1 Introduction

Over the past twenty years, the study of identity within the broad interdisciplinary field of sociocultural linguistics (Bucholtz and Hall 2008) has been elevated from a fringe topic to a central analytic concern. As a vital component of this shift, many scholarly perspectives on language, culture, and society have shown a renewed interest in the concept of style. Yet what exactly is meant by style remains an unresolved question within the field.

*Style* has long been a key term in a number of disciplines and professions, although it is defined and used in divergent ways across these traditions, with little dialogue between different approaches. In literary criticism, for example, style is generally conceptualized as the unique authorial voice of a literary text or an entire body of work, an issue investigated most extensively in the field of stylistics (e.g., Bradford 1997). Meanwhile, in the world of journalism and publishing, style is a set of professionally imposed conventions regarding what is often termed the “mechanics” of writing: attribution, formatting, punctuation, and spelling (e.g., Associated Press 2011; Chicago Manual of Style 2010). Within traditional rhetoric and composition, these two general perspectives on style are brought together, as rules of sentence structure and word choice are prescribed in order to enable novice writers, somewhat paradoxically, to achieve their own textual voice (e.g., Williams and Colomb 2011). Given that the same term is used both for the most idiosyncratic aspects of individual personal expression and for regimented conformity to an institutional standard, it is no wonder that even specialists have had difficulty agreeing on the scope of style.

As in these other areas, within various branches of sociocultural linguistics, there has historically been little agreement on the meaning of *style* or even which aspects of language it involves. These different understandings of

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1 Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at the Symposium on Language and Identity across Modes of Communication at the University of Sydney in November 2011 and at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Conference on Linguistics in Lexington, Kentucky, in April 2012. My thanks to those audiences for their feedback and insights.

2 *The Elements of Style* (Strunk and White 1979), from which I borrow my admittedly somewhat grandiose title, is the classic text within this tradition.
style have generally been applied within specific subfields, particularly along a qualitative/quantitative divide, with little acknowledgment of competing definitions in other parts of the field.

On the one hand, in the quantitative tradition of variationist sociolinguistics established by William Labov (1966), the term is used to account for “intraspeaker variation” – that is, quantifiable patterns of variation, based primarily on specific phonological variables, that cannot be attributed to a speaker’s social categories; these categories, such as gender, class, and ethnicity, give rise to “interspeaker variation”. In this framework, then, style is understood as orthogonal to social identity rather than as integral to it. Such variability is treated as unidimensional, involving an individual speaker’s shift toward or away from the vernacular. This shift is attributed to a likewise unidimensional shift in the speech context, from more or less language-focused, which in turn is thought to trigger a shift in the degree to which the speaker monitors her or his own speech. Meanwhile, the variationist approach to style put forth by Allan Bell (1984, 2001) incorporates a valuable interactional or at least interpersonal component, conceptualizing intraspeaker variation as the result of a speaker’s efforts to design her or his speech to orient either to the audience or to a non-present reference group. But despite this welcome consideration of the interactional context of style, the details of interaction are rarely the focus of analysis in variationist frameworks, and the analyst’s main concern is style shifting rather than style itself.

On the other hand, in the qualitative field of interactional sociolinguistics founded by linguistic anthropologist John Gumperz (1982), style refers to the combined set of linguistic practices characteristic of a specific cultural grouping, such as an immigrant community; the focus of analysis is often on how these practices are misinterpreted by cultural outsiders, especially members of the dominant culture, leading to prejudicial attitudes and inequitable material outcomes against the ethnic group in question. Here, style is a property of the social group, not the individual or the speech situation. And unlike quantitative approaches, which focus primarily – though not exclusively – on phonology, Gumperz’s work incorporates segmental phonology, prosody, morphology, and the lexicon within interaction as interlocking components of style. However, as interactional sociolinguistics was further developed by Gumperz’s students, most notably Deborah Tannen (e.g., Tannen 1984, 1986), it has come to emphasize discourse-level phenomena over lower levels of linguistic structure. This turn of events has led to the further separation of variationist and interactional approaches to style within sociocultural linguistics.

Thus style in these different traditions is conceptualized in sharply dichotomous terms: as either individual or group-based, as rooted either in speech
contexts or in the cultural practices and identities of speakers, as analyzable either through the quantitative examination of specific phonological and grammatical features or through the qualitative examination of discourse. More recent research on style, however, bridges some of these divisions, beginning with the pioneering work of Nikolas Coupland (e.g., 1985, 2007) and Penelope Eckert (1989, 2000), which in different ways demonstrates that style is about both individual social actors and larger groupings, that it involves both the contexts of language use and the users of language, and that it encompasses both the details of linguistic structure and broader interactional and semiotic practices. Contributing to this emerging body of scholarship, sociocultural linguistic researchers have increasingly sought to combine these and other perspectives on style, drawing on the theories, methods, and questions of variationist sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and linguistic anthropology to conceptualize style as a crucial resource for the semiotic production of social identities of all kinds within and across sociocultural contexts (e.g., Agha 2007; Alim 2004a; Bucholtz 2011a; Kiesling 2004, 2005; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Rampton 1995, 2006; Schilling-Estes 1998, 2002).

Underlying all of this work is a general understanding of semiotics as the creation of social meaning through the use of symbolic resources that include but are by no means limited to language. As demonstrated throughout this volume, social positioning is not accomplished through any single mode of communication, whether face-to-face or mediated speech; writing in any genre or medium; embodied action, including gesture, posture, kinesis, facial expression, and so on; or the engagement of material or environmental resources, from the social use of the natural world to personal adornment, tool use, and the deployment of cultural artifacts. Moreover, style is fundamentally a matter of mode in another important sense as well: it is the manner in which social action is taken. From this perspective, then, style is a semiotic meta-activity, which endows every human activity with sociocultural meaning.

1.1 Style: a way of doing things

When style is conceptualized as mode, it becomes clear that what is shared by all of the diverse approaches to style discussed above is also what lies at the core of the everyday lay understanding of style, namely, a way of doing things. This inclusive definition enables researchers to shift from a narrow technical linguistic definition to a view that takes into account all the stylistic work, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, that social actors perform in their everyday lives. It also allows scholars to integrate notions of style as highly individualized with notions of style as highly regimented: in order to be effective, styles must
be understood as both individual and collective, both creative and conventional.

The individual dimension of style is particularly salient in the case of style icons, public figures ranging from Cher to Princess Diana to Steve Jobs whose distinctive self-presentation through personal adornment makes their styles highly recognizable – and hence readily available for imitation or parody. And although style icons like Michael Jackson, Michelle Obama, and Lady Gaga are often known for specific stylistic moves, it is not any single stylistic choice – a sequined glove (in the case of Jackson), a sleeveless shift (in the case of Obama), or even a dress made of meat (in the notorious case of Lady Gaga) – but, crucially, the range and combination of various stylistic resources that creates an iconic style. When a particular combination of resources comes to be recognized as a style, it becomes conventionalized and available for adoption by other individuals and groups.

