That which We Call a Rose by any Other Name Would Sound as Sweet: Folk Perceptions, Status and Language Variation

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Abstract

Folk perceptions of language diversity often differ from the criteria laid out by linguists and have particular implications for applied/sociolinguists since the collective identification of language diversity largely determines the ways in which individuals regard the categorisation of their own (and others) linguistic uses as belonging to a certain social and/or regional variety. Folk perceptions can thus help define speech communities as well as explain sociolinguistic phenomena. This paper provides a critical analysis of the existing folklinguistic research into language variation in a number of different contexts: the UK, the USA, France and Japan. It is hoped that the information gained will lead to greater recognition of the value of folklinguistic research within linguists and amongst the general public and help build up a more detailed sociolinguistic picture of lay individuals’ attitudes towards language diversity.
Introduction

Following seminal research undertaken by Saussure (1857-1913) in the early twentieth century on the arbitrariness of the bond between the linguistic sign and the signifier (Saussure, 1959), a central tenet of modern linguistics has been that, for any given language, there exists no inherent relationship between linguistic forms and the objects and ideas which they refer to. Consequently, linguists generally consider that no language or language variety is inherently more linguistically superior to another. Moreover, despite evidence that Saussure actually believed that arbitrariness implies language as social phenomenon (e.g., Crowley, 1990; Normand, 2004) as well as the importance of the ways in which individuals construct social reality (Saussure, 1959, see also below), Saussure’s (somewhat misinterpreted) legacy has meant that much of the research in ‘proper’ (i.e., internal) linguistics has tended to concentrate on providing explanations for the uniquely human acquisition of first and subsequent languages, and especially regarding the search for an unchanging universal grammar, and/or on the grammatical, morphological, lexical and phonological description, and subsequent classification, of languages and language varieties. Hence, for many professional linguists there seems little academic value in investigating, for instance, whether, and if so, to what extent individuals’ perceive particular language varieties as more inherently correct or aesthetically pleasing in relation to others.

Folklinguistic (i.e., non-linguist) perceptions of languages and their varieties, however, often differ from the criteria laid out by linguists. This is broadly compatible with the view of Milroy and Milroy who note that there exists ‘... a yawning gap between what linguists profess to think about language and what ordinary people assume in their daily use and observation of language’ (1999: 11). Indeed, non-linguists frequently reject notions of linguistic arbitrariness in favour of more socially stratified beliefs and feelings about language diversity, based upon the perceived characteristics of speakers, as members of a wider speech community, of particular languages and varieties.
Findings from research undertaken within the field of social psychology have demonstrated that any attitudes which individuals hold towards particular communities are likely to evoke stereotypical traits about its members, which may or may not be close to the social realities they represent. In a linguistic context, folk perceptions of and attitudes towards language variation have implications for both applied linguists and sociolinguists since the collective identification and social evaluation of languages and language varieties largely determines the ways in which individuals regard the categorisation of the linguistic use of others (and their own) as belonging to a specific social and/or regional variety. Such perceptions can thus help define the geographical and linguistic boundaries of a given speech community. Moreover, although the relationship is complex and highly dependent upon the specific socio-cultural context, social psychologists are generally in agreement that attitudes are a major determinant of behaviour (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). Thus, social evaluations of languages and language varieties can help explain phenomena related to the sociolinguistic behaviour of particular speech communities, such as language change, language decay, language maintenance and language spread (see also Labov, 2001).

Hence, given the importance of measuring folk perceptions as well as the highly contextualised nature of language attitudes, the aim of this chapter is to provide a critical analysis of the existing research investigating social evaluations of language variation in a number of different countries and social contexts. First, a brief analysis of the main methods of language attitude measurement is provided. This is followed by a critical examination of studies of folk perceptions of language varieties amongst native speakers of English in the UK and the USA. The chapter then continues with an examination of studies focussing specifically on evaluations of variation within another European language, concentrating specifically on French. To provide an example outwith non-western contexts, the chapter then concentrates on folk perceptions of regional and social variation in Japan, where as a particularly language conscious society (e.g., Coulmas and Watanabe, 2002),
there already exists a considerable body of language attitude research. It is hoped that the information gained will help build up a more detailed sociolinguistic picture of lay individuals’ attitudes towards language variation in a range of contexts as well as offer a deeper insight into the main investigative approaches to the measurement of folk perceptions and provide potential areas for future attitudinal research.

The measurement of language attitudes

The investigation of folk perceptions of language variation has its origins in language attitude research in the early 1960s in bilingual settings, initially measuring social evaluations of English and French speech amongst Anglophone and Francophone communities in Canada (Lambert et al, 1960). The methodology employed in this study was adapted by sociolinguists and social psychologists, from the late 1960s onwards, as a means of measuring informants’ evaluations of standard and non-standard speech varieties, and a plethora of studies have subsequently been conducted in a range social settings, most especially involving native English speaker informants (see below). The majority of the early studies tended to employ the matched-guise technique (MGT), an indirect approach to researching attitudes, involving informants listening to and evaluating a series of speech recordings of the same speaker in a number of linguistic guises. The informants are typically requested to rate each guise on a bipolar semantic-differential scale in relation to a number of personality traits. In this way, the speaker evaluations are considered representative of the informants’ stereotypical evaluations of the varieties concerned.

