

Interdisciplinary Application of Sociolinguistic Research on Racial Speech Perception

Abstract

This paper encourages methodological discussion of the interdisciplinary potential for linguistic research on speech perception and race. Many linguistic studies on this subject stem from the subfield of variationist sociolinguistics, often leaving assumptions implicit about theoretical perspective and methodology (Eckert, 2000; Schilling-Estes, 2004). I argue that by raising this discussion, sociolinguistic studies of racial and linguistic meaning-making can incorporate increasingly transparent and expanded arguments taken up in interdisciplinary dialogues. I propose complementary research (re)considering longstanding questions about the ideological components and discursive foundations of social processes involved in racial identification of speech.

Avenues for this discussion include how linguistic studies approach racially identified linguistic variation. The insights and suggestions included here stem from research investigating the ways that listeners justify their evaluations of speakers' races based on hearing speech samples, how listeners construct race as a topic through these evaluations, and how language ideologies and social and linguistic categories are resources for framing linguistic perceptions. Two main research questions ground the work I describe in this paper: (1) what resources do listeners draw upon to ascribe racial categories to speakers they hear? and (2) how do details of talk implicate social meaning making around speech style and variation? To address these questions, I employ membership categorization analysis (MCA) as an analytic tool to make sense of how talk is a social accomplishment that constructs race and racialized ways of speaking through interaction. As such, it is worthy of investigation for the social genesis of racially labeled speech styles.

Questions about how "African American English" is conceptualized by listeners (i.e., Green, 2002; Spears, 1988) and findings on perceptions of race in speech (i.e., Baugh, 1996; Thomas & Reaser, 2004; Tucker & Lambert, 1969) can be productively advanced through syntheses of methods. Approaches like MCA, as well as conversation analysis and discourse analysis examine the types of social categories individuals create and use to construct meaning, including sociolinguistic identity. These afford a theoretical stance akin to a sociocultural view (Alim, 2002; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) of linguistic practices (such as speech style and identity construction). Within such a view, speech is viewed as both creating and marking who we are to others. By attending to the discursive construction of meaningful social categories surrounding sociolinguistic identity, analyses can address the social (or sociocultural) side of the ways identity categories based in speech style are created, or enregistered (Johnstone, 2005; Silverstein, 1998). This view, like Eckert's (2000) approach to language change and identity, engages an explicit theoretical lens in order to examine the creation of social categories used to identify speakers based upon race.

Reconceptualizing methodological and theoretical assumptions common to sociolinguistic accounts of racial speech perception offer additional avenues of analysis, building upon past work and promoting interdisciplinary engagement through research that is accessible to other social science disciplines. I argue that greater interdisciplinary engagement in sociolinguistic research on racial speech perception across education, sociology, psychology, and linguistic anthropology can occur by asking additional questions about linguistic meaning making from a sociocultural perspective.

Keywords: Racial speech identification, Language ideology, speech perception, membership categorization analysis, sociocultural theory

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