Exploring social meanings of morphosyntactic variation using the matched guise paradigm

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Introduction
While recent work has explored the social meaning of phonetic variables (Campbell-Kibler 2009; Pharoa et al. 2014), the social attributes that morphosyntactic constructions carry has been less studied (though see Bender 2001; Squires 2013).

This study investigates the social meanings attributed to two morphosyntactic variables in American English: the double modal construction (“I might could go to the store”) and the needs+VERBed construction (“The car needs washed”).

Double modals occur when there is more than one modal in a clause.
- Attested forms of double modals consist of might could, might can, might would, might should, could oughta, etc.
- Might could is the most common double modal.
- Double modals are found in the Southern American Dialect region, originating from Scottish/northern British dialects (Montgomery & Nagle 1993).
- Previous research on double modal acceptance has been recorded in the Mid South (Hasty 2011), Alabama (Feagin 1979), and Texas (Di Paolo et al. 1979).

The needs+VERBed construction consists of the verb ‘need’ followed by a past participle.
- This construction is a feature of the American Midland Dialect region, the English dialects spoken in regions of Scotland (Murray & Simon 1996), and southern New Zealand (Bartlett 1992).
- Positive and negative evaluations of needs+Ved have been tested in Illinois showing the construction to have acceptance in the North Midlands but not in Inland North (Murray, Frazier, & Simon 1996).

Stimuli
Eleven unique sentences were recorded by eleven young female speakers of American English. Four sentences contained target the constructions (halfway through, the original double modal sentences were replaced).

- This might could be a busy week / I might could go to the grocery store.
- Tom might could come with us tonight / Studying might could help your grade.
- My car needs washed so badly.
- The computer needs repaired.

Two versions of each target sentence were created – the original recording intact, and one with the “to be” or “could” cut out. The cuts did not appear to alter the naturalness of the recordings.

Online Data Collection
The study was set up online using Qualtrics and was promoted on various social media websites. In recruitment we targeted participants from the Midland and Southern dialect regions.

Participants were told that they would hear fifteen different speakers; in fact, they heard eleven different speakers, but the four target sentences repeated, such that each version played once. The order of presentation varied across participants.

After listening to each sentence, participants were asked to rate how educated, accented, foreign, friendly, feminine and certain (of the proposition) each speaker sounded. They could optionally leave comments about the speaker. At the end of the study, participants could also indicate whether they personally used the non-standard constructions.

131 participants completed the study aged 18-71, with 61 males and 70 females. All participants reported being native speakers of American English. 66 came from the Southern Dialect Region and 19 came from the Midland Dialect Region.

Analysis
- In both the double modal sentences and the needs+Ved sentences, participants rated speakers as less educated when using the non-standard variants.
- Older participants had a larger difference in how educated they rated speakers depending on the double modal guise than did younger participants. Age did not interact with needs+Ved ratings.
- Participants significantly rated the double modal guise as less certain than the single modal guise. The difference in certainty given to the two needs+Ved variants approaches significance (p=0.07).
- Participants rated the double modal guise as more southern compared to the single modal guise. The needs+Ved variants did not affect southerness ratings.

Discussion
- These results show that morphosyntactic variables carry social meaning, here specifically associations with education; both constructions are seen as low prestige variants (Montgomery 1998, Hasty 2011).
- Although needs+Ved is a feature of the Midland Dialect region, the results suggest that the construction was not seen as regional.
- However, the results also suggest that different listeners respond differently to the variation – for double modals, older listeners interpret it differently than younger listeners (Hasty 2011; Eckert 2014).
- SUSE features have been reported as sounding uneducated and the features have a general tendency to be downgraded among Southerners (Hasty 2008, 2015).
- Modals convey ideas of certainty. The results suggest that with multiple modals, listeners interpret the speakers as seeming less certain than with a singular modal sentence (Nagle 2003).