Sociolinguistic nostalgia and the authentication of identity[1]

Mary Bucholtz
University of California, Santa Barbara

INTRODUCTION

Although sociolinguistics has become a fragmented field since its initial broad conceptualization in the 1960s (e.g. Bright 1966; Gumperz and Hymes 1972), the now-divergent strands of sociolinguistic research continue to share a concern with something that has been called 'real language.' Against the idealism of the Chomskyan paradigm, sociolinguistics positioned itself as an empirical discipline in which *language* was taken to mean the systematic use of language by social actors in social situations. I employ the term *sociolinguistics* here in its original wide reference to include not only the disparate quantitative and qualitative approaches that claim this name but also linguistic anthropology, conversation analysis, and other socially and culturally oriented forms of discourse analysis. For despite the many differences that divided these research traditions, 'real language' remains central to each. And although methods of data collection and analysis vary widely across these approaches, what is meant by *real language* (or by some more theoretically elaborated equivalent term) has remained for the most part remarkably consistent: real language – that is, authentic language – is language produced in authentic contexts by authentic speakers.

For this reason, authenticity underwrites nearly every aspect of sociolinguistics, from our identification of socially meaningful linguistic phenomena, to the definition of the social groups we study, to the methods we use to collect our data, to the theories we draw on in our analysis. Yet despite its pervasiveness in the field, this pivotal concept is rarely a topic of investigation in its own right. In addition, because researchers frequently assume some notion of authenticity in the sociolinguistic study of identity, the latter concept too remains theoretically underdeveloped within sociolinguistics. In the following discussion, I consider the sociolinguistic investment in authenticity as an implicit theory of identity. I then explore the original reasons for this investment and discuss some of the problems and limitations associated with it in the current context of sociolinguistic research. Finally, I offer an alternative vision for the sociolinguistic study of authenticity – one that, rather than presupposing the authentic as an

object to be discovered, instead makes the notion of authenticity available for analysis as the outcome of the linguistic practices of social actors and the metalinguistic practices of sociolinguists. My goal in this discussion is not to dismantle decades of foundational sociolinguistic research, or to deny the many examples of research that already problematize authenticity in some way. Instead, my purpose is to build on both kinds of work by providing a frame for a scholarly conversation that has already been going on for some time concerning the relationship between the sociolinguist and the object of sociolinguistic research.

THE NOSTALGIA OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS

The quest for authenticity in sociolinguistics extends back to the earliest precursors of the field in dialectology and anthropology. Both of these fields were founded on the belief that the scholarly gaze must be cast back from modernity to a prior time – or at least to a place out of modern Western time – in order to make sense of the modern present. In this way, authenticity as a bond to the past emerged as a quintessentially modern concept. Such a theoretical commitment to the historical continuity of past and present surfaced in somewhat different ways in each field, but in both cases this 'desire for origins' (as Frantzen 1990 terms a similar phenomenon in the history of Old English studies) led to a concerted effort to valorize via scholarship an earlier epoch imagined as directly tied to – yet irrevocably sundered from – the present day. Access to the past was provided through the study of those in whom it was thought to be most authentically retained.

In dialectology, the emphasis on the authentic is in part a residue of Romanticism. The roots of dialectology lie in late nineteenth and early twentieth century European efforts to document the speech of the *Volk*, an undertaking that can in part be traced to philology and folklore, both central to Romanticism as a nationalist and intellectual project. Philology was concerned with working backward from the evidence of present-day languages to reassemble the linguistic past, while folklore was dedicated to creating a repository of premodern culture through the collection of folk texts. In its political guise, Romanticism sought to locate the underpinnings of the European nation in the spirit of its people – particularly the peasants whose culture supposedly remained untouched by urbanity. In its scholarly guise, Romanticism valorized the rural population as the authentic source of traditional cultural knowledge and practice, including language. Dialectology furthered both of these efforts. Although the field has expanded well beyond its original mandate, this early commitment to the authentic speaker as remote from urban modernity has remained a core element of much research on regional and social dialects, as reflected in Chambers and Trudgill's (1998) tongue-in-cheek proposal of the label *NORM* (non-mobile, older, rural males) for dialectology's preferred consultants.

