

Unexpected, Owned, and Contrasted:  
Constructing Takoma Park in the Sociolinguistic Interview

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**Abstract**

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.

**Introduction**

All of us live and work in communities. They may be imagined or concrete, defined geographically or socially, separate entities or intertwined. Language practice is instantiated in

community as a means for community members to show affiliation or distance (cf. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, Bucholtz 1999, Labov 1966 and others). Thus it is reasonable that one place we might begin in looking at language practice is by examining how members of a community discuss the communities of which they find themselves a part.

One of the first large-scale studies of language and community in Washington D.C. was conducted by Ralph Fasold in 1972. He examined the intersections between race, space, and language, and the ways in which community members of different races use language to identify with others who share their affiliation. Modan (2007) examined a single community within the District, Mount Pleasant, for the ways in which the linguistic landscape and the individual discourse of the communities' residents contribute to larger Discourses about space, race, gentrification, and urban living. Since Fasold, no large-scale studies of Washington D.C. have been conducted until the current Language and Communication in the District of Columbia project (Schilling and Podesva 2008), a joint ongoing project of the faculty and graduate students of the linguistics department of Georgetown University, of which this paper is a part.

In all of these studies, one primary tool for understanding the ways in which community is being defined and interpreted is the sociolinguistic interview. Within the sociolinguistic interview, the speaker is allowed to discuss freely his stances toward any given issue (DuBois 2007), to tell stories which illustrate the nature of the place, and to draw comparisons between the place being discussed to situate it within larger discourses of community and place. In this paper, I examine how two speakers, "Duncan"<sup>1</sup> and "Peter," both business owners in the Washington, D.C. neighborhood of Takoma, use elements of narrative, stance-taking, and contrast to construct and characterize the community in which they work.

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<sup>1</sup>Names of informants are pseudonyms.

## **The Interviews**

The interviews examined for this paper come 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 (Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994) by the author (Grieser 2010).

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.

Neither of the interviewees is a current resident of Takoma, however, both were raised in adjacent communities; Peter in Ft. Totten, and Duncan in Petworth.

Taken together, the two interviews provide contrasting views of Takoma, and therefore are very instructive in how individual speakers can construct a place through discourse.

## **Takoma D.C./Takoma Park, MD**

Takoma/Takoma Park is a neighborhood directly on the border between Washington, D.C. and Montgomery and Prince George's counties, Maryland. It is served by a station for the

Metrorail system, Washington D.C.'s city subway system, making it accessible without a car. It is bordered by the Petworth neighborhood to the southwest and the Maryland city of Silver Spring to the north.

Takoma is considered a wealthier neighborhood of Washington, D.C., with a median household income of \$48,000 as of the 2000 census according to the Takoma Park Census and Community Information Website (TPCCI), approximately \$8,000 more than the national median. The median family income is \$63,000, \$13,000 than the national median. 8.4% of its residents lived below the federal poverty line in 2000. The neighborhood is also relatively ethnically balanced, with a population that is 48% white and 34% African American. It is a highly educated community, with over 85% of its adults residents holding high school diplomas, and 49% holding bachelor's degrees or higher.

These characteristics make Takoma/Takoma Park an interesting place to study. Its ethnic makeup provides for an interesting contrast to other parts of the District of Columbia, which is often considered to be a predominately African American city, and which has been shown in recent census to be very racially segregated. This segregation and the migration patterns, which cause it may have effects on the use of linguistic features which can be used to index racial identity (Podesva et. al. forthcoming). Takoma's mix of residents of different races as well as its being home to many residents of mixed race mean that it is a place where issues of racial identity, or racial plurality become codified in the space, and it is an ideal place to discover how residents talk about issues of race as they pertain to the neighborhood where they work and live.

### **“Just a Guy Doing It”: Takoma as Unexpectedly Positive Space**

When one exits the train at the Takoma metrorail station, one is greeted with an almost super-idyllic space—a neat parking lot, adjacent to a well-manicured small park. Cedar St., which borders the metrorail station and is a main thoroughfare through the neighborhood, is lined with several small businesses; the only franchise restaurant, Subway, is up a ways in the Maryland side of the community.

