Where does the sociolinguistic variable start?

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In their seminal discussion, Lavandera (1978) and Labov (1978) consider the definition of a sociolinguistic variable and the implications of the extension of the concept of a sociolinguistic variable from phonology to syntax and (to some degree) to discourse. In the thirty-five years since these writings, the debate over what counts as a variable, how to identify variable meanings, and how to circumscribe the envelope of variation continues (Romaine 1981, Fasold 1991, Wolfram 1991, Macauley and Fought 2004, Cheshire, Kerswill and Williams 2005). In this talk we present two case studies, one in sociophonetics, and one in discourse-pragmatic variation. We tackle two core issues: 1) what happens when a variable’s social meaning shifts as a result of a reevaluation of the social dimensions of the community, 2) how do we treat nested layers of pragmatically constrained variation? Our case studies represent different communities of practice and have the potential to shed light on how clusters of relationships, speech events, and shifting social landscapes affect our evolving conception of the sociolinguistic variable.