Review

Emma Moore, *Socio-syntax: Exploring the social life of grammar.* Cambridge:
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Reviewed by Marisa Brook 🅾, Saint Mary's University

The notion that language conveys social meaning is a cornerstone of variationist
sociolinguistics, especially in third-wave approaches (Eckert 2012). However, most of
the existing literature on this topic is concerned with phonetic variables.
Morphosyntactic phenomena are less frequent in everyday usage, and much trickier to
link to the social work that they might be doing (e.g. Cheshire 1999, 2003). Emma
Moore's landmark *Socio-syntax: Exploring the Social Life of Grammar* faces these
challenges and others head-on. The project considers a cross-section of four
grammatical variables in data from Moore's two-year-long ethnographic investigation
of English as used by 13-to-15-year-old girls from a secondary school in northern
England in the early 2000s. As Moore points out, while there has been plenty of
general variationist work on morphosyntax, most of it is based on large corpus studies
as per first-wave techniques. Although such studies almost always take
macrosociological categories into account – age, region, (assumed binary) gender,
racial/ethnic background, level of education, etc. – this process is not as well suited to
addressing how grammatical variables might come to be linked to social meaning on
the local level. Moore's book is therefore a much-needed bridge between milestone
ethnographic projects in sociolinguistics (e.g. Eckert 1988; Bucholtz 1999) and the
large body of variationist work on morphosyntax.

The book is structured logically and flows well from one chapter to the next. Chapter 1
introduces the researcher and her project. Chapter 2 is a detailed explanation of the
ethnography, the school and the relevant social groups among the students. Chapter 3
provides an overview of existing literature on language and social meaning, and how it
might apply to morphosyntactic phenomena. After these, chapters 4 through 7 form the
analysis section: each one addresses a separate grammatical variable and the social
meanings it appears to convey locally (levelled *were*, negative concord,
right-dislocation, tag questions). Finally, chapter 8 concludes and lays out some
ramifications for educators of young people. Most of Moore's chapters are titled with
thought-provoking broad questions; while this choice makes the organisation of the
book slightly harder to infer from the table of contents, it also conveys enthusiasm and
avoids dryness.

Moore opens chapter 1 ('Why does the social meaning of grammar matter?', pp. 1–14)
with a compelling reflection on being an academic from a working-class background. As

an undergraduate, alienated by other elements of post-secondary education, she found refuge in sociolinguistics. This introduction lends the book a sense of immediacy, helps to establish researcher positionality (see also Bucholtz *et al.* 2023) and underscores the nature of sociolinguistics as a fundamentally human endeavour, which rarely gets enough attention (though see Tagliamonte 2016). The introduction to grammatical variation disentangles pragmatic meaning and social meaning, and defines terminology well. Moore's proposed taxonomy of morphosyntactic variables by the level of the grammar they occupy (p. 7) is a welcome inclusion, though the exact criteria used to classify them are left implicit. The chapter ends by laying out several goals of the study, which are carefully stated and ambitious.

Chapter 2 ('The social landscape of Midlan High', pp. 15–45) opens with an intriguing passage from Moore's own fieldwork notes that makes evident how complex and nuanced the local social dynamics are. From there, Moore lays out the genesis of the project, the choice of school (which is in Bolton, near Manchester), the methodology, and how the project proceeded in terms of data collection and her emerging relationships with the students. The attention she devotes to understanding the school's policies, authorities and even physical spaces serves a dual purpose: of course it helps provide explanatory value for the social and linguistic behaviours that Moore observes, but it also sets the scene nicely for the readers of the finished book. Likewise, she takes us through the four main social groups among the young women (the affluent, cliquish 'Eden Villagers'; the loosely organised, school-oriented 'Geeks'; the somewhat subversive 'Populars'; and the especially rebellious 'Townies') by describing her own journey getting to know the groups, their members and their reputations among their classmates. Occasionally, Moore's retrospective evaluations of her younger self as PhD student and fieldworker are so blunt as to seem needlessly critical (on p. 27, for instance, she wonders whether her inability to connect with the boys of Midlan High was a reflection of limited ethnography skills on her part). However, this angle also ends up naturally forming part of the autoethnographic strand of the project.

