
Country Talk

Journal of English Linguistics

40(3) 256–280

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DOI: 10.1177/0075424211420568

<http://jengl.sagepub.com>



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Abstract

Speakers of U.S. English varieties often invoke the term *country* to describe their own speech or the speech style of others. However, surprisingly little attention in linguistics has been given to “Country Talk.” This article analyzes the metalinguistic comments elicited in language attitudes interviews with residents of a community on the border of Texas and Oklahoma who self-identify as speakers of Country Talk. The analysis shows how Country Talk is constructed through local discourses that are in dialogue with broader American language ideologies. The article argues that Country Talk has become enregistered through the circulation of indexical relations between imaginings of particular rural personae, on one hand, and particular linguistic features of Southern and nonstandard varieties of U.S. English, on the other. The analysis of Country Talk highlights the ideological nature of linguistic variation and calls for increased analytic attention to the social meaning of variation and the processes by which those meanings are produced and consumed.

Keywords

enregisterment, imagined communities, indexicality, language attitudes, Oklahoma, Texas

A lot of people talk country here. . . . I’d say seventy or eighty percent of this area still talks country.

—Pete, resident of Texoma

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“Country Talk” is part of the American linguistic landscape.¹ The term *country* is widely used to index a range of social meanings linked to rural and agrarian cultural practices. Americans understand these indexical relationships and readily extend them to the speech styles of iconic personae (Eckert 2008; Silverstein 2003): cowboys, farmers, and ranchers. The comment that someone “talks country” is readily interpretable among speakers of U.S. English, and Country Talk is frequently invoked in studies of folk linguistics (Niedzielski & Preston 2003). Although sociolinguistic studies have generally bypassed speech styles like Country Talk in favor of more geographically delimited regional dialects, recent theories encourage the analysis of all salient linguistic varieties as ongoing ideological projects, or projects of “enregisterment” (Agha 2003; Johnstone, Andrus, & Danielson 2006; Remlinger 2009). This approach shifts attention away from feature-based descriptions and isogloss mapping to the indexical relationships between social practice and speech production. The present article builds on Johnstone (1998, 1999) by focusing on Country Talk as an object of linguistic analysis. We argue that Country Talk has become a national register (Agha 2003; see Halliday & Hasan 1976) composed of indexical relations between American imaginings of particular rural practices and personae and nonstandard varieties of U.S. English.

“Country” is a social identity that has its origins in the ideological dichotomies of “country” versus “city” (Williams 1973) and “rural” versus “urban” (Vanderbeck & Dunkley 2003; Britain 2009). Many sociolinguistic studies analyze the adoption of urban-based linguistic innovations by rural speakers (or vice versa) but are not directly engaged with the specific ideological production of country identity, even though speakers in these studies often use *country* to describe rural life (see Bortoni-Ricardo 1985; Britain 2009; Frazer 1983; Rose & Hall-Lew 2008). Of course, the country–city and rural–urban dichotomies are not synonymous. As Johnstone (1998:162) argues, country is not confined to rural spaces and practices, but is “a matter of ideology, not a matter of demography.” The field of social meanings (Eckert 2008) indexed by rural identity only partially overlaps with the indexical field of country identity, and areas of divergence are largely responsible for *country’s* distinct meaning.

Our analysis focuses on Texoma, a rural community on the Texas–Oklahoma border, where Country Talk is a resource for constructing local authenticity. Nearly all the participants identify as speakers of Country Talk and as members of a country community. Their metalinguistic comments represent how one community positions Country Talk with respect to regional dialect variation, rural cultural practices, and ideologically related personae. We find that Country Talk is an actively negotiated ideological project, differing across interviewees, while nonetheless central to the construction of a local identity.

Country and Sociolinguistics

Country is a common descriptor in perceptual dialectology studies. Participants in Draw-a-map tasks (Preston 1989; Niedzielski & Preston 2003:47) often use the term to label regions they regard as linguistically distinct (see Preston 1996; Fought 2002; Bucholtz et al. 2007; Evans 2010), while they rarely use the term *city* except to name

a specific city. This suggests that country is a salient linguistic category that is connected, in some way, with geographical space. The adjectives that interviewees collocate with *country* also hint at its social meanings. In Fought's (2002:128) study among California college students, areas labeled as *country sounding* were also areas labeled with the social personae *redneck*, *rancher*, and *hillbilly* and the pejorative adjectives *crude*, *unsophisticated*, *terrible*, and *lazy*. These results suggest that Country Talk, like "Southern" speech (Lippi-Green 1997), is ideologically associated with rurality, linguistic nonstandardness, and social stigma.

These associations also surface in studies of discourse data. For example, with respect to stigma and nonstandardness, Frazer (1983) quotes a woman from rural Illinois who says about college, "They used to imitate the way I talk; they used to say that I lived on a farm and stuff just because of the way I talk, like a country person" (Frazer 1983:325). Mallinson and Brewster (2005:794) quote a waiter in a "small, rural southeastern city," who describes his customers this way:

[R]ednecks are just terrible as far as, I don't like to listen to them talk as far as, I mean, I have a bit of a country accent. I talk country sometimes but I mean these guys are horrible and seem so ignorant when I'm talking to them.

This speaker frames his own linguistic identity as "a bit" and "sometimes" *country*, but not as country as the talk of the "terrible . . . horrible" *rednecks*. Similarly, Puckett's (1992:138) study in rural eastern Kentucky found that "[r]esidents are deeply conscious of the negative stereotypes ascribed to Country Talk by most outsiders and many 'proper' people in the country." In these contexts, Country Talk is framed as a resource for mocking and stigma, rather than self-identification.

The participants in the current study recognize the stigma around country, but (re)index those stigmatized meanings to more positive social meanings. Johnstone (1998) argues that "sounding country" can be a strategic resource that exploits stigma to build solidarity and signal resistance to the dominant standard speech variety. In an analysis of a country music singer from eastern Texas, Johnstone shows how Country Talk was enlisted to construct the singer's audience as "family, an audience with rural roots and traditional values, a public set apart from city folks, politicians, nonbelievers in Christ, and other demons" (Johnstone 1998:162). Through multiple links to a prototypical rural lifestyle, Country Talk comes "to have new meanings and new uses" (Johnstone 1998:163).

