

Should I stay or should I go?
The language of not-so-straightforward forms of belonging and disbelonging¹

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Abstract

Social belonging has long been an essential category of basic sociolinguistic research, and yet, sociolinguists have barely talked about what *dis*belonging means for linguistic variation. While recent sociolinguistic research emphasizes the hybridity and dynamicity of social categories, such as gender/sexuality, it also assumes that the speakers' links to these categories remain stable. But do they? And for whom (not)? What can sociolinguists observe if they begin to acknowledge speakers' complex relationships with social groups or their withdrawal from them? In this paper, I argue that the analysis of contradictory and non-linear forms of (dis)belonging can reveal sociolinguistic variation that the framework of the Community of Practice cannot. With two case studies, I demonstrate that 1) speakers employ linguistic strategies to express their complex and non-linear relationships to important social groups, and that 2) leaving such a group may have long-term effects on social dynamics, language production, and language attitudes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistic research has revolved around the topics of belonging since Labov's (1966) pioneering work in New York in the 1960s. Since then, sociolinguists have primarily focused on affiliation with one main group in their analyses to account for the observed linguistic variation, such as speakers' identification as jocks or burnouts in a Detroit high school (Eckert 2000), as Catholics or Protestants in Belfast (Milroy 1980), as rural or urban in an Austrian village (Lippi-Green 1989), and as being rooted or not in Appalachia (Reed 2016). Many of these studies acknowledge complexity to the dimensions of group identification. For instance, within the group of burnouts, another group emerged: the 'burned-out burnouts' (Eckert 2000: 83), who viewed themselves as wilder and more rebellious and also produced more extreme linguistic realizations than the regular burnouts. Hazen (2000) makes a similar observation in Warren County in Appalachia. His concept of cultural identities focuses on the speakers' orientation towards the community or away from it. While the latter tend to abandon the local variant, the former — due to social pressures from the outside — 'embrace their native vernacular and heighten its status as a sociolinguistic marker' (Hazen 2000: 151).

Macrosocial factors, such as socioeconomic background, group affiliation, and gender, were assumed to be stable across populations and individual lifespans by First-Wave sociolinguists. Second- and Third-Wave scholars treat these as hybrid and prone to change, e.g., across different social roles and in different social settings (Podesva 2007) or even within the same social settings (Zilles & King 2005; Levon 2015; Nycz 2018; Neuhausen 2024a). All the studies above seem to assume that the speakers' identifications with these groups remain stable.

Even though sociolinguists are well aware of the hybridity of social categories, they have so far not addressed the fact that the speakers' *relationships* to these social categories can be similarly unstable and complex. Based on two case studies, I explore different forms of religious disbelonging and its effects on how

speakers narrate their life stories, and view and produce language. I demonstrate that 1) speakers can have complex and at times contradictory relationships to the social categories they identify with, and 2) speakers may leave social categories — and that this shows linguistically. Leaving does not necessarily entail a clear cut with the category, but instead may complicate matters on both the social and linguistic level. The first case study represents an analysis of language variation and meta-commentary in the speech of a lesbian former Mormon based in California, and demonstrates complex and conflicting forms of belonging related to queerness and religion. The second analysis explores what leaving the Old Order Mennonites in Southern Ontario means on the social and linguistic level. The paper suggests that looking beyond belonging, i.e., Communities of Practice, may reveal fine layers of linguistic variation, and can inform theories about social and linguistic effects of disbelonging within and beyond the group of interest.

2. APPROACHES TO BELONGING IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

How communities define themselves and the activities they engage in may reveal important processes of belonging. In traditional sociolinguistic research, the concept of *speech communities* is used to explain linguistic variation, treating identity as static throughout the speaker's life based on their sociodemographic background (Bucholtz 1999: 209). Here, language and 'core' members of a social group are of interest, while marginal members are under- or even misrepresented. Moreover, the distinction may (wrongly) entail the assumption that those at the periphery speak less of the vernacular and those at the core identify more with community values. Yet, the Mennonite data demonstrate that also perceived 'core' members leave their communities (for instance, Irene in Section 5.2), opening a whole new can of worms with the question what the 'core' and the 'periphery' socially and linguistically mean. Another issue is that the speech community is often based on the researcher's interpretation rather than the members'

understanding of their practices (Bucholtz 1999: 207), and excludes some speakers from actively participating in research. Lastly, in multilingual communities, the notion of a speech community (and who counts as ‘native’ or ‘non-native’) is ‘blurred and increasingly difficult to operationalize’ (Cheshire 1991: 2).

The Community of Practice offers a useful alternative to the speech community, viewing language and variation as embedded in social practice and taking into account the individual’s range of different practices. It aligns with more recent approaches to identity as fluid, dynamic, and evolving in social interaction. The Community of Practice helps view speakers as agents, classifies them into broader social categories, and identifies larger social and linguistic tendencies. The term initially emerged in social anthropology (Lave & Wenger 1991) and was quickly taken up by sociolinguists (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992). To name but a few, the concept has been applied to a group of nerd girls in a California high school (Bucholtz 1999), to jocks and burnouts in a Detroit high school (Eckert 2000), and to ‘porch sitters’ and ‘church ladies’ in an Appalachian community (Mallinson & Childs 2007), and consistently reveals distinct group-specific linguistic patterns. While the framework includes ‘peripheral’ members and acknowledges that members identify with multiple (potentially overlapping) Communities of Practice, it implies that speakers remain *within* the boundaries of the community and do not leave.

Particularly in the field of queer linguistics, an increasing body of research addresses the complexity of belonging within multiple (conflicting) categories (as can also be seen in this year’s theme ‘Queer (dis)belonging’ of the conference Lavender Languages & Linguistics). For instance, Levon (2015) observes that the gay ultraorthodox Jewish speaker Igal employs vocal fry when he addresses the conflict between his religious and his gay identities. Similarly, Jones (2018) illustrates how LGBTQ youth in a conservative, working-class Northern English town navigate their internalized homophobia. Here, the social categories are in

conflict with each another to the extent that they partially exclude one other, emphasizing the need for intersectional research that understands social positioning as equally dynamic and motile as the categories it is based on.

