

Does Who Speaks Matter?

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The Motivating Story

DISCURSIVE INJUSTICE: "a form of words that in the mouth of a speaker from one social group would realize a certain speech act does not count as the realization of that act when produced by a speaker from a different group in virtue of the degree to which each group is empowered in the society at large." [Kukla, 2014]

Rejection. Sam asks Martha, "Do you want to go out with me on a date?". Martha replies, "No", but Sam's uptake of Martha's rejection is "Yes". [Langton, 1993]

The Received View: Sam commits a discursive injustice because he does not correctly recognize the speaker's intention. In Sam's eyes, Martha's rejection does not count as such *because* she is a woman.

SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIATIONS: According to Labov [1973, p. 272], two expressions qualify as sociolinguistic variations when they represent "two different ways of saying the same thing" (e.g., *It is not happening* and *It ain't happening*).

I thank the Departments of Philosophy and Linguistics at SU for the funding to complete the experiments. I kindly ask you not to share the experimental results or the handout based on them.

They help us convey social meanings!

(1) Professor Vs. Bartender

- a. Jim, who is a white professor, and Marcus, Jim's coauthor and also a professor, are discussing their paper in a research group meeting. Marcus asks Jim whether Jim can run a new experiment to confirm the preliminary results. To that question, Jim answers, "It ain't happening".
- b. Jamal, who is a non-white bartender, is serving Marcus, a professor. Marcus asks for a glass of red wine, and Jamal serves it promptly. Before paying, Marcus asks Jamal whether Marcus can have a more generous pour. To that question, Jamal answers, "It ain't happening".

Nowak's View: an audience is likely to commit a discursive injustice in (1b) because it does not recognize Jamal's intention correctly in virtue of his social identity—if an audience sees Jamal as just 'someone who talks like that', it fails to see the production of the variant in question as an intentional action [Nowak, 2022]. But why is that?

The Register Principle: for any sociolinguistic variant α , if α is part of the register of the comparatively disempowered minority but not part of the register of the comparatively empowered majority, it is more likely that an audience will successfully complete the uptake of α when uttered by a speaker S belonging to the comparatively empowered majority than when uttered by a speaker S' belonging to the comparatively disempowered minority.

#1: If the Register Principle is true, there is an explanation for the existence of the ubiquitous discursive injustices Nowak points to.

#2: If the Register Principle is true, there is an explanation for why these discursive injustices systematically impede disempowered minority speakers from performing speech acts involving sociolinguistic variants that allow them to position themselves within social space.

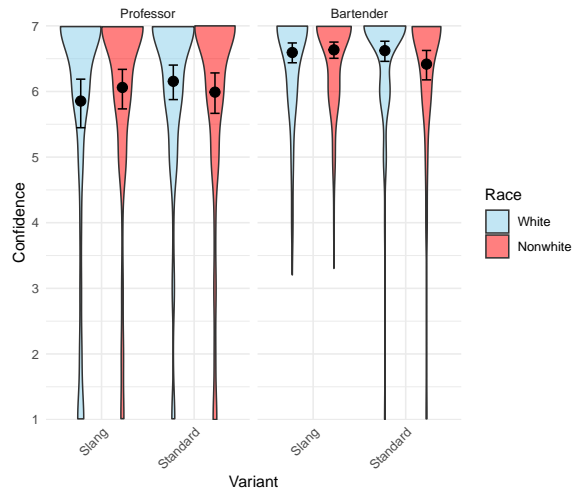
Testing the Principle

Design: Participants were randomly assigned to a condition in a 2 (Race: White vs. Non-white) \times 2 (Job: White-collar, Professor, vs. Blue-collar, Bartender) \times 2 (Variant: English Slang, "It ain't happening", vs. Standard English, "It is not happening") design. The data, code and results of the experiments are available online: .

Tracking Uptake: the more the audience correctly understands the speaker's intention in uttering S , the more the audience will judge the speaker as confident in uttering S .

Comprehension check: is the speaker willing to do X ?

Confidence Rating: Judging by how the speaker phrased his answer (i.e., "It is not happening" or "It ain't happening"), does he seem confident in his decision not to do X ? Rate his confidence on a scale from 1 to 7.



Results: There is a statistically significant difference in the audience's confidence ratings, the uptake, between professors and bartenders. The statistical effect for Job is such that the confidence ratings are higher for bartenders using "It ain't happening" than professors using the same variant. Bartenders, regardless of their race, are perceived as more confident in uttering the relevant variant than professors.

Conclusion: the Register Principle is false.

Future Directions

First Possible Diagnosis: there might be discursive injustices based on one's social persona. Who speaks matters but not in the way one would expect!

Second Possible Diagnosis: the social desirability bias explains the effect that Job, when the speaker is a bartender, has on the confidence ratings participants gave to speakers. But, then, discursive injustices à la Kukla do not exist. It seems that at least in some cases disadvantaged social identities do not affect how an audience recognizes a speaker's intentions—there is no effect on the disempowered social identity on uptake.

References

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