Country identity has been studied extensively in analyses of country music culture (Ching 2001; Ellison 1995; Fox 2004, 2005; Grimshaw 2002; Jensen 1998; Willman 2005). Country music and Country Talk share many relevant social meanings, such as "historical ties [to] rural values and ways of living" (Fox 2004:29). Country Talk is arguably the single most important social practice for constructing an "authentic" identity on the country music market (Fox 2004; Lide 2007), and it carries incredible capital in the global music industry. But what is this speech style, and where does it fit in the American linguistic landscape? This article explores those questions at the local, community level through the language attitudes of speakers of Country Talk.

Participants and Method

Interviews were conducted in two towns that belong to the area locally known as Texoma or Texomaland (Jordan 1978).² Texoma is situated in the Red River valley of Texas and Oklahoma, first settled from the Trail of Tears in the 1830s, then by the building of the Missouri–Kansas–Texas (“Katy”) Railroad in the 1870s. Today, the region is associated with Lake Texoma, an 89,000-acre reservoir built in the 1940s. Lake Texoma draws millions of visitors annually, many from the nearby Dallas–Fort Worth metroplex, who have a noticeable impact on the social landscape of the otherwise rural Texoma area. Towns range in size from approximately 1000 to 30000 people. Depending on the town, the population is around 75 to 95 percent white, with an enduring influence of Native American groups. Poverty, unemployment, and education levels are all around the national average (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Texoma communities are culturally united, in part, through shared orientation to specific agricultural practices. The Texoma landscape is dotted with family farms and ranches, and schools have high rates of student participation in nationally recognized agriculture training programs, such as Future Farmers of America.

Even residents who have no personal connection to agricultural practices identify as people who “live out in the country.” Those who are affiliated with farming or ranching express preference for traditional work models centering on family-based land management as opposed to agribusiness models associated with globalization (Fox 2004; Johnstone 1999). The construction of rural identity is also strengthened through increasing ideological opposition to the large and growing urban areas of Texas and Oklahoma (Sivek 2008). This ideological opposition is reinforced through interactions with, and talk about, tourists from nearby urban areas who visit Lake Texoma.

Texoma is an interesting site for linguistic analysis in part because of its relatively unclear status in dialectological studies of U.S. English. The broader region has been attributed membership in Western, South Midland, and Southern dialect areas, depending on the linguistic variable, the researcher, and the exact area surveyed (Carver 1987; Bailey 1991; Johnstone 2003; White & Shaw 2003; Labov, Ash, & Boberg 2006; Preston & Bakos 2009). As Johnstone (2003:199) explains for Texas,

Historically, economically, and culturally, Texas is both a southern state and a western one. Many Anglo-Texan settlers came from the coastal or mountain South, bringing their plantation or small-farming economy and their southern or south midland ways of talking with them.

An ambivalent identification with regional dialects is likely to be even stronger among Oklahomans, who arguably do not view their state as a distinct geographical and cultural region to the same extent as Texans. While Texas might often be described as “its own kind of south” (Lippi-Green 1997:203, citing Preston 1989), Oklahoma has an even

Table 1. Texoma Area Residents Interviewed by Age, Occupational Areas, and Area Residence

Pseudonym	Age group	Occupational area	Texas or Oklahoma
Alissa	20s	Sales	Texas
Andy	50s	Education	Texas
Cindy	40s	Education	Oklahoma
Diane	50s	Education	Texas
Ed	40s	Education	Oklahoma
Hannah	40s	Business	Texas
Irene	50s	Business	Texas
Kathy	50s	Education	Texas
Kevin	50s	Business	Texas
Kristyn	30s	Business	Texas
Kyle	30s	Agriculture	Texas
Maria	60s	Education	Oklahoma
Olivia	40s	Education	Texas
Pete	60s	Education & Agriculture	Oklahoma
Rachel	40s	Business	Texas
Robert	40s	Education	Texas
Sarah	40s	Education	Oklahoma

more elusive regional identity. The linguistic identification of Texoma is then situated relative to both Texas and Oklahoma. Country Talk may provide a convenient label for a community imagined more with respect to cultural practices than political borders.

This study employs two methodologies from the perceptual dialectology literature: “content-oriented discourse analysis” and the draw-a-map task (Preston 1994; Niedzielski & Preston 2003). Ethnographic methods were not used, although the interviewer (the second author) is very familiar with the community and her local knowledge informed the structure and content of the interview questions. Seventeen interviews were conducted in two Texoman towns, one in Texas and the other in Oklahoma. The interviewer was well acquainted with most of the interviewees prior to the interview. The participant set included eleven white women and six white men from a wide range of ages and a fairly narrow range of educational backgrounds and occupations (due, in part, to economic pressures in the area). Five of the participants are Oklahomans and eleven are Texans. One, Irene, moved from a northern state to Texas as an adult but had lived in Texas for twenty years at the time of the interview. Aside from Irene, none of the interviewees had lived outside of the Texoma area for a long period of time.

Table 1 lists each participant by pseudonym, along with their age group, occupation, and state. Given the small size of the community, every attempt was made to preserve

anonymity. Consequently, an occupational description such as “education,” for example, includes jobs ranging from primary school counselor to college professor.

Each interview consisted of basic biographical questions followed by an elicitation of metalinguistic attitudes, in which interviewees were asked to describe their own speech and the speech of their community. After their initial descriptions, interviewees were explicitly asked to describe Country Talk and to perform an impression of country or to imitate the speech of a person whom they felt exemplified a speaker of Country Talk. Our analysis focuses on the content of these descriptions rather than their patterns of variable linguistic production.

