Similar to whom? Perspectives on linguistic similarity and difference in gentrifying Oslo

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Abstract

Variationism has long been dominant in sociolinguistic studies of cities. However, a variationist approach, which takes discrete, measurable linguistic features as its unit of analysis, cannot account for all the ways that language use becomes socially meaningful in urban contexts. Drawing on two examples from ethnographic fieldwork in a gentrifying neighborhood in Oslo, Norway, this paper shows how linguistic similarity and difference cannot be assumed, but instead rely on uptakes which vary based on the perspectives being brought to an interaction. In the contested context of a gentrifying neighborhood, claims to speak similarly to or differently from others can become an important resource in making larger claims about the social and political situation. We thus need to consider uptake, as well as production, when analyzing how social meaning and axes of differentiation are created through linguistic interaction.

Introduction

Cities and sociolinguistics have long been interconnected, to the point that Coulmas has stated that the entire discipline “as we know it today is unthinkable without the linguistic differentiation observed in early studies of European and American cities” (2017, p. 18). This link is perhaps the strongest in variationist sociolinguistics, in large part due to Labov’s foundational work in New York City and the succeeding studies reproducing his methods elsewhere. However, variationism cannot account for all the ways that language use is socially meaningful in cities. In fact, variationist sociolinguistics has been critiqued since its
beginnings, for separating the linguistic from the social (Cameron, 1990), oversimplifying sociological categories (Williams, 1992), and not taking speakers’ own perceptions and understandings into account (Irvine, 1985). In this article I outline a somewhat different critique, that linguistic similarity and difference cannot always be explained through decontextualizable and measurable linguistic variables. Instead, I draw on recent work in linguistic anthropology on the semiotics of differentiation (Gal & Irvine, 2019), to show how taking up one person’s way of speaking as similar to or different from another’s depends on perspective, situated and partial points of view that “biographical persons can take up and bring to bear on a situation” (Gal & Irvine, 2019, p. 17). Perspectives are related to a person’s social position, but someone does not need to always take up the same perspective. Instead, people can deploy certain perspectives in particular contexts to act on the social context. We can see a variationist sociolinguistic understanding of similarity based on the linguistic variable as just one of many perspectives, albeit one that has authority in scientific, academic contexts for its ability to position itself as an objective “view from nowhere” (Nagel, 1986).

Attention to perspective is important for analyzing processes of differentiation in many contexts, but it is especially valuable in cities, in as far as they are sites of contact between different kinds of people, with different points of view, social and political goals, and economic resources. The convergence of perspectives in a city is especially clear in instances of gentrification, “the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the city into middle-class residential and/or commercial use” (Lees, Slater, & Wyly, 2008, p. xv). There can be different ways of seeing a gentrifying neighborhood, from a dangerous or blighted place in need of investment, to a convivial community under threat as increasing property prices force long-term residents out. One’s perspective on an instance of gentrification will likely be influenced both by that person’s social positionality (for example, old-timer, politician, investor, etc.) as well as their position on larger political issues, like economic
growth, safety, and social inequality. The perspective that one takes up will also influence how one understands different kinds of people in the neighborhood: is the salient contrast between newcomers and old-timers, or between those working to improve the neighborhood versus people afraid of change? Language use becomes an important index in understanding where someone fits on these “axes of differentiation,” contrastive schemas of indexical signs and what they are taken to represent (Gal & Irvine, 2019, p. 19). Unlike a variationist approach, where linguistic variables and social categories remain constant for a community, even if the evaluations of them change, when we think in terms of perspectives we allow for contestation over what those salient categories and associated ways of speaking are.

Crucially, taking perspectives into account requires that we shift the focus of our analysis from production to uptake. As Gal and Irvine outline, uptakes, or as they also call them, “conjectures,” “are the semiotic armature of perspectives” (2019, p. 88). Uptakes/conjectures are a different object of analysis from variationist sociolinguistics, which is primarily concerned with how speech correlates to, or, in more recent work, produces and performs, the speaker’s social identity. The focus on production is clear in variationist and many other sociolinguistic studies of gentrification, which examine how speakers position themselves and take part in place-making practices through the production of socially salient variables. However, in a contested context like a gentrifying neighborhood, where variables indexing a local identity can become commodified for a middle-class, outsider consumer (cf. Hyra, 2017; Johnstone, 2021; Zukin, 2010), producing salient variables is not enough: they must also get taken up by others as an index of being a legitimate member of the neighborhood. A shift in focus to uptake highlights the ways that social meaning is produced interactionally, relying on reception as well as production. Taking up someone else’s speech as an example of a particular category, or refusing to do so, can become a powerful political tool. In this way, uptake is not always the equivalent to perception.
After outlining an approach to the semiotics of perspective and showing how it differs from a variationist approach to social and linguistic variation, I turn to two examples from my ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Oslo, Norway between 2015 and 2019, which illustrate how similarity and difference are not inherent to linguistic variables but need to be constructed through interaction. In the first example, neighborhood activists claim that many different ways of speaking are all similar because they all belong to the neighborhood in that they are authentic expressions of its residents, unconstrained by standard divisions between linguistic codes. The second example shows an opposite occurrence, where members of a neighborhood organization deny that they and other organizations are speaking in the same way and talking about the same thing, even though they are using the same salient lexical items. I ultimately argue that claiming similarity and difference in language is not always based on discrete linguistic variables or objective auditory perception but can become an important resource in political projects.

