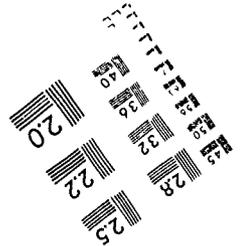
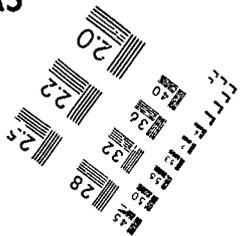


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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the relationship between sex and social class in the spontaneous speech of 16 individuals from Newcastle upon Tyne (England). Specifically, the study examined the frequency of glottalized variants of three voiceless stops, and treated variation by sex as separate from, not a byproduct of, variation by class. Subjects were four male and four female adults from professional families and four female and four male adults who were in unskilled occupations or unemployed. An analysis of the patterns shows an effect of class and a much larger effect of sex. Results suggest that the glottalization considered characteristic of Tyneside vernacular is better described as a male rather than a working class norm. Supporting data from the vowel patterns of the same speakers suggest that consonant variables are more likely than vowel variables to function as sex markers. It is concluded that it is inappropriate to develop a sociolinguistic theory that attempts to explain sex differences in terms of class, and to account for the interacting effect of sex and class by invoking a stereotyped notion of women's status-consciousness. (MSE)

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GENDER AS A SPEAKER VARIABLE: THE INTERESTING CASE OF THE GLOTTALISED STOPS IN TYNESIDE

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All known societies appear to use language as one means amongst others of marking out gender differences. Although gender is generally understood to be a cultural and sex a biological category, I shall adopt here the common linguistic practice of referring to sex differences in language. This avoids potential terminological confusion between cultural and grammatical categories, both of which are referents of the term gender. The precise form taken by linguistic sex differentiation varies from community to community; for example it is likely to be manifested differently in pre- and post- industrial societies and to vary in accordance with culturally determined roles assigned by societies (see Coates 1986 for a general discussion of the issues). In bilingual communities undergoing a process of language shift, the sexes are likely to focus on the new monolingual norm at different rates (Gal 1979).

Most sociolinguistic studies in western hierarchically stratified societies have set out initially to examine the relationship between language and class, or language and ethnicity. The material on sex-marking which has appeared is therefore a by-product, the surveys not having been designed in the first place with this dimension of variation in mind. In westernised societies, the form which linguistic sex-marking has commonly been interpreted as taking is for women to approximate more closely than men of similar status to the prestige norm. But such an interpretation of the very salient sex differences which plainly do exist, and are moreover theoretically important, relies on the analyst's capacity to assign a comparable social class index score to both males and females. In fact one of the problems of a stratificational analysis is that it classifies women in a somewhat arbitrary manner, sometimes assigning to them the class of their husbands or fathers and sometimes determining their class by their own occupations. Because of this (and indeed for other reasons - see Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985 for a much broader critique) it is hard to take seriously the various interpretations of linguistic sex-marking which are based upon the notion of prestige. Perhaps the commonest explanation of the patterns which emerge from a stratificational analysis is that in the absence of opportunities to mark status by occupation, women resort to language. A number of obvious objections might be made to explanations of this kind (Cameron and Coates 1985; Coates 1986). For example, it is not clear why, if they are motivated by a desire to mark prestige, wives of men in high status occupations should not simply imitate the language of their husbands.

Once it has been acknowledged that linguistic differentiation is a particularly salient manifestation of the tendency of communities to mark out gender distinctions by a variety of means, it is difficult, given the

