Social meanings in Puerto Rican Spanish: An experimental study combining sociolinguistics and semantics

Manuel Díaz-Campos, Patrícia Amaral, Gibran Delgado & Iraida Galarza (Indiana University)

The question of how social meaning fits within typologies of meaning has received recent attention in the literature (Smith et al. 2010). This work applies formal semantic tests to the analysis of sociolinguistic variables under the assumption that socio-phonetic meaning is a type of conventional meaning. The purpose of our paper is to build on this research to examine the behavior of the social meanings of the variants of /r/ in Puerto Rican Spanish (PRS). While previous sociolinguistic analyses of PRS identify multiple realizations of /r/, e.g. alveolar multiple trill [r], velar fricative [x], glottal fricative [h] (Delgado-Díaz & Galarza 2015, Navarro Tomás 1948), we focus on the variants with more salient sociolinguistic meaning in this speech community: the velar fricative and the trill. The velar variant is associated with rural, older and male speakers, while the trill is associated with speakers of other dialects of Spanish, among other values. Our research examines (i) whether participants are aware of the social meaning associated with these variants, and (ii) whether speakers treat sociolinguistic meaning as "not-at-issue" or subsidiary to the main content of the utterance. We use semantic tests that tease apart "at-issue" content (i.e. the main entailment) from other types of conventionally encoded, not-at-issue information (Amaral et al. 2007). This research contributes to break disciplinary boundaries, bringing together sociolinguistic and semantic tools in order to better understand the behavior of social information.

Thirty two speakers of PRS, students at the University of Puerto Rico, were recruited. The experiment consisted of two tasks, both using Likert scales. The first task tested whether participants are sensitive to the social meaning attached to the variants. Participants rated how surprised they were about the identity of speakers (*jíbaro* 'rural, autochthonous' vs *extranjero* 'foreigner') of oral stimuli containing the relevant variants. Task 2, an acceptability rating task of mini-dialogues, was designed to test whether sociolinguistic meaning behaves as secondary information or not-at-issue content, using negation and the *Hey Wait a Minute Test* [HWMT] (Shannon 1976, von Fintel 2004). There were four conditions manipulating gender of the speaker (male or female) and sociolinguistic variant (trill or velar).

A generalized estimated equations analysis of the data from task 1 revealed that participants are aware of the sociolinguistic meanings associated with the variants, especially so for the velar variant (p<.000); gender of the speaker is marginally significant. Task 2 showed that participants are sensitive to the distinction between main content and social meaning; they treat social meaning as secondary, not-at-issue information. When the analysis is split by sociolinguistic variant (trill versus velar fricative) there were no differences in the participants' answers for the main entailment condition; stimuli with both variants were equally acceptable. In contrast, the social meaning condition shows differences according to the variant; the velar variant shows higher acceptability ratings. These findings suggest

that sociolinguistic meaning patterns like lexical meaning when there is a well-established value of the particular variant. Further research should examine the behavior of variants not clearly associated with a particular social meaning.

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