Re-examining Similarity and Difference in Accounts of Urban Linguistic Practices

Variationist approaches to sameness and difference

Cities have played an important role in variationist sociolinguistics from its foundations in the 1960s. Although Labov’s earliest work was on the small island of Martha’s Vineyard, many point to his doctoral research in New York City, and the subsequent publication of The Social Stratification of English in New York City (Labov, 2006[1966]), as the beginning of variationist sociolinguistics (Bell, Sharma, & Britain, 2016). Cities continued to be important research sites as variationist sociolinguistics developed, from early studies in Norwich (Trudgill, 1974), Belfast (J. Milroy, 1992; L. Milroy, 1987), and Reading (Cheshire, 1982), to more recent, third-wave studies in cities ranging from Beijing (Zhang, 2005, 2008) to Pittsburgh (Johnstone, Andrus, & Danielson, 2006; Johnstone & Kiesling, 2008), Glasgow
This work has undoubtedly made important contributions to the study of how linguistic heterogeneity is both normal and socially meaningful. However, its dominance in the study of the sociolinguistics of cities, particularly its focus on the linguistic variable and production as correlated to speaker identity, can limit our understanding of the social importance of linguistic similarity and difference.

Others have questioned why the general term “sociolinguistics” so frequently refers exclusively to a Labovian quantitative approach, arguing that this is in part due to pressure from “mainstream linguists” to be “rigorous” and “objective” (Cameron, 1990, p. 84; cf. Bucholtz & Hall, 2008). These critiques focus on the argument that you cannot separate language from the social world, as something that “reflects” the social because language is a part of the social world and must be approached as such (Cameron, 1990; Eckert, 2008). Williams has additionally pointed out that variationist sociolinguistics relies on an oversimplification of sociological categories, and an assumption of consensus around social norms (1992, 2020). Third-wave variationist studies have worked to address many of these critiques and shown how language becomes a resource in constructing social realities. Yet even the third wave continues to take the contrastive variable as the basic unit of the linguistic analysis. While the meaning of a linguistic variable depends on the social context, it remains something that the expert linguist can objectively measure and statistically analyze. In some cases, statistical analysis may not match speakers’ perceptions (Becker & Newlin-Lukowicz, 2018; Benheim & D’Onofrio, 2023), but these differences are explained as the result of language ideologies, and linguists’ focus and speakers’ discourses remain centered on these discrete variables as evidence of whether people speak in the same way or differently.

However, language is made up of a multitude of features and qualities, and a specific variable only becomes salient through the convergence of particular linguistic-systemic and
social-pragmatic factors (Woolard, 2008). Zhang’s study of rhotacization in Beijing provides a good example, where she traces how rhotacization gains semiotic saliency that allows for it to be taken up and recontextualized in particular ways as part of the creation of a new axis of differentiation between state and internationally employed professionals (Zhang, 2008). Yet, while Zhang provides a strong account of how a particular feature becomes socially salient, she maintains an objective “view from nowhere” when describing the distinctions between Beijing speakers who rhotacize their speech and those who do not: differently positioned people in Beijing may have different evaluations of these two person types, but Zhang assumes that everyone in Beijing shares a conception of these types, their associated linguistic practices, and take up the same speakers as exemplifying one of these types. The rhotic-producing smooth operator persona does circulate widely through Beijing, so her assumptions may be correct in this case, but in contexts where social categories are more contested, this connection between ways of speaking and kinds of people may not be as agreed upon, as I will show below with my examples from Oslo. In these cases, we need to pay attention to the role perspective plays in processes of differentiation.

*A perspectival approach to differentiation*

Gal and Irvine (2019) have theorized the role that perspective plays in processes of differentiation. Their understanding of perspective depends on an analysis of uptake, which they sometimes also call conjectures, and what Peirce called abductions. Gal and Irvine’s work builds on that of philosopher Nelson Goodman, who argued that similarity does not rely on observation alone, because “[a]nything is is some way like anything else,” depending on what exact qualities you are picking out and comparing (Goodman 1972, 440). He illustrates this with the following example:
“…suppose we have three glasses, the first two filled with colorless liquid, the third with a bright red liquid. I might be likely to say the first two are more like each other than either is like the third. But it happens that the first glass is filled with water and the third with water colored by a drop of vegetable dye, while the second is filled with hydrochloric acid—and I am thirsty. Circumstances alter similarities.” (Goodman, 1972, p. 445)

How you categorize these three liquid-filled glasses depends on your circumstances, or put another way, depend on the perspective you have at that moment. Are you planning to drink one of these liquids, or just look at how they reflect the light? Putting this into Gal and Irvine’s semiotic terms, the answer to that question will influence the way you typify these three glasses, meaning how you take each of them up as some instance (or token) of a general type, which some set of people agree to be significant. By taking up two things as similar, tokens of the same type, you are taking up a particular perspective (Gal & Irvine, 2019, p. 97). In this case, in typifying by chemical composition or by color, you are either taking up the perspective of a thirsty person, or someone who is more concerned with color.

