

## He says, she says: The acquisition and abstraction of social meaning

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## He says, she says: The acquisition and abstraction of social meaning

**BACKGROUND** | Linguistic variation has an inextricable social dimension: the language features and varieties a speaker uses construct that speaker's individual style (Eckert 2005), but can also be associated with macro-social categories, such as gender, age or social class (Walker et al. 2014). More recently, an interest in how this social meaning of language variation is acquired has been foregrounded in sociolinguistics. In this context, exemplar-based models of speech perception have gained much support since they present a learning mechanism for both linguistic and social aspects of speech (Foulkes 2010, Drager & Kirtley 2016, Jeffries 2019). However, empirical evidence is needed to validate their accuracy, especially regarding the role of input frequency in the acquisition and abstraction of sociolinguistic variation (Drager & Kirtley 2016).

**METHOD** | The present study therefore experimentally explores the amount of exposure to and awareness of a sociolinguistic variable as a potential threshold for the acquisition of social meanings. To do so, a sample of 80 students is trained on a semi-artificial language which contains a new sociophonetic variable. Its use is conditioned probabilistically on speaker gender: the linguistic variant co-occurs with the to be learned macro-social attribute (male or female speaker) in 90%, 75% or 60% of the stimuli respectively. After exposure, participants are assessed on their explicit associations between the linguistic variable and speaker gender in a forced-choice task and a verbalisation task. This test phase also introduces novel items to measure whether participants abstract the newly acquired social meaning to words that formally differ from the training items in varying degrees.

**EXPECTED RESULTS** | Frequent activations of utterances are assumed to result in higher overall activation levels of these utterances in memory, which makes them more readily accessible in controlled mental processes (Drager & Kirtley 2016). Hence, we expect acquisition of explicit associations to be strongest in the 90% condition, followed by the 75% and 60% conditions respectively. Our results will contribute to further substantiating and refining exemplar theory empirically by documenting the conditions under which macro-social linguistic variation is learned.

(332 words)

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