But even within stylistically unified groups, stylistic conventions are generally not completely regimented, and individual group members may create their own variant of a shared style. Conversely, even the most distinctive styles, such as the punk and goth youth subcultures, may have stylistic features in common: leather, dark makeup, the color black. And although flamboyant and spectacular styles such as these tend to attract the most attention from researchers as well as members of the general public, the absence of such conspicuousness does not indicate an absence of style. “Unstylish” styles are styles nonetheless, and they can do just as much socially meaningful work as showier styles, as seen in the case of amateur singer Susan Boyle’s 2009 performance on the television talent show Britain’s Got Talent. Boyle’s frumpy style was interpreted as a marker of her authenticity, and the stylistic makeover she underwent following her rapid rise to stardom was therefore widely condemned as a misrepresentation of her “true” identity. By the same token, some of the most powerful styles involve the purposeful suppression of style, and especially of individual variation, as in the highly regimented, hegemonically masculine styles associated with business, politics, and the military.

To state that stylistic choices are socially meaningful, however, is not the same as saying that the social meaning of any particular stylistic choice is predetermined. The meaning of a single feature cannot be deduced in the absence of the larger stylistic context in which it is deployed. This is because the same feature can participate in many styles. In some cases, these may share a certain family resemblance, as with the use of black leather in both goth and punk to index a generally grim outlook on the world, but in other cases they may occupy entirely different positions in the stylistic universe, as with the association of braids with little girls on the one hand and with pirates on the other.
Up to now I have discussed stylistic practices that are not linguistic in order to make the point that style is not merely, or even necessarily primarily, an issue of language. And for the most part, linguistic and nonlinguistic forms of style operate in very similar ways. The stylistic multivalency and context-dependency of nonlinguistic stylistic features such as black leather and braids are in principle not very different from the stylistic multivalency and context-dependency of the linguistic features that accompany the wearing of leather or braids.

In illustrating this claim it is helpful to set aside those linguistic forms that carry semantic meaning, such as words and sentences, in order to focus exclusively on the semiotic meanings that come to be associated with particular forms. To take a relatively simple sociophonetic example, the low vowel [a] is not generally classified as a separate phoneme in American English, but it may serve as the phonetic realization of three different phonemes in three different American English varieties: /ɑ/ in the North, /æ/ in California, and (with lengthening) /aj/ in the South. This example is not merely an analogy between the variable value of phonetic features and the variable value of stylistic features. Rather, the variability of [a] is simultaneously a phonetic fact and a stylistic fact, because the use of this vowel can evoke associations with any one of these dialects of American English. Although traditionally sociolinguistics has held that dialectal features are by definition involved in social variation rather than stylistic variation, the recent research on style cited above demonstrates that this division does not hold up empirically in how speakers use language. To offer a personal illustration involving the example of the vowel [a], because I have lived in the northern, the southern, and the western regions of the United States, I may stylize my speech depending on the situation by using this same vowel in three different ways to perform three different social personae: the c[a]stic Chic[a]goan, the laid-b[a]ck C[a]lifornian, the m[a:]ghty n[a:]ce Texan. That is, it is not just regions but social types and their associated qualities that are conjured up through the symbolic use of this vowel in different contexts.

The dialectal variability in the value of [a] in American English is enabled by its close phonetic relationship with the phonemes /ɑ/, /æ/, and /aj/. Likewise, relationships between the possible social meanings of stylistic forms allow speakers to extend the range of uses to which such forms may be put. In her work on indexical fields, Eckert (2008: 469) has discussed in detail the many different social meanings that may be evoked by the released pronunciation of [t] in American English, based on research on such wide-ranging types of speakers as Orthodox Jews (Benor 2012), teenage nerds (Bucholtz 2011a), and gay men (Podesva, Roberts, and Campbell-Kibler 2001). As she notes, it is
not only these social types that may come to be associated with released \[t\] but also a wide range of interactional stances and personal attributes, from educatedness to formality to prissiness to emphaticness, which may in turn be linked with them in various ways.

Thus, style concerns not simply ways of talking, but more generally ways of doing things, of engaging in culturally significant activities and practices of any kind using a range of stylistic features in both established and innovative ways. And because ways of doing things involve not only where people are but who they are, stylistic agents locate themselves and others in relation to culturally available social contexts as well as culturally available social types. Or to offer a more concise definition, \textit{style is a system of sociocultural positioning through modes of semiotic action}.

In the remainder of this chapter, I unpack this definition and its implications by examining in greater detail the various facets of style and their consequences for the sociocultural linguistic analysis of identity. I briefly discuss ten different elements of style, which can be loosely divided into two general categories: those elements that focus on the workings of stylistic processes and those related to the acts performed by stylistic agents, whether individually or collectively (see Table 1).

This list is partly overlapping and probably incomplete, but it captures some of the most important issues for sociocultural linguists to consider in undertaking research on style and identity from a multimodal perspective. I illustrate each of these elements of style using my previous and current research on language and other semiotic resources in the production of youth identities in the United States, but it is important to emphasize that the elements I describe are of general relevance for the analysis of all sorts of stylistic work and social identities across settings, situations, and semiotic modes. In short, every social move is also a stylistic move, and style works in much the same way regardless of sociocultural context.

I turn first to the elements of style that contribute to stylistic systems through semiotic processes of meaning making. I then consider the role of social actors in creating styles, as well as the restrictions on stylistic agency.
The most fundamental element of style as a set of semiotic processes is *contextualization*. It is generally agreed by researchers regardless of framework that styles are situated – that is, they are located within specific social, cultural, and interactional contexts. But as a substantial body of scholarship has shown, ways of speaking are also situating – that is, they work to create those contexts in the first place, to constitute a given situation as being of a particular kind (Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Goffman 1981; Gumperz 1982). Thus, where early work on style as situated language use understood style shifting to be a response to a change in the context – from formal to informal, for example – it is important to recognize that speakers’ stylistic choices are themselves a crucial part of what defines a context as informal or formal in the first place, and each subsequent utterance either reinforces or alters the context-creating move of the one before.

An example of this ongoing process of context creation through stylistic work can be seen in Example (1), which is taken from a multi-sited video ethnography of language use among fans of science fiction and fantasy (Bucholtz 2002). The data were recorded at a fan convention in Texas during a live-action role playing game, or LARP. A LARP has a preformulated general plot and setting within which a group of players take on the roles of characters and interact with non-player characters who have been placed in the game by its organizers; the players’ goal is to discover information that will allow them to win the game. Space does not permit a discussion of the rich multimodal stylistic work undertaken by the 75 participants in this particular game, nor even an explanation of its complex rules and details, which are generally baffling to outsiders. For present purposes, it is necessary only to know that in the following interaction a player character, known as a “troubleshooter”, interacts with a non-player character, Johnny-B-GUD.3

(1) (Adapted from Bucholtz 2002: 236–237)

*Johnny-B-GUD is interrogating a troubleshooter about why she didn’t eat the Hot Fun.*
1. JBG: <high volume, slow speech rate> Your lack of cooperation in this matter (.) only proves to me: (.)
2. that it is time:
3. (2.2) <turns to item cards, holds item card out to troubleshooter>
4. Eat this pill. (3.8)
5. <cocks plastic gun, points it at troubleshooter's forehead> Now.
6. <troubleshooter takes hold of card; JBG pulls it away>
7. JBG: <low volume, rapid speech rate> You ate the pill?
8. TS: <low volume, rapid speech rate> Yes I ate the pill.
9. JBG: <pulls away gun; low volume, rapid speech rate> It's truth serum.
10. For the next ten minutes, you have to tell me the truth.
11. <troubleshooter nods>
12. JBG: <points gun at troubleshooter's forehead>
13. <high volume, slow speech rate> Are you a member of a secret society?
14. TS: <high volume, slow speech rate> No citizen.
15. JBG: <pulls gun away; low volume, rapid speech rate>
16. You have to actually tell me the truth.
17. TS: <low volume, rapid speech rate> Seriously [I'm not. ]
18. JBG: [Seriously.] [Two other troubleshooters approach.>
19. JBG: <points gun at first troubleshooter's forehead>
20. <high volume, slow speech rate> Did you know that the Hot Fun was poisoned?
21. TS: <high volume; slow speech rate> No citizen.
22. <JBG moves the gun away.>
23. TS: <low volume, rapid speech rate> Seriously I didn't, I ...

