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# Language, Ideology, Media and Social Change

Nikolas Coupland

Social change is rarely treated in sociolinguistics, even though other perspectives on change, and the specific interpretation of language change developed in variationist traditions, are fundamental. A concept of “sociolinguistic change” should be able to embed analyses of language change, taken to include change in the ideological loadings of linguistic varieties, within accounts of social change. The mass media, generally precluded from analyses of language change, are a powerful resource promoting and disseminating sociolinguistic change. “Standard” and “non-standard” language, interpreted as ideological attributions, are reassessed in relation to social change in Britain over the last 50 years, particularly changes in the constitution of social class. The framing and significance of class-related voices are then briefly explored in a sequence from the popular-culture, high-reach, British TV show, *Strictly Come Dancing*. Conventional sociolinguistic accounts of “standard” and “non-standard” speech fail to capture the characterological work done in the TV performance, and arguably much more generally in the less socially structured and more multi-centred and globalised circumstances of late modernity.

The main traditions in the study of dialect have had plenty to say about language change but little to say about *social* change, even though the two sorts of change are necessarily inter-related.<sup>1</sup> The very possibility of construing linguistic and social dimensions of change separately comes

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Justine Coupland, Peter Garrett and particularly Adam Jaworski for comments on an earlier draft and to Elen Robert, Janus Mortensen and Charlotte Selleck for their many contributions to discussions of these issues. An earlier version of this text was presented as a tribute to Tore Kristiansen on the happy occasion of his 60th birthday.

about because the linguistic has often taken precedence over the social in dialect research, rather than language and society being seen as mutually constitutive entities, and indeed processes. Let us initially take a quick and sketchy tour around three broad approaches to dialect.

The approach commonly referred to as traditional dialectology, associated in England, for example, with Harold Orton's work on the *Survey of English Dialects* (Wakelin; Chambers and Trudgill) seemed to freeze both linguistic and social change. Dialect surveys sought to capture the forms and patterns of the rural speech of older people, and therefore the sociolinguistic norms of earlier generations – earlier relative to the moment of the research survey. This was a dialectology of the *pre-modern*, redolent with “folk” values and interests. The concerns of traditional dialectology were certainly connected with historical linguistics, opening a window on the speech of the rural English past and aiming to preserve what it found. This “traditional dialect geography” had a strong social and cultural leaning, in the sense that older linguistic forms bore witness to older cultural practices. But processes of social change were not of interest in themselves. Social change was simply the underlying force that was undermining traditional dialects.

Urban variationist sociolinguistics (Chambers, “TV makes people sound the same;” Labov, *Pattern; Principles*) majors on linguistic change. Variation in speaker age has been a key methodological resource, but this time in order to study language change in “apparent time,” across different age-cohorts in the same locality, where cohort differences at one sampling time are assumed to stand proxy for changes across “real time.” The time that matters most for the apparent time method is the end of the critical period for language acquisition, when people's vernacular speech norms are, it is argued, consolidated, allowing young adult speech patterns across a range of familiar social categories such as gender and class to stand for their cohort types. There is no interest in how any particular historical configuration, in a socio-cultural sense, might shape the forms or functions of the speech varieties or systems in question. Time in variationist sociolinguistics is operationalised as a series of sampling points for the measurement of how language varieties, viewed as autonomous systems, are changing. Social class at time 1, for example, is theorised to be the same as social class at time 2. In variationism there is no attempt to understand how language variation and use are embedded in changing socio-cultural ecosystems. Variationism's rather sparse social theory has been a common criticism (Coupland, *Style*). This approach to dialect is rooted in *modernist* assumptions about society, assuming relatively fixed models of gender, class and age.

More recent, social constructionist approaches to dialect often claim some sort of warrant in the circumstances of late modernity, and I have made this claim myself. The argument runs that the social conditions of late modernity (taken to mean post-industrial, fast-capitalist, globalising modernity – see Giddens) require a more fluid approach to sociolinguistic and semiotic function. When researchers approach “dialect” and “standard” language in this framework, they are sceptical about what these terms can actually mean in late modernity, both in general and then in any specific context of linguistic performance. The social categories that variationists have mainly relied on are argued to be becoming unreliable; identities are more contextualised and ephemeral, more amenable to agentive construction – the social through the linguistic (Coupland and Jaworski). Social change is certainly on the agenda here in a couple of different respects. But critics can correctly say that constructionist sociolinguistics has not adequately demonstrated the connection between micro acts in discourse and anything we might take to define the current historical moment. It is fair to say that the link between language use and late modernity often tends to be presumed in dialect-focused research (although Rampton, *Language in Late Modernity* is an important exception).<sup>2</sup>

So, as a broad generalisation, each of these three approaches to dialect engages only in very limited ways with social change. But there are plenty of *prima facie* reasons to take social change seriously in sociolinguistics, and in the analysis of what we call “standards” and “dialects”<sup>3</sup> as part of that. To put it negatively, it is inconceivable that the social values that attach to “standard speech” are the same today as they were 50 or 60 years ago. Take for example the Queen’s speech in a British context. Studies have shown how it has changed over time (Harrington; Harrington, Palethorpe and Watson; Wales 1994) and they help make the point that change in speech norms over the adult lifespan is far from impossible. But it is also true that “the Queen’s speech” – especially if we understand that phrase in the determinate sense of her annual Christmas TV “broadcast to the nation” – operates in a different sociolinguistic environment today from earlier decades. I am thinking of how these broadcasts, in the earliest years of Queen Elizabeth’s reign

<sup>2</sup> Non-dialect sociolinguistics is, on the other hand, increasingly interested in the relationship between language and social change – see, for example, Chouliaraki and Fairclough.

