Social media and Sociolinguistic Change
Christian Ilbury (University of Edinburgh)

Since the advent of the internet, the effects of digital technologies on language variation and change (LVC) have been a persistent question, both within the field of sociolinguistics and in popular discourse more generally. But while media and non-linguists continue to confidently assert that social and digital media are rapidly changing the way we speak and interact (e.g., Langdon, 2022; Smith Galer, 2024), the sociolinguistic evidence is less conclusive (Tagliamonte, 2014). Some researchers have even gone as far to claim that media is 'irrelevant' to language change, with Trudgill (2014: 221) contending that the role of digital media in language variation and change is of "no great interest in solving the big challenges of linguistics". But given the omnipresence of digital communication in contemporary society, this position seems untenable, and the role of media in LVC is now a key question that contemporary sociolinguistics needs to be able to answer.

In this talk, I argue for a repositioning in how we view social and digital media in LVC. Specifically, I align with Androutsopoulos (2016) in arguing for a move away from the model of 'media influence on language change' (cf. Chambers, 1998; Labov, 2001; Stuart-Smith et al., 2013; Trudgill, 2014) toward an approach which considers the relationship between mediatisation and sociolinguistic change. To do this, I draw on a series of case studies from my recent research to demonstrate how the mediatisation of speech styles has implications for (offline) sociolinguistic dynamics more generally (i.e., not just 'language change').

Through this discussion, I demonstrate that social and digital media play a central role in two main sociolinguistic dynamics that have implications for LVC research: (i) enregisterment and indexicality; and (ii) language contact, appropriation, and diffusion. I draw on examples of Multicultural London English and African American (Vernacular) English to demonstrate that the mediatisation of these varieties has consequences for how they are used within language/speech communities and how they are perceived by others.

In summarising, I return to the question of the role of media in LVC. I argue that future research in LVC should focus more so on how users respond to and engage with different mediatised representations of (speech) styles, and how these engagements may in turn shape their own linguistic practices. Rather than viewing the 'offline'/'online' as separate dimensions of the social world, I follow media scholars in arguing that the two are entangled and interdependent, such that our analyses of LVC need to be able to account for the ways that language users adopt and interact with linguistic styles *across* offline/online contexts.

References

Androutsopoulos, Jannis (2016). Theorizing media, mediation and mediatization. In Nikolas Coupland (ed.), *Sociolinguistics: Theoretical Debates*, pp. 282-302. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Chambers, Jack K. (1998). TV makes people sound the same. In: Laurie Bauer, Peter Trudgill (eds.), *Language Myths*, pp. 123–131. London: Penguin.
Labov, William (2001). *Principles of Linguistic Change, Vol. 2, External Factors*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Langdon, Scott (2022). TikTok Slang: The exclusive language of Gen Z. *Higher Visibility*. https://www.highervisibility.com/ppc/learn/tiktok-slang/ [accessed 19.02.2025].
Smith Galer, Sophia (2024). How TikTok created a new accent - and why it might be the future of English. *BBC Future*. https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240123-what-tiktok-voice-sounds-like-internet-influencer [accessed 19.02.2025].

Stuart-Smith, Jane, Claire Timmins, Gwilym Pryce and Barry Gunter (2013). Television is also a factor in language change: Evidence from an urban dialect. *Language*, 89: 1–36.

Tagliamonte, Sali A. (2014). Situating media influence in sociolinguistic context. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 18(2): 223-232.

Trudgill, Peter (2014). Diffusion, drift, and the irrelevance of media influence. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 18(2): 213–222.