The context of this interaction may seem to be all but over-determined: the setting, which has been transformed by the organizers of the game from a blandly institutional public meeting space to a science-fictional world replete with props and costumed characters, may seem to dictate what sorts of language can be used in this place at this time. Yet the example demonstrates that participants are working within and in fact instantiating two contexts, moving fluidly between the game world and the real world as they jointly negotiate the rules and events within the game. This toggling between contexts is accomplished through rapid switches in speech style, from loud and slow for in-game speech to quiet and fast for behind-the-scenes out-of-game speech, as well as through contextualizing stance markers (e.g., Seriously, lines 17, 18, 24) and embodied actions such as the handling of game props (Figure 1). In this
way, the speakers do not step in and out of statically defined contexts but actively bring those contexts into and out of existence through their interaction, as they take up and set aside different personas moment by moment.

Contexts, then, both shape and are shaped by stylistic work. Moreover, if contexts are not pre-established, then neither are they monolithic. Any given stylistic act may simultaneously draw on contexts at multiple levels: large-scale historical, political, and social forces; the local cultures and communities of practice where these forces operate on the ground; the activities that take place within local cultures and communities, involving culturally meaningful sites and material items; the specific interactional sequences that unfold as part of these activities; and finally the individual utterances and other communicative acts that make up stance-taking moves, which position speakers in relation to one another and which in turn are made up of the familiar linguistic stuff of style – clauses, words, morphemes, phonemes (or letters, in the case of written modes of communication) – as well as gestures, facial expressions, and other embodied actions. Each of these contexts gives meaning to stylistic action.

In Example (1), for example, speakers produce utterances and gestures as part of interactional sequences that constitute the activity of playing a particu-
lar live-action role-playing game, and that activity is set within the larger ethnographic context of a particular science fiction convention, as well as the community of practice that centers on gaming. The relevance of the larger social context of American popular culture is less visible without a great deal of ethnographic knowledge about the design of the game and its clever intertextual links to classic science fiction and horror genres. As I have discussed in the larger study from which this example is taken, this knowledge helps account for such stylistic specifics as the characters’ performance accents, their improvised dialogue, and even the red shirts issued to the game players (Bucholtz 2002). It is only a deep contextual knowledge that enables participants, first, to recognize that a simple detail like T-shirt color may be socially significant and, second, to correctly interpret its meaning. Moreover, the extensive knowledge required to fully appreciate the game is part of what it means to be a science fiction and fantasy fan, a widespread yet stigmatized late-modern youth identity that involves an entire set of consumption practices fed by Hollywood, mass-market publishers, and a variety of corporate suppliers of fan-oriented toys, games, and leisure activities (e.g., Bacon-Smith 2000). For this reason, stylistic research must be attentive to all aspects of context, from patterns of linguistic and interactional structure to embodied ethnographic practices and activities to larger economic, sociocultural, and historical processes.

2.2 Indexicality

Contexts are vital to the creation of stylistic meaning, but the process of meaning making itself requires the second element of style: indexicality, or the linking of semiotic forms, including linguistic forms, to context-specific social meanings. Indexicality is the basic mechanism underlying identity projects of all kinds (Bucholtz and Hall 2005), and stylistic work in particular draws together multiple indexical resources for social positioning. These resources may be generally classed into three categories: activities and practices, stances, and what I call, with some misgivings, “pure” indexicals. This latter category has received the most attention in contemporary stylistic research. Pure indexicals are semiotic forms that are relatively empty of decontextualizable meaning and can thus be endowed with a range of context-specific meanings: in this sense,

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4 The players’ red shirts are a winking allusion to the “redshirt” characters on the classic science fiction television program Star Trek, so dubbed by fans of the show. Redshirts are non-speaking extras clad in red uniforms who, like the players of this role-playing game, are destined to die early and spectacularly as the plot unfolds.
[a] is a pure indexical, and so is braided hair. The use of a standard or non-standard grammatical variant is a pure indexical, and so is the choice of one language rather than another, since these alternatives do not have inherent social meaning (although of course they have inherent semantic meaning). Nevertheless, it should be obvious from these examples that pure indexicality is a matter of degree rather than a categorical quality. It is also important to note that although pure indexical forms are semiotically flexible, once they take on a semiotic value, any additional meanings tend to develop from that original value, as shown in Eckert’s (2008) discussion of indexical fields. In this sense, no indexical form is ever entirely “pure” or devoid of semiotic meaning.

The other two kinds of indexical resources, activities and practices on the one hand and stances on the other, were discussed above as contexts for stylistic work. But given the co-constitutive nature of contexts and styles, these resources may also function semiotically in their own right. Activities and practices are culturally meaningful undertakings, and thus by their very nature their enactment indexes the cultural positioning of the social actor who performs them. Playing a science fiction role-playing game, for example, is not simply a context for identity work but an act of identity work, positioning the player as the sort of person who plays such games. By the same token, stances — that is, linguistic acts of (inter)subjectivity — are interactionally meaningful undertakings and thus index a social actor’s positioning in relation to ongoing talk. Hence stance taking can be understood as identity making on a small scale, as speakers lay claim to particular beliefs, feelings, and knowledge. Indeed, stances are the building blocks of identity, accumulating into more enduring styles through repeated use (Bucholtz 2009; Bucholtz and Hall 2005).

Stances have been classified in a number of ways, often including epistemic, affective, and evaluative types (see overview in Englebretson 2007). As John Du Bois (2007) points out, however, every linguistic act of stance taking — which is to say, every utterance — is simultaneously epistemic, affective, and evaluative. Du Bois’s framework highlights the complex subjective and intersubjective positioning achieved through stance taking as a social act that positions the speaker in relation to both the addressee and the target of the stance.

Stance, then, is a mediating indexical level between linguistic form and stylistic or identity categories. The interactional role of stance is illustrated in Example (2). The analysis of the data (Bucholtz 2009) is part of a larger ethnographic study of Mexican migrant youth in Southern California. One of the most striking linguistic resources that these teenagers used, especially boys, was güey, a multifunctional lexical item that is sometimes translated as ‘dude’. Among these young people, güey performed a range of interactional tasks and
was used extremely frequently, especially at the end of intonation units: roughly every ten seconds in the larger interaction from which the example is taken. Here two boys, Chris and Chilango, discuss how many classes Chris missed while he lived in Mexico because he was competing in soccer matches, a story that elicits a series of disbelieving stances from Chilango.