In his interview, Peter describes the space of Takoma by challenging the interviewers to compare it to other locales:

You go in any section of Washington D. C. where there's a metro  
station across the street  
and a seven-eleven  
and it's quiet.  
It's peaceful.

Takoma is situated between an urban district neighborhood (Petworth) and a suburban Maryland town (Silver Spring), causing it to embody characteristics of both the urban and the suburban areas which surround it. However, its identity in many ways comes from the creation of contrast between the urban center of Washington D.C. of which it is technically a part. In this quote, Peter draws a contrast between Takoma and other areas of Washington D.C. by referring to the qualities which surround the metro station at Takoma: “quiet” and “peaceful.” By discussing the existence of a metrorail station and a Seven-Eleven, Peter draws on the expectation in his listener’s minds that such a place will not be quiet and peaceful, thus elevating the existence of these qualities in Takoma as special. The use of “any section in Washington D.C.” challenges the interviewers to compare Takoma with all other places, and “any” creates an implicature that every other section of D.C. with a metrorail station will not have the qualities which Peter ascribes to Takoma.

The construction of Takoma as a positive space takes place through these contrasts of Takoma to other communities, in particular the D.C. neighborhood Anacostia, within Peter's interview. Many times this is achieved simply by contrasting what goes on in Takoma with what might be expected in a community. Peter is a new member of the community, having opened his shop some eight months prior to the interview. This gives him the opportunity to cast Takoma as an unusual space through a narrative of how he was welcomed to the community as a new business owner.

Yeah yeah I tell you if you if you stay here long enough you  
know  
when I first got here  
I thought I thought it was the  
the strangest thing happened to me  
A guy came by  
and he had a basket  
and he welcomed me  
because I I had a business another shop on Martin Luther King  
avenue in Southeast  
which is night and day  
I been at that shop over there for about twelve years  
but a guy came by here  
he had a basket  
and I stood out front  
and watched him  
he was over at the seven-eleven  
he stayed there for a minute

and he stopped up at the cleaner's  
and he stopped next door  
and he came by  
and stopped with me  
and said, "Hello, how are you,  
uh we understand that you are uh a new business owner here,  
we want to welcome you to the neighborhood."  
I forget what he said his name was,  
he told me his name,  
and he had a basket with one dollar bills in it  
and he pulled out three of them and said  
here, this is in case somebody is short for their haircut  
today.  
Have a good hhh  
somebody is couple dollars short on their haircut.

From the outset of his narrative, Peter frames this story in contrast to expectation. In the abstract to his narrative (Labov 1972), Peter provides the evaluation that the story about to be told is the “strangest thing.” The use of “strangest” presupposes that there is some state of affairs in which the following behavior is not the norm, and places Peter’s narrative in contrast to that behavior. Like his statement about going to “any section of Washington D.C.” and finding peace and quiet, his evaluation of this story’s content as “strange” positions Takoma as a place which is positively contrasted to the remainder of Washington D.C. In addition, he places Takoma in direct contrast to other locations he talks about in the interview, in particular the D.C. neighborhood of Anacostia, where he owns a second shop.

Peter invites the interviewers to follow with him watching as the “basket man” approaches his shop by using temporally ordered phrases (Labov and Waletzky 1968) with

identical syntax. The repetition of the syntax *and he verb+ed* allows the listener to “watch” as the basket man performs the actions of moving from business to business as he approaches the barbershop. It also has the effect of increasing the time it takes to get to the punch line of the story of why it is that this man is behaving this way, and because the listener is forced to wait longer for the explanation, this way of telling the story also underscores the unusual nature of the man’s actions.

