Vignette 2c
How to Uncover Social Variables
A Focus on Clans

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"By the way, my mother's dialect is not quite the same as mine," a Sui friend casually mentioned to me. "That's how it is for most children growing up in Sui villages."

Little did I know that this tidbit of information would eventually develop into my dissertation and then further research on clan as a sociolinguistic variable. But I first had to become engaged in the Sui community, let go of prior assumptions, and learn from the perspectives of cultural insiders. After all, the purpose of data collection is to gain new knowledge, and sometimes that new knowledge involves new variables. If we design our data collection on the basis of old knowledge, we may miss the chance to uncover meaningful variables.

I arrived on the field trained in a set of classic, time-tested principles about how language varies with respect to socioeconomic stratification, age, gender, ethnicity, geographic region, and other factors. Many of those principles are primarily based on major world languages or well-known minority languages and varieties, and they tend to be studied in the context of Western industrialized societies (e.g., Labov, 1972; 1994; 2001; Trudgill, 1974). Other research settings may be dramatically different, such as indigenous minority languages (Stanford & Preston, 2009). In the rural Sui villages of southwest China, for example, clan is a crucial social variable that far outweighs socioeconomic status. Likewise, Sui research on gender, regional variation, child dialect acquisition, and other topics would be incomplete without considering clans.

Entering the Sui World

The indigenous Sui people of Guizhou Province, China, follow a strict custom of clan exogamy: husbands and wives must not be members of the same clan, and the wife moves permanently to the husband's village at the time of marriage. As a result, these patrilineal villages are complex sociolinguistic environments involving a wide range of clans, many of which have distinctive dialect contrasts. Though mutually intelligible, Sui clan-level dialects have striking linguistic contrasts that include lexical variants (such as high-frequency words like the first singular pronoun), diphthong variants, and tone variants. Even so, each village has a single dominant dialect: the dialect of the men, unmarried women,
teenagers, and older children. Married women maintain the dialect features of their original home villages to a high degree, even after decades in the husband’s village (Stanford, 2008a).

In this way, Sui speakers make use of dialect features to reflect and construct their loyalties to clans. The clans can be viewed as “communities of descent” (Stanford, 2009b): social groups that are constructed around local notions of shared lineage and often perceived as being rooted in the ancient origins of the society. Lifelong membership in a community of descent is socially assigned at birth according to local understanding of each infant’s lineage, and so these communities are best described from an emic sense of ancestral descent. By contrast, the notion of “community of practice” is typically applied in situations that have a much stronger sense of emergent, evolving, negotiable identities and memberships, rather than ancestral lineage (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Meyerhoff, 2002; Wenger, 1998). Yet language has an important constitutive role in both cases. In-married Sui women express a strong sense of stable, lifelong loyalty to their communities of descent despite being separated from their home villages, and this is clearly evident in their dialect choices.

The role of clan as a social variable is also important in Sui child dialect acquisition. Prior work in other societies has suggested that children acquire the dialect features of their peers rather than their parents (Labov, 1972, p. 304). But in Sui society, the key distinction lies along clan lines, not parent-versus-peer. As a result of patrilineal clan exogamy, most Sui children are raised in households where the mother speaks an “outsider dialect” (matrilect), while the father and older siblings speak the local dialect (patrilect). Sui children rapidly learn to distinguish these clan-related dialects; young children may speak a mix of matrilect and patrilect, but older children and teenagers are almost fully patrilectal (Stanford, 2008b). A child’s most important dialect choices are therefore focused on clan distinctions.

Uncovering Social Variables

The Sui examples above illustrate the value of seeking local perspectives from the very beginning of a project – before data collection begins. Johnstone (2004) suggests that we seek “the local knowledge that motivates and explains the behavior of a particular group” (p. 76). This perspective is clearly important when studying a culture like that of the Sui, and it is just as important when investigating one’s own culture. Here are a few suggestions to help uncover locally meaningful social variables:

1. *Be engaged with the community and personally involved in local life as much as possible.* Be a participant-observer, not a detached scholar. Make genuine friendships, join local activities, and find a way to make a positive contribution as a stakeholder in the community. For me, this involved building long-term friendships with Sui families and assisting in educational and development projects in the village. In this way, ethnography becomes a natural part of community participation, rather than an afterthought or supplement to the “main” research. Rather than viewing these social activities as a task that must be completed so that the “real linguistic research” can begin, recognize that personal interactions are a key part of the research itself. Without such experiences and knowledge, my sociolinguistic data and understanding of Sui would have been inaccurate. From the beginning, have the goal of engaging with the community and understanding local social meanings:

> Variationists who are interested in the local meanings of variation have to be willing to *start* with ethnography, using ethnographic research methods to decide what the possible explanatory variables might be in the first place, rather than starting with predefined (and presumably universally relevant) variables and bringing in ethnography only to explain surprising findings or statistical outliers.

> (Johnstone, 2004, p. 76)

2. *Let go of prior assumptions.* For example, at first I wrongly assumed that the boundary lines on Chinese maps of the Sui region, such as townships, counties, and other administrative entities, were central to the Sui experience of place. I later found that indigenous Sui notions of place do not match those administrative boundaries. The Sui notion of place – and dialect features – is constructed by local understanding of clans, indigenous toponyms, and surnames (Stanford, 2009a; 2009b).

3. *Depend on the insights of cultural insiders.* Have the attitude of a learner, not an “outside expert.” Rather than simply collecting linguistic data from the language consultants, learn from them. They have a lifetime of knowledge of the community.

At the same time, it is good to remember that local consultants (like all of us) may overlook the significance of some of their own behavior, viewing it as simple “common sense.” For example, when I asked why different Sui people within the same village used different first singular pronouns, some respondents thought it was a foolish question: “Each speaks their own way [of course] … People surnamed Lu speak like the Lu place. We people surnamed Pan speak like people surnamed Pan [even though we live here in the Lu place]” (Stanford, 2009b, p. 295). Overlooking the significance of everyday behavior can also occur when the researcher is a cultural insider studying her or his own community. Therefore, it is always wise to gain perspectives from a wide variety of community members of various ages and diverse backgrounds.

Cultural insiders can also produce valuable moments of performance speech (Schilling-Estes, 1998). For example, if someone mentions that another person “speaks differently,” the researcher might ask, “Can you imitate that speaker for me or describe the way that person talks?” Even though performed speech features are typically exaggerated, they often contain valuable clues for later research on natural speech. Those performances are especially valuable in the early research stage when some of the basic social and linguistic variables are unknown. But note that the researcher should first determine whether such activities are culturally appropriate for the specific community.
"To See What Is in Front of One's Nose"

When my Sui friend first told me about his mother's dialect, it was the initial step in a long but fascinating process of learning about the linguistic complexity of Sui society. During that process, it was necessary to become involved in the community, let go of prior assumptions, and depend on cultural insiders. In this way, I was eventually able to make progress in uncovering locally meaningful social variables.

George Orwell once wrote, "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle." For sociolinguists and the communities we study, this struggle involves seeing past our own familiar ways of thinking and perceiving the world. This is certainly important for Sui research. It might seem less important when the research site is more similar to our own culture, but actually the underlying challenges and opportunities are the same. If we can see beyond our noses, we should be able to gain new sociolinguistic insights about any particular community and about human society in general.

References