(2) (Bucholtz 2009: 155–156)

1  **CHRIS:** Ahí tengo todavía la boleta, [güey.]
   *I still have the report card, güey.*
2  **CHILANGO:** ¿Trescientos sesenta, güey?  
   *Three hundred and sixty, güey?*
3  **CHRIS:** Como lo de un año, {güey.}= <creaky voice>  
   *About a year’s worth, güey.*
4  =[Faltas.]  
   *Absences.*
5  **CHILANGO:** [Por eso] digo, güey.  
   *That’s why I’m telling you, güey.*
6  No mames.  
   *Come on. <lit., ‘Don’t suck’>*
7  Ya casi— ¿Fuiste cinco días a clase, [o qué]?  
   *Almost— Did you <only> go to class five days, or what?*
8  **CHRIS:** [No, güey.]=  
   *No, güey.*
9  =Pero, ya ves que son ocho clases.=  
   *But, you know there are eight classes.*
10  =Osea, hay cuántas.=  
    *Like, how many are there.*
11  =Y en todas esas clases, en:—  
    *And in all those classes, in—*
12  Tuve trescientas y sesenta y algo faltas.  
    *I had three hundred sixty something absences.*
13  Pero iba a los concursos.=  
    *But I used to go to the competitions.*
14  =Y una clase, güey?=  
    *And one class, güey?*
15  =Iba a Puerto Vallarta, güey,  
    *I used to go to Puerto Vallarta, güey,*
16  a, a las playas a concursar, güey.  
    *to, to the beaches to compete, güey.*
17  Y llegaba,
Although at one level, güey here indexes Mexican youth identity, as well as a particular style of masculinity, an analysis focused on the wider social meanings of güey misses the primarily interactional work being performed through this term. As with ‘dude’ as described by Kiesling (2004), güey fundamentally indexes a stance that combines subjective coolness or an in-control affect with intersubjective solidarity. Such a stance is especially important in the two face-threatening interactional moves consistently taken here: self-enhancing acts of braggadocio performed by Chris and other-diminishing displays of skepticism by Chilango. In this sequence, the interactional functions of güey are paramount, although the heavy use of this form by young Mexican and Mexican American men (and women) has gradually sedimented into an index of a more stable social positioning, a particular style of young Latino coolness that is now available for wider circulation and appropriation.

Example (3) provides an illustration of how all three types of indexical resources – activities and practices, stances, and pure indexicals – work together to construct style. The example is taken from an interview I conducted during ethnographic research with European American teenagers at a multiracial California public high school that I call Bay City High School (Bucholtz 2011a). The interviewee, Erich, is a self-described nerd, a socially marginal stylistic category that at Bay City High, as in many other American high schools, involved shunning any form of coolness or trendiness and instead embracing intelligence, eccentricity, and humor (cf. Bednarek 2012). Here Erich describes a book he has recently read, the science fiction novel *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson.

(3) (Bucholtz 2011a: 152)

1 Erich: U:h,
2 Hong Kong is a franchise too. =
3 =Mr. Lee’s Greater Hong Kong <[hāŋ kāŋ]>,

And I would get there,
y todos los profes me ponían mi {diez:, güey,}
*<creaky voice>*
and all the profs would give me my ten *<points>*,
güey,

bien chingón:.
really cool.

CHILANGO: @
Mary: Is it meant to be a funny book, or is it [sort of a, _] humor.=
Erich: [Yeah.]
Mary: =Yeah.=
Erich: =But, it's very good.
Mary: =Lower volume> {It sounds good.}=
Erich: =Sumatran computer virus.
@@
Mary: =Smiling quality> {Yeah.}
Erich: It's,
Mary: a *[ejʔ] compu- it's;
Erich: that's,
Mary: (some),
Erich: who:le,
Mary: long involved plot about these things called namshub *[n̠mʃub].
Mary: Which is kind of like a computer program that will program your brain.
Mary: <sniff> And uh,
Mary: (0.6)
Mary: Oka::y,
Erich: [2@ 2 ]
Erich: [It's:,2]
Erich: it's very complicated.
@@
Mary: You have to really read the book to understand it <[it]>.

In this interaction, indexical work is accomplished at multiple levels. The activity that Erich reports that he engages in, reading science fiction, is a stylistic act that was strongly associated with nerdiness at the time and place of my research. In fact, reading books of any kind was seen as a nerdy activity at the school. And Erich’s decision to describe that activity to me in detail further
indexes his nerdy identity; many students who engaged in potentially nerdy activities tended to keep them hidden from others or downplayed their semiotic significance, but in this interview Erich literally goes on record as a nerd. Moreover, Erich's stances throughout our discussion are displays of nerdy attitudes and knowledge, from his positive evaluations of the book in lines 11 and 12 to his final claim to epistemic superiority in lines 31 through 34, a highly nerdy interactional move. The linguistic details of Erich's speech also index his nerddness: his use of relatively formal register lexis such as *somewhat humor* (line 8) and the intensifier *very* (lines 11–12) as opposed to trendier and cooler intensifiers common among Bay City High School students such as *really, totally, or so* (cf. Tagliamonte 2008). In addition, Erich uses hypercorrect pronunciation of *Hong Kong* in line 3 and released [t] in *somewhat* (line 8) and *it* (line 34). Together, these features exceed even the norms of standard American English, and hence I term this speech style *superstandard English*; at Bay City High School, as elsewhere in American culture, this style is indexical of nerdiness. Indeed, even the nasal quality of Erich's voice is often popularly associated with nerds.

Many of these features may be understood as not simply indexical but iconic of the styles they create, in that the relationship between form and meaning may be one not merely of contextual juxtaposition but of a perceived resemblance (cf. Irvine and Gal 2000). This semiotic coherence between form and meaning is what Dick Hebdige (1979), borrowing from Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963), terms *homology* in his pioneering book on youth styles in postwar Britain. For instance, because to be punk means to embrace chaos, the resources of punk style both index and iconically represent disrepair, decay, and rage. And because to be nerdy means to embrace intelligence and eccentricity, the activities, stances, and pure indexicals of nerdy style index and at times iconize specialized knowledge, educatedness, and distance from trendy coolness.

### 2.3 Complexity

From the discussion thus far it should be apparent that styles are constituted by an assemblage of features rather than isolated indexical forms. Moreover, these features are not randomly selected and combined but are interconnected in a principled way. Hence, the third element of style is *complexity*, or the systematic interrelationship of semiotic features. Complexity is abundantly in evidence in Example (3) above: although numerous semiotic resources contribute to Erich's identity, no single item on its own is adequate to construct his style, and all of them work together to achieve a particular indexical meaning, nerdiness. The three nerdy values I discovered in my fieldwork, intelligence, eccen-
tricity, and humor, are enacted in different ways through the specific stylistic moves that Erich makes. He positions himself as intelligent through his use of features of superstandard English as well as through the topic of reading and the knowledgeable epistemic stances he takes. He indexes his eccentricity through his uncool choice of reading material, and he displays the distinctively nerdy brand of humor in his stated appreciation for the quirky plot of the book he describes. Through such complex stylistic acts, disparate features converge toward a single semiotic meaning.