In this paper, I distinguish between the following types of disbelonging: 1) a way of doing identity, 2) a space of oppression and exclusion, and 3) a strategy of resistance. Note that some of these may overlap, as I demonstrate in the following. First, disbelonging can be essential and even desired for the purpose of identity work, e.g., teenagers seeking distance and otherness during puberty in order to develop identities that are distinct from their parents (Erikson 1968), which also shows linguistically (Chambers 2009: 181–189; Tagliamonte 2016: 53).² Second, disbelonging can be a space of oppression and exclusion, e.g., accent discrimination in the context of higher education (e.g., Dunstan & Jaeger 2015 in Appalachia; Illbury, Clark & Breese forthcoming in the UK). Finally, disbelonging, or what Muñoz (1999) terms *disidentification*, may represent a strategy of survival for queer speakers of color, in response to being stigmatized for not “conform[ing] to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz 1999: 4). Exploring disbelonging in arts produced by Nigerian diasporic women, Akinbola argues that disbelonging as a practice can be used to “[interrupt] colonial shame” and employs the notion to explore the “ambivalent relationship between alienation and belonging” (Akinbola 2025: 3). She sees disbelonging as a space in which marginalized positions can be used to grow community and challenge oppression:

Disbelonging as a concept offers language for thinking through how marginal subjects use their anti-respectable positionalities—as displaced, as “lost,” as too hybrid to belong in just one place—as a mode of self-fashioning, which gives them a platform from which to challenge oppressive ideologies and envision new ways of relating. Not only normalizing but also embracing disbelonging as a way to orient oneself

² Shout-out to Daniel Knuchel, who made this brilliant connection.

within and in relation to community pushes back on the deep-seated belief that the feeling of alienation is equal to cultural obliteration, when in fact alienation can serve as fertile ground for connection and possibility. (Akinbola 2025: 2)

Disbelonging thus differs from boundary work, a social construction of symbolic difference (e.g., Grbić & Kujamäki 2018: 113), as it blurs the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, positioning individuals in in-between spaces that call for a re-negotiation of belonging. This paper attempts to understand what impact different forms of disbelonging can have on language production, and explores the latter two types of disbelonging in two religious settings; disbelonging as a space of oppression and exclusion in a Mormon context, and as a strategy of resistance (and leaving) in a Mennonite setting.

3. LANGUAGE AND RELIGION IN NORTH AMERICA

Previous research identifies a strong link between religious identity and linguistic variation. This applies to mono- and multilingual groups, e.g., monolingual Mormons in Alberta (Meechan 1999; Rosen & Skriver 2015) and Utah (Baker & Bowie 2010), but also multilingual Orthodox Jews in New York (Benor 2010; 2011), Old Order Mennonites in Ontario (Neuhausen 2024a), and Amish in Pennsylvania (Kopp 1999; Brown 2022). These studies confirm that religious groups linguistically differ from neighboring communities. This may affect the lexical level, e.g., via borrowings from Hebrew and Yiddish (Benor 2010), or the phonological level, e.g., less Canadian Raising (Meechan 1999; Neuhausen 2024a) or less /æ/-raising (Rosen & Skriver 2015) than in the surrounding community, and participation in mergers typical of local Utah English, e.g., *fail-fell*, *pole-pull-pool*, and *dull-pull*, rather than those typical of the Western shift, e.g., *pin-pen* (Baker & Bowie 2010). Moreover, variation within religious groups may further index specific group affiliations. In the US, some linguistic forms index affiliation with

the Orthodox Jewish, non-Orthodox Jewish, or the non-Jewish mainstream (Benor 2010); and in Canada, vocalic variation in Pennsylvania German *mom* indexes affiliation with the traditional Old Order Mennonites or the less traditional Markham Mennonites (e.g., Neuhausen 2024b: 30).

Not only religious affiliation but also the degree of participation in religious practices, i.e., how active Mormons are in the church, seems to affect language production. Inactive Mormons pattern more similarly to non-members, using fronted pre-nasal /ʌ/ significantly less than active members (Baker-Smemoe & Bowie 2015). This parallels previous work on a non-practicing Jewish group who linguistically distanced themselves from Orthodox Jews English and converged towards non-Jewish English (Benor 2011: 148). For these groups, religious affiliation is more important than American or Canadian identity, which likely reinforces the observed linguistic differences (e.g., Rosen & Skriver 2015: 106).

3.1 *Mormons in the US*

The Latter-Day Saints Church, or colloquially referred to as the Mormon Church, was founded in the early 19th century in New York (Weber 2019: 3). The church conventionally teaches and reinforces homophobia, resulting in complex social dynamics. According to conventional Mormon belief, ‘God would never hardwire same-sex desire or gender dysmorphia into his otherwise perfect creations’ (Weber 2019: 242). How same-sex desire is navigated in heterosexual Mormon marriages is investigated by VanderStouwe (2024). In the reality TV show *My Husband’s Not Gay*, Mormon men who identify as having same-sex attraction conform to Mormon ideals by marrying women and fathering children. Emphasizing *having* same-sex attraction (rather than *being* it), they draw on the analogy of a hobby. Instead of viewing their attraction as part of their identity, they treat it as something they choose to practice or not. Their approach affords religious individuals who

‘consider homosexual behavior immoral’ (Weber 2019: 263) to indulge in homosexual attraction and desire without acting on them.

A statement from the Mormon-founded Brigham Young University similarly emphasizes the divide between practice and identity. On the one hand, any queer practice is strictly forbidden. With only 1% of the student body representing non-members of the church (Nield 2021), the university positions itself with a queerphobic policy that aligns with the Mormon Church, illustrated in example (1). Here, homosexuality is classified as ‘romantic behavior’ only, thus invisibilizing (queer) sexual behavior. Moreover, the ban for homosexuality begins at a much earlier stage (‘same-sex *romantic* behavior’) than for heterosexuality (‘*sexual* relations outside a marriage’). The Honor Code does not specify what ‘romantic behavior’ encompasses, but it seems to be tolerated for non-married heterosexuals. The reification of heterosexuality in the first sentence lets the following reference to same-sex romantic behavior appear like an afterthought in example (1):

- (1) [Each campus member commits to] [l]ive a chaste and virtuous life, including abstaining from sexual relations outside marriage between a man and a woman. Living a chaste and virtuous life also includes abstaining from same-sex romantic behavior (Brigham Young University 2026a)
- (2) CES [Church Educational System] is deeply committed to helping all our students, including our LGBTQ students, feel both the love and covenant expectations of the Savior. Same-sex romantic behavior has been and continues to be contrary to the principles included in the CES Honor Code. LGBTQ students are a welcomed and valued part of the campus community and share a common identity with every student as sons and daughters of God. (Brigham Young University 2026b)
- (3) One of the Honor Code principles states: ‘Encourage others in their commitment to comply with the Honor Code.’ Encourage is not synonymous with ‘turn someone in.’ Encourage is an action that means to give support, confidence or hope to someone. We are all members of the BYU community [...], and we should always reach out in love and support to those around us. (Brigham Young University 2026b)

On the other hand, the university does not deny LGBTQ students' identities, and expresses a commitment to make all students, 'including our LGBTQ students', feel welcomed and loved. According to the university, queer students are no different from other students and 'share a common identity', shown in example (2). In the Frequently Asked Questions section of the website, students are explicitly encouraged to not turn queer students in but to 'reach out in love and support', shown in example (3). Importantly, the use of the first person pronoun *we* also includes the institution in the act.

