

Unexpected, Owned, and Contrasted: Constructing a Border Neighborhood in the Sociolinguistic Interview

Although modern sociolinguistics takes as a given that communities can be formed by mutual shared practice (Bucholtz, 1999; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992 and others), for most speakers with whom we work, the notion of “community” is deeply imbued in their understanding of the physical spaces in which they work and live. As such, in pursuit of a full understanding of the social meaning of any given speaker’s speech, we must consider the “where” of speakers’ experiences, and the ways in which they take stances regarding that space.

This paper is a discourse analysis of two sociolinguistic interviews from the Language and Communication in the District of Columbia (LCDC) project (Schilling and Podesva 2008), an ongoing project of the Georgetown University Department of Linguistics. The interviews were both conducted by the author for use in a course in sociolinguistic field methods in the spring of 2009. This particular class studied the neighborhood of Takoma, D.C. and its adjacent and complementary neighborhood, Takoma Park, Maryland.

Interview one was conducted with “Peter,” a fifty-seven-year-old, African American lifetime D.C. resident and owner of a barbershop in the neighborhood. It was conducted by two interviewers over the course of two and a half hours, and has been the subject of further study on addressee-induced style shift by the author. Interview two was conducted with “Duncan,” a mid-thirties coffee shop owner also in the neighborhood. The author interviewed this subject alone. Both interviews employed traditional sociolinguistic interviewing techniques, and also included the drawing of a cognitive map of the Takoma/Takoma Park neighborhood.

In the course of their interviews, both Duncan and Peter use methods such as contrasting Takoma to other neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., and by taking stances toward the other D.C. spaces, are able to characterize Takoma as both contested space, but also race-neutral and pleasant space. They create Takoma by using narratives to illustrate the character of the people they find in their community, by taking their own stances toward the issues they perceive as salient in their community and the prevalent ideologies of race and involvement in the community, and also by contrasting Takoma with other places in the District of Columbia. Each of these is then drawn upon to cast Takoma in the light which that speaker chooses, and ultimately create an image of a border neighborhood—both appreciated for its urban cosmopolitanism, and celebrated for its suburban peace.

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