The distinction between mentions and imitations is not emphasized because both are framed as quotative in this particular metalinguistic context, and comments about phonetic features, for example, may often be achieved only through imitation (Niedzielski & Preston 2003). Toward the end of the interview, each participant was asked to compare Country Talk to the speech associated with other social categories or attributes that arose spontaneously earlier in the interview. These categories often included the terms *Southern*, *hick*, *redneck*, and *rural*. In anticipation of the salience of these particular terms, the interviewer then deliberately introduced each term that had not already been introduced and asked the participant to draw comparisons between those categories and *country*. At the end of the interview participants were given a map of the United States that was blank except for the lines outlining each state. Participants were asked to circle “where people talk country.” Participants’ speech was also recorded during this task while they explained their reasons for circling particular sections of the map.

Results and Analysis: Texoma

This section argues for the enregisterment of Country Talk as evidenced in the metalinguistic discourse of speakers of Country Talk. We first establish the community’s identification with Country Talk and provide an overview of the linguistic features cited by the Texoma interviewees as representative of the Country Talk register. We also highlight the ideological associations between Country Talk and Southern varieties of U.S. English that are evidenced via the partial overlap in features cited in the interviews and those described in the regional dialectology literature. We then present evidence that these features have become enregistered as country (as opposed to Southern or rural). The discussion is divided and presented according to three related yet distinct fields of indexical meaning making: rurality, regional distinctiveness, and ideologically related social personae.

We Talk Country

The most robust generalization across the interviews is that nearly every Texoman in this sample described their own speech as *country*, and most participants further

described the speech of the local area as *country*. Some participants considered their own speech to be so representative of country that mock production was impossible.

(1) Kevin (50s, Business, Texas)

- 1 Interviewer: If you just had to characterize the people that live around here, as opposed to maybe neighboring cities, what would you say?
- 2 Kevin: Hmm, probably more of a, uh, uh, rural environment and country environment, uh, that I would say that we have here.
- 3 Interviewer: What does talking country sound like to you?
- 4 Kevin: Well probably just the way I sound, I probably sound country.
- 5 Interviewer: Can you do an imitation?
- 6 Kevin: Well, that's what I'm doing right now! [laughter] I don't have to imitate. [pause] Nope!

In (1), the interviewer introduces a contrast between the local area and neighboring cities, a contrast that is highly salient in the community but that may be partially responsible for Kevin's characterization of the local area as *rural*. Kevin's spontaneous use of *country* in line 2 creates a direct parallel between *rural* and *country*—the two terms are used without distinction. Kevin responds to the interviewer's question about "the people that live around here" in terms of the "environment," either meaning a social environment or linking the people to the physical environment (Rose 2005). In line 3 the interviewer shifts the question to focus on speech, and Kevin responds with a statement of self-identification, although he shifts the focus from "talking country" to "sound[ing] country." This reframes his speech as something that is perceived by others, rather than a product of self-intention, which creates some distance between his identity and the entirety of what Country Talk indexes. He further hedges this statement of identification with "probably." In line 6 he identifies more directly with "doing" Country Talk, although accompanies this statement with laughter, perhaps entirely due to the incongruity of being asked, in essence, to imitate himself. Kevin never objects to the use of the term *country* to describe speech, nor does he show preference for another term like *Southern*.

Roughly half of the interviewees spontaneously produced the term *country* to describe their own speech, while the other half (including Kevin) fully agreed on the appropriateness of the term when the interviewer introduced it. Only one Texoman, Maria, did not consider her own speech to be country. This difference in association appears to be due to her personal characterization of Country Talk as limited to lexical items used by professional cattle ranchers (closer to register in the sense of Halliday & Hasan 1976). Maria's understanding might suggest that others in the community hold similar associations: perhaps those Texomans whose speech is best described as Country Talk are those who work in the cattle ranching industry (Hall-Lew 2005).

Despite these undeniable ideological associations, we found no correlation between those Texomans who identified most strongly as speakers of Country Talk and those

who worked in ranching or other agricultural professions. Aside from Maria, the ten professional educators in the sample readily identified as speakers of Country Talk. Some of these educators explicitly stated that the use of Country Talk is orthogonal to a speaker's occupation. An analysis of all the interview responses revealed no apparent differences in language attitudes that correlated with occupation.

Metalinguistic Representations

While Texomans characterized their speech as country, they were less consistent when asked to describe the linguistic features of County Talk. Many features were mentioned by only one or two people. The high degree of variability across participants may indicate that the country register, however conceived, indexes country identity, rather than any one of its associated variables. This supports Squires's (2010:470, emphasis original) approach to the enregisterment of Internet language, in which she notes that "it is useful to talk about the enregisterment of a *variety* as partially separate from the enregisterment of the variety's *features*."

Table 2 shows the linguistic variables mentioned or imitated by participants when asked to describe Country Talk. The table roughly categorizes variables by type—discursive, lexical, morphosyntactic, or phonetic/phonological—although some of these features cross categories (such as IN/ING; Hazen 2008). Each feature is listed with the speaker(s) who mentioned or imitated it. Whenever possible, participants' own terminology was used (e.g., "louder" vs. "increased amplitude"). All vowel features were rendered as imitations. This may be because the terminology used to refer to vowel variation is too specific to linguistic discourse or (also) because vowel variation is not a common subject of local metalinguistic discussion. Some of the features listed are broader categories than others, for example, "cattle ranching terms" versus the single lexical item *howdy*.³ A thorough analysis of the participants' patterns of nonimitative, day-to-day linguistic production is beyond the scope of this article, though existing analyses of other varieties of Texas and Oklahoma English provide relevant points of comparison (Tillery 1992; Bailey & Tillery 1996; Bailey 1991; Tillery & Bailey 1998).

Examples (2) and (3) are short illustrations of interviewees' statements during the elicitation of these features.