These statements illustrate the complex relationship between the university's queerphobic stance and their desire to show inclusivity. The distinction between practice and identity symbolizes the church's opaque and non-linear way of handling LGBTQ matters. Last but not least, the focus on same-sex romantic behavior (and the lenience towards heterosexual romantic behavior) may speak to the institution's awareness of the potentially grave consequences for the church if members were to realize their queerness following such 'romantic relations'.

Group membership	First language	Transport	Clothing
Conference Mennonites	 Mennonite English	 any-colored cars	 mainstream
Conservative Mennonites	 Mennonite English	 any-colored cars	 traditional
Markham Mennonites ("the black car church")	 Pennsylvania German & Mennonite English	 black cars	 traditional
Old Order Mennonites ("horse and buggy")	 Pennsylvania German	 horse and buggy	 traditional

Figure 1 The Mennonite continuum in Southern Ontario along with their social and linguistic practices, with drawings by Corinna Assmann.

3.2 Swiss Mennonites in Canada

The Mennonites' origin can be traced back to 16th century Zurich, Switzerland, from where they moved via the Alsace and Palatinate first to Pennsylvania in the 18th century and later to Canada in the early 19th century (Fretz 1989: 5, 7). The Mennonites' early suffering during the religious persecution in 16th-18th-century Europe is still vividly remembered. This manifests in the present-day norms and values of the traditional communities, resulting in non-conformity with and separateness from mainstream society. The Mennonite continuum in Southern Ontario comprises the traditional horse and buggy-driving Old Order group and three splinter groups (see Figure 1). The Old Order Mennonites object to the use of modern appliances, e.g., cell phones, cars, computers, and the internet, while the more modern communities gradually allow more social participation in mainstream society. The Conference Mennonites fully participate in mainstream society and make full use of modern technologies. The degree of bilingualism in the different groups reflects this social continuum; the Old Order Mennonites still use Pennsylvania German as their first language, whereas the Conference Mennonites have shifted to English.

I view every Mennonite group as their own Community of Practice, as each group participates in different social activities and has a different relationship to their heritage and language(s). These differences describe, among others, religious activities (e.g., Old Order youth groups, Sunday school in the transitional groups, instrumental music in the Conference Mennonites), social activities (circle letters across Old Order settlements, restricted internet access for Markham Mennonites, use of social media and participation in mainstream society in the two modern communities), education (parochial school for the Old Order and Markham group,

public school for the Conservative Mennonites, and higher education for the Conference Mennonites), dress (plain, mainstream), and language skills (bilingual, formerly bilingual, monolingual).

The Old Order Mennonites' separation from mainstream society stabilizes their group identity as a Community of Practice, but also in the more liberal communities, the social structure is tightly interwoven with identity. Positive identity practices serve to construct a desired group identity and emphasize intra-group aspects of social identity, while negative practices may help to distance oneself from another group (Bucholtz 1999: 211–2). In the Old Order setting, positive identity practices are the use of Standard German and Pennsylvania German for praying, singing, and community-internal communication, while negative identity practices are indulging in excess, entertainment, and driving cars.

Yet, in the tight-knit Mennonite community, the boundaries between the Communities of Practice become blurred by speakers who leave one group for another and still maintain close relationships with the first. Unlike in other previously described Communities of Practice, linguistic variation does not hinge on (just any) affiliation with a local Community of Practice but is hierarchically organized, i.e. whether speakers are affiliated with the Old Orders, were once affiliated with them (and to what degree), or were never affiliated with them.

4. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The first case study is based on a 6.5 hour video podcast episode from the podcast *Mormon Stories* with a total word count of 71,866. Sal and her partner Lena describe their life stories; Sal grew up in the Mormon Church and started a family in a heterosexual marriage. She left the Mormon Church, and subsequently her husband, and is now engaged to Lena. Sal describes her journey to discovering her sexuality despite her internalized homophobia. The two speakers are very public and visible as ex-Mormons and lesbians via public social media accounts; as a

result, the analyzed conversation should be considered a linguistic performance. However, the format of the video podcast generally does not leave much room for post-editing and removing parts of speech, as is often done in podcasts. After contacting the podcast hosts, I received an unedited sound file, on which the present analysis is based. The Mormon Stories podcast addresses both a Mormon and non-Mormon audience and is moderated by the two hosts John and Carah, both former members of the Mormon Church.

The second case study is based on 40 sociolinguistic interviews that I conducted in 2018-19 with 51 speakers who are affiliated with the Mennonite communities described above. The fieldwork took place within the framework of Sali Tagliamonte's research project 'Dialects of Ontario' (2003; 2007; 2010; cf. <http://ontariodialects.chass.utoronto.ca>), which documents linguistic variation in English across Ontario. Six years after my first visit to the area and after I first connected with a neighboring Mennonite community, I spent five months with the present community, familiarizing myself with their culture and languages. Even though we established a common ground thanks to my German European background, I continued to be a cultural outsider at all times, representing the secular mainstream society and higher education. The present data set comprises approximately 49 hours of speech, with the majority of the interviews being bilingual Pennsylvania German-English. The total word count of the English corpus amounts to 356,053.

Both data sets cover spontaneous spoken speech, depicted narratives of the individuals' life journeys, and can be read as linguistic performances to cultural outsiders. Both conversations address a wider invisible audience; while the video podcast addresses an (invisible) non-present online audience that may consist of both cultural in- or outsiders, the sociolinguistic interviews represent a linguistic performance to a present cultural outsider (and potentially other non-present researchers that pose as cultural outsiders).

The sound files were segmented and transcribed in Elan (Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics 2019). The linguistic analysis of creaky voice was auditorily and acoustically determined in Praat (Boersma & Weenink 2013), pauses were identified and measured in Audacity (Ash et al. 2015).

5. DISBELONGING AND LINGUISTIC VARIATION

In the two case studies, I investigate the speakers' links to one social category (religious affiliation), and to what extent its non-linearity impacts social dynamics and language production. While the first analysis explores the speaker's non-linear relationship to her community, the second focuses on what leaving one group might mean on a social and linguistic level.

