COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: LEGITIMACY, MEMBERSHIP AND CHOICE

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Abstract
Communities of practice has emerged as a challenger to previous sociolinguistic models such as speech communities and social networks. The valorization of non-linguistic behaviours as adding further explanatory power to sociolinguistic models is timely. However, the types of self-constituting communities of interest to sociolinguists are not the same as the communities of learning studied by Lave & Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998). If this model is to become dominant, then the mechanisms by which it models access, gate-keeping and its internal hierarchy need development. Using Eckert's (1999) Belten High data, and other work on adolescent talk, it is argued that gaining legitimate peripheral participation is a matter of sanction from within the hierarchy. Individuals do not have open access to the communities based solely on their desire to be part of that community and to take part in its practices. While practices may define the community, the community determines who has access to that practice. (Community of practice, speech community, social networks, adolescents, nerds)

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyse the social construct of community of practice, as introduced by Lave & Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998), and used by Eckert & McConnell-Ginet to investigate linguistic variation and change in American High School students (Eckert 1999, Eckert 2001, Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992, Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1995, Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1999). It is suggested as a tool for sociolinguistic analysis, in preference to speech community (and, by implication, to social network theory). Practice theory characterizes membership as being created and maintained through social practices (linguistic or otherwise) at a local level, rather than global categories being imposed on individuals. The focus of this paper is to investigate the precise mechanisms within communities of practice for the gaining and maintenance of membership, and to consider the validity of this structure for linguistic communities. The data we will be considering is mostly drawn from Eckert's work: it is a critical analysis of how she has applied practice theory to an ethnographic analysis of a self-structuring community.

In the next section, the general concept of community of practice is defined, particularly in distinction to the Labovian notion of speech community, and in relation to its constitutive features (Wenger 1998). Following this, we look in detail at the internal structure of communities of practice, considering the mechanisms of membership: the types of membership, and the trajectories between them. This section is concluded by a consideration of brokering: the process by which change in practices is hypothesized to occur. In the following section, we shift our focus from a theoretical to a more practical perspective. Having detailed the process and structure of practice theory, the question is whether it can account for linguistic practice in the adolescent arena. This is examined using Eckert's data, analysis, and other research on adolescent language use. In the final section, we evaluate the efficacy of this model for the analysis of language variation.

2. What is a Community of Practice?

In this section, we will look at the basic definitions of communities of practice, and evaluate them from the viewpoint of their applicability to a sociolinguistic context. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992:464) define it as:

> "…an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short practices- emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor."

It is difficult to compare directly this definition with one for speech community because of the contested nature of the latter. However, we will choose a couple of definitions as representative of the general concept. Given that we are considering work which has essentially arisen out of the Labovian variationist paradigm, it would seem appropriate to begin with Labov (1972:120)

> "The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms; these norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behaviour, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage."

The other main source of work in this area is from the ethnographic paradigm. The following is one of many, broadly similar, definitions given in a range of publications by Gumperz, a proponent of the ethnographic view:

> "… members of the same speech community need not all speak the same language nor use the same linguistic forms on similar occasions. All that is required is that there be at least one language in common and that rules governing basic communicative strategies be shared so that speakers can decode the social meanings carried by alternative modes of communication." Gumperz (1972:16)

These two definitions have been chosen because they represent two different angles on the concept. Labov's focus is on the relationship between sociolinguistic data and formal linguistic theory (Santa Ana & Parodi 1998), whereas Gumperz's is more ethnographic, and is concerned with social knowledge about language choices, as well as the use of particular phonological variants. However, it is still clear that both of these definitions are concerned solely with language: they do not consider the contribution of other social actions (practices) to the creation and maintenance of communities. This is the most obvious difference (and deficit) when compared to the community of practice model. However, there are other important differences, which are discussed in Bucholtz (1999:207-210) and Eckert (1999), and which we will summarise here.

Firstly, Eckert points out that Labov's conception of shared norms is an agreement within the community about the relationship between certain phonological

variables and membership of certain groups. It is not – unlike the community of practice model - about shared evaluation of the meanings created by that variation. Labov's (1963) New Yorkers might agree that a rhotic accent is prestigious, but the owner of that accent could be evaluated positively or negatively by different sections of that community. In that respect, the speech community model emphasizes the pattern of variation produced, rather than the perception of that variation by different members of the speech community. Secondly, variationist studies which are based on the speech community model, tend to concentrate on central members as being 'good examples', at the expense of those at the margins[1]. Thirdly, a top-down categorial analysis leads to an individual's behaviour merely reproducing the practices of the group, thus denying the agency of the individual, and the possibility of linguistic change. It also leads the researcher to impose categories, rather than seeking out local categories and local meanings through ethnography. Finally, because categories are imposed from above, individual's identities are seen as static, rather than shifting, and potentially multiple. The role of practice in creating and maintaining identity is thus denied.

Social network analysis (e.g. Milroy 1987, Lippi-Green 1989), like communities of practice, is concerned with the links between individuals, and how those links draw them into or away from a group identity. A further similarity is that it provides for gradable concept of membership: individuals can be more or less integrated within a network. However, it is argued by Holmes & Meyerhoff (1999) that the main distinction between the two approaches is that the links used to define social networks are essentially role-based – whether people work together, socialize together, are related – rather than the practices they share. And, like most variation analysis, social network analysis is based almost solely on linguistic variation, rather than seeing linguistic variation as one part of the network of practices.

So, the main distinction between communities of practice on one hand, and speech community and social networks on the other, should be clear: this community is defined by more than the linguistic code(s) used. The core of the community of practice concept resides in the importance of *doing*, and, more particularly, doing things in a way which reinforces membership in that community of practice. It is about local meanings, and an individual's management of their identity. Membership governs more than language choice: all aspects of involvement in an individual group are considered. This foregrounding of other behaviours is, perhaps, particularly important. Such aspects have been mentioned or discussed in work on linguistic variation. For example, Milroy (1987) mentions choice of dress in one particular group in her Belfast study, and Labov's (1963) Martha's Vineyard study relies on the orientation of its subjects to the island for its explanatory power, yet these aspects are not part of the linguistic theory which is expounded. Practice theory aims to valorize all social actions equally.