(2) Hannah (40s, Business, Texas)

- 1 Interviewer: Do you think people who are from the city talk differently?
- 2 Hannah: In the country we, um, there may tend to be little, um, verbage usages that everybody just—they just get in the habit of using.
- 3 Interviewer: What are some of those? Expressions that are—
- 4 Hannah: Sometimes we'll use the term *y'all* or— . . . you think of the word *howdy* a lot, words are more centered around country, what we tend to say kind of *hickville*, more so than the sophisticated city word usage.

Table 2. Features of Country Talk Elicited through Metalinguistic Questions

Type	Feature	Example	Mentioned By
Discourse	folk similes	<i>It's rainin' like a cow peein' on a flat rock.</i>	Cindy, Pete, Sarah
Lexical	cattle ranching terms	<i>water the cows</i>	Cindy, Hannah, Irene, Kevin, Kyle, Maria, Pete
	<i>howdy</i>	—	Cindy, Ed, Hannah, Rachel, Diane
	<i>yonder</i>	—	Ed, Pete
Morphosyntactic	<i>fixin' to</i>	—	Alissa, Andy, Cindy, Irene, Kathy, Robert
	<i>y'all</i>	—	Cindy, Ed, Hannah, Irene, Maria, Sarah
	<i>ain't</i>	—	Alissa, Pete
	deictic <i>them</i>	<i>them cows</i>	Cindy
	double modals	<i>might could</i>	Pete
	nonstandard verbal morphology	<i>I seen; we done</i>	Hannah, Kathy, Olivia
Phonetic/phonological	slow	—	Alissa, Andy, Kathy, Kyle, Olivia, Sarah
	"a drawl"	—	Alissa, Irene, Kyle, Robert
	monophthongal (ai)	<i>drawn out (ai)s</i>	Irene, Olivia
	vowel breaking	<i>it's like "house" has two syllables instead of one</i>	Rachel
	nasal	—	Andy, Kathy, Maria, Robert
	louder	—	Cindy, Olivia
	monotone	—	Olivia
	nonstandard lexical stress	[diwein] (for Duane)	Rachel, Robert
	-in for -ing	<i>dropped Gs</i>	Cindy, Hannah Kathy, Robert, Sarah

In (2), Hannah cites particular lexical choices as a defining quality of Country Talk; she mentions *y'all*, *howdy*, and "words . . . more centered around country" as Country Talk's most salient features. Across participants, the most frequently mentioned or imitated linguistic variables were lexical, specifically *howdy*, *y'all*, and *fixin' to*, the latter two being well-documented features of Southern U.S. English (Bernstein 2003; Tillery & Bailey 1998; Tillery et al., 2000). In line 4, Hannah situates the social meaning of *country* in a layered semiotic space: she first invokes a parallelism with the term

hick(ville), one of the stigmatized social identities discussed below, and then invokes the country/city contrast, framing the city as “sophisticated” and enregistering Country Talk as unsophisticated.

In example (3), the interviewer’s questions elicit different linguistic characteristics of Country Talk.

(3) Sarah (40s, Education, Oklahoma)

- 1 Interviewer: Are there phrases that you think are typical country?
- 2 Sarah: Oh, there probably are. I don’t know if it’s more in the way they sound or if they’re just, uh, you know, some of the things that we say that are more things that probably country people would say, “It’s rainin’ like a cow peein’ on a flat rock,” you know, you probably don’t hear that in New York.
- 3 Interviewer: Are there things that you could say, “well, it sounds like this when I talk” versus when somebody else talks?
- 4 Sarah: I just think that maybe it has something to do with exaggeration or drawin’ out vowels or droppin’ off the . . . see, I said *drawin’*, *drawin’* out vowels, instead of *drawing*, a lot of that, drawing a word way out.

In line 2, Sarah gives an example of a folk simile (Hendricks 1960) that she associates with both Texoma speech (“some of the things that we say”) and Country Talk (“things that probably country people would say”). Sarah discursively situates the simile with Texoma and in contrast with “New York,” which is often framed as iconic of “the city,” ultimately symbolizing the field of meaning that stands in contrast to country. The content of the similes themselves further imbue country with its own indexical associations (in this case, cows; see Rose 2005). Texomans who mentioned folk similes often also mentioned cattle ranching terminology or phrases, such as *punch some dogies/doggies*, *water the cows*, and *tank* (‘a small lake’). Hendricks (1960:262) argues that folk similes and cattle ranching terminology are closely related in Texas, referencing rural life—“cotton patches, dippers, cowtracks, and billy goats”—rather than urban life. Furthermore, in Texoma, folk similes were not limited to the older participants, and the ranching terms were not limited to individuals engaged in agricultural practice.

In line 3 of example (3) Sarah mentions two of the more commonly mentioned phonetic features: “drawn out” vowels and the use of the alveolar nasal for (ING), sometimes called “g-dropping.” The former might refer to a number of different vocalic processes attested for varieties of Southern English, including longer vowel duration and slower rate of speech (Fox 2004:89; Jacewicz et al. 2009), or having a “drawl” (Feagin 2006). The feature of “g-dropping” is probably the least surprising variable mentioned, having been shown in previous work to index the country as opposed to the city or the suburbs (Campbell-Kibler 2006). Two other features are among those attributed in dialectology to Southern U.S. varieties: vowel breaking (Sledd 1966; Wells 1982:533) and the monophthongization of (ai) (Tillery 1992; Fridland 2003).

However, other phonological features associated with Southern varieties, such as the *pin-pen* merger (Brown 1991), were not mentioned.

A few of the interviewees characterized Country Talk as more monotone and louder than Standard English varieties, though others disagreed with these characterizations when asked. Participants invoked the persona of a working cowboy as a point of reference—a persona that, while stoic (and monotone), nonetheless has to communicate by speaking over long distances (i.e., loudly). These iconic connections to cattle ranching culture ideologically link suprasegmental features with the discourse and lexical features mentioned above, mutually contributing to an enregisterment of Country Talk.