<sup>3</sup> I persist in putting “standard” and “non-standard” in quotation marks firstly because these default terms in sociolinguistics have not been subjected to enough critical consideration; and secondly because whatever relationship they originally pointed to between language and society now needs to be reassessed. We need to reassess these terms in the light of social change processes, as I suggest below.

(crowned 1953), were received by a relatively dutiful and royalist public, many of whom would stand in silence in front of their radios or TV sets when the (so-called) “British” (so-called) “national” anthem was played over the airwaves.<sup>4</sup> The Queen’s speech still features in Christmas Day television schedules, although 2008 saw the 15th alternative Christmas message being broadcast by Channel Four, an event that previously featured speakers including Brigitte Bardot, Ali G (the satirical comedian) and Marge Simpson. The British media and many British people’s orientation to “the Queen’s speech” in the winter of 2008 clearly differed from earlier decades, and several interlinked dimensions of social change are relevant to this shift.

What are these dimensions of change? Let me propose – over-confidently, no doubt – a list of general observations about social change in Britain over the last 50 years. This is the sort of list that people born in the middle of the 20th century will, I am assuming, recognise as part of their own experience, as I do myself. The list refers to different sorts of change, some more material, some more ideological:

*Social change in Britain, 1960-2009: A tendentious list*

- Increasing mediation of culture and greater cultural reflexivity
- The proliferation and speeding up of communication technologies
- A shift towards multi-modal textual representations
- A shift from manufacturing to service sector work
- The decline of the Establishment
- Failing trust in professional authority
- The growth of the middle class but the accentuation of the rich/poor divide
- Greater subservience to market economics, in the face of its demerits
- An upsurge in consumer culture and new forms of commodification
- A shift from group-based to individual-based rights and obligations
- Some blurring of the distinction between private and public spheres
- A reduction of the grosser inequalities by gender and sexual orientation
- The pursuit of body projects and a stronger economy of personal appearance
- Developing ethnic pluralism, especially in urban settings
- The development of a post-retirement life-stage
- The slow dawning of a more liberal politics of ageing
- Massively increasing geographical mobility
- National boundaries becoming in different ways more permeable
- Reframing and rescaling of local-global relationships

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<sup>4</sup> This further rash of hedging, through scare-quoting, is meant to imply that there are important challenges to any claim that Britain is a “nation” (see below) and that the anthem in question unequivocally represents or iconises Britain.

Different observers would construct different versions of this list and argue about its contents and emphases and about the status of the evidence. Evidence is patchy but significant – I shall refer to some of it shortly. Many elements of the list cohere into broader-based patterns of social change, summarised by tricky and potentially over-reaching concepts like *globalisation*,<sup>5</sup> *individualisation* and *commodification*. For all their trickiness, these are themes I want to engage with in what follows. While debates are raging in social science about how we should define and nuance these and related concepts, very few if any social scientists feel we should dismiss them altogether, so neither should sociolinguists dismiss them. My argument is that, if we assume that Britain and not-too-dissimilar countries have been experiencing social change of the above sorts, then it is inconceivable that language use and language ideologies have not been reshaped by it, whether or not we use the short-hand term “late modernity” in reference to where we are now.

Incidentally, we should note that 1960 – the notional first date in the caption to the above list – coincides more or less with the birth of sociolinguistics. So what is at stake here is how a more contemporary sociolinguistics might need to break its ties with some of the discipline’s foundational assumptions about social organisation, social identity and the meanings of dialect variation. As an effort towards this sort of reorientation, I shall enlarge on three more particular themes relevant to the list of change processes – *social class*, *national identity* and *mass media* – and try to anticipate how our understanding and analysis of “standard language” and the complementary concept of “dialect” might need to be adjusted in the light of ongoing social change.

#### *Social change, social class and the attribution of “standard”*

Social class has been the focal social dimension of modernist, structuralist, variationist sociolinguistics since the 1960s. Sociolinguistic variables have generally been defined by how their variants index social class, in the sense of marking class differences in frequencies of use between class groups. A common social-evaluative gloss has been that “standard” speech variants or speech styles “have high overt prestige” while their “non-standard” counterparts “are socially stigmatised.” Variation in relation to style/situation is then modelled as a secondary dimension,

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<sup>5</sup> It might seem blinkered, in the early weeks of 2009, to point to continuing globalisation, when much of the world is having to retrench and restructure under the body blow of “the credit crunch.” But I am taking a longer view here, and there is no evidence that the world is ready to “de-globalise,” particularly in cultural and linguistic dimensions.

overlaid on “social” (social class-related) variation (Labov, *Patterns*). Gender-related variation is modelled as the relative frequency of use of class-salient speech variants, and so on, confirming that social class sits at the heart of social explanation in variationism. But the most important, if obvious, point here is that *the terms “standard” and “non-standard” are themselves ideological value-attributions*. Yet sociolinguists often take them to be primes, as if we could identify what a “standard” variant is, independently of social judgements that are made about its use or its users. The term “standard” in the variationist paradigm, and in most of sociolinguistics, is taken to be a linguistic reflex of high social class: the assumption is that “standard language” is what “educated people” use when they write (in accordance with grammatical, lexical and orthographic norms), and in a different sense what people at the top of the social hierarchy use when they speak (according to grammatical, lexical and phonological norms). The problems of definition here are obvious: Is class that stable? Is educatedness a reasonable proxy for class? Is sociolinguistic indexicality that direct? But social change is making these problems of interpretation even more acute.