What philology and folklore did for Europe, anthropology did for the rest of the world. As in these fields, the anthropological commitment to document ways of life vanishing in the wake of modernity was heavily nostalgic. Like 'salvage anthropology,' 'salvage linguistics' sought to preserve indigenous cultures and languages through description, and especially to reconstruct an earlier historical moment before European contact and colonialism. As linguistic anthropology developed as a tradition distinctive from both linguistics and other subfields of anthropology, it often focused on those communicative practices believed to be most 'traditional' despite dramatic cultural change, such as ritual speech and performance. For these reasons, linguistic anthropologists as well as other kinds of sociolinguists working with minority language groups often viewed speakers' shift away from their language of heritage as a shift away from an authentic past. The perception of cultural change as cultural loss promoted this branch of sociolinguistics too as a frequently nostalgic enterprise.

The commitment to study those who have been relegated to the margins of modern structures of power stands as one of the most potent ethical principles of sociolinguistics. But the positing of authenticity as the prerequisite for serious scholarly attention often works to undermine this principle by designating some language users but not others as legitimate representatives of a given community. In addition, a sociolinguistics founded on authenticity must face the problem of essentialism.

FROM ESSENTIALISM TO STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM (AND BEYOND)

For more than a decade, the issue of essentialism has been widely debated within the social and human sciences, but these debates have had a much smaller impact on the field of sociolinguistics. Essentialism is the position that the attributes and behavior of socially defined groups can be determined and explained by reference to cultural and/or biological characteristics believed to be inherent to the group. As an ideology, essentialism rests on two assumptions: (1) that groups can be clearly delimited; and (2) that group members are more or less alike. The idea of authenticity gains its force from essentialism, for the possibility of a 'real' or 'genuine' group member relies on the belief that what differentiates 'real' members from those who only pretend to authentic membership is that the former, by virtue of biology or culture or both, possess inherent and perhaps even inalienable characteristics criterial of membership. The problems associated with essentialist reasoning have been enumerated at length in nearly every corner of the academy; these range from the theoretical (essentialism reduces the diversity of humanity to a small set of attributes and behaviors recognized by the theory) to the methodological (no characteristic of group membership that meets the essentialist standard has been definitively identified) to the political (essentialism disempowers many people by excluding them *a priori* from groups in which they might on other grounds count as members).

Yet despite these serious problems, essentialism is also an important intellectual and social tool. For researchers, essentialist assumptions may facilitate analysis by enabling them to identify a previously undescribed group and offer a preliminary description; for group members, essentialism promotes a shared identity, often in opposition to other, equally essentialized, social groups. For both, essentialism is, among other things, a tool for redressing power imbalances, as when the group under study is seen by the dominant group as illegitimate or trivial, or when a stigmatized group forms an oppositional identity to counter such negative ideologies. Essentialism may therefore be a deliberate move to enable scholarly activity, to forge a political alliance through the creation of a common identity, or to otherwise provide a temporarily stable ground for further social action. Such uses of essentialism have been termed *strategic essentialism* (Spivak 1988; for the introduction of the concept into sociolinguistics, see McElhinny 1996). What makes some essentializing efforts strategic is that they are undertaken to achieve a short-term goal with awareness of their limitations in the long term. Although not all participants who commit themselves to an essentialist position necessarily recognize it as a temporary tactic, strategic essentialism helps explain how the sociolinguistic concern with authenticity emerged from the sociopolitical and intellectual conditions in which the field developed in the latter part of the twentieth century. I briefly illustrate the uses of strategic essentialism in two different areas of sociolinguistics that took shape in the 1970s: language and gender studies, and research on African American Vernacular English. In both of these sociolinguistic undertakings, researchers focused on highly 'marked,' socially marginalized groups (women and African Americans) in part to recognize and legitimate their widely devalued linguistic practices.

Until recently, the notion of authenticity was not as explicitly invoked in language and gender as in other areas of sociolinguistics, precisely because the essentializing assumptions of gender were so powerful that it was difficult to imagine an 'inauthentic' woman or man. To be sure, speakers who deviated from normative beliefs about gender were discussed early on (see K. Hall 2003 for a survey of this work), but such speakers remained peripheral to theories of language and gender for many years. Essentialism came to be identified with two strands of research in particular, often somewhat misleadingly called the 'difference' and 'dominance' approaches. Though frequently cast as rival accounts, these two models had a great deal in common, most notably, their assumption that the study of language and gender was synonymous with the study of gender difference (see also Bucholtz 2002). Where the dominance model located gender differences in power differences, however, the difference model tied them to cultural differences. Each model often sought to celebrate women's special linguistic abilities, which were seen as contrasting with men's. Both perspectives (but especially the culture-based model, which is often accused of taking a non-feminist or even anti-feminist position) have come in for a good deal of criticism as researchers have sought to characterize gender in

less dichotomous terms. Yet the critics have generally missed the fact that early feminist theories, which influenced both frameworks, were based in strategic essentialism. The process of analytic simplification allowed researchers to establish gender as a legitimate topic of linguistic research, but at the cost of leaving out of their accounts a great deal of linguistic diversity within and across genders, which was only later introduced into scholarship.

