6 shows that the Geeks and the Populars talk about non-delinquent topics much more than the Townies do (when using negation). And, although it looks like the Populars and the Townies talk about delinquent topics the same amount, note how much the Townies talk about boys compared to the Populars. Furthermore, 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 could be considered to involve discussion of a particular kind of delinquent behaviour.

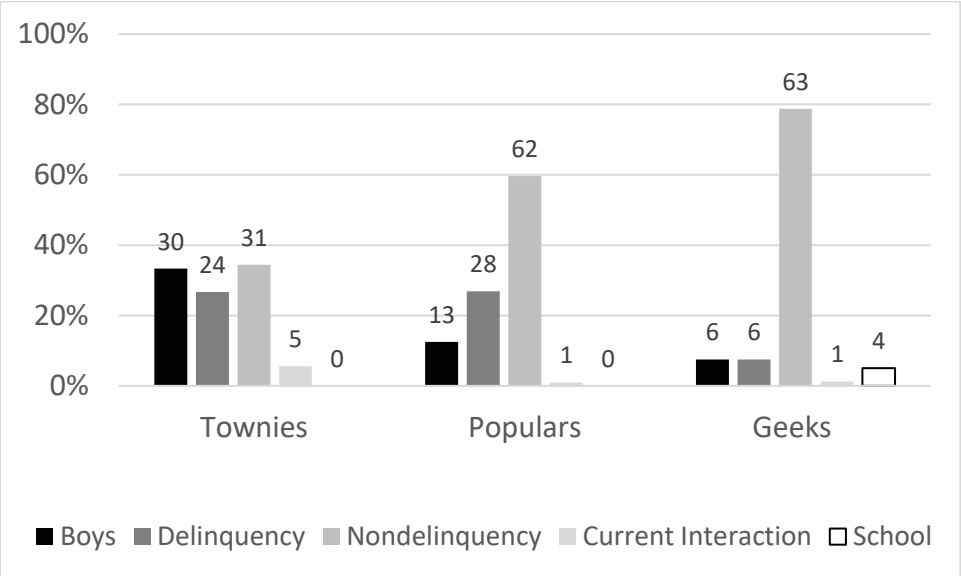

Figure 6: Distribution of topics by CofP in sentences containing negation by postverbal indeterminates [Raw Ns for each topic are given above each bar; percentages were calculated by dividing the number of times each topic was discussed by the total numbers of sentences containing negation with postverbal indeterminates, and multiplying by 100.][9]

Reviewing the results so far, it would seem that negative concord might not just correlate with class, and social group, but it might also index specific forms of social practice too. This is apparent in how the form correlates with content of talk (i.e. what people talk about) and with speaker persona (as encapsulated by CofP membership). With respect to the potential social meanings of negative concord, then, the data considered so far suggests that there is an indexical relation between negative concord and delinquency (and, indeed, any number of social

properties or stances that are ideologically associated with delinquency). The fact that the Townies use negative concord more than anyone else most likely arises from the fact that they are the delinquent group, *par excellence*. That is to say, the relationship between negative concord and the Townie persona is an *n-th* + 1 indexical order (Silverstein 2003; Eckert 2008:484; Moore & Podesva 2009:476–477).

But what is it about negative concord that enables it to operate as an index of delinquency? Labov (1972c:381) notes that negative sentences can "provide a way of evaluating events by placing them against the background of other events which might have happened but which did not". As noted in the opening discussion, Labov (1984:50) has also observed that the introduction of indeterminates to a clause adds intensity and that negative concord itself is further intensifying (see also Greenbaum and Quirk (1990:226 [e]). When discussing the functions of negation, Giora (2006:992–994) also notes its emphatic effects, observing that "a negation marker might, at times, be an intensifier, highlighting the information within its scope". As Labov (1984:43) himself acknowledges, the definition of 'intensity' is difficult to establish. Nonetheless, Beltrama (2016:4) observes that "all intensifiers can be seen as devices that, roughly speaking, strengthen the meaning of the expression they combine with." Consequently, we might assume that speakers call for intensity at moments of emphasis, for instance, when an utterance requires enhancement or discourse prominence. If negative sentences also function as evaluators, it may be that they serve to emphasize a speaker's assessment of the content of their talk.