Sociolinguistics has come to accept a particular account of the concept of “standard” and of the process of linguistic standardisation, for example in the authoritative account given by James Milroy and Lesley Milroy (Milroy and Milroy). In a clear summary text, James Milroy writes that “standardization consists of the imposition of uniformity upon a class of objects” so that “the most important property of a standard variety of a language is uniformity or invariance” (133). Milroy then gives us good news as well as bad news about standardisation. On the one hand he equates the drive to standardise language with the drive to standardise weights and measures, and he suggests there are social advantages in the process:

The availability of a standard variety is in fact highly functional in human affairs, just as standardized weights and measures are so obviously functional. Standard varieties are comprehensible much more widely than localized dialects are. Furthermore, elaboration of function is one of the characteristics of a standard language; it can be used in a wide variety of different spheres of activities. (134)

But he is also clear that there are restrictive, judgemental and discriminatory aspects of standard language ideology that are operative in “standard language cultures” (such as Britain):

In standard-language cultures, virtually everyone subscribes to the idea of “correctness” with some forms being considered right and others wrong . . . a person who uses non-standard linguistic forms will often be from a minority ethnic group or a lower social class. (134-5)

The apparently positive “weights and measures” reading of “standard” is in fact a quite different reading from the “standard as correct” reading. There is no process of social discrimination (and Milroy uses the term “discrimination” himself in the bad news part of his account) in establishing standard units of length, weight or currency. Is any person or group who is committed to using alternative units discriminated against or disenfranchised by standardisation in this regard? In what ways is linguistic standardisation functional? It is conceivable that a linguistic “standard” *could* be constituted on this “weights and measures” principle. But if discrimination (in Milroy’s bad news account) is structured into standard language ideology, then to posit a supposed neutrality in the (good news) definition of a linguistic “standard” comes close to accepting the arguments of language ideologues, who have seen “standard English,” usually very poorly defined, as “obviously functional.” I have suggested that when “standard language” has been revered, this stance is rationalised by the claim that it is the only *authentic* language, according to criteria including historicity, coherence and value (Coupland, *Authenticities*). That is, standard language ideology has involved de-authenticating “non-standard” language on the basis that it supposedly lacks a dignified history, is opportunistic or chaotic or worthless.

Even so, we have to ask how pervasive and persuasive standard language ideology actually is. Milroy goes on to make familiar points (following the classic sociolinguistic treatment by Einar Haugen) about the “selection” of a standard variety being an arbitrary process, but in the gift of people in authority who impose their interpretation of correct usage on others, the majority, particularly through the education system. The oppressed then “accept” and “implement” the standard (Milroy 135-6). But in what sense is “standard language,” for example in contemporary Britain, a continuing imposition by elites on the disenfranchised masses, whose speech is by implication “non-standard” and systematically devalued and stigmatised? Is there so much bad news?

We know that speakers of linguistic varieties conventionally called “non-standard” sometimes do judge themselves inferior to speakers of varieties called “standard,” along the lines of Labov’s vivid early characterisation of New York City as “a sink of negative prestige” (*Patterns*). In Britain, Received Pronunciation (RP) is often felt to be a prestigious way of speaking, and non-RP speakers sometimes even find RP intimidating.

But there are also domains where speaking RP is impossible or marginal or even risible. It is remarkable how uncritical linguists have been in interpreting the co-variation of class and “standardness” that survey research into linguistic variation has thrown up, as if the general patterns of co-variation that we find are sufficient to validate theoretical assumptions around “standardness” and the empirical procedures used for defining and operationalising social class. There are several potential *non sequiturs* here. Class stratification has never been a universal of social organisation in all regions and communities in Britain or elsewhere, and class is constituted differently in the different social settings in which it functions.<sup>6</sup> Judgement/attitudes research has always shown that the social meanings of linguistic varieties are complex and multi-dimensional, and (as Tore Kristiansen’s research clearly shows, e.g. Kristiansen, “Language Attitudes”; “Norm-Ideals”) contextual factors impinge crucially on which social meanings are attributed to linguistic varieties. Although this is not the place to attempt a full review, sociolinguistics has often over-simplified its account of the ideological loading of linguistic varieties. So any analysis of contemporary “de-standardisation” (see below) should be wary of assuming that standard language ideology (SLI) was ever as fully consolidated as many have assumed.

Of more direct relevance to my argument here is that the meaning of social class itself, in Britain and no doubt elsewhere, has not been constant *over time*. The most extreme and most contentious claims in this area have been made by Ulrich Beck, for example in the assertion that social class has become a “zombie category” in late modernity – a category emptied out of any contemporary relevance, an idea circulating in the social twilight despite being to all intents and purposes dead (Beck, “Brave New World;” Beck and Beck-Gernsheim). Beck builds a thesis

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<sup>6</sup> In Coupland (“Speech Community”) I reconsider sociolinguistic theorising of speech community, community of practice and “the authentic speaker.” “Communities” can be class-structured in radically different ways, not least from one time period to another. For example, the South Wales Valleys have seen extreme and damaging de-industrialisation with the demise of coal-mining, compromising the tight work-based social networks and communal norms that distinguished the working Valleys for much of the 19th and early 20th centuries. In consequence, older indexical associations of Valleys ways of speaking, centred on communal pride, resilience, socialist politics and resistance, traditional masculinities, and so on are called into question. Aggressive social change has, we might say, cast Valleys voice and identities adrift from their anchoring social forms and practices. It is also important to note that social class in the Valleys never existed as a full, incrementally graded hierarchy, and there was no normative aspiration to a “high-prestige” speech variety such as RP. In the Valleys as in much of Wales, RP primarily means “English” and “not us”, where the perceived outgroup by no means has unquestioningly attributed “prestige.”

around individualisation. He says that contemporary education, legal and welfare systems “presume the individual as actor, designer, juggler and stage director of his or her own biography, identity, social networks, commitments and convictions” (Beck, *Reinvention of Politics* 95). He argues that in late modernity individuals are disembedded from historically prescribed social structures, and therefore disembedded from social class hierarchies; individualisation is a change-process that has stripped away the relevance of class. Many sociologists have resisted or qualified this claim (e.g. Atkinson; Skeggs; Walkerdine), but Beck’s ideas have stimulated significant reconsiderations of class in contemporary sociology and triggered empirical research on the nature and extent of related changes. There is evidence to support milder and better-contextualised versions of Beck’s individualisation thesis.