A strategic use of essentialized and hence authentic identity is similarly evident in sociolinguists' validation of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a legitimate linguistic variety, a revolutionary viewpoint that challenged generations of racism, linguistic and otherwise. Indeed, what made this challenge so powerful was precisely the sociolinguistic commitment to describing the speech of inner-city youth, who had been – and continue to be – maligned and misrepresented in public discourse. In such a context, a demonstration of, say, the linguistic flexibility of bidialectal middle-class African Americans would have failed to persuade skeptical teachers, policy-makers, and researchers in other disciplines of the value of AAVE. Thus the most useful conceptualization of the AAVE speech community at the time, both politically and theoretically, was one in which those speakers whose speech was mislabeled as substandard or even as not really language at all were placed at the very center, as the most competent and systematic speakers of a complete and systematic variety. This remarkable reconfiguration of margin and center yielded a new perspective on African American language use. In fact, the early study of AAVE represents one of the most successful uses of strategic essentialism in sociolinguistics (or indeed in any academic field). But the recognition of AAVE and its speakers necessitated a series of simplifications that reduced the complexity of AAVE users to a subset of the entire community and reduced the complexity of African American language use to a subset of the community's entire repertoire. Such simplifications were certainly not intended to be the full story but instead functioned as strategies that allowed sociolinguists to intervene in a high-stakes sociopolitical issue despite very real constraints.

Both the study of language and gender and the study of AAVE developed in a different political and intellectual climate from that of today, and the essentialist strategy required to establish these areas of research is no longer necessarily the most effective or productive. Newly emerging areas of inquiry are evidently responding to the lessons learned in earlier periods of sociolinguistic research as well as to changing social conditions in the world that sociolinguists study. The long-standing critique of essentialism in language and gender research, for example, has taken a new direction with the recent consolidation of language and sexuality as a field of sociolinguistic research (e.g. Campbell-Kibler et al. 2002; Livia and Hall 1997), particularly via researchers' recognition of non-normative sexuality as one arena in which gendered cultural and linguistic norms may be subverted or challenged. Moreover, a growing body of scholarship on transgendered language use (e.g. Barrett 1999; Besnier 2003; Gaudio

1997; Hall and O'Donovan 1996) has called into question any claims for a biological essentialism based on sex that might replace a cultural essentialism based on gender. At the same time, the tendency for language and gender researchers to focus on the white, English-speaking middle class has been increasingly criticized and corrected by researchers concerned with a more complete scholarly representation of the gendered use of language (e.g. Galindo and Gonzales 1999; Morgan 1999; Sawin 1999). Similarly, sociolinguistic studies of African American speech communities inform recent studies of the language use of other racialized groups within the United States, which in turn are able to document more fully the relationship between language and ethnoracial identities. The new body of work on Asian American language use (e.g. Chun 2001; Hanna 1997; Lo 1999; Reyes 2002), for instance, is especially notable for its focus on the diversity, complexity, and contestation of Asian American linguistic practices. Meanwhile, the variability of African American language use based on generation and other factors has been increasingly brought into view, along with a broad focus on the full repertoire of African American spoken and written language (e.g. Lanehart 2002; Morgan 2002). Similarly, the long-standing sociolinguistic tendency to investigate socially marked or hypervisible categories like women or African Americans over their unmarked, 'normative' counterparts, such as men or European Americans, has begun to shift in recent years, as attested by the explicit investigation both of men and masculinity (e.g. Johnson and Meinhoff 1997) and of whiteness as a racialized category (e.g. Bucholtz and Trechter 2001).[2] Rather than simply validating or celebrating the linguistic practices of politically subordinate social actors, analysts now increasingly seek to understand those who hold positions of structural power by virtue of their gender, race, or other factors, and how such groups employ language to maintain their positions of power.

