

# The Elements of Style

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## Style is structured

### The Paradigmatic

To talk about the structure of style, we need to identify substitution classes.

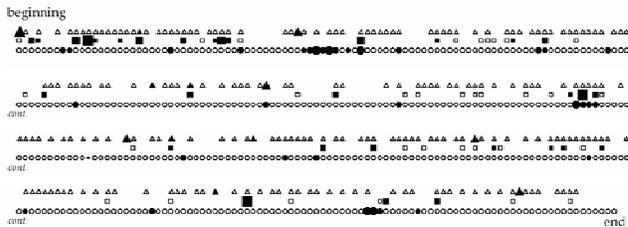
### The Syntagmatic

Style unfolds over time: in the course of an interaction, a day-in-the-life, a life course, the life of a community, a generation, a historical moment.

### Constructions

There may be co-occurrences of stylistic resources that are smaller than styles.

## Stylistic resources cluster along the syntagmatic axis: The Gay Diva



Releases	Rises	Falsetto
▲ 2 above	● rise	● 1-2 above
▲ 1-2 above	○ different variant	● 0-1 above
▲ 0-1 above		● 0-1 below
▲ 0-1 below		● 1-2 below
▲ different variant		○ different variant

The gay doctor discussed on the right, though he projects a competent and caring persona in clinic, builds a diva persona when hanging out with friends. Here, you can see strong stop releases (prissy) and intonational features (animated, expressive) clustering along the syntagmatic axis of a friendly barbecue (Podesva 2006).

## Style is performative

What that means is that **style brings about meaning** - it doesn't just reflect already-existing meaning. And a **stylistic move** can bring about a change in meaning. Both style and meaning are **fluid and ongoing**, and hold the possibility for change. Note that this is not just a change in form, but in meaning as well - **stylistic change is (even at a very local level) social change**.

We don't change willy-nilly; any innovation must be legible - it must build in a comprehensible way on established resources. Hearers must be able to interpret the stylistic move.

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## What is Style and Why should we care about it?

Style is a socially meaningful clustering of features, within and across linguistic levels and modalities.

It's important to understand style because

It is in styles that variation takes on social meaning

The social meaning of a linguistic resource is brought to life through its connections to identities, situations, and other resources (linguistic and non-linguistic). Those connections are used, formed and re-formed through the construction of styles.

## People and spaces go together

'Style' is often used to talk about difference between situations, whereas **dialect** is used to talk about differences between people. But these two dimensions are not independent. Different people tend to inhabit different situations and speakers know this. **Styles** are what people construct in response to the whole picture.

## Meaning is constructed at many societal levels

Q: What do Fussy Teachers, Brits, Orthodox Jews and Gay Men have in common?

A: Final stop release.

Based on the common American stereotype of the British as more proper and educated than Americans - and on the uses of clear speech in school and certain other situations, Americans seem to assign a general meaning of 'articulateness' to this particular hyperarticulation. This feature emerges in styles involving articulateness - in 'Yeshivish' (Benor 2002), in 'nerdy girl' (Bucholtz 1996) and in 'Gay Lawyerish' (Campbell-Kibler et al.).

## but ... Frequency isn't everything

Once stop release is available, it can be **phonetically** exaggerated to get a 'prissy' meaning. A gay doctor releases 6% of his /t/s and /d/s in clinic, drawing on the 'articulateness' meaning to construct a caring doctor persona. When he's being flamboyantly gay with his friends at a barbecue, he releases less (3%) but the bursts are significantly longer and more intense, a phonetic character that helps him build a diva persona. (Podesva 2006)

## How do people process style?

While variationists generally relate linguistic production to social types, we've paid little attention to how people perceive style. Experimental work on the interpretation of the English variable (**ING**) shows that listeners interpret the use of (**ING**) within the context of overall impressions. So a use of **-en** might enhance a Southern accent in the mouth of one person, dampen a gay accent in another and sound 'condescending' in a third (Campbell-Kibler 2005).

## How do we build style?

### Bricolage

moving objects across borders, recombining them to create new meanings

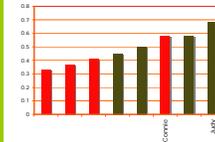
If we take the font on the left and combine it with more conservative colors, it looks less playful - but brings a bit of whimsy to this drab box.

(a businesswoman wears a Mickey Mouse watch with her blue suit to show that she isn't completely under the corporate thumb)



A linguistic Mickey Mouse watch: (ay) in the Detroit suburbs

The raising of the nucleus of (ay) is an urban feature, and is favored by kids who are alienated from school, and who resist adult domination. Connie is a jock

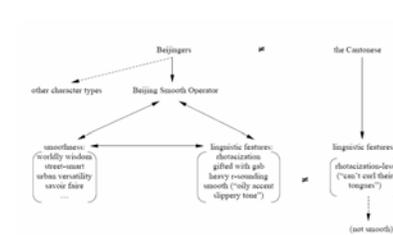


who prides herself in her independence. While most of her stylistic features pattern with the other **jocks** in her friendship cluster, her (ay) is almost as high as that of the most burned-out burnout, Judy, and as high as Judy's burnout friends. It seems that incorporating (ay) into her style allows Judy to stand out as a more independent jock. (Eckert 2000)

## Style is historical

Styles always come from somewhere. They are steeped in **history**. What works as a stylistic move is something that has been **significant** in a community's past. So styles are **ideological**: people don't do stylistic work around issues that are trivial to them. They construct styles which reveal something about their historical **trajectories** and their beliefs about their **experiences**. (think, for instance, of Martha's Vineyard).

Using the past to explain the present: The 'smoothness' of Beijing speech



What makes Beijing professionals use rhotacization to construct their professional identities? And why do men use this resource more than women?

Study of historical sources (novels, essays, literary and critical works) shows that, over time, this variable has come to represent a social character

type (the Beijing Smooth Operator) and a character trait (smoothness). When the locally-based Chinese business professionals use rhotacization to construct a **cosmopolitan style**, they are entering into a dialogue with this variable's social history. That they are constrained by its past life shows up in its gendered use: the Beijing Smooth Operator is a male character type and the 'smoothness' associations of this feature may be risky for a woman's professional image. (Zhang, under review)