

Modelling sociolinguistic cognition with existing systems

The third wave of variation studies has relied heavily on the concept of indexicality, a set of culturally defined connections between linguistic and other social structures which allow speakers and listeners to invoke and alter social context (Eckert 2008, Ochs 1992, Silverstein 1976). Work on indexicality has focused on the interactional and cultural levels of analysis, but the young field of sociolinguistic cognition has begun to explore the individual-level cognitive structures and processes which underlie indexical practices (see, e.g. Levon & Fox 2014, Loudermilk 2013).

In Campbell-Kibler (2016), I argued that no specialized sociolinguistic monitor is required to account for variation-related behavior. Instead, the observed patterns can be accounted for by systems of person perception, self-regulation, linguistic grammar, habit formation, and general reasoning, all cognitive structures amply motivated by work outside of sociolinguistics. Assuming that the grammar includes the ability to incorporate nonlinguistic context, as in current exemplar models (e.g. Johnson 2006, Sumner et al 2014) and that person perception and self-regulation are able to observe at least some linguistic behavior, these systems are capable of accounting for the sociolinguistic behavior we have observed.

In this talk I will explore two key points for this approach. First, despite these systems being distinct and independently motivated, they presumably all depend on links between linguistic and social structures in order to do sociolinguistic work. To what extent are such links shared across systems and to what extent are they distinct? Preliminary work suggests that they may be distinct, meaning that each system learns and stores its own set of linguistic-social pairings, allowing for disconnect across behaviors.

Second, these systems appear to be made up of multiple processes working at differing levels of deliberative access, leading to proposed models that include a divide between implicit and explicit elements (Evans 2008). Likewise, previous work in variation as well as in language attitudes, language ideologies, and language regard have shown that sociolinguistic structures used in different tasks are multiplex and at times contradictory, necessitating divisions such as overt vs. covert attitudes (Kristiansen 2009). Both literatures suggest that sociolinguistic links differ across processes with variable levels of deliberative awareness and control, raising questions of how precisely to capture this dimension in the proposed approach.