These recent shifts in sociolinguistics do not yet herald the end of essentialism – or the end of the political and intellectual need for strategic essentialism in particular. Given that the groups studied by sociolinguists are often marginalized politically, economically, and socially and hence may not even be recognized by the academy or by dominant society as legitimate subjects of research, strategic essentialism continues to be a necessary tool for both sociolinguists and the communities we study. In using this tool, however, researchers must remain mindful of the assumptions it brings along with it concerning 'real' language and 'authentic' speakers. The sociolinguistic study of authenticity proposed here therefore has two principal aims. The first is to examine the authenticating practices of language users. The second is to examine the authenticating practices of sociolinguists themselves. Such an undertaking requires us to recognize that we, no less than the people we study, draw on ideologies of language to structure and make sense of the social world.

LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES OF AUTHENTICITY IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

The call for reflexivity that has resounded throughout the social sciences has also reached sociolinguistics, and there is now a considerable scholarship on the ethical and political dimensions of our work (e.g. Blommaert et al. 2001; Cameron et al. 1992; Hill et al. 2002; Labov 1982; Morgan 1994a, b; Rickford 1997; Zentella 1996). At the same time, the sociolinguistic study of language ideologies (see Woolard 1998a) has provided a productive framework for the analysis of how particular political interests are served by particular cultural beliefs about language – a study in which the practices of linguists themselves are also important objects of inquiry. However, a great deal remains to be done to uncover the taken-for-granted professional metalinguistic practices that make sociolinguistic research possible. Here I briefly consider a set of language ideologies that together have produced the construct of the authentic speaker. These ideologies are manifested in many of the research practices of sociolinguistics, including how we develop our theories, how we collect, select, and analyze our data, and how we talk both about what we do and about what language users do. Below I identify four ideologies, two concerning authentic speakers and authentic language, and two concerning the linguist's relationship to authenticity. Although these ideologies are not shared by all sociolinguists, and they may at times conflict with one another, they are shared widely enough to have left their mark on sociolinguistic theory and practice. I should emphasize that I am no more immune to them than any other researcher; all scholars are influenced by some form of ideology. Our goal, then, should not be an unattainable ideology-free sociolinguistics, but a reflexive sociolinguistics that acknowledges and monitors its own interestedness (see also Bucholtz 2001).

The first and most widespread ideology is that of *linguistic isolationism*. According to this ideology, the most authentic language is removed from and unaffected by other influences, and thus the most authentic speaker belongs to a well-defined, static, and relatively homogeneous social grouping that is closed to the outside. In the logic of this ideology, the effects of social and linguistic contact are problematic – hence, the normal state of linguistic affairs is often understood as a difficulty for sociolinguistic analysis. This ideology has been most powerful in dialectology, which in early studies exhibited an explicit concern with the purity of a speaker's dialect (cf. Milroy 1987: 14–17). Milroy rightly points out that variationist methods are an improvement over traditional dialectology in that they do not require a search for the most 'genuine' form of a language. However, the variationist approach also shows the impact of the ideology of linguistic isolationism. Variationists have tended to exclude from studies of change in progress non-native speakers as well as those who are recent arrivals to the community; research on the effects of geographic mobility on language use has been an important counterbalance to this general tendency (e.g. Chambers 2002; Kerswill 1996; Payne 1980). In linguistic

anthropology, as in anthropology more generally, linguistic isolationism surfaces in the kinds of communities selected for study. The ideologically preferred research site continues to be non-urban and non-Western; such remoteness and isolation ensure, as far as possible, that the community's language and culture are relatively unaffected by outside influences and hence that maximal distance and difference from the (post)modern West is maintained.

Even in many studies of linguistic and cultural contact, the ideology of linguistic isolationism can be seen in the fact that bilingualism and multilingualism are taken to be special rather than typical sociolinguistic situations. Romaine, in her textbook on bilingualism, notes that 'it would certainly be odd to encounter a book with the title *Monolingualism*' (1991: 1; quoted in Woolard 1998b) – that is, despite the prevalence of multilingual societies, it is monolingualism that is unmarked and is perceived as not requiring explanation. In studies of bilingual language use, too, a presumption of purity leads to the frequent conceptualization of languages as autonomous and distinct from one another, so that mixed languages and codeswitching present special analytic problems in assigning the 'source' of linguistic structures to one language or another (cf. Woolard 1998b). Similarly, in the interactional realm, studies of intercultural communication, especially those concerned with miscommunication, often presuppose that in many ways cultural groups remain unchanged by the contact situation. Consequently, it is often argued, miscommunication results when speakers come to an interaction with different assumptions about culturally appropriate language use. In all of these situations, taking a pure or isolated code as the starting point of sociolinguistic research has yielded important insights into the social nature of language, but at the expense of setting aside those linguistic phenomena that fit less easily within such a definition. The idea that the most authentic form of a language – or of language itself – is a mythical 'purest' form untouched by outside influences, overlooks the central role of contact in shaping almost all languages and varieties.

