Individual differences in matched guise performance

The matched guise paradigm (Lambert et al. 1966) elicits subjective evaluation of a talker according to "guises" that differ minimally along a linguistic dimension. The primary use of matched guise experiments has been to interrogate potential social meanings of sociolinguistic variables. Campbell-Kibler (2008) shows that listeners can range widely in the meanings they assign to a variable, namely ING (*workin' ~ working*). This study takes a known, widespread meaning for ING—that the /ɪŋ/ variant is associated with intelligence—and asks whether individuals differ in their sensitivity to this particular indexical association.

Following Campbell-Kibler, we manipulate naturally-occuring utterances for stimuli. 16 critical sentence-length utterances containing one instance of ING each, plus an additional 30 filler utterances not containing ING, were taken from unique talkers in the Philadelphia Neighborhood Corpus. Half of the critical utterances originally contained /ɪŋ/ and half originally contained /ɪn/, which we refer to as the "carrier style" conditions because other stylistic and referential elements in an utterance might co-occur with the original ING variant. The corresponding matched guises were created by splicing in the opposite variant from another instance of the same lexical item in the same talker's interview.

Each participant heard both guises, 17-34 trials apart, for each critical utterance. The critical trials were counterbalanced for which guise was presented first and whether that guise was congruent with the original form of the utterance (the carrier style). The presentation order of the critical and filler items was pseudo-randomized within those constraints, then held constant across participants so that each individual received identical input. 34 participants rated each trial for "How smart does this person sound?" on a scale of 1 to 7. The resulting 1088 ratings were normalized within participant.

Mixed effects regression on the aggregate data indicates that the carrier style condition predicts smartness rating better than the presented guise, with no significant interaction. However, closer inspection reveals that pooling the data masks several distinct participant response patterns. 13 participants have the expected guise effect (/ɪŋ/ sounds smarter than /ɪn/) across utterances regardless of the carrier style, whereas 7 participants do have the expected guise effect but only in one carrier style or the other. A further 8 participants are not sensitive at all to either the guise or the original context. No participants are sensitive to the carrier style but insensitive to the presented guise.

These results suggest considerable, but not random, heterogeneity in how sensitive individuals are to sociolinguistic information. We identified three major response patterns: ING sensitivity, ING sensitivity only in certain contexts, and lack of sensitivity to ING. Such differences may inhere in individuals' ability to perceive or attend to variation, propensity to adjust social evaluation based on linguistic behavior, interpretation of a particular variable's indexicality, or a combination of these. The results also highlight the carrier phrase as integral to matched guise outcomes: the original variant in an utterance may be a reasonable proxy measure for the overall sociostylistic context in predicting social evaluation.

Campbell-Kibler, K. (2008). I'll be the judge of that: Diversity in social perceptions of (ING). Language in Society, 37(05), 637-659.

Lambert, W. E., Frankle, H., & Tucker, G. R. (1966). Judging personality through speech: A French-Canadian example. Journal of Communication, 16(4), 305-321.