5.1 If I stay, there will be trouble: Non-linear relationships to a social category

The first case study focuses on Sal's complex relationship to the Mormon Church during her affiliation with it. Even though she always knew that she was different, Sal also felt a strong desire to fit in. She describes that she felt she was at a crossroads at several times in her life but always decided to stay with the church, shown in example (4). Her repetitive use of the verb *believe* emphasizes the contrast between her past and present self, as well as her belief at the time that conforming was the right decision. However, she repeatedly felt an inner conflict with the church's expectations of her, illustrated in example (5). This description suggests that even though cognitively she wanted to fit in, her emotional ('I didn't feel like I agreed') and bodily reactions ('my conscience said something different') contradicted this. Her cognitive response was to ignore all signals her body sent, as she realized it would lead her astray from the religious path. The listing of several expressions to convey the same idea iterates her strong desire to conform: the repetition of *to choose* [the church], followed by the expression *to get in line* and

the verb *follow*. While the former implies agency, the latter two signal passivity — the choice that Sal made.

- (4) a few times along my path I had like kind of a fork in the road where I'm where I noticed I'm like I can choose this way or I can choose that way and I always chose the church and I felt because I felt more safe I really believed in God I believed that I needed to do these things to get to the place to get to heaven I believed that I needed to conform
- (5) I had plenty of times where I didn't feel like I agreed and my conscience said something different but I thought it was my purpose to shut that down to think like I am a human and that's that's not godly and to choose to choose to to get in line and and follow

Having grown up in the church, she remembers feeling very rooted in the Mormon culture, in example (6), and views the church as 'extended family' and a place of comfort, in example (7).³ The content of her descriptions is underlined by the linguistic form; she repeats the intensifiers *very* and *really* in both examples and lists positive adjectives: *proud*, *happy*, *comforting*, *safe*. The last intonation units are rhetorically and linguistically separated from the rest. Expressing the contrast between the unknown non-Mormon and the known Mormon world, the units are marked by comparably long pauses of 0.8 seconds, and the last one is completely expressed in creak, which linguistically intensifies what is being said.

- (6) I was very much a Mormon a little Mormon kid and proud of it happy
- (7) The church was (0.4) my extended family (0.3) and so that was (0.5) that was very comforting and (0.3) it's all I knew (0.2) you know, I didn't know anything different and so it felt really safe and **(0.8)** I (0.5) really didn't have any close friends **(0.8) that weren't Mormon**

³ Numbers in round brackets indicate pauses (in seconds); bold numbers refer to particularly long pauses; bold text signifies creak; underlined instances are referenced in the text; extra-linguistic information is indicated in angle brackets.

Early on in her childhood, Sal realized that she could not live up to the heteronormative expectations of the Mormon Church, as illustrated in examples (8)–(10). The conflict between what was expected of her and how she behaved also became visible to the other children, e.g., in terms of her gender representation. She describes that she could not squeeze herself into the normative (binary) gender roles imposed on her, in example (8), and was mocked by other children for not aligning with external expectations, in examples (9)–(10). Her repetitive use of ‘I didn’t fit’ emphasizes her discomfort when she recounts that time. Her gender representation is so markedly different that even when she accidentally aligns with their heteronormative ideas, e.g., that girls like the color pink, she was teased for it. In other words, even when she played by the rules, other children thought it was funny because it did not fit her ‘tomboy’ persona.

- (8) I I felt **(2.3)** like I didn’t fit **(1.1)** I felt like **(0.8)** they wanted me to be (0.4) the binary woman (0.2) and to to just listen to their (0.7) to just obey and get in line and be the (0.5) girl that they thought I was supposed to be and I wasn’t
- (9) um I was teased for being a tomboy it was just like really awkward because I didn’t fit I didn’t fit a mold
- (10) I worked really hard (0.4) and this may be surprising or ironic to s- to save money to buy myself a bike (0.2) in elementary school (0.7) and I went to the store and I (0.2) and I bought it and and I pulled up to my group of friends (0.4) and they’re like (0.5) ‘oh, Sally has a pink bike she bought a pink bike’ and it was like (0.3) fuchsia or something like purpley pink (0.5) and (0.3) I didn’t even think twice about it and I got made fun of because **(1.1)** I was **(0.8)** having something that didn’t fit the mold that they thought (0.2) a tomboy (0.7) like I was made fun of because (0.5)
 [John: mm ’cause pink is for feminine]
 yeah and so they’re teasing me because of that because like (0.5) they put me in a certain box and now they have something to say about it and **(0.8)** and (0.3) that was just **(0.8)** <exhales> it felt so unfair to me you know

Ahmed (2004: 147) describes normativity as a ‘comfort zone’ for ‘those who can inhabit it’ and the opposite for those who cannot. She continues to describe these recurring moments of discomfort and their consequences as follows:

[T]hose moments of interpellation get repeated over time, and can be experienced as a bodily injury; moments which position queer subjects as failed in their failure to live up to the ‘hey you too’ of heterosexual self-narration.

Sal’s purchase of the pink bike could have resulted in a moment of recognition (‘hey you too’), but instead prompted another moment of ‘failure to live up’ to heterosexual norms. Despite her alignment this time, the other children mark Sal as a queer subject by calling out the incoherence of her gender presentation. This example illustrates how gender and sexuality are closely interwoven within the heterosexual matrix. To put it in Butler’s (1991: 24) words, in the Mormon context, ‘becoming a viable subject’ depends on the ‘compulsory performance’ of ‘coherent gender’ as part of heteronormativity, and ‘acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence’.

Sal perceives the Mormon Church to erase and silence any identification with homosexuality, shown in example (11). Potentially queer individuals are supposed to ignore their emotions and align with normative heterosexual behavior:

- (11) I never did this with my bishop but I I did hear when men go in or anybody say ‘I think I’m gay like I have these attractions’ (0.4) they’re just like (0.7) ‘no you’re not (1.3) just don’t kiss girls and kiss boys (0.8) you know like you’re not gay’

The figurative silencing is underpinned by Sal’s acoustic silences. The pauses in between the intonation units increase and reach the peak when Sal directly quotes the gaslighting request: ‘no you’re not [gay] (1.3) just don’t kiss girls and kiss

boys'. Her repetition of 'you're not gay' further emphasizes the act of top-down gaslighting.

