

Auditory affective priming: Exploring new methods to measure language attitudes

In the context of the theme session ‘The Perception of Non-Native Varieties: Methods and Findings in Perceptual Dialectology’, this paper sets out to explore a novel technique to measure implicit attitudes towards language varieties. Despite the abundance of new methods to investigate implicit attitudes that have been introduced in social psychology over the past two decades (e.g. neuroimaging, the Implicit Association Test (IAT), affective priming (AP), etc.), the application of these techniques in linguistic research has been limited. Speelman et al. (2013) have taken the lead here and developed auditory affective priming (AAP) for linguistic applications. The AAP technique is based on the extensively studied AP paradigm used in social psychology. A classic AP experiment measures the reaction time a respondent needs to categorise a target picture as negative or positive after being presented with a prime picture. If the prime has the same polarity as the target picture, it has been found that the reaction time is shorter than when prime and target are contrastively polarised (see table 1 below for a schematic overview). Analysing reaction times, then, allows to determine whether a stimulus is experienced positively or negatively. Speelman and colleagues bring innovation to this method by replacing the visual primes from the original technique by auditory ones which allows linguists to study language attitudes (see also Degner 2011 and Degner et al. 2012 for experiments using auditory primes in a non-linguistic context).

<i>Prime valence</i>	<i>Target valence</i>	<i>Response latency</i>
+	-	short
+	+	long
-	-	long
-	+	short

Table 1 – Schematic representation of the affective priming effect

However, the linguistic AAP technique has only been tested once on a relatively small sample and further research is needed to assess its possibilities and compare it to existing methods in language attitudes research. Questions that need to be addressed concern the characteristics of the auditory primes (can we go beyond the phonetic level as explored by Speelman et al. 2013? is the technique suited for L2 accented speech? etc.) and the possibilities to enter sociolinguistic variables in the design of the experiments (will an abundance of variables overload the design of this sensitive method?). In addition, a number of practical concerns need to be considered (e.g. the problem of the technique’s transportability).

Given the relative novelty of AAP in linguistic research, the paper will present a systematic survey of the possibilities and difficulties of implementing the technique in linguistic attitude research, with specific attention for research into (second) language varieties and comparison with existing methodologies.

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