Within the community of practice framework, the recognition of the role of behaviours beyond language marks the move towards more complex and subtle social models. Eckert's (1980) ethnographic study of jean width may seem rather idiosyncratic at first glance, but there is little doubt that in adolescence, at least, the 'right' clothes choices play a similar role in community membership to linguistic choices. As Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1995:504) say of the communities in Belten High "There is no

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[1] However, although community of practice may validate study of the periphery, we suggest later that are problems with the level of articulation of community of practice structure.

community focused on linguistic practice, no community focused on gender practice, no community focused on class practice". While the data we concentrate on may be linguistic, it has to be remembered that the construction of self is a more complex operation than 'simply' making the right lexical, syntactic and phonological choices. This expansion of focus creates its own problems for researchers, but also it begins to suggest the difficulties posed to members and would-be members in terms of 'getting it right'. We will return to both of these issues later.

The other terms of interest in Eckert & McConnell-Ginet's definition are *mutual engagement* and *mutual endeavor*. These are two of the three constitutive features of a community of practice, as defined by one the concept's original authors, Wenger (1998:73):

1. mutual engagement
2. a joint enterprise[2]
3. a shared repertoire

The shared repertoire is the practice, the way of doing, which can be instantiated through linguistic features, personal common ground (Clark & Schaefer 1987), a shared perspective on the world, and many other behaviours[3]. This is the outcome of mutual engagement in a shared enterprise, and the concrete material which provides a locus of study for the sociolinguist.

For a community of practice to exist, its membership must engage in regular interaction with each other. In the typical case, this would be face-to-face, for example in the corridor at school, or over the coffee machine at work. However, geographical proximity in itself is not sufficient to entail a community of practice. Wenger (1998:73) says a community of practice exists when "people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another". So, the type of phatic communion I share with the majority of my neighbours does not involve us in a community of practice, as we are not joined in meaning-making. Our spoken interactions are unpredictable in frequency (when we happen to be going in/out at the same time), have no definable outcome, and make no perceptible changes to our relationship, other than keeping the channel of communication open. Whereas, the conversations I have with colleagues at work create meanings at many levels. We engage in the talk needed to keep the department running; each of these conversations acts to reinforce (or, perhaps, modify) the position of each of those people within the structure of the department, and their relationship to the university as a whole. Our interaction is frequent – almost daily – and has real outcomes in terms of changes to (or maintenance of) mechanisms in the workings of the department and changes to (or maintenance of) working relationships. Holmes & Meyerhoff (1999) discuss this in terms of *quantity* vs. *quality* of interaction. In a sense, I know more of the minutiae of my immediate neighbours' life than I do of my colleagues'. As a resident on a small street, I am aware of my neighbours' comings and goings, see their lights go on and off and hear the music they play, as they see and hear mine. But I am an outsider to the activities they are engaging in, whereas I am a participant in one aspect of my work colleagues' lives. The absolute contact is quantitatively less, but qualitatively has a greater effect on both parties' lives.

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[2] Although the terminology is slightly different, we would consider this to be equivalent to *mutual endeavor*.

[3] See Wenger (1998:125-6) for his list of these indicators.

It is interesting to consider whether the canonical instance of face-to-face interaction is necessary to the creation and/or maintenance of a community of practice. Wenger (1998:74) says:

"Given the right context, talking on the phone, exchanging electronic mail, or being connected by radio can be *part of* what makes mutual engagement possible."   [my emphasis]

This implies that some interaction involving co-presence is entailed in practice. However, people do initiate and maintain relationships (of varying importance) via electronic communication. For example, an Internet newsgroup can develop a shared repertoire via a group of people who read and post frequently; the mutual engagement here is obvious, although it is perhaps harder to see what the shared goal might be: a problem we will return to shortly. Other communities of practice, such as a group of close friends, or family members, might be initiated via physical co-presence, but maintained largely in later years via telephone conversations and electronic communication. One of the interesting questions here is the lifecycle of a community of practice: how much engagement, and what type of engagement is necessary to maintain it? For example, a family group certainly constitutes a small community of practice whilst all its members live in the same house, but what happens when siblings grow up, move out, and maybe have families of their own? Even if those family members should live locally and meet relatively frequently, their interaction will be to some degree different from that shared in their home environment. The question is at what point does their interaction cease to 'count' as a community of practice?

Such questions may be resolved in part by an appeal to Wenger's third constitutive feature: a joint enterprise. This is a more complex concept than simply a shared goal; it encompasses both any physical outcomes and the process of meaning-making itself. For Wenger's example of medical claims processors, it includes not only the claims processed, but also how the staff interact with the constraints of the institution, and make their place of work one which they can exist within:

"the enterprise … includes all the energy they spend … not only in making claims processing possible in practice, but also in making the place habitable for themselves. Their daily practice, with its mixture of submission and assertion, is a complex, collectively negotiated response to what they understand to be their situation."   Wenger (1998:78)

In a workplace situation such as this, it is relatively straightforward to see what a joint enterprise might be: one could describe the enterprise of university teaching in much the same way. However, it is much more difficult to determine a shared enterprise in self-constituted groups, rather than those which arise in relation to an activity within an institution. Where the outcome or product from a group is not concrete, its shared enterprise may not be obvious to an outsider, indeed, the mechanisms of such a group can be entirely opaque to those not considered to be a member. To return to one of the examples used above, an Internet newsgroup usually convenes around an interest that the posters share, whether it is cycling, the linux operating system or the posters' sexual

orientation. However, this interest in itself is certainly insufficient to guarantee a shared enterprise, yet I would argue that some newsgroups *do* constitute a community of practice, at least at particular points in their history. What makes the difference? Similarly, a group of students who socialize together at university may become a community of practice; equally, they may not. Yet, one could still argue that that grouping has arisen in response to the situation in which they find themselves.

