

“Twang” in discursive constructions of language variation in American English

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Studies in perceptual dialectology have shown that the term “twang” is often mentioned by non-linguists as a common descriptor of linguistic differences in American English (e.g. Evans 2002; Fought 2002; Cukor-Avila et al. 2012; Cramer 2013). Sociolinguists have mainly defined “twang” as referring to a voice quality of excessive nasality (Montgomery 2008; Jacewicz et al. 2009; Cukor-Avila et al. 2012). It has also been described as having a “negative,” “ambiguous” (Fought 2002), and non-specific meaning (Evans 2002). However, language users’ understandings of the term have not received much analytical attention.

This discourse-based, qualitative examination attempts to fill this gap by exploring social and language-related meanings that the term “twang” has for American English speakers. The paper uses focus group and interview data collected for a larger project on language ideologies in the state of Oklahoma. It employs a rhetorically-oriented approach to discursal data which combines the Argumentation Theory (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969; Walton 1989) developed in the field of rhetoric with conversation-analytic techniques. This approach allows for an analysis of argumentation schemes of informal logic that associate or dissociate socio-cultural and linguistic concepts in the fluid intersubjective constructions of the social meanings of language variation.

The results reveal referential complexity of the folk-linguistic term “twang.” Its meaning does not seem to be restricted to perceptions of nasality, as defined by sociolinguists. The folk conceptualizations of “twang” include references to the linguistic processes of vowel diphthongization which are distinguished from vowel elongation described as “drawl” by folk respondents. This is in contrast with specialist definitions of the term “drawl” which often include both elongation and diphthongization of accented vowels (e.g. Montgomery 2008; Feagin 2015). In our data, discourse participants create argumentative oppositions between the concepts “twang” and “drawl” to construct linguistic boundaries between the states of Texas and Oklahoma. The discourse data also reveals sociohistorical conceptualizations and implicit evaluations of “twang” argumentatively constructed as part of folk theories of language contact and change which bring together personal experiences with language variation and interpretations of historical and social events. The paper discusses positive social evaluations implicitly ascribed to “twang” in representations of vernacular authenticity on the one hand, and, on the other, implicit negative evaluations of the degrees of “twang” which serve to index social boundaries between unmarked “normative” white Southerners and “lesser whites” along the dimensions of social class, economic standing, personae and behavior type. These results suggest that “twang” has a complex socioindexical profile which includes associations with

clusters of linguistic features and social constructs valorized differentially in the local rhetorical contexts of language ideology creation.

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