Similarly, Sal's discomfort is also expressed through lengthened pauses (of at least 0.8 seconds) preceding the following utterances in examples (7)-(11): 'I [really didn't have any close friends]', 'that weren't Mormon', 'like I didn't fit', 'I felt like', 'they wanted me to be [the binary woman]', 'I was', 'having something that didn't fit the mold that they thought', 'and [that was just]', 'it felt so unfair to me you know'. These utterances all describe Sal not fitting in despite her trying very hard. The last utterance in example (10) is not only preceded by a comparably long pause but also accompanied by an audible exhalation, which may signal how this stress has become embodied. Looking back at the situation enables her to acknowledge the unfairness of the situation — being not only mocked for her difference, but even more so for her attempts to align, because her difference is felt to be so unyielding — and to relieve some of the tension of her embodied stress.

In Sal's narrative, the body plays an important role in the social discomfort she experienced as a young Mormon woman. This is illustrated in example (12), where she links the attempt to align with heteronormative ideas to causing distress and discomfort in her body. As a young woman in a heteronormative society she knows that she is expected to date men, which she emphasizes through the repetitive use of obligatory *supposed to*: 'that's what I was supposed that's what's supposed to be happening'.

When she forced herself to align with these heterosexual norms, her body reacted by feeling distress, discomfort, and refusal. Other physical reactions that Sal believes to be caused by the pressure of conformity emerge in the form of gay dreams and an eating disorder. In high school Sal had recurring dreams of kissing another girl, shown in example (13). While she may have successfully silenced her body during the day, her desires physically emerged in her sleep in the form of dreams that, as soon as she was awake, made her feel uncomfortable and shameful.

She explains that she thinks that her brain would not ‘allow’ the possibility of being gay in order to protect her in the homophobic Mormon space. Here, Sal’s brain seems to function as a gate keeper so that she remains in the safety of her (dis)comfort zone. She also links serious physical implications, i.e., an eating disorder, to being closeted and therefore not feeling comfortable in her body, illustrated in example (14).

- (12) I have thought I needed attention from the **opposite** sex ‘cause that’s what I was supposed to that’s what’s supposed to be happening (0.3) so when it did I was accepting **of it** (0.6) because **it fit the mold** (0.2) even though in my body it felt (0.2) super stressful and uncomfortable **like** (0.7) very (0.6) very non-preferred
- (13) I had I had dreams (0.4) about (0.4) like unsolicited like (0.8) I had dreams that I was (0.2) some (0.2) that I had a **girlfriend** (0.8) in high school (0.6) but I didn’t (0.5) give **any** thought to **it** like I would wake up and I’d **be like** (1.2) **urgh** (0.4) **I don’t like that that makes me uncomfortable** jeez why did I have to have that dream (0.1) then I’d try to forget about it
- (14) I **developed an eating disorder at that time** (0.5) **um** (1.0) and I believe (0.4) it feels (0.7) to me that (0.3) it was (0.6) also involved **with like my sexuality I was like** (0.3) very worried about (0.2) my appearance and I felt **awkward** in my body and (0.8) I wanted to make sure that boys were gonna like me

Despite clearly not fitting in, Sal explains that she was trying to align with Mormon expectations and attract boys, even though this prompted feelings of shame, disgust, disrespect (of her body), and sadness. She was so ashamed of her attraction to girls that she did not even tell her mother, which, to her, was a big deal, shown in example (15). As soon as she played by the rules and began dating men, she felt ‘grossed out’, in example (16). Her response to that feeling was to immediately suppress it. She felt like she violated the boundaries of her body, in example (17), and was only able to recognize this when she realized she was a lesbian. Finally, example (18) refers to her heterosexual marriage. Here, Sal describes how her body expressed the repercussions of this coercion on a physical level, now finding itself

at rock bottom. She employs a metaphor of death, expressed twice: ‘a part of me died’ and ‘[was] put to rest’. Needless to say, death represents the gravest decline of a body. While, according to this statement, part of her body has died, her surviving soul felt ‘so sad’. This creates a vivid image of the turmoil and inner conflict she experienced. Moreover, the fact that she views her heterosexual marriage as a ‘betrayal of self’ implies that she could have anticipated this — had she listened to her bodily symptoms.

- (15) I didn’t tell my mom (0.4) which is a big deal ’cause I told her **everything** (0.3) and (0.6) I wouldn’t allow myself to say like I’m **attracted to them** (0.3) or **I think I’m gay** (0.1) I wouldn’t go there **in** my mind, I don’t think my brain al- (0.2) would **allow it** (0.6) **um** because (0.4) of the repercussions of **what** (0.2) **of what that would** mean (0.5) and so **(1.6)** I was conscious though that I (0.2) that I had a s- a **secret like** (0.8) draw to these girls
- (16) **I** wasn’t like **that** I did what I was told **and** I talked myself into not **being** **(0.9) like grossed out** (0.3) **even though (1.4) even though I was (1.1) um**
- (17) something that’s sad that I’ve realized now (0.3) is the feeling that I often had (0.7) um that (0.1) uh was a violation of my boundaries (0.5) **um** (0.5) **like my bo- my body** (0.5) **uh and** (0.1) **I didn’t** know that’s what I was experiencing I couldn’t I didn’t have a name for it but that’s that’s definitely **what was happening uh and** I (0.5) it was really **easy** t- (0.2) to recognize it was als- almost in- (0.2) instant **(0.9)** recognizable feeling after I **accepted the fact that that I was a lesbian**
- (18) **uh I um** (2.2) I feel (0.4) definitely like (0.4) a part of me died (0.3) **like** (0.6) and just **totally (1.8) um (3.4)** was (0.3) like **(1.6)** put (0.2) put to rest (0.2) when I got married **(2.1)** because **(1.4)** it was such a (0.1) a (0.4) betrayal of self (0.9) **um** (0.3) **and (1.1) he is** [a] great (0.2) person and I’m sad that I did **that** to him too (0.6) unintentionally and **unknowingly** um (0.3) but I know (0.8) for a fact **that** (0.1) **that (1.3)** my **(1.0)** my soul was like so sad (0.1) and I’ve and **I changed like I felt it like I** just **said okay** (0.2) this is it this is what I have to do (0.4) this I better be okay with **this**

Sal links the body to bigger social phenomena on the rhetorical level, and modifies her voice at the same time. The latter is expressed through an increasing number of pauses that gain in duration, along with a change from modal voice to creak. When

Sal describes her marriage as causing the greatest decline of her body, almost every word is preceded and followed by pauses, as indicated in example (18).