The results of these MGT studies demonstrated clearly that non-linguists differentiate between standard and non-standard speech varieties and have stereotyped attitudes towards them. Moreover, in the vast majority of studies inferential statistical analysis of the quantitative data collected indicated that native speakers of the language in question tend to evaluate standard speech more positively on status/competence traits (e.g., educated/uneducated) whilst non-standard speech is
generally evaluated more favourably on *solidarity/social attractiveness* traits (e.g., honest/dishonest). This seems to be the case amongst informants who speak a standard variety as well as those who speak a non-standard variety of the language in question.

However, a number of concerns have been raised in relation to the reliability and validity of the MGT as a measurement of language attitudes, most especially concerning the use of speakers reading aloud the same pre-prepared text as stimulus speech as well as the practical implausibility of finding a single speaker who can authentically produce all the speech varieties presented for evaluation (for an overview see Garrett, 2010). In response, researchers developed the verbal-guise technique (VGT), where informants listen to and evaluate natural speech from a series of different speakers. The VGT has been found to be a much more reliable instrument provided the researcher controls for potentially extraneous factors such as differences in voice quality, speech rate and pitch of the speakers (see McKenzie, 2008a). Moreover, there have also been criticisms of the MGT because the informants are seldom informed of the situations within which the messages are produced, and as such, the speech stimulus can, in effect, be decontextualised (e.g., Coupland and Bishop, 2007). As a consequence, there have been calls to conduct further research into whether the broad *status/competence* and *solidarity/social attractiveness* evaluative dimensions of standard and non-standard language varieties generally found amongst informants in MGT/VGT studies would also be demonstrated in more localised discourse-based techniques of attitude measurement (see also below).

Preston (1989) developed perceptual dialectology to broaden the scope of language attitude research by focussing on the ways in which underlying folk perceptions of language varieties develop and persist. It is worth noting that perceptual dialectology is itself an umbrella term for a range of folk linguistic techniques involving map-tasks and procedures are frequently modified to suit the particular requirements of individual studies. Nevertheless, in order to determine which varieties are
salient for informants, the initial task for participants in the vast majority of studies is to draw boundaries on a minimally detailed map around areas they consider regional varieties of speech to exist. Typically, informants are then requested to rank the speech regions identified in terms of ‘correctness’ and ‘pleasantness’. Finally, informants may be requested to listen to recordings of the varieties in question and to state the regional provenance of speakers. A major advantage of perceptual dialectology is that because the speech boundaries are provided by the informants themselves, it is felt that the approach allows for a much more socially meaningful measurement of regional speech evaluations.

Folk perceptions of language variation in the UK

The earliest language attitudes research conducted by sociolinguists and social psychologists in the UK tended to employ the matched-guise technique and generally indicated that attitudes towards English language variation were based upon the perceived social class of the speaker in question. Giles (1970) study, for instance, used the MGT to investigate the perceptions of 177 secondary school students from south-west England and Wales of 13 English speech varieties. It was found that on three dimensions of status, aesthetic content and communicative content, Received Pronunciation (RP) was the most highly rated and the urban varieties included in the study, i.e., Cockney English and Birmingham English, were evaluated especially negatively.

In the avalanche of research which followed, many separate language attitude studies in the UK have confirmed that vernaculars associated with working-class speakers based in the traditional industrial heartlands of the UK (e.g. the areas around Glasgow, Liverpool, Birmingham and Newcastle) are generally the most stigmatised in terms of status. In contrast, standard varieties of Scottish, English, Welsh and Irish English are generally regarded as more prestigious. In a relatively recent follow-up to the Giles study, Hiraga (2005) employed the verbal-guise technique to investigate the language attitudes of 32 ‘southern English’ informants studying at the University of
Oxford. The results again demonstrated that RP was rated highest and Birmingham English lowest on the status traits. In contrast, in terms of solidarity, Yorkshire English was rated the most favourably, with both RP and Birmingham English evaluated relatively unfavourably.

A similar recent study, albeit on a much larger scale, measuring folk perceptions of 5010 UK nationals of 34 English speech varieties was conducted by Coupland and Bishop (2007). The researchers employed a direct instrument of attitude measurement involving speech samples developed in collaboration with the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) as part of the Voices project. Analysis of the data collected indicated that urban varieties of English continue to be evaluated negatively in terms of status whereas RP (operationalised as ‘Queen’s English’ in this study) and ‘Standard English’ were still rated most highly. On solidarity/social attractiveness traits, however, standard regional varieties, such as Scottish English and Southern Irish English as well as ‘accents identical to own’ were evaluated most favourably, with urban vernaculars again seemingly stigmatised. Interestingly, social variation within the sample was often found to be a significant determinant of attitude, most especially in terms of regional provenance, gender and age; in the case of the latter suggesting that attitude change towards greater tolerance of linguistic diversity may be underway amongst younger British nationals. Nevertheless, Coupland and Bishop concluded that the informants’ overwhelming evaluations of RP and Standard English as prestige forms of spoken English points to a continuation of the ideological prescriptivism for ‘proper speech’ amongst the UK population, also evident from the results of prior attitude studies, and based largely upon the perceived social class of the speakers of the varieties in question (see Milroy, 1999; McKenzie, 2010 for a more in-depth discussion of standard language ideology/native speaker ideology).

