

Editorial

# Introduction to the Special Issue *Social Meanings of Language Variation in Spanish*

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Centering stances, positionalities, and style, the third wave of sociolinguistic study positions individuals at the heart of its analysis. Understood as a continuation of the first and the second waves (see [Eckert 2005](#)), which sought to elucidate correlations between linguistic features and broad socio-demographic groups (first wave) or locally relevant categories and networks (second wave), the third wave focuses on the social meaning of variable linguistic features and recognizes that speakers agentively employ the linguistic resources at their disposal to signal group memberships, construct their personae, and position themselves in interaction. To understand how linguistic features (or clusters of features) index social meanings, scholars in the third wave have adopted a variety of methodologies, including ethnographic methods as well as experimental work. For instance, in her study on language use among rival Latina groups in a California school, [Mendoza-Denton \(2008\)](#) conducted ethnographic research to examine how the members of each group employed various practices (including, but not limited to, linguistic behaviors) to express social alliances and identities. Similarly, [Snell \(2010\)](#) used an ethnographic approach to explore how possessive “me” is used in stylistic performances (and, as a result, in the construction of local identities) by students in two different schools in North East England.

Experimental research within the third wave has allowed sociolinguists to tap into social meanings and perceptions that might not be apparent by only examining speech production. [Campbell-Kibler \(2009\)](#), for example, used a combination of experimental and interview data to investigate the social evaluations of the English (ING) variable. The study highlighted, on the one hand, the diversity of social meanings indexed by this variable and, on the other, the flexibility of such associations, given that, for instance, perceptions of education and intelligence shifted based on other factors (e.g., perceptions of the speaker’s regional origin). Subsequent perception research has clearly demonstrated that social meanings are highly dependent on factors related to the speaker, such as their perceived age, race, or nationality ([Niedzielski 1999](#); [Drager 2005](#); [Staum Casasanto 2010](#)), and the listener, like their gender or their own linguistic variety ([Hay et al. 2006](#); [Drager 2011](#)). The dynamic and complex links between social meanings and linguistic practices that studies in the third wave have uncovered are created, reaffirmed, and extended in an iterative process, allowing speakers to position themselves in social space by adopting particular styles that are associated with specific linguistic features.

Third-wave approaches thus provide critical insights into the driving forces behind sociolinguistic variation at the micro-level and elucidate the connections that exist between what happens locally and broader social categories. However, research on the third wave has been, to the present, largely focused on the English language. Because the resulting sociocultural and linguistic biases are baked into our current understanding of the reasons that lead speakers to select particular linguistic and stylistic features, a broader exploration of linguistic variation and social meaning in other languages is sorely needed. To tackle the



**Citation:** Barnes, Sonia, and Whitney Chappell. 2023. Introduction to the Special Issue *Social Meanings of Language Variation in Spanish*. *Languages* 8: 283. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8040283>

Received: 2 November 2023

Accepted: 17 November 2023

Published: 6 December 2023



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questions raised by the third wave in other contexts (e.g., how are social meanings linked to particular linguistic forms? How is social meaning structured? How does linguistic use affect social meaning? How do social meanings relate to one another? What is the role of social meaning in language variation and change?), we have mobilized scholars at the vanguard of Spanish sociolinguistics to share their work in this Special Issue. In doing so, we seek to both further extend the third wave to the Spanish-speaking world and to deepen, develop, and enrich the scope of third-wave research.

The contexts under exploration in the studies featured in this Special Issue include monolingual (i.e., Chile, Spain) and multilingual spaces (i.e., Spanish in the U.S., Mayan Spanish, Argentine Guarani), where the interaction between multiple languages provides speakers with a greater linguistic repertoire from which to draw in socioindexical processes. The authors also adopt a variety of methodological approaches, including perception tasks, survey experiments, discourse completion tasks, as well as more qualitative methods such as discourse analysis and grounded-theory text analysis. Finally, the inherent interdisciplinarity and variability of the third wave is on full display in this Special Issue. In the articles featured here, sociolinguistic analysis interfaces with pragmatics (Czerwionka et al.), psycholinguistics (Licata), onomastics (Enríquez Duque), and computer-mediated discourse (Callesano, Pinta and Dickinson). The studies also draw heavily from fields outside of linguistics, such as anthropology (Baird), social psychology (Regan), and psychology (Licata), and they target different linguistic levels, namely phonetics, morphosyntax, pragmatics, and semantics.