In chapter 3 ('How do we study the social meaning of grammatical variation?', pp. 46–74), with examples and references well selected from her Midlan High data, Moore introduces the study of social meaning in language and explains the justification for her methodology. In one concise chapter, she condenses almost as much information as could be found in an entire textbook, assuming no prior familiarity with third-wave sociolinguistics. Throughout, whenever the content becomes abstract or rarefied, Moore provides either a helpful schematic or a strikingly clear definition. (The two minor exceptions are the processes of *iconisation* and *rhematisation*, which come across as opaque here; however, both of these can be found defined with clarity in chapter 5.) The balance between the introductory material of chapter 1 and that of chapter 3 is a bit lopsided, as if some parts of chapter 3 were moved there from chapter 1; however, the bottom line – that 'social signification operates across all types of language structure' (p. 61) – rings through.

The subsequent four chapters comprise the analysis and interpretation, with each chapter featuring a different variable. The order correlates with the level of grammar

(towards the more purely syntactic), but also draws upon an increasing set of pieces of background.

Chapter 4 ('How free are we to vary the grammar we use?', pp. 75–110) examines the 'levelled *were*': nonstandardised use of *were* for the standard *was* in the past tense. To contextualise this variable, Moore very effectively summarises the literature on variation in L1 acquisition, as well as findings from traditional dialectology. Among the Midlan High girls, use of levelled *were* correlates with the class background of the girls, but social group explains the findings better than class alone – class is not deterministic when it comes to linguistic behaviour. Moore also gently, but convincingly, illustrates a tendency for variationist work on class and nonstandardised grammar to overemphasise external stigma without asking whether it also exists in community-internal norms.

Chapter 5 ('How do we use grammar to design our talk?', pp. 111–37) examines negative concord at Midlan High: both where it exists (in the speech of Popular and Townie girls, especially when expressing anti-establishment attitudes) and where it does not (among the Eden Villagers and almost all of the Geeks). Moore's key insight is that the roles of semantic and pragmatic meaning cannot be overlooked in the emergence of social meaning. Opposite standardised single negation in present-day English, the heightened 'pragmatic force of negative concord' (p. 137) helps to explain – along with the stigma – why it is of particular interest to the social groups who habitually resist authority.

In chapter 6 ('Does everyone use grammar to make social meaning?', pp. 138–70), Moore analyses a subtler phenomenon: right-dislocation, or the use of a coreferential noun or verb phrase at the right edge of the clause (examples on p. 141 from the Midlan High data include '*They had a massive fight, her mum and dad*' and '*That's where she lives, her*'). Right-dislocated tags, while not connected to any particular persona, are used divergently by different social groups, and the reason is that social groups do not have the same habits in terms of how they talk about other people. This introduces one of the most important core insights of Moore's book (p. 165). Variationists typically treat the effects of social factors as disconnected from the effects of linguistic factors as if the connection is entirely arbitrary; but she argues, convincingly, that explanatory power is lost if the possible connections are not taken into consideration. Any morphosyntactic form will have informational content, and this will inevitably affect who wants to use it and how.

Chapter 7 ('How does grammar combine with other elements of language?', pp. 171–206) revisits Moore & Podesva (2009) and reanalyses the tag questions used by Midlan High girls, integrating an analysis of tag distribution with attention paid to their pronunciation. The chapter is notable for taking a more sceptical position on the issue of personae than Moore & Podesva (2009) did, instead concluding that tag questions at Midlan High 'have limited indexical meanings' (p. 173). As per the variables in chapters 4 through 6, the social groups act divergently in terms of their tag-question usage. This is true in multiple respects: rate of usage, the kinds of tag questions used, what they are used for, and the variable realisation of /t/ and /h/ within

them. The Populars stand out as the major users of tag questions at Midlan High; Moore's analysis untangles some subtle divergence in the norms for how the groups interact with other people, and it is *this*, rather than any differences in personae, to which Moore attributes the effect of social group on tag-question variation.