We can extend Goodman’s example to perspectives on linguistic variation, replacing his three liquid-filled glasses with three speakers in Oslo, Norway, where I have conducted fieldwork. If we are concerned with whether a speaker is from the east or west side of the city, we will listen for diphthongs and salient suffixes (Vaa, 2016). If we are someone concerned with the differences between older, generally white, “ethnic” Norwegians, and teenagers of migrant background, we might focus instead on syntax and prosody (Opsahl & Nistov, 2010; Svendsen & Røyneland, 2008). And, as I will show below, if we are part of a particular set of neighborhood organizations in the central Oslo neighborhood of Tøyen, we will pay attention to something else entirely, which is not easily reducible to a linguistic
variable that could be measured “objectively” using a tool like Praat. How we compare speakers depends on the perspective that we are bringing to the situation. This does not necessarily mean that we are physically perceiving speech in different ways: in the Oslo example, people taking up different perspectives may agree that two speakers produce the diphthong [ei] where the third produces [e], but they will not necessarily agree that this distinction is an important sign of social difference at that particular moment. While this example is somewhat oversimplified, it demonstrates how, in taking up instances of speech as tokens of a particular type, speakers take up particular, sometimes competing, perspectives, which can have important social effects.

A key site of competing perspectives in many cities today are areas undergoing gentrification and urban renewal, terms I use here to broadly refer to processes where more affluent residents move into historically working-class parts of a city, sometimes accompanied by publicly or privately funded land redevelopment projects. While some may see increased investment in a neighborhood to be a positive change in what was before a “blighted” area or “slum,” others may see gentrification as a strategy to force minoritized groups out of the city center, or to turn a formerly vibrant heterogeneous community into a more homogeneous place of middle-class consumption. Gentrifying neighborhoods are frequently accompanied by disagreements over which residents have a legitimate claim to a place, and linguistic practices can play a key role in these disagreements, as can be seen in the increasing attention sociolinguists are giving to gentrification. Most of this work, however, focuses on the speaker’s place-making practices in gentrifying contexts, attending to either discourses (Grieser, 2022; Ilbury, 2022; Modan, 2007; Trimaille & Gasquet-Cyrus, 2017), the changing semiotic landscape (Gonçalves, 2019; Leeman & Modan, 2010; Trinch & Snajdr, 2017; Vandenbroucke, 2018), or the shifting indexicalities that emerge as newcomers take up local forms of speech (Johnstone, 2021). While some of these studies do
consider uptake, they are primarily concerned with the variation of evaluations and indexicalities of different kinds of speech, while the social and linguistic categories themselves remain constant. For example, Trinch and Snajdr examine how the moral evaluations of “Old School” or “New School” shop signage differ between middle-class newcomers and longer-term working-class residents in Brooklyn, yet they assume that, while evaluations differ, the distinction between old and new signage is shared by all residents (2017). What I am proposing instead is that, before comparing these different evaluations, we need to first more closely examine the semiotic processes through which instances become differentiated into metapragmatic categories such as old and new school in the first place. While this might be straightforward in some situations, as I found in my fieldwork in Oslo, what gets taken up as legitimately belonging within a gentrified neighborhood can already be contested, and the ways that language becomes a tool to construct social categories cannot always be analyzed by looking at decontextualizable linguistic variables. The very act of categorizing forms of linguistic expression is already a site where competing perspectives emerge.

A Gentrifying Norwegian Neighborhood

My research consisted of 23 months of ethnographic fieldwork in and around Tøyen, a neighborhood of about 13,000 residents in east-central Oslo, Norway, between 2015 and 2019. I volunteered with community organizations, joined local leisure groups, attended neighborhood events ranging from Christmas markets to meetings with local politicians, created an archive of media discourses, conducted interviews, and had numerous more casual conversations with the people I encountered throughout my fieldwork. The analysis in this article brings together several of these diverse data, including casual conversations with passersby at the community center, discussions at neighborhood events, publicly circulating
descriptions about the neighborhood in newspapers and song lyrics, and interviews with a
neighborhood resident and an employee of a local organization.

Tøyen has been a working-class neighborhood and a first stop for migrants arriving in
the city for about 200 years. These migrants first came from rural areas of the country and
neighboring Sweden, but more recently are from Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, the former Yugoslavia,
and Syria, among other places. The largest group of migrants and their children when I
conducted my research in Tøyen had Somali background and had arrived in Norway in the
1990s. Many residents of migrant background live in social housing, of which Tøyen has a
higher concentration than the rest of Oslo. The neighborhood’s central location, accessible by
every metro line, and a short walk from the main train station and new cultural center built on
the waterfront, has also led to increasing gentrification, including rapidly rising housing
prices and a proliferation of bars and restaurants. At the time of my fieldwork, about half of
Tøyen residents had non-European immigrant background, while the other half were
wealthier, well-educated white, “ethnic Norwegians,” many of whom were in their 20s or
30s. This situation created many of the typical divisions between poorer, minoritized
residents and wealthier gentrifiers that you see in other cities, and much has already been
written about these divisions in Tøyen specifically (Andersen, Eline Ander, & Skrede, 2020;
Brattbakk et al., 2015; Huse, 2014; Kohne, 2020; Ruud, 2003; Sæter & Ruud, 2005;
Tormodsgard, 2015). However, Tøyen also had a movement, especially among the parents of
children at the local primary school, that was trying to cross those boundaries and to make
Tøyen into a version of what a more diverse, inclusive Norway could be. These efforts were
complemented by a state-sponsored project to improve living conditions for all residents.
Whether these efforts in fact set Tøyen apart from other gentrifying areas in Oslo is itself a
topic for debate, which as I will show in the next section, is tied up in how different people in
the neighborhood took up instances of other peoples’ speech as sounding similar or different.
Hearing Tøyenish Similarity Despite Difference