The excerpt in (1) is taken from an interaction between two Townie girls, who were discussing how teachers treat kids who are in the 'bottom set' (i.e. the teaching group containing pupils who are considered to have the weakest academic abilities). Amanda is describing how her and her friends are disobedient and 'delinquent' – they talk throughout the class and smoke ('going for a fag') – but are not reprimanded by the teacher for doing so ('DTs' refer to detentions).

1. Yeah, cos in last year, in Science, I was in bottom set and I was with all them. It was everyone, like Ellie, Will, Sam, Paul – everyone. And they'd all be there and we'd just talk all the way through. And because we were in bottom set, they expect us to be like that. And **they don't give you DTs or nothing like that.** They just go, 'Alright, quiet. You've had your laugh,' and everything. And they know what we're doing. They talk to us, the teacher, going, 'Oh yeah. Go on, you can go for a fag,' stuff like that. And they don't really care and you don't – **I dint learn nothing last year**.

There are two instances of negative concord in the excerpt which are highlighted in bold. The structure of the first, "they don't give you DTs or nothing like that" could be seen to strengthen the surprising claim that teachers don't punish disobedient students. The second instance of negative concord, "I dint learn nothing last year", is articulated with heavy stress on the indeterminate 'nothing'. Its structure could be seen to emphasise how very little Amanda learnt in a situation that is intended for learning.

Excerpt (1) provides some clues as to why negative concord is a good syntactic vehicle for 'delinquency'. It suggests that discussion of delinquency itself might facilitate the use of intensifying linguistic strategies. After all, reporting delinquency entails the provision of some kind of surprising or remarkable information, given that engaging in delinquency entails subverting normative behavioural expectations.[10] The subversion of expectations is seen in the instances of negative concord in excerpt (1): we wouldn't expect teachers not to punish delinquent pupils, and we wouldn't expect pupils not to learn something in their classes.

This suggests that speakers may use high frequencies of negative concord in discussions of delinquency because such talk requires the use of linguistic strategies which permit the emphasis of unexpected information. But this is not the whole story. It is, of course, also the case that using a form like negative concord adds flavour to a delinquent style. If it didn't, we would expect all speakers, irrespective of social group, background or forms of practice, to use negative concord as a means of expressing intensity and emphasis. But this is clearly not the case. Irrespective of its discourse function, negative concord is the kind of form that is corrected by teachers and other authority figures, who would never utter the form themselves. It does no harm to the persona of a Townie girl to be heard using linguistic forms which are evaluated in this way when the discourse context permits it. Consequently, how negative concord enters into the styles of the CofPs at Midlan High may reflect the interaction between its discourse function and its well-established social meaning as an anti-establishment linguistic device.[11]

Co-present linguistic features

I now move on to a consideration of how negative concord occurs alongside other linguistic forms. The graphs in Figure 7 show the proportion of the vernacular co-occurring features discussed above that are found in sentences containing negation with postverbal indeterminates. Tokens of negative concord are represented by the solid coloured bars, and standard negation is represented by the hatched coloured bars.

