Co-variables: Are sociolects coherent?

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Every speech community has multiple sociolinguistic variables, for which some variant is associated with higher overt prestige and careful speech, while other variants are associated with lower status and casual speech. It is often assumed that these variables are correlated in their association with speaker status, defining internally coherent ‘sociolects’ in which higher status speakers mainly use high-status variants of all variables, and low-status speakers use mostly low-status variants. However, little published work examines this assumption. Is it true that individuals who use more of one prestige variant also favor others? Or do they pick and choose variants –sometimes standard and sometimes vernacular ones—whether purposefully to construct unique identities, or randomly?

This paper investigates cross-correlations among four sociolinguistic variables in Brazilian Portuguese – two syntactic (nominal and verbal number agreement) and two phonological (-s deletion, vowel denasalization) – across 20 individuals. The results show considerable cross-variable correlation, but most of it suggests structural or grammatical coherence: the syntactic variables, both involving number agreement, are well-correlated, suggesting a possible parametric relationship, and each phonological variable is well-correlated with the one syntactic variable with which it has a trading relationship (the phonological processes delete segments or features that serve as agreement markers). But the phonological variables do not correlate with each other, nor with the syntactic variables with which they lack a trading relationship. However, there is some evidence that non-linguistic (i.e., social) factors are involved in producing correlations. Female speakers show stronger correlation among all linguistic factors than males, and males show age grading (for nominal agreement) and apparent genderindexicality for denasalization that both interfere with the correlation with status. The conclusion is that coherent sociolects do exist, correlating multiple variables, but they reflect the rich complexity of social dimensions and multiple identities.