Language ideologies, locality and speech perception.
What experimental methods can do, and what they have not done yet

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Perception and variation

1. Phonetic variation and the social meaning with it associated play a crucial role in language perception (Niedzielski 1999, Hay, Drager and Warren 2009, Campbell Kibler 2011).

2. Social/episodic information is cognitively stored alongside grammatical information and is processed together with the latter (“exemplar models”, Pierrehumbert 2002, Labov 2010)

Psycholinguistics is not only about grammar. It must also include the processing of variation and indexical/social meaning (including sets of consistent beliefs on how people speak (Gal and Irvine 2000))
Sociolinguistics in the lab

Cons:
- Non ecological
- Oversimplification of complex semiotic processes

Pros:
- Fine grained manipulation of phonetic segments
- Precise test for perception
Both in Canada and in Michigan, the diphtong [aʊ], among other vowels, displays a raised pronunciation (lower F1).

http://www.gazzaro.it/accents/sound/house.mp3
The experiment

However, while raising is part of an explicit stereotype on Canadian speech, it is below awareness in Michigan, as Michiganders have a self stereotype as standard English speakers. Are divergent stereotypes responsible for divergent perception of the same segment?

Subjects: 41 adults from Michigan
Stimuli: 50 sentences uttered by a speaker from Detroit with raised vowels
Procedure:
   a) Bias by labelling the origin of the speaker of the audio stimuli (Canada or Michigan)
   a) Vowel recognition task on a 6 vowel continuum with different acoustic properties
Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>F1</th>
<th>F2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>830</td>
<td>1330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>1150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Ultra-low
- Canonical /a/
- Actual token

Legend:
- "Canadian"
- "Michigan"
Niedzielski’s conclusion

- Detroit speakers do not hear Canadian Raising in their own speech and in the speech of their Detroit neighbors.

- However, it is possible to make the Canadian Raising in the speech of Detroiter noticed by the speakers themselves—by leading them to think that the speaker is Canadian
Issues

1. The actual relationship between stereotypes and perception (and the community) is underdiscussed

2. The interpretation of the results is not entirely clear. Which is the role played by stigmatization in the perceptual task?
Issue 1

- Experimental subjects of the perceptual study are treated as a homogenous population (no discussion of inter-subjects differences in stereotypes)

- Lack of a strong connection between attitudes and perception data: informally collected attitudes (females have more explicit stereotypes) are not entirely consistent with those of the perceptual study (no difference between men and women)
Issue 1: a better grasp on attitudes

Orientation towards language is never homogenous within a community.

- Fierce localism vs embarrassment about the local variety (Silverstein, p.c.)
- Labov 1966: linguistic insecurity is associated with highly specific social strata (lower middle class)
- Levine and Crockett 1967: “the rates at which r is produced are not normally distributed about a single central value but tend to be bimodal”

If we want to investigate the nexus between stereotypes and acuity of perception, we need to have a better understanding of how stereotypes are distributed within a community
How can this be done? The experimental challenge

- Eliciting attitudes in an explicit way does not give good results
- Most desirable output: a fine grained enough model of language affiliation/orientation that allows for a discrete categorization
- Possible criteria: social stratification, political beliefs, years of residency, specific orientations towards local activities (hockey in Canada)

What has always been lacking in the experimental literature is an in depth analysis of the model of linguistic affiliation within a community
Issue 2: unaware, or willing to be so?

How should we interpret “Michigan residents’ self stereotypes as standard speakers?”
Two distinct scenarios could be happening here:

a) Michiganders are simply unaware of their own dialectal features (raising included)

b) “Believing that one speaks SAE is what is most comfortable to believe”. Regardless of their perception, Michiganders could just be more willing to present themselves as SAE speakers.
Issue 2: different standards

Replicate a similar test in a country in which local accent, though not standard, is not as stigmatized as in the US.

Italy: “The very concept of a standard spoken Italian with a standard pronunciation has been described as controversial. Even in the high reaches of academia everyone speaks with an accent that betrays their geographical origin” (Cavanaugh 2005).

- Much stronger awareness and less stigmatization of the local accent
- Less pronounced “standard anxiety
Lombardia Alpine valleys

- Mountaineer accent vs Milanese accent (widely used in the media, closer to the standard, but regionally marked)
- Set of salient variables [dʒ] -- [ʒ]; [d] -- [θ];
- Iconic inferences: consonant lenition -- toughness, focus on being rather than on the appearance
- Authenticity, hard work ethic
- Would speakers of this variety still be perceiving their own speech as more “standard like” than it actually is?
Conclusion

- Niedzielski shows that language stereotypes significantly affect speech perception, adding a new perspective on the study of language processing.

- Experimental techniques, as they can manipulate minimal sound segments and easily cue sets of stereotypes in the speakers, are a promising arena for research on the topic.

- However, more efficient methods for individuating the models of language affiliation within a community, together with work on geographically more varied speech communities.
References


Eckert, Penelope. 2010. Affect, sound symbolism, and variation. Penn working papers in linguistics. 16.1.


References


Labov, W. 1966. Hypercorrection by the lower middle class as a factor in linguistic change. In William Bright, editor, Sociolinguistics