To take one instance, research by Tilley and Heath, using a self-report survey method, has assessed whether and to what extent social class and other “traditional identities” such as religiousness and Britishness in Britain have been reconfigured in the last 40 years. They found that the proportion of British people who claim adherence to a religious identity has declined markedly over four decades (28), although those who say they are religious do prove to have normative (conservative) moral views that differ considerably from non-religious people’s views. With social class, Tilley and Heath found that Britons are still on the whole prepared to ally themselves with different social class groups, but that social class categories have ceased to be indicative of any great differences in personal values. Class belonging in Britain, Tilley and Heath argue, now has little influence on attitudes and behaviour:

There has been little, if any, decline in class identity, but nowadays, at least, differences in class values are relatively small compared with differences in religious values – and appear to have declined quite considerably over the last two decades. While people may still think of themselves to belong to a particular class, social classes do not seem to act as distinctive normative reference groups in the way they once did. (28)

For example, self-ascribing social class groups were formerly quite sharply divided on the politics of economic redistribution, with strong views in favour of redistribution being held by working class people. Tilley and Heath show that such value differences between classes have now largely lapsed. Class is not dead, but there is evidence of the implications of class having waned, in the sense that it nowadays fails to divide groups politically and ideologically. Neo-liberalism has swamped working class ideological politics.

Another study where survey research fails to find close relationships between social class and social attitudes, values or preferences is Chan and Goldthorpe who studied the relationship between social stratification and patterns of cultural consumption in England, with particular reference to people's engagement with different genres of music. They found a tendency for working class people to be more "univorous" (listening to and consuming only one genre of music – pop and rock) than people in the highest social strata. But their main findings are that *all* social classes share this tendency and that there is nowadays no "music-consuming elite," because people in the high social classes simply tend to be rather more "omnivorous" – more wide-ranging in their tastes – than others. There is no evidence of a "dominant class" whose "class conditions" predispose them to consume "high culture," in the way that Bourdieu's analysis of taste and distinction suggests (Bourdieu).<sup>7</sup> What might the social change towards relative classlessness or towards more omnivorous cultural consumption mean for a sociolinguistics of "standardness"?

In purely distributional terms, we would expect an expanded self-ascribing middle-class to be more diffuse in their overall speech styles in any given region than previously. The smaller, more structurally distinct middle-class of earlier times would have had more potential to cohere around "standard language." Dialect levelling (Britain, Vandekerckhove and Jongburger) will have reduced the gap between working-class and middle-class norms, but the new middle class is likely to contain people whose speech spans a wider range of styles than the old middle class. But also, even where patterns of linguistic variation persist across class-indexed groups (as of course they do, despite degrees of linguistic levelling), we would expect the sociolinguistic indexicality of class – the value associations of "standard" and "non-standard" speech – to be weaker and less significant. This might be part of a more general waning of senses of social superiority and inferiority – democratisation of a sort, then – but it would more specifically relate to a weakening semiotic of "sociolinguistic taste," including as regards "prestige" and "stigmatisation." We would expect that people at the top of the social scale, however this might be measured, or claimed by people themselves, will have become more sociolinguistically "omnivorous", as they are with musical taste, in their willingness to "consume" (to accept and possibly even positively value) a wide range of language varieties.

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<sup>7</sup> It is likely that the 25 years since Bourdieu's text have seen significant social change.

We need to explore new possible configurations where linguistic differentiation at the level of usage persists, but where the social meanings of variation change. In some cases, these meanings may be blunted and more obscure. In other cases, earlier meanings may be reallocated as demands on speaking and performing change. If, for example, there are greater demands on more speakers to self-present as “socially attractive” more than “competent,” then the evaluative and ideological architecture of “standard language” will have changed. Shifts of this sort would indicate that Britain was becoming, or had already become, less of a “standard language culture” in Milroy’s sense. At the risk of over-emphasising the central point here, the core process of change here is not language change but language-ideological change, embedded in wider processes of social change.

Other demonstrable social changes in Britain are consistent with shifts of this sort. The ideology of “standard as correct” that Milroy describes is in fact located in “Establishment” values rather than in social class hierarchies in general, and “the Establishment” is certainly not co-terminous with (all of) “the middle-class” (Milroy’s educated people) or even “the upper-class” (to the extent we have one in Britain). The Establishment is, or was, a highly conservative body of policy-making and opinion-forming people in Britain, with influential roles in military, religious (Church of England) and political life. Harold Macmillan, elected Prime Minister in 1959, and earlier, Lord John Reith, general manager of the BBC, 1922-1927, can stand as historical prototypes of the Establishment. But the British Establishment has been in retreat for decades, under the forces of internationalism, secularisation, popular culture displacing high culture, plus a good deal of media exposure, criticism and ridiculing of elites. There are certainly relic features of the Establishment to be found in contemporary Britain; we might think of the gentrified demeanour of some members of the House of Lords, or self-styling elites in some private schools, cricket clubs or sailing clubs. Some English towns, like Marlborough, style themselves as retainers of conservative, elite values. The Establishment has arguably “gone heritage” in such places, packaged for late-modern consumption by people whose speech, dress, lifestyles and possessions are strikingly and self-consciously “old school.”

