The Indexical Cycle and the making of sociolinguistic meaning: Differentiating New Zealand and Australian Englishes

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The Indexical Cycle models the processes by which language, particularly linguistic variation, generates social meaning. It addresses questions such as: How do linguistic variants accrue social meaning? Why do they do so? Who is responsible? And why do some other forms not do so?

This issue has been addressed since the early days of sociolinguistics, initially by Ferguson & Gumperz and especially Labov. From the 1980s Silverstein theorized the process in a more sophisticated fashion in terms of indexicality, followed by Irvine & Gal (iconization), Agha (enregisterment) and Eckert.

In this paper I build on an early attempt by Bell to model these processes as the foundation of Audience Design theory. The Indexical Cycle identifies five stages through which linguistic forms accrue social meanings based on the social distinctiveness of their users, then become evaluated and emulated by others, and eventually may serve as the focus of linguistic performance and overt comment.

I develop and test this model on data from New Zealand and Australian Englishes. New Zealand has long been keen to differentiate itself from its much larger neighbour. Two salient markers of this difference are the DRESS and KIT vowels. Both have taken part in the southern short front vowel shift, but differentially in the two national varieties. I examine the past movements of the two vowels through the Indexical Cycle, and analyze how this is expressed in the present in performed expressions of dialect difference when performers 'do' the other variety. I examine the 'how' of this development, and 'who' it has involved. I then seek to understand 'why' one of the vowel differences has become an icon of distinction between the two Englishes, while the other flies underneath the radar of sociolinguistic awareness.

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