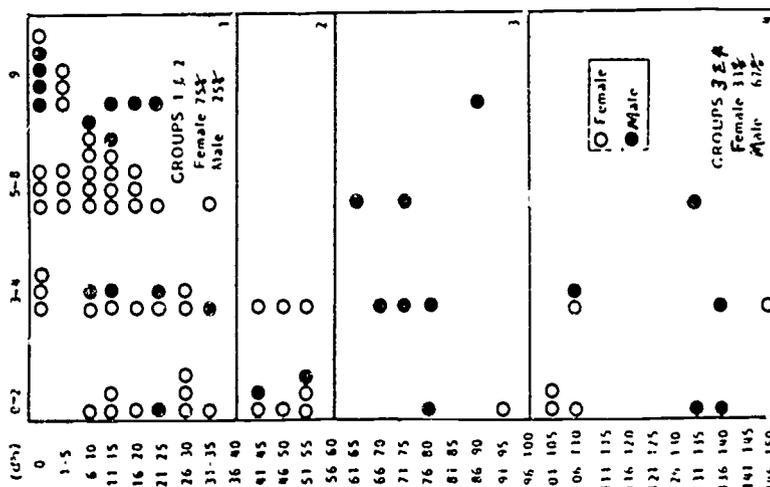
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general orientation of current sociolinguistics, to progress further in finding a convincing explanation of linguistic sex-marking. The most fruitful procedure, as with so many problems, might well be to try and rethink the whole issue and to seek lines of explanation other than those associated with the notion of prestige. Horvath's (1985) re-graphing of some of Labov's data in terms of 'natural' linguistic groupings rather than primarily in terms of social class even suggests that sex should take precedence over class as the major speaker variable. Criticising an initial approach to the data in terms of class (which is a problematic variable even at the sampling stage) she remarks that 'if social class is seen to take precedence, then these other social dimensions might remain hidden or only dimly perceived.' (Horvath 1985:64). One implication of these comments is that it is perhaps more reasonable (certainly just as reasonable) to explain class differences in terms of sex, as an alternative to the standard approach to the explanation of sex differences in terms of class. In fact the issue raised here is a serious one for sociolinguistic theory.

Although it is clear from Horvath's graph of Labov's (dh) data (see Figure 1) that sex of speaker accounts for the natural groupings which appear rather better than class (which nevertheless has a substantial effect) sociolinguists have for many years attempted to 'explain' sex differences in class terms. They have not usually acknowledged the theoretical assumptions underlying their line of argument - that women are for various reasons more likely to be oriented to high prestige norms than men. However, the rather unconvincing and ad hoc character of these explanations has been spelt out by, for example Coates (1986). Nor have they greatly advanced our understanding of the nature and role of sex differentiation in language, or how it interacts with social class variation. That I think is the rather depressing conclusion we are forced to draw from scrutiny of more than 20 years of work in the Labovian tradition. I think that Bob Le Page, who has for many years been in the forefront of criticisms of 'unidimensional' sociolinguistics, would share these general views, although he would probably offer a much more radical critique of the problem and a very different approach from the one which I am developing in this paper.

Figure 1.

(dh) in New York City (After Labov 1966 and Horvath 1985)



Back now to language, sex, and class. The data discussed by Horvath and presented graphically in Figure 1 cannot easily be dismissed as an isolated example. Coates has regraphed a substantial amount of data from a number of well-known sociolinguistic surveys which shows clearly that sex of speaker quite commonly accounts for patterns of variation at least as well as, and in some cases, better than, social class. In a recent study of the dialect of Amsterdam, Schatz (1986) finds sex-related differences in the distribution of variants of the (a) variable in low status speakers only, rather than the expected pattern of women approximating to the norms of a higher social group. Finding that the existing paradigm does not accommodate the Amsterdam data, she remarks: 'No other sociolinguistic study has ever documented the existence of separate status-bound male and female linguistic variants....The existence of such sex-bound socially diagnostic variables definitely merits further research' (Schatz 1986:102f.). The problem faced by Schatz (and no doubt others who have uncovered but not reported such 'anomalous' data) is that current sociolinguistic thinking does not provide a framework for interpreting patterns of this kind.

Although it is possible to cite data from a number of studies in support of the argument that sex differences cannot appropriately be explained in terms of class, I shall concentrate here on one small pilot study which set out explicitly to examine the relationship between the variables of sex and class, rather than viewing the former as a by-product of the latter. An analysis carried out in Newcastle upon Tyne, by Rigg (1987) on variation between glottalised and non-glottalised variants of the fortis stops /p, t, k/ in word-medial and word-final positions shows that, as in Amsterdam, the effect of sex on a given variable can sometimes be quite dramatically greater than that of class. Sixteen speakers were studied in all, whose ages ranged from 23 to 55: four males and four females from professional families, and the same number who were unemployed or in unskilled occupations. The number of tokens for each speaker for each variable listed in Table 1 varies between 30 and 40. Average frequency of glottalised variants used in spontaneous conversations is as follows:

Table 1.

