Title: Bivalent class indexing in the sociolinguistics of specialty coffee talk

Abstract: In this article, we analyze the register of specialty coffee talk through an analysis of cupping events and broader specialty coffee company discourse. This register includes both a rarefied lexicon as well as broader rhetorical strategies utilized in specialty coffee marketing and branding, with indexical potentials pointing simultaneously to both higher and lower class positions. We refer to this semiotic pliability as \textit{bivalent class indexicality}. This approach to indexicality offers a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between language and social meaning by analyzing practices that move across multiple sociolinguistic scales (Blommaert 2016) to show how this register indexes social characteristics with seemingly opposing social valances.

Keywords: Bivalency, Coffee, Indexicality, Class, Authenticity

Running Title: Bivalent class indexing in specialty coffee

Word Count: 9,514
**Resumen:** En este artículo se analiza el registro de habla de café de especialidad por medio de un análisis de catas de café (‘cuppings’, o eventos de desgustación de café), y el discurso de branding y marketing en la industria de café de especialidad. Este registro de habla consiste tanto en un léxico enrarecido como en estrategias retóricas más generalizadas, con potencias indexicales que señalan a la vez posiciones socioeconómicas más altas y más bajas. Referimos a esta cualidad como *la indexicalidad bivalente de clase*. Esta perspectiva a la indexicalidad cuenta con una interpretación más matizada sobre la relación entre el lenguaje y el significado social, por medio de un análisis de prácticas que muevan a través de múltiples escalas sociolingüísticas (Blommaert 2016). Así demostramos cómo este registro de habla puede indicar características con valores sociales supuestamente opuestos.
INTRODUCTION

Indexicality (Peirce 1897; Silverstein 2003) represents a major cornerstone in sociolinguistic theory, particularly in discussions regarding the relationship between language and social meaning (Eckert 2008; Zhang 2017). This theory has shaped our understanding of how a linguistic form or collection of forms can point to one or a multitude of social characteristics. Until this point, much sociolinguistic research has shown that even when a given linguistic feature indexes a multitude of social characteristics, these characteristics are often related, if only in that they belong to the same indexical field (Eckert 2008). In this study, we suggest a new view of indexicality through an analysis of a linguistic register that we describe as ‘specialty coffee talk’.

Focusing specifically on North American specialty coffee companies we analyze this register across multiple sociolinguistic scales (Blommaert 2016) to show how it indexes both higher and lower class positions simultaneously. The ability of specialty coffee talk to index these oppositional positions emerges vis-à-vis class anxieties, which for specialty coffee consumers in North America manifest as an uneasy balance between a tendency towards progressive political orientations, socioeconomic privilege in the global market, and ready consumption of luxury products. The potential contradiction of consuming luxury goods, while maintaining progressive political orientations, is neutralized by an appeal to “authentic” forms of consumption. The understanding of bivalent indexicality that we advance here allows us to see how modern class positionalities are constructed as consumers index both “elite” and “authentic” forms of consumption through simultaneous practices (cf. Mapes 2018).

Coffee as an American staple has its roots in 17th century Europe and the Protestant ethic, which hailed coffee as ‘the great soberer’ (Schivelbusch 1993: 34). It was seen as a drink
that made possible the bodily regulation so heavily valued during this period. As Schivelbush (1993: 39) notes, “For optimistic middle-class progressives, coffee’s chief property, that of stimulating the mind and keeping one awake, was quite welcome. After all, it promised nothing less than to lengthen and intensify the time available for work.” Despite its ability to buttress the values of English puritanism, until the mid-19th century, coffee was comparatively expensive and challenging to obtain, limiting its consumption to prestigious social circles (Reitz 2007). European imperialism and the fine-tuning of the mechanisms of colonialism began the process of coffee’s ‘democratization’ (Ellis 2004; Schivelbusch 1993).

Following the American Civil War, coffee’s elite connotations eroded further, as wage growth and a decline in global coffee prices brought the beverage within the reach of more American consumers (Morris 2017: 465). Two World Wars, plus decades of advertising that aligned coffee consumption with worker productivity (Jimenez 1995; Pendergrast 1999), led to coffee’s enregisterment (Agha 2007) as a fixture of the American working class. This is encapsulated most clearly in Dunkin’ Donuts’ now ubiquitous assertion that “America Runs on Dunkin’”, which frames their coffee as “growth and fuel” for the American labor force.¹

In the 1980s coffee consumption was declining—except for an upswing in the growth of ‘specialty’ coffee companies (Roseberry 1996: 767). This specialty sector of the coffee industry emerged as advertising executives urged for the development of niche markets to which specific coffees could be sold. They distinguished, among other potential markets, adults “for whom coffee is a ‘way of life’ and who prefer to buy their coffee in a gourmet shop” and working folks “who [do] not want to spend much time in the kitchen and for whom a better instant coffee should be developed” (1996: 765). This is emblematic of the process of market nichification, described by Heller (2013) as characteristic of late capitalism, and closely tied to the increasingly
global circulation of material and semiotic forms of authenticity (see also Mapes 2018). Since the 1980s, specialty or ‘craft’ coffee has primarily been marketed towards the upper- and upwardly mobile-middle class, becoming associated with so-called 'yuppie' (Roseberry 1996; Zhang 2005) or 'hipster' (Michael 2015; Scott 2017) character types.

Craft coffee in the United States is an industry of skilled artisans, delivering handmade products to increasingly discerning consumers who put a premium on quality and authenticity. The result is that specialty coffee now holds its own elevated status alongside products like Darjeeling tea (Besky 2014), heritage meat (Cavanaugh 2016; Weiss 2016), artisanal cheese (Paxson 2012), olive oil (Meneley 2007), alcohol (Gaytan 2014; Manning 2012), and artisanal water (Kaplan 2007; Wilk 2006), among many others. These comestibles have often been situated within the broader ‘slow food’ movement that has gained traction in European and North American food markets since the 1980s (Meneley 2004).