Just as the third wave is complemented by other fields, it is also complemented by earlier waves. As Schilling (2013) astutely notes, while we have “sailed over the first and second waves of variation study to reach the third, we would do well to remember that the three waves are part of the same ocean, that elements of all three “waves” of study were present from the outset of variation study [. . .], and that the best current studies will approach the social meaning of linguistic variation from a range of perspectives” (p. 343). The third wave’s connection to earlier waves is highlighted in “Spanish in the Southeast: What a Swarm of Variables Can Tell Us about a Newly Forming Bilingual Community,” by Jim Michnowicz, Rebecca Ronquest, Sarah Chetty, Georgia Green, and Stephanie Oliver. In their exploration of how two generations of Spanish speakers in the Southeastern United States employ multiple linguistic variables, or a “variable swarm,” Michnowicz et al. find that second-generation speakers demonstrate more correlations across contact variables than first-generation speakers, with some innovative features incorporated in tandem, and that certain linguistic features follow a pattern of adoption across generations (e.g., phonological filled pauses). This approach utilizes first-wave methodologies to explore how broad social groups (first generation vs. second generation) employ variable linguistic features, and the analysis of a swarm of factors demonstrates the order of adoption and interdependence of these features within the community. However, Michnowicz et al. build on first-wave approaches by exploring individual behavior, concluding that, unlike other variables, the most salient contact features (e.g., English discourse markers) show highly variable rates of uptake. In other words, their swarm analysis sheds light on (i) which variables demonstrate predictable behavior and uptake across the community and (ii) which are potentially available as vectors for actively constructing bilingual identities at the individual level.

As we mentioned above, sociolinguistic perception studies play a key role in extrapolating the kinds of identities speakers aim to construct through a particular variant, as they establish the social meanings its use evokes. For example, in “Clothing, Gender, and Sociophonetic Perceptions of Mayan-Accented Spanish in Guatemala,” utilizing a comparative word cloud analysis of evaluations of different guises, Baird finds that Guatemalan listeners tend to associate Mayan phonetic features (/f/ fortition and the apocope of word-final unstressed vowels) with the *traje típico*, or traditional Mayan clothing. However, *traje típico* responses, serving as a proxy for a Mayan cultural identity, are significantly more likely for female voices, especially those that include Mayan-accented speech, which aligns with

gendered clothing (and identity) practices in Guatemala. Baird concludes that “the visual body-language link is significantly more essentialized for the identity of a woman than for the identity of a man in Guatemala, suggesting that gendered stereotypes, language ideologies, and embodied practices mutually reinforce one another in the collective consciousness of the region” (p. 1). In other words, bilingual linguistic features live unique social lives, depending on the social context in which they are embedded.

In addition to social context, linguistic factors can influence a variant’s social meanings, and this notion serves as the focus of “Exploring the Role of Phonological Environment in Evaluating Social Meaning: The Case of /s/ Aspiration in Puerto Rican Spanish” by Christina García, Abby Walker, and Mary Beaton. Building on previous research that found that Caribbean coda /s/ reduction is associated with lower status and masculinity, the authors include the additional factors of phonological context (preconsonantal /s/ vs. prevocalic /s/) and the proportion of a particular variant ([s] vs. [h]) in their methodology to determine whether and to what extent these factors influence listeners’ social evaluations. The incremental addition of [s] or [h] variants did not alter listeners’ perceptions, but the phonological context did, such that [s] was only rated as less masculine than [h] in preconsonantal environments, where it is least expected, particularly in men’s speech. As a result, García et al. contend that marked linguistic contexts, such as preconsonantal [s] in the speech of Puerto Rican men, invite more robust socioindexical meaning.

When it comes to analyzing speech production, studies in the third wave have often turned to stance to examine the role of differing positionalities in intra-speaker or stylistic variation. In “Creaky Voice in Chilean Spanish: A Tool for Organizing Discourse and Invoking Alignment,” Mariška Bolyanatz explores the meanings and stances conveyed by creaky voice quality in Chilean Spanish. Using a conversation analytic approach to examine sociolinguistic interviews from Santiago, Bolyanatz demonstrates that creaky utterances were frequently used to organize the speaker’s discourse (e.g., to signal a hedge or the end of a turn). The phonation type was also commonly employed to position speakers in the interaction, namely as a token to invoke alignment, ensure comprehension, or seek support for a position, particularly when potentially controversial information was shared. Aligning with data from other languages, Bolyanatz observes that creaky voice as a hedge may connect the bodily experience with the thought process, with the bodily expression of creak connected to one’s inability to complete a thought. By focusing on intra-speaker variation, this study contributes to our understanding of how linguistic resources like phonation type might be employed for various stylistic purposes, providing a basis for future work that links these positionalities to the construction of more enduring personae and identities in Spanish-speaking communities.

