

Cognitive questions of sociolinguistic meaning

Kathryn Campbell-Kibler

The Ohio State University

The study of sociolinguistic variation is uniquely poised to advance cognitive science through our engagement with on the one hand, the ethnographic investigation of the relationships between language and social structures and on the other the cognitive representation of language.

While the study of language change remains a core area of interest in variation, the third wave of variation study (Eckert 2005) has brought with it a new set of fascinating and challenging questions.

These center around the now well-documented observation that individuals notice some, but not all, linguistic variation and associate it with concepts, including groups, places, topics and more. As originally observed by Labov (1972) this noticing occurs in multiple ways, from language forms influencing social perceptions, to speakers changing forms within or across interactions, to forms being subject to explicit verbal commentary. From Agha's (2007) work, we also know that it positions language features within registers, sets of speech forms understood as belonging to a coherent whole with social import, for example, Southern accents, cookbook talk or politeness.

These registers are fundamental to speakers' everyday use of language, allowing them to make sense of their own and others' behavior.

One key area of sociolinguistic variation in the coming years will be tackling the cognitive "how" questions of this process of tying language forms to each other and to other non-language concepts, including how this process is and is not integrated with language processing itself. I will discuss some possible formulations for these questions and discuss current work bearing on them, with an emphasis on the social perception of speech.