Southern U.S. English features are clearly major contributors to the imagining of Country Talk. Nonstandard lexical stress was another feature mentioned (e.g., [diwein] for “Duane”; see Wells 1982:529). A few features of Southern U.S. English syntax (such as double modals or deictic *them*) were also imitated. However, some variables Texomans attributed to country are not limited to Southern varieties, namely *gonna*, mentioned once, and *ain’t*, mentioned twice. These variants probably index informality or nonstandardness, constructing Country Talk with respect to moments of situated use by particular personae: casual speakers in casual contexts. Johnstone’s (1998) analysis of *ain’t* as a feature of talking country characterizes such forms as indices of private talk, where the private–public distinction is a semiotic contrast with sociohistorical links to rural ways of living. Features that index informality in general may simultaneously index layered meanings of both Southernness and rurality.

The ability to explicitly link linguistic features to the concept of Country Talk implies that Texomans have access to a stylistic representation of country that is conveyed linguistically. Assuming a shared structural representation of Country Talk allows for further investigation into the field of social meanings that are indexed by that style. The analysis below argues that Country Talk is constructed through discourses around the semiotic fields of rurality, regionality, and stigma. The meaning of Country Talk emerges from, and is constrained by, the oppositions created along each of these dimensions.

Country as Rural

Country Talk indexes particular kinds of rurality: wide pastoral farmlands or wild frontier ranches, united through land-based work. Rural associations stem from the ideological opposition of country and city (Williams 1973; Frazer 1983), and the contrast with urbanity is one of the strongest indexical relationships between cultural practices and the enregisterment of Country Talk. The most consistently mentioned attitude in this sample of participants was that country is excluded from imaginings of urban life. This is shown above in (3) and can be seen again in (4) and (5).

(4) Olivia (40s, Education, Texas)

1. Olivia: I think it's unfair to say that you speak country if you've been born and raised in a big metropolitan area, because by definition that's not country. So Austin, Houston, cities like that, you can't really say that's country, although [pause] it's my opinion they have a Texas accent in some of those big metropolitan areas, but maybe it wouldn't be fair to say they speak country.

This excerpt is from the beginning of the metalinguistic portion of Olivia's interview. Olivia cites rurality as the primary meaning of country, and from this discursively creates a distinction between Country Talk and "a Texas accent." By some Texoman definitions, people from cities cannot claim membership in a country speech community, and must defer to regional meanings to explain any linguistic distinctiveness. Delimiting the borders of the indexical field in this way makes Country Talk a useful resource for constructing one's sociolinguistic identity with respect to rural meanings.

Other interviewees drew on a more gradient notion of Country Talk, framed in terms of the overall strength of linguistic features (rather than, say, one's physical distance from a city). In this representation, urban Texans would still "have a Texas accent" (4) but would "probably not talk quite as country as we would" (5). Presupposing a gradient character of Country Talk semiotically constructs two poles of reference, from a most extreme version of country to something imagined as "neutral," as Andy puts it, or "CNN speak," as Olivia describes it later on in her interview. The metalinguistic work by the interviewees here consists of positioning themselves and their community somewhere along that continuum. This positioning is illustrated in example (5).

(5) Andy (50s, Education, Texas)

- 1 Interviewer: Do you think that people, say, in Austin or Houston talk about the same as we do, or do you think that's different?
- 2 Andy: Uh, no, I think people in Texas in the cities . . . I think people who are born probably in those cities probably hear more of a dialect that's more towards neutral than what we do, so they probably talk not quite as country as we would, so people from Austin, Dallas, Houston—many of those would not quite have the twang, so to speak, or the drawl that we would.

Furthermore, Country Talk is far from a ubiquitous cover term for English spoken across rural America. As seen in (6) below, Texomans reference a regionally bound rurality in the meaning of country, recognizing that people who live in rural areas outside of Texoma (and the South) may not sound country or describe their speech as such.

(6) Cindy (40s, Education, Oklahoma)

- 1 Interviewer: What do you think about country versus rural?

- 2 Cindy: I perceive those both as pretty much the same in this area but I suspect there are rural areas in the North where they don't talk like we do but I would still say, "Oh you guys are rural folks because you farm or you ranch or you're raising wheat or whatever," and so I suspect that we're all rural folks that are out doing that kind of thing I would categorize as that, but I don't think we probably talk the same.

In (6), Cindy frames country in explicitly local terms, contrasting "this area" with "the North" and "we" with "they." By doing so she foregrounds place in the indexical relationship between country and rurality. While rural practices span borders and regions—"we're all rural folks"—the Country Talk speech style does not. Unlike the speech in the rural parts of "the North," the speech found in rural Texoma is enregistered as country. Among these self-identified speakers of Country Talk, processes of enregisterment are primarily local. The indexical relationship to rural practices is mediated by the location of those practices and the actors who embody them.

Country as Regional

If one axis of ideological contrast is distance from an urban center, another is distance from the South, specifically Country Talk's positioning relative to the ideological contrast between the North and the South (Preston 1989, 1994, 1996; Labov 1994; Dorrill 2003; Labov, Ash, & Boberg 2006). Perceptual dialectology has documented associations among Oklahoma, Texas, and the South, including among residents of Oklahoma (Preston & Bakos 2009) and Texas (White & Shaw 1990; see also Johnstone 2004:200). Furthermore, Campbell-Kibler (2006) found a significant correlation between listeners' perceptions of speech as being both from the country and from the South (and, for some, the Midlands). All Texomans interviewed in this study agreed with the characterization of their town as "a Southern town." But just as the connection to rurality was nuanced, so is the connection to the South. The following interview excerpts and Draw-a-Map task results show that many Texomans associate Country Talk with Southern U.S. English, but that the relationship extends only to certain Southern varieties, and only to a certain extent. Again, the semiotic relationship is a gradient one.

(7) Pete (60s, Education & Agriculture, Oklahoma)

- 1 Interviewer: Do you think that talking country sounds Southern?
- 2 Pete: I think it's more Southern than anything else. I think it is. Yes, I would definitely I think it has to go back to a lot of the South when people migrated up into this area.

