

## The interplay between listener characteristics and talker acoustics in regional accent perceptions

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A key ingredient in the production and perception of language variation is the social perception of the speech of others. Our own sociolinguistic choices are informed by those of our interlocutors and our awareness of the judgment of others is a factor in our own sociolinguistic choices. This sociolinguistic perception in turn cannot be understood without reference to the underlying models speakers maintain of their sociolinguistic worlds which inform a wide range of sociolinguistic behavior, from deliberative, explicitly articulated metalinguistic commentary to sociolinguistic production or perception in the moment. Little is known, however, about their structure or their links to behavior. In particular, we do not know to what degree the models or systems underlying metalinguistic reportable beliefs are integrated with or distinct from those underlying sociolinguistic perception. This study examines the relationship between explicit metalinguistic models and online sociolinguistic perception of regional variation in the US. It asks whether individuals who report high degrees of accent in a given location are more sensitive to the specific acoustic features which distinguish that area from others. In other words, is there a coherent construct of “knowing about” a given accent, which comprises both explicit report and recognition?

901 listeners rated 15 brief word lists sampled from a larger pool of talkers, featuring only words from the GOOSE (150), TRAP (150), DRESS (150) or LOT (112) vowel class. The participants were told nothing about the talkers, who were all white women between the ages of 18 and 25 who had lived in a single town in Ohio between the ages of 6 and 17. They rated each voice on a visual analogue scale from “not at all accented” to “very accented”. Afterwards, they provided their age, gender, race/ethnicity, regional history and English native speaker status. They then rated seven regions in Ohio on the same scale they had rated the speakers on.

The results do show a correlation between perceived accent in talkers and perceived accent in regions, namely that listeners who give high accent ratings to talkers also give high accent ratings to abstract places. In other words, there is a dimension of inter-individual variation that might be termed “accent orientation”, which predicts how strongly an individual attributes accent to other native speakers of their language. We find, however, no correlation between accent attributions to region and sensitivity to acoustic features. Listeners across the board show a pattern of response to acoustic features, but this pattern is not strengthened by belief in or knowledge of the regional accent associated with the acoustic feature.

These results suggest that metalinguistic commentary and sociolinguistic perception are operating on distinct systems, which only slightly inform each other. It also suggests that direct access or observation of one’s own sociolinguistic perceptions is not the primary feeder of explicitly reportable linguistic beliefs.