Similar to other luxury comestibles, craft coffee comes with a high price tag, limiting participation in this industry to relatively privileged sectors of American society. As Roseberry (1996: 773) describes, the original market segment toward which specialty coffee, tea, and chocolate were directed was that of “urban, urbane, professional men and women who distinguished themselves through consumption”, with these practices coming to define an aspect of yuppie subjectivity. Although the 99 cent ‘cup of Joe’ still exists, specialty coffee allows astute consumers “to use coffee as a prop for the expression of individual personality” (Morris 2017: 487). Specialty coffee consumers become invested not just in the coffee, but in how it is grown, harvested, and brewed—and in particular, how these features distinguish it from ‘bad’ (i.e., ‘cheap’) coffee.
For such educated, critical consumers, the ‘authenticity’ of the coffee they consume matters. One need only glance at the scholarship on Fair Trade coffee (e.g. Lyon 2011; West 2012) to see the level of economic and sociopolitical effort that consumers invest in deciding which coffee to consume, as these are all indexes that point to ‘good quality coffee’. San Francisco-based Ritual Coffee frames this distinction as a historical change in the market:

Forty years ago, a cup of coffee was nothing more than a caffeine delivery vehicle. It didn't really matter how it tasted, it just had to slap you awake in the morning or prop you up through a long afternoon. But in the last decade or so, things have changed. A lot. A few people scattered across the country discovered how amazing a cup of coffee can be when you source the beans directly from farmers you know. When you roast the beans yourself in such a way that nothing intrinsic to the coffee is removed. When you brew the coffee with down-to-the-second precision.

In other words, the conspicuous consumption of specialty coffee provides a site of distinction for upwardly mobile Americans (Bourdieu 1984; Gaudio 2003; Silverstein 2003; see also Paxson 2012 on cheese).

Like producers of other foods, specialty coffee companies distinguish themselves from mass franchises by broadcasting their focus on ‘good’ coffee in several ways. Many offer ‘cuppings’—tasting events where specialty coffee is evaluated according to precise, technical jargon. In many ways, this language parallels Silverstein’s analysis of oinoglossia (2003). Silverstein (2003, 2006) argued that through ‘proper’ forms of consumption—including the use of a specialized lexicon of wine-tasting terminology—consumers could “ritually become” the individuals that the wine talk register indexically denotes (usually a yuppie, at least someone upwardly mobile). As Silverstein notes, “[e]lites and would-be elites in contemporary society seek to use these enregistered forms; using them confers (indexically entails) an aspect of eliteness-before-prestige-commodities, of which ‘distinction’ is made” (2003: 226). In connecting the quotidian experience of coffee to rarefied ingredients and production processes,
the sensory lexicon of coffee cuppings elevates coffee from an everyday experience to one that indexes specific class-based positionalities. However, we argue that the discourse of specialty coffee more broadly does not index ‘upper classness’ so directly as oinoglossia does.

This is because the language used by specialty coffee companies on their websites and promotional materials utilize rhetorical strategies geared towards making them seem cool, friendly, and down-to-earth – quite different from the image of the snobbish wine connoisseur. Specifically, the discourses of specialty coffee marketing and branding indicate a desire to locate an ‘authentic’ specialty coffee experience in imagined connections (Besky 2014) between the consumer, coffee producing regions, and producers themselves. This ‘symbolic inversion’ (Roseberry 1996: 774) can be seen in coffee advertisements that project authenticity and legitimacy as emergent from producers and places in the Global South. These advertisements are reminiscent of the forms of “lowbrow appreciation” described by Mapes (2018: 7), which focus on environments often associated with rurality or the working class. As a result, they recreate what West has described as an “eco-neoliberal fiction; a fiction that is meant to divert our attention away from the structural causes of environmental degradation and social injustice” (2010: 694).

In what follows, we lay out a framework for our understanding of class and taste, before moving on to an analysis of the sociolinguistics of specialty coffee tastings events. Drawing on data collected from coffee cuppings held in Tucson AZ and Chicago IL, as well as the first author’s three years of experience as an employee in the specialty coffee industry we show how the rarefied lexicon of coffee cuppings serves to indexically raise the class position of participants. We then turn to an examination of North American specialty coffee company marketing and its role in mitigating class related anxieties for consumers. By moving from the
lexical level of cupping to the broader semiotics of how coffee is marketing in North America, we illustrate how the register of specialty coffee accomplishes this bivalent class indexing.

CLASS, TASTE, AND BIVALENCY

While Bourdieu’s (1984) ‘distinction’ framework is not universally accepted as a model for class hierarchy and cultural (re)production (e.g. Riley 2017), it offers an especially compelling model for understanding the bivalent social indexes of specialty coffee talk. Bourdieu’s theory of distinction hinges on three key concepts, summarized nicely by Riley (2017): “one’s resources (capital) produce a character structure (habitus) that generates particular sorts of behavior in the contexts of particular social games (fields)” (§2). A central aspect of habitus is aesthetic taste. Bourdieu argues that taste is not neutral: our consumption of various cultural products is “a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code” (1984: 2). For instance, a preference for jazz versus hip-hop reflects not internal, inherent preference, but a process of acculturation to the right “kinds” of preferences. Learning these ‘codes’ is, at least in part, a function of access to the forms of capital that grant access to the fields in which the codes are utilized.

Taste in food and drink is of course an important site for the negotiation of appropriate class habitus, resting on a distinction between ‘tastes of luxury (or freedom)’ and ‘tastes of necessity’ (Bourdieu 1984: 177). Thus, for the working class, food which is economical, filling, and easily shared dominates; it is then presumed that this reflects an inherent, natural preference among the lower-classes for foods like beans, potatoes, and breads. The bourgeois, with the freedom of time and capital, have the ability to ‘choose’ more refined, delicate foods (Bourdieu 1984: 178). This distinction is not only reflected in the types of food that each class chooses or
‘has a taste for’, but in the ritual of consumption itself. A strict, orderly, formal ritual of consumption is part of the bourgeois habitus of food.

