

This paper focuses on new mixed methods for studying social correlates of linguistic variation and some of the implications of using such methods. The research uses an adapted form of the Matched Guise Technique (Lambert et al 1960), based on minimal pairs of digitally manipulated recordings. It investigated the influence of the English variable (ING) on listener perceptions of the spontaneous speech of eight speakers (2 men and 2 women from California and North Carolina), combining the nuance of qualitative study with the rigor of experimental methods. The results shed light on listener understandings of (ING), a variable which has been extensively studied from the production point of view. In so doing, they revealed information about the structure of socially meaningful linguistic variation overall.

This project drew on valuable and under-used insights from the literature on listener perceptions:

1) Digitally manipulating the stimuli to ensure that only tokens of (ING) were changed (Fridland et al 2004, Plichta and Preston 2005). This technique allows for precise control over the linguistic qualities to be altered and minimizes confounding variables.

2) Using as stimuli spontaneous speech gathered from sociolinguistic interviews. Read speech differs from spontaneous speech (Laan 1997, Hirose & Kawanami 2002) and can be easily detected by listeners (Mehta & Cutler 1988, Guaitella 1999). Using spontaneous speech improves the social believability of the task and thus the ecological validity of the results. Four excerpts were taken from each speaker, two on work topics and two on recreation, to examine the role of message content.

3) Combining open ended group interviews (N = 55) with restricted choice survey data (N = 124). In this case, each form of data expands on the other while also providing a check, improving both the complexity and reliability of the results (Wolck 1973). Conducting the interviews first allowed those responses to be used as a pilot for developing the form of the survey (Williams et al 1976). The survey consisted of a set of 6-point rating scales (e.g. *very educated/not all educated, shy/outgoing*) and of adjective checklists (e.g. *artist, polite, joking*) from which listeners could select appropriate descriptors.

These techniques yielded a rich set of data concerning not only the influence of (ING) on listener perceptions, but also the structured relationships between different perceptions. This information forces us to consider the connection between linguistic variation and social meaning in a new light. One of the most stable findings in the production literature on (ING) has been the independent influence of class and situational formality (Labov 1966, Trudgill 1974). Although it is tempting to view these factors as unrelated, my data on listener perceptions shows they are tightly intertwined. When listeners selected a *working-class background*, they rated the speaker as significantly more *casual*. Conversely, when a *wealthy background* was selected, the speakers were rated as significantly more *formal*.

	Checkbox not selected	Checkbox selected	sig.
working-class	<b>2.82</b>	2.49	0.002
middle-class	2.73	2.82	0.307
wealthy	2.71	<b>3.05</b>	0.002

Table 1: Ratings for casual/formal, by class

Table 2 expands this connection to the effect of (ING). While ratings were more *casual* for perceived *working-class* speakers generally, this pattern was greatly increased when they used *-in*.

		Checkbox not selected	Checkbox selected	sig.
working-class	<i>-in</i>	2.84	2.29	0.025
	<i>-ing</i>	2.79	2.71	

Table 2: Ratings for casual/formal, by class and (ING)

This pattern and others reported elsewhere demonstrate the importance listener perceptions and the power of combining experimental control with careful attention to social detail. These methods described represent a multi-pronged approach that is necessary for a full understanding of the structure of sociolinguistic variation.

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