(8) Hannah (40s, Business, Texas)

- 1 Interviewer: Do you think talking country is a Southern thing or more general?

- 2 Hannah: You know, I kinda I think [pause] I sort of associate Southern and country.

In (7), Pete connects Country Talk and Southern speech, although his response that country is “more Southern than anything else” indicates that country is imagined as more of a mixed speech style than as a straightforward regional variety. In (8), Hannah also agrees with this indexical link, but hedges her answer, indicating that the link is mediated by other associations. The primary source of the hesitation appears to be the cultural and physical distance between Texoma and regions of the United States more directly associated with the South. While drawing parallels between Country Talk and Southern speech, participants simultaneously distinguished them.

(9) Rachel (40s, Business, Texas)

- 1 Interviewer: Would you call this a Southern town?
- 2 Rachel: Um, I think so.
- 3 Interviewer: And would you say you had a Southern accent?
- 4 Rachel: Um, no. Only because I have family from Mississippi and their accent to me is much more Southern than ours.

(10) Kyle (30s, Agriculture, Texas)

- 1 Interviewer: Would you say that you have a Southern accent?
- 2 Kyle: Not so much a Southern accent, just more of a Texas accent than anything. 'Cause really you get to a Southern accent you're more in along the area of Alabama, South Carolina. . . . Our accent is completely different from theirs.

In (9), Rachel's answer in line 2 is affirmative, yet hedged, and in line 4 she explicitly associates “a Southern accent” with Mississippi, rather than her own speech. Her use of the comparative “more Southern” presupposes a gradient quality to Southernness. In (10), Kyle draws an even sharper distinction between places like “Alabama, South Carolina” and Texoma (“completely different”). Kyle's response constructs Southernness as a discrete, rather continuous or gradient, quality, one standing in contrast to country. This frame is accomplished in part because Kyle (a Texan) categorizes his speech as “Texan,” rather than Southern. This particular parallelism was common across those who lived in Texas, while none of the Oklahomans described their speech as “Oklahoman.” This asymmetry between Texan and Oklahoman interviewees evidences a general ideological process of Texan exceptionalism (constructed among both Texans and non-Texans; Johnstone 1999:508).

This exceptionalism is furthered by linguistic representations of regional dialects, such as the *Atlas of North American English* (Labov, Ash, & Boberg 2006), which posits a “Texas South” variety (also containing Southern Oklahoma) positioned *within* the borders of a more general “South” dialect region. Despite their differences, Texomans on both sides of the border identify as speakers of Country Talk, and all stated that their speech did not differ from the speech of their neighbors on the other



Figure 1. Three individual maps representing Country Talk: Type 1 (nearly exclusively Texoman—black line), type 2 (broadly Southern—dotted line), and type 3 (more than Southern—gray line)

side of the border. The ability to claim a single speech variety that transcends border divisions is clearly a useful resource. Texomans' construction of a Country Talk community provides exactly that.

Many Texomans construct a gradient scale of Southernness, including at least *the Deep South* and *country*, the latter largely overlapping with *Texan* for Texans. This fluid representation allows Texomans to claim the Southern identity without fully equating their language and culture with the areas more widely considered to be prototypically Southern. Texomans negotiate between a set of features and social meanings that distinguish their country style from the rest of the South. In both cases, regionality and rurality are co-constructing properties. However, the regional meanings of Country Talk are not as readily identified as the rural meanings. While the "most" country speech was attributed to the "most" rural locations, it is not the case that the "most" Southern locations were described as the "most" country.

The positioning of Texoma and Country Talk as simultaneously Southern and "not Southern" can also be seen in responses to the draw-a-map task. Responses were roughly distributed across three types, represented by three individual maps overlapping in Figure 1.

Maps of type 1 (five participants) basically restrict the area of Country Talk to Texoma. Maps of type 2 (seven participants) include various Southern States. Maps of type 3 encompass even more states, varying by participant. Kyle includes the Great

Plains; Robert includes Northern California; Cindy and Irene both include the Southwest. Diane chooses instead to mark major cities (New York City, Philadelphia, etc.) “where they don’t talk country,” indicating that Country Talk can be found across most of the United States. Minimally, participants circled Texoma, and maximally, Country Talk was said to occur across the entire nation.

What the type 3 maps suggest is that, while Country Talk may be imagined and constructed as a subtype of Southern speech, the South is just one place where Country Talk is spoken. Each of the five respondents who produced a type 3 map justified his or her choice. On one hand, each was aware that his or her choice was unusual, which itself indexes the Southernness of Country Talk. On the other hand, the content of their justification exemplifies how Country Talk is imagined with respect to particular rural personae and related cultural practices that transcend political borders. For example, Robert talks in (11) about his association between Country Talk and cultural practices in California, a state not typically linked to representations of agricultural life (except by some respondents within California; see Bucholtz et al. 2007:345).

(11) Robert (40s, Education, Texas)

- 1 Interviewer: Do you think someone could talk country outside of the South? Or outside of even Texas and the Deep South?
- 2 Robert: Well, I do remember in California there were different—some of my classmates in college who weren’t from the city who were from the country, whether it was a farm or whatever, they had a slight—it was not quite a drawl but it was—it was different than someone from say L.A. or Sacramento or something like that it was—you could tell that they grew up earthy. [laughter]
- 3 Interviewer: Would you characterize the way they spoke as country?
- 4 Robert: Country, yeah.

Robert’s personal experience with individuals from California who participated in familiar rural practices allows him to justify the assertion that Country Talk is an appropriate term for some speech “outside of the South,” as the interviewer puts it. The country–city contrast is strengthened while specific regional associations are weakened. Like Robert, Kyle and Diane both supported their perceptions of the non-regionality of Country Talk by citing evidence from personal experience. Others did not present personal experiences as evidence but nonetheless defined the Country Talk speech community based on the perception of shared cultural practices across regions. Cindy includes the Southwestern states, as shown in (12).

