Sociolinguistic variables and internal constraints from a listener perspective

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Since the beginning of variationist sociolinguistics, sociolinguistic research has involved experimental inquiry (e.g. Labov 1966) into dialect differences, and experimental approaches to studying sociolinguistic variation have become increasingly used over the past couple of decades. Much of the existing experimental work (e.g. Labov 1966, Preston 1999, Campbell-Kibler 2007, Labov et al. 2011) has focused on examining the evaluation and social meaning of variables. This is important work, but it has typically not deeply probed the internal grammar of **listeners** in the same way that the much larger tradition of sociolinguistic production studies has, when studying the "orderly heterogeneity" (Weinreich et al. 1968) of variables as they are produced by **speakers**.

Experimental approaches offer key opportunities to query the robustness of internal constraints for listeners, and different listener groups. Understanding listeners' internal constraints on linguistic variables is particularly important for the study of language change, providing insight into how variables are transmitted through the speech community, and how stable variables remain stable in production while the perception of those variables is influenced by general cognitive and perceptual processes.

This talk surveys several lines of experimental research that have focused on listeners' internal constraints on sociolinguistic variables through perception studies. For instance, Bender (2000) probed listeners' sensitivity to the following environment constraint for copula absence in African American English, and recent work by Vaughn and Kendall (2016) explored listeners' knowledge, and use in perception, of grammatical category constraints on English variable *–ing* realization. These studies have demonstrated that listeners are sensitive to the variables' internal conditioning and simultaneously offer us ways to clarify our knowledge about these variables. In synthesizing this recent work, we seek to promote the increased use of such approaches and provide suggestions for future work.