

Abstract

Understanding the structure of sociolinguistic variation requires understanding what information it conveys to listeners and how. Variation not only correlates with social structures but carries social meaning, influencing listener perceptions and through them social structures. This research demonstrates that listeners' interpretations of the English variable (ING) (working/workin') depends on contextual factors and its correlates interact with each other perceptually.

The study employs the Matched Guise Technique, using digitally manipulated stimuli differing only in tokens of (ING). The stimuli were created from spontaneous speech from eight speakers, two men and two women each from the South and the West Coast. Listener reactions to the manipulated recordings were collected in two phases. Group interviews (N = 60) provided open-ended information regarding the recordings generally and listener ideologies about (ING). This data was used to construct a survey (N = 124) to collect more structured responses.

The findings show that (ING) is connected to a network of social meanings, including education, articulateness, formality, region and the rural/urban divide. Overall, speakers were rated as more educated and more likely to be articulate when they used *-ing*. The data also show that variation-based social meaning is not compositional but instead the impact of a variable depends on its context. Regional accents triggered expectations regarding (ING) use and meaning, which influenced the impact of actual uses. (ING) shifted the relationship between pairs of meanings, such as masculinity and intelligence or socioeconomic class and formality. Finally, listeners showed agency selecting what cues to attend to and how to interpret them. The effect of (ING) depended, among other things, on the positive or negative reaction of

the listener. Using *-ing* could make a speaker sound more intelligent to some while making others think only that the speaker is trying to sound more intelligent.

These results show that variation does influence listener perceptions, i.e. carries social meanings. These meanings, however, are not static. To understand their structure, a fully developed theory of style is needed, explaining not only how variation contributes to larger impressions, but also how overall impressions influence the contribution of a single variable.