Bridging the gap between sociolinguistics and semantics: The social meaning of /r/ variants in Puerto Rican Spanish

Manuel Díaz-Campos

Indiana University, Bloomington

The question of how social meaning fits within typologies of meaning has received recent attention. 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. This paper builds on this research by examining the behavior of the social meanings of two variants of /r/ in Puerto Rican Spanish (PRS): the velar fricative, associated with rural, older, male speakers, and the trill, associated with speakers of other dialects of Spanish. We ask whether participants are aware of the social meaning associated with these variants and, using semantic tests, whether they treat sociolinguistic meaning as “at issue” or as subsidiary to the main content of the utterance. Thus we combine sociolinguistic and semantic tools in order to better understand the behavior of social information.

Thirty two speakers of PRS completed two tasks using Likert scales (1-7). In the first, participants rated how surprised they were about the identity of speakers (jibaro ‘rural, autochthonous’ vs extranjero ‘foreigner’) containing the relevant variants. In the second task, an acceptability rating 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). 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 conventional 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.

Manuel Díaz-Campos is Professor of Hispanic Sociolinguistics at Indiana University, Bloomington, USA. He has published on the acquisition of sociolinguistic variables in L1, sociolinguistic variation including phonological and morphosyntactic phenomena, acquisition of second language phonology, and topics in Spanish laboratory phonology. His research appears in notable journals, such as Language in Society, Probus, Lingua, and Studies in Second Language Acquisition, among others. He is the editor of The Handbook of Hispanic Sociolinguistics (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) and the author of Introducción a la Sociolingüística Hispánica (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).