Percentage of glottalised variants of three voiceless stops in the spontaneous speech of 16 Tynesiders.

	WORKING CLASS			MIDDLE CLASS		
	(p)	(t)	(k)	(p)	(t)	(k)
MALE	99.5	97.0	94.5	96.5	91.0	80.5
FEMALE	60.0	31.0	28.0	27.0	32.5	11.0

Although there clearly is an effect of class here, it is dwarfed beside the effect of sex; the glottalisation which is so characteristic of

Tyneside vernacular (see Wells 1982:374) is better described as a male norm than a working class norm. Data such as these, taken in conjunction with the points raised by Horvath, Coates and Schatz, suggest that we are asking the wrong question about sex differentiation in language if we approach it in terms of social class by asking why women approximate to the norms of the class above them. As Horvath points out, such an approach leads to a rather dim perception of the character of the differentiation (one is tempted to suggest that it is a little like characterising biological differences between men and women in terms of differences in average height or weight). It also seems to have the effect of blinkering us to alternative lines of investigation.

If we look further at the distribution of these glottalised variants in the speech of the Tynesiders, the importance of disentangling the variables of class and sex point becomes even clearer. Figure 2 compares frequencies for conversational and word-list styles with respect to word-medial position where glottalisation is most likely. It is apparent that the men do not use the glottal variables to mark out stylistic distinctions, the glottalisation rule being near-categorical for males in both classes. Turning to the women, we see a spectacular difference. With the exception of SM, women in both classes completely avoid the glottalised variant in word-list style. The interesting point about SM is that she is only 23 years old, 15 years younger than any of the other women. Hence, we may suggest tentatively that the male pattern of near-categorical glottalisation is likely to spread further in the speech community; and we do have some corroboratory evidence of this from a separate study of 8 year old school-children from Benwell, a working class area of Newcastle (Cowhig 1986). This also revealed sharp patterns of sex differentiation, with the girls behaving in a similar way to SM. Incidentally, the configurations in Figure 2 also suggest that the glottalisation rule has affected /k/ later than /p/ or /t/, an issue pertaining to the progress of linguistic change. Although we shall not pursue the matter of linguistic change in detail here, we shall look shortly at differences in the patterning of variants of these phonological variables relative to each other, with attention to the speaker variable of sex.

We may conclude from Table 1 and Figure 2 that there are interesting patterns of sex differentiation in this glottal metavariable (comprising three sub-variables) which appear to be relatively independent of class. Figure 3, where the solid dots represent male speakers and the unshaded ones female speakers, reveals a further interesting difference in the way men and women characteristically use glottalised variants of the three variables. Males generally, particularly working-class males, seem to have a strong tendency to use the glottalised variants of all three variables at similar frequency levels, while the women tend to use them at differing levels. This perhaps reflects the progress and ordering of the glottalisation rule through time and social space, which at the time of the study was near categorical for working-class men, who are followed closely by middle-class men. The rule is apparently affecting the women more gradually, one phonological variable at a time; and perhaps most interestingly of all, SM

Figure 2.

Percentage of glottalised variants of (p), (t) and (k) in word-medial position in two speech styles of 16 Tynesiders.

