

On constructing social meaning with stop release bursts

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Recent approaches to variation have treated phonological variables as resources for constructing social meaning (Eckert 2000). The meaning encoded in phonological variation is generally assumed to derive from the frequency with which a given variant appears. This paper argues that social meaning is transmitted not only via frequency, but also through the fine-grained phonetic details differentiating one token from another.

The variable under consideration is the release of word-final stops, a variable with a short but rich history, particularly with respect to identity construction. Bucholtz (1996) suggests that released stops can be used in constructing nerd identity among adolescent girls; Benor (2001) has further observed this variant in the speech of learned Orthodox Jews; and Podesva et al. (2002) discuss a gay activist lawyer's use of release bursts to sound competent to a primarily straight audience. Together these studies suggest that the meaning of released stops, very generally, is 'precision' or 'competence.'

This paper reports on the speech of six medical professionals in both social and work settings. Results for one speaker, Heath, a gay white man in his mid-twenties, reveal that (when controlling for linguistic factors like segmental context, lexical type, prosody, and morphological affiliation) the speaker is more likely to release stops when meeting with a patient than when speaking with friends (VARBRUL factor weights: .626 w/patient, .366 w/friends; $p < 0.01$). This result is consistent with the 'competence' meaning discussed above.

A more fine-grained acoustic analysis of the data, however, indicates that even though Heath's stop releases are less frequent when speaking to his friends, they are longer in duration (49 ms w/friends vs. 33 ms w/patient, $p < 0.048$). It is argued that the duration of the release bursts indexes not just precision, but the degree of precision, such that super-long release bursts come to index something more like 'prissiness.' The use of release bursts to perform prissiness, a common gay stereotype (Barrett 1995), is part and parcel of Heath's construction of persona, as the flamboyant gay man in his friendship group. This interpretation is independently supported by Heath's frequent use of falsetto in the same context.

Analyses couched solely in terms of frequency of occurrence, as in the VARBRUL analysis above, may fail to capture subtleties in social meaning construction, as captured in the acoustic analysis. Low-level phonetic details, often ignored in sociolinguistics, therefore play a central role in the construction of social meaning.