The four chapters of analysis have several major strengths. One is Moore's masterful use of a wide assortment of tools – quantitative and qualitative alike, and often employed in tandem. The selection of techniques is tailored to each variable in turn, depending on its frequency, its linguistic properties and/or its patterning. While this means that the four sets of analyses are heterogeneous rather than streamlined, it is apparent that this is a necessity of examining four very different variables. As in the three introductory chapters, another strength is how cautious Moore is to spell out explanations and avoid assumptions about prior knowledge on the part of her readers. Her definitions are uncommonly straightforward (even for fine details of the mixed-effects logistic regression in chapter 4) and most of the graphs are clear and helpful.

Finally, chapter 8 ('What does it mean to view grammar as a fluid, flexible social resource?', pp. 207–32) concludes the work and presents the take-away messages. Bookending the beginning, Moore recounts a vivid anecdote of being shamed in the primary-school classroom in the 1980s for nonstandardised grammar. This segues into the final part of her book: a punchy coda in which she underscores the need for educators of children to better understand what nonstandardised grammatical variants are, where language ideology comes from, and how very adept young people with large sociolinguistic repertoires are at drawing on these resources and using them strategically.

Moore's book more than meets its author's ambitious goal 'to provide the first comprehensive account of the social meaning of grammar' (p. 208). The writing is consistently lively, engaging and down-to-earth – full of fascinating observations and even some humour (for instance, p. 136 refers to 'negative concord in all its indexical glory'). The extent of research cited is large and wide-ranging, encompassing not just an impressive array of variationist work (some of which is new and/or obscurely disseminated), but multiple forays into adjacent fields – and yet the citations and quotations never leave the text cluttered or otherwise hard to follow. Forethought and care are apparent in every respect; even the front-cover image of the book is meaningfully related to class and language in the north of England (p. 142). The discussion of how existing variationist practices sometimes miss the mark in conceptualising class differences is worded nonconfrontationally, but is cogent.

There is very little to criticise about *Socio-syntax* as a whole. It would be nice to see a bit more detail about how tokens were extracted and coded for each of the variables; the reader is left to assume that transcripts were read through and tokens collected manually in every case. The discussion of the Interface Principle (Labov 1993) seems incomplete, and would be stronger with a breakdown of the assorted and almost contradictory ways in which this idea has been used in the variationist literature (as per Dinkin 2016). How Moore uses the term 'sound symbolism' – and where that stops and where 'iconisation' begins – is a bit murky. A British word for 'cigarette' on

p. 130 that is homonymous with a word that is a homophobic slur in some dialects of English would benefit from a footnote to point this out for readers unaware. A small number of the graphs are somewhat difficult to understand (figures 5.5 and 5.6 divide up tokens of one variant, then another, in a way that is atypical for variationist practice and a challenge to grasp; figures 6.8 and 6.9 appear to be describing two halves of a binary variable but the proportions do not seem to add up this way). These, however, are very much the exception.

Overall, Moore's book is a trailblazing work that represents a leap forward for variationist inquiry. *Socio-syntax* will serve as an excellent model for students thinking of undertaking ethnographic projects of their own – or even those curious about how to combine quantitative and qualitative methods well. Moore's own story is a testament to the importance of working to ensure that academic linguistics is inclusive enough to have space for those with firsthand experience of linguistic discrimination and systemic oppression more generally (as per Charity Hudley & Mallison 2018). Along similar lines, given the high degree of accessibility, *Socio-syntax* will also be valuable and informative for primary and secondary educators open to hearing what Moore and her Midlan High participants have to say.

Reviewer's address:
Department of English Language and Literature
Saint Mary's University
923 Robie Street
Halifax
Nova Scotia B3H 3C3
Canada
marisa.brook@gmail.com

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