However, in relation to spoken “standard language” and Received Pronunciation (RP), Mugglestone writes about a long shift, which she sees as having begun in the 1960s, whereby “talking proper” in Britain (according to Establishment standard language ideology as promoted by Lord Reith at the BBC, for example) has come to be construed as “talk-

ing posh.”<sup>8</sup> The attribution “posh” entails a certain *lack* of respect for a “high” dialect/accents variety, or at least the acknowledgement that its claims to superiority are not fully credible. Posh cuts away the ideological underpinnings of the concept of “standard,” as it has been uncritically used in sociolinguistics. It also undermines the relic-Establishment semiotic, where it persists or where it is recreated as a would-be elite form. Posh de-natures the Establishment voice, cutting through its links to authenticity (which are as spurious as those of other claimed sociolinguistic authenticities, as with the notion of “the pure vernacular” – Coupland, “Authenticities”).

Following arguments like these, there are reasons to suppose that the conventional class-based sociolinguistic conceptualisation of “standard” and “non-standard” speech is becoming out-dated; it starts to appear modernist from a late-modern perspective. Blommaert’s idea (following Silverstein) of “orders of indexicality” can be invoked here, referring to competing and potentially shifting value systems around language use. Older indexical orders, such as Establishment SLI, have given way to newer ones, where posh speakers are quite commonly laid open to ridicule, and under some circumstances start to feel “insecure,” where the social meaning of voice is less determinate, and where backing social class winners and losers is not the only game in town. There is therefore an increasingly urgent need for contextual sophistication in accounts of social meaning, although it has *always* been the case that SLIs have successfully colonised *particular* speech genres, social domains and social groups, *and not others*. To take one example, Ben Rampton’s research gives us access to the particular domain of secondary school education and multi-ethnic urban youth in two British cities. He concludes from his ethnographic research (Rampton, *Crossing; Language in Late Modernity*) that posh is indeed structured into the social experience and imaginings of the British youngsters he studies, but that its meanings are diffuse and, once again, at a much more micro-level, highly contextualised. Rampton argues that his informants are *not* subordinated by oppressive meanings of class that limit their life chances. Although it would be unwise to generalise from these specific data to broader patterns of

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<sup>8</sup> “Posh” is far from being a recent coining and today there are other ways of lexicalising inter-class relations, including “ra.” “Ra,” said (and commonly stylised) with a long open back vowel, is mainly used in reference to young females, their voices (selectively conservative RP), their taste in clothing (e.g. pashminas) and their taste in alcoholic drinks (e.g. Lambrini). The long open back vowel picks up on the long-standing short/long contrast between southern (RP) and northern pronunciation in the word set that includes *class*, *dance* and *fast*. But it is in stylised performances of “ra,” with hyper-backed and open vowel quality, that the class stereotype and the speaker’s stance towards it are conjured.

change, Rampton's research emphasises that we need to move on from received assumptions about indexical orders.

### *Social change, national identities and “standard language”*

Globalisation is widely held to be destabilising nation-states and national identities, to the extent that some social theorists want to dispense with the concept of national identity. Some of them want to dispense with appeals to identity altogether (Brubaker and Cooper; Hastings and Manning). Beck's claims (see above) pattern with other influential treatises on new global inter-dependencies (e.g. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*; *Individualized Society*; Giddens), all of which point to the decline of national political autonomy under globalisation. The relationship between language and globalisation urgently needs to be reassessed (see Fairclough; also Coupland “Sociolinguistics and Globalisation;” *Handbook of Language and Globalisation*) and, once again, it needs to be nuanced and contextualised. There are some clear sociolinguistic trends that need to be studied and theorised, including the onward march of “world languages,” the linguistic consequences of increased trans-national migration and influence, new core-periphery arrangements, etc.

Several of the ideas I drew on in relation to social class have a clear trans-national dimension. Blommaert, for example, applies his concept of orders of indexicality mainly across cultural zones, implying that when people and linguistic varieties “travel,” they are potentially subject to very different and often very damaging value re-orderings. He gives the example of when an English text authored by a middle-class person in Nairobi, and judged to be an instance of elite practice there, is judged sub-standard in London (Blommaert 4). Nairobi and London are, to that extent, different “centres” of authoritative judgement, yet texts and varieties increasingly have to function across national boundaries where new globalised inequalities lie in wait. Rampton's multi-ethnic student groups are of course a demographic product of earlier trans-national flows, and Rampton interprets the young people's shifts in and out of ethnic as well as class voices as the working through of new inter-ethnic and inter-class relationships.

Issues of “standard and non-standard language” relate very directly to the structural integrity of nation-states, because SLIs, where they function convincingly, derive their authority from state institutions. The decline of the Establishment, which we considered in relation to changes in social class in Britain, began with the loss of empire. It is continuing alongside the waning of British influence in the world and a massive upsurge in transnational exchange – economic, communicative

and cultural. James Milroy makes the point that, in a “standard language culture,” people assume that language is a cultural artefact, owned by the cultural group and both needing and meriting protective action (136). In contemporary Britain it is impossible to hold to these principles of ownership and purity for English, or to see “standard English” as the property of “the English” or “the British,” let alone “the English/British Establishment.”

We can once again turn to recent sociological surveys in Britain for evidence of a decline in “Britishness” as a meaningful and valued self-attribution since World War II. McCrone argues that this decline was, as I suggested just-above, in the first instance a post-empire phenomenon, but the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism<sup>9</sup> and political devolution in its varying degrees and contexts are certainly further considerations. Tilley and Heath’s study, which I drew on earlier, also points to immigration and ethnic pluralisation, and to three factors underlying the decline of Britishness: (a) increasing cosmopolitanism, which tends to downplay the importance of the nation state; (b) the impact of particular events over recent decades, such as political devolution; and (c) generational change, in that people who grew up in a time of “national solidarity” (epitomised by World War II, although Britain has never truly been a single “nation”) developed lasting “national” (British) identities that appealed less to more recent generations.