Folklinguistics research in the UK continues to develop. One recent innovative study, employing the VGT, examining 32 UK and immigrant Polish adolescents’ attitudes towards a number of forms of British speech, was recently conducted by Clark and Schleef (2010).
indicated that although the Polish adolescents tended to have more difficulty accurately identifying the varieties in question, there were few significant differences between the ratings of the UK group and the Polish group of informants. Both UK and Polish adolescents, for example, tended to evaluate RP highly in terms of status but lower on solidarity/social attractiveness. In contrast, Standard Scottish English (SSE) was judged positively on status and on solidarity/social attractiveness and Birmingham English negatively on both dimensions. A large scale project investigating folk perceptions of UK-born university students of varieties of non-native English speech is currently underway (McKenzie, in progress). In light of the international policies adopted by many UK universities, and the resultant increase in overseas students, as well as the importance of measuring language attitudes as reflections of levels of prestige and acceptance associated with particular speech communities, the findings of the study may help indicate the extent to which specific groups of overseas students are accepted by British-born nationals into the higher educational community in the UK and thus, have important implications for future higher educational policy in the British Isles.

**Folk perceptions of language variation in the USA**

Unlike in the UK, perceptions of varieties of US English are largely based upon regional lines as opposed to dimensions of social class. Moreover, attitudes towards linguistic diversity in US English amongst the general public are generally considered to be based largely upon notions of correctness. More specifically, it seems that the most intense language attitudes are focussed upon those varieties of US English (and their associated linguistic variants) most often categorised as ‘non-standard’. This is broadly compatible with the view of Wolfram (2004: 70) who maintains that ‘for present-day American English, it is clear that the vast majority of socially diagnostic structures exist on the axis of stigmatization rather than the axis of prestige’.

Although generally associated with the Midwest of the United States, there remains some confusion
amongst the general public as to the precise geographical provenance of speakers of mainstream (i.e., standard) US English. This may be because a large number of speakers from the northern and north-western states take it for granted that they themselves use ‘proper English’ and for this very reason assume that the variety they speak is ‘neutral’ and ‘accentless’ (e.g., Lippi-Green, 1997; Preston, 2008). Niedzielski (2002) notes that such an assumption has led these very individuals to believe that they are responsible for maintaining standards in US English. This subscription to a self-serving standard language ideology (see Milroy, 2001) also seems to be perpetuated by speakers of non-mainstream mainstream (i.e., non-standard) US English, and is demonstrated in the levels of linguistic insecurity found, for instance, amongst informants from New York and the southern states. Indeed, folklinguistic research conducted in the USA from the 1960s onwards has demonstrated repeatedly that New York English and varieties of English spoken in the southern states are identified by informants throughout the country as the most salient forms of US English precisely because they are categorised as non-mainstream and thus, the most stigmatised (e.g., Bucholtz et al., 2008).

In the specific case of New York English, the inclusion of a series of attitude statements as part of Labov’s (1966) ground-breaking sociolinguistic study of the social stratification of English in Lower East Side New York constituted one of the first examples of folklinguistic research to demonstrate the considerable levels of linguistic insecurity which exist amongst many members of the New York speech community, and especially amongst females and the lower middle classes. Labov (1966) believed that such linguistic insecurity stems largely from long standing patterns of negative prestige associated with New York English, as a salient speech variety, within the USA population more widely, where New York speech is frequently judged as ‘sloppy’, ‘careless’, ‘loud’ and/or ‘harsh’. Indeed, in a later reflection upon the 1966 study, Labov (2006: 324) maintained that ‘New York is at one extreme of a continuum of linguistic insecurity, and the effect is so strong that the negative assessment of the New York City vernacular emerges under direct questioning’.
A relatively large percentage of perceptual dialectology research has been conducted within the US context. The findings of those US studies utilising perceptual dialectology techniques have demonstrated that the southern United States is usually identified as the most salient dialect region by residents throughout the country. For this reason, Southern United States English (generally perceived as those forms of English spoken in the states of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, Georgia and, frequently, Texas, North Carolina and South Carolina) is consistently rated as ‘incorrect English’. For instance, in one of the first pieces of research of its kind, Preston (1986) conducted a perceptual dialectology study to investigate folk perceptions of US speech areas amongst 138 young, well-educated, Caucasian undergraduates from Hawaii, southern Indiana, western New York, New York City and south-east Michigan. The results of the study demonstrated clearly that those areas evaluated as ‘the worst’ in terms of language use, i.e., the Southern states (along with New York and Hawaii), were also perceived as the most salient. In contrast, the most ‘correct’ English was found to be spoken in the Midwest of the country.

Hartley (1999) conducted another perceptual dialectology study in the United States, this time involving 66 Oregon residents. The study again highlighted the extent to which the south of the USA is marked in (socio)linguistic terms, with 97.3% of informants identifying the southern states as the most salient linguistic region and the overwhelming majority rating southern speech relatively negatively in terms of correctness but broadly favourably in terms of pleasantness (with Georgia and Louisiana English evaluated especially positively).

