

“Loud, crass, and punctuated” or “Rich, fast, and educated”? Heterogeneity in Language Regard

Benjamin Jones, University of Washington

Nicole Chartier, Amazon

Betsy E. Evans, University of Washington

The assumption of structured heterogeneity is a fundamental aspect of the variationist approach to understanding language production (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog 1968); however, this notion is not often extended to research on evaluations of language. That is to say, although attitudes are used as an explanatory factor in linguistic change, variation with regards to attitudes is often masked by single-point measures of a whole community. In recent decades sociolinguistic research paradigms have been reasonably critiquing the lack of studies examining variation in the evaluations of linguistic variables within a given speech community (e.g. Levon, 2018). The aim of this paper is to unmask the inter-group variation of attitudes to further our theoretical constructs of language variation and change.

Non-linguists' evaluations of language variation, or 'language regard' represent beliefs about language but also reveal implicit beliefs that listeners have about speakers. Depending on the method of inquiry into speakers' language regard, the relationship between an individual's experience with a geographic location and their perception of linguistic variation in that place can also be explored. Language regard research combined with geographic space is often referred to as Perceptual Dialectology (hereafter PD). PD is well suited for examining the heterogeneity in attitudes to linguistic variation (Preston, 2015). However, socially relevant information, such as socioeconomic status (SES) or regional identity, is infrequently incorporated in as an explanatory variable. We have found only a few studies where such variables are considered in the analysis of PD data (e.g. Demirci & Kleiner (1999) for gender, Montgomery (2012) for location, Evans, Dunbar & Chartier (forthcoming) for travel experience, Fernandes & Ravindranath (2013) for age, Cukor-Avila (2018) for gender and age). In order to demonstrate that respondents' socio-demographic background can play an important role in understanding attitudes expressed in PD research, 398 PD maps were collected online using an integrated GIS application (FLOM, n.d.) to explore New Englanders' perceptions of linguistic variation in that region (Chartier & Jones, 2018). Detailed demographic information, including age, socioeconomic status (SES), and a regionality index (Chambers 2000:10-13; Chambers and Heisler 1999: 40-46) was solicited along with respondents' computer-assisted drawn maps of linguistic variation in New England. Results from Chartier & Jones (2018) showed that respondents from New England marked similar perceived dialect regions on their maps, yet evaluated those same regions differently. This follow-up study examines how age, SES, and regionality demonstrate the existence of structured heterogeneity in PD evaluations of speech in the same way that it exists in speech production. These results suggest that the inclusion of sociodemographic factors in PD analysis is necessary for understanding the role of evaluation in linguistic variation and production. This has important implications for variationist theory with regards to how we understand language regard and change in any geographic region.

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