In their introduction to *Language in Society's* special issue on communities of practice, Holmes & Meyerhoff (1999) comment on the problem to sociolinguists of the lack of specificity inherent in the notion of joint enterprise; they suggest that this generality may not be a problem in the domain for which the concept of community of practice was originally developed – learning – although they do not explore at this point why this might be the case. Two reasons could be suggested. Firstly, although Lave & Wenger (1991) explore a number of quite different learning mechanisms, from western style formal vocational training to a seemingly unstructured acquisition of midwifery skills in Yucatan, there is always a concrete process which the community and the learners can orient towards: this gives a focus for a joint enterprise; it is inevitably more difficult to put a name to the joint enterprise which might hold together local communities like the ones Lesley Milroy interviewed in Belfast (Milroy 1987). Secondly, learning situations are often conducted in relation to institutions, or, at least some formal, concrete social structure. This gives a locus to which a group can orient its practice. Wenger's claim processors define themselves – and their community of practice - as much in relation to *Alinsu*, their employer, as to their tangible work of handling claims. For Eckert's (1999) jocks and burnouts, the acceptance or rejection of the institution of the School, and what it represents, acts as the basis for their conflicting enterprises. Again, for sociolinguistic study, there may not always be such a perceptible locus for a potential community of practice in the frame, and thus, it is not always easy to identify the enterprise that apparently drives the need for mutual engagement.

The complexity surrounding these constitutive features seems to be compounded by an uncertainty in the types or sizes of groupings to which the concept of community of practice can be applied. In the concluding section of Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1995:504), this issue is raised and dismissed in short order:

> "Readers may wonder just what communities of practice exist. Do girls and boys form separate communities of practice? Do jocks and burnouts? What about in-betweens? Jocky jocks? Burned-out burnouts? Does the student body of the whole high school constitute a community of practice? Questions like these miss a critical point about communities of practice: they are not determined by their membership but by the endeavors that bring those members … into relations with one another …, and by the practices that develop around, and transform, these endeavors."

While Eckert & MConnell-Ginet are right to focus on the importance of practice, the question of membership cannot be so easily dismissed. If community of practice is going to be accepted as a concept which can be applied to other linguistic communities, then researchers need to know its limits. Asking such questions is not denying the importance of practice, but rather is asking what types of groups can be constituted and

maintained through this mechanism. At a crude level, there is the question of 'grain size'. Does the requirement for joint enterprises and mutual engagement mean by definition that communities of practice is a tool for micro-level analysis, or can the concept be articulated at more macro-levels of society? Indeed, one of the most interesting issues with communities of practice may well be in looking at the interactions between related or overlapping communities of practice. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1995:504) complete their discussion of this issue thus:

> "Athletic boy jocks and burned-out burnout girls, for example, have different forms of membership in this large community of practice [the school]. And in the process of pursuing these different forms of membership, they attend to communities of practice of their own, based on and constituting specific places and points of view within the larger community."

So the creation and maintenance of jockdom and burnoutdom is part of these students' membership of the larger community of practice. For the burnouts, it is presumably also a construction of their membership of the local community outside of the school, which could also possibly be viewed as a community of practice. However, at this type of grain size it becomes increasingly difficult to discuss mutual engagement and joint enterprise in all but the most general terms. Although Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992) instruct us to look locally for meaning-making, it is not clear when 'local' becomes 'global', or in Wenger's (1998) terms, when face-to-face communities become ones of imagination or alignment. Indeed, from a sociolinguistic point of view it is not clear that we want to draw impenetrable lines between the two: meaning may be made locally, but it articulates with more global concerns. This interaction is apparent in Eckert & McConnell-Ginet's discussion of the Belten High data (Eckert 1999) and in their discussion of Labov's (1963) Martha's Vineyard study (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1999). In both cases, more global concerns affect decisions of identity alignment, and the practices through which this is achieved. However, with the current exegesis of this theory, it is not clear how relationships between local and global concerns can be articulated.

3. The Internal Structure of a Community

In order to examine communities of practice further, it is necessary to outline the internal structure of a community of practice as described by Lave & Wenger (1991), and Wenger (1998), as the original, and most thorough, exposition.

When returning to the original, the first point to be made is that communities of practice was initially developed as a theory of learning. The central concern of Lave & Wenger (1991) is the process of learning via engaging in appropriate practice: a type of apprenticeship. It is their argument that people learn more effectively through participation in the activity, rather than by first learning theory, and then having to apply it. They investigate this view by considering a series of five case studies of apprenticeship, which can be classed as more or less successful in their induction of the learners into appropriate practice. The key concept here is that of *legitimate peripheral participation*: the idea that learners need to be allowed to participate in a limited way in

actual practice, with only a limited degree of responsibility, in order that the learning context is not unduly pressurized. Such persons are considered to be in an inbound trajectory, headed for full participation in the community of practice. The more successful apprenticeships (e.g. Yucatec midwives, Vai tailors) allowed their trainees to gradually increase their participation in the practices that create the community, both in the range of practices, and degree of participation. Therefore, these initiates are allowed to have imperfect practices, and are allowed the access to information that would enable them to match their practices to those that are expected within the community. In contrast, Lave & Wenger cite the example of a butchery course where the practical work is restricted to each apprentice learning one task at a time, and only moving to another task if its operator should leave: thus they were not allowed access to the breadth of practices necessary to full participation in the community of practice.

To understand further the importance of legitimacy in the community of practice structure, the possible forms of membership in a community of practice also need to be outlined. Wenger (1998) defines three different types of membership:

- full participation
- peripheral participation
- marginal participation

These forms of membership are distinguished on the balance of participation to non-participation, and the trajectory of the person in relation to the community of practice. A full participant is on an insider trajectory, maintaining their membership through participation in community practices. A peripheral participant has partial participation: their non-participation in certain practices is seen as an opportunity for learning. They may be on an inbound trajectory, or may simply maintain a peripheral trajectory. In contrast, the partial participation of marginal participants is seen as a barrier to full participation: they will either maintain a marginal trajectory, or are on an outbound trajectory. Wenger (1998) cites the example of the 'glass ceiling' for female employees in a company with a male hierarchy as an example of the latter. Another such example might be the potential difficulty in negotiating the transition from doctoral student to faculty member within the same department or institution.