Although critiques of this framework suggest that it is, at best, only a metaphor for class distinction (Riley 2017), Silverstein’s work (2003, 2006) uses language to show how such processes of distinction actually work through interaction. Silverstein makes this case with respect to oinoglossia. One of the most salient aspects of this oinoglossic register is its “creative power to index consubstantial traits in the speaker” (Silverstein 2003: 226). He argues that by consuming wine and simultaneously using this specialized, rarefied register to describe the sensation(s) of consumption, “we become, in performative realtime, the well-bred, characterologically interesting (subtle, balanced, intriguing, winning, etc.) person iconically corresponding to the metaphorical fashion of speaking of the perceived register’s figurations of the aesthetic object of connoisseurship, wine” (Silverstein 2003: 226). In essence, then, mastering and deploying this register provides cultural capital that allows a speaker to affiliate themselves or index their membership in more affluent socioeconomic classes (Silverstein 2006: 491).

Manning’s (2008, 2012) work on drink orders at Starbucks also illustrates the role language plays in constructing a ‘distinctive’ food habitus. He argues that while successful reference in ordering a drink may be enough for a customer to be served, it does not confer the same level of prestige or distinction on the customer as does correct reference within the production focused register of Starbucks (Manning’s ‘half-caf-double-decaf-breve-affogato-no-cream’, 2008: 106). Manning further argues that because distinction is conferred through semiotic control over the Starbucks register, this type of language foregrounds class anxieties that exist in the United States, differentiating between customers who want a Starbucks coffee
experience (i.e. ‘elite’) versus those who simply want a ‘cup of joe’ (2008: 106). Toback’s (2017) analysis of Tully’s Coffee in Japan also foregrounds how distinction of this type is discursively constructed in the context of coffee. Toback suggests that the use of set Italianate phrases for ordering links coffee consumption to ideologies of European elitism, thus conferring cultural capital on customers.

On a broader level, Gaudio (2003: 660) has shown that talk over, or about coffee, is implicated in sociolinguistic processes that are linked to race and class in the United States (cf. Bourdieu’s description of the French cafe, 1982: 183). Roseberry (1996) shows that the growth of specialty coffee in the United States reflects a clear alignment with forms of class-based symbolic distinction. In this respect, specialty coffee mimics those establishments at the heart of Habermas’ (1989[1962]) treatment of the bourgeois (Gaudio 2003: 678). Specialty coffee draws on imagined connections with the European coffee houses that Habermas considered to be vibrant sites of political and cultural debate (see Ellis 2004). However as Gaudio (2003: 678) notes, specialty coffee has depoliticized this image, focusing instead on the forms of sociability engendered in these spaces. Through this depoliticization, the neoliberal political and economic order that acts on consumer practices conceals forms of inequality throughout the United States generally, and within the spheres of consumption specifically (Gaudio 2003: 683-84; West 2010). This concealment is evident in Gaudio (2003)’s description of the locations of Starbucks franchises in Tucson during the late 1990s/early 2000s: all “in the wealthier, whiter north side of town, most of which—given inadequate public transportation, especially in the city’s pre-dominantly Latino south side—are difficult for poorer people to reach, and often unwelcoming to those who do come” (684). This geographical distribution makes access to “choice” in coffee
consumption not just a matter of the free market, but a result of “economic, racial, and geographic constraint” (Gaudio 2003: 684).

Although upon first glance, the register of specialty coffee talk appears to closely parallel the mechanics of Silverstein’s oinoglossia, more recent research (Manning 2008; 2012) has foregrounded that the indexical entailments of specialty coffee consumption are rather different from, and perhaps even more complex than those of wine. Therefore, specialty coffee talk cannot be understood simply as coffee-focused oinoglossia. Instead, we find evidence that specialty coffee talk generates *bivalent class indexicalities*: meaning relationships in which a linguistic form indexes competing, opposing, even contradictory social characteristics simultaneously.

Woolard’s (1998) use of the term *bivalency* to refer to linguistic elements that can belong equally to one or more codes has inspired our use of this term, but in our analysis, we use bivalency simply to refer to the quality of having two characteristics at once. Building on Eckert (2008)’s argument that a given linguistic feature can index a range of related social characteristics within the same “indexical field”, we suggest that specialty coffee talk can in fact index *contradictory* social characteristics. We argue that this dual indexical work serves to mitigate the class-based anxieties that the ‘yuppie’ consumers of specialty coffee may experience in the process of consuming a luxury food item through the simultaneous projection of an unfussy and socially conscious image (Gaudio 2003; Jimenez 1995; Roseberry 1996).

THE LANGUAGE OF COFFEE CUPPING

Data analyzed in this portion of the study draws on recordings and participant observation in coffee cuppings held at specialty coffee establishments in Tucson, AZ and Chicago, IL, as well as the first author’s experience as a member of the specialty coffee industry. Between 2009 - 2014, Author X was employed for a total of three years as a barista at specialty coffee
establishments in both Atlanta, GA and Chicago, IL. Beyond preparing and serving specialty coffee, Author X was responsible for educating customers on the flavor profiles and tasting notes of coffees being served, as well as providing information about the regions and farms on which these coffees were grown. Outside of work, during this period Author X also participated in the broader professional coffee communities in both cities, which included participating coffee related events and cuppings. In addition to Author X’s experience working in the industry and attending cuppings as both a professional and consumer, between 2015 - 2017 both authors took part in coffee cuppings and tastings held throughout Tucson, AZ, while Author X also collected linguistic data from coffee cuppings in Chicago, IL.