Tilley and Heath’s main conclusion from this dimension of their empirical work is that there has indeed been a decline in British national pride. Data across the period 1981 to 2003 revealed, for example, that 57% of respondents surveyed in 1981 said they were “very proud” to be British, a percentage that had declined to 45% by 2003, but with strong birth-cohort effects too. The authors also show that Welsh and Scottish groups were (stepwise) lower in expressed British pride in 2003, and that their values fell more dramatically over the period after 1981 than those of English groups. Young Scots expressed least pride in being British. Tilley and Heath say that those who claim British identity nowadays do *not* have very distinctive views or attitudes from those who don’t. Britishness is therefore another candidate for being considered something of a “zombie category,” even when it is invoked.

Our own sociolinguistic survey results point to patterns of social evaluation where Scottish and Welsh people attribute significantly more prestige and social attractiveness to their “home” varieties, while attributing less prestige and social attractiveness to varieties labelled “standard

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<sup>9</sup> These “nationalisms” are not easy to sum up and do not closely parallel each other.

English" and "the Queen's English" than many other groups do (Bishop, Coupland and Garrett; see also Coupland and Bishop). In that study, although the "standard" varieties presented for assessment still generally remained in the ascendancy, there was intermittent evidence of a weakening of support for "standard English." Younger informants, for example, regularly attributed more positive values to conventionally low-prestige varieties than older informants did, and this might indicate generational shift over time (as opposed to intrinsically age-graded difference). Also, we argued that the survey method and the use of conventional labels for accent varieties were likely to have predisposed conservative ideological stances. The general point is that we should expect the declining appeal of Britishness to be freeing up particular "non-standard" varieties to function as targets (or "norm-ideals" in Kristiansen's sense) in particular domains, as new evaluative "centres" (in Blommaert's sense) come to prominence. Some of these centres are already apparent in the mass media.

#### *Mass media, social change and the meanings of dialect*

The mediatisation of late-modern life is probably the best evidenced social change of the last fifty years, in Britain and globally (but of course with hugely variable rates of change and levels of impact in different places). Sociolinguistic interest in change and the media has been dominated by the assertion that systemic linguistic change is *not* directly influenced by television as a "social factor" (Chambers, "TV Makes People Sound the Same;" Labov, *Principles*), although there have also been some efforts to reassess this claim (Stuart-Smith). But if we cast the net wider, as we surely must do, and ask what impact the broadcast media have on the evaluative and ideological worlds in which language variation exists in late modernity, then it is inconceivable that the "no media influence" argument can hold. Mass media are changing the terms of our engagement with language and social semiosis in late modernity, and with linguistic variation and dialect as part of that.

TV in particular has put mediated linguistic diversity in front of the viewing public far more pervasively and with much richer and more saturated indexical loading than face-to-face social reality can achieve. TV representations have confirmed, but also challenged, social stereotypes attaching to dialect varieties in Britain, in highly complex patterns. If we look for TV's role in confirming traditional sociolinguistic stereotypes, we can confidently point to ways in which, since the 1960s, TV's high-reach channels have often represented structured urban speech communities. For example, two long-running soap operas based in

London (*East Enders*) and Manchester (*Coronation Street*) have imaged close-knit, working class communities sharing lifestyles, social problems, hardship and resilience narratives, each of them powerfully articulating a distinctive sense of place through voice. TV shows of this sort have consolidated regionalised versions of urban working class lifestyles and ways of speaking, in stark opposition to the old institutional voice of public broadcasting. There is no major urban or regional British vernacular that does not have a ready sociolinguistic prototype in a TV soap opera or in some high-profile celebrity. British radio has also contributed to a sociolinguistic stratification effect, in the hierarchy of “serious” to “popular” broadcasting roles. Conservative RP has often been associated with the voices of “serious” news readers (particularly on BBC Radios 3 and 4), and “non-standardness” has been ideologically confirmed in the voices of not only TV and radio soap stars but also stand-up comedians, footballers, snooker players and vox pop street interviewees. Radio 1, the youth-oriented pop and rock BBC channel, aligns very much with the popular culture vernacular norm, to the extent of being one of those environments where RP is not only non-functional but risible.

But these implied hierarchies – which they are only from selective viewpoints – are only a part of the sociolinguistic order that television and radio portray. The mass media also pose powerful *challenges* to traditional sociolinguistic orders. One key consideration here relates to ways of experiencing and consuming the mass media, over and above the sociolinguistic forms and styles that the media represent. The social reflexivity of the mediation process is what changes our terms of engagement with mediated voices. Dialect on TV is, as variationists rightly point out, “not real,” and as viewers we do not orient to it or to media performers in the same way as we do to co-participants in face-to-face social interaction. But the mediation gap encourages critical reflexivity around dialect performance, particularly across the vast and growing range of available representations. At the very least, as we consume diverse media images of sociolinguistic types, we cannot avoid construing alternatives, seeing performances that could have been quite different, built from different semiotic indexicalities. It is this contrastive bricolage effect, the complex but condensed admixture of linguistic styles and meanings, that the mass media uniquely provide, for example when we hop channels or simply wait for the next half-hour slot to bring around a fresh mix.

Contrastive dialect semiosis is in fact the basis of a particularly striking recent trend in British TV. This format involves disembedding speakers with strongly resonant “regional and social dialects” from the social matrices that might appear to provide their distinctiveness. A

clutch of new popular TV formats are built on the design of mixing social types in the same social settings and exploiting the social dissonances between them. The most obvious instances are the “lifestyle exchange” shows that, for example, put posh people into menial work roles, or give people “makeovers” that disrupt their physical and social identities (see J. Coupland on the *Ten Years Younger* format). In one sense these disembeddings *confirm* the traditional sociolinguistic order, as people often flounder in their newly contrived social contexts. But the audience has nevertheless been led into reflexive appraisal, to construe alternatives to the traditional, modernist order based on gender, age or class principles. Audiences see the process of recontextualisation as well as the social structure that is recontextualised. This meta-level resource encourages consumers to “see through” the dialect hierarchies that persist – to hear “standard and nonstandard voices” as stylisations of class language (Coupland, “Dialect Stylisation”).

