

Social Cognition and Sociolinguistic Processing - Automatic Vigilance and Ingroup Identification

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As sociolinguists begin to investigate the mental representation of variation (Campbell-Kibler, 2010; Casasanto, 2009), it is becoming increasingly important to define how language comprehension and social cognition interact during “sociolinguistic processing”. Studies showing the influence of cues to speaker dialect on the perception of related segmental variation (eg. Niedzielski, 1999) suggest that social cues merely orient listeners’ expectations. But these experiments tend to isolate phonetic perception by limiting the degree of lexico-semantic processing that characterizes authentic language comprehension. The effect of accented speech on the processing of lexical meaning may be more profound given the close relationship between the social meaning of linguistic variables and semantic meaning (Smith, Hall & Munson, 2010; Campbell-Kibler, 2009). This study examines the effect of dialectal variation on semantic processing.

Ninety-seven participants (61 European-Americans, 36 African-Americans) quickly classified positive and negative adjectives (eg. “disgusting” versus “rewarding”) produced in an African-American and an unmarked Southern American English (AAE and SAE, respectively) guise. Because stimuli cuing the perception of outgroup membership are known to activate negative stereotypes (eg. Fazio et al., 1995; Greenwald et al., 1998), European-Americans were hypothesized to categorize negative adjectives in the AAE guise quicker than positive ones, and vice versa for African-Americans. Instead, participants generally classified negative adjectives ($M = 885.5$ ms) faster than positive ones ($M = 908.3$ ms), $F(2, 95) = 14.25$, $p = 0.00$ ($d = .96$). When African-American listeners heard productions in the SAE guise, however, reaction times for positive ($M = 935.7$ ms) and negative words ($M = 931.2$ ms) showed no such disparity, $t(35) = 0.24$, $p = 0.81$.

Scores on a scale of “ingroup identification”, a 9-item measure of the importance of ethnic group membership to one’s identity, were used to model reaction times. African-American and European-American listeners were divided into “high identifiers” and “low identifiers” using a median split ($Md = 4.45$ on 7-point scale). This analysis revealed that only low-identifying African-Americans classified positive words ($M = 844.8$ ms) faster than negative ones ($M = 869.4$ ms), with a larger disparity in reaction times occurring with the SAE ($M = -35.7$ ms) as opposed to the AAE guise ($M = -13.6$ ms), $t(15) = -1.15$, $p = 0.27$ and $t(15) = -0.85$, $p = 0.41$, respectively.

Because “events that may negatively affect the individual are typically of greater time urgency than are events that lead to desirable consequences”, a processing advantage for negative stimuli is consistent with the social cognition effect known as “automatic vigilance” (Pratto & John, 1991: 380). Ingroup identification is negatively correlated with outgroup contact (Kenworthy et al., 2011), so low-identifying African-Americans are likely to have relatively plentiful contact with the phonetic variation encountered in the SAE guise. Although divergent from the overall automatic vigilance effect, this group’s response pattern may be partially explained by greater contact with SAE, resulting in a similar degree of salience for both guises. This study points to the potential importance of social cognition concepts in sociolinguistic processing studies, particularly those targeting lexico-semantic meaning.