Her use of creaky voice co-occurs with descriptions of discomfort. While creak is often restricted to the last syllable or foot before a pause (Thomas 2011: 225), it may occur elsewhere for social or stylistic purposes. In Sal's descriptions of the contradiction between her sexuality and Mormon norms, creak seems to symbolize the conflict and discomfort she experiences: When she describes that she dated men in order to conform to Mormon expectations, this, to her, felt uncomfortable but 'it fit the mold', illustrated in example (12). When her sexual attraction to girls emerges in recurring dreams, she expresses the discomfort she felt through a comparably long preceding pause and the creaky utterance 'urgh I don't like that' in example (13). The expression *urgh* is intensified through preceding and succeeding long pauses, an exaggerated use of creak (which is visible on the spectrogram), and the lengthening of the syllable to one second. In example (14), creak is employed to describe Sal's physical reactions: 'developed an eating disorder at that time', 'with like my sexuality I was like', 'awkward'. In example (16), almost all utterances are expressed in creak, and all of them refer to physical reactions, intensified by comparably long pauses in between them: 'being (0.9) like grossed out (0.3) even though (1.4) even though I was (1.1) um'. In these extracts, all longer utterances entirely expressed in creak describe the conflict between Mormon norms and Sal's bodily responses.

In some examples, the change from modal voice to creak represents the contrast between the mind and body. In example (15), the contrast between what she consciously decided to (not) think about ('I wouldn't allow myself', 'I wouldn't go there in my mind'), and what her body felt ('attracted to them', 'gay', 'what of what that would [mean]', 'secret'), is marked by a change from modal to creaky voice. In example (17), the contrast between modal and creaky voice similarly aligns with Sal's cognitive understanding expressed in modal voice ('I didn't have

a name for it') versus her inner reactions, expressed in creak ('what was happening'). The last utterance is preceded by a long pause (0.9 seconds) and a comparably long utterance that is entirely expressed in creak: 'accepted the fact that that I was a lesbian'.

Descriptions related to Sal's outer appearance that align with Mormon ideas tend to be expressed in modal voice: 'that's what I was supposed to that's what's supposed to [happen]' in example (12), 'very worried about my appearance' and 'I wanted to make sure that boys were gonna like me' in example (14), and 'this is it this is what I have to do' and 'I better be okay with [this]' in example (18). With the exception of some instances of creak on the final syllable in pre-pausal contexts, barely any creak is employed in example (18), where Sal describes her surrender. This utterance displays overall fewer linguistically marked variants (fewer/shorter pauses, less creak), suggesting that social conformity may go hand in hand with linguistic conformity.

The use of creak for discomfort and inner conflict aligns with Levon's (2015) findings depicting the conflict between religion and homosexuality (realized in Hebrew). Previous research on American English suggests that one function of creak is to signal a dispreference to continue a topic or a disalignment with the primary speaker, when in combination with another linguistic form, i.e., *yeah* (Grivičić & Nilep 2004). While Grivičić and Nilep focus on interactional responses, creak in Sal's narrative expresses her disalignment with imposed societal norms.

The use of creaky voice, as expressed by Sal, also co-occurs with described instances of masking. Masking is employed in face-to-face interaction for the purpose of an audience (Goffman 1956: 74) and aligns with heteronormative expectations. Ahmed (2004: 150) describes this phenomenon as 'queer skin, straight masks'. Sal seemed to be under a lot of pressure to mask (i.e., maintain a heteronormative behavior to fit in) and now views her masking behavior as entailing physical implications, e.g., feeling grossed out and developing an eating

disorder. Moreover, the employment of modal voice aligns with depicted forms of masking (i.e., what she allowed herself to think, concerns about her outer appearance), while creak appears to represent instances where the mask breaks or slips away (feeling discomfort, developing an eating disorder, feeling grossed out, experiencing gay attraction). These symptoms of discomfort provide a glimpse of the person behind the mask.

This first close analysis of how Sal describes her complex relationship to the Mormon Church demonstrates that the discomfort and conflict she experiences emerges linguistically, i.e., through rhetoric imagery, creaky voice, and pauses. The following case study zooms out and takes a look at the bigger picture, exploring the conflict and non-linearity caused by leaving a social category, and what impact this has on social dynamics within and beyond the group. I further show how leaving affects individual language production and attitudes, even beyond the act of leaving.

5.2 If I go, it will be double: Leaving a social category

Speakers may not only have unstable and non-linear relationships with the community they identify with (as demonstrated in the previous section), but they may also decide to leave a community. Leaving the Old Order Mennonite Church represents a major change both on the social and linguistic level. On the social level, it signifies the loss of one's familiar environment and a sudden shift towards independence and mobility, often going hand in hand with getting one's driver's license. On the linguistic level, leaving the bilingual community often means that speakers leave the domain where their first language Pennsylvania German is spoken and enter a space where Ontario English is the only language for all communication.

Leaving does not mean cutting all ties with the old community; on the contrary, many speakers continue to maintain close relationships with some Old

Order members, as demonstrated in example (19), or have contradictory and complex relationships with them, prompted by the strong negative response from other in-group members.⁴ Cleon, Minerva, Irene, and Selema left the Old Order Church, and report subsequent long-lasting conflict with at least one close family member. Cleon remembers how he was shocked at his grandfather's offensive language in response to his father leaving the Old Order Church with his wife and children, shown in example (20). Minerva clarifies that she will not repeat how her mother reacted to her leaving the Old Order Church, presumably in a similarly offensive manner, shown in example (21). One of Selema's family members has refused to meet as a family since she left, illustrated in example (22). While Irene's mother did not explicitly criticize her for leaving the church, her father made no attempts to hide his disapproval, in example (23). Interestingly, Irene's family was considered one of the more traditional families, which locates her family at the core of the community. As a result, she believes that her leaving may have upset family members (and other church members) even more than in other cases, shown in example (24).

- (19) I always appreciated them and I I still do and I I'm actually still with a group of friends from our youth with the Old Orders we had a nice gathering here in June (Claire)
- (20) Cleon it was in nineteen forty-seven when my dad got his first car that was like we were horse and buggy Old Order first you know I was [anonymized] years old I'll never forget that
 James why will you not forget that
 Cleon the feelings
 James what were they
 Cleon I didn't know that my grandfather could talk like he did
 James *vah er vah er bays* ['was he was he angry']
 Cleon I was shocked yeah

⁴ All names in the Mennonite corpus have been anonymized. Translations are my own and indicated in square brackets where needed. Instances of Pennsylvania German are written based on English phonology, making it legible to its speakers.