Within the industry, cupping is primarily used as an evaluative tool. But recently, specialty companies have begun offering public cuppings to engage an increasingly informed consumer base. Consumer participation in cupping makes it possible for customers to gain some level of expert knowledge about the flavor profiles and sensory experiences of a given coffee, developing their palates and providing them with the sociolinguistic tools to better describe and discuss coffee as part of their experience of material consumption.

As with the genre of wine tasting, coffees can be evaluated on a number of sensory characteristics. In general, coffee cupping occurs in three phases: evaluation of the dry aroma of a coffee, evaluation of the wet aroma, and finally a tasting evaluation. At each stage in the evaluation, participants work to train their palate, moving them towards an articulation of the tasting ‘notes’ – remarks on the sensory characteristics of the coffee’s taste and aroma – sometimes on prepared evaluation sheets, sometimes by taking notes on scraps of paper or mobile devices, and sometimes by simply talking them through.
Cupping evaluations take the form of a wide range of lexical descriptors that coalesce to form a larger ‘flavor profile’, a description of the coffee’s flavor characteristics as determined at each stage of the cupping process. The terms depicted in the coffee taster’s flavor wheel published by the SCAA (Figure 1) provide an overview of the linguistic resources common in this sensory and discursive practice. These flavor profiles are, of course, unique to each participant in the process, as each taster will have a different palate.

![Coffee Taster's Flavor Wheel](image)

Figure 1: Coffee tasting wheel (SCAA 2015)

While industry cuppings are geared towards evaluation, public cuppings are focused on exposing the consumers to the sensory experience of coffee tasting and description, allowing
them to participate in the process of ‘painting a landscape together’, while acknowledging the multiple unique perspectives and sensations that are possible. For the public, cupping is a reflexive practice, geared towards bringing consumers to the point where they can describe what they like in their coffee. This provides an educational entrée into connoisseurship, with the process of these events and their register of descriptive talk ritually denoting the types of elite, bourgeois characteristics akin to those discussed by Silverstein (2003). Looking collectively at the linguistic data that emerged from the coffee cuppings included in our field sample, the lexical descriptors used fall into broad nominal and adjectival categories, presented below in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nominal Forms</th>
<th>Adjectival Forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meat</td>
<td>Earthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco</td>
<td>Sweet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirt</td>
<td>Oaky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnt Wood</td>
<td>Faint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Root Beer</td>
<td>Darker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>Heavier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian Plum</td>
<td>Nutty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spice</td>
<td>Bready</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peach</td>
<td>Brothy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peach Fuzz</td>
<td>Fruity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peach Skin</td>
<td>Semisweet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dry Nut</td>
<td>Bright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chocolate</td>
<td>Softness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campfire</td>
<td>Malic Acidity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherry Chocolate</td>
<td>Cedary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazelnut</td>
<td>Dirty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roasted Hazelnut</td>
<td>Bland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roasted Walnut</td>
<td>Juicy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lavender</td>
<td>Beefy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strawberry Candy</td>
<td>Salty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raspberry Ale</td>
<td>Hollow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulp</td>
<td>Dry (finish)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicinal Lemon Balm</td>
<td>Astringent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange Sherbet</td>
<td>Pulpy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherry</td>
<td>Fruit Forward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bread</td>
<td>Soft Appley-ness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Plum  Faded
Sugar Cane
Watermelon Candy
Vanilla
Vanilla Honey
Oatmeal Cookie Dough
Pine Nut
Citrus
Dry Almond
Black Pepper
Lime
Cured Beef
Salt
Rice Krispies
Grain
Caramel
Milk Chocolate
Bergamot
Coco Nibs
Neapolitan Ice Cream
Strawberry
Ginger
Orange Pith
Plum Brandy
Merlot
Tannins
Sourdough Bread
Pecan
Dry Hops
Grape
Raisin
Stone Fruit

Many of these descriptors are also visible on specialty coffee products, such as bags of beans and website advertisements, as seen in Figures 2, 3, and 4 below:
Figure 2. Presta Coffee Roasters (Arizona) Kenya Label

Figure 3. Verve Coffee Roasters (California) Guatemala Label
Describing a coffee’s wet aroma as reminiscent of plum brandy, or its tasting notes as akin to a fruit forward merlot indexically anchors coffee within the established semiotic space of wine (see Silverstein 2016 on the process of ‘vinification’). As a result, these descriptors index the refined and cultured qualities that the specialty coffee industry attempts to foster. The use of this lexicon couples with specific bodily practices that are emblematic of the ritual of cupping, including, as one professional noted during our fieldwork, the proper technique to “shower your tongue in liquid” during coffee tasting.

Although these descriptors regularly draw on unusual ingredients, such as kiwi or blackcurrant, cuppings and the evaluative judgments that emerge in these contexts also make ample use of more quotidian tastes and flavors, e.g. fruity or sweet. Regardless of whether a consumer draws on the exotic or quotidian in describing a coffee, the act of searching for and naming tastes other than coffee while consuming it ritually transforms coffee from Mintz’s “proletarian hunger killer” (1979), “consumed in working-class homes and during workplace
‘coffee breaks’” (Jimenez 1995: 49), to an object worthy of careful appreciation by discerning experts.

This “ritual transformation” of the beverage allows, consequently, for consumers to transform *themselves* into the kind of people who drink prestigious, specialty, craft beverages—that is, into Silverstein’s “well-bred, characterologically interesting person” (2003). However, this discursive alignment with a ‘prestigious’ social type is only one function of the specialty coffee talk register. In the next section, we move away from the cupping table to focus on how specialty coffee marketing discourse allows consumers to align themselves with less ‘prestigious’ class positions.

THE PUBLIC FACE OF SPECIALTY COFFEE

While our analysis of cupping illustrates the applicability of Silverstein’s (2003, 2006) analyses of wine tasting, a strict ‘oinoglossic’ reading of specialty coffee talk misses the complex ways that class is indexed through this register. In addition to an aesthetics rooted in elitist discourse that locates coffee on a plane similar to wine, specialty coffee also intertwines with these elite discourses a focus on ‘authenticity’ (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014; Mapes 2018; see also Besky 2014 on Darjeeling tea; Weiss 2016 on heritage pork), often via fetishization of the foreign and exotic places and spaces in which ‘good’ coffee is grown.