In a later study, again employing perceptual dialectology techniques, Fought (2002) investigated 122 Californian undergraduate students’ perceptions of regional distinctions in US English. The results indicated that the south of the country was again identified as the most salient linguistic region, and southern US English speech was generally evaluated unfavourably. In contrast, the
speech of the Midwest, although rated broadly positively, was demonstrated to be especially
difficult to categorise in terms of its specific linguistic features. It is interesting to note that a
number of informants in the study noted that southern US speech is associated with African
American Vernacular English (AAVE). Such an association may, to some extent, explain the
frequently unfavourable evaluations of southern US speech (and perhaps the southern states more
generally) amongst the United States population. Negative perceptions of southern US speech on
seemingly racial dimensions provides evidence that language attitude research can reveal prejudices
that may not, or indeed cannot, be expressed in other contexts (see also McKenzie, 2010).

It is perhaps worth highlighting the potential similarities between distinctions made between ratings
for the southern states of the USA on dimensions of correctness and pleasantness and the
aforementioned distinctions between evaluations of urban vernaculars in the UK in terms of status
and solidarity/social attractiveness components. Indeed, the parallels between the findings in the US
and UK provide compelling evidence of the existence of broadly similar, complex and potentially
conflicting non-overlapping attitudinal dimensions within a broad Anglo-American linguistic
context. Likewise, the similarity in the attitudinal dimensions uncovered in both the
sociopsychologically-oriented language attitude studies conducted in the UK and the largely
folklinguistic research, involving perceptual dialectology techniques, undertaken in the USA, again
provides evidence of correctness/status and pleasantness/solidarity as distinct evaluational scales.

An interesting recent direction which folk linguistic research in the United States has taken, and one
which mirrors similar UK studies, involves the investigation of native US English speakers’
perceptions of non-native forms of English speech. One of the earliest investigations was
Lindemann’s (2003) verbal-guise study, examining the attitudes of 39 English native speaker
undergraduates from Michigan towards spoken forms of mainstream US English and Korean
English. The results demonstrated that the informants’ evaluations of Korean English were much
more unfavourable on both status and solidarity traits when compared to ratings for the mainstream US speech. A similar verbal-guise study was conducted by Cargile et al. (2010), on this occasion examining the attitudes of 65 native US undergraduates towards mainstream US English speech as well as a range of non-native English speech. Analysis of the data collected indicated that, on dimensions of status, evaluations of forms of English identified as spoken by North Americans or Western Europeans were significantly more positive than the ratings of English speech identified as spoken by ‘Asians’. In contrast, few significant differences were found between ratings for the speech varieties in terms of social attractiveness. Interestingly, Cargile et al. found a positive correlation between the ‘perceived foreignness’ and the status evaluations of the speech varieties, suggesting that further research incorporating the variable ‘perceived foreignness’ as a potential predictor of language attitudes towards L2 speech would be worthwhile.

Folk perceptions of language variation in France

Traditionally France is a multilingual country. Gallo-romance varieties are generally to be separated into those of langue d'oïl – French is historically a langue d'oïl variety – and those of langue d'oc. Moreover, in the territory of contemporary France, languages as German – in the Alsacian and Mosselan varieties – Dutch, Breton, Basque and Catalan as well as Corsican are spoken. In spite of the multilingual character, today the traditional regional languages are considered as minorised languages. Dedialectisation and language loss is a widespread phenomenon together with the emergence of French as the only official language occupying prestige functions in education, administration and the media. Despite some local and intellectual initiatives for revitalisation, non-French languages and non-standard diatopic varieties of French are used mainly by older people, in informal communication and in rural areas. The long tradition of linguistic centralism has been described by language historians as Calvet (2005), Caput (1972/75) and de Certeau e.a. (1975). Primary French dialects as for example traditional Picard or Occitan varieties, such as Gascon have suffered considerable diminishing of active speakers. Success stories, such as the recent film
Bienvenue chez les chtis (2008) by French director Dany Boon testify the great public interest in inner-French linguistic diversity and show the humoristic potential of dialect use in France, nevertheless this cannot hide the fact that primary dialects are mostly restricted to traditional folk domains. In everyday life French citizens are mainly confronted with secondary or even tertiary dialects, as for example the français du Midi, the regional French spoken in the ancient langue d'oc-area, influenced by Occitan, Basque or Catalan substrate. On the other hand, social and generational variation play an important role in the French society, as the domination of standard French is one of the keys to social mobility.

Linguistic variation is described in everyday language by a whole range of different terms. In contrast to dialectologists who prefer to distinguish on the one hand between primary, secondary and tertiary varieties (Coseriu 1980) and on the other between diatopic, diastratic and diaphasic variation, everyday French offers terms like patois, parler, dialecte or langue régionale – the latter for historic non-French languages spoken in France. The use of these terms is not consistent (Scherfer 1982:164), sometimes non-standard varieties are regarded as 'simplified' or 'bad' French; furthermore the distinction between French varieties and autonomous romance languages, such as Occitan is object to some confusion in metalinguistic discourse by non-linguists (Döring 2007). These types of social evaluation have a considerable impact on the perception as well as on the evaluation of linguistic variation. Perception of diastratic or diaphasic variation is often influenced by a normative perspective, as deviation from 'neutral' standard French is considered 'incorrect'. Pustka (2010) mentions the perceptive evaluation of different accents as more or less pleasant (fr. agréable) by her informants. Southern French has, for example, a better public reputation than varieties associated with the North. The concept of linguistic correctness is linked to the idea of a 'neutral' referential norm coinciding with Parisian French.

