

From correlation to meaning: A matched guise study of (ING) and /t/ release

Increasingly sociolinguists have understood meaning as a product of interaction between speakers and hearers (for example Eckert 2001, McConnell-Ginet 2001). In practice, however, the study of the social meaning of variation has focused almost exclusively on production, so we know a lot about when and how speakers employ variables, but have comparatively little information as to how hearers interpret those variables. Thus, all that is definitely established is a correlation between resource and person/situation, not a meaning relation, although sound hypotheses may be developed through ethnographic work. One exception to this emphasis on production is language attitudes (for an overview see Cargile and Bradac 2001), but this work has focused primarily on language varieties, rather than specific resources.

My research addresses this gap by applying the matched guise technique to two variables: (ING) and release of word final /t/. It forms part of a larger project that attempts to combine the precision of the experimental paradigm with qualitative attention to social nuance. This first step aims to establish hearer response in general terms, as a platform on which to build a more complex follow-up.

Sentences from four speakers were digitally manipulated to create 19 pairs of recordings differing only in one of the two variables. 34 subjects (college undergraduates) listened to 10 randomly selected pairs, rated each recording on 10 adjectives (casual, formal, wealthy, educated, smart, nervous, relaxed, careful, confident, polite) and gave estimates of the speaker's age and region of origin. The adjectives were selected through reference to previous work on the variables and in language attitudes and pilot testing. In particular, adjectives were chosen that reflected the findings that (ING) variation correlates with socio-economic status and with formality in situation (e.g. interview vs. conversation) (see Fischer 1958, Labov 1966, Wald and Shopen 1985) and /t/ release with education or precision (Benor 2001, Bucholtz 1998, Podesva in progress).

The ratings for the ten adjectives were subject to factor analysis to determine the pattern of covariation. Factor analysis gave three factors. Since the factors given (shown below) made sense, weighted averages of these were used in the subsequent analysis, and given the names Mood, Status and Politeness.

Mood	Status	Polite/Age
relaxed	educated	polite
casual	wealthy	age
nervous	smart	
formal		
confident		
careful		

Within-subjects ANOVA indicated significant effects for both variables on the factors of Mood and Status, but none on Politeness. Further analysis will investigate the individual ratings and interaction effects, including one between Politeness and speaker which is as yet unexplained.

	F	Sig of F
(ING) in something:		
Mood	819.37	.000
Status	358.30	.000

Politeness	.90	.346
gerund (ING):		
Mood	562.71	.000
Status	213.52	.000
Politeness	.30	.583
t release:		
Mood	755.39	.000
Status	161.10	.000
Politeness	.04	.841

By using descriptors relevant to specific variables, this study moves beyond the traditional categories of analysis in sociolinguistics and particularly language attitudes studies. In addition, by combining experimental quantitative data with qualitative analysis it expands the methodologies available for analyzing social meaning.

References

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