

EDITORIAL

# Introduction: Language outside the norm: Reactions to non-conforming speech and speakers

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This special issue of the *Nordic Journal of Linguistics* is dedicated to studies that explore the effects and implications of speaking differently from a norm. In recent years, a number of sociolinguistic studies have focused on how speakers who deviate from a given linguistic norm are perceived by listeners in various contexts. This special issue presents a selection of such studies to illustrate the current state of the field. Traditionally, sociolinguistic research on language attitudes has aimed at connecting perception to how linguistic variation relates to language change. As the collection of articles in this issue will show, research on language attitudes and their effects has widened to encompass broader research interests as well as new methodological approaches.

Previous studies of attitudes towards non-standard language typically show low degrees of tolerance towards linguistic variation, including dialect variation, the use of multiethnic youth styles, and foreign accents (Garrett 2010, Coupland & Kristiansen 2011, Grondelaers & Kristiansen 2013). As argued by Kristiansen (2009), for instance (see also Labov 1972), negative attitudes towards non-standard speech affect speakers' linguistic choices, prompting them to accommodate to the standard norms and thus resulting in language change. Other studies have found that overtly stigmatized forms may be covertly upgraded (Labov 1966), leading to questions about the co-existence of multiple norms and how best to capture them empirically.

Recently, questions have arisen about the effects of linguistic context (Levon 2014, Pharao et al. 2014) and situational context (Sharma 2018, Levon et al. 2021) on the interpretation of non-standard features, with a particular focus on ensuring the ecological validity of experimentally obtained data. It has become clear that while some salient features may be doing the majority of social work across contexts, it is important to understand them in relation to the features with which they co-occur. This highlights the importance of contextualizing variation in terms of

styles and registers. The specification of situational context in work on language attitudes has elucidated the real-life consequences of using non-conforming languages, such as in job interviews (Levon et al. 2021) or criminal court cases (Levon & Ye 2020). Together, these approaches connect the study of language attitudes to broader questions of social meaning and the sociolinguistics of everyday life.

Other studies have addressed the larger theoretical issue of what language users conceive of as a norm, particularly changing perspective from individual linguistic features back to whole styles or registers (Montgomery & Moore 2018). The style perspective on language attitudes and ideologies has also led to a re-emphasis on multiple kinds of data, including analysis of how linguistic forms are perceived in interaction (Buchstaller 2009, Podesva 2011, Sharma et al. 2019, Moore 2021), and how language users overtly discuss particular forms either in direct interviews or in spontaneous group conversation. Such studies build, in general, on a long and established tradition of investigating meta-linguistic and meta-pragmatic comments among speakers, including folk beliefs about dialects (Preston 1999, Jaworski, Coupland & Galasinski 2004).

Traditionally, the field has been concerned with linguistic variation in terms of social and geographic distribution across social categories such as age, gender, and ethnicity. While the field has been concerned with language change, seminal empirical studies have shown how such distributions also result in different linguistic input in working class and middle class families respectively, leading to uneven attainment in education and labour (e.g. Heath 1982, Hasan 2002; in Scandinavia also e.g. Scheuer 1998, Røyneland 2005). In our own work on language and social mobility in the project *Speaking Up*<sup>1</sup> we focus, in collaboration with Astrid Ag and Anna Kai Jørgensen, on the connection between the use of non-conforming language and attainment in education. In three Danish cities, we investigate the language use and attitudes among first-year students in pedagogy and teacher training programs. In this project, two sub-projects focusing on perception and language attitudes are related to sub-projects that examine the social meaning of variation in interaction employing ethnographic methods, among others. The idea is to shed as broad a light as possible on the complex consequences of speaking in a non-conforming way. Our project arose out of a desire to understand more deeply how the use of non-conforming language affects the lives of people, in particular how positions of power are established and maintained and have consequences in everyday lives. The purpose of this special issue is to bring together studies with a similar approach, i.e. studies that seek to understand how reactions to language outside the norm impact the lives of those who use non-conforming language.

The articles that follow address how attitudes are formed both historically through the actions of different social agents and how these may have an impact in everyday lives. They present empirical investigations of different reactions to dialects, speech styles, and accents, covering languages as diverse as Finnish, Danish, and different varieties of Dutch. The collection includes a variety of methods, from meta-commentary extracted from focus groups (Doreleijers and Swanenberg), discourse analysis at the macro level (Vaattovaara and Halonen), online experiments (Lybaert et al.), to close inspection of classroom interactions

(Larsen). The studies not only show reactions to speech and language that differ from a norm but also how such norms come to be established and how they may be reshaped in specific cases of interaction.

Doreleijers and Swanenberg's article 'Non-conforming dialect and its (social) meanings' explores how perceptions of the use of adnominal gender marking of the masculine suffix *-e(n)* vary between younger and older speakers. According to the authors, the gender suffix is a shibboleth of the Brabantish dialect, which indexes 'brabandishness'. However, recent changes indicate that, among younger speakers, its grammatical function is diminishing in favour of a stylistic meaning. The study is based on statements extracted from ten focus group interviews involving fifty younger and older participants. The younger speakers, who do not use the dialect as their first language, often apply the masculine suffix to feminine or neuter nouns, reflecting a shift towards using the suffix as part of a stylistic marker rather than a grammatical necessity. The study reveals the interesting result that social meaning of a traditional non-standard dialect feature may not be fixed, but varies depending on the context and the speakers. While younger speakers perceive the use of the suffix as a performance of a Brabantish persona, older speakers hear it as hyperdialectism and as less authentic.