Beyond research in the explicit field of 'perceptual dialectology' (Preston 1989; for romance
languages Krefeld & Pustka 2010), romance philology has treated some relevant questions on language consciousness in studies coming from different research fields. Folk perceptions of language variation is – in a wider sense of the term – an integrated part of certain sociological analysis, as for example Bourdieu (1982). The symbolic value of certain linguistic behaviour coincides with social perception of different linguistic habits, i.e. social and situational language varieties. Bourdieu describes linguistic behaviour as part of the socially shared mental representations, as “actes de perception et d'appréciations, de connaissance et de reconnaissance” (1982:135). As his interest in the social role of linguistic variation lies more in the sociological than in the linguistic dimensions, the empirical basis for affirmations on dialect perception and dialect evaluation remains weak. He delivers insights into the social and ideological framing of metalinguistic concepts, distinguishing between a 'centralist' and a 'regionalist' discourse, both results of a certain 'construction'. When Occitan activists presuppose the linguistic unity of a given diastematic continuum – often called Occitania, which has never been a delimited historical, political or economical entity –, perception of linguistic variation obeys to rather ideological presuppositions.

More empirical studies on language awareness – including studies on the folk knowledge about own and alien varieties – have been carried out for example by Peter Scherfer (1983). Along with current criticism on traditional French terminology Scherfer observes, that even the use of _patois_ for naming local or regional varieties carries pejorative meaning, which shades light upon folk perceptions of language variation. In his study on language awareness shared by dialect speakers in Franche Comté, he offers insights in the difference between 'mental' and dialectological borders between different dialects (1983:147). Scherfer distinguishes between 'subjective' – referring to folk linguistic mental representations – and 'objective' – referring to concepts accepted by dialectologists – dialect borders. His study relies on quantitative (27 informants) and qualitative interviews. Scherfer examines metalinguistic knowledge about the primary dialect as well as general attitudes
towards dedialectisation and growing hegemony of standard French. The loss of the primary dialect for instance by younger generations in Franche Comté is not seen as problematic by dialect speakers. Instead, the use of secondary or tertiary dialects, regional French, is privileged. Following Scherfer, dialect speakers know about the negative evaluation of regional primary dialects in France, often associated with linguistic behaviour of lesser educated populations.

Kuiper (1999; 2005) conducted two studies on Parisian perceptions of regional French. Based on interviews with 76 informants from Paris, he examined mental dialectological maps, and identified the three regions of Midi, Alsace-Lorraine and the North (Picardie/Nord-Pas de Calais) as those regions perceived as hosting most deviation from standard French pronunciation. Boughton (2010) analyses the perception of diatopic variation from urban areas in Northern France, comparing the cities of Nancy and Rennes. The study shows that regional variation is hardly perceived, as the regional French varieties of Northern and Western France are quite neutralised. Boughton explains this fact by the absence of diatopically marked patterns and by the lack of metalinguistic knowledge about regional variation in Northern French.

Pustka (2010) resumes several research projects on perceptive dialectology, conducted by students from Munich University. The main focus in these studies lies in the perception of the Southern French accent by Parisians and inhabitants of Toulouse. One of these studies relies on a survey of 52 Lycée pupils and teachers from Paris, another on research carried out during a university excursion to Toulouse. Interestingly, there is apparently a whole range of different terms for naming the French varieties spoken in Southern France, for example, accent du Midi, accent Marseillais – Marseille is seen by many Frenchmen as the prototypical location in the ancient langue d'oc-region – français méridional, français du Midi or français du Sud. Terms in relation with Occitan substrate, such as francais d'oc or francitan – both used by linguists to describe the interlanguage marked by Occitan interference – were unknown to the informants, in Paris as well as in Toulouse.
(Pustka 2010:128). The results of the studies undertaken by Pustka demonstrate that in contrast to affirmations made by Kuiper (1999), the mental maps of the regions identified with the Southern accent are far from consistent. Parisians identify the accent either with the whole langue d’oc-region (38 % according to Pustka; 32 % according to Kuiper) or with Provence only (10 % according to Pustka; 63 % according to Kuiper).

In contrast to the primary French dialects, regional French from the South enjoys a certain prestige, initially associated for standard French speakers with popular actors, such as Fernandel or Marcel Pagnol. Until the 1990s the accent du Midi has had the reputation in the North as being folkloric or simply funny (Huret/Romero 2001), nowadays the Southern accent is more and more cultivated as an expression of regional identity. Nevertheless it is also object to a certain social evaluation, in 'normative milieu' as the educational system the marked patterns are generally weakened, whilst a strong 'accent' is associated with popular, less educated environments. The metalinguistic folk knowledge in hetero-representations by Parisians about the accent du Midi is generally limited to phonetic characteristics, as the non-realisation of nasal vowels or the pronunciation of the standard French e muet having evidently strong consequences for the syllabic structure. Lexical peculiarities, such as chocolatine (in contrast to the standard French pain au chocolat), are also part of the commonly shared knowledge about Southern French (Pustka 2010:135). In self-representations, Toulouse citizens also mention the realisation of <r> as [r], a phonetic characteristic that is rather restricted to rural areas in the South.