In this section, we show how the language used by the specialty coffee industry to talk about people and points on the supply chain pushes imagined connections between consumers and coffee farmers or pickers that lessen the metaphorical distances between these groups. In doing so, brands and consumers become aligned with the (seemingly) exotic Global South. This
alignment helps consumers assert themselves as a socially aware, progressive, and down-to-earth sort, in spite of their use of the fancy, perhaps snobbish lexicon that cuppings demand.

Initial examples of this discourse can be seen in the sourcing information provided by Stumptown Coffee Roasters:

The best coffee grows in the most remote places. There is a thin band that goes around the world near the equator. Within that band, you need mountains, thick old-growth forest and just the right microclimate. Set aside up to four days to get there.

... On your way there, you’ll pass through Houston’s George Bush Intercontinental Airport, or you’ll stand in the endless security line at New York’s JFK en route to distant parts of Ethiopia, Colombia, Indonesia and 10 other countries around the world.

You’ll also experience 8 vaccines (the malaria pills—which can cause hallucinations and nightmares—are the worst), a passport that fills up with handwritten visas, bumpy eight-hour van rides, granola bars and in at least one case, eating the heart of a bull that has been slaughtered in your honor.

The Green Team members, named for the color of coffee beans before they are roasted, don’t do it the easy way, which would be buying bulk, mid-quality beans at a trading floor in a capital city. Instead, they go right to the source of the best coffee — that farm or washing station high atop a distant Ethiopian hill. It ends when they arrive at that distant farm, washing station, factory or mill. They sit down in a home or around a campfire to talk about this year’s crop with a producer they have met many times. They get to work.

Figure 5: Stumptown Coffee Roasters (Oregon)

In discourses like the one above, the authenticity of a given coffee is rooted in the exoticization of the coffee and the place that it is grown (see Figure 5). Coffee at its source is distant, remote, embedded in a different way of life than that of the consumer. Stumptown illustrates this by telling consumers how getting to the best coffees involves multiple plane rides, eight vaccinations, and even being offered the heart of a bull.

This exoticization is even more profound when examining Blue Bottle Coffee’s 2016 release of a limited-run of high-quality specialty coffee from Yemen (Eggers 2018). Although Yemen was one of the first places in the world where coffee was grown and harvested, high-
quality coffee from Yemen is rare given its continually turbulent political environment. Since 2015, this has included a Saudi-led and U.S.-backed military conflict leading to near-total infrastructural collapse across the country (Blumi 2017) and resulting in a virtual inability to export coffee beyond its borders. Blue Bottle’s acquisition of Yemeni coffee was the result of two suitcases being smuggled out of the country by Mokhtar Alkhanshali (a Yemeni-American coffee importer) on a 20ft boat.¹⁰

Eggers (2018) chronicles the lengths that Alkhanshali went through to get coffee out of Yemen, emphasizing not only his journey across the Red Sea, but Saudi bombings, American drone strikes, and militarized checkpoints. After finally arriving in California, that coffee came to be sold at Blue Bottle for $16 per cup—as founder James Freeman put it, ‘miracles aren’t cheap’.¹¹ This tells us that the $16 price tag reflects the lengths that the company went through to get the coffee, and the immense amount of labor (and luck) that went into its growth, harvest, and production.

By utilizing marketing discourses that explicitly call attention to America’s involvement in the destruction of Yemen through drone strikes and support for the Saudi-led war (Eggers 2018), consumers are connected to the plight of Yemeni coffee producers.¹² Through their partnership with Port of Mokha, the exporting company founded by Alkhanshali, Blue Bottle notes that their offering of Yemeni coffee allows consumers to help “revive Yemen’s coffee economy by linking farmers to the specialty market”.¹³ As consumers read through the informational pamphlet that accompanies their coffee, they are able to imagine themselves as being connected to the exotic, war-torn land their coffee came from, and contributing to the improvement of the lives of producers—even while the tasting notes consumers may have used to describe this coffee align them with high-class, prestigious, Western modes of consumption.¹⁴
Thus, the potential for *bivalent class indexicality* emerges: specialty coffee consumers can point to their alignment with prestigious, high-status, Western, capitalist class positions, while simultaneously aligning themselves with marginalized coffee producers in an exotic, far-off land. To be clear, the imagined alignment with Yemeni coffee growers produced by Blue Bottle’s narrative does not actually challenge forms of structural inequality or degradation that have influenced the Yemeni coffee industry. But it does create a discursive space where specialty coffee consumers can feel ‘good’ about their elite coffee consumption choices. As consumers index their socioeconomic status by purchasing a $16 cup of Alkanshali’s coffee and describe it using the specialized lexicon of tasting notes, they simultaneously downplay that status by reading about the history of the Yemeni conflicts, the hands that grew the coffee, and the labor that went into its transport and production.

In addition to the exoticization of the places in which specialty coffee is grown, a tandem process is evident in specialty coffee marketing wherein coffee laborers themselves (by and large living and working in the Global South) serve as objects of exoticization. One example of this process can be seen in the sourcing materials provided by Canadian specialty coffee company 49th Parallel, presented in Figure 6.15
SOURCING

The coffees we end up bringing to Vancouver are the result of determination and passion from the farmers and all parties along the supply chain working to preserve that initial hard work.

The people we work with are up at the crack of dawn, tirelessly working towards a plentiful and sweet harvest. They are vibrant members of their communities. We love working with them.