Defining the Tøyenish type

It would be possible to do a traditional variationist study in Tøyen. For example, one could imagine a Pittsburghese-style study (Johnstone, 2021) of the circulation and reindexicalization of “a-endings,” how many Norwegians refer to the feminine singular definite suffix common in the East Oslo dialect, as opposed to West Oslo, where there is generally no distinction between masculine and feminine nouns, and both are inflected with the masculine -en. Or one could look at local features of the youth variety, frequently categorized as a multiethnolect, spoken by many young people, especially on the east side of the city. These include V2 constraint violations, lexical borrowing from Arabic, Urdu, and other languages, and notable prosodic patterns (Opsahl & Nistov, 2010; Svendsen & Røyneland, 2008). However, if you only look for discrete variables, you will miss an important way that some of the people I encountered during my fieldwork identified local linguistic practices, or what they sometimes called tøyensk (Tøyen-ish).

Whenever I asked outright if there was a Tøyen-specific way of speaking, some people would assume I meant the youth variety, but most would look at me blankly. Yet at other times, when I was observing meetings or participating in other events, people would start to talk about the category “Tøyenish.” Yet what they were talking about exactly could refer to all sorts of things. Defining the Tøyenish type and taking up particular instances as tokens of that type became a way for my interlocutors to make much larger claims about the neighborhood. I first encountered the term Tøyenish at the community center where I did much of my fieldwork. The organization that managed the building would often post signs with practical information, like building’s opening hours, or that the elevator was broken.
These signs would frequently draw comments, because they were never written in standard Norwegian, as in the example in Figure 1.

Figure 1: One of the signs that drew comments at the community center. The text of the sign reads, “September 2018. Main Door. The door is unlocked 8:30-19:00 on weekdays. Outside of that, use key fob if you have it, or intercom if you are visiting. The door is open when the reception for Oslo municipality is staffed. From September of this week. – Service desk in the Volunteer House.” Photo by author.

As the result of what is commonly referred to as the “language struggle” (språkstrid) in the 19th and 20th centuries, there are two Norwegian orthographic standards, Bokmål and Nynorsk (Haugen 1966). Bokmål is by far the most common, taught as the primary language in 8 out of 9 primary schools across the country (Foss, 2022). It is particularly associated with Oslo and other cities, while Nynorsk was originally based on the dialects spoken on the rural west coast, where it remains most popular. Every Norwegian child must learn both standards in school, but the two standards are not supposed to be mixed, which is exactly
what the sign in Figure 1 is doing. Although most of the words on the sign are the same in both standards, a few are not, as outlined in Tables 1 and 2.

*Table 1: Nynorsk Lexical Items in Figure 1*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nynorsk</th>
<th>Bokmål equivalent</th>
<th>English gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hovuddøra</td>
<td>hoveddøra</td>
<td>front (main) door</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kvardagar</td>
<td>hverdager</td>
<td>weekdays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>open</td>
<td>åpen</td>
<td>open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frå</td>
<td>fra</td>
<td>from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>auka</td>
<td>uka</td>
<td>the week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: Bokmål Lexical Items in Figure 1*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bokmål</th>
<th>Nynorsk equivalent</th>
<th>English gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>utenom</td>
<td>utanom</td>
<td>except</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frivillighetshuset</td>
<td>friviljugheitshuset</td>
<td>the volunteering house</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, the word *sørvisdesken* in the last line is not part of either standard, and I have only ever seen it used by this organization. Its meaning would, however, have been clear to most readers, as it is a Norwegianized spelling of the English “service desk.”

While signs like this attracted a lot of commentary and attention, people responded to them in different ways. Many thought they were written in gibberish, because they were mixing things that should not be mixed. An older man, not talking about these signs in particular, but about a similar example of mixing Nynorsk, Bokmål, and English, joked that this way of writing was “hipster Norwegian,” because it mixed things that should not be mixed and used English when everyone spoke Norwegian. I asked a friend involved in Norsk
Målungdom (Norwegian Language Youth), an organization promoting Nynorsk, and she said that this sign was written in Nynorsk, because she could tell the person who had written it was really trying to use Nynorsk, even if there were some mistakes. And finally, several people who were involved in local neighborhood organizations said that signs like this one were written in “Tøyen-ish” exactly because they were so difficult to categorize.

None of the people I asked knew who had written the signs, but they were all certain they knew what kind of person the writer was, and made judgements about them. It almost does not even matter who wrote these signs, because what is more interesting here is how people responded in so many different ways to exactly the same thing. My friend in Norsk Målungdom, for example, explained to me that she had said this sign was written in Nynorsk because she wants more people to be using Nynorsk, and she supports those who try, even if the end result is not perfect. Local activists, meanwhile, said these signs are Tøyenish because they were concerned with creating a kind of inclusive, mixed neighborhood, and accepting the unexpected ways in which their neighbors used language was part of that goal.

