Where does the social meet the linguistic?

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RESEARCH QUESTION

Are there linguistic constraints on the elements that social meaning can attach to? Or are all elements of language fair game for social evaluation? (cf. Eckert & Labov to appear)

ONE FREQUENT ANSWER

Syntactic variables are less likely to be socially evaluated than variables at other levels of the grammar.

"Variables that are fundamentally grammatical are less likely to mark social factors than lexical variables are."
(Meyerhoff & Walker 2013:407)

"The force of social evaluation, positive or negative, is generally brought to bear only upon superficial aspects of language: the lexicon and phonetics."
(Labov 2001:28)

"Syntactic variables do not usually distinguish social groups in the same way that phonological variables do."
(Cheshire 1999:59)

"A very tentative hypothesis [...] emerges [...] according to which syntax is the marker of cohesion in society, with individuals trying to eliminate alternatives in syntax. In contrast, pronunciation represents the permanent social group with which the speaker identifies."
(Hudson 1996:45)

"Perhaps most of so-called "syntactic variation" is motivated by pragmatic factors alone, and rarely, if ever, serves the function of distinguishing social groups in the way that "classic" phonological and morphological variables do."
(Winford 1996:188)

"Social factors operate primarily upon surface patterns rather than abstract syntactic alternatives."
(Weiner & Labov 1973:56)

THIS POSTER

- What empirical support is there for the proposal that syntactic variation is less likely to be socially evaluated?
- Meta-study of syntactic variables in the *LVC* catalog to assess presence/absence of social evaluation

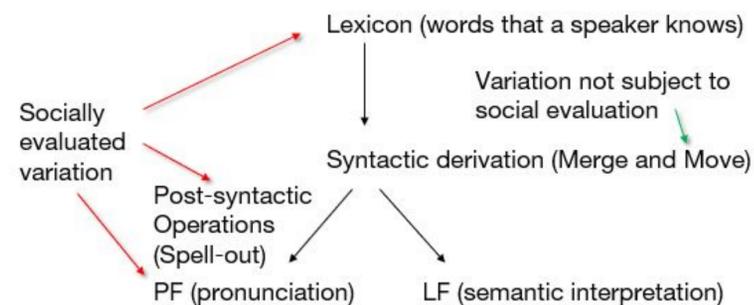## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SOCIAL EVALUATION?

Two major possibilities:

1. **Social conditioning** in the production domain:
- used preferentially by different groups within a speech community
  e.g. gender effects on changes in progress (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2017)
- used in one speech community but not others
  e.g. *needs washed* (Murray et al. 1996)
- target of style-shifting
  e.g. negative concord (Labov 2001)

2. **Social evaluation** in the perception domain:
- target of prescriptive norms
  e.g. preposition stranding (Kroch & Small 1973)
- target of socioindexical judgments (e.g. "that sounds…")
  e.g. singular *don't* sounds low-status (Squires 2013)

For the purposes of this study, we are most interested in social evaluation as **a socioindexical judgment,** rather than a group- or style-preferential production difference, or an imposed prescriptivist judgment.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SYNTACTIC VARIATION?

Generative morphosyntactic theory (Minimalism, Distributed Morphology) identifies **three** distinct phenomena that can fall under sociolinguists' umbrella of "syntactic variation":

1. variation in word choice (Lexicon)
2. variation in spell-out (Spell-out)
3. variation in word order (Syntactic derivation)

OUR HYPOTHESIS

The choices made by a speaker at the decision points of a grammar (i.e., Lexicon and Spell-out) are more likely to be targeted for socioindexical judgments than is variation in the Syntactic derivation (e.g., floating quantifiers, scrambling, dative alternation, word order alternations).

THE META-STUDY

- All issues of *Language Variation and Change* (401 total articles)
- Selected any article that considered a variable construable as "syntactic" (= any of the 3 phenomena listed earlier)
- Coded each variable for
  - whether the authors looked for
    - social conditioning in the production domain
    - social evaluation in the perception domain
  - and whether they found any.

RESULTS

Classification of variables	Social conditioning of variable (production)	Social evaluation of variable (perception)	Total
Word choice	Looked for: 38 Found: 34	Looked for: 10 Found: 9	n=56
Spell-out	Looked for: 83 Found: 63	Looked for: 28 Found: 23	n=122* *10 variables ambiguous between spell-out and word choice
Word order	Looked for: 10 Found: 6	Looked for: 4 Found: 1	n=30* *3 variables ambiguous between word order and word choice

DISCUSSION

Indeed, there is more social evaluation (perception) of word choice and spell-out than word order, **but** very few studies have actually looked for social evaluation of word order.

- The one paper that found social evaluation of word order found that the dative alternation was briefly socially evaluated when it became popularized in the history of English (D'Arcy & Tagliamonte 2015).

Even in the production domain, variation in word order appears less likely to be socially conditioned. When it is, the cases are all restricted in certain ways:

- involve language contact
- involve prescriptive pressure
- involve language change

We suggest future research:

- carry out perception studies of variation in word order that are not confounded by other phonological or morphological variation
- tease apart whether variables are subject to global social evaluation, local social evaluation, or both