In the second ideology, *linguistic mundaneness*, the most authentic language is language that, from its user's point of view, is unremarkable, commonplace, everyday. The ideologies of isolationism and mundaneness may be mutually reinforcing, in that this kind of ordinary language is considered to be particularly inaccessible and difficult to document because of the contact conditions in which most sociolinguistic research occurs. The ideology of linguistic mundaneness is part of the sociolinguistic emphasis on documenting quotidian language, a principle that represents an important improvement on linguistic frameworks that take invented and context-free sentences as data. Use-based approaches have thus considerably enriched the definition of language to incorporate utterance production, interactional negotiation, the use of the body, and other elements excluded from inquiry in non-empirical models. However, the concern with authenticity that often informs studies of language in use has also led this approach to restrict its own definition of *(real)*

language to a narrow subset of all language use. Most traditions share a strong preference for spoken over written language, to such a degree that *speaker* is synonymous with *language user* in many sociolinguistic studies.[3] Sociolinguists also favor some kinds of speech over others, frequently aiming to capture what is termed 'naturally occurring speech.' This collocation takes for granted the existence of a principled and hierarchical distinction between 'natural' and 'unnatural' language use; here, authenticity is inscribed in the very terms under which sociolinguistics operates. The elusiveness of the goal of documenting such speech is suggested by my choice of verb – *capture* – and much energy has been expended devising ever more ingenious ways to approximate an authentic speech context in a research situation. In variationist sociolinguistics, the gold standard of authenticity is the most vernacular speaker at his most casual and unself-conscious, and hence most systematic (my use of the masculine pronoun is intentional, for the authentic speaker is often imagined as male – cf. Eckert 1989; Morgan 1999).[4] Likewise, in conversation analysis, as the name implies, conversation is held to be the most authentic kind of language, forming the base from which all other kinds of language use derive.

The issue of methodology raised by the ideology of linguistic mundaneness leads to the third ideology, namely, that of *the linguist as obstacle to linguistic authenticity*. In other words, even if we find authentic speakers, they may not produce authentic speech in our presence. This problem, which Labov (1972) has famously termed the 'observer's paradox,' is due to the fact that speakers may not use language in the same way with community outsiders as they do with insiders (or even with insiders who are also researchers). Many of sociolinguists' research practices are therefore designed to circumvent the problem of our own existence.

Linguistic anthropologists have attempted to overcome the observer's paradox by becoming quasi-community members via the fundamental method of ethnography: participant-observation. Though primarily intended as a method for researchers to learn to view a culture from the perspective of its members, participant-observation is often believed to have the secondary advantage of minimizing the disruptive effects of the research situation. By contrast, variationist sociolinguists have often turned to controlled research situations, such as the sociolinguistic interview, which creates contexts that allow for the elicitation of authentic speech – the vernacular. (Like linguistic anthropologists, variationist researchers may also draw on ethnographic interviews and participant-observation.) In conversation analysis, the researcher often recedes from view altogether, since data that betray awareness of the researcher's presence are often excluded from analysis as 'unnatural' or inauthentic. But all of these and other research situations are always only approximations of 'authentic' (i.e. non-research) contexts of language use. If our goal is truly to collect and analyze authentic speech, then we are doomed to failure – or to extremely unethical research practices that no sociolinguist would endorse.

The final language ideology, and in some ways the most powerful, is that of

the linguist as arbiter of authenticity. It is we who ultimately decide who is and is not an authentic speaker, what is and is not authentic speech. Although the perceptions of speakers and hearers may inform our decisions, such perceptions are usually called language attitudes or language ideologies, while our own perceptions are labeled analysis. Not even an ethnographic approach, which privileges the perspectives of community members, releases the researcher from the responsibility of determining who and what will count for purposes of analysis.

