Indexicality, sociolinguistic awareness, and language change

A major enterprise of sociolinguistics since the inception of the field (e.g., Labov, 1963) has been to identify how social meaning affects language change. Labov (2001), for instance, outlined two types of linguistic changes, defined in terms of metalinguistic awareness: *change from above* (where speakers are aware of the change) and *change from below* (where speakers are not). These two types of change propagate differently through a speech community, with changes from above carrying explicit social meaning that can be selected for by speakers, and changes from below propagating more neutrally. Eckert (2019), by contrast, argued that changes from above and below both carry social meaning with complex *indexicality*. Here, we present previously unpublished data from an experiment designed to test how different kinds of indexicality (Eckert, 2008; Silverstein, 2003) affect the borrowing of a linguistic feature (*author citation*). We compared participants' actual rates of borrowing to their metalinguistic awareness of borrowing (Figure 2), finding that (1) participants' metalinguistic reports of *not* borrowing features were inaccurate across all conditions, and (2) metalinguistic reports of borrowing variants with higher-order indexicality were more accurately reported than reports of borrowing first-order variants.

In previous work (*author citation*), we found that higher-order variants were borrowed at significantly higher rates than first-order variants. In this experiment, participants were assigned to either the *Wiwo* or the *Burl* alien species and played a game using a miniature artificial language. We manipulated the *alienability* and the *social relevance* of a Burl-dialect feature in a 2x2 design, finding that Burl forms were borrowed at significantly higher rates when it had both components of higher-order indexicality (Figure 1).

Here, we take a closer look at the role of metalinguistic awareness across the four conditions of our experiment. Participants completed a post-experimental survey including detailed questions about their use of the alien language, such as "Did you try to adjust your use of the language to sound like other aliens?" Participant's responses were classified into three categories: "No", "Yes" (if they responded "yes" but did not identify the relevant feature, and "Yes: f/b" (if they identified the feature, an alternation between f and b). We used these responses as a metric of metalinguistic awareness, and compared this to their actual production rates of Burl forms across the four conditions.

Our results are presented in Figure 2. First, we found that participants across all conditions inaccurately reported *not* changing their language. This finding aligns with much empirical work in sociolinguistics (e.g., Labov, 2001, *author citation*) showing that participants inaccurately self-report *not* producing features that they do actually produce. Second, across all conditions but the second-order condition, there was no correlation between self-reported use of the borrowed form and the actual use of the new form ($r^2 = 0.01$). Third, the second-order condition stands out as anomalous. In this condition, there is a stronger relationship between actual borrowing and reported borrowing ($r^2 = 0.11$), suggesting that participants in the second-order condition only exhibit accurate metalinguistic awareness of the presence of borrowing.

These results suggest that the metalinguistic awareness expected to play a role in sound change is not straightforwardly mapped onto changes from above vs. changes from below. Instead, we find that metalinguistic awareness is affected both by the perceived presence of borrowing as well as the order of indexicality that a feature is associated with.

References

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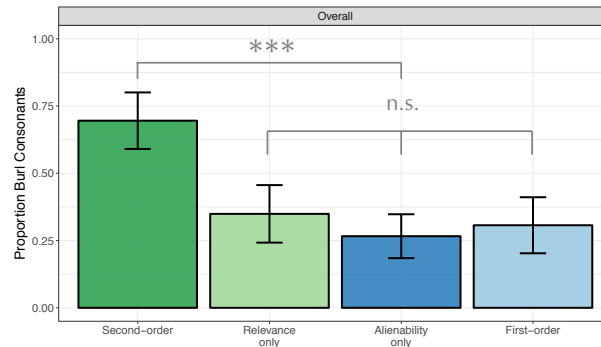
Figure 1: Proportion of Burl consonants used by Wiwos in each condition. First-order variants index group membership, while higher-order variants index *alienable* and *socially relevant* traits associated with that group; variants with only *social relevance* or *alienability* are treated like first-order variants.
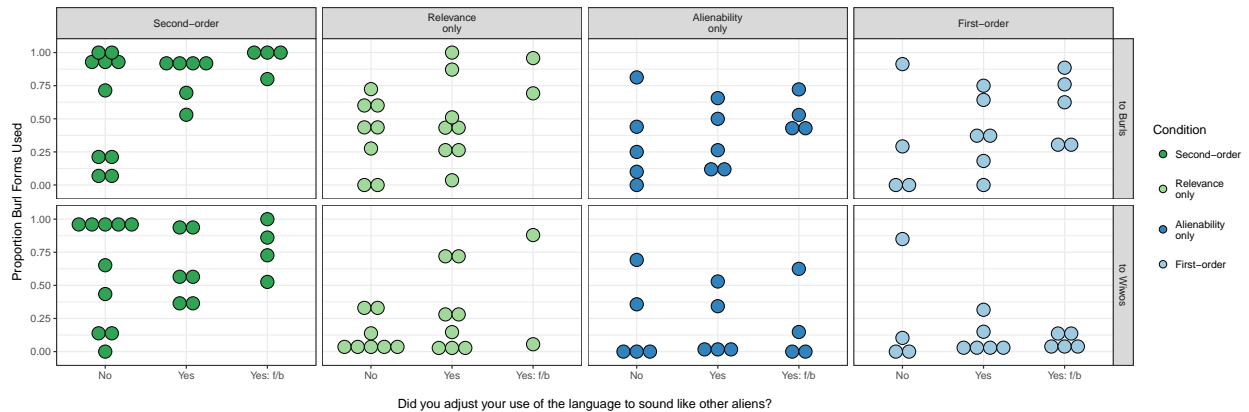
Figure 2: Individual Wiwo participants' rates of Burl forms across conditions, separated by their self-reported use of Burl forms, and by interlocutor.