Workshop 2: Implicitness and experimental methods in language variation research

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Abstract:

Implicitness, whether it is used in the context of language attitude research (Garrett 2010), work on language regard (Preston 2010) or studies focusing on the social meaning of language variation (Campbell-Kibler 2007), is a problematic concept in linguistics. Few researchers have taken up the challenge of reflecting on, and defining its nature, let alone that anyone has ever pinpointed its theoretical significance or how exactly we can measure it.

Firstly, from a conceptual point of view, several definitions and interpretations of implicitness have been put forward, but in linguistics the focus tends to be on awareness/level of consciousness (e.g. Labov 1972; Kristiansen 2009; Garrett 2010; Grondelaers & Kristiansen 2013; Preston 2013; Preston 2015). In social psychology, by contrast, the concept of implicitness has been questioned extensively and researchers have proposed multidimensional definitions that recognize more facets in the concept of implicitness than just awareness, facets which are not usually considered in linguistic research. Implicitness in this field is usually understood in terms of automaticity which comprises multiple features (unintentionality, resource-independence, uncontrollability as well as unconsciousness) that need not all be present, but can qualify the way in which the outcome of an attitude measure is implicit (De Houwer et al. 2009; De Houwer & Moors 2010; Gawronski & De Houwer 2014). Such definitions of implicitness seem to allow for a conceptualization in terms of gradience, or a continuum between implicitness and explicitness.

Secondly, when it comes to the theoretical importance of implicitness, it has been claimed that implicit, private, deep evaluations can access the perceptual correlates of linguistic change (Grondelaers & Kristiansen 2013; Kristiansen 2010; Preston 2013). However, studies like Soukup (2013) which showcases that the use of an open guise technique (where participants are aware of the fact that one speaker uses different language varieties), claim to be able to explain language variation in certain contexts. This may raise questions like: do we always need implicit measures? What is the theoretical significance of implicitness in the study of language variation and change? Should it occupy a privileged position when it comes to explaining the driving force behind language change as suggested by
Kristiansen (2010) contrary to for instance Labov’s (2001) current more anti-subjective position? Finally, challenging the linguistic conception of implicitness has important methodological consequences. If we ask ourselves the question what exactly we mean by implicitness, and if we should find that it is a multifaceted concept, we should also ask ourselves which aspect of implicitness we are measuring with specific methods and tools. This goes for traditional sociolinguistic methods like matched guise experiments, but the question is especially relevant in the context of the recent upsurge in social psychological measures to study implicit associations. Linguists are gradually starting to use methods originally developed in social psychology, like the Implicit Association Test (e.g. Campbell-Kibler 2012; Redinger 2010; Babel 2010; Pantos & Perkins 2012; Lee 2015; Rosseel et al. 2015; Loudermilk 2015; Watt & Llamas 2015). Yet, they do not always question what it is exactly that these tools measure, how these methods fit in with sociolinguistic conceptions of attitudes and social meaning, and how the measurements compare to the ones obtained from more traditional tools (e.g. matched/verbal guise experiments).

This workshop aims to bring together experimental research into language regard and into the social meaning of language variation, which approaches and reflects on implicitness from different angles: conceptual, theoretical or methodological. Contributions to the workshop deal with questions such as:

- What aspects of implicitness play a crucial role for linguistic attitude research and research into language variation and change?
- How do different interpretations of implicitness relate to different methods to capture language regard/attitudes/social meaning of language variation?
- What is the relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes? Are they discrete entities or are they the extreme ends of a continuum?
- What is the link between concepts like implicitness, salience and awareness?
- Which research questions require measuring implicit attitudes/associations and which ones are better studied using explicit measures or a combination of both?

References
Campbell-Kibler, K. (2007). Accent, (ING), and the social logic of listener
perceptions. American Speech, 82(1), 32–64.
Grondelaers, S., & Kristiansen, T. (2013). On the need to access deep evaluations when searching for the motor of standard language change. In T. Kristiansen & S. Grondelaers (Eds.), Language (De)standardisations in Late Modern Europe: Experimental Studies (pp. 9–52). Oslo: Novus Press.


