Creating gender distinctions: migrant teens’ acquisition of sociolinguistic variation

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Introduction

How much social and linguistic information can older learners of a language acquire from the speakers around them? Our study investigates the patterns of variation in the speech of teenage migrants in Edinburgh and London, looking at the well-studied and well-understood (ing) variable in English. We have interviewed Polish teenagers and a comparable number of locally-born teenagers in each city, who we use as a benchmark for establishing the norms of variation the Polish kids have the most frequent exposure to. This paper focuses on the social variables of gender and style. We question to what extent Polish adolescent immigrants are acquiring the variable constraints of their local peer group in respect to gender and style. We then discuss how our findings on gender and style among native and non-native speakers relate to current ideas on indexing gender in sociolinguistics. We speculate that some social indexes are more readily assigned to variation than others, and we explain why we think gender constitutes one such index.

Data collection

Fieldwork on this project took place at high schools in London and Edinburgh. Linguistic production data were collected from 16 Polish migrants living in Edinburgh and 21 Polish migrants living in London. Linguistic data were also collected from 21 Edinburgh-born and 24 London-born teenagers attending the same school as the Polish adolescents to provide a benchmark for the types of English to which these Polish adolescents are regularly exposed. Sociolinguistic interviews were carried out between all participants and a female local researcher. Speakers were also recorded performing a short reading task of 17 sentences that was designed to elicit a wide range of different phonological variables. Personal information and language attitudes were collected in a short questionnaire and a verbal guise test which required the teenagers to listen to short recordings of speakers with London, Edinburgh, Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle, Polish, RP and Scottish Standard English accents (see Clark and Schleef forthcoming). The conversation and reading-task data were transcribed orthographically using ELAN (http://www.lat-mpi.eu/tools/elan/), resulting in a time-aligned corpus of around 100,000 words.

Analysis

As a first step in our analysis, we explored the variable realisation of (ing) (with variation between [ɪŋ] and [ɪn] in unstressed syllables) in this corpus. We extracted all tokens of (ing)

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from the conversation and reading passage data (1833 tokens in Edinburgh and 1556 tokens in London) and coded these data for a range of different social and linguistic constraints often found to operate on (ing) variation in English\(^2\). We then subjected the data to a multivariate analysis to determine which social and linguistic factors constrain the realisation of (ing) among each of the two speaker groups in Edinburgh and London\(^3\).

**Results**

In most English-speaking communities world-wide there is a common core of social and linguistic constraints on the distribution of the apical and velar variants of (ing) (Hazen 2006, Labov 2001). In respect to gender and style, this research has show that the velar variant is more frequent in formal than conversational style and that females are more likely to use the velar form than males. In both the London and Edinburgh locally-born teenagers we find only some of these constraints are significant (see Table 1). In neither city do we find the common gender pattern among the native speakers, such that the velar variant is probabilistically associated with female speakers and the apical variant with male speakers. Instead, in both London and Edinburgh, style is statistically significant among the native speakers.

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<tr>
<th>London-born adolescents</th>
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<td>Female reading</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>Female speaking</td>
<td>29</td>
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<td>Male reading</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>Male speaking</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<th>Polish-born adolescents in London</th>
<th>Polish-born adolescents in Edinburgh</th>
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<td>in</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female reading</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>Female speaking</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td>Male reading</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
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<td>Male speaking</td>
<td>17</td>
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Table 1: Percent distribution of variants of (ing) by gender and style in London and Edinburgh

Style is not significant among the non-native speakers. However, in London, the Polish teenagers have generated a statistically significant gender distinction, but one that reverses the typical pattern in native speakers. In Edinburgh too, we see a gender trend emerge. However, this trend is not significant. Instead, social network emerges as a significant factor. Gender and social network are not unrelated, and we would argue that what we see here are different facets of the same processes of translating variation into sociolinguistically meaningful patterns. Constraints seem to have been transformed among the L2 learners, i.e. new

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\(^2\) Predictor variables included preceding and following phonological context, grammatical category of the lexical item, number of syllables in the word, previous realization of the (ing) variable, lexical frequency, speech style, sex of speaker and the speakers’ attitude towards the local Edinburgh accent (see Schleef, Meyerhoff & Clark (forthcoming) for further details).

