

Austrian listeners' perceptions of style-shifting: an experimental approach and socio-phonetic analysis

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'Speaker-design' approaches to linguistic style-shifting investigate how speakers proactively shape talk in order to elicit desired hearer responses (Schilling-Estes 2002). Thus, speakers may switch into socially marked varieties to contextualize utterances for interpretation, as when Austrian native-speakers switch from standard into negatively regarded dialect to convey antagonism. A condition for such a strategy's success is that hearers actually *perceive* the performed shifts, to contextualize and interpret utterances accordingly. However, shifts between closely-related varieties may not be clear-cut, making it difficult for analysts to argue for their potential as 'contextualization cues' (Gumperz 1982).

Following Coupland (1980), this paper explores an experiment in non-linguists' perceptions of style shifts as a possible methodological remedy. 42 participants (Austrian native speakers) listened to 12 audio-recorded extracts from an Austrian TV political discussion show, underlining those passages in transcripts where they perceived Austrian dialect to be spoken (vs. standard Austrian German, which is more commonly used in public media). The average length of the extracts was 72 seconds.

Of a total of 2,240 words in the transcript, 349 (15.6%) were underlined as dialectal by at least a quarter of informants. Results show that of these 349 words, 78% (N= 273) can be accounted for as unambiguously containing phonological, morphosyntactic or lexical dialect features (e.g. the dialectal form [gUat] vs. standard [gu:t] – *good*; the dialectal auxiliary 'täte' vs. standard 'würde' – *would*).

However, 22% percent (N=76) of the underlined words could not be accounted for by any segmental phonological, morphosyntactic, or lexical feature. We examined these un-accounted-for instances of perceived dialect shift to see if (1) they could be accounted for by intonation contour, and (2) they cluster together with dialectal features in surrounding discourse.

(1) To investigate the effects of intonation, we used ToBI annotation methods (Beckman & Elam 1993) to compare two recordings of the same text (from a different data set), one in super-regional Austrian dialect, one in standard (comparable to the varieties used in the perception experiment). Results suggest that intonation contour is not clearly distinctive for dialect vs. standard, since both dialect and standard show rising pitch accent (LH), declarative lowering of F₀ (L%), and 'continuation rises' (H%) at the right edge of intonational phrases. (2) Further analysis of our experiment's speech samples shows that almost all un-accounted-for words cluster together with words showing clear dialect features, and that together the underlined passages frequently constitute interactional 'moves' (Goffman 1981), i.e. utterances in which a speaker e.g. sums up an opposing position, ironically quotes a political antagonist, or expresses contempt towards an interlocutor. Thus, our experiment suggests that informants perceived entire stretches as dialectal rather than listening word-by-word for dialect vs. standard use, and that shift boundaries are drawn on the utterance rather than the word level.

Perception experiments such as ours give much-needed empirical validation to the interactional analysis of shifts between closely-related varieties. The identification of dialect 'diagnostic' features as well as shift boundaries as perceived by listeners is a requisite for any analysis of the strategic use of styles in conversation.

References:

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