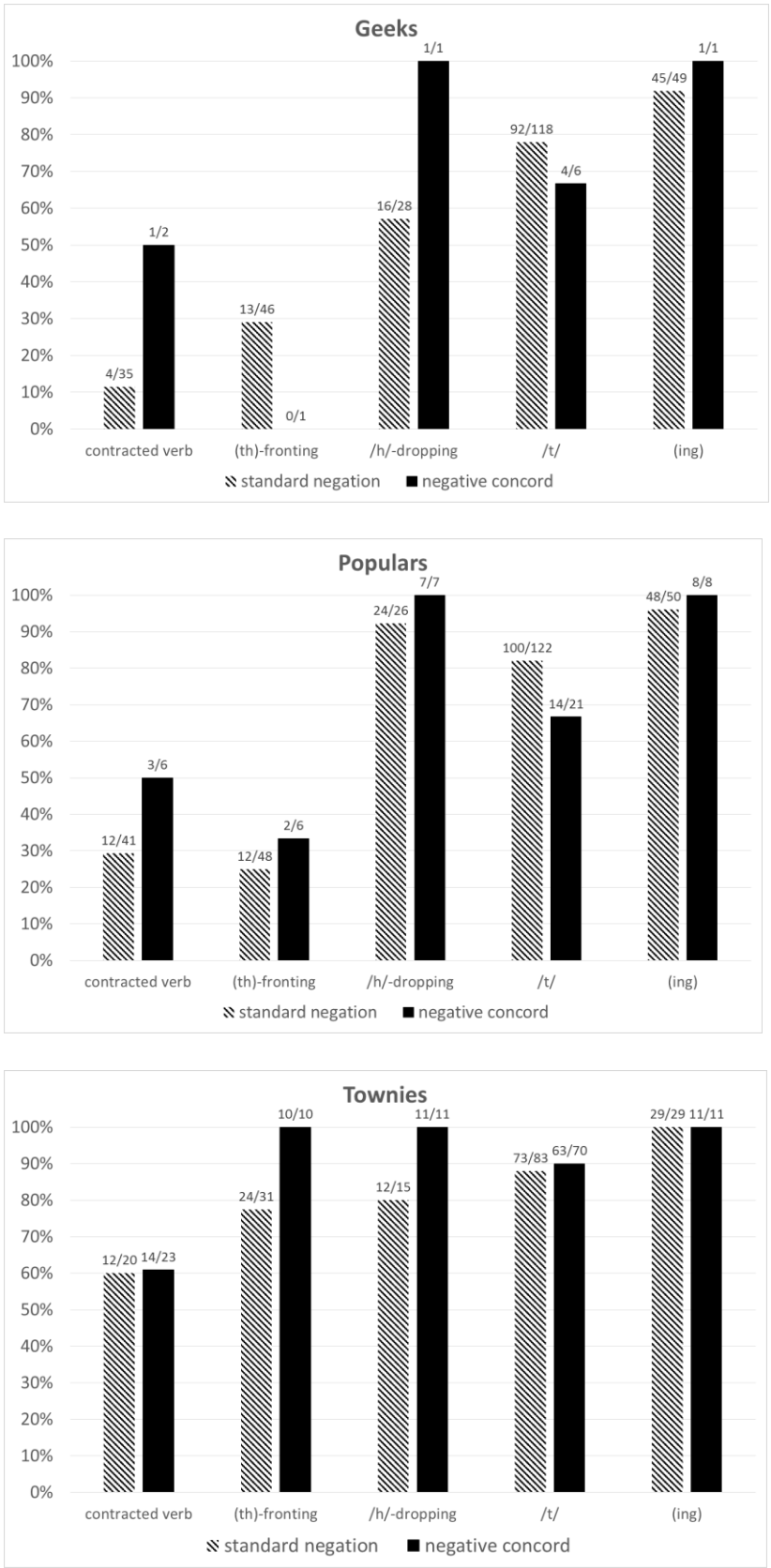

Figure 7. Percentage of vernacular features occurring in sentences containing negation with postverbal indeterminates. [The Ns above each bar show the number of vernacular features as a proportion of the total number of possible occurrences with a specific type of negation.]