\(^3\) Rbrul (Johnson 2008) was used to run a mixed-effect multiple regression analysis in which the individual speaker was also included as a random effect. Full details of this regression can be found in Schleef, Meyerhoff & Clark (forthcoming).
constraints on (ing) seem to have been adopted which are not apparent in (or not relevant to) the UK-born adolescents.\(^4\) This leads us to our hypothesis. It seems that when social constraints start to emerge among our Polish-born teenagers, there is a tendency for them to be associated with more visible, transparent group categories close to the speakers’ immediate surroundings, rather than more abstract social categories such as style.

We are observing something among the L2 speakers which seems to run counter to other assumptions about the indexical relationship between language and social attributes. Ochs (1992) and Eckert (2008) propose that the association of linguistic variants with social attributes and social groups, such as gender, is an indirect relationship, mediated by more direct indexicalities, such as stance or activity. Following their work, we might expect a casual stance or an activity like reading aloud to emerge first among the Polish teenagers, and only after such stances or activities have achieved some shared recognition, for characteristics such as gender or friendship network to be indexed. However, this does not seem to be the case as there is no evidence that they have acquired any stylistic constraints on (ing). How can we then explain the results on gender? Since it is not entirely clear what exactly our Polish teenagers know about the social meaning of (ing), its indexical potential and what their competence is in regards to indexing variations in style, we are left with speculations:\(^5\)

1. Polish teenagers might generate gender or friendship network as a first-order index when trying to make sense of the sociolinguistic complexity of (ing).

2. Gender and network indices among migrants may emerge indirectly from a direct indexing of a style or stance based on stylistic stratification of (ing) in locally-born peers.

3. Our Polish teenagers do not replicate style as an expression of formality (as elicited in our interviews), but they may very well create other more contextualized styles (or persona styles, Eckert 2008: 456) that have escaped our analysis.

While (1) and (2) would require additional data collection, there is some evidence we can put forth in favour of (3). The verbal guise tests of eight British accents give us some speculative hints about what Polish-born teens know about the social meaning of variants and their ability to index variations in style. Clark and Schleef (forthcoming) show that they can perceive the social evaluation of extremes, and they seem to be doing this much better at the solidarity (rather than status) end, i.e. they are doing better at acquiring evaluations associated with attributes such as friendliness, coolness and solidarity rather than poshness and intelligence. If we were to tentatively extend this proposal to persona styles, we could argue that our Polish-born teenagers first build up competencies in perceiving styles that are linked to friendliness, coolness and solidarity, styles to which variants of (ing) may very well contribute and which may indirectly index other social categories. This is in line with the suggestion that for our teenagers more visible, transparent, concrete group categories associated with their immediate surroundings are acquired first. However, based on this line of interpretation, it is not style as such that is acquired later, but certain specific styles (especially those related to formality and status) are acquired later. If we are correct, then persona styles should emerge first that are associated with more visible group categories, e.g. friendship networks and gender, rather than more abstract categories. Thus, some styles may be acquired more easily, and indirect

\(^4\) Similar transformations have also been found in respect to linguistic constraints, e.g. grammatical category. A detailed discussion of this point can be found in Schleef, Meyerhoff & Clark (forthcoming).

\(^5\) A detailed discussion of these points can be found in Meyerhoff & Schleef (under review).
indexing may certainly be possible in respect to these styles. Confronted with a context that was set up to elicit formality style resulted in the natives producing exactly this style, indexed partly by variation of (ing), and ignoring other styles that (ing) variation may contribute to. The Polish teenagers could not do this, instead, their production of (ing) may have been influenced by very local persona styles about which we know too little.

Conclusions

Including non-native speakers in variationist analyses presents sociolinguists with new challenges. We have to base our interpretations on these speakers’ limits and potential and accept the possibility that some social meanings can be perceived by them, while other social meanings cannot be perceived or are reinterpreted. Future research must aim to find out more about the competence of non-native speakers in this respect. While more research must be conducted to gain a better understanding of what our Polish teenagers know about the social meaning of variables, we believe we have provided some initial evidence that when social constraints and social styles start to emerge there is a tendency for them to be associated with more visible, transparent group categories close to speakers’ immediate surroundings no matter whether they are in the native input or not.

References


Miriam Meyerhoff and Erik Schleef (Under review). Sociolinguistics and immigration: what teenagers may be telling us about the acquisition of social and linguistic constraints. In Journal of Sociolinguistics.