Through both his external evaluation (Labov 1972) of the man’s actions as strange as well as his use of strictly temporally-ordered clauses to stave off the “punch line” of his narrative, Peter is able to underscore that such kindness, found in Takoma, is an unusual place seemingly filled with people who do positive things. This point is made further when one of the interviewers asks, “This was just a guy doing this?” and Peter answers, “He was just a guy doing it.” The “just” in this statement contrasts to some expected function of someone with a basket of money for new business owners, perhaps a member of the community board, or someone acting in some other official capacity. Instead, the subject of this narrative is “just a guy,” likely or supposedly acting under his own volition and out of his own kindness. In fact, Peter goes on in the interview to describe the man as so virtuous he even refuses to pay any kind of discount for his haircut. Thus this narrative, coupled with Peter’s statements about the environment of Takoma, serve to contrast Takoma with the existing (other areas in DC near a metrorail station) and the expected (that people not in an official capacity will not go out of their way to greet a new business owner), casting the neighborhood of Takoma as a pleasant space in a way that outsiders such as the interviewers might find unexpected.

### **“Takoma Park Is Not For Sale”: Ownership and Ordinances**

One issue that comes up in the construction of Takoma as a place is the degree to which Takoma is owned by, and subsequently policed by, its residents. In answer to the description of the gentleman who comes around with the basket of dollar bills in the narrative described above, Peter goes to his window and retrieves a bumper sticker he keeps there, which he feels sums up the behavior of the gentleman with the basket and explains a good deal about Takoma itself.

Show you what.

This this one bumper sticker that I picked up from up the street explains it all.

Takoma Park is not for sale.

Someone someone owns it.

Every piece of something around here, someone owns it and people have to have a total different uh attitude toward things from when they're buying it or when they own it

or when they're renting it from someone else.

You know look around everything that you see around here looks like it belongs to someone that cares about it.

What does it mean for a place to be “owned,” particularly in the sense of an entire community? The bumper sticker itself, as well as Peter’s invocation of it in the course of explaining his feelings about Takoma, play on several general assumptions of ownership. When something is owned, it is presumed to be taken care of by its owner. Saying that an entire neighborhood is owned, therefore, implies a degree of caretaking on the part of the residents of the neighborhood. In the course of his interview Peter reveals that the ownership of Takoma is both literal, in that houses in Takoma are often passed down from generation to generation, but also deals with this caretaking aspect:

Go around another section.  
You see boarded-up building  
and somebody own it  
but they don't care nothing about it.

As with the discussion of what Takoma looks like near the metrorail station, Peter creates a picture of Takoma in part by contrasting Takoma to “another section [of town]” where buildings are boarded up. This image is invoked to contrast with the neighborhood of Takoma, where the lack of boarded up buildings is supposed to indicate that Takoma is cared for by its residents.

However, the bumper sticker does not merely say that Takoma Park is owned, it also says it is “not for sale.” This implies yet another level of ownership—not only the care involved in owning something, but also a desire to keep it. In fact, Peter mentions that the boarded up building is owned, “but they don’t care nothing about it.” By not being “for sale,” Takoma says to the outsiders that it is not only owned but also strongly desired. The bumper sticker implies that no one wishes to be rid of Takoma, they own it and won’t be accepting payment for it. It is perhaps this desire which results in the care in which Peter takes so much pride.

At the same time, ownership is not without its questions and problems. The reality of a community is that while a community’s members may have a sense of ownership and of the community belonging to them in such a way that they desire to care for it, a community at large cannot actually be owned by a person, or even by a group of people. The ways in which Takoma’s residents try to exercise their “ownership” of the community is the topic of much discussion in both Peter’s and Duncan’s interviews. Both note the abundance of ordinances in the area, although the two have quite different opinions of them. Peter, for example, finds them to be another example of how community members assist one another:

It's like a small country town.

You gotta remember um the Mason-Dixon line is in Annapolis  
and we're below we're below Annapolis  
so it's the country.

We down south.

It's a lot of southern hap- hospitality here.