Vaattovaara and Halonen also focus on a single feature, the fronted /s/, which has a long history in the Finnish speech community that can be traced in discourses back in time. Their paper ' /s/ ideology in twentieth-century educational materials in Finland: On the language-political and sociocultural underpinnings' is a continuation of previous work, which examines ideologies of the variation in /s/ in Finland. They identify two discourses concerning the use of fronted variants of /s/, both of which label speakers who use the variant as non-conforming. One discourse concerns the impurity of the fronted variant, and has its origins back in the nineteenth century and debates about unwanted influence from Swedish, which has a dental /s/, and is perceived in contrast to what is understood as the proper and good Finnish /s/, which is alveolar. The other discourse concerns how the fronted variant is linked to Helsinki as a particular place that is home to people with inauthentic and improper behaviour. Vaattovaara and Halonen provide an overview of training materials in Finnish in schools (for L1 speakers) and show that the fronted /s/ is overtly commented on in guides to speaking properly all the way up through the twentieth century. Only recently has the criticism of the variant been abandoned by speech pathologists, and a shift is on the way with an acknowledgement that the variant is a feature of the speech of Helsinki. However, fronted /s/ still appears to be overtly looked down on, as evidenced by comments in the popular media. Interestingly, Vaattovaara and Halonen show how both the 'impurity discourse' and 'the Helsinki discourse' are rooted in the same basis of nationalist ideology beginning in the 1850s, with an increased desire for Finns to distance themselves from all manner of Swedish cultural influences.

While the papers of Doreleijers and Swanenberg and of Vaattovaara and Halonen focus on specific linguistic features with a longstanding history of being perceived as markers of local and national identity, Lybaert et al. and Larsen consider whole varieties and registers to study listeners' reactions and attitudes in broader linguistic contexts.

In 'Students' attitudes towards an instructor's foreign accent and non-standard language variety', Chloé Lybaert, Sarah Van Hoof and Koen Plevoets report on a speaker evaluation experiment conducted online in Flanders in Belgium. The aim of the study was to investigate how perceptions of standard and non-conforming speech relate to ethnicity, which in the experiment was indicated by an Eastern European name and by an Eastern European foreign accent. A total of 393 participants were asked to listen to a (fictive) two-and-a-half minute lecture by a female university instructor. A photo and a name were displayed as participants listened, and subsequently they were asked to rate the speaker and the quality of the lecture on a range of Likert scales. Interestingly, while Colloquial Dutch was perceived as less 'correct' or 'beautiful' compared to Standard Dutch, this did not negatively impact the instructor's perceived didactic competence, status, or social attractiveness. The Eastern European accent, however, negatively influenced perceptions of the instructor's social attractiveness but did not affect evaluations of the lecturer's didactic competence or status. The authors end up concluding that the respondents showed a high level of tolerance towards non-conforming speech. However, a negative bias was noted for social attractiveness related to the Eastern European accent. The authors do, however, emphasize the complexity of tracing accent biases and suggest that future research should incorporate a broader range of accents than only Eastern European accent.

Lybaert et al. have thus developed an experiment that specifically focuses on predefined varieties and accents. Larsen, on the other hand, starts from a different perspective, basing her analysis of reactions to non-conforming speech on ethnographic observations in classrooms. This approach represents a more exploratory study, allowing authentic interactions to identify the registers to which participants react.

Larsen's paper 'Speaking like a "good student": Norms and deviations in contemporary upper secondary education in Denmark' presents a study based on sociolinguistic ethnographic fieldwork in two different classrooms. Through careful observations of interactions in the classroom and interviews with the students, Larsen uncovers two separate strategies employed by the teachers that the students interact with: some teachers explicitly instruct them in proper academic terminology, whereas other teachers try to orient toward more youthful everyday language as a means of 'meeting the students at their own level'. However, Larsen is able to show that neither of these two strategies are equally accessible to all students, and do not necessarily provide straightforward ways of performing like a good student. Precisely because the teachers differ in their strategies, students find it difficult to navigate between the options. This is made even more difficult by the fact that they also have to align with the norms of their peers, some of whom agree with the valorization of academic language whereas others find it snobbish. Others look down on teachers for trying too hard to be like the pupils whereas others welcome the attempt to make classes more accessible in that way. In this polarized landscape of multiple linguistic norms, pupils must navigate to find their footing.

All of the studies show how variation must be viewed in a social context if we want to gain a deeper understanding of the effects that variation may have within societies where many different ways of speaking exist alongside each other despite quite well-established norms for proper speech. Veering away from the norm and

using non-conforming language may have consequences for how speakers are perceived, but importantly can also lead to renegotiations of social meanings associated with variation, with a potential for changing the balance between normative forms and those traditionally associated with the colloquial or informal. The studies thus emphasize the fluid relationship between language variation, social meaning, and higher-order ideologies of proper ways of speaking. Not only does language change but so do our evaluations of different ways of speaking.

It is our hope that this special issue will convey the importance of continuously developing our understandings of how listeners respond to non-conforming speech. Insights into reactions to non-conforming speech and speakers not only provide knowledge about the status and social significance of various linguistic features, styles, and dialects. Understanding the interplay between language use and social evaluation also provides important knowledge on the ways linguistic variation is embedded within power and broader ideologies, and how these affect processes of societal in- and exclusion and discrimination. We hope that the collection as a whole may inspire researchers from different methodological traditions to engage in discussions and collaborations.

## Note

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