- (21) you wouldn't wanna know [what she said when I left] it was I I I can't I won't even share that because it was horrible [...] and I mean yeah she shared her feelings but not not in a positive way you know but not positively (Minerva)
- (22) now we can't have Christmas gatherings because of her now w- she doesn't want them and she says we can't have them (Selema)
- (23) mm (1.7) <inhales> my mom never said anything but dad wasn't like (1.5) they weren't too happy about it of course mm but mom never (1.7) <inhales> said anything about it? she (2.8) <inhales> yeah she was the one that (0.6) always encouraged me to keep coming home so <laughs> <inhales> (0.4) uhm that's what pulled me through I think because (1.4) I still wanted to see her and I knew she's happy to see me so and dad eventually (0.7) came around too but (1.3) it took him a long time <laughs> <inhales> (0.6) <sighs> (0.9) it was I would say it was when he (0.5) like the last couple of years (0.7) last year at least, he was pretty much in bed (1.5) <sniffs> and so (0.9) I would try to go home weekends and (1.2) just to say 'hi' if nothing else and (1.7) <inhales> he seemed to appreciate that because he realized that (0.9) there's things I can help him with that (0.4) my sister didn't always have time to just sit down and (1.0) <inhales> so (0.6) I felt he really came around then (2.4) and seemed to appreciate me after all (0.4) but it it took a long time <laughs> (Irene)
- (24) nobody would have ever expected [me to leave the church] because we were considered as one of the plainer families (Irene)

When Irene describes her parents' reaction, she takes comparably long breaks, inhales audibly, and laughs between emotional passages. Even though the strained relationship with her father represented an emotional burden for her, she kept returning and tried to rebuild her relationship with him. Her voice becomes quiet when she repeats the following two utterances: 'mom never said anything' and 'he seemed to appreciate'. Interestingly, the grammatical object of *appreciate* changes from *that* to *me*, underlining the change from her father's appreciation of Irene's action (to visit him) to appreciating her as a person.

Different forms of silence revolve around the subject. First, we can observe what McLoughlin (2026: 12) defines as 'gaps', where silence represents the withholding of information: While Cleon and Minerva clearly seem to remember

what has been said to them by family members, they refuse to repeat it, probably to avoid causing emotional turmoil. Similarly, Selema's family member sees the conflict caused by Selema leaving the church as a given; rather than addressing her concerns in the present situation, the family member appears to draw a line without giving a reason: 'she doesn't want them [family gatherings] and she says we can't have them'. While the former represents the *supranarratable*, i.e., 'what can't be told because it's beyond the capacities of language to render it in words', the latter represents the *subnarratable*, i.e., what is not worth mentioning (McLoughlin 2026: 12). At the same time, Cleon employs what McLoughlin terms 'the quiet style' (2026: 16), i.e., his words become 'short and simple, little is said and white space abounds on the page'. While McLoughlin refers to notions of silence in literature, this can be understood figuratively when transferred to spoken speech. Cleon's linguistic style, usually marked by elaborate vivid stories, suddenly shifts and becomes monosyllabic and clipped. Another form of silence can be observed in the reaction of Irene's mother. In Irene's recollection, her mother remains silent while still welcoming Irene and encouraging her to maintain the connection with the family. McLoughlin (2026: 13) describes this subtle form of silence as 'words that conceal'. Despite not explicitly addressing it (and 'concealing' her emotions), Irene still senses her disapproval: 'they weren't too happy about it'. Her mother is not the only one concealing words; Irene also masks what exactly her father's reaction was by not clarifying what his negative reaction was. A final form of silence is produced by Irene herself: an acoustic silence (McLoughlin 2026: 10). She produces comparably long pauses between her intonation units and lowers her voice. The combination intensifies what she says and emphasizes its emotional toll on her. The different forms of silence demonstrate that leaving is a sensitive topic and considered a cultural taboo that disrupts communication in the family. Such patterns reveal interruptions in the individuals' links to social categories and reveal the potential for conflict.

While for many families, leaving signifies a disruption of the norms, this may not apply to all families/family members: Not all family members remain silent about leaving, and some even explicitly express their support to do so. When Claire, as an Old Order, moved to town for work, she had a business phone which posed a problem for the Old Order Church at the time. By owning a business phone for work, she entered a grey area as the Old Order Church did not have clear regulations for that specific case. As a result, she rearranged her circumstances in a complex manner to conform to the Old Order regulations, before one of her siblings initiated her process of leaving by telling her to ‘move on’, as shown in example (25):

- (25) I was uhm actually with the Old Orders when I started the [business] and they did not have residential phones at that time and [...] I had a business phone but they uh uh they were a bit uh edgy about it [...] my next door neighbors [...] had an extra room so I s- I said to them if I would I explained to them what is happening and if I would rent the room [...] as long as I have a room elsewhere then it's not considered that that is also my personal dwelling that it's more considered a business [...] but then some of my siblings just said ‘move on’ the one thing that kind of got me going is because I did really um long to have my own transportation and I said ‘well here it goes’ (Claire)

The different stances Claire takes in this example visualize the space of disbelonging she entered before leaving the church. She initially aligns with the Old Order regulations, even though they challenge her work routine, and went out of her way to find a compromise. Yet, when one of her siblings proposed an easy way out for her — to leave — she disaligns with the Old Order Church and makes the decision to leave. Here, Claire performs *fractal pivoting*, i.e., she takes up different perspectives in the same situation (Gal & Irvine 2019: 88). It appears that she already desired to leave but did not allow herself these thoughts — until prompted to do so by someone else.

For speakers who leave the Old Order Church and join, for example, the Conference Mennonites, their use of the English language is often the only way to mark their heritage, as the Conference Mennonites blend in with mainstream society and are not visibly marked as Mennonites. Speakers who leave display marked linguistic patterns; they align with neither the community they left nor the community they join, and instead create their own phonological and grammatical structures (Neuhausen 2024b; 2025). I argue that this likely represents the speakers' complex forms of (dis)belonging, manifested in negotiations between the old and new social norms.

Susannah, who left the Old Order Church as a teenager, has spent over 70 years in mainstream society — the vast majority of her life. Instead of linguistically approaching her immediate environment, she produces a considerable amount of /ɹ/ tokens in <wh-> words. In Ontario English, this sound has been replaced by /w/ since the 1960s (Chambers 1998: 26) but is still present in Old Order English. In example (26), Susannah produces the sound twice in read-out speech, which is often seen as more performative than spontaneous spoken speech. But even in the latter, e.g., in example (27), Susannah employs first [w] in *when*, then corrects herself to [ɹ] when describing the prescriptivism towards English in her school. This suggests that /ɹ/ may represent 'good English' to her.