People mix it now right about now we got

(2 lines omitted)

Um there're people from all over the world that are starting

to come into Takoma Park

and um the people that live here I see them updating people

educating people

we don't throw trash here

no we don't do this do that

you get a lot of ordinances here

and there are people here that will let you know

For Peter, the existence of ordinances are not so much an imposition on the other citizens of Takoma, but rather a way for the citizens of Takoma to show their welcome. He frames his discussion of the ordinances by situating Takoma geographically, “we’re below Annapolis [the Mason-Dixon line]...we down south.” In addition, current residents informing new residents of what to do, is described as “updating” and “educating.” Both these words have very positive connotations, and although the words that Peter ascribes to those doing the “updating” might be easily interpreted as face-threatening orders (Brown and Levinson 1987), the positive connotations of “updating” and “educating” in the context of southern hospitality serve to frame the actions of the Takoma residents as beneficial to, rather than imposing upon, those newcomers to their community.

Peter's view of the Takoma ordinances is not, however, shared by Duncan. As a younger proprietor of a business in Takoma, Duncan discusses the impact of the community's ideals on the way he and others are able to run their businesses:

Imagine if you took a bunch of hippies and yuppies  
and threw them in in one neighborhood  
and they all got together  
and said "let's make this a semi-commune."

Right?

Sort of like a public/private hybrid here.

So the community has put out a number of zoning rules that make it  
difficult for a business to exist.

And they complain about everything.

Which is understandable, I mean it's your community,  
you have the right to complain.

Um but they wanted it to be directly

the businesses that survive in this neighborhood are the businesses  
that cater to the neighborhood.

Duncan paints a completely different image of Takoma's ordinances than does Peter. Rather than them being a sign of welcome and inclusion, they are means to exclude businesses that do not "cater to the community." He goes on to describe the kinds of businesses he feels are wanted by Takoma: boutique-style stores that are difficult for their owners to sustain profitably. For example, he describes the plight of the small boutique shop down the street:

Their business is a very eclectic, organic, all-natural kind of  
store  
where you can find Children's books  
and uh Hippiewear hhhh

I can't think of anything else hhhh

But unfortunately, as great as that is,

and the community does its best to support it,

it's not sustainable.

Because even though that's exactly what they want in the community,

they can't sustain it.

The word “sustain” and “sustainability” are used repeatedly in Duncan’s discourse, to describe the necessary outcome of a business in Takoma; they occur five times in 649 words as he describes the nature of running a business in the neighborhood. To him, the desires of the community to have certain types of businesses are largely at odds with the community’s ability to support those businesses. By framing the existence of ordinances in the neighborhood as being a hindrance for businesses rather than a gesture from one helpful neighbor to another, Duncan paints a very different picture of Takoma’s ownership: to him, Takoma is owned, but not by those who might wish to do business there.

### **“There Are No Secrets in Southeast”: Takoma in Contrast**

Often what informs our understanding of what any given thing *is* an understanding of what it is not. Both Duncan and Peter contrast Takoma to other parts of the District of Columbia and the Maryland suburbs in order to create the image of Takoma they wish to project to the interviewer. In Peter’s case, Takoma is contrasted mainly to the location where he runs a second barbershop, Anacostia.

Anacostia is a neighborhood in the southeast quadrant of the District of Columbia that is over ninety percent African American according to the 2000 census (Podesva et. al. forthcoming). Its crime rate is higher; its population less affluent and less educated than the

residents of Takoma. Because its population is so different from that of Takoma, it is readily drawn upon for the purpose of making Takoma seem more like the unexpectedly pleasant place that he creates through his early narrative. For example, we can contrast the basket man narrative with a narrative he tells about southeast.

there's two things about southeast thatcha have to know.

One is there are no secrets in Southeast.

None.

If you're doin' if there's anything you don't want to be

known,

don't do it in southeast

because they feel that it's perfectly all right to get in your

business.

I would could sit there all day

and cut hair

and there would be a guy in the woods behind the shop

and I had paid no attention to

that I did not know was there,

could probably tell you how many heads I cut and how much

money I had in my pocket

'cause he had no business of his own

...

He had came down

and asked me for two dollars

and I asked him I said wait a minute

cause I know he expecting me to come off real crazy

whuhhh {makes noises to imitate craziness}

I said let me get this straight.

