

Dialect perception in Spanish-speaking Miami: The interaction of top-down and bottom-up stimuli

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The majority of the work in folk dialectology (Preston 1989, 1993; Niedzielski 1999, 2000; Niedzielski and Preston 2000) and perceptual dialectology (Bucholtz et al. 2007; Fridland 2006; 1996) has focused on varieties of English. As a result, relatively little experimental work has been conducted on the perceptions of Spanish varieties spoken in the United States (Alfaraz 2003 is a notable exception). This comes in spite of increasing interest in non-perceptual dimensions of U.S. Spanish (e.g. Otheguy & Zentella 2013).

We begin to report on the findings of a speech perception experiment that interrogates local perceptions of Spanish varieties spoken in Miami. Not only is Miami the most Latino city in the U.S. (79% Latino, 2010 Census), it is also the most foreign-born (60%). Three additional factors add to the complexity of Miami's sociolinguistic scene: 1) varying degrees of Spanish/English bilingualism, 2) cross-generational language shift from Spanish to English, and 3) the diversity of Spanish language varieties spoken in the region. The largest national-origin groups in Miami are Cubans, Colombians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans, but Miami's Spanish-speaking environment includes in an increasing number of other national-origin groups. This demographic situation raises important questions for sociolinguists about language perception in super-diverse (Blommaert 2010) urban settings, and about the interaction between sociological stereotypes and acoustic stimuli in the perception of language.

In the current study, three male residents of Miami read a short text in their home variety of Spanish: Peninsular (Madrid), Highland Colombian, and post-Castro Cuban, which are primarily distinctive due to the following phonetic variables: 1) Madrid; use of ceceo and apical realization of /s/ 2) Highland Colombian; unique intonation patterns and non-weakening of final /s/ and 3) Cuban; strong weakening of final /s/, velarization of final /n/, and neutralization of final /l/ and /r/ (Lipski 1996). These men were college educated in their respective countries of origin, are employed in Miami, and between the ages of 25-40. Participants (N=321) were asked to listen to these recordings and were given some background information about the speaker, including the parents' country of origin. In certain cases the parents' national-origin label matched the country of origin of the speaker (speaker: Cuba, origin-label: Cuba), but otherwise, the background information and voices were mismatched (speaker: Cuba, origin-label: Spain). This manipulation allows us to distinguish the perceptions based on bottom-up elements (speech signal) from the top-down ones (social information). Participants were then asked to rate each voice on a 5-point Likert scale for a range of personal characteristics and to answer questions about a speaker's employment, family, and income.

Data were analyzed using SPSS and they show a number of interactions between speech stream and national-origin labels. We focus on two significant findings: 1) a competence/warmth split, where national-origin labels raise and lower perceptions dependent on the trait itself and 2) a blue-collar /white-collar split, where the national origin labels determine

the likelihood of the speakers' occupation. We also report on differences in perception amongst Latino and non-Latino participants, who respond differently to top-down and bottom-up stimuli.