Within early sociocultural linguistic research on style, Susan Ervin-Tripp ([1972] 1986) developed the concept of co-occurrence rules or co-occurrence constraints to characterize the semiotic interconnection among the features that make up a style; this idea is somewhat akin to the notion of homology as adapted by Hebdige. Ervin-Tripp notes that stylistic features tend to be in alignment, so that, for example, formal lexis generally co-occurs with standard phonology and morphosyntax. This is not to say that combinations of features that may seem stylistically jarring to outsiders do not occur; indeed, observers often struggle to make sense of newly encountered styles. Yet styles create their own internal logic, so that otherwise divergent elements align with one another simply through juxtaposition. In other words, stylistic elements are not placed together because they make sense together; rather, they make sense together precisely because they are placed together. What is more, social actors may carefully calibrate their styles to achieve particular effects, amplifying or downplaying apparently incongruous features as required. This phenomenon can be seen in the ubiquitous instances of campaigning politicians peppering their stump speeches with a few well-chosen colloquialisms in order to present themselves as “just folks” or “one of the people” (cf. Bourdieu 1977; Silverstein 2003a). In light of such creative combinations of stylistic features, it is likely that styles permit a wider latitude than the original conception of co-occurrence constraints suggests; indeed, the combining of stylistic features may not be subject to any predefined rules at all. Nevertheless, the selection and arrangement of stylistic features is consistent at least according to those who deploy them, resulting in an internally cohesive style.

### 2.4 Distinctiveness

While styles gain internal consistency through the property of complexity, they are also organized in an orderly fashion vis-à-vis other styles. This organizational principle is the semiotic relation of **distinctiveness**, or the creation of meaning via contrast (Irvine 2001). As all the foregoing examples indicate,
styles and their features gain meaning only in relation to other, contrasting alternatives.

The principle of distinctiveness was especially clear at Bay City High School, where youth styles were often quite deliberately forged in opposition to other available styles. Table 2 lays out some of the key stylistic contrasts at the school with respect to the semiotics of clothing, other cultural activities and practices, and language.

Each of the four most recognized styles available to European American students – preppy, alternative, hip hop, and nerdy – took its meaning from the others within Bay City High’s strongly racialized stylistic universe. This process was particularly evident in the contrastive deployment of specific stylistic features. Thus, the baggy clothing of hip hop fans was meaningful because it

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Preppies</th>
<th>Alternative</th>
<th>Hip hop fans</th>
<th>Nerds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clothing</strong></td>
<td>ragged</td>
<td>ragged</td>
<td>neat</td>
<td>neat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>expensive</td>
<td>mostly</td>
<td>at least some</td>
<td>inexpensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>inexpensive</td>
<td>expensive items</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>conservative</td>
<td>flamboyant</td>
<td>both conservative (&quot;preppy&quot;) and flamboyant</td>
<td>either conservative or flamboyant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>close-fitting</td>
<td>loose-fitting</td>
<td>oversized, baggy</td>
<td>neither tight nor baggy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural activities and practices</strong></td>
<td>prestigious</td>
<td>few</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>low-prestige</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>extracurricular activities</td>
<td>extracurricular activities</td>
<td>extracurricular activities</td>
<td>extracurricular activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>commercial rock music</td>
<td>indie (independent) music</td>
<td>rap music</td>
<td>variable music (rock, opera)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>beer and some marijuana</td>
<td>extensive drug use</td>
<td>mild drug use</td>
<td>few/no drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
<td>colloquial</td>
<td>colloquial standard; general standard; general nonstandard English</td>
<td>emblematic features of African American English</td>
<td>superstandard English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
radically departed from the close-fitting clothing styles of preppies; the extensive drug use of alternative youth was significant because it noticeably differed from the more moderate drug use of other kinds of teenagers. Linguistically, nerds’ use of superstandard English was meaningful because it was marked in contrast to the more colloquial speech styles of cool students such as preppies, alternative youth, and hip hop fans. Likewise, white hip hop fans’ nonfluent, emblematic use of features of African American English as part of their affiliation with a cultural style of black origin separated them from other cool white youth, who borrowed in a far more selective and off-record way from their black peers (Bucholtz 2011a).

More generally, entire styles acquire their meaning only in relation to other styles. At Bay City High School, to be preppy meant to hold oneself apart from the less elite youth styles, while to be alternative meant not to participate in the mainstream and commodity-driven activities of the other styles (as suggested by the very label *alternative*, which included a range of countercultural styles, including hippies, punks, goths, and skaters, or skateboarders). Meanwhile, to be a nerd meant not to affiliate with coolness, a central value in the other youth styles, and to be a hip hop fan meant not to align with the white-oriented forms of youth culture associated with other styles. Claiming a style is therefore not only an act of defining the self, but simultaneously an act of defining the other.

### 2.5 Recombination

Stylistic features, then, gain meaning through both contrast and coordination with other features. But these semiotic meanings are by no means predetermined or static. The fifth element of style is *recombination*, or the creative juxtaposition of stylistic features. This process has also been termed *bricolage*, another concept that Hebdige (1979) borrowed and reworked from Lévi-Strauss (1966). Via the recombinative property, stylistic features may be put together in new ways and thereby acquire new meanings. In this process, features do not entirely lose their earlier significations; instead, some component of the previous meaning is brought along and put to a different use in the new semiotic context. Recombination thus relies on previous uses of semiotic material even as it transforms meaning through recontextualization (Briggs and Bauman 1992).

An example of recombination can be seen in hip hop practices at Bay City High School and, indeed, throughout hip hop culture. At the time of my research in the 1990s, the urban working-class hip hop clothing style pioneered
by black and Latino youth involved the appropriation of high-end white preppy designer fashions by such labels as Tommy Hilfiger, Nautica, and Ralph Lauren’s Polo label. The style included neatly pressed polo shirts, button-down shirts, and khaki pants, often layered with heavy jackets and accessorized with chunky brand-name athletic shoes and caps or beanies. The clothing was creatively transformed not simply through its recontextualization from elite country club sportswear to street fashion, with accompanying innovations in accessories, but also through hip hop’s baggy aesthetic, which rendered this originally highly conservative preppy style exaggerated and flamboyant, with sagging, wide-legged pants and oversized shirts and jackets. The recombinative move of hip hop fashion in this period was also arguably a political statement of the economic inequality and racism that historically barred most African Americans both from owning designer clothing and from entering the elite settings where it was traditionally worn.

At the level of language, recombination was also evident at Bay City High School in the appropriation of elements of African American youth language by European American teenagers who did not orient to hip hop culture. Whereas white hip hop fans openly and extensively drew from African American linguistic resources, preppy white students at the school borrowed slang and sometimes even phonology and grammar from their black peers in a more gradual and often unconscious way as part of their projection of a cool, trendy persona. Such incorporation of practices associated with blackness into otherwise indexically white performances may thus partly or wholly deracialize black semiotic resources while retaining certain interactional and stylistic functions, such as solidarity and coolness (cf. M.H. Goodwin and Alim 2010). Through recombination, styles are continually reworked and renewed.

3 Dimensions of stylistic action

The first five elements of style described above have focused on the workings of stylistic mechanisms: the ways in which semiotic forms operate together to produce meaning in context. The final five elements of style shift from a consideration of style as process to style as action. At issue in this regard is the role of social actors in building styles as well as the limitations on stylistic agency.
3.1 Agency

The sixth element of style is agency, or the ability to act upon the world. In the case of style, this form of action is semiotic: the ability to create, interpret, and circulate social signs. A consideration of agency necessarily involves both the possibilities afforded for stylistic action and the constraints that limit such action. On the one hand, styles are actively created by stylistic agents, but on the other hand, stylistic choices are restricted depending on access to semiotic resources (cf. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985).