In taking up these signs as tokens of a particular type, like Tøyenish, Nynorsk, gibberish, or hipster Norwegian, readers were also taking up a particular perspective, whether around neighborhood solidarity, minority language rights, standard languages, or concern about “hipsterification” in the city center. As Gal and Irvine (2019) have theorized, these perspectives are all based on clusters of conventional conjectures about a semiotic relationship between qualities of language and social types. A Nynorsk advocate takes up any Nynorsk words as a sign that the writer was trying to use Nynorsk, ignoring, or “erasing,” the Bokmål words. The other perspectives, meanwhile are all taking up the unexpected mixing of different linguistic features, although they are then making very different judgements about that mixing.
Seeing these signs as tokens of a type also allowed my interlocutors to claim similarity between these signs and other instances that they can say are tokens of the type. Focusing in on the Tøyenish type, as time went on, I learned that this specific mix of Nynorsk, Bokmål, and English was not the only thing that could be categorized as Tøyenish. Although the exact meaning of Tøyenish varied between different kinds of people who used the term, among the kinds of local activists who I talked to about these signs, primarily middle-aged, white, and highly educated, Tøyenish was any sort of mix of unexpected things, or any sort of crossing of expected boundaries. The category was also used to refer to other things aside from language, like music that that sounded simultaneously South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American. That was a very different kind of mix, but it was all lumped together as Tøyenish.

The Tøyenish listening subject

Importantly, Tøyenish was usually something neighborhood activists would claim to hear in others, not something they claimed to speak themselves. What was more important for my research interlocutors than speaking in a particular way was that you allowed this unorthodox mixing from others. This ideology was present even in cases where no one mentioned the word Tøyenish but was a more general practice. Many of the people I spent time with at the community center saw it as their responsibility to understand what their interlocutor had said more than it was for the interlocutor to speak in a way that would ensure ease of understanding. It was about respecting others on their own terms, and not judging them based on traditional sets of linguistic or social standards. Although these people in Tøyen took the idea much further, this focus on understanding being the hearer’s and not the speaker’s responsibility is a very Norwegian language ideology, where people are expected to continue to speak their regional dialect, and to some extent even Swedish or Danish, no
matter what dialect their interlocutors speak. The more typical Norwegian ideology makes a sharp distinction between traditional dialects and speaking “broken” Norwegian, a category that includes foreign accents and the youth multietnolect. Yet these activists’ hearing all unorthodox ways of speaking as “Tøyenish,” and taking on the responsibility of understanding what the speaker is saying, was a political move that was part of a larger effort to create a more inclusive community. This uptake also allowed these primarily white, middle class residents to position themselves a particular kind of “listening subject” (Inoue, 2003) who is accepting of difference.

We can see the political goals of the category of Tøyenish clearly in a story that was included on a 2014 neighborhood-based music project, The Sound of Tøyen. On one track, Per Fugelli, a physician well-known for his frequent newspaper column, and a resident of neighboring Grønland, which is frequently linked to Tøyen, talked about his experience walking around the area.

*Extract 1: Fugelli’s Narrative (Fugelli, Pumba, & Alstad, 2015).*

1 Og ikke sant, lyden av And right, the sound of
2 Tøyen, jo men ikke sant, Tøyen, but right, Tøyen, but right,
3 altså det er ikke mulig that is, it’s not possible
4 å skille lyden av Tøyen-Grønland to divide the sound of Tøyen-Grønland
5 fra bildet av Tøyen-Grønland from the image of Tøyen-Grønland
6 på en måte, ikke sant? in a way, right?
7 Og– og jeg, jeg tror at And– and I, I think that
8 jeg oppdaget det i krystall I discovered that crystal clear
9 mens jeg var syk. For jeg har hatt kreft while I was sick. Because I have had cancer
som kommer og går nå i fem år. that comes and goes now for five years.

Og innimellom cellegiftregimet og vært And now and then chemotherapy and been

ganske shabby. Og da tenkte jeg: rather shabby. And then I thought:

"Faen, takk skjebnen for at jeg bor "Damn, thank fate that I live

på Grønland og ikke på Frogner!” in Grønland and not in Frogner!”

Fordi det var så deilig å gå ut Because it was so nice to go out

og ikke bli pekt på, eller ikke få en følelse and not be pointed at, or not get the

feeling

om at: “Herregud det er kanskje noen that: “My God, maybe someone

som ringer til politiet!” is calling the police!”

fordi at du går her og sjangler og faller. because you’re walking here and

stagger and fall.

Å komme ut i et mangfold av ekte, ærlig To come out in a diversity of real,
honest

liv, ikke bare glansbilder, ikke sant. life, not just glossy images, right.

Altså det er jævla avslappende. That is, it’s damn relaxing.

Du trenger ikke å være skuespiller når du You don’t need to be an actor when you

bor her. Du kan ta et stykke på vei, jeg live here. You can get on the way, I

skal ikke romantisere, men et stykke won’t romanticize, but

på vei, i alle fall mer enn veldig mange on the way, at least more than very

many

andre steder, så kan du ta maskene av other places, so you can take the masks

off

på en måte. Og det er en veldig god skole, in a way. And that’s a very good school,
Although the album was called the *Sound of Tøyen*, Fugelli explains in the first few lines that he cannot separate the sound from the image, resonating with recent work in linguistic anthropology on the interrelation between sound and visual perception (Rosa, 2019). Fugelli may also never use the word Tøyenish, but his description here matches what his neighbors who did use the term meant by it. First, he says that Tøyen-Grønland is a place of “real, honest life” (lines 20-21), where you do not need to be an “actor” (line 23) and can take your “masks off” (line 27). He contrasts this with other places, like Frogner, a wealthy neighborhood in western Oslo, where it is important to maintain a “glossy” (line 21) yet “fake” (line 32), appearance. Throughout my fieldwork, I heard many other people in Tøyen, including local activists, make similar comparisons between a homogeneous, artificial snob on the west side of Oslo, compared to the laid-back, more heterogeneous people on the east side, and in Tøyen in particular. Among Norwegians, these qualities of fakeness, glossiness, and fanciness are all commonly associated with the “pretty” (*pen*) Norwegian spoken in western Oslo. While not everyone may have used the word Tøyenish to describe Fugelli’s attitude, they shared this feeling that, in Tøyen-Grønland, people were able to express their “true” selves, unconcerned about fitting into a Norwegian standard type in the same way that people in other parts of the city were. This was particularly the perspective of white Norwegian adults living in the neighborhood, but others, including young people of
minoritized background, also expressed the idea that Tøyen was different from the rest of Oslo (e.g. Barzinje, 2020).