As diatopic differences tend to be neutralised, social variation continues to play an important role in folk perceptions of language variation. Boughton (2010) focusses on the fact that, for his informants, social differences in linguistic behaviour are far more recognisable than regional ones. Recorded linguistic samples by speakers belonging to different social and generational groups were generally correctly identified, independently from their regional origin. In public metalinguistic
discourse (Osthus 2006), some diastratic or diaphasic varieties as French youth speak (Goudailler 2001) enjoy a constant public interest. Conveyed by the media and popular culture, popular knowledge of linguistic features as verlanisation (i.e., inverting the syllabic structure of lexical unities) is widespread across different generations. What can be retrieved is that the use of Verlan is considered by many French nationals to be restricted to younger people, prototypically with migration backgrounds, living in the cités, the suburbs of Paris, Lyon and other urban agglomerations. Language myths are widespread, for example, that of considering French youth speech as a mixture of French and Arab, a finding, which lacks - apart from a few lean words of Arabic origin - any empirical evidence.

Recent studies on metalinguistic folk conceptions are based on the analysis of public metalinguistic judgements, for example, in Internet discussions and in the social media. Döring (2007) observes the virtual construction of Occitan language identities; Helfrich (2007) analyses public debates on the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in France. Qualitative research on metalinguistic folk concepts, including those on common received ideas and presuppositions, promise a deeper insight into the interdependence between commonly shared received ideas on language and the perception of linguistic reality.

**Folk perceptions of language variation in Japan**

Although in the feudal period differences between varieties of the Japanese language were accentuated by political divisions based upon regional lines, during the Meiji period (1868-1912) and for much of the twentieth century, the notion of kokugo (national language), modelled upon the speech of upper-middle class Tokyoites, was propagated by the Japanese Government as a means of forging a sense of national identity amongst the Japanese population. Indeed, until as recently as the 1970s the kokugo variety was employed as the sole model of instruction in educational establishments throughout the country; reinforcing a simplistic ideology of Japanese race equals
Japanese language (i.e., kokugo) equals Japanese culture (see also Carroll, 2010: 188-191). It is perhaps not surprising that, during this period, as a result of the ideological institutional suppression and/or policy eradication, native speakers of Japanese held deeply negative attitudes towards other varieties of the Japanese language (as well as towards the Ainu language in the north island of Hokkaido and the Ryukyuan language of southern Kyushu and the southern island of Okinawa).

However, from the 1970s onwards there has been an increasing awareness, and indeed acceptance, at governmental level of the importance of the substantial regional and social variation which exists within the Japanese language. For instance, in the education system, and despite differences in approaches between local educational authorities, there has been a gradual but steady policy shift away from the sole employment of kokugo and towards explicitly encouraging children to become more fully aware of the value of local forms of the Japanese language as a reflection of regional identity.

Amongst the general population there is also evidence that folk perceptions of non-standard varieties of Japanese are increasingly favourable. It has been noted that there is a greater awareness amongst the Japanese population that regional variation within the Japanese language has long been declining and that the linguistic differences which remain are increasingly being regarded as central to the maintenance of a local identity symbolic of a past Japan (Carroll, 2001a). Evidence for such perceptions is borne out by the findings of a 1990 study, undertaken by the national television and radio broadcaster NHK (quoted in Carroll, 2001b), examining the key words associated with the standard variety of Japanese (hyoojungo) as well as non-standard varieties of Japanese generally. Analysis of the data collected demonstrated that the most frequent terms employed by informants to describe the (speakers of) the standard variety were ‘bureaucratic’, ‘polite’ and ‘formal’ (seemingly reflecting status evaluations) whereas, in contrast, local forms of Japanese were most frequently perceived as ‘warm’, ‘expressive’ and ‘gentle’ (appearing to indicate favourable ratings in terms of
social attractiveness). Attitudes towards urban non-standard varieties of Japanese appear to be especially favourable. For instance, in a recent study McKenzie (2010) utilised perceptual dialectology techniques to measure attitudes towards variation in the Japanese language amongst in excess of 500 Japanese students from twelve universities throughout the country. In the first part of the study, the results indicated that whilst the vast majority identified the speech of Tokyo residents as representative of standard Japanese, an even larger majority identified Osaka (and its speech variety, *Osaka-ben*) as the core area where non-standard Japanese is spoken. In an extension of the study involving the same sample, it was found that a relatively large percentage of the respondents (43%) evaluated *Osaka-ben* positively (most frequently as ‘kind’, ‘friendly’ and/or ‘gentle’). Whilst a further 40% of the informants were found to be relatively neutral towards Osaka speech, the much lower percentage (17%) who rated the speech negatively tended to comment upon its ‘lack of intelligibility’ and/or ‘strangeness’.