The case of white hip hop fans is again illustrative of this stylistic property. Middle-class white youth at Bay City High School who embraced hip hop style directly appropriated its fashions through hyperconsumption of the expensive clothing required for the style, a potent form of economic agency that was unavailable to many young people of color. However, white teenagers were limited in their access to the full semiotics of hip hop style due to their lack of fluency in African American English, which in many ways forms the base of the language of the Hip Hop Nation (Alim 2004b). White fans dealt with this constraint on their stylistic agency by emblematically using a handful of the most salient elements of African American English, including lexical items and a few iconic phonological and grammatical structures. Example (4) demonstrates this emblematic language use, along with white fans’ orientation to brand-name fashion. Here two white hip hop fans, Willie and Brand One, describe their style.

(4a) (Bucholtz 2007: 381)

1 Mary: What--
2 How would you (. ) describe your style?
3 (1.7)
4 Willie: .h:::  
5 Well like Nikes,  
6 : h h:  
7 I haven’t bought a other kind of pair of shoe,  
8 (0.8)
9 since like fourth grade.

(4b) (Bucholtz 2007: 382)

109 Willie: .h And mostly like (. ) shirts and stuff,
like name brand,
like (1.0) Tommy Hilfiger,
Nautica, =
=like this is Nautica right here, =
Brand One: =This is Polo.

In line 7, *I haven’t bought a other kind of pair of shoe*, Willie embeds a few nonstandard features associated with African American English into his otherwise largely colloquial standard English speech. Yet thanks to his and other white hip hop fans’ physical self-presentation, even these small linguistic gestures toward an African American English target were enough for their peers to recognize their speech as “talking black”.

Indeed, every stylistic act necessarily involves some degree of agency tempered by socially imposed constraints of various kinds. Even stylistic agents who enjoy considerable structural power in some domains inevitably face limits on their ability to engage in semiotically meaningful action.

### 3.2 Habitus

While many of the stylistic acts described so far are more or less deliberate if not necessarily fully conscious choices, other aspects of style are a matter of habitual practice. The seventh element of style, *habitus*, is the largely unconscious set of practices inculcated into individuals as part of their socialization into a specific culture (Bourdieu 1978). Habitus is therefore an important source of constraint on stylistic agency.

Habitus underlies a wide variety of culture-specific interactional practices from politeness norms to embodied communication, issues that have been extensively investigated within the field of intercultural communication (e.g., Gudykunst 2003). Habitus is also involved in phonological changes in progress that operate below the level of conscious awareness (Labov 1972). This is the case with the shift in California English and other varieties in the United States toward the pronunciation of the *-ing* grammatical morpheme as [in], possibly due to the influence of Chicano English (cf. Fought 2003; Mendoza-Denton 2008). Among many young speakers in California, this shift has been almost categorical in the past generation, so that for them the older pronunciation of *-ing* as [ɪŋ] has nearly disappeared in this morphological context. This linguistic practice is part of style in that it distinguishes ingroup members (i.e., young Californians). However, it is only when such practices come to awareness, usu-
ally through contact with outgroup members, that they may be deployed in a more deliberate fashion (Silverstein 2003b; Johnstone, Andrus, and Danielson 2006).

The innovative pronunciation of -ing is in fact beginning to enter wider awareness, as shown in Example (5). This example is taken from an online search engine’s interactive community, where members can receive help and information on a wide variety of topics:

(5) (Yahoo! Answers, 2009)
http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090224162758AAzxLnG

I need help with my sons pronunciation of words ending in -ing?

Any speech people out there that can help me with some ways to help my son who is in 2nd grade. Words like Ring, playING, wing etc (...) anything ending in ING comes out sounding like EEN. Any ideas? Other than that we notice no problems with his speech. Thanks. – mets9999

In this request for help, the innovative pronunciation of -ing is treated as pathological rather than as stylistic. But [in] is also gaining ground as a stylistic feature, at least among outgroup members: for instance, it is a regular target of a popular New York bike blog’s mockery of West Coast speech through the spelling of biking as bike-een (http://bikesnobnyc.blogspot.com/). As this phonological innovation continues to spread across the United States, it is likely to gain both recognition and a range of indexical meanings. In this process, [in] may eventually become less a part of habitus than a resource for purposeful stylistic agency. Hence, habitus is a source of semiotic material, by producing and reproducing cultural practices specific to and associable with particular social groups. But habitus also imposes certain limits on agentive stylistic work by creating well-worn paths of stylistic practice that are not entirely under individual control.

3.3 Interpretation

The issue of agency and its limits is also relevant to the eighth element of style, interpretation, or the attribution of meaning to stylistic features or entire stylistic packages within a given context. Styles do not come with pre-assigned meanings but only gain social significance through agentive interpretive work. However, meaning does not reside wholly with the stylistic agent; interpretation is equally an issue for those who use specific stylistic forms and those
who encounter them. The semiotic force of such features, and of the styles they collectively form, must be interpretable by others in order to be culturally intelligible (cf. Butler 1990). At the same time, stylistic interpretations are highly situated and frequently contested, with competing meanings often ascribed to stylistic forms by ingroup and outgroup members. In this way, interpretation is not simply an individual cognitive process but the constantly shifting ground of social, cultural, and political struggle.

The question of interpretation is central to ongoing debates both within linguistics and in popular discourse regarding the indexical force of rising intonation in non-interrogative contexts. This phenomenon was first systematically documented in Australian English (Guy et al. 1986), but it is also widespread in California English as well as increasingly throughout the United States; once again, Chicano English speakers appear to lead in the use of this feature. The rising declarative contour has been commented upon by a number of linguists over the years, with most early interpretations suggesting that it is either ideologically or in fact associated with a lack of knowledge or some sort of insecurity, especially among women, who are often said to use it most (Lakoff 1975; Ohala 1984).

Example (6) illustrates an alternative interpretation of this contour, based on data collected during a four-year video ethnography of language, interaction, and identity among undergraduate science and mathematics students at a California university (e.g., Bucholtz, Skapoulli, Barnwell, and Lee 2011; Bucholtz, Barnwell, Lee, and Skapoulli 2012). The interaction below takes place in a calculus class as Jennifer, a first-year student, explains a difficult homework problem to Wyatt, a second-year student. The example is taken from the middle of her explanation.

(6) (Cranfill and Bucholtz 2011)

35  JENNIFER;  And that'll give you like, (.)
36       the- (. ) your vector?
37       direction?
38       And then you start your vector (.)
39       at your point
40       'cause it's just going from your point to your line? .h
41       And then if you; , (.)
42       take the: coordinates that you get?

5 This research was supported by the National Science Foundation (HRD 0624606).
which is like X one plus, (.)
um A T,
plus B one, (.)
um plus X- (.)
plus Y one=

WYATT; =Y one.

