Constructing (in)formal communities: A theoretical perspective on the perception of pronominal address in South African German

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This contribution deals with a metapragmatic phenomenon in a lesser-known variety of German spoken in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal Province, sometimes called *Nataler Deutsch* or *Springbokdeutsch* (Franke 2008). Based on ongoing qualitative analysis of semi-structured sociolinguistic group interviews, my central preliminary claim is that in South African German, the German T- and V-pronouns (*Du* vs. *Sie*) have been re-indexicalized with social meanings that both draw from cultural stereotypes (about German-speaking South Africans as opposed to Germans from Germany) *and* pre-existing pragmatic functions, which constitutes a special case in socially meaningful language variation. With my presentation of these findings and interpretations, I aim to put forward a theoretical discussion about the relationship between (meta)pragmatic and social meaning.

During field research in South Africa, the use of German T- vs. V-pronouns emerged as a highly salient metalinguistic topic that appears constitutive of the community's self-understanding, specifically in demarcation from Germans from Germany. Often unprompted, the claim that German-speaking South Africans only ever use T-pronouns recurred in many interactions. According to interviewees, V-pronouns are completely out of use and therefore feel strange. On the other hand, Germans from Germany were reported to prefer using V-pronouns. Speakers further constructed this ideological projection of language variants onto social groups via several folk linguistic hypotheses, which, interestingly, are strongly intertwined with reported cultural auto-stereotypes, including ideas of a generally casual, relaxed habitus resulting from the close-knittedness of the German-speaking minority as well as language and culture contact. Germans from Germany, on

the other hand, were usually described as comparatively distant, reserved and rule-obsessed people.

It seems that for German-speaking South Africans, the perceived use of either T-pronouns or V-pronouns has developed an interpretation as social meaning of perceived characteristics of communities of speakers, following typical cognitive-semiotic patterns of language ideology (Irvine and Gal 2000). Since pronominal address is frequently the topic of metalinguistic comments and directly inscribed into ideas of distinct communities and locales, these meanings appear to take the semiotic form of third-order indices or linguistic stereotypes (Silverstein 2003; Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson 2006). This development of new meaning building onto pre-existing meaning strongly resembles the sociolinguistic variationist indexical field theory (Eckert 2008), according to which a single sociolinguistic variable may convey different more or less related possible (social) meanings, since contextual specifics always bleed into the perpetual reconstrual of the indexical sign relationship between language variants and their perceived social meaning. Since in the case described above, social meaning appears to (at least partly) derive from *pragmatic* meaning, a theoretical question becomes inevitable: In how far may the cognitive-ideological processes in the case described above fit into the same theoretical frameworks originally developed for shifts in purely social meaning? By pursuing this direction of interpretation, I hope that my contribution will provide an opportunity to discuss a current meta-theoretical consideration in how far the traditionally semantic, pragmatic and social approaches to meaning can or should be combined into a broader perspective, or an integrated theory of meaning (Eckert 2024).

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