Opening the black box of social meaning:

A pragmatic sociological treatment of variable liaison in spoken French

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Variable liaison (VL) is a phenomenon in spoken French where a latent consonant at the end of a word may (1a,c) or may not (1b,d) be pronounced if the following word begins with a vowel. Formal accounts of VL have pointed to high degrees of lexical determinism, but a full account requires a better understanding of VL's socio-stylistic aspects. Social factors, in addition to linguistic ones, have long been considered fundamental to the understanding of VL (see, e.g., Delattre, 1955, et seq.; Encrevé, 1988), though have remained elusive throughout the literature. Previous work has highlighted the link between VL and writing, proposing that the realization of consonants which are always present orthographically might lead listeners to interpret meanings such as *authority* or *professional expertise* (Hornsby, 2020), but has left the social aspects of this link underdeveloped. How are such meanings related to a reference to writing? Here, we examine the social meanings of VL by mobilizing Eckert (2008)'s conception of *indexical fields* within the framework of pragmatic sociology (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991, et seq.). Indexical fields characterize potential associations between sets of social features (identities, personae, social conditions, ideological or stylistic stances) and linguistic forms through the lens of indexicality. Pragmatic sociology is a critical sociological approach that provides a model to understand precisely *how* social interpretation happens: social interactional situations are governed by specific, locally-meaningful value systems (termed *worlds*) that actors refer to in order to justify their behaviors and produce critique. These worlds render certain meanings available for interpretation while rendering others 'contingent' to the situation.

Here, we aim to unpack the black box of social meaning: if indexical fields contain multiple potential meanings, how are these meanings structured relative to one another? In our approach, the meanings are organized according to the internal structure of the world governing a given situation. Certain meanings are thus made available for contextualized interpretation. Following Hornsby (2020), we propose that the meanings in the indexical field of realized VL correspond to various social representations of writing. We provide a sketch of these representations which have been discussed in the fields of philosophy, anthropology, and sociology, and which we organize into four clusters: *Preparedness*, reflecting the effort and forethought put into a written text; *The Republican Standard*, reflecting the orthographic norm taught within the French school system, *Variability*, reflecting the pragmatic competence to make deviations from this norm, a mark of belonging to the elite, and *Ideological Materiality*, reflecting the social and juridical authority of codified language in writing.. Any of these or further meanings might be at play when "writing" writ large is indexed in a social interaction; we propose that it is through the prism of a given world that a subset of meanings can be targeted for interpretation in a given situation.

In the present study, we test the proposed link between VL and these representations of writing experimentally. We prepared and normed 32 stimulus items that each included a short passage describing a character in an interaction typical of one of four of Boltanski & Thévenot's proposed *worlds* (8 items per world). Each item included a short quotation from the main character including two possible VL sites which was presented auditorily to participants in two guises (one with the liaisons realized, one without). We then asked participants (*N*=60, recruited online through Prolific) to select which of the two recordings they thought best corresponded to the character in the situation. We found that participants had a preference for the realized variant only on trials in the Industrial World, where professionalism and expertise are valued as a way of establishing one's place in a merit-based hierarchy (see Fig. 1). Following our pre-registered analysis plan, we used a logistic mixed-effects model to test that the preference for the realized variant was higher in the Industrial World than the average preference for VL in our task (represented as a solid line in Fig. 1; β=0.30, *SE*=0.09, $\chi^2(1)$=12.1, *p*<0.001).

We interpret our findings according to the theoretical framework described above, and propose that VL's relation to writing is only pertinent in situations where values like professionalism and expertise are at issue (i.e., social situations couched within the industrial world), reflected notably in the cluster we identified as *Preparedness* within the indexical field described above. We thus significantly expand upon the theoretical underpinnings of the social meanings associated with VL that have been proposed in the literature, while providing an experimental test of our hypotheses.

(1)   a. *trop important*   c. *les vins étrangers*
          [tʁopɛ̃pɔʁtɑ̃]   [lɛvɛ̃zetʁɑ̃ʒe]
          'too important'   'foreign wines'

       b. *trop important*   d. *les vins étrangers*
          [tʁoɛ̃pɔʁtɑ̃]   [lɛvɛ̃etʁɑ̃ʒe]
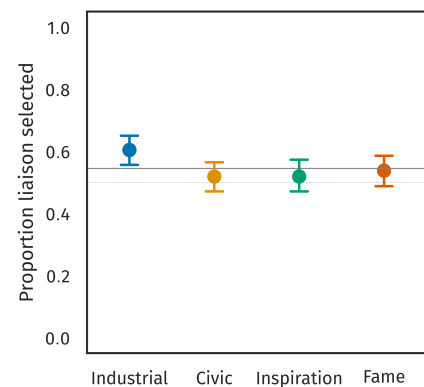   'too important'   'foreign wines'

Figure 1: Proportion realized liaison selected by world.

Link to materials, analysis and pre-registration:

https://osf.io/j8gev/?view_only=625e332cfcb44293b67b2b1de5349e60

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