

A complete picture of variation and its role in the overall structure of language requires understanding both the social meanings at play in individual interactions and the larger patterns these interactions form. The process of hearing and interpreting variation is one of the crucial links between these two levels. This is because speakers learn about variation by hearing it and because they take listeners into account as they construct performances (Giles 1977, Bell 1984, 2001).

This research investigates the structure of social meaning from the listener perspective, using a modified version of the matched guise technique (Lambert et al 1965, Lambert 1967). The results address one of the most important theoretical questions concerning the function of linguistic variation. They show that variation is meaningful, in the sense of transmitting information from speaker to hearer but also that exactly which meanings are involved depends on a range of contextual factors.

To make the stimuli for this project, I used computer software to digitally manipulate recordings of spontaneous speech from sociolinguistic interviews, creating pairs which differed only in the variable (ING), as in "working" or "workin'" (Labov 1966, Trudgill 1974, Wald and Shopen 1985). The speakers in the interviews were men and women, from the South and the West Coast.

I collected data in two phases. First, I gathered native intuitions from 55 participants in a series of 20 group interviews, which elicited both general impressions of the recordings and conscious ideologies concerning (ING). The second phase was a Web-based matched guise survey (N=124) which tested these intuitions by collecting covert reactions to (ING). Listeners evaluated eight speakers using six point scales (e.g. casual/formal, educated/not educated) and yes/no adjective checklists (e.g. articulate, redneck, joking).

Some of the results were to be expected from the existing literature. Overall, speakers were described as "articulate" more often when they used -ing (21%/27%, $p = 0.037$). They also received higher ratings for "educated" on a six point scale (3.81/3.98 $p = 0.008$).

Most of the results, however, were a good deal more complex. For example, (ING) changed the relationship between different responses, strengthening the connection between the speaker being perceived as casual and being perceived as working-class, and shifting the relationship between perceived intelligence and masculinity.

The role of (ING) was also influenced by other linguistic characteristics. Using the -in variant increased how accented Southern speakers sounded (3.89/3.66, $p = 0.013$). However, it dampened the accent in a nonSouthern speaker (1.86/2.26, $p = 0.034$). Listeners saw this speaker as urban and bicoastal and associated his accent with him being gay, an engineer or a wealthy New Englander.

Individual uses of variation undoubtedly carry social meaning, but these meanings do not combine by simple addition. The role of each individual variable is influenced by the context within which it appears. There are multiple dimensions of context: linguistic and social aspects of the speaker, the content of the utterance, the real or imagined situation and the linguistic knowledge, social background and emotional reactions of the listener.