The data represented here needs to be interpreted cautiously, given the low data counts for some environments. To take the Geeks' use of contracted verb forms as an example: when their negation was standard, there were 35 instances in which they could have contracted verbs, but they only did so 4 times (or 11.4% of the time). In the context of negative concord, there were 2 instances in which the Geeks could have contracted verbs, and they did so once (or 50% of the time). The analysis also does not fully account for the linguistic constraints on the variation which may govern the occurrence of variable forms. However, given that the syntactic context in which co-present features are analysed is limited to instances of negative concord, there are a smaller number of contrasting linguistic environments in which forms may occur (compared to datasets which compare variants across all syntactic environments). For instance, instances of word-final (ing) in this limited dataset are largely restricted to clause-final instances of *anything* and *nothing*, and instances of (th)-fronting are generally limited to occurrences in these same words.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the first thing to notice is that there are two variables that all groups use in remarkably similar ways. Vernacular pronunciations of /t/ and (ing) are used frequently by all social groups, irrespective of whether or not a speaker uses negative concord. 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 suggests that their potential social meanings in this dataset are not ideologically linked to the same stigmatised associations that negative concord seems to index. This clearly demonstrates that there is no direct correlation between the label 'nonstandard' and the meaning 'stigmatized'. Vernacular variants of /t/ and (ing) may well have social meanings that are primarily associated with dimensions of affect rather than prestige, and that the tendency to express these dimensions runs across all of the speakers in this sample irrespective of social group. It is 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 role of phonetic variables in communicating affect likely explains these findings. They suggest that social meanings may operate at different levels. That is to say, some social meanings may go across a large stretch of discourse, whereas others may be specific to a particular section of talk within a larger unit. This, in turn, will affect the frequency of different linguistic forms on the basis of their relationships with the social meanings articulated.

The second thing to notice in these figures are the extreme patterns in the Townies' data. The Townies use all of the vernacular forms frequently and, notwithstanding some small effects for context, they do so irrespective of whether or not they are using negative concord or standard negation. This contrasts with the other CofPs who combine features in more nuanced ways. For

instance, the Geeks only use high frequencies of /h/-dropping and contracted verb forms when they are using negative concord, and they use very little (th)-fronting (although the only tokens I have of them doing so are in standard negation, rather than negative concord). The Populars show a small but probably insignificant effect according to whether or not /h/-dropping and (th)-fronting occur in negative concord or standard negation, whereas contracted verb forms seem to show a slightly bigger effect for negation context. However, the key thing to notice about the difference between the Populars and the Townies relates to the overall frequencies of (th)-fronting: Populars use this feature far less than the Townies overall.

What does this brief analysis of co-occurring features add to our understanding of the social meanings of the linguistic forms discussed in this paper? The fact that all CofPs 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, more precisely, 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. Given claims made in the sociolinguistic literature about the relationship between this feature and youth norms in the late 1990s/early 2000s (Williams & Kerswill 1999; Kerswill 2003; Stuart-Smith, Timmins & Tweedie 2007; Stuart-Smith & Timmins 2010), it was likely a relatively new change in progress in this community when the data was collected. Furthermore, the greatest users of (th)-fronting in Lawson's (2009) study of adolescent boys in Glasgow were those aligned with a violent counter-culture. As a form of intensification, negative concord might "strengthen the meaning of the expression [it] combine[s] with" (Beltrama 2016:4), therefore the risky meanings of (th)-fronting may be all the more apparent when combined with this syntactic form.[12] Given this, 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 Populars in their pursuit of newer, more daring, more rebellious practices.

The relationship between negative concord and other co-occurring features suggests that this syntactic construction can also enter into symbiotic relationships with other 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 are directly equivalent. The indexical field of a linguistic feature is complex, consisting as it does of a "constellation of ideologically related meanings" (Eckert 2008:454). Therefore, it is likely that the linguistic features that correlate with negative concord only do so relative to a subset of the potential meanings of negative concord. Nonetheless, co-occurrence suggest that some parallel meanings exist and I discuss the implications of this in the final section.