These ideologies of authenticity have provided an important base for sociolinguistic scholarship, by enabling research to proceed in the first place and by highlighting (if too often uncritically) ideologies that language users themselves often share with the sociolinguists who study them. It is therefore neither desirable nor possible to eradicate ideology from sociolinguistic research altogether. However, these ideologies also limit the kinds of questions sociolinguists tend to ask and the kinds of answers we tend to come up with. Rather than attempt to track down authentic speakers, sociolinguists might instead devote more time to figuring out how such individuals and groups have come to be viewed as authentic in the first place, and by whom – a process that brings together issues of social structure and individual agency that are increasingly central in sociolinguistics (cf. Carter and Sealey 2000; Coupland, Sarangi and Candlin 2001; Woolard 1985).

FROM AUTHENTICITY TO AUTHENTICATION

Sociolinguists already have many tools for undoing authenticity: Le Page's acts of identity model (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985); Bell's (1984, 2001) concepts of audience and referee design; Rampton's (1995) theory of language crossing; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) development of the community of practice model; Pratt's (1987) proposal for a linguistics of contact; and Coupland's (2001a) relational approach to identity. Many of these theories contribute to the recent outpouring of research on style as a production of identity in which language users creatively – but not unconstrainedly – draw on available linguistic resources in specific interactional and sociocultural contexts. All of these frameworks move us away from the theoretical construct of the authentic speaker to the often unexpected identities (S. Hall 1980; Williams 1961) that human beings take on in practice. And these theorists suggest that when sociolinguists encounter such unexpected identities, our reaction should be one of delight, not dismay – or disdain – for it is only when we are surprised out of our assumptions that we can truly appreciate the creative and innovative sociocultural work that social actors regularly accomplish with language. Yet this scholarship does not deny the central role of social and political structure in the social formation of identity. Indeed, it is only in relation to such structures that identities take on their social meanings. Taken as a whole, this body of scholarship indicates that contrary to the way much

sociolinguistic research has proceeded, authenticity is not there to be discovered, nor even to be cleverly coaxed into range of our recording equipment; rather, it is conferred – by language users and their audiences, and by us, the sociolinguists who study them.

I seek to build on this work by relocating the construct of the 'authentic speaker' within sociolinguistics. In place of the unexamined notion of authenticity, I offer the alternative concept of *authentication*. Where authenticity presupposes that identity is primordial, authentication views it as the outcome of constantly negotiated social practices. My discussion here draws on my recent work with Kira Hall (Bucholtz and Hall forthcoming), in which we propose a set of relations, which we call *tactics of intersubjectivity*, that produce identity – both one's own and others' – through linguistic and other symbolic practices. It is the tactic of authentication that produces authenticity as its effect. Thus sociolinguists should speak not of authenticity but more accurately of authenticity effects, achieved through the authenticating practices of those who use and evaluate language. This perspective does not deny the cultural force of authenticity as an ideology but emphasizes that authenticity is always achieved rather than given in social life, although this achievement is often rendered invisible.

The *tactics of intersubjectivity* model is intended to reflect the fact that identity formation is closely tailored to its context: identities emerge from temporary and mutable interactional conditions, in negotiation and often contestation with other social actors and in relation to larger and often unyielding structures of power. The model comprises three pairs of tactics based on three conceptually separable but interrelated sets of identity relations. Though organized as polarized terms, these pairings are neither categorical nor mutually exclusive. In other words, at any given moment, language users may locate themselves anywhere between the poles along each relational continuum and may even draw on aspects of both poles simultaneously.

The first pair of terms concerns similarity and difference.[5] *Adequation*, a term that incorporates the concepts of both equation and adequacy, calls attention to the fact that social actors, in creating some shared commonality across the lines of difference that separate all individuals, do not seek to erase those differences entirely. It may therefore be glossed as the construction of contextually sufficient similarity between individuals or groups. *Distinction*, conversely, involves a differentiating process that downplays intersubjective likeness. The second set of relations, authorization and illegitimation, foregrounds the role of institutions in conferring or withholding structural power. *Authorization* concerns the claiming or imparting of a culturally recognized powerful status, while *illegitimation* is the denial or rejection of such a claim. Of greatest interest to the present discussion is the third pair of identity relations, authentication and denaturalization, which involve genuineness and artifice (see also Coupland 2001b). *Authentication* is instantiated through the assertion of one's own or another's identity as genuine or credible. By contrast, *denaturalization* is the

phenomenon whereby an identity is held up as inauthentic or unreal – as literally incredible. Perhaps more than any of the other tactics of intersubjectivity, denaturalization highlights the value of conceptualizing identity relations as polar, for this arrangement forces analytic attention to precisely those aspects of identity practice least examined by sociolinguists: those that emphasize the gap between a performed identity and an assumed target reality. I briefly illustrate what we mean by authentication with reference to AAVE, which as I have already suggested has been central to the development of the concept of authenticity in sociolinguistics.

