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Collaborative Research: Listening out for variation: An investigation of mono- and bidialectal listeners inside and outside of Southern US communities

ABSTRACT

Is knowing two dialects like knowing two languages? While research has shown that listeners typically find it easier to understand speakers of their own dialect, a large number of listeners have lifelong exposure to multiple dialects, making them receptively bidialectal. This collaborative project explores the behavioral responses (speed and accuracy in understanding speech) and neurophysiological responses (using EEG to measure brain activity when hearing speech) of bidialectal and monodialectal adults listening to different dialects. The project specifically studies how context impacts what bidialectal listeners do, testing the hypothesis that these listeners switch between a flexible, but less efficient strategy when they are unsure which dialect to expect, and a focused, more efficient strategy when a given dialect is expected. The project focuses on receptively bidialectal listeners from South-Central Appalachia who have long-term exposure to their local dialect as well as Mainstream US English. Participants are tested in both university and community settings using a mobile EEG unit (the Brain Bus), expanding on the typical populations used in dialect processing research and increasing participation in EEG research.

Bidialectalism is a contested and undertheorized concept in linguistics. However, the effect that long-term exposure to dialectal variability has on listeners' cognitive representations and strategies has implications for understanding how listeners process variation in general, and for conceptions of bilingualism and monolingualism as involving different cognitive architectures. By combining behavioral and neurophysiological measures, and building on recent developments in using EEG research in speech perception, the project provides foundational insights on the cognitive and neural bases of bidialectal communication. The project manipulates dialect expectations in two different ways (using visual cues to talker-identity in one experiment, and preceding sentence accent in another), and to different degrees (strong vs. weak vs. no dialect expectations), to examine how generalizable context effects are, and to better understand where listeners draw boundaries between dialects.