Many other contemporary British TV shows are premised on strong typological contrasts in voice and demeanour. In the Christmas 2008 TV schedules the BBC’s most-watched show was an episode of *Strictly Come Dancing*. The show positions people who have succeeded in very different walks of life (an international rugby player, a TV soap star, a pop singer, a TV political commentator, and so on) as celebrity members of a dance competition. Their dancing skills, which are often implausibly good, are progressively honed over the TV series and aired in weekly performances of different demanding dance styles. Performances are picked over and assessed by a resident team of judges and also by the general public who vote by telephone. In any traditional framework, the sheer range of social and sociolinguistic types here is bewildering. The four judges, three males and one female, are themselves typologically dispersed. Each one is easy to define in a series of reductive social categorisations: “the tall, serious, posh male judge,” “the sharply critical London-sounding female judge,” “the tall, avuncular, London-sounding male judge,” and “the wacky, short, second-language, Italian-sounding male judge.” These are (my own) highly essentialising descriptions, but they are the categories worked into and exploited in the show itself. Each judge plays up to his or her stereotyped persona, and some of the social attributes I have just listed are routinely mentioned in the show’s discourse.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Craig Revel Horwood is constructed as the posh judge, even though his speech is not consistently RP. The gap between his relative RP and slightly camp self-presentation and the more vernacular styles of the other judges is sometimes parodied by the show presenters.

*Strictly* therefore presents sociolinguistic bricolage, but another aspect of this is to break up the predictable associations of “standardness” and status – to render traditional orders incoherent. The judges are mostly a pretty vernacular bunch who pass judgement, often derisorily, on the more “socially accomplished” dance trialists. The show is hosted by Bruce Forsyth, an elderly doyen of British TV game-shows, known for his silly humour, his long chin, his tap-dancing, his catch phrases and his London voice. The other host is Tess Daley, whose reductive typological description might be “the tall, beautiful, working-class, northern-sounding former model” – Tess’s attributes are, from a conventional socio-structural viewpoint, internally complex and (in modernist conceptions) incoherent in their own right. The level of *individualisation* in this persona formatting is remarkable – characters are quickly pulled away from any residual social matrices. The “Italianness” of the fourth judge is not salient in ethnic or national terms, but his linguistic quirkiness and ebullience probably are. Tess Daley is not meaningfully “northern” in the social configuration of *Strictly*, as the show creates its own principles of social contextualisation. There might be residual semiotic values of “northern unpretentiousness” in Tess’s manner, but Tess Daley is . . . simply Tess Daley, just as “Brucie” (Bruce Forsyth) is his own auto-iconic individual self. *Strictly* generates a cast of individualised celebrities who are played off against each other. The dance competition scrutinises the individual competences of performers, and there is only one winner.

We should also recognise another basic quality of TV semiosis, and that is its multi-modal framing.<sup>11</sup> *Strictly* is once again a revealing case, when we consider its kinetic and bodily dynamism, the startling colours of performers’ dance costumes and the visual extravagance of its sets. *Strictly* is undoubtedly an extreme case, but the social meanings of voice *per se* are further complicated when voices work alongside the semiotics of movement, body shape and stature, physical and physiognomic beauty, clothing, and so on. TV “personalities” and “celebrities” (Turner) are constructed at the intersection of multiple semiotic modalities, and this is another key consideration in how mass-mediated late modernity is repositioning “dialect.” While a movement towards study-

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<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to Adam Jaworski for this observation. AJ also notes that it is easy to be too generous in assessing the media’s affordances and representational openness. The media exercise their own versions of gate-keeping and censorship (cf. Blommaert’s discussion of evaluative “centres,” earlier). AJ also cautions that mass-mediated individualisations are often *aspirational*, “working alongside the upsurge in consumer culture and the growing importance of market economies, which precisely depend on aspiration as the main motive for consumption because it’s inexhaustible” (personal note).

ing “dialect in discourse” is in evidence in sociolinguistics, there is as yet no concerted project of studying how voice “means” in relation to concurrent non-linguistic parameters.

### *Discussion*

In this paper I have entertained several claims about how linguistic varieties referred to as “standards” and “dialects” are coming to hold different, generally less determinate and more complex, values in a late-modern social order. I have had Britain in mind, although the social changes I have been referring to are far from unique and much of the social movement in question is globally based. I have pointed to several sociolinguistic assumptions that have remained largely unchallenged since the early years of the discipline, particularly assumptions relating to a fixed and meaningful class order, operating through a relatively isolated and intact national framework, where linguistic indexicalities are formed and maintained in warm-bodied social exchanges but under the ideological control of dominant social groups. My conclusion is that this is, nowadays, an account in need of revision. It is true that there is a risk of swimming with a critical tide of grand-theory revisionist claims (e.g. that class and national identities are no more, although these are not the positions I have argued), but there is a comparable risk of acquiescing to conventional dogma.

The concept of *de-standardisation* does seem appropriate to alert us to many of the relevant language-ideological changes, although it clearly needs specifying and evidencing. A first step is to blend the concepts of linguistic change and social change into a unified notion of *sociolinguistic change*, broad enough to conceptualise the interplay between the existing variationist field and changes in the structure and application of beliefs and social evaluations of language varieties. Sociolinguistic change will study language-ideological change in the context of social change, and refer to changes in linguistic usage within that broader matrix. If we try to theorise de-standardisation, this would refer to the whole of the matrix, not merely loss or distributional reduction of the use of high-status varieties over time as one form of linguistic levelling. Whether or not linguistic repertoires change substantially over time, we have to ask how individuals and groups perceptually segment those repertoires at any given point in time and in different social contexts, and how they may reallocate values and meanings to existing styles and valorise new ones.

