Expecting a Performance: Listener expectations of social meaning in social media

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Walking around the mall and just saw two kids shoplift

Images: Fabletics.com, Federico Beauty Institute
Two related observations

- **Social meanings aren’t fixed**
  - “a constellation of ideologically related meanings” (Eckert 2008)

- **Social meanings are listener-dependent**
  - linguistic performance ≠ ‘transmitting an encoded message’ (Campbell-Kibler 2008, Burnett 2017)

→ **Social meanings: ‘listener-situated’**
  - meanings depend on listeners’ situated uptake
Social media posts:
• a spot-lit ‘front-stage’ (Goffman 1959; Bullingam & Vasconcelos 2013)
• ‘high performance’ (Coupland 2007)
How do expectations of speaker performance mediate listeners’ interpretations of speakers – in the absence of rich, socioindexical cues?
Experiment 1
**um / uh**

- “Women use *um*; men use *uh*”
  Acton (2011), Tottie (2011)
- Overall preference for *um*: a female-led change in progress
  Fruehwald (2016)
‘Women use *um*’

Hazel Hayes @TheHazelHayes · 23h
I just, *um*, I really, just,
*runs fingers through hair*
I sort of, *um*
*sighs*
Like, just, *um*
*weird grin*
Y’know, I
*eye roll*
I’m. Like. Batgirl?

Or whatever.

SuperBroMovies @SuperBroMovies
WB Reportedly Eyeing “Kristen Stewart Prototype” For ‘BATGIRL’ bit.ly/2A51leG
Men use *uh*

Tina Belcher @GirlsNoteBook ⋅ 1h

guys are over here like "yeah *uh* in my opinion the perfect female body is like a victoria's secret model but with 3x bigger boobs" and girls are over here like "mmm dad bods are literally just fine just please respect us" and guys are over here like "no"

Sorority Probs 🤷♀️ @SORORITYPROBS ⋅ 2h

I've never seen a more fragile male than a frat boy getting called out for his mistakes

"*uh* believe what you want but you are crazy Jessica"
Walking around the mall and **um** just saw two kids shoplift

Walking around the mall and **uh** just saw two kids shoplift
How ________________________ is the user?

educated/uneducated
formal/casual
smart/stupid
pretentious/unpretentious
friendly/unfriendly
masculine/not masculine
feminine/not feminine
funny/unfunny
young/old

(7-point Likert scale)
Design

condition 1: um

condition 2: uh

Mixed-effects ordinal regression models for each social dimension
Predictions

• *um*: more feminine/less masculine, younger
• *uh*: less feminine/more masculine, older

*um*

‘Cher’ (Clueless)

*uh*

‘The Dude’ (The Big Lebowski)
Results

‘listeners’ use contextual expectations and existing ideologies to reason about a ‘speaker’

all results $p < 0.05$
Experiment 2
I'm driving my car across Texas... send me suggestions for BBQ places

I'm drivin' my car across Texas... send me suggestions for BBQ places

I'm drivin my car across Texas... send me suggestions for BBQ places
How ____________________________ is the user?

educated/uneducated
formal/casual
smart/stupid
pretentious/unpretentious
friendly/unfriendly
masculine/not masculine
feminine/not feminine
funny/unfunny
young/old

(7-point Likert scale)

Design

8 unique tweets
(driving, cooking, looking, walking...)

condition 1: ing
condition 2: in
condition 3: in’

Mixed-effects ordinal regression models for each social dimension
Predictions

• Similar results for IN vs ING and IN’ vs. ING
  • e.g., less educated, more casual...
• IN’ = IN?
  • Or is IN’ a ‘performative move’...?
Results compared to ING

IN
- less educated
- more casual
- stupider

IN'
- less educated
- more casual
- stupider
- more masculine
- funnier

Qualitatively, same results for IN’ vs. IN

all results $p < 0.05$
Why IN’ ≠ IN?

• ‘Listeners’ sensitive to IN’ and IN - but only IN’ associated with additional socioindexical meanings (masculine, funny)

→ IN’ – a performative move
  → ‘Listeners’ reason that IN’-users are performing ‘funny, down-to-earth guy’
  → thus ascribe distinct meanings to IN’

→ Meanings of IN’ emerge from listeners’ reasoning about speakers’ language use, given the performative context
IN’ and high performance

In high performance...

“The poetic and metalinguistic functions of language comes to the fore and considerations of ‘style’ (...) become particularly salient”
(form focusing)

“There is an intensity, a density and a depth of utterances or actions, or at least this is assumed to be the case by audiences”
(meaning focusing)

Coupland 2007: 147
To summarize

In the absence of rich socioindexical cues...

**um/uh** results show:
- ‘listeners’ use contextual expectations and existing linguistic ideologies to reason about a ‘speaker’

**ing/in’/in** results show:
- the emergence of a particular set of social meanings may be partly contingent on contextual expectations

Listeners expect a performance?
→ Listeners interpret a performance!
Conclusions / implications

Theoretical

• Listeners’ expectations of an interaction may shape the meanings that emerge therein – not just listeners’ expectations about speakers.

Methodological

• Contextual expectations, and expectations of ‘performance’ may shape listener interpretations more generally.
  • E.g., in lab experiments.
Thanks!

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and big thanks to the Stanford Linguists for their advice, guidance, suggestions (etc.) on this project
References


Models

um/u

clmm(attribute ~ variant + (1|phrase_pos))

ING

clmm(attribute ~ variant + (1|word))