Sound change, priming, salience

Producing and perceiving variation in Liverpool English

Marten Juskan

Language Variation 3

./langsci/graphics/lan

Language Variation

Editors: John Nerbonne, Dirk Geeraerts

In this series:

1. Côté, Marie-Hélène, Remco Knooihuizen and John Nerbonne (eds.). The future of dialects.
2. Schäfer, Lea. Sprachliche Imitation: Jiddisch in der deutschsprachigen Literatur (18.–20. Jahrhundert).
3. Juskan, Marten. Sound change, priming, salience: Producing and perceiving variation in Liverpool English.

ISSN: 2366-7818

Sound change, priming, salience

Producing and perceiving variation in Liverpool English

Marten Juskan

Marten Juskan. 2018. *Sound change, priming, salience*: *Producing and perceiving variation in Liverpool English* (Language Variation 3). Berlin: Language Science Press.

This title can be downloaded at:
http://langsci-press.org/catalog/book/210

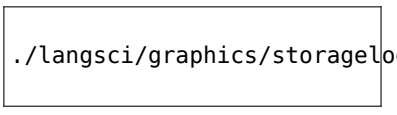
ISBN: 978-3-96110-119-1 (Digital)
978-3-96110-120-7 (Hardcover)

ISSN: 2366-7818
DOI:10.5281/zenodo.1451308
Source code available from www.github.com/langsci/210
Collaborative reading: paperhive.org/documents/remote?type=langsci&id=210

Cover and concept of design: Ulrike Harbort
Fonts: Linux Libertine, Libertinus Math, Arimo, DejaVu Sans Mono
Typesetting software: XeLaTeX

Language Science Press
Unter den Linden 6
10099 Berlin, Germany
langsci-press.org

Storage and cataloguing done by FU Berlin



To Daniela

Contents

13 Conclusion

Although this study primarily set out to explore the role of salience in exemplar priming it has also produced a number of related results, which are nonetheless interesting. The claim that younger Scousers' speech is noticeably more local (cf. Watson 2007a) could be confirmed, but only for the two salient variables in the sample (NURSE-SQUARE and lenition), which appear to carry considerable amounts of covert prestige. Local variants of non-salient variables, on the other hand, were actually found to be receding. Young Liverpudlians seem to be somewhat more willing to express a local identity linguistically than older ones, but they rely almost exclusively on highly salient and/or stigmatised features for doing so.

Linguistic norms and attitudes in the speech community have remained relatively stable. Speakers of all three generations investigated generally like 'soft' or light Liverpool accents, but largely reject very strong ones, to a not inconsiderable degree because the latter are perceived as exaggerated and artificial. Despite these similarities the presence of hypercorrection particularly in the middle-aged speakers suggests that this group is most sensitive to the negative image of Liverpool and Scouse, probably because economic decline and stigmatisation of the city were at its historic height in the 1970's and 80's when these speakers were growing up.

The phonological variables investigated are not equally salient in all three age groups. For happy-tensing and velar nasal plus there is essentially no change, both variables are largely below the radar for all speakers in the sample. With respect to the NURSE-SQUARE merger, however, conscious and sub-conscious awareness declines from the middle to the young generation, while lenition of /k/ sees a steady and linear increase in salience from the oldest to the youngest speakers. Crucially, however, lenition of /k/ is the most salient feature in *all* age groups, and is universally followed by the NURSE-SQUARE merger, velar nasal plus, and happy-tensing. While speakers of different age groups have thus not the same level of awareness of the individual variables, the relative ordering is the same in all three generations.

This ordering is then mirrored in the perception data. Both accuracy of 'correct' token selection and statistical robustness of the priming effect correlate with the social salience of the test variable. No effect at all is detectable for happy-tensing, and only a weak one for velar nasal plus (if participant as a random factor is not taken into account). The NURSE-SQUARE merger and /k/ lenition, on the other hand, both generate robust priming effects, and for the latter salience can even explain differences between sub-groups of stimuli (divided by phonological environment) or subjects (middle- vs. working-class background). The main hypothesis that this study was built on could thus be confirmed: The more socially salient a linguistic variable is, the more pronounced the resulting effect in an exemplar priming experiment will be; below a certain level of sub-conscious awareness no statistically significant priming effects are generated.

Intriguingly, all significant effects in the perception experiment are in the unexpected direction: Subjects who have been led to believe that the speaker is from Liverpool are *less* likely to perceive variants typical of Liverpool English. While it is seemingly at odds with existing priming research in sociolinguistics, this result is actually compatible with previous work in psychology and suggests that the phonetic distance between the prime and the actual speech signal is too great for perceivers to include the stimulus in the primed category. Priming works nevertheless, but the outcome is a contrast effect instead of the assimilation effects that were found in the studies conducted in Detroit and New Zealand.

Another unexpected outcome of the perception test is that frequency of the carrier word is not really a factor worth mentioning when it comes to predicting how subjects will perceive the stimulus. In Chapter 4 I did argue that frequency of *remembrance* and not frequency of *occurrence* should be most important, but it is still surprising that the latter should essentially play no role at all. It is possible that frequency is just not relevant in this particular context. The production data support this idea, because frequency turned out to be a (nearly) non-significant predictor in production as well. All the same, a different test design that is specifically aimed at investigating frequency effects in priming experiments might be able to yield further interesting insights.

For the perception test, it would also be desirable to have a less biased sample of participants than the one this study is based on. The dataset for perception is quite heavily skewed towards participants that are in their twenties and have a middle-class background. This is not due to a flaw in design, but something of an unfortunate coincidence linked to the difficulties of recruiting participants over the internet. A more balanced sample of subjects would, however, enable the researcher to conduct a much more thorough analysis of the impact of social

characteristics of the perceivers than I have been able to do in this study. The tentative results and conclusions presented in this book, and, more importantly, the ones that can be found in previous research (cf. Hay, Nolan, et al. 2006; Hay & Drager 2010) strongly suggest that this is a fruitful area for future research that can help us to better understand how language perception works.

Turning back to the primary issue of this book, my analysis shows that exemplar priming in sociolinguistics not only needs a variable that comes with a high degree of social salience. In addition, two further requirements have to be met, at least when the goal is to create an assimilation effect: The phonetic distance between the primed variety and the one actually used in the stimuli must be comparatively small, and categorisation of the stimuli must be a comparatively difficult task to start with. So far, criteria defining contexts where 'successful' exemplar priming is to be expected have been lacking. I hope that the ones I have suggested here can serve as a starting point for developing a more elaborate 'theory of priming' (cf. Cesario 2014) in the realm of sociophonetics.

Sound change, priming, salience

This volume investigates the realisation and perception of four phonological variables in Liverpool English (Scouse), with a special focus on their sociolinguistic salience. Younger speakers' speech is found to be more local, but only for the two salient variables in the sample (NURSE-SQUARE and /k/ lenition), which appear to carry considerable amounts of covert prestige. Local variants of non-salient happy-tensing and velar nasal plus, on the other hand, are actually found to be receding, so at least to a certain extent Scouse also seems to be participating in regional dialect levelling.

The importance of salience is also obvious in the perception data, with only the two highly salient stereotypes generating robust effects in a social priming experiment (albeit in the unexpected direction). These results indicate that the investigated variables differ measurably not only in their use in production, but also in terms of how central they are to mental sociolinguistic representations of Scouse. They also tell us more about the way we process, store, and (re-)use sociolinguistic variation in perception. By defining likely contexts for significant priming effects they might finally even help in coming up with a more elaborate 'theory of priming' in the realm of sociophonetics.

ISBN 978-3-96110-119-1