

Attitudes and variation: What is the attitude object?

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Historically the study of language attitudes has focused on the investigation of sets of linguistic attributes which together make up an “enregistered” (Agha 2007) accent or variety. While some work has examined paralinguistic cues as contributors in their own right, the relationship between the details of linguistic variation and perceptions of accent has been underexamined. Coupland’s (2007) notion of style challenges the fields of sociolinguistics and language attitudes to think not only about how accents are regarded, but how they are formed and maintained as coherent social objects.

This paper will present results from a series of three studies involving the impact of the English variable (ING) on social perceptions of spontaneous speech. 23 brief (10-20 second) excerpts of spontaneous speech were taken from interviews with 4 male and 4 female speakers from two distinct regional areas in the US. These excerpts were digitally manipulated to make produce matched pairs, one clip featuring only *-in* tokens, and another with *-ing* tokens. These stimuli were presented to listeners in online surveys asking them to evaluate the speakers they heard, rating them on qualities like “intelligent”, “masculine/feminine” and “shy/outgoing” and selecting yes/no checkboxes.

The first study (N=124) demonstrated that one of the key associations of (ING), education/intelligence, applies only in a subset of cases, those in which speakers were judged as aregional and working class. The second (N=137) showed that manipulating the information provided about the speakers could not only eliminate, but reverse, perceptions of speaker knowledgeability. Finally, the third (N=173) found that the two variants of (ING) actually operate on independent dimensions of the social space, with only the *-ing* forms impacting perceived intelligence/education while *-in* forms influence perceived casualness.

On the basis of these results, I argue that a crucial question in the study of language attitudes is how language features identifiable by linguists are recognized by listeners and integrated into social perception. In order to understand language attitudes, we need to understand not only how established varieties are perceived, but also how variables function together to form styles. I suggest that a core element of this effort must be an understanding of the relationship between individual cues and social percepts in rich, socially believable linguistic contexts.