1. How socially detailed are indexical representations?

**Question**

What kind of social-indexical information is carried by a single vowel realization? When we hear someone speak, we receive information about who is speaking, as well as a what is being said. Individual speech features can be used as a cue to a wide range of aspects of social identity (refs). What is it that listeners know about their languages that allows them to do this? A straightforward answer might be that listeners have very socially detailed representations of linguistic variation, accrued through their experience of speech in the social world. These might include categories of talker such as ‘middle class’/’working class’, ‘old’/’young’, ‘urban/rural’. A second possibility is that listeners’ representation of social-indexical mappings are less about their direct experience of linguistic variation, and more related to language ideology – the culturally-determined ideas about ways of speaking which circulate in society.

**Why important?**

**How will you answer it?**

By comparing the distribution of variation in production with listeners’ responses to a social perception task. If listeners responses map to the distribution of variation in production, it would provide evidence that they have access to those distributions. If their responses deviate from the distribution in production, it would provide evidence that their responses are guided by some other representation of linguistic variation.

2. Where do indexical meanings come from?

**Question**

How does a speech community come to recognize the indexical field of a particular speech pattern? There’s plenty of evidence that listeners can interpret language variation as socially-meaningful. For example, American listeners reliably interpret the velar variant of –ing as more ‘articulate’ and ‘educated’ than the alveolar form. Where did this meaning come from, and how did they come to agree on it? A common-sense answer might be that variation arises across social groups due to contact/internal biases. At some point, speakers notice this difference, and begin to derive social meanings from it.

Alternatives:

Variation arises across situations, gets noticed, assigned meanings

Iconicity – e.g. effort

Greedy meanings – we’ve got a set of ideas about how society is structured, and we look for cues to map to those meanings, even when they might not actually be informative. Creaky voice is an example.

**Why important?**

**How will you answer it?**

If the key precursor of indexical meaning was the social group, we’d expect to find a) forms which vary across social groups but aren’t available as a social cue, b) forms which vary across social groups and are available as a social cue, but we shouldn’t find forms which are available as a social cue but don’t vary across social groups. Further, we’d expect the social perception of variation to reflect its distribution in production: if group level variation is the source of social meaning, listeners should be able to map variants to the appropriate social categories.

**Question**

What is the relationship between social meaning and linguistic change?

Languages are changing all the time, and there are a lot of reasons for this. A key claim of sociolinguists is that one thing which can influence sound changes is their attachment to social meanings, which may facilitate or inhibit the spread of innovations. For example, it might be argued that two linguistically-similar changes are spreading at different rates due to their participation in the local social-semiotic system. In most cases, these claims are drawn primarily from production data. For a given claim regarding the role of social-indexical meaning in a sound change, how do we know that the patterns we observe are caused by social-indexical meaning and not something else, and how can we test whether the specific meanings we propose to be relevant are those which are important?

**Why important?**

**How answer?**

To answer this question I survey the types of claim made about social meaning in sound change, and attempt to use them to form predictions regarding the spread of innovations and the social perception of the forms undergoing change. For example

a) Those forms which spread more uniformly are less important as a social-indexical resource than those which spread less so.

Not straightforwardly, but the less uniform change is recognised more consistently as socially meaningful.

b) Those groups which behave differently with regard to a particular change are more sensitive to the hypothesized social meaning.

Yes: more mobile listeners are more sensitive to variation in /o/ and /u/ as a cue to ‘broadness’

c) Sensitivity to the proposed social meaning predicts production behaviour above and beyond group membership.

1. Sound change and social meaning are unrelated

2. Sound change provides a resource for indexical meaning, but indexical meaning doesn’t constrain linguistic change.

3. Sound change is constrained/motivated by social meaning.

What would the best possible evidence of the influence of social indexicality on sound change look like?

1. People recognise the proposed meanings

2. There is a relationship between the rate and uniformity of adoption of innovations and their social perception

3. There is variability in the social meanings listener groups assign to competing variants, and those groups show variable adoption of innovations

4. Among the groups who are most advanced with regard to the change, those who attend most to the proposed meaning show deviant behaviour

Paper 1:

Variation and change in the tense back vowels of York, Northern England

Paper 2:

The social perception of a sound change

Paper 3:

Indexical sensitivity and the leaders of linguistic change