(12) Cindy (40s, Education, Oklahoma)

- 1 Cindy: [There] might be some [Country Talk] out here in Arizona too or New Mexico, maybe a smidge there too, on the ranches. I would say on the ranches of Arizona and New Mexico you could probably hear that

Country Talk too. I think Colorado and Utah, even though that's farming and ranching, some ranching going on up there, some huge ranches, I don't know if you'd hear that.

Cindy's knowledge of cattle ranching practices in Arizona and New Mexico leads her to mark those regions as potential locations for hearing Country Talk. At the same time, ranching practices in and of themselves are not sufficient: Cindy excludes "huge ranches" as sites of Country Talk, indexing an opposition between small business and big business that is central to the discourse of American agricultural communities (Rose & Hall-Lew 2008). Through the semiotic process of fractal recursivity (Irvine & Gal 2000), small, family-owned ranches are ideologically linked to Country Talk, whereas large, corporate ranches are ideologically opposed. This ideological opposition further strengthens the construction of the rural–urban contrast as central to the meaning of Country Talk.

In general, Texomans are willing to label speech outside of Texoma and the South as *country* if they have encountered or are aware of communities that have similar cultural characteristics and practices to their own: places that share features of small town, rural life. These associations have become enregistered in large part because of the imagined personae (Eckert 2008) or characterological representations (Agha 2003) that embody specific social meanings at an ideological level. Which personae get linked to which features is the subject of the next section.

Country as Stigmatized

A stigma is a devalued social identity, evidenced in language through pejorative discourse (Crocker, Major, & Steele 1998; Goffman 1963). Fox's analysis of country music culture in Texas describes the stigma of country in the national imagination:

The culture I have described here . . . is mythologized in commercial country music, . . . it is oversimplified, sometimes polemically, in its popular cultural representation, reduced to "redneck" stereotypes and subject to a disparaging cosmopolitan gaze when it is noticed at all in some segments of American society, or else sweetened with saccharine nostalgia or cloying nationalist sentimentality. (Fox 2004:318)

Texomans position themselves in opposition to this "disparaging cosmopolitan gaze." Because they were interviewed by an in-group community member, Texomans shared common ground with the interviewer.⁴ They were relatively free to express solidarity, and one result was the frequent construction of a shared country identity in opposition to other social categories. Two personae dominated this process: "hick" (Niedzielski & Preston 2003:103; Evans 2010; Greene 2010) and "redneck" (Grimshaw 2002; Jarosz & Lawson 2002; Hartigan 2003; Niedzielski & Preston 2003:145; Vanderbeck & Dunkley 2003; Evans 2010).⁵ While negative attitudes about country rarely

occurred in the interviews, negative attitudes toward hick and redneck were abundant. Positive meanings of country emerge in Texoma in part because of the available contrast with hick and redneck, neither of which any of the participants identified with explicitly (in contrast to other studies; Fox 2004:24-25; Greene 2010; Huber 1995; Jarosz & Lawson 2002). The discursive construction of both hick and redneck further enregisters Country Talk.

Questions about hick and redneck focused on linguistic variation, eliciting descriptions of the speech styles associated with each persona. Many participants stated that there was no linguistic difference, but rather difference with respect to formality or appropriateness of use, as in (13).

(13) Kristyn (30s, Business, Texas)

- 1 Interviewer: . . . talking country, do you think that's different from hick or do you think that's the same?
- 2 Kristyn: I think that's probably just our slang term that we use sometimes for talking country. Most people just say that that's just- [pause] "You sound hick" instead of "You sound country," but regionally I think it's probably better to say country.

Kristyn's remarks represent the opinion that talking country and talking hick are referentially the same but socially different: Country Talk is the socially unmarked term for local ways of speaking, and hick is considered its "slang" or marked counterpart. By describing *country* as the "better" term of reference she mitigates its stigma and further stigmatizes *hick* through that opposition.

Those interviewees who did perceive a linguistic difference between country and hick focused on morphosyntax rather than accent, based on indexical associations with low education. The attitude that people who talk country are more educated than hicks was expressed regardless of the education level of the respondent. Through the enactment of this opposition, Country Talk becomes enregistered as a more grammatically standard style. In (14), hick is positioned near the end of an ideological spectrum of education levels. It becomes synonymous with "uneducated." The existence of hick in the local discourse fills an area of semiotic space that allows country more positive meanings.

(14) Alissa (20s, Sales, Texas)

- 1 Interviewer: Do you think that country is the same as hick?
- 2 Alissa: Um, no, I don't think it's the same. I mean hick would be generally defined probably as being uneducated but one from the country could be educated.

(15) Kathy (50s, Education, Texas)

- 1 Interviewer: Do you think that's different than hick?
- 2 Kathy: Well, I think that people that are sometimes classified as hick have huge grammatical errors in their speech and we don't always have

as many of those. We have some, but when I think of people who we say are hicks, they use the word *ain't*. They have extreme subject and verb agreement issues like they say, *I seen* and *we seen* and *we done*, things like that. They don't use those helping verbs.

Excerpt (15) demonstrates this indexical process with explicit reference to language. There is no overall difference in the types of variables interviewees cited as belonging to Country Talk or to hick. Rather, the contrast between hick and country is made more with respect to the extent of variable use. In (15) Kathy notes that people "classified as hick" have "huge" and "extreme" "errors" and "verb agreement issues," whereas people who speak Country Talk "don't always have as many." The difference between hick and country is constructed through their relative position on a scale of the amount of nonstandard morphosyntactic features.

Hick and redneck are both stigmatized, but redneck occupies yet another distinct area of Texoman semiotic space. In contrast to hick, the difference between country and redneck emerged as a contrast based on personality characteristics and behavioral patterns, rather than a lack of education or linguistic nonstandardness (despite other representations to the contrary; Jarosz & Lawson 2002; Hartigan 2003; Vanderbeck & Dunkley 2003). Many Texomans felt the term *redneck* either had no relation to a speech style or was indistinguishable from Country Talk, as captured in (16) and (17).

