Beyond "Enregistered Dialects": Linguistic Form and Social Meaning in Time and Space

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Sociolinguists interested in the areal and social distribution of linguistic forms and sets of forms have found Asif Agha’s term "enregisterment" useful as a label for the process by which language forms get semiotically linked with social meanings. In some of this work, a set of forms that are associated, by people in a particular community or area, with a place or a group of people is referred to as an "enregistered dialect." An enregistered dialect, in this sense, is a dialect that people are aware of, often because it has become linked in popular discourse with a city or an area. While the idea of an enregistered dialect can be useful, I argue that it can obscure the historical, contingent, and fragmentary nature of the links between language forms and meanings – precisely the aspects of semiosis that the concept of enregisterment can help us describe.

To support this claim, I first propose a definition of enregisterment and then consider each of the elements of the enregisterment process in turn, drawing on my work in Pittsburgh, US for illustrations. I ask, for example, what is enregistered, individual linguistic forms or sets of forms? What are the "registers" to which linguistic forms can be semiotically linked? Who enregisters forms with meanings, individuals, or communities? How do they do this, by using the forms, by modeling them, by talking about them? What sorts of ideologies shape the enregisterment process? When and where is enregisterment likely to occur? How do the results of enregisterment spread across speakers and communities?

In light of these questions and answers, I then ask how the meanings created through enregisterment can be distributed across time and space. I describe the patterns of variation and change that are modeled in terms of "orders of indexicality," and "indexical fields," and I propose a third alternative, "indexical layering," to describe the heterogeneous, shifting sociolinguistic world people experience in a city like Pittsburgh.

Keywords: