Stigma, prestige and identity - case studies on the English of the North of England

Tania Oblak*
Universidad del Salvador
Argentina

Ana Laura Pagliaro**
Universidad del Salvador
Universidad Nacional de La Plata
Argentina

It is no news that witnesses to different linguistic uses and dialects can contribute with relevant information as to the social connotations of such features. More than forty years ago, Hudson (1981) posited that personal experiences served as valuable sources of information as regards language and society, yet he also considered that "witnesses" should bear in mind that most of us are not fully aware of the immense amount of dialects we hear every day, even when we are non-native speakers of that language. With that in mind, we tried to put an objective edge on our subjective accounts of particular communicative events that took place during our experience as exchange students at University of Chester. With the aim to sift through our own preconceptions of English language, relevant theory has been of vital importance in the endeavour of explaining the motivations behind some linguistic choices we witnessed.

Yet, as Hudson (1981) posits, it would be naïve to think that our perceptions are more than just a limited starting point from which we could begin to understand those linguistic choices. Hence, we decided to also contrast our hypothesis with the findings of perceptual dialectologists whose exhaustive work has shed light on this particular matter.

Following the definition of Wells, a dialect is a "speech variety which is more than an idiolect but less than a language" (1982, vol. 1, p. 3). An accent is that part of dialect which comprises the use that is made of sounds, rhythm, intonation, prosodic features, and the way in which all these are interrelated. Everyone speaks with an accent; the special way a speaker has of exploiting it is their idiolect. An accent can usually be a reliable marker of geographical or social origin. The sex, age and educational level of the speaker will also influence one's speech. (Wells, 1982, vol. 1)

In this work, when we talk about "dialect", we refer to a combination of pronunciation (what people call "accent"), lexis and grammar (Trudgill, 1999). When we started studying this topic, we found it very interesting that maps were key to this scientific discipline. Both Trudgill and Preston dwell on the importance of maps for dialectology, but for dialectologists it is not their maps that count so much as the maps created by the speakers themselves. As Trudgill explains, "dialects form a continuum, and are very much a matter of more-or-less rather than either/ or" (Trudgill, 1999, p. 6), and this is due to the fact than languages change, all the time, and "different changes take place

in different parts of the country" (Trudgill, 1999, p. 6).

There are numerous maps showing different particular features, and their disposition across England. What some perceptual dialectologists find interesting is observing how people create different maps, adjudicating themselves an affiliation which may not even be their own. Why would people claim to speak in a certain way when they actually do not? Why would they want to be thought of as speaking in a certain way? As Trudgill explains, "all dialects, both Traditional and Modern, are equally grammatical and correct. They differ only in their social significance and function." (Trudgill, 1999, p. 12-13). But what is this "social significance" we are talking about?

As we all know, there are "ways of speaking" -dialects- that are more prestigious than others. This is the case in all languages, and English is by no means an exception. We only have to look at the way we, as language learners, see a person who uses a different grammar or pronounces words with a non-RP pronunciation (and let us not deny that). Why do we do that? Let's go back to the social significance we have been discussing. According to Wells (1982, vol. 1, p. 15): "in 1972 a survey carried out by National Opinion Polls included the question 'Which of these [eleven specified factors] would you say are most important in being able to tell which class a person is?'- The respondents were a random sample of the British public. The factor which scored highest overall was 'The way they speak'." Then it is evident that speaking one way or another not only shows where you come from geographically, but also where you come from in the social scale. "A person's social position is reflected in the words and constructions he uses, as well as in the way he pronounces them." (Wells, 1982, vol. 1, p. 13) As we know, it is Standard English (SE) and Received Pronunciation (RP) that are held in best regard when considering accents and dialects, but why? We tend to associate this variety with high-class, educated people, and we use that variety for academic purposes, but that does not mean we could not use another to communicate the same ideas… yet the social connotation might be other, depending on who we are talking to and his/her perceptions of the language. In historical terms: "Standard English has its origins in the older Traditional Dialects of the Southeast of England, and rose to prominence because this was the area in which London, Oxford and Cambridge were situated, and which contained the royal court and government." (Trudgill, 1999, p. 12). Yet Trudgill illustrates the conventionality (maybe even "randomness") of the association between linguistic features and class when stating: "If the capital of England had been, say, York, then Standard English today would have shown a close resemblance to northern dialects of English" (Trudgill, 1999, p. 12-13). Surely a shock for some people.

Fig. 8 Approximate southern limits in broad local accents of unsplit FOOT–STRUT (solid line) and flat BATH (broken line) (from Chambers & Trudgill 1980)

Before going any further, we should turn our attention to the non-standard dialect we are analysing. When we talk about the dialect of the North of England, we refer to the linguistic North, above the Severn-Wash line. Geographically, it includes also the midlands, but it is so divided because of two important distinctions in pronunciation: the FOOT-STRUT Split and the BATH Broadening. Both phenomena were trends established in the South

and they have not been adopted in the Northern area. The former means that the vowel of FOOT is used for STRUT words as well, and the latter involves the use of the TRAP vowel for BATH words. (Wells, 1982, vol. 2) The lack of a FOOT-STRUT split in the North is quite noticeable in the way speakers usually greet each other: "Cheers, love!" is rendered as /tʃɪəz lʊv/. This dialect is associated with the working class, because it remained in the area where the country's industry most flourished. Owing to the stereotypical perception of its speakers, it sounds as "dirty" and "uncouth" to some and is condemned as incorrect.
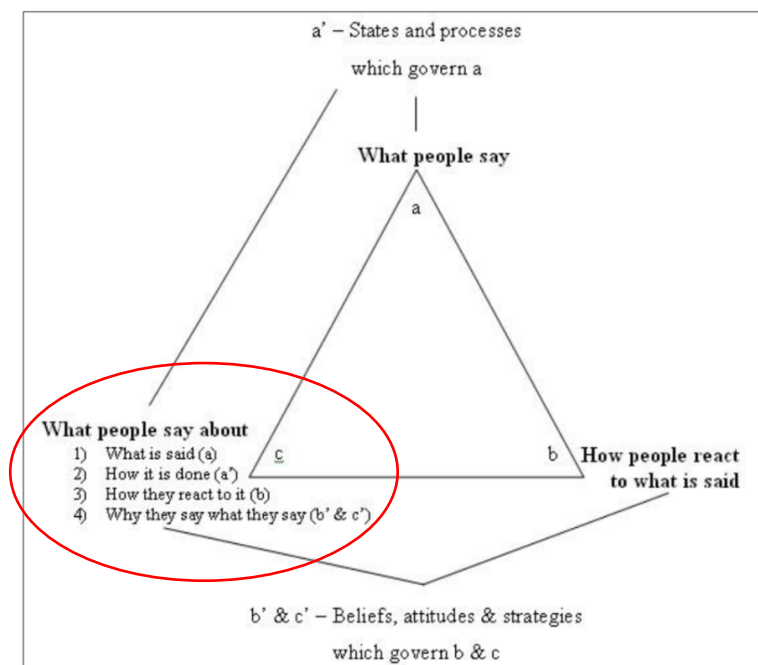

Figure 2.1: Preston's three approaches to language data (Preston, 1999b: xxiii)

Our work aims at tackling what people say about dialects, either their own or alien: "An understanding of this correlation between group stereotypes and linguistic facts, [...] appears to be particularly important in the more scientific calculation of the social identities we maintain and respond to." (Preston, 2008, p. 41). This image was taken from Montgomery's account on Preston's theory: "The final corner of the triangle (*c*) concerns what people say about what is said. This (with the addition of *c'*) is, according to Preston's definition, 'the stuff of folk linguistics, [of which] *perceptual dialectology is a sub-branch*' (Preston, 1999b: xxiv, my italics). The 'folk' are non-linguists and language users who have no formal linguistic training." (Montgomery, 2007)

As human beings, we tend to classify people according to stereotypes. Dialect plays an important part in determining the image we hold of those belonging to various groups. Most often, stereotypes are not individually held, but shared by a community. In this way, the social significance of a dialect can be established on a larger scale, as was the case with SE, considered at a national level as more prestigious than other regional dialects. Wells (1982, vol. 1, p. 30) refers to studies in which people assumed RP speakers to be "more ambitious, more intelligent, more self-confident" and possess other similar positive attributes, as well as some negative ones. These assumptions are based on previously held stereotypes and rely solely on the speech of the person.

When dealing with the SE dialect, we find it is peculiar in that, unlike every other dialect, it does not belong to any region and it is spoken by a minority. Nevertheless, it holds great prestige and speakers of other dialects aspire to acquire it. The privilege associated with SE stems from its originating in the aristocracy and being taught in public schools. As Abercrombie (Collins & Mees, 2013, Section D1) points out, it is "a blatantly undemocratic institution, […] the status symbol of an elite." Its close relationship with the higher ruling social class assisted in its establishment as the standard dialect, as the innovative model of educated speech everyone should aspire to copy. The choice of one dialect over the rest is completely arbitrary and it arises as a consequence of stereotypes attached to each one. By default, all other non-standard dialects are labelled as incorrect and undesirable. (Wells, 1982, vol. 1) This implicit distinction becomes ingrained in native speakers, and determines their self-perception.

The social significance of speaking SE can be traced in many (if not most) speakers, and that is the case of J. J is a civil engineer, working at a company that designs kitchens. He is originally from Sheffield, but currently lives in Manchester, near his job. He attended University of Manchester and is certain he speaks SE, though most of his linguistic features show otherwise. When talking about meals, he identifies breakfast, dinner, tea (as the main meal) and supper (an optional light snack before bedtime). This classification is characteristic of the North of England, since Southern SE speakers identify breakfast, lunch, (tea) and dinner (Tomkins, 2006). Nevertheless, J claims his dialect is "neutral", (meaning "standard") as opposed to "Northern", as a consequence, in J's words, of attending "a good school". J's self-image is most likely biased by not identifying himself with characteristics he associates with speakers of less prestigious dialects. He considers himself to be – or aspires to be– similar to SE speakers. (Wells, 1982, vol. 1). In J's case, it is true to say that "the frequency of one variant or another has a powerful effect on social judgments [...]" (Preston, 2008, p. 50) and that, therefore, for self-esteem's sake, he experiences "a great deal of inaccuracy in both self-report of the use of a specific feature [...] or in the identification of [...] [a] quality of a specific feature." (Preston, 2008, p. 50). Hence, when we refer to "self-esteem's sake", we make reference to the phenomenon of "claiming" as opposed to "denial" (Montgomery, 2007, p. 334). J both denies his Northern accent (deemed undesirable and a symbol of low education) and claims a dialect that is not J's own, because the speaker is fully aware of the higher likeability of SE.

Due to the negative connotation of non-standard dialects, its speakers usually feel the need to alter them in order to avoid feeling out of place among standard dialect speakers. It is interesting, however, to note that according to Wells (1982, vol. 1), speaking with a regional dialect is sometimes considered as a source of innovation, and therefore SE (and RP) could be losing its charm. The fact remains that few people manage to retain their native dialect because of the pressure imposed – especially in school– to use the standard one. Wells identifies two groups as "linguistically resistant": those who return to their native dialect once they retire, and those who manage to use both dialects throughout their lives. These people "can pass traditional-dialect on to further generations". (Wells, 1982, vol. 1, p. 7) If speakers have to fight against stereotypes because of their speech, why do they not focus only on the standard dialect?

We have previously mentioned self-perception and it is precisely this feature which seems to perpetuate the existence of non-standard dialects. Speakers are conscious of being judged by others on the basis of their speech and they know that they can "manipulate" this judgement by adapting the way they speak. Although they want to project a favourable image of themselves, they are also aware of their self-image and personal identity. As dialect reflects this identity, they will not deny who they are and where they come from by changing their speech entirely. "To do otherwise would mean being dishonest with [themselves]" (Wells, 1982, vol. 1, p. 31). An interesting example of the identity attached to a dialect can be found in the BATH Broadening. SE speakers pronounce it as /bɑːθ/, while northerners produce it as /bæθ/. If they did not, they feel they would be betraying their North of England origin. (Wells, 1982, vol. 2) The same is true for people speaking in a Southern dialect. C, for instance, is a teacher at University of Chester born in the South, who now lives in the North (New Brighton) and her dialect betrays her origin. She did not modify her speech and she even mockingly argues with her students about the proper way to pronounce BATH. C's overt conception of language could be said to concur with "folk theory of language" as portrayed by Preston.

In C's mind, we could say, "a Platonic, extra-cognitive reality is the 'real' language, such a thing as English or German or Chinese. [...] Since this connection to the rule-governed, exterior 'real' language seems a natural (and even easy) one, many folk find it difficult to understand why nonstandard speakers, for example, persist in their errors (and often find them simply lazy or

recalcitrant)." (Preston, 2008, p. 64). Her conception is, therefore, considered within the reach of folk linguistics as opposed to linguistics theory that dwells on a different conception of language where "one moves up (and away from) the concrete reality of language as a cognitively embedded fact in the capacities of individual speakers to the social constructions of language similarity" (Preston, 2008, p. 63).

Being able to adapt one's dialect to different circumstances may be viewed as an advantage. It has been compared to being bilingual, since it provides more tools for communicating. The choice of one dialect over the other also reflects the speaker's attitude towards their interlocutor –by speaking in a similar way as them, they can establish a feeling of convergence and proximity, while retaining distinct dialects gives a sense of distance and may hinder communication. (Wells, 1982, vol. 1) A clear case of a speaker fluent in two dialects is M. She is a university teacher of Psychology at the University of Chester. Her speech resembled that of any other teacher or student at the university (North of England), but she admitted that it is not her native dialect. She comes from Scotland (presumably the border with England) and claims to switch dialects to suit the context. As a way of establishing convergence in her working environment (with colleagues and students), she has adopted a different dialect. In this particular case, it could be established that M switches her dialect when in Chester because of the prominence of the place in her professional life, considering that prominence is not to be related to population size but to the fact that the speaker (M) finds this area prominent in her life, worthy of her changing her way of speaking accordingly (Montgomery, 2007). As M resorts to her native dialect only when she is at home, she also conforms to Wells' idea that the native one is used as the informal alternative and the adoptive dialect is used in formal contexts (Wells, 1982, vol. 2).

Going back to the example of C above, she, unlike M, rather resorts to divergence and marks a boundary between her surroundings and herself, by maintaining her native dialect and presenting it as the best there is. Of the aforementioned examples, then, it would be true to establish that "speakers of majority varieties have a tendency to spend the symbolic capital of their variety on a 'Standard' dimension. Speakers of minority varieties usually spend their symbolic capital on the 'Friendly' dimension." (Preston, 2008, p. 58).

In the present paper, we aimed at analysing the underlying perception speakers have of their own speech and of other varieties. By looking at examples of everyday life in Chester, we focused on the perception of dialects, on the 'folk theory of language'. It is through the subjective notions of speakers that social significance appears as a set of connotations labelling dialects and associating them to different stereotypes. At the same time, speakers have a subjective image of themselves that they wish to maintain and show. The way in which speakers manage to balance social significance with their own personal identity, will determine the attitude they show towards their own dialect and towards those whose speech is different.

Even though, in historical terms, Great Britain has not shown a wide variety of surveys and studies in perceptual dialectology/linguistics, there seems to be an increasing interest in it in the last twenty years. Some examples are: the Survey of English Dialects (SED), the Tyneside Linguistic Survey, the SuRE project and the many studies collected together in Foulkes & Docherty's *Urban Voices* (1999), and also the BBC *Voices* project (Montgomery, 2007). We intended to bring to attention the interest to increase general public awareness of variation in GB and the value it has for language learning and teaching (Preston, 1999b: xxv). This paper is a brief overview of observations we made and knowledge we gained during our five month stay in Chester. With it, we intended to give back to the University that sent us there, and, by doing so, giving us the opportunity to experience variation and, most importantly, plurality.

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