With the rapid rise of computer-mediated discourse, social media has increasingly become the locus of research on identity work. In “Correntino Spanish Memes and the Enregisterment of Argentine Guarani Loanwords,” Justin Pinta examines the social values of memes in Corrientes, where prolonged contact between Spanish and Guarani has led to the incorporation of numerous Guarani loan words in the local variety of Spanish. Through a corpus analysis of Instagram memes, Pinta demonstrates that, in addition to conveying nostalgia, humor, and irony, Guarani loans have undergone enregisterment, indexing local ideological stances toward social phenomena and character types, such as the hard-working, family-oriented Correntino gaucho and the sweet-talking, heavy-drinking Correntino womanizer. Pinta concludes that language contact serves as an engine of variation and social meaning-making, which can be reified and intensified through memes.

Kendra V. Dickinson’s “What Does it Meme? English-Spanish Codeswitching and Enregisterment in Virtual Social Space” also delves into a corpus of memes to explore the enregisterment of a particular brand of U.S. Latinx millennial identity through linguistic practices. Dickinson finds that Spanish lexical insertions, often related to cultural practices, food, and kinship terminology, help to construct a bicultural identity revolving around a shared set of references. Similarly, Latinx characterological figures are evoked through quotatives, whereby mothers, fathers, and older family members are repeatedly

constructed as Spanish speakers, unlike quotatives attributed to others in the community. Dickinson argues that, together, these linguistic features enregister an identity that involves speaking both Spanish and English as well as having close ties to Latinx cultural norms and Spanish-speaking parents. Memes can both reflect and propagate the properties and attributes associated with a Latinx millennial identity, playing an important role in identity construction in virtual social space.

Language co-occurs with other semiotic resources in the process of enregisterment, and Salvatore Callesano sheds light on the interplay between linguistic and thematic features in “Mediated Bricolage and the Sociolinguistic Co-Construction of No Sabo Kids.” More specifically, Callesano uses “hashtag communities” on TikTok to analyze portrayals of “no sabo kids,” a derogatory term used to refer to a purported lack of Spanish fluency among English-dominant heritage Spanish speakers. Highlighting the notion of bricolage, the discursive themes of “performative lexical gaps,” “ethnicity,” and “proficiency” commonly appeared alongside phonological and lexical variation. The author contends that multimodality and semiotic bricolage can enregister the linguistic features associated with the no sabo kid persona, conveying ideologies about the purported “inauthentic ethnicity” of Latinx bilinguals. Through his analysis, Callesano illustrates how language ideologies shape the creation of collective sociolinguistic styles and ethnolinguistic identities while also highlighting the urgency of considering new media in examinations of social meaning, indexicality, and enregisterment.

The third wave’s applicability to interdisciplinary research is apparent in the final four articles of this Special Issue. In “(Mis)pronunciations of Hispanic Given Names in the U.S.: Positionalities and Discursive Strategies at Play,” Paola Enríquez Duque unites the third wave with onomastics and explores how the variable pronunciations of given Hispanic names are used by speakers to position themselves in a range of contexts. A qualitative analysis of the metalinguistic comments of six Hispanic participants who recognize two variants of their name demonstrates, on the one hand, their phonological awareness and, on the other, their individual criteria in determining which specific features distinguish the variants. The participants’ narratives shed light on how the variants of their given names are purposefully mobilized as they negotiate social positionings, a phenomenon underscored by a case study of one participant’s conflicting attitudes toward the pronunciations of her name as she constructs stances of both annoyance and resignation toward the Anglicized variant. In addition to a dynamic socioindexical tool, Enríquez Duque argues that Hispanic naming practices are a sociocultural strategy that is used to bolster intergenerational relationships.