The division between peripherality and marginality is a problematical one to characterize through a precise definition. At least, a clear distinction is not offered in either Lave & Wenger (1991) or Wenger (1998). The difference would appear to be one of access: it would be possible for two individuals to engage in the same practices within a community of practice, yet one of them could be marginalized, whilst the other could be on a peripheral inbound trajectory. Essentially, it must be a question of sanction; some individuals are allowed their choice of participation (to move from peripheral to full; to remain as peripheral), whereas others are marginalized. Where self-constituted communities of practice are involved, this area becomes particularly interesting, as there are no codified means of entrance, or recognized routes, for example, by formal training or qualifications. This leaves the question of who within the community of practice endorses an individual's entry, and how this is managed. This will be discussed further in relation to adolescent peer groupings in the following section.

The final structure we would like to consider in this context is that of *brokering*. This is important because it considers the mechanism through which new (or revised) practices can be imported into a community of practice. It also has a number of

implications for the structure and interaction of membership categories. Potential brokers have membership of multiple communities of practice, although it should be noted that multimembership in itself does not entail brokering. Indeed, brokering is a potentially difficult path to tread, and one that requires a particular type of membership – one that is not explicitly named by the theory, but Wenger (1998:110) summarises it as follows:

> "Brokers must often avoid two opposite tendencies: being pulled in to become full members and being rejected as intruders. Indeed, their contributions lie precisely in being neither in nor out. Brokering therefore requires an ability to manage carefully the coexistence of membership and nonmembership, *yielding enough distance to bring a different perspective, but also enough legitimacy to be listened to*." [emphasis added]

It is unclear what such individuals' status within the community of practice is – Wenger's quote implies they are not typically full members (although this doesn't fit very well with most of the examples he gives), yet it is hard to imagine peripheral members having sufficient legitimacy to affect group practices. He cites examples of individuals importing different work practices across parts of an institution, and importing work safety practices to the home. However, these are rather different acts, and rather different overlaps compared to the type of interactions between self-constituting communities of practice, like the adolescent peer groups of Eckert's work. Where the communities of practice are potentially competitors, for example, jocks, burnouts, inbetweens, then brokering is a rather different proposition to the examples Wenger gives. In the first of his examples – transferring practices across an institution - the communities of practice are not particularly conflictual, and the individual has the legitimacy conferred by the institution. In the second – transferring practices from work to home - the communities of practice are in different spheres (family, work), and are thus even less likely to involve delicate identity work, whereas the question of legitimacy, and being able to uphold such a delicate position is much more of an issue for Eckert's subjects[4]. This issue will be revisited in more detail in section 4.3.

It can be seen from this discussion that the notion of membership in communities of practice is not a straightforward one. While practices are central to membership, the *amount* of practices engaged in does not directly index membership type, and arguably, even the *type* of practices may not index this (*c.f.* peripheral vs. marginal membership). However, what should be evident is that *legitimacy* is crucial in all aspects of membership, and it is this issue, in the context of Eckert & McConnell-Ginet's work on Belten High, which we will now go on to discuss in detail.

4. Legitimacy and Membership at Belten High

The flipside of legitimacy is choice. A superficial reading of communities of practice might suggest that individuals have the choice of which communities of practice they belong to – by engaging in appropriate practices we earn ourselves membership. Our highlighting of the importance of legitimacy perhaps indicates that our choice is not quite

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[4] However, it should be noted that Wenger credits to Eckert this addition to the theory, so any difficulties with this concept cannot be attributed to the problems involved in shifting the concept of Communities of Practice into the sociolinguistic sphere.

so open. We will suggest that there are also some other problems with this perceived choice which are not entirely to do with legitimacy, and in addition, that the concept of legitimacy needs some 'unpacking'. Our discussion of this will concentrate on the example of adolescent peer groups, as exemplified by Eckert's work, although some of the comments we make are equally applicable to the theory of communities of practice in general.

4.1 Legitimate Peripheral Participation

"It is not surprising that [loners] might not develop delicate linguistic patterns in concert with major clusters, since they lack the opportunity to participate on an ongoing basis in the process of meaning-making with a consistent set of peers." Eckert (1999:205)

"On the school playground, the unmarked but sharp boundary of a clique can be a cruel reality, one for which well-meaning parents and teachers are of little help." Wenger (1998:104)

Learning in communities of practice is essentially about legitimate peripheral participation – being allowed a safe environment in which to make mistakes, and gradually extend and normalize your practice, as discussed earlier. Lave & Wenger (1991:113) make the point that being tolerated at the periphery of a community does not necessarily provide a learning experience – peripherality without participation is not enough. It is clear from the quotations above that access to such an environment is not necessarily available. From the outset, individuals do not always have choices. Again, the problem of these potential barriers is intensified for an aspiring member of a self-constituting community, as the requirements for membership are not codified: there is no 'person specification' as there might be for a job, or an academic course of study. Simply, they are evaluated as a prospective member under criteria that they may not know or understand. Even if they are allowed that initial access, there is, equally, no codified inbound trajectory, so it is not clear how an individual moves from peripheral to full membership. So membership is not simply about practice, it is also about acceptance.

Kinney (1993) draws attention to the difficult position of those who wish to be accepted into the 'trendy'[5] group, but cannot manage the transition:

"I wanted to [be in the trendy group] but I wasn't; I never had a lot of friends. I always had one or two friends, and we were dressing pretty trendy and stuff like that, but we never really had trendy friends"
Female high school junior, Kinney (1993:28)

From the students that he interviewed, he suggests that both groups of students were extremely aware of the social distinction being made. Nerds knew that being "different in any way" (Kinney 1993:27) was sure to draw negative attention from the trendies; ridicule and exclusion were the result of nerdiness. The experience of exclusion can be heightened by the knowledge that such students often aspire to acceptance by the

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[5] Kinney is using the dichotomy of nerdiness vs. trendiness. Jocks and burnouts could be viewed as two different modes of being trendy.

dominant trendy group, so their negative treatment has a particular bite. Such behaviour can have a long-lasting deleterious effect on isolated teenagers' perception of themselves: they are not always able to distinguish others' perceptions from their own sense of self worth (Snow & Anderson 1987). While these negative effects may not apply to all those outside the trendy group, their existence suggests that those affected have not consciously chosen their position. Both the quotation from Kinney (1993) above and Eckert (1999) below show the speakers' inability to understand the position that they are in, and the trajectory to where they would like to be:

> [about her peer group]
> "Uh, I've been trying very hard to make more friends, but it's hard to just say, "Be my friend" (laughter) …. I don't see why I'm not involved with friends and have some close friends, or – like other people, not everybody, but most people have a group of friends that they do things with, and they can talk easily with them, and I have a few friends but not a whole group of friends. *And sometimes I wonder is there something I'm doing wrong*." [emphasis added]

> [about her family]
> "*I'm not really worried about what they'll think if I do something*. Or that I have to do anything toward keeping my family … It's different than with my friends." [emphasis added]

<div align="right">Eckert (1999:206)</div>

This girl from Eckert's data is obviously struggling with her position on the margins, and it evidently isn't a position she has consciously chosen. The implication is that she would like to feel more accepted by her peer group, but there is no transparent mechanism through which she can do this. In both quotations, she shows insecurity with her practices in relation to her peer group: the meaning she is making is not understood by her.

The importance of transparency in situated learning is an area which Lave & Wenger (1991) discuss in relation to artifacts such as a quartermaster's alidade. They argue that using something appropriately involves not just using it, but also understanding its significance in practice; this understanding is also necessarily intellectually prior to its appropriate usage. Lave & Wenger suggest that for effective learning to occur, the use and meaning of artifacts must be transparent. The problem for Eckert's adolescents is that this is often not the case. In contrast to more structured learning environments, even the artifacts themselves may not be easily identified. If we take the artifacts of adolescent practice to be such variables as clothes style, facial and bodily gestures, speech style, then the prospective member must identify the important aspects, and map that variation to social signification. We would suggest that under these conditions, even legitimate access to the practice of a community does not guarantee the acquisition of such skills.

This perhaps applies particularly to the type of phonological variables which sociolinguists are interested in. Teenage magazines of the type that Talbot (1995) discusses give advice on fashion and behaviour – these may relate to global rather than local meanings, but they at least begin to identify variation and possible meanings. There

is rarely such conscious discussion of linguistic variables in the media aimed at teenagers[6], and while such magazines will tend to use the current fashionable lexis, it is still left as an inference for the reader. Phonology, or how people sound, is mentioned even less frequently. Bergvall (1999:279) suggests that the type of phonological variation found in Eckert's study is "mostly unconscious" on the part of the students, a view which is also supported by Preston (2001:286). Whilst we would be wary of assigning delicate phonological variation entirely to the subconscious level, as speakers do show some awareness of this type of variation (e.g. by mimicking the speech of others, or commenting on others 'speaking funny'), it is almost certainly true that individuals don't pay as much conscious attention to their phonology as to their clothes, gestures and the content of their talk, partly because they are not explicitly taught to attend to that aspect of their display by the adolescent culture that surrounds them. In addition, phonological variables are also typically more locally based; therefore national media are not necessarily going to be useful in the process of decoding local signification. So, in order to use local variables appropriately, speakers will need to be very attuned to local speech in order to notice and reproduce variants appropriately, even though they probably would not be able to express the difference in their actions if they were asked to do so.

Such delicate phonological awareness may not be accessible to all individuals. Indeed, why should it be? Students of practical phonetics produce performances that fall within a normal distribution, as for any other subject. Some simply have a better 'ear' for detecting differences in sounds, and some are better natural mimics. Presumably, this difference in skills applies as much for sounds 'in the wild', as for sounds in the classroom. Given that for the latter they are taught the technical difference in sounds, and what is involved in producing them, one might suggest that speakers have a potentially more difficult task. For example, it was only when I studied linguistics at University that I became aware of the distinction in phonological systems in Britain signaled in part by the use of the TRAP vowel for the BATH lexical set (Wells 1982) even though my immediate family (on further inspection) are split fairly evenly in their usage, whereas my four year old nephew was quick to query why I used /a/ rather than /ɑ/, unlike most of the adults around him. While this can partially be explained by the fact I spent my childhood in Birmingham (predominantly /a/, but not exclusively so), and my nephew has always lived in East London (predominantly /ɑ/), it still shows a rather greater awareness of sounds than I had, and perhaps augurs well for his ability to engage in appropriate linguistic practice in the future. This is anecdotal evidence, but there seems no reason why humans should all have equal skills in this area. Bucholtz (1995:356) in her study of 'passing' as a different ethnic identity says that individuals can be "perceived as outsiders in an ethnic group if they lack the requisite linguistic skills", even if their appearance is physiologically appropriate, thus demonstrating the importance of linguistic performance. However, this aspect of her work is played down in order to focus on particular individuals' *success* in re-interpreting and re-presenting their identity. Ignoring this type of variation in performance skills would seem to be another example of

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[6] Although there is an increasing awareness of language use in the media. In Britain, there have been articles about Estuary English and 'uptalk' in the national press. For example, *Eastenders spoken 'ere* (Roger Scott, *The Daily Mail*, 22nd February 1999) or *It's goodbye Memsahib, hello Sheila* (Malcolm Bradbury, *The Daily Mail*, 20th March 1996). However, these scarcely count as the delicate use of local variables.

what Coupland, Giles & Wiemann (1991) term the 'Pollyanna principle': the tendency of linguists to see only the effectiveness of human communication, and to disregard imperfect performance, and variation in linguistic ability.

Eckert (1999:8-9) herself discusses the possibility of incomers acquiring the precise phonological system associated with a particular area. Work from Payne (1980) and Chambers (1992) suggest that our ability to assimilate distinctions based on word class assignment, or to consistently use the correct form when distinguishing word sets which were merged in the previous dialect (e.g. *cot* vs. *caught* or *put* vs. *putt*) decreases greatly with age. Pre-adolescents (8-9) were shown to have some success in the simpler forms, but after the age of 13, acquisition becomes much less predictable. For this reason, Eckert (1999:82) excluded from the phonological analysis anyone in her dataset who had moved to Neartown after the age of eight. Whilst there are sound methodological reasons for omitting these individuals from experimental work, it should not be forgotten that they have to cope with the sociolinguistic reality. If such incomers are limited in their usage of local phonological variables, then it may also be the case that their opportunities for acceptance (and thus their choices) are also limited.