You want me to give you two dollars.  
You want me to reach into my pocket  
and the money that I stood there all day long and cut hair  
with  
take my money  
and give it to you  
so you can go back up into the woods  
and smoke some crack (until) the milk crate and drink beer  
with the money that I made all day  
is that what you askin'  
is that what you said 'cause I'm not understandin'.  
you know  
He man no man you done got at least two hundred twenty dollars  
man,  
you can't give me two?

Peter uses this narrative to characterize a number of features about Southeast. One is the existence of those with little else to do than “get in your business:” in fact, the entire story hinges on the wino character knowing that Peter has two hundred and twenty dollars because he has been counting the number of people who’ve come into the shop and knows how much per person Peter has likely charged. In this way, Southeast simultaneously becomes a place where others are idle, but also a place where private information cannot be held that way.

At the same time, this narrative is told in response to the question from one of the interviewers, “And how does this compare you said you also have a barbershop uh in Southeast.” Because this narrative is told in response to the implied directive from the interviewer to compare the two barbershops, it serves as a commentary on Takoma as much as it is a commentary on Anacostia. Peter refers to Anacostia being “night and day” when compared to

Takoma, and by doing so, he invites his audience to reflect on the ways Takoma is not like Anacostia. Because Takoma and Anacostia are to be “night and day” (i.e. polar opposites) of each other, through the contrast to the characterization of Anacostia in this narrative, Takoma is characterized as a place of privacy, and a place of work. By using this narrative to explain what his other shop is like, Peter creates a particular image of Takoma, one which fits the other ways he has characterized the neighborhood so far: a place of peace, privacy, and where people are hardworking and caring.

Like Peter, Duncan also contrasts Takoma with other parts of D.C. in order to explain how he views the area. As we see with the discussion of ordinances, however, Duncan’s view of Takoma is one which privileges the sustainability of business over the preferences of individuals. Thus it is unsurprising that many of Duncan’s contrasts center around the economic viability of Takoma’s practices compared with those of neighboring communities. For example, he contrasts Takoma with the neighboring area of Petworth:

I used to be an idealist,  
until the reality sunk in  
And I look at it from a business perspective  
and I'm simply saying like,  
look you guys have very great ideas  
but the way you go about it is not effective.  
Your message doesn't go beyond your local community.  
You go next door to the community right down the street which is  
Petworth,  
and everything that they do that's positive in Takoma goes right out  
the window.  
There's no recycling in Petworth.

There's no compost bin pile in Petworth.  
There's no  
you go to a restaurant there  
and they look- and you ask them if they recycle  
They'll look at you like  
Why do I want to spend an extra hundred and fifty dollars on garbage  
collection you know?

Unlike Peter, Duncan uses contrast to underscore not the value of Takoma but rather its inefficacy. He uses a long string of existential *there*, which is commonly used to introduce new referents into discourse (Schiffrin 2006). In this case, the existential allows Duncan to marshal a list of the things that are absent in Petworth, and which by contrast are implied to be present in Takoma. The structure of this list and its items serve as an indictment of sorts against Takoma, and an argument that what its citizens do, as beneficial as they may seem to others like Peter, are completely ignored outside their community and therefore largely ineffectual.

### **Conclusion: Takoma Contested**

It is readily apparent that different community members will construct their communities in different ways, choosing to emphasize the parts of their experiences that bolster their own positions. For Peter, Takoma is a place of peace and welcome, for Duncan, Takoma is a place which hinders his and others' abilities to operate a business. Yet upon examination we can find similarities in the ways that speakers can characterize their community; through contrast both with assumed qualities in abstract, in the case of a peaceful metrorail station, or with a concrete locale such as Anacostia or Petworth, and through stance-taking with regard to a community issue such as the ordinances in Takoma Park.

To Duncan and Peter, Takoma is at once idyllic and idealistic, helpful and confining. 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 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.

The ways in which individuals talk about their communities can tell us a great deal both about the communities and about the speakers themselves; their orientations towards the topics talked instantiate their community in relation to its members. In examining the ways speakers have of making meaning of the physical space in which they live and work, we can better understand how a community is created and maintained in the eyes of those who participate in it.

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