Next, Lori Czerwionka, Bruno Staszkiwicz, and Farzin Shamloo utilized a mixed-methods approach to link the third wave with pragmatics in “Contextual Variables as Predictors of Verb Form: An Analysis of Gender and Stance in Peninsular Spanish Requests.” An analysis of verb forms elicited in a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) found that male and female speakers of Madrid Spanish respond to the contextual variables of power, distance, and imposition differently when selecting verbs: men made use of imposition as a higher-level predictor, while women relied more on distance. However, the participants exhibited a great deal of individual variation within these broad social groups, with certain participants employing more categorically direct or indirect verb form choices, regardless of the contextual variables provided in the DCT. Highlighting the social moves made by speakers who deviate from the gendered norm in addition to broad gendered tendencies, the findings of this study elucidate the social meanings and distinct frames associated with different verb forms at both the micro- and macro-levels of social structure.

Gabriella Licata connects the third wave with psychology in “Indexing Deficiency: Connecting Language Learning and Teaching to Evaluations of US Spanish.” Using two different research paradigms—the matched guise technique (MGT) and implicit association test (IAT)—Licata tests the attitudes of three groups (Spanish teachers, heritage language students, and second language students) toward standardized Spanish and US Spanish. These tests shed light on both deeply rooted implicit bias, as elicited by the IAT, and more

pliant attitudes, as elicited by the MGT, and the use of both helps to determine if there is a correlation between participation in different language programs and shifting explicit attitudes toward Spanish in the US. Licata discovered that, while lexical features of US Spanish were salient to all three groups, there was no significant difference in groups' attitudes in either testing condition, which suggests that biases against US Spanish are shared regardless of language program, although explicit and implicit biases seem to be different cognitive processes. These findings demonstrate the prevalence of standard language and monoglossic ideologies in the US, which are often formalized in academic settings, resulting in the racialization and discrimination of US Spanish speakers.

Finally, in "Examining Monoglossic Language Ideologies in the Social Perception of Spanish in Texas," Brendan Regan and Jazmyn Martinez continue this line of research, adopting a social psychology perspective to explore the role of ideologies in socioindexical processes. The authors conduct an experiment in which they provide the same linguistic stimuli to participants across two guises but alter the social information presented with them. More specifically, they inform both second language and heritage Spanish learners that the speakers they hear have different nationalities (from Mexico or Texas), serving as a proxy for implied monolingual or bilingual status, respectively. The results of the experiment show that the implication of whether the listener is hearing a bilingual or monolingual variety of Spanish has a significant effect on the social evaluation of the speaker, with "bilingual" speakers (i.e., the guises that were presented with a 'Texas' label) being evaluated more negatively than "monolingual" voices (i.e., those accompanied by a 'Mexico' label). Given that the indexical differences observed are solely based on the implied monolingual or bilingual status of the speakers and not directly associated with specific linguistic features, these findings highlight the importance of considering exposure to language attitudes when examining social meaning. This analysis also uncovered an effect of the listeners' linguistic background: only heritage listeners evaluated Mexico-labeled voices differently from Texas-labeled guises, giving the former more positive ratings in the categories of socioeconomic status and social affect. Such an effect illustrates the indeterminacy of social meaning, which, as this study shows, applies not only to linguistic variants but also to entire language varieties.

Having advanced sociolinguistic work from a third-wave perspective in the specific context of the Spanish-speaking world, this Special Issue also opens the door for future work. While the possible research directions are innumerable, in this paragraph we focus on three key areas that strike us as particularly vital. First, given the large amount of existing research on macro-social patterns in Spanish and Hispanic contexts, a greater focus on intra-speaker variation, style-shifting, and stance-taking would not only round out the sociolinguistic panorama but also help connect the broader sociolinguistic trends observed in existing research with individual decision-making at the interactional level and locally relevant social categories. Next, we encourage more diverse methodologies that build on the more traditional and more widely employed paradigms. While the ubiquitousness of the sociolinguistic interview, for example, is clear in Hispanic sociolinguistics, relatively few researchers have adopted ethnographic methodologies that require them to immerse themselves in a community and observe it for an extended period of time. Similarly, few scholars have looked to other social science fields to incorporate experimental tests that, as we show in this Special Issue, could shed light on social meaning at different levels. Finally, if Spanish was underrepresented in previous work on the third wave, the indigenous languages of the Americas, which are often in contact with Spanish, are virtually absent.<sup>1</sup> While documenting the linguistic properties of indigenous languages is a worthwhile endeavor, our research needs to explore the rich social meaning conveyed by and within them, which will challenge unfounded stereotypes about their simplicity and enrich our general understanding of how social meaning is structured.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A notable exception includes the work of Anna Babel on Quechua and Spanish.

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