These People for Example

Figure 6: 49th Parallel Coffee Roasters (British Columbia) - 'Sourcing'

Where Stumptown focused on the exoticization of place and space, 49th Parallel authenticates their coffee through references to and representations of the individuals that grow and harvest their coffee. Here, 49th Parallel specifically focuses on the labor practices that these individuals endure. Although they acknowledge this work as tireless, sun-up to sun-down labor, the strategic essentialism (Spivak 1996; see Bucholtz 2003 for its application in sociolinguistics) inherent in presenting only this narrow aspect of the supply chain, ultimately provides the consumer with a fraction of the realities of the global coffee trade.

During our data collection, Author X attended a ‘meet the farmer’ event held in one of Tucson’s specialty coffee shops. At the event, Arturo (a pseudonym), a farmer from Costa Rica
gave a public presentation about the farm, its history, and the processing practices used in harvesting their coffee and bring it to the specialty market. The event was attended by individuals that Author X knew as members of the professional specialty coffee community in Tucson, as well the general public.

In the question and answer period, attendees asked a number of questions related to the labor practices that Arturo employed, how these practices fit into the coffee supply chain, and what they mean for the laborers picking the coffee. Arturo acknowledged that much of his labor force were workers from neighboring areas of Costa Rica, as well as a substantial migrant labor population from other parts of Central America. However, he was quick to point out that the premium paid by American specialty coffee companies for his product translated into an ability to pay his laborers more for their work. In this particular case, the farmer shifted to paying coffee pickers per hour, as opposed to a weight-based, per piece payment system.

Events like this one call attention to a number of aspects of the specialty coffee trade that are relevant to the argument that we present here. First, although it is true that in at least some cases, farm owners whose land produces specialty coffee may themselves be middle-class, an enduring reality of the specialty coffee trade is that it draws heavily on migrant and working-class labor to actually pick coffee. Second, coffee harvesting is an incredibly back-breaking process. Specialty coffee requires that coffee cherries only be harvested by hand at the peak of their ripeness. As Arturo’s presentation showed, the actual manual labor associated with specialty coffee is conducted both by local working class laborers and a robust migrant labor force.

Arturo has used the premium paid for specialty coffee to raise the standard of living of his employees through practices such as switching to per-hour compensation. In this respect, his
decisions show that fair or direct-trade coffee does hold the potential to raise economic standards for at least *some* individuals within the coffee supply chain (Lyon 2011). However, although in this case coffee pickers may receive higher wages, these wages also come with additional labor requirements, such as only picking cherries that are especially ripe, making that labor potentially more challenging, requiring more time and care to actually conduct. Images of these workers also form one of the major marketing tools employed by specialty coffee companies in selling their product to North American consumers, as shown in Figure 7 below, which features coffee pickers and processors in Burundi depicted on Intelligentsia Coffee’s public website.

![Figure 7. Karyenda Burundi, Intelligentsia Coffee](image.png)

These images of hardworking laborers produce an idyllic, but ultimately imaginary, artisanal vision of a commodity while also providing a strikingly clear example of how the bodies of coffee laborers are used to establish the authenticity and legitimacy of the coffee itself. Through offset images, consumers are visually led to associate the coffees offered by 49th Parallel and Intelligentsia with the labor and lives of decontextualized, nameless coffee pickers. These representations reinforce the types of connections discussed previously that situate coffee
as exotic, aligning the exoticization of the product with the exoticization of the people that produce coffee. The result is a continued North-South hierarchy linked to enduring histories of structural inequality and racism that have long been a part of transnational economic and political regimes. Such essentialized representations of specialty coffee producers reflect broader trends in the marketing of artisanal comestibles. In particular, there is a strong resemblance to imaginaries about tea plantation workers proliferated through the marketing of Darjeeling tea (Besky 2014). As with the case that Besky describes, in specialty coffee these imaginaries ultimately work to make consumers feel better about themselves while not actually addressing systemic or structural forms of inequality that act on coffee producing communities.

The mediatization (Agha 2011) of the bodies and experiences of coffee producers or pickers locates them as the source of authentic coffee, while creating an imagined connection between the consumer and individuals at other levels of the coffee supply chain. These forms of representation couple with fair trade agreements (Lyon 2011; West 2010, 2012), and developing direct relationships (Weiss 2003) between specialty coffee companies in the global north with their producers in the Global South. Such relationships represent a foundational component of the specialty coffee industry, with Intelligentsia Coffee telling their consumers that they:

understand that what happens on the farm directly affects the quality of our coffees, which is why we’ve spent the last 15 years and counting cultivating relationships with growers who share our exact standards in quality. We don’t just buy exceptional coffee from award-winning growers around the world. We accompany our coffees every step of the way, from the nurseries where the seeds are planted to the coffeebars where they are brewed with precision. Direct Trade benefits everyone involved, including you.

Here, long-held relationships between coffee companies and producers are foregrounded, and through their consumption, specialty coffee drinkers are drawn into these relationships as well. However, as West (2010: 694) notes, such connections ultimately serve to create and
reinforce what she describes as an eco-neoliberal fiction. With the exception of relatively rare “meet the farmer” events and the like, consumers have little if any contact with the individuals that grow their coffee. By creating a discursive space that allows for the imagination of a personal connection with the farmer, the consumer participates in a kind of ‘cultural tourism’, aligning themselves with coffee growers while maintaining their own position in global racial and socioeconomic hierarchies.

Beyond the product, specialty coffee discourse regularly emphasizes the cultivation and development of community, centered around the roaster and cafe. Coffee houses have long been viewed as intellectual and community hubs, particularly for the bourgeoisie, and this remains an important part of how the specialty coffee industry views itself (Ellis 2004; Gaudio 2003). Through discourses that highlight coffee’s exotic characteristics, consumer participation in the community surrounding coffee allows them an imagined entrée into this exclusive, unique space.

