

## What Makes me Talk that Way? Speaker Choice and the Evidence from Folk Linguistics

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### Abstract

When speakers choose from their repertoires, they choose on the basis of linguistic and information procedural, interactional, and sociolinguistic constraints. All three are well known. On the basis of the first, one would not say "What John lost was his book" if certain relevant factors were lacking, in this case the presupposition that John lost something. With regard to the second, one would not respond to such an enquiry as "What time is it?" with "I've got a thorn in my toe," unless the responder cares nothing for the Maxim of Relevance. Finally, to quote Susan Ervin-Tripp's famous example, one would not say on meeting the Pope "How's it going? Your Eminence? Centrifuging okay? Also, have you been analyzin' whatch'unnertook t'achieve?"

As regards speaker choice, I will not concern myself with the long-standing philosophical war between those who hold with a Rational Action Theory and those who side with Bourdieu's notions of habitus and field, although conscious choice is not entailed by either. I believe that the material I present here is consistent with either theoretical stance.

I will focus on the interaction between the dominating result of folk linguistic research and all three of the constraints listed above. That dominating result is clearly *prescription*, the idea in every language we have investigated, regardless of individual differences and subtleties, that there is only one correct way to behave linguistically. I believe this in spite of the fact that the long-standing sociolinguistic notion of *covert prestige* would seem to allow for the opposite conclusion (i.e., that there are multiple appropriate ways to behave linguistically) and that societies such as Norway seem to even more directly contradict this position. I will claim in every case that *covert prestige* (or "other system" prestige) is possible only in the face of an established and overtly prestigious variety.

I will outline first a model for the activation of sociolinguistic meanings of the sort presented in Niedzielski & Preston's *Folk Linguistics* (rev. pbk ed., Mouton 2002), but my main concern will be to show how these meanings interfere with perception and production in both current variation and as sources for language change. This evidence is taken from experimental and discoursal evidence collected in language attitude and folk linguistic studies, including those that touch on the subfield of perceptual dialectology.