Fugelli’s comments also explain why different people would be heard as Tøyenish in completely different ways. For example, while the multiethnolect many teenagers spoke would sometimes be referred to as “Tøyenish,” as Mads, a white Norwegian man in his 30s, told me, if someone like him used typical features of the youth register, like mixing Arabic lexical items with Norwegian, he would just sound “lame” (teit). However, the person who wrote the signs at the community center could have been a white man in his 30s, and that would be an instance of Tøyenish. Being heard as Tøyenish was not about producing specific features, but instead about crossing traditional boundaries in a way that others understand to be authentic to who you are. Sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have now long argued that authenticity is not always naturalist, indexed solely by a speaker’s first language (e.g. Rampton, 1995; Sharma, 2010; Woolard, 2016). The kind of Tøyenish authenticity is similarly nonnaturalist, yet it also highlights the importance of uptake, where simply mixing codes is not enough, if others do not also take up that mixing as authentic to who you are.

Fugelli’s narrative further shows how claims to a Tøyenish group, like all ideological work, includes erasure (cf. Gal and Irvine 2019). Fugelli describes his “shabby” (line 12) looks as something that would be pointed to suspiciously in other parts of the city, going so far as to suggest that someone might have even called the police if they saw him after his chemotherapy treatments (line 18). On the one hand, Fugelli frames others in Oslo as being so afraid of difference and shabbiness that they would call the police on a sick old man, positioning people in Tøyen-Grønland as inherently more caring and accepting. At the same time, he equates the experiences of all the different people living in Tøyen-Grønland, regardless of the specificities of what makes them different. They are all a “mixed gang” who would not be able to be themselves elsewhere. Framing all kinds of mixing as similarly
“Tøyenish” erases how these kinds of boundary-crossing are very much not the same beyond the neighborhood, and some Tøyen residents found this perspective to be overly positive and naïve. Mixing Nynorsk and Bokmål like the community center signs is not as stigmatized outside of Tøyen as using features of the youth variety, and while I never heard of the police being called on a cancer patient, young men of minoritized background in Tøyen do report being frequently targeted by the police (Sunde, 2017). Yet, while many of the residents I spoke to were reluctant to go quite as far as Fugelli, especially people of color, some did still use the term Tøyenish to refer to ways of speaking and being that did not quite fit anywhere else. By taking up all of these different forms of difference as tokens of a common Tøyenish type, made up of people who are outsiders in the rest of the city, all different but who all get along, residents like Fugelli are attempting to create a coherent group that did not exist already. This kind of group performance is an attempt to bring the neighborhood together, and, at the same time, a performance for people in the rest of Oslo, to show them that a happy, heterogeneous community is possible. In a country where anti-immigrant discourse freely circulates, claiming Tøyenish similarity is a powerful political statement.

Using the Same Words to Speak Different Languages

While the category of Tøyenish was used to take up different ways of speaking and behaving as all tokens of the same type, some of my interlocutors also made an opposite claim, that people who to many seemed to be speaking in exactly the same way, were in fact speaking quite differently.

I spent most weekdays during my fieldwork at the offices of Inspire, an organization partially funded by the Oslo municipality, which provided starting grants and support to help residents to create small businesses that addressed a “social goal” in the neighborhood. These business ideas included, for example, employing teenagers to serve as security guards at the
local library, and a catering company that also served as a support group for Somali immigrant women. In the months I spent with the organization, attending internal meetings, helping organize events, and chatting with members, Inspire support staff frequently mentioned their frustrations about how other people, particularly politicians, “didn’t get it,” meaning in part that politicians could not distinguish between the more community-focused work Inspire was doing from the more profit-oriented entrepreneurship support organizations appearing throughout the city. Staff saw this problem as having important consequences, as other organizations would be invited to speak at events, or potentially even receive funding instead of Inspire.

