Complicating categories: Personae mediate racialized expectations of non-native speech

Research in speech perception and social psychology has shown that American listeners link certain racialized groups to non-native English speech. Photographs leading listeners to believe that a speaker is Asian, versus White, can hinder comprehension of L1-American English speech (e.g., Rubin 1992) and facilitate processing of L2-accented English (McGowan 2014). Such studies rely on the notion that an Asian face primes expectations of L2-accented English. However, the treatment of "Asian" as a monolithic social category in prior work may not accurately characterize listeners' sociolinguistic expectations. Recent work has shown that specific *personae*, or social types, can mediate links between linguistic styles and larger-scale social categories (e.g., D'Onofrio 2016). This paper presents a listening comprehension experiment with persona-based primes. Results illustrate that listeners' expectations of Asians as non-native speakers are not categorical, but are instead mediated by more specific social types, supporting models of sociolinguistic knowledge that move beyond macro-social categories to incorporate personae.

Three visual primes were selected through an online rating task. American listeners rated two photographs of the *same* Korean male actor significantly differently on "foreign accentedness" (p=0.024). I term these photos, which differ in hairstyle and clothing, the "K-pop" (higher accentedness) and "Bro" primes (lower accentedness). A third picture of a white male was given similar ratings to the Korean photos on traits like "friendliness" and "attractiveness."

162 participants completed a listening comprehension experiment online. Each saw one of the primes (K-pop, Bro or White), described as the speaker. Listeners then heard a recorded English passage, read by either an L1-American English speaker or by an L1-Korean speaker. This yielded six total between-subjects conditions (3 photographs x 2 voices). Participants then completed a cloze test, a measure of comprehension (Rubin 1992), in which they filled in missing words from the passage they heard.

Voice and social prime significantly affected cloze task performance. Listeners hearing the L1-accented voice were more accurate overall than those hearing the Korean-accented voice (p=0.0038). For both voices, listeners who saw the "K-pop" prime performed better than those with the "White" prime (p=0.033). This was expected for the Korean-accented voice (McGowan 2014), but contradicted prior work showing that Asian faces hinder comprehension of L1-English (Rubin 1992, Babel & Russell 2015). Here, the K-pop picture *improved* performance regardless of voice, perhaps indicating that listeners anticipated comprehension difficulty and thus showed greater attention in listening.

Crucially, two depictions of the *same* Korean individual differed significantly: listeners with the "K-pop" picture performed better than those with the "Bro" picture (p=0.028); "Bro" patterned nearly identically to the "White" picture. This suggests that racialized linguistic expectations, and accompanying differences in comprehension, are linked with specific *types* within the racialized category, rather than with some phenotypical notion of "Asian." Indeed, results reflect contradictory ideological notions of Asians as *forever-foreigners* or *honorary-whites* in the American imaginary (e.g., Lo & Reyes 2009). Claims relating broadly racialized categories to accentedness therefore elide significant aspects of listeners' sociolinguistic expectations, as these expectations appear to be linked with more detailed social *personae* inhabiting these categories.