(16) Ed (40s, Education, Oklahoma)

- 1 Interviewer: Is redneck different from country?
- 2 Ed: Oh, I think so. I think redneck. [laughing] You talk about redneck you're talking about more how they do things and how they live than how they speak.
- 3 Interviewer: Do you think they would sound any different than someone who talked country?
- 4 Ed: No.

(17) Pete (60s, Education & Agriculture, Oklahoma)

- 1 Interviewer: What about redneck?
- 2 Pete: Well redneck is . . . there's just a lot of people around here that're pretty redneck and I don't mean that in a sense that are bad, that means they'll fight you real quick, uh, and it doesn't take a whole lot to get them to do that, um, you know, or they'll get pretty upset pretty quick. They don't- I guess if you might say they- they really haven't learned the terminology of trying to solve anything diplomatically, uh, it's pretty well if, uh, *you dance with my girl again I'm gonna whip you*, you know what- and uh, or if- and, uh, and I've noticed this too, on redneck, if you'll notice their vocabulary, a lot of their words are cuss words, uh, and I'm not gonna say using God's name in vain but they'll say *hell* and *damn* real, real regularly, uh, and it's really a lot because of where they were brought- they can't express themselves any other way

you know. I- I would almost classify redneck as pretty quick tempered person.

Ed's comment in (16), about "how they do things and how they live," is maximally vague, perhaps in part because the stigma around redneck creates a kind of taboo. The laughter, pauses, and filled pauses in these examples are further evidence of a taboo quality. Ed's account of the salient attributes of redneck focuses on patterns of behavior and downplays patterns of linguistic production. In (17), Pete's anticipation that *redneck* might be interpreted as "bad" is evidence of the term's stigma. The behaviors he then describes are largely social taboos, rather than linguistic nonstandardness.

While Country Talk may be stigmatized in certain national contexts, in Texoma its links to local meanings and its opposition to more stigmatized categories make it a powerful resource for the construction of identity. Talking country is a tool for indexing local membership, simultaneously positioning its speakers outside of the arrogant cities, the ignorant hick, and the taboo-flouting redneck. It is important to note how situated this process is; in other contexts country, hick, and redneck overlap more. In Texoma, these personae compose distinct semiotic fields, and that quality of distinction aids in the enregisterment of Country Talk.

Conclusion

As variationist sociolinguistics continues to recognize the value of analyzing individual linguistic variables with respect to social meaning and the styles in which they occur, there is a clear need to account for the sociohistorical life of those styles. The present article addresses this need by analyzing the enregisterment of Country Talk at the local level. In Texoma, the use of Country Talk is valuable linguistic capital for claiming local membership in a region sitting on the border of two states and multiple dialect areas. Within this community, Country Talk is negotiated on multiple dimensions of social meaning: rural–urban, Southern–non–Southern, and stigma–prestige.

Johnstone (1998:153) argues that "being and sounding country is less and less a matter of demography and more and more a matter of identity. It has become a resource that can be used in the process of self-creation through talk." Future study would benefit from a comparison between local and supralocal processes, such as in mainstream country music representations. How are meanings negotiated between these levels of discourse? How do processes of enregisterment differ? Future analysis might also ask how enregisterment differs across communities and how linguistic attitudes might differ when measured implicitly (e.g., Campbell-Kibler 2006; Plichta & Preston 2005). Would a larger sample size reveal demographic differences in the way Country Talk is construed (e.g., Johnstone 1998, 1999)? It is important to note that none of the data in the present article are from naturally occurring discourse, and the interviewer's questions surely participated to some extent in the enregisterment process itself. An ethnographic approach to these questions would be the ideal extension of the present study, exploring how the social meanings gleaned here might emerge in day-to-day life.

Perceptual dialectology has long argued that studies of dialect geography must be informed by speakers' perceptions and attitudes (Preston 1989; Benson 2003). Country Talk serves as an example of how models of enregisterment can further those goals, uniting dialect geography with theories of indexicality, ideology, and social meaning. Country Talk displays a complex overlap, gradience, and fluidity of meaning that is ultimately inherent to all enregistered linguistic varieties. Attempting to unpack these semiotic relationships and their negotiation in face-to-face interaction opens up a promising direction of inquiry for sociolinguistics.

Acknowledgments

This study was presented at the 2008 CLASP conference in Boulder and at the 2009 LSA in Chicago. We'd also like to thank Agata Daleszyska, Rebecca Greene, Penny Eckert, Mary Rose, and members of Stanford's Sociorap series for comments. We'd especially like to thank the editors of this journal and three anonymous reviewers for their thoroughly helpful comments and criticism. Above all, the participants in this study deserve a very warm debt of gratitude.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Thanks to the Stanford School of Humanities & Sciences for partially funding fieldwork costs.

Notes

1. The Country Talk register discussed here is specifically American. While *country* can be found in other parts of the English-speaking world (and, in translation, beyond), the social meanings at issue will necessarily be specific to the sociohistorical processes of the given location.
2. The towns are small enough that participants' names are kept anonymous to protect their identities.
3. The greeting *howdy* was usually accompanied with laughter on the part of the participant. Some stated that *howdy* was never a word they would actually use as a serious greeting, but would rather use in a playful, joking manner. It may be that *howdy* is so iconic of Country Talk, it has become an exaggeration of it. This is parallel to the enregisterment of certain features of "Pittsburghese" detailed in Johnstone, Andrus, and Danielson (2006).
4. At the same time, the interviewer's social position as a linguistics graduate student, as well as the interview context and the presence of the audio recorder, may have simultaneously created an out-group frame.
5. All participants were also asked about a third term, *hillbilly* (see Niedzielski & Preston 2003:58; Feagin 2006; Lide 2007:13; Bird 2008). However, responses such as "I met one once" and

“I don’t know many of them” clearly placed the term and referents to *hillbilly* as ideologically separate from *hick* and *redneck* and not relevant to the Texoman social landscape.

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