Conclusion

The evolution of third wave sociolinguistics, and its focus on the social meaning of linguistic variation, provides opportunities for the study of syntactic variation. By focusing on occurrences of negative concord in data collected during an ethnographic study, I have demonstrated that – in addition to tracing the social correlates of this form – it is possible to observe the ways in which the pragmatic function of a linguistic feature interacts with the styles of particular communities of practice. My understanding of the nature of social meaning was deepened further by considering how several phonological features and one morpho-lexical feature varied in-step with negative concord. This multi-layered approach analysed the type of individual who uses negative concord, what individuals used this form to talk about, and how the form is constructed within a larger discourse frame. This enabled me to observe where different kinds of linguistic variants (syntactic, phonological, morpho-lexical) shared parallel meanings. More generally, by viewing patterns of variation holistically, I demonstrated that not all nonstandard variants index stigmatised social meanings (as shown by the different ways in which the various phonological variants patterned with negative concord), but also that the meanings of a more obviously 'stigmatized' form (negative concord) are nuanced by the precise contexts in which the feature is uttered and how it is uttered.

The analysis provided above has suggested that more research on syntactic variation has the potential to elucidate our understanding of the contexts in which all kinds of linguistic variation occur. The paucity of research on syntactic variables is no longer just a problem for understanding syntax; it's a problem for understanding how the social meaning of linguistic variation operates across grammatical categories. We cannot escape the fact that speakers utter phonological variation in the context of syntactic constructions. We could chose to see this as simply inconvenient – something to be ignored or overcome in our research designs. Alternatively, we could chose to see it as an opportunity to learn more about how the social meaning of language is structured. As the analysis in this paper has suggested, 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 allow us to more easily identify the meaning potentials which pertain across grammatical levels. That is to say, if the social meaning of syntactic variables can be (relatively easily) 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.

This potential has not been fully recognised in research on social meaning because of the focus on phonological variables at the expense of other levels of the grammar. Cheshire (1987:268) has argued that it doesn't make sense to treat phonology and syntax in the same way. To some extent, it doesn't. As I noted earlier, there are clearly differences between syntactic variation and phonetic and phonological variation. These differences likely have consequences for the ways in which meaning might attach to certain language features, and for how that meaning might develop or change. For instance, while the data in this paper has suggested that negative concord and (th)-fronting have shared meaning potentials, there are plenty of unanswered questions. For instance, what happens when (th)-fronting occurs in another context – say in an imperative (for example, *Try to th*[f]*ink for yourself*), or in a right dislocated tag (for example, *It's a waste of time, this th*[f]*ing*)? That (th)-fronting can occur in a range of syntactic constructions, each of which have their own pragmatic functions and, potentially, their own social meaning potentials, suggests that (th)-fronting has a much broader indexical field than negative concord. (This is, of course, true for nearly all phonological variables.) Nonetheless, our ability to unpack that indexical field may rely upon our ability to observe (th)-fronting in the precise syntactic environments that flavour its meaning potentials. So while it makes sense to separate out grammatical levels, failing to acknowledge how they interact in the process of meaning-making greatly reduces our abilities to tell the whole story about language variation and social meaning.

This chapter began by evaluating the challenges to the study of syntactic variation, noting how these challenges have led to syntactic variables being under-represented in variationist research. I argued that these challenges are largely neutralised when our goal is to understand the social meaning of linguistic variation. However, in examining the co-occurrence of syntactic variation and variation at other levels of the grammar, I hope to have demonstrated that increased research on syntactic variation will not just help us to understand the social meanings of syntax, it will also help us understand the social meaning of language variation full stop.

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Notes

[1] Thanks to Jenny Cheshire for an initially anonymous critical and insightful review of the first draft of this paper, and to Julia Snell for further helping me to clarify my ideas. Any remaining errors are, of course, my own.