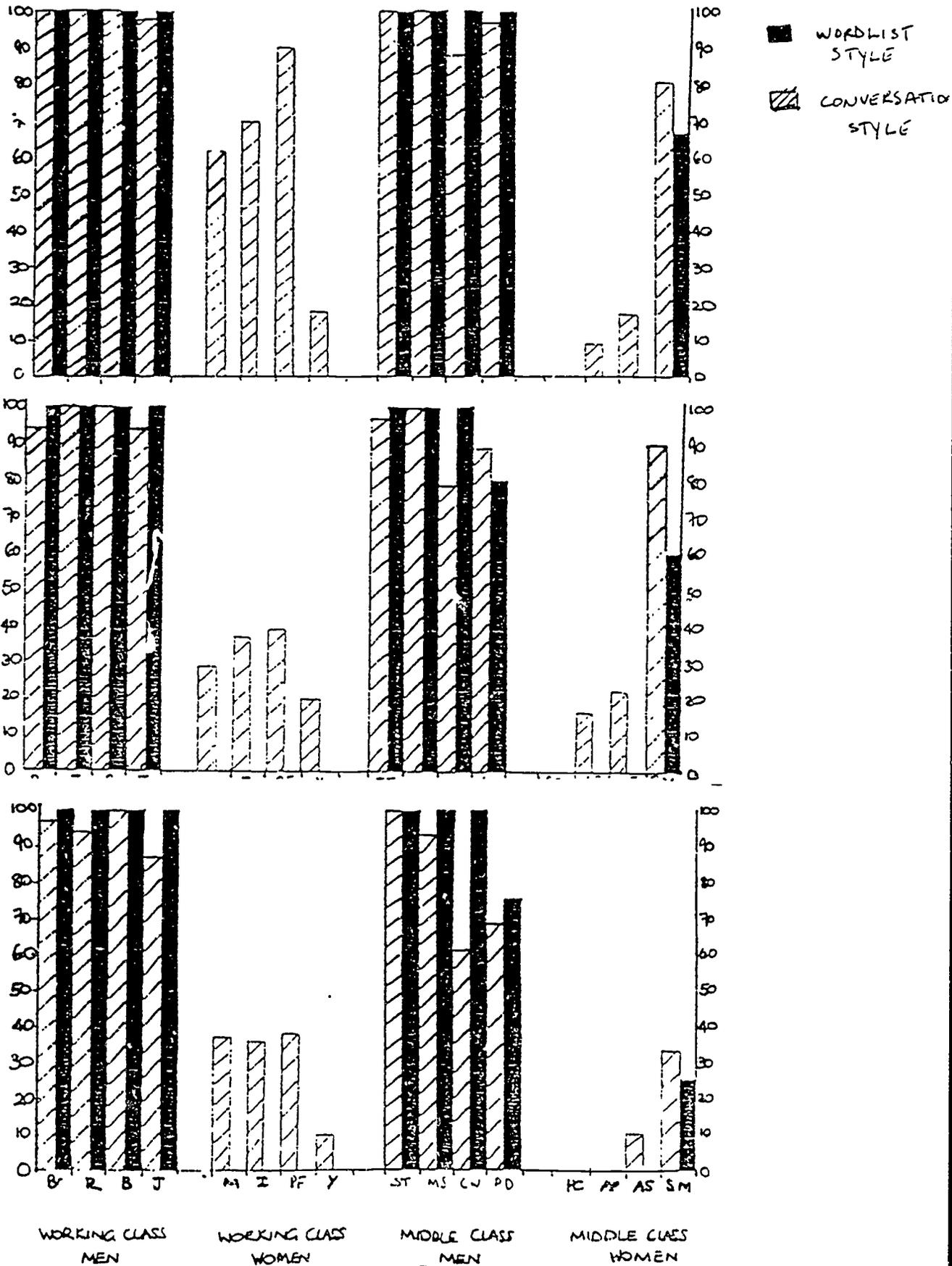
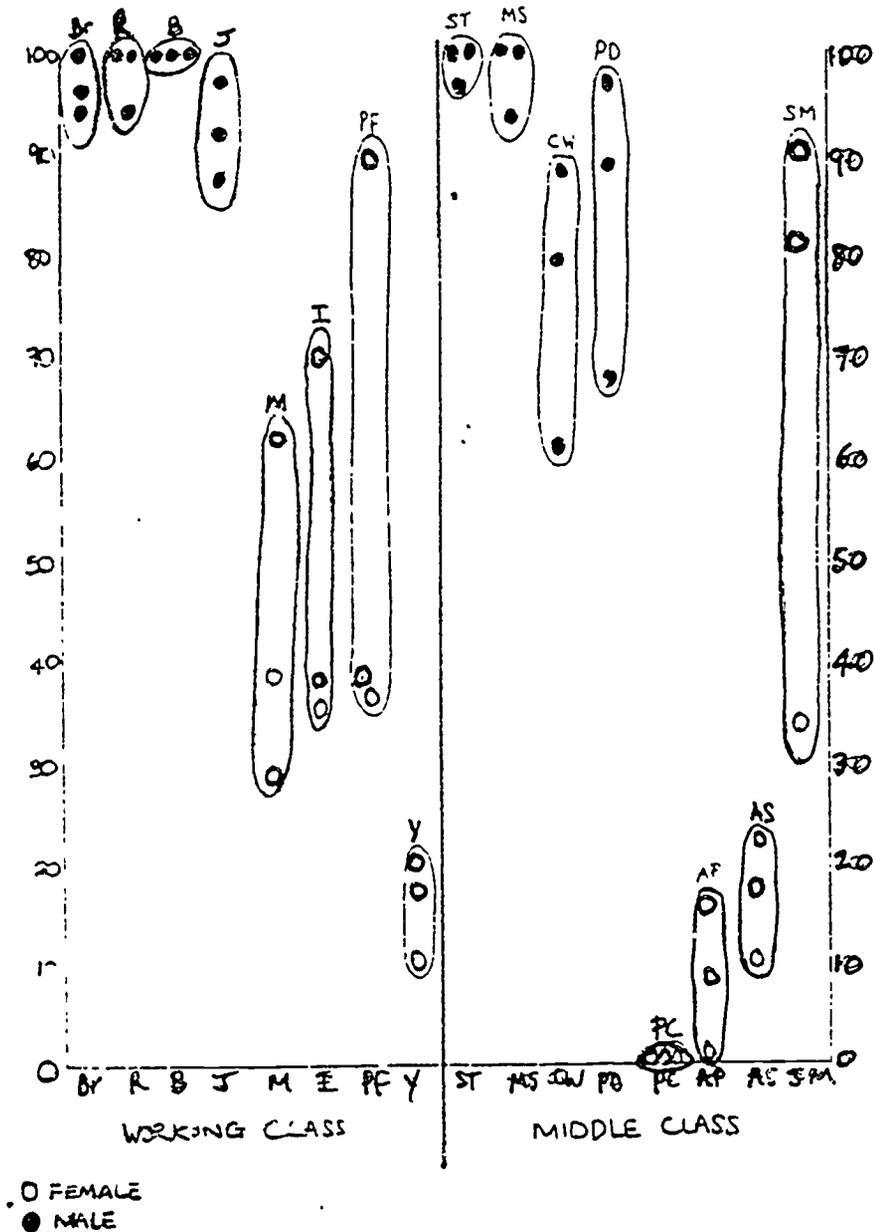