THE AUTHENTICATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SPEECH

Within the vast body of research on African American language and culture, the language ideologies enumerated earlier have given rise to a number of authenticating practices among sociolinguists, designed to locate the authentic speaker of authentic AAVE. These include the emphasis on the working and unemployed classes, the concentration on male speakers, and the focus on taboo language. Morgan (1994a, b) offers an incisive critique of such practices and their underlying ideologies, so they are not addressed here. It is important to reiterate, however, that these ideologies emerged from the specific conditions in which sociolinguistics found itself earlier in its history, conditions that are no longer in effect today.

By contrast, the authenticating practices of speakers and hearers regarding AAVE have been closely examined only recently, and they differ dramatically from those in which sociolinguists have engaged. Foremost among these are practices surrounding the use of AAVE by European Americans, a situation that involves both pre-existing culturally recognized structures (of AAVE itself as a discrete linguistic variety and its racially circumscribed 'speech community') and language users' exploitation of those structures as resources for creative identity work. Of course, not all such instances of what Rampton (1995) calls crossing involve authentication. Ronkin and Karn (1999), for example, observe that Internet parodies of what is imagined to be AAVE or Ebonics are racist acts that rely on the assumption that such language use is recognizably mockery and hence inauthentic. These cases illustrate the process of distinction, not authentication. But researchers have also described the ways in which certain European Americans may claim or gain authentication as speakers of AAVE. Some may use AAVE without serious engagement with any actual African Americans, as shown in work on white hip hop fans and other European Americans who are marginal to African American cultures (Bucholtz 1999; Cutler 1999; Jacobs-Huey 1996). Other European Americans who use AAVE may be fully accepted by African Americans as speakers of the variety, as shown by Hatala as early as 1976 and more recently by Sweetland (2002). In the first case, white hip hop fans' authenticating practices tend to involve the use of the most emblematic elements of AAVE, without regard for the systematicity and

complexity of the variety as a whole. Such practices are ratified, if at all, mainly by other European Americans – African Americans tend to reject this kind of language use as inauthentic. In the case of European Americans who are accepted into a local community of AAVE speakers, authentication is less necessary. Most such speakers are not aiming to display their authentic credentials as speech community members; the tactic of intersubjectivity most relevant to their language use is adequation – the display of a shared local identity through similar language use. Authentication is at issue for these white speakers of AAVE only when they venture beyond the local community – or when their speech is examined by sociolinguists.

Authentication also arises in some situations among African American speakers – for example, it may be an issue for some middle-class African Americans who are not native speakers of AAVE and nevertheless try to use the variety (Baugh 1992; Rahman 2002). Or it may be found in the rhyming battles documented by Morgan (e.g. 2002) in which rappers vie with each other over who is keeping it the most real. Authentication may also be at work (and may be more acceptable to native speakers) in language crossing situations involving Asian Americans or other racialized groups that seek to display sociopolitical solidarity with African Americans against white hegemony (e.g. Chun 2001).

All of this evidence indicates that we cannot and should not abandon the concept of the authentic speaker, because its use is not restricted to sociolinguistic analysis. Speakers and hearers too rely on the notion of authenticity, not in the construction of their theories but in the construction of their identities. However, as analysts, sociolinguists must acknowledge that authenticity does not exist prior to the authenticating practices that create it; that is, we need to separate out authenticity as an ideology from authentication as a social practice. The approach to authentication as an object of research has already been taken by a number of researchers from a variety of sociolinguistic perspectives (e.g. Henze and Davis 1999; Ochs and Capps 1997; Thornborrow and van Leeuwen 2001). The argument sketched here offers one way to consolidate this and other research into an explicit scholarly agenda.

CONCLUSION

Sociolinguistics has traditionally rested on a foundation of nostalgia. Turning to the past and to communities viewed as preserving the past has allowed the field to contribute importantly to social and humanistic science by demonstrating the competence and creativity of social groups often devalued by modernity. But a nostalgic sociolinguistics cannot adequately describe or explain the complex identity practices in which language users engage – practices that in principle need not be tied to a particular era, whether pre-modern, modern, or post-modern, although the details of these practices are often historically as well as culturally situated.