It is clear from Eckert's ethnomethodological work that, indeed, some of these incomers did find their choices restricted once they moved to Belten High. All of those who commented on this problem came from areas closer to Detroit, and they report that whilst the division between jocks and burnouts was similar, the practices that were used to display and maintain those identities were somewhat different. One student who had been a jock when he lived nearer to Detroit, was now a burnout, because the practices of Urban Town jocks were closer to Belten burnouts, and "he had been unable to fit in with the Belten jocks" (Eckert (1999:125). Evidently, he had not been able to adjust his behaviours sufficiently to gain acceptance. Others were more successful, but still demonstrated their awareness of the need to adjust their practices:

> "All these short haired kids. My hair was long, it was really long, you know, and these people were, "well get your hair cut," you know. And they all had these Nike tennis shoes on. And that's what I remember. Nike tennis shoes. So, I went home and said, "Mom, screw these Trax tennis shoes, I got to get some Nikes," you know …. (laughter) So I had to get Nike tennis shoes like the rest of them." (Eckert (1999:144)

It should also be remembered that the communities within the school show an orientation to socioeconomic class. Whilst coming from a middle class family doesn't prevent you from being a burnout, or having a working class background doesn't stop you from being a jock, Eckert's data shows that socioeconomic background is an important indicator of likely membership. It is also something the adolescent has no control over: while an individual can try to engineer their appearance, speech style and other practices, their background remains a constant, at least in this particular life-stage[7].

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[7] Work reported in Labov (1966) and further discussed by Chambers (2003) has shown that upwardly mobile speakers use local linguistic features more like the social grouping of which they see themselves to be a part. This was based on informants who had grown up in working class families, but were now employed in jobs categorised as middle class. While in principle the students at Belten High should be able to do the same, we would argue that this new construction of identity is probably harder to achieve whilst

How significant a factor this is in gaining access is not obvious. The burnouts' rejection of the latest fashion in jeans allegedly because of their cost (Eckert 1980) suggests orientation towards class issues, but this is at a rather superficial level. However, it would seem to be another potential barrier to choice.

Although ability to assimilate new practices and present oneself appropriately is only one aspect of acceptance, we should be careful to admit their role. It is also clear that gaining access to practices in such a way that their meaning is sufficiently transparent to aid assimilation is also a difficult task. Therefore, the barriers to participation should not be underestimated. These are implicit in Eckert's ethnographic work, but they are not so evident in the operationalisation of communities of practice in the sociolinguistic sphere. It is not that community of practice doesn't provide a vocabulary to discuss this area, more that the boundary situation is grossly different in these self-constituting communities, and this needs to be explicit.

4.2 Hierarchies and Legitimacy

Barriers to entry and legitimate peripheral participation entail a process of gate-keeping. In order for such a process to function, there must be mechanisms by which the boundary and the internal structure of the community of practice is controlled. The question now raised is whether the theory of community of practice can account for the type of hierarchy this implies, given its seeming assumption of legitimate access which we have seen above.

If we look at Lave & Wenger (1991), we find that the only distinction made is between those on the periphery, and those who are full members. No further subcategorisation of full membership is attempted. This might lead to the suggestion that there is no further structuring involved in the community of practice beyond these two categories. Indeed, this view seems further substantiated by Lave & Wenger (1991:36) choosing the pair of terms *peripheral vs. full* rather than *peripheral vs. central*, because a community of practice "has no single core or center", and to choose the term 'central' would imply otherwise. If there is no single centre, then this would also imply that there can be no simple hierarchy within those who constitute full members. However, the concepts of marginality, and legitimate peripheral participation demand some form of hierarchy: how else can access to participation be managed? Eckert (1999:36-7) mentions the notion of hierarchy in passing when she discusses - what she views as - an egalitarian group negotiating the meaning of a symbol (skulls) which were important to them. And it is clear from the ethnographic work – such as the quotations that have been used previously - that there are hierarchies within the adolescent communities. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1995:492) spell this out very clearly:

> "What is essential for jock girls is approval from those already prominent; especially but not only boys. To be seen by those able to grant entry to the inner circle as desiring such entry is to jeopardize the chances of getting it."

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the student is likely to be living at home, and therefore does not have either the degree of emotional or financial independence from their family networks.

Not only is there a hierarchy, but also, those within the community of practice are extremely aware of those at the top, and the power that those few wield over the other members. However, there seems to be no real sense of how this can be mapped using the community of practice structure: this is a detailed ethnographic analysis, not an employment of practice theory.

Eckert employs sociograms to represent the friendship networks within the groups, and these are perhaps the closest she comes to representing the connections, and, to an extent, the hierarchy. However, this technique is made much less useful because she does not distinguish one-way and mutual naming. While a member can name another with a higher status, their acceptance is only truly shown by a higher status member naming them. Labov (1973:87) demonstrates this point through his work on local street gangs. Some of those who are considered lames name members of one of the local groups – the Thunderbirds – but the lack of mutual naming confirms their position outside the group. Thus, providing information about mutual naming for the Belten students would have provided a useful mapping of the groups, with a greater indication of the power structure. Though, again, this is not part of the community of practice theory, but rather a technique, which has been in use in variation work for a long time (e.g. Cheshire 1982). We would argue that some such method is needed within the community of practice framework.

In this context, it is interesting to note that discussions of gate-keeping and hierarchies in Eckert's study seem to appear more in examples concerned with jockdom than burnoutdom. There are explicit references to the jock hierarchy, whereas there seems to be no such comment about the burnout one[8]. For example, Eckert (1999:144) cites the students' general view that it's difficult for incomers to 'make it' in the jock hierarchy. This, she suggests, is partly because of the difficulties in adapting stylistically (as discussed previously), but also partly because the hierarchy is quite tightly structured, and offers few routes in. In the discussion of the sociograms, she (1999:185-6) also implies that are tensions within the jock crowd relating to the junior high schools the students came from. There is a perception that the girls who came from Rover (rather than Finlay or Bolder) dominate the female hierarchy, and thus gain the majority of the prestige available from the community and the school[9].

