Linguists commonly define style as different ways of saying the same thing. This treatment of style as independent of content is part of a larger treatment of language as excisable from social practice. It invokes a set of constructs – sociolect, ethnolect, genderlect, speech community, register – that are all too easily treated as static assemblages of features marking pre-existing and stable social situations and categories. But style is an expressive practice in which social distinctions are produced and reproduced, and one might think of the lectal constructs as representing stability in the face of change. This talk will consider stylistic practice as a dialectic between change and stasis, arguing that it is only in considering the social practice in which variation takes on meaning that we can untangle the interplay between them.

Meaning, Stasis and Change in Stylistic Practice

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