Stylistic variation for perceived listener need: Social variation in clear and plain lab speech
Jane Mitsch and Cynthia G. Clopper, the Ohio State University

In variationist sociolinguistics, stylistic variation is often defined with respect to the topic or task, such as word list reading vs. interview speech. More vernacular forms are observed for less formal topics and tasks, whereas more standard forms are observed for more formal topics and tasks (Labov, 1972). Another source of speaking style variation is thought to reflect the relationship between the interlocutors. Talkers accommodate to their listeners to create social solidarity (Giles et al., 1987) or adjust their speech to construct a social identity in the discourse context (Eckert, 2001). In the speech sciences, stylistic variation is typically examined with respect to talkers' adjustments for the perceived needs of the listener, such as “clear speech” directed toward a hearing-impaired or non-native listener. Clear speech is characterized by segmental hyperarticulation, including longer and more peripheral vowels (Krause & Braida, 2004).

The goal of the current study was to explore the potential interaction between sociolinguistic variation and stylistic variation related to perceived listener need. Fifteen young adults (5 male, 10 female) each from the Midland and Northern dialects of American English read a set of sentences with monosyllabic target words in sentence-final position. Each talker produced the sentence list twice: first as if talking to a friend (plain lab speech) and then as if to a hearing-impaired adult (clear lab speech). The target vowels produced by each talker were acoustically analyzed for duration, dispersion from the center of the vowel space, and vowel trajectory length (TL; Fox & Jacewicz, 2009). If stylistic variation based on listener need is similar to task/topic-oriented variation or social accommodation, we would expect to observe greater effects of social factors in the less effortful plain speech directed towards a familiar peer than in the clear speech directed towards an unfamiliar adult.

The results confirm that gender, regional dialect, and speaking style affect vowel production in this task. As expected, vowels were significantly longer and more dispersed in the vowel space in clear speech than in plain speech for all talker groups. In addition, the TL of /æ/ was longer for the Northern talkers than the Midland talkers, consistent with the diphthongization that accompanies /æ/ raising in the Northern dialect (Labov et al., 2006). Similarly, the TL of /u/ was longer for the female talkers than the male talkers, consistent with more extreme /u/-fronting among women than men. Crucially, these differences in TL across talker groups were observed to a similar degree in clear and plain speech.

These results suggest that sociolinguistic variation is manipulated differently for style shifts related to perceived listener need than for style shifts related to the topic, task, or social relationship to the interlocutor. Speaking style variation is multidimensional and driven by many contextual factors that contribute in different ways to constructing social identity (Eckert, 2001). The current findings reveal that assessments of listener need lead to segmental hyperarticulation, but a relative lack of within-talker adjustment of social variables. Listener need may therefore differ qualitatively from other factors contributing to stylistic variation.