Through talking to staff, and even more in observing the reactions of audiences at their public-facing events, it became clear that part of the problem was that Inspire and these other organizations were using what sounded, to many at least, like the same entrepreneurial register to talk about their work, with lexical items like impact, pitch, and incubator, and frequent code-switching into English. From a variationist perspective, these lexical and code choices would suggest that Inspire members were speaking in the same way as other entrepreneurial groups, yet Inspire staff denied that using these same features meant that they were the same kind of people or that they were talking about the same thing as more business-focused organizations. At one event Inspire organized around community projects focused on sustainability and the environment, a participant complained that, while her organization and other green entrepreneurs were using the same words, “they’re not speaking the same language at all.” She used the example of how, while more profit-focused entrepreneurial organizations spoke about “impact” to describe how much of the market share their goods or services have acquired, her group spoke about impact to talk about the effect that their work had on social networks within the neighborhood.
While this claim to be using the same words but speaking different languages may at first seem strange, this situation is in fact common: think of how words like *freedom* or *rights* have long been used to mean completely different things by different political parties. The meaning of such lexical items is not to be found in the formal semantic structure because, as Silverstein argued, “every lexical item includes a pragmatic residue,” a component that can only be determined through considering context (1976, p. 52; cf. Parmentier, 1997). Urciuoli has called these terms that appear in many contexts “strategically deployable shifters” (SDSs), “…lexical item[s] or expression[s] deployed in different discursive fields so that, in effect, people using term X in a referring expression in field A are engaged in a different pragmatic activity from those using the formally identical term X in a referring expression in field B. The salient interpretation of the term depends on the relation of its user to its audience and so shifts with context; in that sense SDSs have shifter-like qualities” (Urciuoli, 2003, p. 396).

Yet while Urciuoli is interested in the discursive processes through which terms like *skills*, *diversity*, and *excellence* come to appear to have clear referents and become semiotically coherent in American university marketing materials, what is at stake for Inspire is not as much the coherence of multiple SDSs, but rather being able to know when someone using term X is in field A versus field B. When an outsider listened to Inspire staff speaking, they would not only assume a fixed referent of a term like *impact* or *incubator*, if they were able to imagine a referent at all, but they would also assume that the speaker belonged to the same entrepreneurial discursive field as anyone else who used the term. To an outsider, everyone using these lexemes was speaking in the same way because they were talking about the same thing: “business” (*næring*). Inspire staff members, however, could hear a difference, both in
the referent of the SDSs being used, and the social type of the speaker that that particular usage of an SDS indexed.

What then are Inspire members listening for in order to differentiate multiple usages of these SDSs? I asked Linda, one of the leaders of Inspire, during an interview conducted over a brief return trip to Oslo six months after I had completed my primary fieldwork. At this point, Linda and I had known each other for the several years, so while the interaction was set up as an interview, Linda knew I was a sympathetic listener. We were nearing the end of the 45 minutes we had before an event we had decided to attend together, and I had been asking her about the entrepreneurial jargon she frequently used to describe Inspire's work, when we began to talk about Accelerate, another organization that Inspire is frequently confused with.

Extract 2: Interview with Linda

1 Janet I think it takes actually a little bit of time to sp— get into it and realize that
2 you’re not talking about the same thing
3 Linda We’re not talking about the same thing. We’re NOT. And they keep saying
4 you know, and they keep saying, “oh but we are,” but we’re not. No, we’re not.
5 Janet Yeah, well it’s also in their interest to say they’re talking about the same thing.
6 Linda YES, and when you look at their website, it’s as if they’re only doing that.
7 But have you spoken to them recently?
8 Janet No, actually.
9 Linda Cause I haven’t spoken to them for years um but ((Ingrid)) has taken over, and
10 uh, apparently it’s back to sort of like talking like when they started you know,
11 “we’re going to work very closely with local people,” blah blah blah you
know and internships and all the rest of it, but that’s how— that’s what they talked about at the beginning, I mean and, as long as they see it as a partnership, would be great, but when they started it was very much, “we’ve come to take over the whole village,” you know, and you just kind of, no we're— we’re— workers

Janet Yeah, it was going to be the ((Accelerate’s tag line))

Linda But I think in the end, if you ask them why were you established, you know, um, you tend to get “We want to solve the plastic ocean thing,” and then you say, “Well, you know, who’s going to benefit, how are you going to show (. success?)” And (. it’s– it’s– you find out pretty quick after a few (. whys, what kind of person they are? (. And I always say, walking into ((Inspire)) compared to walking into ((Accelerate)), you just feel the difference

Janet Oh yeah, yeah

Linda It’s just (. because– because the very important part about social enterprise is the ones that work are the ones that are run by the person who’s experienced the challenge, and that tends to be the difference

Janet That’s a big difference, yeah

Linda And the people in ((Accelerate)) or any other– lots of other places, they're people who want to solve problems for others.

Linda begins in lines 3-4 confirming what I had already observed, that although Accelerate claims they are talking about the same thing as Inspire, that the meaning of the SDSes they are using is constant between contexts, Linda does not see them in this way at all. In differentiating the way that Accelerate talks about their work from Inspire, Linda is not pointing to what the organization is saying specifically. Instead, Linda voices Accelerate’s
discourses as “blah blah blah” (line 11), because she knows that I already know all of these organizations produce very much the same narrative, using the same lexical items and expressions coherent with “work[ing] very closely with local people.” Instead, Linda distinguishes between Accelerate and Inspire through three contextual cues that influence how she takes up their way of speaking as not being about the same thing as her way of speaking. First, Linda is suspicious of Accelerate because she thinks that they want to “take over” (line 15), instead of creating equal partnerships with other people in the neighborhood. Second, Linda asks follow-up questions, with the aim, not exactly in pinning down a referent, but to instead, “find out what kind of person” the speaker is (line 22). Much like who can be considered as speaking Tøyenish depends on an uptake of that person’s expressing their authentic self, determining whether another entrepreneurial organization is speaking the same way Inspire is depends on identifying signs that index the kind of person who is speaking. Determining the referents of the lexical items a speaker uses relies on first determining the speaker’s social identity.