[2] Here, and throughout this chapter, I use the term 'phonological variation' as short-hand for phenomena that is both phonetic and phonological (and more phonetic than phonological in a large number of cases). Although not ideal, I use 'phonological variation' because it is the term most commonly used in the existing literature which discusses differences between syntactic variation and phonetic/phonological variation (see, for instance, the quotation from Sankoff in the first paragraph of this chapter).

[3] Of course, the linguistic variable is a heuristic analytical device (Labov 1978) that was never intended to reveal much about social meaning. Rather it was intended to simplify the comparison of forms so that language change could be easily modelled. See, for instance, García (1985:203, 213) who notes that Weiner and Labov (1983:31) approach their discussion and analysis of the passive with "a bold simplification of the problems of meaning".

[4] See also Campbell-Kibler (2016) for a discussion of the limits of the sociolinguistic monitor as currently conceived.

[5] While Eckert presents phonetic variables as being the primary carriers of affect, see Ochs and Schiefflin (1989:22) who argue that "[o]ne cannot argue for a clean division of labor between areas of the grammar assigned to logical and affective functions. One cannot argue, for example, that syntax exclusively serves logical function while affective functions are carried out by intonation and the lexicon. Affect permeates the entire linguistic system. Almost any aspect of the linguistic system that is variable is a candidate for expressing affect".

[6] Eckert (2018:190) also argues that "referential components" differentiate syntactic and phonological features because the former are primarily propositional, such that "whether a sentence is negative or positive depends upon the nature of the proposition, but once negation

occurs, there's a choice whether to use the standard or the non-standard form". However, it's not clear how this referential function is any different from the fact that occurrences of a phonetic variable are occasioned by the need for a speaker to produce an utterance containing the variable. So, whether /t/ occurs depends upon whether a speaker utters /kat/ or /kab/, and one could equally argue that there is then a choice about whether to use a particular variant. Nonetheless, as discussed above, the very structure of a syntactic item might determine what the form can pragmatically communicate, and this may determine (and even restrict) the social meanings associated with it.

[7] The term 'indeterminate' is used following Labov (1972a:775) who states that "the label 'indeterminate' was first applied by Klima (1964) to distinguish *any, ever* and *either* from other indefinites like *some*, primarily on the basis of their co-occurrence with negative and question features."

[8] Figure 5 also suggests that the context in which the Townies use the largest proportion of negative concord is 'current interaction' (recall that this is talk occasioned by the recording situation itself). However, as can be seen in the Townie's graph, the figures here are very low (there are only 5 instances of negation with postverbal indeterminates in this context, and 3 of these are negative concord). It is possible that the correlation between negative concord and the current interaction indicates something about the nature of Townie peer interaction which differs from the peer interaction of other groups, but more data would be required to substantiate this.

[9] To give an example: for the Townies, there were 90 tokens in total (as can be seen from adding up the raw figures for all this CoP's topics). There were 30 times in which Townies talked about boys. So the percentage Townies talked about boy was 33.3% (30 divided 90, multiplied by 100).

[10] It may be that the context of the study facilitated the occurrence of negative concord to some extent. It may be an particular useful linguistic device for young people who wish to articulate a

'delinquent' identity to someone they know reasonably well (the fieldworker), but who is, nonetheless, an outsider.

[11] See, also, Eisikovits (1991), who found that male adolescents used nonstandard *don't* (vs *doesn't*) when talking about anti-establishment values and affirming the speaker's 'toughness'.

[12] This might explain why the Geeks only ever use (th)-fronting with standard negation. Of course, as I elaborate in the conclusion, the indexical field of (th)-fronting is likely to be broad, and precise social meanings will be conditioned by the component of the larger style in which it occurs. This will further differentiate the uses of different CofPs. So, while it may seem surprising that the Geeks use (th)-fronting at all, the precise ways in which (th)-fronting enters into their repertoire may be subtly, but significantly, different from the ways in which this form enters into the Townies' repertoire. Discourse analysis is required to explore this further, and I hope to undertake this analysis in subsequent work.