The studies cited above give us some idea of what sociolinguistics would look like if we sought to explain how some speakers come to be valorized as 'authentic,' and if we shifted our focus from the language users who confirm our expectations to those who unsettle them – that is, the so-called inauthentic speakers. As research is already beginning to indicate, such a field would look very different from the way it has in the past. In place of a nostalgic sociolinguistics, we might have a reflexive sociolinguistics, a sociolinguistics directed as much inward as outward, as aware of the sociopolitical workings of disciplines as of speech communities. A reflexive sociolinguistics attends to the ways that language, history, and culture are recruited via ideology to create structures of unequal power. It does not give up on identity but recognizes that the social identities created through linguistic practices are both flexible and fragmentary and always have been. It critically reflects on its own ideological stake in how these identities are represented in scholarship, and it has a healthy suspicion of an unexamined notion of authenticity as the standard of sociolinguistic research.

To be sure, such a sociolinguistics runs the risk of replacing scholarly self-effacement with scholarly self-absorption, as has been charged of some anthropologists and others who take their own discipline as a focus of research. But as of yet, sociolinguistics is in little danger of ignoring its central concern with describing and explaining language use – a reflexive sociolinguistics simply broadens our research scope to include the language use of sociolinguists and other scholars as part of its agenda, something that individual researchers have long been doing (e.g. Preston 1982, 1985). Such a shift removes authenticity from its position as an unexamined first principle of sociolinguistics and makes it available for a wide variety of sociolinguistic analyses. Inevitably, the original concept of 'real language' that has long shaped sociolinguistic theory and method will itself be transformed in this process, enabling a much broader definition of sociolinguistics as quite simply the social study of language, 'real' and otherwise.

NOTES

1. My thanks to Penny Eckert and the other organizers of NWAV 31 at Stanford University for inviting me to participate in the panel 'Elephants in the room: Conversations we should be having,' where these ideas were first aired. I am also grateful to the NWAV audience for a stimulating discussion, and especially to Rudi Gaudio, Bonnie McElhinny, Keith Walters, and Kit Woolard for insights into authenticity in sociolinguistics. Thanks are due as well to students in my graduate courses Foundations in Sociocultural Linguistics and Language and Identity for their reactions and ideas, to Allan Bell and Nikolas Coupland for encouraging me to publish this essay, and to Allan, Nik, and Penny for extremely helpful comments on an earlier version. A special acknowledgment must be made to Kira Hall, who has contributed innumerable ideas to this discussion as part of our collaborative work on language and identity. All remaining weaknesses are my own responsibility.

2. Sociolinguistic studies of white speakers are extremely common, of course, but the behavior of whites as such (rather than as a racially unmarked group) tends to be examined primarily for comparison with blacks' linguistic practices.
3. Likewise, the term *speaker* marginalizes other types of language use as well, most notably sign language.
4. This tendency to associate the vernacular with men may appear to be a counter-example to the claim that unmarked social categories such as masculinity are less examined in sociolinguistics. However, the two phenomena are compatible. Sociolinguistics – like all social sciences – shows a preference for studying social groups at one degree of difference from the unmarked norm. Thus studies of gender have traditionally focused on white female speakers; studies of AAVE have traditionally focused on black male speakers. In both cases, comparative analysis may also occur, but it is still rare to find non-comparative studies of speakers whose identities are two (or more) degrees of difference removed from the unmarked norm, and when such studies are conducted, the marked social category memberships are foregrounded and the unmarked ones are backgrounded. In this way, a group of, say, African American lesbians is never taken as authentically representative of either the category of women or of African Americans. See Barrett (2002: 30–31) for an insightful discussion of this issue.
5. Somewhat analogous concepts, such as accommodation (Giles, Coupland and Coupland 1991; Giles and Powesland 1975) and audience/referee design (Bell 1984, 2001) already circulate in sociolinguistic research on style. While acknowledging a debt to such work, the tactics model differs from these in developing additional dimensions of identity relations.

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Address correspondence to:

Mary Bucholtz
Department of Linguistics
3607 South Hall
University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara
California 93106–3100
U.S.A.
bucholtz@linguistics.ucsb.edu