- (26) remember [ɹ]en I talked to you [ɹ]en I was out east (Susannah)
- (27) our teacher insisted we speak good English and [w]en like [ɹ]en grade one [students] came in she would tell us to help the little ones if we hear them say something wrong help them to say it right (Susannah)
- (28) my parents did not talk like that but some families do but my parents didn't [...] 'I seen them' sorry yeah we weren't allowed to say that at our school 'several times already' well 'already' that is they say that a lot 'I did already! are you coming already? I was over there already I made my bed already' oh yeah 'grandpa's horse is awful slow and awful old' no my parents would have spoken a little better English than that 'almost as old has him' well it would be almost as old as 'he' (Susannah)

In addition to language production, also language attitudes may be affected by leaving. Prescriptivism toward English prevails in the Old Order community, but usually not outside of it — the only instances I observed were produced by speakers who left the Old Orders and held on to the language attitude. Like many Old Order speakers, Susannah has a clear idea of what represents ‘good’ English, as demonstrated in example (28). In the Old Order church, prescriptivism toward English may be motivated by the need for communication with cultural outsiders in their second language. Outside the community, it is not necessary for speakers to prove their linguistic skills in English, as all communication happens in English anyway. Susannah’s case shows that despite having lived in mainstream society for most of her life, she has maintained the language attitudes she learned in a different cultural and linguistic setting.

The Mennonite context demonstrates that the concept of the Community of Practice is useful to facilitate a cultural outsider’s understanding of prevailing social dynamics, including attitudes such as prescriptivism towards English in the Old Order group vs. outside of it, and general linguistic tendencies, such as the survival of /*ʌ*/ in the Old Order group vs. outside of it. But focusing only on the theoretical framework of the Community of Practice conceals some fine-grained social linguistic variation, e.g., the conflict caused by leaving, which changes social dynamics and correlates with linguistic variation, e.g., the different forms of silences. I propose that investigating linguistic variation beyond belonging, i.e., also exploring different forms of disbelonging, may contribute to sociolinguists’ understanding of belonging, exclusion, and discrimination.

6. EXACTLY WHO AM I SUPPOSED TO BE? OUTLOOK AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

With this paper I demonstrate the usefulness of the concept of *disbelonging* for understanding sociolinguistic variation. I have shown that complex relationships to

social groups become visible in language production (vocal fry, number and duration of pauses, loudness/quietness), in meta-commentary (how speakers observe and interpret different forms of disbelonging and link them to bigger societal issues), and in language attitudes (maintaining prescriptive language attitudes learned in a different social setting).

Concerning language production, Sal uses linguistic resources to express her inner conflict; she employs creaky voice for discomfort and modal voice for alignment with Mormon norms. Similarly, Irene's use of pauses and a lowered voice intensifies the depicted emotions.

Meta-commentary reveals the speakers' underlying beliefs of how they see the world and locate themselves in it. Sal understands her feelings of not fitting in as something that expresses itself physically despite her attempts to ignore them, i.e., in the form of an eating disorder and recurring dreams.

Language attitudes can be carried along from one social category to the next and applied to a new social setting. Susannah has maintained her prescriptive language attitude towards English all her life; while it may serve as motivation for Old Orders to learn English as a second language in school, outside the Old Order context, where English is learned as a first language, prescriptive ideas towards English no longer appear to play a role (evidenced by the lack of them in monolingual Mennonite groups).

The present data suggest that not all linguistic variants represent forms of belonging, but may instead signal forms of disbelonging (or former belonging). Susannah's maintenance of linguistic forms that are used only in the Old Order group, e.g., the use of /ʌ/, positions her as different from her current Mennonite community and runs counter to theoretical assumptions of language accommodation, i.e., that speakers linguistically accommodate over time. The present study also shows that even speakers who are considered 'central' to the community (or at least perceived as such by other in-group members), may decide

to leave — questioning traditional sociolinguistic assumptions related to ‘marginal’ and ‘core’ members of the community.

Understanding both Mormon and Mennonite communities as Communities of Practice helps to understand the broader social and linguistic dimensions of each community. Yet, as both case studies demonstrate, the individuals’ relationships to the group are by no means stable. Despite the usefulness of the concept, group affiliation with (just any) Community of Practice, i.e., Mennonite branch, does not solely explain the observed linguistic variation and masks important group-internal social and linguistic differences.

If sociolinguists continue to focus on notions of belonging, they may overlook what *disbelonging* means for linguistic variation, and contribute to an invisibilization of people who fall between the cracks because they have their own struggles and disagreements with, for example, the group they affiliate with. I propose that not only are social categories hybrid and prone to change, but also the individual relationship(s) each speaker has to these categories. The case studies reveal that some speakers have complex and, at times, contradictory relationships with the groups they identify with, and raise new questions related to notions of belonging: Why does a speaker stay with a social category that may cause internal conflict and potentially even physically harm them?

While the analyzed context is highly specific in terms of social and cultural settings, forms of disbelonging are common in contexts beyond these specific case studies and affect all groups in which individual realities conflict with external expectations. On a bigger scale, forms of disbelonging often correlate with discrimination and oppression, as experienced by diasporic groups (Akinbola 2025), but on a smaller scale, they can also allow for spaces of universal socialization, e.g., teenagers seeking distance from their parents for the purpose of identity work (Erikson 1968; Chambers 2009: 181–189; Tagliamonte 2016: 53). Experiences of disbelonging can also be empowering, e.g., when representing

strategies of resistance or survival (Muñoz 1999). Future research should explore to what extent different types of disbelonging influence language production, language attitudes, and social positioning.

Further research on disbelonging has the potential to further sociolinguists' understanding of social and linguistic ideas of belonging. What does it mean for an individual to (dis)belong? What has the potential to interrupt linear relationships with important social categories? How do such interruptions emerge in social dynamics and language variation? Sociolinguistic approaches to identify forms of disbelonging can explore rhetoric descriptions of disbelonging (as in the case study of Sal, who links her emotional and physical discomfort to bigger social issues), or social and/or linguistic cues signaling interruption (such as different forms of silence in narratives and linguistic form). Such cues may reveal underlying norms and expectations, as well as the potential for non-linearity of the speakers' links to social categories.

Greater knowledge about what disbelonging means — to both the community and the individual — can further sociolinguists' understanding of social dynamics and their impact on language production. By zooming in on the struggles and disagreements experienced by individual speakers, linguists may relate their findings to bigger societal phenomena, such as processes of in/exclusion, discrimination, and dis/identification.

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