Figure 3.

Percentage of glottalised variants of (p), (t) and (k) in word-medial position in the spontaneous speech of 16 Tynesiders.



reveals a very clearly female pattern with respect to this type of distribution even though she seems an atypical female speaker if we confine our attention to the stylistic information on Figure 2. Figure 3 suggests that there may be a lot more to say about male/ female differences in the use of key social variables than is revealed by a simple frequency count.

Interesting as these Tyneside data are, I would not want to ascribe to sex as a speaker variable any particular primacy in accounting for phonological variation, with class running a poor second. In fact a more recent supplementary pilot study of the language of these same sixteen speakers with respect to a number of vowel variables (see Turner 1988) shows clearly that while some vowels do pattern primarily by class of speaker, others seem particularly sensitive to style. We are at the moment looking at the suggestion that consonant variables are more likely than vowel variables to function as sex markers (see Figure 1 above, and also the distributional patterns of the Belfast (th) variable (Milroy and Milroy 1978) for some support for this notion). Whether or not this turns out to be the case, I think we have to accept the more general sociolinguistic principle that speakers use language to align themselves with others - and indeed to differentiate themselves - along several sometimes intersecting dimensions. Fragments of the language which we call linguistic variables are used for this social purpose. However, while it is sometimes the case that the same fragment marks out both sex and class differences, thus fulfilling a multiple social function, it can also happen (and this is the important point) that these two tasks are carried out by different variables. One of our findings in Belfast indeed was that variables did not appear always to have the same social function; sometimes they seemed to function as network markers, sometimes as sex markers, sometimes as both. So it seems that individual linguistic variables can have one social function or more than one. If we admit this general principle, it seems misguided to develop a sociolinguistic theory which attempts to explain linguistic sex differences in terms of class; certainly it does not seem rational to account for the interacting effect of sex and class by invoking some stereotyped notion of the status consciousness of women.

