The more the merrier? The role of linguistic input in the acquisition of social meaning

BACKGROUND | The usage-based paradigm assumes that language users' linguistic knowledge is derived from the input that they receive (Langacker 1987, 1991; Tomasello 2003; Bybee & Beckner 2012). Within this paradigm, exemplar-based theories of language learning assign a pivotal role to linguistic input for the acquisition of both linguistic and social aspects of speech (Bybee 2001, Docherty & Foulkes 2014, Drager & Kirtley 2016). More specifically, the frequency with which a linguistic variant and a social category co-occur in input has been argued to influence the storage and entrenchment in memory of the association between them (Foulkes 2010; Docherty, Langstrof & Foulkes 2013). However, few studies on the acquisition of socially meaningful language variation have compared the effects of varying degrees of co-occurrence on (speed of) acquisition.

METHOD | The present study therefore experimentally explores various co-occurrence patterns of linguistic variants and social categories in listeners' input as a potential threshold for the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation. To this purpose, a sample of 80 Flemish students is trained on a semi-artificial language constructed of short Dutch sentences with a pseudonoun (e.g. *Ik zie een* lopat. "I see a *lopat*."). The pseudoword contains a new type of sociophonetic variation, the (de)voicing of the word medial stop, which is constrained probabilistically on speaker gender identity: the use of a linguistic variant by one social group (speakers identifying as male versus as female) is manipulated between participants to constitute 90%, 75% or 60% of the group's total number of utterances. In a subsequent test phase, explicit associations between the linguistic variable and speaker gender identity are assessed in a forced-choice categorisation task. This is followed by a verbalisation task to gauge participants' awareness of those associations. Novel stimuli are inserted into this test phase to measure the extent to which participants generalise the newly acquired social meaning to previously unencountered lexical items.

EXPECTED RESULTS | As utterances are heard more frequently, their representational strength in memory accumulates, which makes them more readily accessible in controlled mental processes (Bybee & Thompson 2000, Drager & Kirtley 2016). Hence, we hypothesise most successful learning across participants of associations between a variant and a social category as the latter approximate maximal co-occurrence in participants' input, i.e. in the 90% condition followed by the 75% and 60% conditions respectively. Our results will thus build upon the insights of exemplar theory by further documenting the role of external linguistic input in the acquisition and mental processing of socially conditioned language variation.

(412 words)

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