An explicit focus on community building represents another facet of the specialty coffee industry, emphasizing the idea that coffee moves beyond just its status as a commodity (Baijnuth 2015), carrying the potential to bring people together. Those forms of connection extend beyond the capitalist fueled discursive encounters discussed by Gaudio (2003), to an attempt to bring individuals together around a love of coffee. See, for instance, this excerpt from Cartel Coffee Lab’s website (Figure 8).

**IT'S A STORY ABOUT PEOPLE**

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From seed to cup, specialty coffee is a story involving many people. Our purpose is to invite as many as possible to participate in and learn about this ever-growing narrative. Coffee is our craft; people are our passion.

Figure 8. Cartel Coffee Lab (Arizona)

Here, Cartel foregrounds that their ‘story’, as well as the ‘story’ of coffee itself, is one that involves many hands across multiple levels of the supply chain. While acknowledging that the supply chain of coffee extends beyond the borders of the state of Arizona, Cartel stresses the centrality of individuals in the way that they conceptualize the experience of coffee production and consumption. For Cartel, one of the most important aspects of an authentic coffee consumption experience is that it is one that is not solitary, but engaged, collaborative, and communal. In other words, the experience of coffee is one to be celebrated as part of a larger shared community of practice (Eckert and Wenger 2005; Lave and Wenger 1991).

This focus on community within specialty coffee extends, of course, to include the people that grow and harvest coffee. Through practices of fair or direct trade (Lyon 2011; West 2012), specialty coffee companies seek to empower and support coffee producing communities around the world, as Intelligentsia Coffee describes on the portion of their website that tells consumers “Why We’re Different”:

We didn’t adopt Direct Trade practices because it’s a trendy way to do business; we introduced the concept to the coffee industry. Our commitment to direct trade allows us to cut out unnecessary importers and exporters, and enables us to truly partner with our growers.

Our buying team travels the globe and is collectively in the field virtually every day of the year, sourcing new grower relationships and working with our existing farmers.

We meticulously collect data, insights, and best practices from all of our growing partners and share them to improve overall quality. We also tie adherence to sustainable
farming and environmental practices with our commitment to paying above Fair Trade prices for truly outstanding coffee. This ensures responsible stewardship of the land, and a sustainable business model for our farmers, resulting in partnerships that thrive year after year. Because of this, we’re able to provide you with exclusive, remarkable coffees you won’t find anywhere else.

Intelligentsia argues that their commitment to direct trade practices makes it possible for their relationships with coffee producers to extend beyond a producer-buyer dynamic, noting that they consider their coffee growers ‘partners’ in a relationship that benefits both Intelligentsia and the growers themselves. Similarly, Philadelphia-based La Colombe Coffee Roasters notes:

[We] pride ourselves on proactive, long-term relationships with small-holder farms and socially responsible coffee-growing associations. For us, the quality of our coffee starts with the quality of these relationships. By working directly with farmers to create mutually beneficial partnerships, we can increase transparency in the supply chain, guide farming practices to yield better and better beans, and support the livelihoods of coffee-producing communities.

Here again, La Colombe describes their relationship with coffee producers as a partnership developed over long periods of time. In forming these relationships, La Colombe achieves one of its stated goals, to 'support the livelihoods of coffee-producing communities.' But La Colombe does not only concern itself with ‘community’ among coffee growers-- community among consumers is also a central issue, exemplified in how they describe their 'neighborhood':

In addition to supporting our coffee-producing communities, we seek to support, nurture, and enhance the local neighborhoods that are home to our cafes. From providing free coffee to a nearby homeless shelter to helping with the community garden across the street, we work hard to engage with our environment and create meaningful connections with our neighbors.

For La Colombe, ‘community’ extends from coffee-producing regions to the local neighborhoods in which La Colombe storefronts open. In this case, the cafe serves as a central site in the creation of community, with their engagement with the community extending to outreach work that provides coffee in neighborhood homeless shelters and working in their local


community garden.\textsuperscript{22} Perhaps inadvertently, their efforts to engage with social issues like homelessness accentuates one of the realities of the specialty coffee industry in North America: it remains implicated in the very processes of gentrification and urban change that contribute to homelessness in the first place (Zukin 2008).\textsuperscript{23}

Although companies like La Colombe or Intelligentsia believe that “coffee in all its forms—whole bean, brewed, and espresso—should be an approachable, accessible luxury”\textsuperscript{24}, it is still a ‘luxury’, and therefore remains implicated in inequality. The cost of specialty coffee makes it inaccessible to many members of the grower communities as well as to significant segments of the American market. Through language that centralizes the importance of community, such as the ones shown here, enduring class-based inequalities are downplayed by foregrounding the neighborhood-based, community-building possibilities of a local coffee shop, and by offering semiotic links to the ‘authenticity’ of the people and places where specialty coffee is grown. In all cases, these discursive representations fail to acknowledge an important reality of the specialty coffee industry: fair, or direct trade, and an explicit focus on community development and capacity-building ultimately does little to subvert the weight of global capitalism. The mechanisms and frameworks put in place by specialty coffee companies are almost uniformly market-based solutions to address the failures of neoliberal economic policies that have manifested themselves in the developing world (Besky 2014; Fridell 2007).

CONCLUSION

Despite the deeply entrenched economic disparities between the wealthy and the middle-to-lower classes, the upper classes are no longer seen as the sole arbiters of taste (Baker 2013; Bourdieu 1984). Indeed, in popular discourse, the tastes and styles of the very wealthy are often portrayed as old-fashioned, out-of-touch, and dated (Sherman 2017). This is linked to a turn to discourses
of ‘authenticity’—the very perception of the wealthy as out-of-touch with ‘real’ people means that their tastes are also somehow inauthentic. Authenticity in taste (broadly) is instead conceived of as connecting to marginalized groups and so aspects of style that are seen as originating among these groups are seen as more authentic (Johnston and Baumann 2014). Of course, it is not the case that these groups become suddenly valued by the mainstream. Instead, mainstream middle or upper-middle class white folks, who are distinguished from the extremely wealthy in the current American class dynamic, become the only legitimate carriers of these ‘authentic’ styles and moral or ‘ethical’ forms of consumption (Sherman 2017).