If it is the case that the jock hierarchy is more contested, then it may be indicative of the difference in the resources to which these two communities have access. For the jocks who have status, the prestige gained is not just within their peer group, but is ratified through the institution of the school, and has a payback that offers a trajectory into an adulthood that is valued by society at a global level. For the burnouts, there is no such economic payback. They earn prestige amongst their peers, and a route into an adulthood that is not so valued by society, but has a local meaning. The trajectory to prestige for the jocks involves excellence in sports, school government, activities, academics, and so forth. These are limited resources: students must compete with each other in order to gain recognition. The types of activities that bring prestige for the

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[8] Or, at least, not in such a way that implies competition within that hierarchy. Judy is referred to as a "burned-out burnout" (Eckert 1999:1), so that implies the existence of a hierarchy, but no comment from Eckert or the students suggest that access to burnout hierarchy is restricted.

[9] This may well also be true for the jock males as well, but their clusters and affiliations were not studied in as much detail.

burnouts are not a limited resource in the same way: there's no restriction on how many people can cruise the parks, party or skip school. While this is a simplistic portrayal of the meaning-making that these groups are involved in, it does offer some explanation for the greater concern jocks seem to have about their place in the hierarchy, and also for their reservations about allowing newcomers access to the resource offered by the school. Where membership offers access to a scarce resource, entry *must* be limited, and thus choice, by definition, cannot be entirely open.

Given that the situation for learning within this type of community of practice is less than ideal – as has been discussed above – then the importance of the hierarchy is magnified. If entrance cannot be ensured via learning and engaging in appropriate practices, then the way in is based mostly on being accepted by those who have status. This would seem to be confirmed by the case of Vaughn, in Labov's (1973:106) study. He seemed to have gained a position of some status in one of the main local street gangs, the Jets, in the year in which he had lived in the area, yet Vaughn characterized himself as being a lame in his previous neighbourhood, and his use of the vernacular did not contradict this view. Indeed, Labov's analysis of his language placed him closer to the lames than the gang members. It seems unlikely on this evidence that Vaughn's display in itself was sufficient to gain him access, but at thirty years distance and with minimal ethnographic information, one can only guess at the reason for his admission. It can only be assumed that someone in the leading cluster of the Jets sanctioned his entry, and thus enabled his access to the hierarchy. There is little reason to suppose that this process, with all its inequalities, has changed much in the intervening time. If we want to study the workings of communities, then it is not just the physical manifestations of practice we need to investigate, but also a more detailed and structured account of how access and acceptance is managed.

4.3 Brokering and Linguistic Change

Allied to this area also is the question of brokering: the introduction of new or revised practices into a community. As outlined earlier, Wenger (1998) and Eckert (1999) characterize brokers as persons on the periphery, who act as a conduit for such innovations: the proviso is that they must have sufficient status within the community of practice to introduce such a change, but must not be a full participant. The argument for the brokers' peripheral position is that full participants are more interested in maintaining current norms than bringing in new ones. While this might seem a conceptually attractive viewpoint, its validity is questionable. We suggested earlier that managing such a peripheral position would seem very difficult where membership of different communities was potentially conflictual, as in the Belten data. And the argument developed in the discussion of access, acceptance and peripherality above should underline why such a process seems unlikely. It is hard to imagine an outsider/peripheral participator having sufficient status to ratify an innovation. Such persons may display innovative practices, but surely a full participant (and presumably someone who is part of the hierarchy) must sanction its adoption by revising their own practice? The following example given by Eckert (1999:215) seems to illustrate this suggested process:

"One member of cluster 5 was known for her fashionable clothing. An avid reader of *Seventeen* magazine, she was always the first person to arrive in

school with the latest fashions appearing in that magazine and in the department stores. But this won her scorn rather than admiration or even approval. Her friends thought she was silly for following *Seventeen* slavishly, and she herself told me that the other pupils in school didn't like the fact that she came in with the latest styles. She could even point to the girl in cluster 4 who was known for introducing new styles into the school, and who would be licensed to introduce the styles that she was wearing prematurely."

Eckert explains this by an appeal to the importance of the 'local order'. The girl is directly accessing the global context, rather than waiting for mediation through the local context. While this may be true, it cannot be denied that local acceptance of clothing innovation in that group seemed to rely on sanction by one particular member. If linguistic practice is to be seen as equivalent to other community practices, then there is little reason to suggest that linguistic innovations occur in any other way[10].

Bucholtz (1999:219), in her study of a nerd community of practice identifies one of her subjects, Carrie, as a "cultural and linguistic broker" as she is a peripheral member of the nerd community, but can also engage with the 'cooler' groupings in the high school. This peripherality, and ability to engage in different groups would seem to agree with Eckert's definition of brokering, however the same problem of ratification occurs here, too. In the examples of talk that Bucholtz gives, Carrie engages in some nerd identity practices, but also in some negative identity practices, such as the use of current slang (associated with a 'cooler' identity). The nerd grouping recognize these words as 'Carrie words', but their usage gains a negative response from the group – it is hard to see how someone in this position could sanction linguistic change. Carrie provides a conduit of information about alternative practices – so in that sense she is a broker of sorts – but as a peripheral member, her usage of alternative practices is subject to group acceptance or rejection.

In the social network model, this problem is dealt with by identifying two separate processes in the mechanism of change: innovation and adoption (Milroy 1992). An *innovator* has a number of relatively weak ties across networks; this enables them to escape the pressure to conform experienced by those who have relatively strong ties within a network. However, they are reliant on someone who has dense links within the network taking on the innovation: this is the act of ratification performed by an *early adopter*. Weak links and Strong links here seem roughly equivalent to the distinction between peripheral and full membership in practice theory. Indeed, Wenger (1998) makes the same type of appeal to full members being too engaged in maintaining current practices, in comparison with peripheral members, and thus unlikely to introduce change. Certainly, the innovation/adoption distinction provides a possible alternative interpretation of Eckert's example: the girl in cluster 4 is an innovator, but such changes are only ratified for the group by their being adopted by the girl in cluster 5. Equally,

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[10] Indeed, in her Preface to Linguistic Variation as Social Practice, Eckert (1999:xiii) says of her own high school experience: "Irene Erianne brought in new ways of saying things, Judy O'Grady ratified them, and each of us picked them up more or less, depending on the degree to which we cast our lot with the aspects of the local Italian-American culture that they were tied to." It would be interesting to know how Eckert viewed these persons' positions within that community.

