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Cognitive Styles and Language Variation

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Individual differences in cognitive processing styles are evident in all human activities. We sometimes recognize extremes of cognitive styles when we talk about people who “see the big picture” and others who are “detail oriented,” but more nuanced perceptions are elusive. Alan C. Yu (2010) first noticed that the “AQ Test” developed for other purposes by Baron-Cohen et al. (2001) can be used productively for locating people on a continuum relating to their cognitive styles. The gradations can then be used as correlates for linguistic differences. I will (1) validate the Baron-Cohen Test as an instrument for measuring cognitive styles, and (2) demonstrate its applicability as a correlate for differences in perceptual compensation for phonetic conditioning (following Yu 2010), and (3) illustrate its relevance for individual predispositions toward scientific and humanistic thinking, and its bearing on verbal proficiency. Yu’s results have implications for sex-based differences in language change (Chambers 2005), imperfect learning as a mechanism of change and the role of “insiders” as agents of change. New results show that cognitive styles correlate significantly with academic discipline choices among individuals, and they correlate significantly with verbal fluency (Khuu 2014). Sex cuts across these results in interesting ways. These results demonstrate cognitive styles can be a productive new dimension in understanding sociolinguistic variation.

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