

**Perception, cognition and linguistic structure:  
The effect of linguistic modularity and cognitive style on sociolinguistic processing**

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Labov (1993) has suggested that patterns of morphosyntactic variation do not elicit the same kinds of perceptual reactions from listeners as phonetic variables because “members of the speech community evaluate the surface form of language but not more abstract structural features.” In this talk, we report on an experiment designed to test this claim by examining the effect of linguistic modularity on listeners’ social evaluations of socially meaningful forms. Building on recent studies of the *sociolinguistic monitor*, an hypothesized cognitive mechanism that governs frequency-linked perceptual awareness (Labov et al. 2011; Levon & Fox, 2014; Wagner & Hesson, *fc*), we investigate listeners’ reactions to two socially salient variables in British English: TH-fronting, or the labio-dental realization of the inter-dental fricatives (e.g., *fink* for *think*; Kerswill 2003), and the Northern Subject Rule (NSR), or the use of verbal *-s* suffixes when the subject NP is not third person singular in function (e.g., *they really likes ice-cream*; Childs 2013). These variables are interesting since they are not only differentiated by the level of linguistic structure at which they are situated (i.e., phonetic versus morphosyntactic) but also by their perceived geographical epicenter (with TH-fronting seen as stereotypical of Southern British English varieties and the NSR of Northern ones). These variables therefore provide us with an ideal test case of the ways in which social and linguistic factors may come together to constrain the operation of the sociolinguistic monitor.

Our experiment follows the protocol established by Labov et al. (2011): Resynthesized stimuli derived from the speech of a woman from the southeast of England and controlled for the variable realisation of both TH-fronting and the NSR were presented to 79 British listeners in Newcastle and in London. In order to test for additional possible constraints on perceptual sensitivity, listeners also completed questionnaires related to their British regional identities (Cargile & Giles 1997) and their cognitive styles more generally (Hurley et al. 2007).

Results indicate that while both variables show significant and statistically independent effects, our listeners are more sensitive to the social meaning of the morphosyntactic feature than the phonetic one. This finding is important since it suggests that variables at a higher level of linguistic structure are available to the sociolinguistic monitor. Moreover, reactions to different frequency distributions of the NSR are also significantly conditioned by both listeners’ region of provenance (i.e., North vs. South) and individual differences in listeners’ cognitive styles. This result demonstrates that morphosyntactic variables are in fact fully embedded in listeners’ cognitive-evaluative structures and subject to the same types of perceptual mechanisms as phonetic variables are. Overall then, our findings support the claim that sociolinguistic processing is influenced by a range of both social and psychological constraints (Preston 2010; Campbell-Kibler 2011; Wagner & Hesson, *fc*) while at the same time demonstrating the need for our models of sociolinguistic cognition to be extended so as to include patterns of grammatical variation (cf. Walker 2010; Meyerhoff & Walker 2013).

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