Carrie has the potential to be an innovator (as she is a conduit of alternative practices), but change will only occur if a central/core[11] member of the group adopts the alternative practice.

Of course, this characterization doesn't fully explain why a full member (or person with dense, multiplex links) should choose to adopt new practices, and move on from maintenance of current practices. Nor does it explain the group hierarchy and the importance of ratification. However, recognition of these processes is important in the development of our understanding. It may be that the concept of brokering can be usefully extended to account for the division between innovation and adoption, but at its current level of articulation, the concept used in social network theory seems more complete. There is, perhaps, little reason why it could not be adopted into practice theory.

5. Discussion

The attraction of communities of practice is in its appeal to practice and its valorization of all human behaviour, not just linguistic variation. Such an approach can illuminate some aspects of social action. For example, Freed's (1999) study of pregnant women offers an explanation for those women's oft-reported feeling of 'not owning' the pregnancy and birth experience. The community of practice they pass through is owned by the medical professionals, and they are not party to its meanings, and don't engage fully in its practices. Essentially, they are marginal participants on an outbound trajectory. Alternatively, Eckert's analysis of the construction of gender in this data provides some account of why there is so much variation within women's language, and moves away from the straitjacket of the female/male dichotomy. Like other practice, linguistic practice differs according to an individual's identification with jockdom or burnoutdom: female jocks orient towards suburban variables (more standard), whereas female burnouts orient towards urban variables (less standard) (Eckert 1999). However, it is far from being a panacea for the sociolinguistic problem of finding an appropriate concept to represent groupings within societies.

It seems to be as hard to say what type of grouping could be represented by community of practice, as to define what could be represented by speech community or social network. The constitutive feature of shared enterprise/mutual endeavour is particularly difficult to handle for the type of self-constituting groups that sociolinguists study, and at its current level of exposition it would surely exclude many groupings. Indeed, Eckert does not seem to identify what this mutual endeavour is for the Belten jocks and burnouts, and there is no obvious concrete effect from their behaviour that would seem to meet Wenger's (1998) definition. The only possible interpretation would seem to be that their mutual identity practices are to be understood as constituting a shared enterprise, and if this is the case, then the concept of shared enterprise needs considerable clarification.

The emphasis on mutual engagement leads to focus on the *local*, and it may well be that the niche for practice theory is at the micro-level of ethnographic research, and alternative models are needed for what Wenger (1998) terms as communities of imagination and alignment. But, it must not be forgotten that sociolinguistic theory needs

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[11] These are terms used by Bucholtz (1999), even though they are denied by Lave & Wenger (1991), as hierarchy seems essential to ratification and acceptance.

models of macro-levels of society as much as it needs models applicable to micro-levels. The interactions of these two is as crucial to linguistic meaning as it is to other practices, and the position of communities of practice within this context needs to be carefully considered.

However, even this is simplifying the problem. Within Eckert's work, there is a combination of practical ethnography and the conceptual structure of communities of practice. Certainly, the communities of practice model requires this level of detail, but many of Eckert's ethnographic findings cannot be expressed through the theory of communities of practice. As we have suggested above, communities of practice have explanatory power in relation to gender-based language variation, but their internal structure is not sufficiently complex to account for all the intricacies of gaining and maintaining membership. In the case of the empirical work in Belten High, this may be at least partially attributable to the theoretical apparatus being adopted after the original data collection – it would seem that the initial approach was purely ethnographic, and it may be that an alternative approach to data collection is necessary to facilitate a more productive communities of practice analysis. Nevertheless, the current analysis that communities of practice provides does not elucidate the data sufficiently. Eckert's ethnographic work offers a sensitive picture of teenage identities, as shown by the examples used throughout the discussion of legitimacy and membership, but it is difficult to see how the mechanisms described by Eckert and Wenger could be used to access this level of delicacy.

The main problems we have identified are concerned with choice, hierarchy and linguistic change. Implicit within the concept of communities of practices seems to be the idea that individuals can choose the extent of their membership in a community. However, this relies on the transparency of artifacts used in practice, and legitimized access to peripheral participation. Neither of these are guaranteed to Eckert's adolescents, or, indeed to similar types of self-structuring communities which typify the linguistic groupings studied by sociolinguists. Learning about the local social signification of practices – including linguistic practice – is most likely to occur by an individual both being admitted as an internal audience, and being allowed increasing access to participation. Being within the group is prior to understanding the meaning being made; understanding the meaning is prior to making even initial attempts at participation. Legitimacy allows mistakes and thus effective learning: without that initial acceptance, local meaning-making is difficult to penetrate, and errors can incur a high cost in ridicule. While discussing the notion of style-shifting between relatively standard forms and more localised non-standard accents and dialects, one of my current undergraduate students summed up the feelings of the group by saying "You get something wrong, and then you're made to feel stupid". It takes little pedagogical knowledge to realize such high risks to an individual's face constitute a barrier to learning, and thus to participation in the future.

The fact that these communities have barriers, and monitor access and admission, must entail that they have an internal structure and hierarchy. If an individual is to have the right [power] to sanction another's access and admission, then that right [power] must be recognized and accepted by the majority of the community, and thus they must be considered to be towards the apex of the hierarchy. Other than distinguishing between accepted members (*full participants*) and those on the margins (*peripheral and marginal*

participants), practice theory has no concept of hierarchy. The only description of degrees of membership in the Belten data comes from ethnographic interviews, or sociograms: neither of these are accepted parts of communities of practice. The importance of legitimacy and sanction within self-constituted communities cannot be over-emphasised, and thus, a practical way of modeling the internal structure is essential if practice theory is to become a tool for linguistic modelling.

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