Kristiansen (“Language Standardisation and Standard Languages”) suggests a distinction between linguistic *de-standardisation* and *demotisation*. In this opposition, de-standardisation is a type of value levelling that washes out status meanings formerly linked to “standard” and “non-standard” varieties. Demotisation refers to continuing investment in a “standard” or “best” variety of speech, but where a formerly popular or more vernacular variety rises to take the place of the earlier “standard.” The shifts I have discussed above appear to sit better under the rubric of de-standardisation than demotisation. In Britain at least, it is very difficult to point to any one vernacular that is rising to be treated as “the best way of speaking.” So-called Estuary English is sometimes discussed in these terms in popular media, but there is no evidence of a coherent new variety – a demoticised RP – coalescing around London-influenced features and being used in the prototypical domains where old RP held sway. It is more a matter of “locally distinct dialects . . . being replaced by supralocal or regional koines, which are characterised both by the levelling of marked or minority features and by interdialect caused by imperfect accommodation between speakers of different dialects in contact” (Britain 149). But also, there is informal evidence of RP increasingly failing to unquestioningly attract attributions of power, status and authority, and the result is indeed a sort of democratisation. One problem here is, however, that we know from attitudes research that RP rarely ever had this unquestioning support. The “superiority” of RP was often a two-edged sword in social-evaluative terms.

But de-standardisation need not be simply a neutralisation of indexical meaning, a bleaching-out of socially attributed values. I have argued that the mass media have increased our level of sociolinguistic reflexivity, and dialect difference, at least in Britain, is very much alive as a productive source of meaning-making, albeit in shifting value systems. Some of the emotional heat and prejudice around class does appear to have dissipated, and to that extent we might suggest that class is becoming, if not a “zombie” category, a more “banal” dimension of social life, in the same way that Michael Billig suggests has happened with nationalism in Britain). A more banal social class ideology would involve less overt conflict over taste and socio-economic resources, even though social groups would still be distinguishable by virtue of their semiotic markers. We might look for evidence of “class games” through language in late modernity, as opposed to the class wars of modernist Britain, even though we should not underestimate the potential for social inequality to be linguistically focused in *particular contexts*. Vernacular speech retains its potential to evoke regional and social affiliations, and under globalisation, “the local” often acquires new positive value as an antidote to “the global familiar.” We need to look for signs that the old so-

ciolinguistic association of vernacular speech with social stigma is breaking down, as well as being selectively maintained. As with RP, many vernacular speech styles in Britain have had multi-dimensional evaluative profiles. The language-ideological shift I am speculating about here might therefore be best described as a reconfiguring of evaluative profiles in particular contexts, rather than a wholesale democratising shift. In this reconfiguring, long-standing stereotyped attributes of vernaculars, such as personal attractiveness and unpretentiousness, come more to the fore, under changed social priorities.

As the (relative) national consensuses about class and “national” British identity break down, we would expect to see a more multi-centred sociolinguistic culture being affirmed. This is a society where singular value systems, including those for ways of speaking, are being displaced by more complex and, once again, more closely contextualised value systems. We might be seeing a *relativisation* (rather than a neutralisation) of sociolinguistic values. The broadcast media are far more diverse in their formats and genres than they were, so there has been substantial expansion of both “dialect” and “style” dimensions of variation, classically conceived – we engage with people who “are from” hugely disparate social enclaves but also with people who “are doing” hugely disparate things, sociolinguistically. However unfashionably in the discipline, I think we are bound to seek connections between these changes in the mediated world and the world of “everyday language.” With the growth of service-based employment, there are greater demands on people to be able to self-present “attractively” as well as (in other situations) “competently,” and we might expect the performative range of “everyday” language use to be broadening in response.<sup>12</sup> The old sociolinguistic dimension of stylistic “formality” has proved to be far too restrictive to capture the range of self-presentational resources that recreational talk and talk-at-work nowadays demands (Coupland, *Style*). In some accounts we are living in an increasingly ironic world where, consistent with a culture of increased sociolinguistic reflexivity, we are expected to be able to perform ourselves with considerable metalinguistic sophistication. Neo-liberalism prioritises what we can “bring off” and earn in local markets, not what we are structurally limited to or entitled to. The resources of “standard” and “dialect” presumably have to be deployed in new acts of identity within such markets.

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<sup>12</sup> Scare-quoting of “everyday” here is to suggest that the mass media are very much part of most people’s “everyday” experience, just as many people transact large parts of their “everyday” lives via mediated communication.

Finally, on the theme of how to approach change, it is interesting to return to how sociolinguistics has built change into its paradigms. Variationists regularly try to distinguish “age-grading” effects (linguistic changes linked to individuals growing older) from “language change” effects (linguistic changes that show the speech system evolving). The evidence for systemic change in a speech system is what social theorists and gerontologists call a cohort effect, where researchers can hope to distinguish the linguistic consequences of advancing years (ageing effect) from the linguistic consequences of cohort membership (cohort effect, based on the likelihood that the individual has gone through life sharing historical experiences with a wider group of people born into the same circumstances at the same time). But there is a well-established *tripartite* model of change (see Mason and Fienberg) that recognises not only “ageing” and “cohort” effects, but also “period” effects, and the theoretical assumption is that all three corners of the change triangle and their interactions need to be borne in mind. Sociolinguistics have generally not considered “period effects,” which we could interpret sociolinguistically as how language use and language ideologies settle into specific patterns during any one historical epoch. The point, then, is that any ageing individual and any particular cohort will need to come to terms with (tune into or resist) the dominant socio-cultural ethos at any one time. The challenge for sociolinguists working with an expanded concept of sociolinguistic change is to interpret synchronic data in relation to a more rounded model of diachronic processes.

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