It is worth noting that whilst restrictions of space allows for the discussion of only a limited number of studies within each country, the results of a number of other relatively similar studies investigating folk perceptions of Japanese language variation have found broadly similar patterns of evaluation in relation to the perceived status and social attractiveness of standard and non-standard forms of Japanese (see, for instance, Ball, 2004 study of Kansai varieties; Long, 1999 perceptual dialectology study of regional variation; and Morris, 2010 study of linguistic stereotypes and vowel devoicing).

**Conclusion**

Non-linguists’ perceptions of language often differ from the criteria laid out by linguists. Folk perceptions of linguistic variation are important, nevertheless, because they can help define speech communities as well as explain sociolinguistic phenomena such as language spread, language maintenance, language decay and language change. Moreover, the maintenance of linguistic
diversity – when it comes to the ‘protection’ of endangered language varieties or minority languages – depends on public support. Folk perceptions of one’s own or others language variation often mirrors the social status and prestige of these varieties. As such, this chapter has highlighted the need for a greater degree of recognition within modern linguistics of the value of research measuring folk perceptions of language diversity.

The discussion above has also provided a concise critical evaluation of existing measurement techniques and findings from studies investigating folk perceptions of and attitudes towards linguistic diversity, with a specific focus on studies in the UK, the USA, France and Japan. An ever-increasing body of research has demonstrated the complex ways in which non-linguists evaluate language variation and the extent to which lay perceptions of language diversity are frequently in opposition to those of applied linguists and sociolinguists. Most particularly, there is clear evidence that those varieties which are considered standard for members of a given speech community tend to be evaluated highly in terms of status/correctness whereas varieties deemed non-standard are frequently rated more favourably in terms of social attractiveness/pleasantness. Nevertheless, for a number of reasons, it is clear that there is considerable scope for further folklinguistic investigation.

First, the great majority of research examining non-linguists’ social evaluations of language variation have involved either indirect approaches to language attitude measurement, such as matched-guise/verbal-guise studies, conducted mainly in UK contexts, or more direct approaches to measurement, such as perceptual dialectology studies, many of which have been undertaken in the USA and Japan. There has, however, been relatively little research undertaken specifically examining the relationship between the salient evaluative dimensions of status and solidarity/social attractiveness, which inferential statistical analysis has demonstrated account for much of the attitudinal variance in MGT/VGT studies, and folk linguistic categories of correctness and pleasantness employed in the majority of perceptual dialectology studies. Clearly, in order to
provide a more integrated framework for the investigation of lay individuals’ perceptions of language variation it would be worthwhile to measure any potential association between the findings of studies employing indirect techniques of attitude measurement and the results of research which employ data elicitation techniques of perceptual dialectology.

Secondly, despite recent calls to include a variety recognition component into research instruments measuring non-linguists’ perceptions of language variation (e.g., Preston, 1993; McKenzie, 2008b), the tendency in the majority of studies has been for researchers to presume that informants who listen to and evaluate speakers are able to accurately and consistently categorise the varieties under consideration, as socially or regionally localised forms. Since misidentification of the speech is a potentially confounding variable in studies of this type, any data collected is likely to be more difficult to interpret. This may be particularly the case in studies involving listeners with relatively lower levels of previous exposure to the varieties under consideration, such as children, L2 speakers of the language or L1 speakers who do not employ the varieties in question. In the case of L2 speakers of English, McKenzie (2008b) found that the inclusion of a variety recognition question in a VGT study investigating Japanese informants’ attitudes towards a range of native and non-native varieties of English provided valuable information regarding the specific linguistic cues upon which the listeners based their identifications and misidentifications upon and thus, was felt to offer an additional insight into the ideological forces in operation amongst the particular L2 community.

Thirdly, there have also been criticisms aimed at language attitude research for its general failure to investigate the extent to which particular linguistic features, or combinations and/or frequencies of use of features, relate to patterns of speech evaluations amongst specific speech communities (e.g., Edwards, 1999). Instead, because many language attitude researchers have academic backgrounds in social psychology rather than in sociolinguistics/applied linguistics, the majority of studies have tended to be conducted at a more macro level (Milroy and Preston, 1999). Indeed, although there
exists some research evidence that it is pronunciation, and to a lesser extent, lexis, which leads specifically to different levels of identification and evaluation of language varieties (e.g., Van Bezooijen and Gooskens, 1999; McKenzie, 2010), further in-depth micro level research would help researchers better understand the ways in which particular aspects of speech elicit specific types of speaker ratings and which, in turn, would allow sociolinguists investigating language change to identify, with greater levels of confidence, sound changes in progress within particular speech communities (see also Labov, 2001).