The consumers to whom specialty coffee is marketed in North America typically see themselves as politically liberal and progressive in a way that distinguishes them from the very wealthy elite, yet their privileged position in global economic markets and eager consumption of luxury products undermines this distinction. Thus, class ‘anxieties’—the constant calculus of balancing between “relaxation in tension, ease within restraint, a rare and highly improbable combination of antagonistic properties” that characterizes bourgeois distinction (Bourdieu 1984 311)—may manifest (cf. Middleton 2013: 609). One way in which these consumers mitigate this anxiety is by centralizing the role of the people who grow and harvest their coffee in an effort to stress their own status as mindful consumers (cf. Bourdieu 1984’s “strategies of condescension”).

In reality, of course, most consumers will have no contact with these people. Instead, this consumption allows the consumer to participate in a kind of ‘cultural tourism', aligning themselves with coffee growers in far-off, exotic locales—again, constructing authenticity through association with hard-working farmers in the Global South and yet maintaining their own position in the global racial and socioeconomic hierarchies. In other words, by discursively
centering the role of laborers in the Global South, the upper-middle-class Americans who consume specialty coffee can align themselves with the ‘authenticity’ that the growers represent (cf. Orlove 1998). As we have stated above, this alignment does little to materially affect the lives or labor conditions of coffee growers. Instead we argue its function is to provide a discursive space in which consumers can feel better about themselves, particularly in light of the ways that the lexicon of coffee cuppings situates them in a privileged, elite class position.

Yet, just as when “the person ‘naturally’ identified with a Rolls Royce, a top hat or golf...takes the metro, sports a flat cap (or a polo neck) or plays football” (Bourdieu 1984: 472), this discursively-enacted “deliberate transgression” of presumed class lines must be “counterbalanced” by an increased attention to other forms of class distinction (Bourdieu 1984: 225). Rituals such as specialty coffee cuppings socialize consumers into the use of a technical language in order to discursively mark their consumption practices as rarefied and esoteric—in other words, far from the ‘authenticity’ of the coffee growers. Specialty coffee is not simply fuel for a proletariat worker (although it may also serve this function), but a luxury comestible requiring specialized knowledge in order to properly enjoy (Silverstein 2003). Learning to describe coffee as having notes of ‘bergamot’ or having the flavor of a ‘fruit-forward merlot’ explicitly transforms the material experience of coffee from fuel for working-class productivity to a product meant for leisurely and satisfying indulgence.

The data we have analyzed above shows that coffee’s bivalent class indexes—that is, the ability to concurrently point to both ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ class positions—emerges as a way for specialty coffee consumers to assuage the anxieties that develop as a result of attaining a high-status class position, while at the same time wishing to disavow it to appear more ‘authentic’. By explicitly naming the labor and trade practices that bring these brands and their consumers into
contact with the coffee growers through labels such as 'fair’ or ‘direct’ trade, specialty coffee drinkers can disavow (imagined) old fashioned class dynamics, in which the rich, white, and powerful avoid any connection or closeness with the poor and brown. Yet through the complex, intricate lexicon of coffee flavor notes, specialty coffee drinkers engage in the same process of distinction which ritually transforms wine consumers into the elite, well-bred, interesting character type they would otherwise like to reject.

Broadly, this analysis advances a new way of understanding the relationship between language and social meaning. Most analyses of this relationship tend to present it as a unidirectional process in which a linguistic form indexes one stance, feature, or characteristic in an indexical field; or even a process in which a linguistic form can potentially index many related stances, features, or characteristics, as in the construction of linguistic style (Coupland 2007; Eckert 2008). This work shows how some forms of language use can index opposing or contradictory social characteristics at the same time, a phenomenon which has not been described in the literature thus far. We suggest that the reason for this is that until recently, much sociolinguistic research has focused on only one sociolinguistic “scale” at a time (Blommaert 2016). By analyzing both linguistic choices on the individual level (i.e., the development of the lexicon of specialty coffee cupping) and how these individual choices are engendered by, reflected in, and made possible based on broader sociocultural discourses, theoretical concepts such as indexicality can become more complex, rendering the analyses we conduct with them more nuanced and accurate.

NOTES

1 Acknowledgements
As one of the reviewers of this manuscript noted, while here we specifically examine coffee that is consumed black (in coffee tastings) or marketed as whole beans (on websites and promotional materials), this is not how most North American consumers actually take their coffee. Additives to coffee, whether in the form of milk (steamed versus not), sugar (whether as simple syrup or granules), or flavorings (e.g. Irish Cream, Hazelnut, etc) are all part of broader consumer discussions of coffee. They too also act as indexes of class of the sort that we describe here, although we do not treat them in our analysis. We agree that it is worth investigating in future work what these additives say about a coffee, who consumes it, and how they are situated within the broader North American class dynamics that we describe.

Silverstein (2016) does note that the use of this oinoglossic lexicon is not without its own forms of anxiety that are both emblematic of and induced by its very use.

We see similar moves in Sherman’s (2017) analysis of affluent New Yorkers, who assuage their anxieties about their socioeconomic status through rhetorical moves that centered progressive political views, social consciousness, and morality linked to their consumption practices.
Similar discursive moves can be seen in the case of Palestinian olive oil described by Meneley (2011).

While American consumption of Yemeni coffee unquestionably speaks to issues of class, this example also emphasizes to the extent to which class is embedded in Empire. For American consumers, their citizenship itself facilitates access to Yemeni coffee while simultaneously reflecting the power of American commodity markets and consumption practices to exploit global resources.

Pacific Standard also provides a recent discussion of the coffee shop as a symbol of neighborhood gentrification: http://psmag.com/economics/history-of-coffee-shop-as-symbol-for-gentrification
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