And finally, Linda claims that she can “just feel the difference” (line 23) between the two organizations when walking into their offices. I unfortunately did not ask her to elaborate, but from my own experiences in the two places, and from what she went on to say about the importance of social enterprises being run by someone who has themselves “experienced the challenge” (line 27), I am fairly certain she was referring to both the minimalist, Scandinavian design of their offices compared to the somewhat less elegant Inspire offices, as well as to how Accelerate’s staff were primarily young, white Norwegians, while Inspire included many more people of color who lived in Tøyen. Acknowledging that other organizations are using the same lexical items, but claiming that they are nonetheless speaking a different language, was a way for Inspire members to draw boundaries around who belongs and whose visions for the neighborhood are legitimate. For Linda, this was
someone who was either themselves a long-term Tøyen resident who had experienced the challenges of living in the neighborhood, like unemployment and housing insecurity, or someone like herself, who supported those kinds of residents and lets them lead in how to address their problems. A wealthier, white Norwegian from outside of Tøyen who wanted to put themselves first could not be speaking about the same thing, not matter what lexical items they used. In order to understand what someone was saying, Linda stressed that you cannot listen for lexical variation alone but need to know who that person is.

**Conclusion**

This paper has taken two examples from a gentrifying neighborhood in Oslo as a way of pushing how we consider language as a tool of social differentiation beyond the objectively measurable linguistic variable. While sociolinguistics has increasingly taken emic social categories and personae into account, much less attention has been given to how ways of speaking themselves get taken up as similar or different. While the isolable linguistic variable may be relevant in many contexts, my examples from Oslo show that that is not always the case: different ways of speaking can get taken up as similarly “Tøyenish,” while what sounds like the same entrepreneurial register to some is taken up as speaking “different languages” by others. These claims to similarity and difference occur at different moments to do different things, like creating commonality across difference in a multicultural neighborhood, or distinguishing one’s own motives from other organizations competing for the same funding. The analysis in this article points us in three directions. First, it reminds us of the importance of moving beyond production alone and focusing on uptake in understanding social and linguistic differentiation. Aside from highlighting how differentiation is constructed relationally to do things beyond identity work, a focus on uptake also allows us to move beyond an “objective” view of linguistic differentiation to
consider the interplay of multiple perspectives, both on social and linguistic types. Noticing a specific instance and taking it up as a token of a particular type of speech is simultaneously taking up a perspective. These perspectives occur in contrasting sets: taking up different kinds of speech as Tøyenish contrasts to the more standard understanding of “correct” opposed to “incorrect” Norwegian, while arguing that local organizations are not actually speaking in the same way about the same thing contrasts with the perspective that all entrepreneurial talk is the same. In shifting the focus to uptake and perspective, we can see how social and political action are not the domain of the speaker alone.

Second, these examples show how hearing speech goes beyond acoustic perception. Listeners attend to a wide range of signs beyond the acoustic when they hear and typify how people speak: for example, what the person looks like, their presumed socio-economic and ethnic background, and their relationship to the neighborhood. Linguistic differentiation cannot be abstracted out of the context in which these speech events occur but is integral to the ways that linguistic production gets taken up. A semiotic approach to differentiation can help us to analyze these complexities, showing how listening relies on many things, acoustic and otherwise, being taken up as potential signs.

Finally, while this analysis could be extended to non-urban contexts, an attention to perspectives is especially important in a gentrifying neighborhood. Not only do many different kinds of people and different positionalities come into contact here, but the stakes are high for defining what the neighborhood is, how it fits into the wider city, and who gets to decide who belongs. In these kinds of charged situations, actors do not just perform their conflicting positions through taking up shared salient linguistic variables, or in disagreeing over the indexicalities of particular ways of speaking. While these aspects remain important, the examples from Oslo show that the ways that speech becomes typified as similar or different is already a site of social action.
References


ENDNOTES

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1 Although this article focuses on variationist studies of cities, Coulmas was referring to sociolinguistics much more broadly, and we can also extend this comment to more recent work, for example the importance of cities in theorizing linguistic landscape studies (Shohamy, Ben-Rafael, & Barni, 2010) and superdiversity (Blommaert, 2013).

2 At least in third-wave variationist sociolinguistics. Labov, especially in his earlier work, assumed that there was also general consensus on evaluations, a point that has now been frequently critiqued (Gal, 2016; Johnstone, 2021; Williams, 1992).

3 Slotta (2023, p. 206) has recently made a similar point about the speaker- and identity-focused tendency in variationism. He suggests variationism should adopt a broader conception of the social, including attention to the relationship between speaker and addressee, and the connection between certain activities and linguistic registers, while in this article I am focusing on studying uptake through metadiscourses.
These examples are meant to give a sense of the wide geographical range of variationist studies of cities and are by no means an exhaustive list.

This requirement is sometimes waived for migrant children who do not learn Norwegian until they start school.

A pseudonym.

The stakes of these political claims are quite high as Tøyen is a frequent target of anti-migration and anti-Muslim discourses, including in the general news media, and also from extremist organizations like Stopp islamiseringen av Norge (Stop the Islamification of Norway), who hold rallies in the central square about once a year.

I am using pseudonyms for the organizations and people mentioned in this section.

This interview was conducted in English, the language Linda and I tended to speak to each other.

Transcription conventions:

(.) pause

WORD emphasis

((word)) edits for anonymity

Tøyen activists sometimes refer to the neighborhood as “Tøyen village,” a name that has also been popular with developers in their marketing materials.