Fourthly, a further criticism relates to the methodological assumptions which lie behind the quantitative-dominant approaches to data collection and analysis in the majority of MGT/VGT and perceptual dialectology studies. It is perhaps for this reason that language attitude research has often been perceived within sociolinguistics as ‘....a discrete, banded and even dogmatic methodology’ (Garret, Coupland and Williams, 2003: 228). Such negative perceptions are largely a result of the rise, in recent years, of social constructionist (or new paradigm) approaches to research within the social sciences more broadly, where complex constructs such as identity and attitude are considered to be dynamic and negotiated in context, as opposed to being relatively stable and enduring. A major implication for the scientific study of linguistics is that for social constructivists, language itself is thought of as a means by which any given individual, through interaction, can construct his/her social world as opposed to simply being a reflection of his/her mind. To enable linguists to conduct contextually dependent and socially specific linguistic research within this social constructivist paradigm, sophisticated qualitative methods of discourse analysis have been developed. There have, however, been only a limited number of discourse analysis studies concentrating specifically upon non-linguists’ perceptions of language. One notable exception is a relatively recent study undertaken by Liebscher and Daily-O’Cain (2009), who employed three discourse-based methods of analysis; content-based, turn internal semantic and pragmatic, and interactional methods, to examine language attitudes in interaction amongst L1 speakers of German
living in Germany or Canada. Whilst the findings of the study are interesting and suggest that it is indeed possible to adapt discourse analysis techniques in order to study language attitudes, such research is clearly in its infancy and further studies of a similar nature need to be undertaken in a greater range of contexts.

Similarly, given the increased focus on in-depth, localised research focusing specifically on the interactional processes by which individuals construct the social world, there is undoubtedly scope for the incorporation of other sociolinguistic research methods into the design of studies measuring non-linguists’ perceptions of language variation, most especially those developed within social network analysis (e.g., Milroy, 1987) and communities of practice (e.g., Eckert, 2000). Although any theoretical and methodological value has yet to be demonstrated, it may well be that adapting sociolinguistic techniques, to be employed in combination with existing language attitude and perceptual dialectology methods, would allow for complementary macro and micro research perspectives and hence, provide more certainty to any findings from future research. Metalinguistic discussions and evaluation of language varieties by lay persons in electronic social media (e.g., Döring, 2007) could also provide a deeper insight into the structure of non-linguists’ reasoning.

This paper began with a call for further folklinguistic research to be conducted in order that linguists can better understand lay individuals’ beliefs and feelings about language variation and language use. Given that there already exists some evidence of disparity between linguists and non-linguists’ views of language diversity, it seems important to consider whether, and if so to what extent and by what means, linguists should disseminate their research findings more widely amongst the general public. Aitchison (2001) points out that the attitudes of linguists themselves towards the ways in which the general public view language tend to be based upon a somewhat tactless deficit model in which non-linguists are generally misinformed and do not have sufficient understanding of language ‘facts’. These negative attitudes towards folk perceptions may, to some
extent, be responsible for the mutual distrust that seems to exist between non-linguists and linguists as well as the public’s general suspicion of and/or lack of interest in listening to the views of language specialists (see also Cameron, 1995; Johnson, 2001). Instead, it may well be more constructive for both linguists and the general public if such negative perceptions of lay individuals’ understanding of language issues were not the default stance amongst professional linguists. From this perspective, it would seem to follow that an important objective for linguists, and sociolinguists and applied linguists in particular, would be to engage more fully with the general public in relation to more controversial issues surrounding language use, such as in relation to the dynamic nature of language itself or regarding the potential social and educational consequences of ‘language purism’ as an ideological construct. This level of engagement between academics and the general public may help provide a more cohesive framework for changing any negative attitudes which non-linguists may hold towards (speakers of) those language varieties deemed non-standard.

It is perhaps ironic that individual attitudes towards socially emotive issues such as language diversity and language use are likely to be held with greater intensity and to persist for longer when those deeply personal positions are challenged in the name of scientific authority. It is for precisely this reason that linguists must be very careful of the manner in which they intend to communicate with the general public in relation to language issues, most especially when the objective may be to initiate attitude change. An excellent starting point for linguists may well be to take non-linguists views about language more seriously and to conduct in-depth longitudinal folklinguistic studies amongst specific speech communities in order to better understand the reasons why non-linguists, possessing agency as members of those speech communities, may hold the perceptions that they do. Only then might the general public be less wary of the views of linguists and be more prepared to take note of the findings from linguistic studies.

Moreover, whilst the misinterpretation of Saussure’s work has been advantageous for the
establishment and continuing justification of linguistics as a subject distinct from psychology (Joseph, 2004a), the result has been an overly narrow definition of precisely what the scope of the field of linguistics constitutes, and which frequently does not include psycholinguistics, historical linguistics or sociolinguistics (Milroy, 2001). In the case of the latter, since the investigation of language attitudes was largely responsible for the establishment of sociolinguistics as a distinct field of study (Joseph, 2004b; McKenzie, 2010), such a narrow interpretation of linguistics may also help explain the reasons why folk views about language are not afforded a greater degree of attention from a broader range of linguists. Indeed, as early as the second decade of the twentieth century Saussure himself argued ‘that linguistics should continue to be the prerogative of a few specialists would be unthinkable – everyone is concerned with it in one way or another’ (1959: 7). Hence, in the same way that sociolinguists and applied linguists need to understand lay individuals’ views of language diversity, and engage sensitively and without judgment with the general public, they should also be more vocal in arguing for a greater awareness and acceptance of the findings from folklinguistic research within the language sciences more widely.

Bibliography


