

What does the linguistic environment contribute to social meaning?

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The study of sociolinguistic meaning has begun to explore what factors influence the meaning potentials of a form or style (Campbell-Kibler 2009; Phrao et al. 2014; cf. Silverstein 2003; Agha 2007). This paper explores the role of the linguistic context of a variant—that is, the linguistic conditions favoring or disfavoring its occurrence—in constraining its possible social meanings. I argue that the linguistic environment can transform the social meaning of a variant, and to substantiate this claim I examine creaky voice in Mandarin Chinese at different locations in the intonational phrase. Creak’s proposed social meanings are variegated—ranging from “bored” (Laver 1980) to “tough” (Mendoza-Denton 2011) to “sexy” (Kajino and Moon 2011), and this variability presents a challenge to scholars seeking to explain how such meanings arise and circulate. My results show that the social meanings of creak are both iconically motivated and extremely sensitive to contextual factors, and that linguistic context helps constitute the field of contrasts in which its social meanings are generated.

Using a matched guise design, audio stimuli were created with a target syllable of either low tone (tone 3) or high falling tone (tone 4) in phrase-medial (4th syllable) or phrase-final position (10th syllable). Creaky and modal realizations of the target syllable produced by two native Beijing Mandarin speakers were spliced into a carrier recording of the stimulus sentence (cf. Campbell-Kibler 2007, Podesva et al. 2014), yielding matched creaky and non-creaky guises of the target syllable in different tonal and prosodic environments. Native Mandarin hearing participants heard each stimulus, saw it in Chinese orthography, and rated the speaker on a number of adjective scales.

Mixed-effects models of the ratings, using speaker and stimulus frame as random effects, indicate that in phrase-final position (where creaky voice is more frequent, Belotel-Grenié and Grenié 2004) respondents rated creaky guises as significantly more *enthusiastic* (qingxu gao) and *interested* (gan xingqu) than non-creaky guises. In phrase-medial position, the opposite held, with creaky guises rated as significantly less *enthusiastic* and *interested*.

I suggest that creaky voice is evaluated relative to its level of predictability in context and its interaction with the intonational phonology of the phrase. In phrase-final position, where creak is more frequent and intonational lows are common, creak may be interpreted as a cue to phrase-final low intonation (Peng et al. 2006), and interpreted as an excursion beyond the ordinary boundaries of the speaker’s pitch range (Mendoza-Denton 2011; Podesva 2007; Sicoli 2010). Such excursions generate indexicalities of energy and effort (see Gussenhoven 2004 on the Effort Code), thereby affording inferences of “enthusiasm” or “interest.” In phrase-medial position, meanwhile, creak is less common, and so emerges as unexpected lowness in a non-low context, generating indexicalities of low effort, interpreted as decreased enthusiasm and interest (see also D’Onofrio, Hilton, and Pratt 2013 on phrase-medial creak among burnouts).

Though linguistic context has not received much scholarly attention in studies of social meaning, it is an integral part of the ecosystem in which a variant’s indexical value is determined. Continuing investigation of the semiotic, social and psychological facets of stylistic meaning must seek to understand the scope and scale of linguistic context’s contribution to this ecosystem.

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