JENNIFER; plus um, (.)
B? T?
°I think that would be what% you get?° .h

And that’s like your new X and Y,

Jennifer uses the rising contour extensively both in this explanation and in a similar explanation to another second-year male student later in the class; the contour occurs in approximately a quarter of her intonation units in these exchanges. Given that Jennifer is younger than her male peers and, as a woman, a member of a marginalized minority within mathematics as a discipline, it might be expected that her use of this contour would signal some sort of uncertainty or tentativeness. Yet there is no indication that non-interrogative rising intonation functions in this way in her speech; Jennifer’s rapid speech rate, her largely unhedged assertions of knowledge, and her use of technical vocabulary (e.g., vector, line 36; coordinates, line 42) all indicate epistemic authority (Heritage and Raymond 2005). Not only can rising intonation co-occur with a stance of epistemic certainty, but in this case such intonation in fact indexes an epistemically certain stance by positioning Jennifer as a knowledgeable expert who is concerned to ensure her recipient’s comprehension. Moreover, the fact that the contour is interpreted as indexical of expertise within the local interaction is confirmed by the response of her recipients (e.g., line 48), who affirm their understanding at various points and consistently defer to Jennifer’s greater epistemic authority. Such examples demonstrate that outgroup interpretations of specific stylistic features may be substantially at odds with how stylistic practices are read in the local cultural and interactional context of their use.

3.4 Ideology

When interpretations come into conflict, what is at stake is the ninth element of style: ideology, or a system of cultural beliefs that privilege the interests of certain groups over those of others. Ideologies do not involve the exercise of coercive power but depend on the more indirect yet no less effective force of
“common sense”, or normative ways of understanding the world. Because ideology is tied to group interests, it is an issue not of individual agency but of collective meaning-making processes which are undertaken by different groups with divergent interpretations and goals. Although it is especially visible when competing meanings are in play, ideology in fact undergirds all stylistic action.

The collective and contested nature of ideology in stylistic meaning is evident in the case of non-interrogative rising intonation. A booming cottage industry has developed to advise young middle-class American women in how to overcome this supposed “verbal tic”, popularly termed *uptalk*, in order to succeed in the professional workplace (e.g., DiResta 2006). This advice genre is part of a longstanding tradition of pathologizing women’s speech as deficient and disordered (Cameron 1995) – contrary to the sociolinguistic reality that rising intonation is found in the speech of men as well as women and that it can be successfully used to exert power and authority, as illustrated above.

A second example of how wider cultural ideologies reinterpret local stylistic practices comes from media representations of white hip hop fans. As discussed above, in the 1990s, European American youth, especially boys, began engaging in hip hop culture as part of the construction of a stylistic identity. White and black observers alike often criticized these practices as the acts of racial and cultural wannabes, or “wiggers” (a derogatory term coined from the blending of *white niggers*). A series of youth-themed films produced by Hollywood primarily in the 1990s and early 2000s established the “wigger” character as a recognizable and laughably inauthentic social type who claimed a hip hop identity in order to compensate for his inadequate white masculinity (Bucholtz 2011b; cf. Bucholtz and Lopez 2011). Crucial to such portrayals is the use of language and other semiotic resources ideologically associated with blackness.

One such representation is shown in Example (7), taken from the film “Havoc”, a drama about wealthy white youth in Los Angeles who dabble in hip hop culture, with tragic results:

(7) “Havoc”, 2006 (adapted from Bucholtz 2011b: 261)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Dialogue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>How long have you identified with uh gangsta culture?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toby</td>
<td>I mean I hate fuckin, rich-ass, white culture. That shit’s fuckin wack. You know?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>So are you guys just, wiggers, trying to borrow from the blacks?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Nah. (The) whole world sucks, son. It’s like all the good shit came from black people.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Eric: You like anything white?
Sam: Yeah. I like my skinny white ass, playa.

In this scene, as in most such films, the characterization of the wigger figure is accomplished through the heavy but nonfluent use of African American English features: here, these include the –ass intensifier (rich-ass) and the reflexive –ass construction (my skinny white ass) (Collins, Moody, and Postal 2008; Spears 1998), along with nonrhotic pronunciation in playa (i.e., player) and the negative evaluative slang term wack. Such characters are generally portrayed as buffoons at worst, misguided at best. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, as hip hop emerged as culturally dominant among youth of all races, the mediatized circulation of representations of this sort ideologically narrowed the social meaning of white participation in hip hop. At the time, this ideology served to impose some measure of interpretive control over what was popularly conceived of as the racially transgressive behavior of European American middle-class youth. Thus ideology can be mobilized as a form of stylistic containment, reasserting hegemony in the face of local stylistic counter-ideologies that threaten the social order.

3.5 Resignification

The final element of style considered in this chapter is resignification, another term borrowed from Butler (1990, 1997). In the process of resignification, semiotic forms acquire new meanings through the purposeful recontextualizing acts of stylistic agents; resignification is thus often an outcome of recombination. Here again power and agency are in tension with one another, for politically subordinated individuals or groups may use resignification to challenge the interpretations of more powerful others. Indeed, according to Butler, resistance to or subversion of hegemonic ideologies is intrinsic to resignification, as in the reclamation of homophobic slurs like fag and dyke. However, in other cases resignification may not have such empowering effects, as when counter-hegemonic stylistic features are appropriated by members of a socioculturally dominant group. This situation was discussed above with regard to the appropriation of African American youth language by European American teenagers.

In the following example, resignification works in Butler’s original sense, functioning in a small but significant way to comment critically on ideologies of race, class, and citizenship. Example (8) comes from the above-mentioned study of language use among Mexican migrant youth in Southern California from which Example (2) is also drawn. In the racially and linguistically segregated space of the English Language Development classroom that was the pri-
mary focus of the study, migrant teenagers, most of them low-income and many of them undocumented, regularly confronted their marginal status both within the school and in the larger English-speaking society. Through the daily embodied ritual of the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, with hand placed over the heart, these students were required to rehearse their loyalty to a nation that did not acknowledge them as members.

However, as the example demonstrates, these recently arrived young immigrants did not necessarily acquiesce to their socialization into a literally second-class form of citizenship (cf. Lee 2010). In this example, Sergio (wearing the researcher’s wireless microphone) and the other students in the class chorally recite the Pledge together with the voice of a school administrator transmitted into the classroom through the public address system:\(^7\)