Differences between communities in what we might call a division of sociolinguistic labour (in the context of this paper, differences in the effects of class and sex upon language variation) can be demonstrated dramatically by comparing the material we are familiar with from New York City and Norwich not only with the Tyneside data presented here, but more exotically some data recently collected in a sociolinguistic study in the township of Rades, Tunis (Jabeur 1987). One of the Arabic variables studied here involved alternation between monophthongal and diphthongal realisations of the items /aj/ and /aw/. The diphthongised variants (as opposed to the monophthongs /i:/ and /u:/) are described as 'markers of old urban female speech' (Jabeur 1987:192). Examples cited are /bajt/: /bi:t/ 'a room'; /nawm/: /nu:m/ 'sleep' (Jabeur 1987:110). Older women appear to be proud of using these markers in their speech, while the younger women use the monophthongised variants which are characteristic of male speech. Observations gathered during field work suggest that the

older women consciously view the diphthongised variants as distinctively female, while young women are actually laughed at for attempting to use forms which identify the speaker as being old and coming from the centre of Tunis. The interesting but perhaps not entirely surprising point here however is that the social value attached to these female variants is not associated with their presence in Modern Standard Arabic. All of these women are uneducated or minimally educated and in fact we probably need to take into account a different set of cultural categories which allow the older women to be specified as a distinct group.

The hazards of oversimplifying or overgeneralising the significance of the relationship between class-based prestige and sex-marking in language are further demonstrated when Jabeur broadens his focus to include variation in the French spoken by bilingual Tunisians. Analysing one highly salient variable (R), he finds alternation between a uvular fricative and an alveolar trill, the uvular fricative being the Standard French variant. Interestingly however, women variably use the French variant, while men never use it. Thus, variability correlates only with sex, not with educational or occupational social dimensions. What seems to be happening is that the men are using a variant which identifies them clearly as Tunisian, while the women are going for a French identity. Jabeur suggests that the symbolism of this French variant is one of 'education, modernity and above all female emancipation' (1987:206).

The women's focus on the French variant cannot however be said to be associated with prestige in any simple and straightforward way. This is because the broader focus offered by an examination of a range of morphosyntactic variables of Arabic (alternating between Standard and dialect) reveals a stratification according mainly to educational level, but not according to sex (Jabeur 1987:207). This is the converse of the (R) distribution, and suggests strongly that while speakers of both sexes are focussing on these Arabic variables to mark prestige, they use French variables to mark out gender. Unlike the situation in many western cities studied by sociolinguists where the same bits of the language do both jobs, we find in Tunis a division of labour between Arabic and French, structurally parallel to the division of labour between the glottal and vowel variables in Tyneside. In both Tunis and Tyneside, it is difficult to generalise on sociolinguistic patterns associated with only a small number of variables, without taking account of the wider picture.

In view of the current state of the art I can do little more here than suggest that approaches other than the classic Labovian one to the relationship between language and sex are surely possible. For example, one might reasonably take as a starting point the observation that the characteristic occupations of men and of women are distinctly different, as are the kinds of relationships with co-employees associated with them. So also are the general patterns of informal social relationships contracted by men and by women (see further Milroy 1987). Cheshire (1982) finds the same differences between male and female adolescents, reporting that among the females differences in language use correlate most closely

with degree of conformity to mainstream values. This is quite a different variable from social class. Yet another avenue of explanation might develop from a comparison of certain properties of the language of care-takers of young children (who are usually women) with the language of women generally (Snow 1986).

I shall not attempt here to pursue alternative explanations, but will conclude on an optimistic note by suggesting one particular direction in which we ~~we~~ can begin to make fruitful progress. As I have attempted to argue elsewhere (Milroy 1988) it is possible to bring together various findings on differences in discourse patterns between the sexes with the findings of Labovian sociolinguistics, which until now, have been viewed as entirely different enterprises (but see Lavandera 1982 for an exception). What I hope is clear however from my contribution to this volume in honour of R.B. Le Page is that the breadth of focus characteristic of his work is sorely needed if we are ever to make any progress in understanding the widespread, and indeed perhaps universal, phenomenon of linguistic sex-marking.

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