Social Meaning and Less Conscious Sociolinguistic Features: The Case of /u/

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BACKGROUND
- Meaning of linguistic variants changes depending on:
  - Individual talker (Campbell-Kibler 2010, Podesva et al.
  - Listener origin (Walker et al. 2014)
  - Perceived talker dialect / prosodic frame (Phares et al. 2014)
- Sociolinguistic perception has focused on “stereotypes” (Labov 1965)
  - “Overt topic of social comment”
  - Less known about more subtle features not subject to introspective awareness

QUESTIONS
1) Do linguistic features low in explicit awareness carry meaning in perception?
2) Is the meaning of these features modulated by perceived talker race and gender?

THE FEATURE
- Fronting of the back upgliding vowel /u/ found throughout the U.S.
- Fronted variants are more common among:
  - Women (Lobanov, Ash, and Boberg 2006)
  - Younger speakers (Lobanov, Ash, and Boberg 2006)
  - College-educated speakers (Lobanov, Ash, and Boberg 2006)
  - White speakers (Findlay and Barrett 2006)
  - Urban and suburban speakers (Hinton and Barrett 1967)
- This study looks at two monophthongal variants of /u/ when the vowel precedes a coronal (Koops 2010).

METHODS
- College-aged talkers from the SLAAP corpus (Kendall 2007)
  - “Dude” manipulated to back and front positions using Akyustyk extension for Praat
  - Four tokens each of ten vowels were gathered and normalized using Lobanov

EXPERIMENT
- 24 audio recordings (12 talkers x 2 guises) pseudo-randomized into two blocks
  - No mention of talker race or gender
  - Six-point scales:
    - masculine
    - feminine
    - black
    - white
    - trendy
    - intelligent
    - educated
    - from the city
    - from the country

PARTICIPANTS
- 94 listeners from Ohio State
  - 84% from Ohio
  - 56% female
  - 82% white
  - 86% had at least one parent with a college degree
    - 90% between 18 and 22 years old

ANALYSIS
- Results normalized by question and participant
  - Ratings that loaded together in a factor analysis combined
    - The full mixed effects model included:
      - fixed effects for gender, race, /u/, and their interactions
      - random intercepts for talker and participant
      - random slopes for gender, race, and /u/ over participant

POST-TASK INTERVIEW
- Two-thirds of participants did not report paying attention to “dude.”
  - Those who did pay attention to /u/ mostly commented on vowel length or pragmatic use of “dude.”
- Participants had a difficult time ascribing /u/ variants to regions in the U.S.

CONCLUSION
1) Listeners do assign social meaning to features low in explicit awareness, such as /u/.
2) The meaning of /u/ changes depending on perceived talker gender and race for competence and perceived talker race for “trendiness.”

This work furthers the idea that listeners make use of everything in the speech signal to form impressions, including features listeners may not be completely aware of.

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