\[
\begin{align*}
1 & \text{ P.A. system: } \quad \text{Let’s begin.} \\
2 & \text{[1 I pledge allegiance, 1]} \\
3 & \text{Sergio: } \quad \text{[1 I pledge alle@giance, 1]} \\
4 & \text{P.A. system: } \quad \text{[2 to the flag, 2]} \\
5 & \text{Sergio: } \quad \text{[2 to the flag, 2]} \\
6 & \text{P.A. system: } \quad \text{[3 of the United States of America. 3]} \\
7 & \text{Sergio: } \quad \text{[3 of the United States of Mexico. 3]} \\
8 & \text{P.A. system: } \quad \text{[4 And to the republic, 4]} \\
9 & \text{Sergio: } \quad \text{[4 And the repub, 4]} \\
10 & \text{P.A. system: } \quad \text{[5 for which it stands, 5]} \\
11 & \text{Sergio: } \quad \text{[5 for which it stand, 5]} \\
12 & \text{P.A. system: } \quad \text{[6 one nation, 6]} \\
13 & \text{Sergio: } \quad \text{[6 one nation, 6]} \\
14 & \text{P.A. system: } \quad \text{[7 under God, 7]} \\
15 & \text{Sergio: } \quad \text{[7 under God, 7]} \\
16 & \text{P.A. system: } \quad \text{[8 indivisible, 8]} \\
17 & \text{Sergio: } \quad \text{[8 indivisila, 8]} \\
18 & \text{P.A. system: } \quad \text{[9 with liberty and justice for all! 9]} \\
19 & \text{Sergio: } \quad \text{[9 wi’ liberty and justice for all. 9]} \\
20 & <\text{students sit down}> \\
21 & \text{Sergio: } \quad \text{¡Viva México!} \quad \text{Long live Mexico!} \\
22 & \text{¡Viva México!} \quad \text{Long live Mexico!}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^7\) Transcription conventions follow Bucholtz (2011a).
Sergio’s rewriting of the Pledge of Allegiance may seem to be no more than an ephemeral playful parody, but given that he is wearing a microphone this gesture has a more enduring effect. Preserved on my research recording, Sergio’s bilingual rendition of the Pledge of Allegiance is a mediated resignification of an obligatory linguistic act of loyalty to the United States into a spontaneous statement of national pride in Mexico, one that he eagerly shares with his classmates around him. To be sure, this subversive action is fleeting, but it carves out, if only for a moment, a space for Sergio’s Mexican identity within the classroom — and it continues to recirculate in multiple modes, including as a digital audio recording of research data and as the above printed transcript. At its best, then, resignification enables those who have been subject to others’ meaning-making processes to style their own identities by reworking the tools of hegemony using their own semiotic resources.

4 Conclusion

The defining issue of sociocultural linguistic scholarship for over a decade has been the question of identity. As researchers have gained greater theoretical and methodological sophistication in addressing this question, it has become increasingly apparent that identities are semiotic projects in which not simply language but style, as a multimodal phenomenon, plays a critical role. By contrast with early linguistic approaches, in which styles were often conceptualized as clearly delineated linguistic entities that varied predictably depending on the context or the speaker, the recent sociocultural theories of style that have informed this chapter focus instead on how the diverse resources of styles are actively constructed, used, interpreted, and transformed in a variety of contexts and by a variety of speakers. In this view, styles are modes of social action and hence dynamic semiotic systems for identity work.

Such a broad understanding of style necessarily involves a wide range of phenomena. I have suggested that a sociocultural linguistic theory of style
needs to consider both the semiotic properties of stylistic processes and the acts of and limits on stylistic agents. In particular, I have proposed the following ten interrelated elements of style:

(1) **Contextualization.** Styles are situated within contexts at multiple levels, including local interactional and ethnographic contexts as well as broader sociocultural, economic, political, and historical contexts. At the same time, styles are not simply responsive to the situations of their use but contribute to the production of those situations as well: style is an inherent part of the creation and differentiation of contexts at all levels. That is, styles and contexts are co-constitutive.

(2) **Indexicality.** Styles are built through the linking of semiotic forms and contextualized meanings. The indexical resources that make up styles are of three kinds: activities and practices, stances, and "pure" indexicals. Activities and practices are simultaneously contexts for stylistic work and indexes of specific styles. Stances, acts of (inter)subjectivity that interactionally position self and other, serve as the building blocks of styles as they are taken repeatedly over time and across interactions. Finally, pure indexicals, semiotic forms that have little or no decontextualizable meaning of their own, are highly flexible in their meaning-making potential but easily become invested with specific social meanings in particular contexts.

(3) **Complexity.** Styles cannot be created through the isolated use of an individual indexical form, which does not have sufficient semiotic force on its own. Rather, styles are bundles of co-occurring multimodal semiotic features. Furthermore, these features are in semiotic alignment with one another. In other words, within a given style diverse forms are coordinat-ed to produce a cohesive semiotic package.

(4) **Distinctiveness.** Styles take on meaning only in relation to other styles, and stylistic features take on meaning only in relation to other stylistic features. Hence styles and features only make sense within a set of comparable alternatives. The contrastive semiotic systems in which styles participate, moreover, are not limitless but are constrained by the range of stylistic options available in a given context.

(5) **Recombination.** Stylistic features can be reassembled into new configurations. In this process, features may acquire additional indexical associations, but they also carry with them some trace of their earlier meaning, which is put to new semiotic use. Recombination thus enables the creation of style through the innovative juxtaposition of indexical resources. At the same time, recombination necessarily preserves some part of the stylistic histories of indexes as they travel into new contexts.

(6) **Agency.** Styles are created through the semiotic work of social actors who establish and interpret stylistic meanings and disseminate them more
widely. The ability to engage in purposeful semiotic action is therefore fundamental to style. Yet social actors are not free to make whichever stylistic choices they wish; all stylistic agency is limited by uneven access to semiotic resources, and this access is not always straightforwardly dependent on access to structural power. Style, then, is semiotic action taken within the confines of socially imposed restrictions.

(7) **Habitus.** A primary source of social constraint on stylistic agency is the set of habitual practices that individuals perform without full deliberate intention as members of particular social and cultural groupings. Although the use of a given stylistic feature may arise from habitus rather than agentive choice, it still carries semiotic meaning as an index of group membership. Such indexes become particularly salient when they are encountered by outgroup members, who in turn may attribute new stylistic meanings to them.

(8) **Interpretation.** Styles and stylistic features do not have any pre-established meaning, even within a specific context. Instead, all semiotic material gains its meaning from the interpretive action of the stylistic agent who uses it as well as of the other social actors who must make sense of it. Because meaning-making rights do not reside wholly with any individual or group, the indexicality of stylistic forms is frequently subject to contestation and negotiation. Moreover, interpretations are closely tied to particular contexts and groups, so that as styles circulate in new settings they become available for reinterpretation or interpretive struggle.

(9) **Ideology.** The interpretation of stylistic action is never neutral but is always intimately connected to ideologies, or cultural belief systems that work to the advantage of some groups over others. Ideological systems come into conflict when an outgroup interpretation is imposed on an ingroup style. The commonsensical nature of such interpretations is further reinforced by powerful institutions like the media, yet dominant ideological interpretations can nevertheless be contested by social actors.

(10) **Resignification.** Although stylistic action is carried out within constraints, the possibility of creating new meanings from existing semiotic material is always available. At its most politically transformative, the property of resignification allows stylistic agents to challenge hegemonic interpretations of their semiotic activities or to claim dominant resources as their own. However, resignification can also be used to reassert dominant stylistic meanings in relation to politically subordinated groups, as powerful outgroup members appropriate the semiotic resources of the less powerful. In either manifestation, resignification is an important tool of agentive stylistic change by producing new semiotic meanings as well as entirely new styles.
Taken together, the ten stylistic elements examined in this chapter offer a detailed characterization of style as multimodal semiotic action and demonstrate its central importance for sociocultural linguistics. A deep understanding of style is especially necessary at the present moment in the field’s development, as researchers from varied methodological and theoretical perspectives seek more sophisticated ways to investigate identity. The stylistic properties and processes discussed here – and others as well – form a powerful and dynamic system for the semiotic production of social identities of all sorts. And, as has been emphasized throughout this chapter, the workings of this system reveal that style is not solely a linguistic issue. Although language is a particularly rich semiotic resource for the creation of social meaning, styles are accomplished through a wide range of semiotic processes and modalities, of which language is only a part. Sociocultural linguistic explorations of identity, then, must consider the full set of semiotic tools through which social meanings, including social identities, are built, maintained, and changed via stylistic work.

References


