Two perceived gaps in the literature on language attitudes motivate this research: The first is the lack of research on factors responsible for variation in language attitudes (e.g., Garrett 2010; Preston 2010:23). Garrett (2010:176) identifies an individual’s valuing of sociolinguistic diversity—referencing Coupland and Bishop's (2007) finding that respondents who indicated that they “enjoy hearing a range of accents” gave more positive evaluations of varieties of English on prestige and social attractiveness scales—as especially worthy of more attention. The second gap is the lack of empirical research supporting the common assumption that greater knowledge of (socio-)linguistic principles results in more positive attitudes toward nonstandard linguistic forms (e.g., Reaser 2007).

In an attempt to bridge these gaps, (1) we developed a psychometrically-valid tool for assessing one's appreciation of sociolinguistic diversity and knowledge of linguistic principles, what we call collectively "sociolinguistic receptivity"; (2) we investigated factors that correlate with sociolinguistic receptivity (e.g., social characteristics, exposure to linguistics); and (3) we examined the relationship between sociolinguistic receptivity and ratings of informal and nonstandard linguistic features.

We report on data collected (in spring 2012) via an online survey of 330 native-English-speaking Americans. Respondents rated their level of agreement (7-point Likert-type scale) with 19 statements evaluating knowledge of linguistic principles (e.g., “Minority dialects often contain grammatical errors”) and appreciation of sociolinguistic diversity (“I enjoy hearing different accents of English”). The internal consistency in the ratings of the survey items was good (Cronbach’s α=.856), though, as expected, there was considerable individual variation within ratings of each item (SDs from .954 to 2.11). Social factors (e.g., age, gender) did not tend to explain this variation; however, we discovered other factors positively associated with higher sociolinguistic receptivity scores, including prior experience with linguistics, the personality trait openness to experience (Costa and McCrae’s Five-Factor Model), and spending time abroad.

Respondents also rated the correctness (7-point Likert-type scale) of 30 sentences containing standard, informal, and regional or social dialect variants. As expected, respondents with higher sociolinguistic receptivity scores showed greater acceptability of informal and nonstandard linguistic forms than those with lower sociolinguistic receptivity: Results of a MANOVA show a main effect of sociolinguistic receptivity on mean correctness ratings for all sentence types ($F(262, 4) = 28.50, p<.001$), and post-hoc tests show significant differences ($p<.001$) for each pairwise comparison.

Our study begins to reveal factors that account for variation in language attitudes, develops a means for assessing openness to sociolinguistic diversity, and demonstrates that sociolinguistic receptivity plays an important role in influencing attitudes toward informal and nonstandard speech, providing empirical evidence to support the assumption of many language/dialect awareness programs that education about language variation leads to greater acceptability/less linguistic profiling (e.g., Reaser 2007). Future research is needed to see if these findings hold with judgments of more naturalistic stimuli (e.g., a matched-guise paradigm) and with other types of linguistic features (e.g., other national and regional varieties of English) and to determine if sociolinguistic receptivity (among other factors) plays a role in other types of language attitudes (e.g., perceptual dialectology).