What did you think she'd say? Expectations and sociolinguistic perception
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The creation of social meaning via sociolinguistic variation (Eckert 2000) depends on listeners transforming linguistic stimuli into social perceptions. Many questions remain open about how a single variable contributes meaning, including what role listener expectations play in determining the salience of variation, for example whether all tokens of a variable carry social meaning or only unexpected ones.

This paper explores listener expectations in sociolinguistic perception of the English variable (ING) in the spontaneous speech of two men and two women each from California and North Carolina. The matched guise study compared three guises, all with some level of interference from deliberately introduced white noise.   Guises were created through digital manipulation, resulting in near-identical recordings: one with tokens of -in, one with -ing and one with no audible tokens of either, due to white noise. This last served as an (ING)-neutral guise, leaving listeners free to posit either variant.

Responses were collected from 174 predominantly White, age-heterogeneous listeners, solicited through an online social networking site. Listeners rated speakers on eight 6-point scales (e.g. educated, intelligent, friendly), and selected descriptors from a list (e.g. annoying, a nerd, a mother). Prior to hearing the speakers, listeners completed a brief questionnaire on demographics and mood. Afterwards, they were asked to report which (ING) variant they remembered each speaker using. This approach produced two different windows into listener expectations regarding (ING), one relatively conscious: asking listeners which variant they believed each speaker to have used, and one relatively unconscious: examining which (ING) variant patterned with the (ING)-free guises in the perceptual measures.

The results showed a marked difference between the two measures. As expected, in the memory task listeners did not remember which (ING) guise they had heard for each speaker, responding instead along regional lines. North Carolina speakers were predominantly described as having said -in (79% -in) and the Californians as having said -ing (28% -in).

The covert (ING) effects did not show this regional division, but instead showed different groupings for different types of evaluation. On one hand, -in guises stood out as more casual and accented:

 -in guises were rated more casual (2.40) than either -ing (2.51) or neutral (2.51) guises (p=0.018).

 -in guises were rated more accented (3.62) than -ing (3.47) or neutral (3.40) guises (p=0.010).

On the other, -ing guises stood out as decreasing the influence of mood on evaluations:

 -in and neutral guises received higher intelligence ratings the more pleasant the listener's mood, while -ing guises did not (p=0.045)

-in and neutral guises for male speakers received higher scores for masculinity the calmer the listeners' mood, while -ing guises did not (p = 0.019)

Listeners' conscious assessments of (ING) use reflect familiar regional stereotypes (Hazen 2005) but their social perceptions display a more complex pattern, showing that either (ING) variant may contribute new information, depending on the social quality of the speaker under consideration.

References

Eckert, Penelope (2000) *Linguistic Variation As Social Practice: The Lingustic Construction of Identity in Belten High*, volume 27 of *Language in Society*. Blackwell, New York.

Hazen, Kirk. 2005.The in/ing variable. In K. Brown, editor, *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, volume 5. Elsevier, 2 edition.