

The Indexical Order and Models of Sound Change

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In variationist sociolinguistics, the way we often describe a relationship between a linguistic variant and its ability to signal something social is to say that that variant “indexes” a social meaning. Indexicality emerges in context, and so a variant is always available to index multiple meanings. The relationship between these meanings can be described as the “indexical order”. In this talk I argue that Silverstein’s (2003) concept of the indexical order has been oversimplified in sociolinguistics. I argue that we should instead foreground the concept of markedness and rely more on the use of nth and n+1st indexicals than strictly ‘1st’ and ‘2nd’ indexicals. I make this case through a reanalysis of one synchronic variable, the ‘foreign-a’ vowel in the US English pronunciation of ‘Iraq’ (Hall-Lew, Coppock, & Starr 2010) and one diachronic variable, the US English low back vowel merger (Hall-Lew 2013). I end with implications for computational models of sound change.