

Chapter 6

The role of listener variation

One of the important distinctions between a social meaning approach to variation and one which focuses more on social address is the degree of agency attributed to the speaker. One of the dangers of privileging the speaker's role in the construction of meaning is the risk of overemphasizing the agency that any one individual speaker has to construct their social performances. Critics this approach may protest that it leads down a path of anarchy, predicting that any speaker can combine any resources to produce any effect he or she desires. Because we know this is not true, we must develop our theoretical tools to capture the limitations operating on this process.

6.1 Understanding the importance of the listener

One central answer to this problem lies in the reactions of listeners, which provide a brake on speaker agency, limiting speakers to performances that others can interpret. This is not to say that speakers may not choose the resources they wish to employ, but that they may not choose the interpretation that others assign to them. The process of constructing linguistic performance is not like encoding a secret message but more like choosing a name for a child. In designing a performance, one must consider not only the best case scenarios, but also the worst. Because listeners have agency as well, they are not required to interpret variation in exactly the ways intended by speakers. This give-and-take is what is referred to by the term intersubjectivity, the process by

which social structures are constructed between social actors rather than within any single one.

Butler (1993) discusses the role of the audience under the term **intelligibility**, which refers to the degree that listeners are able to understand a given style. If listeners had no agency of their own, speakers would be free to combine linguistic and extralinguistic resources in any combination, with the intent of producing any meaning they wish. In the real social world, there are many consequences to presenting a style which is not intelligible to others, ranging from the light to the severe. These consequences may be direct, such as verbal mocking or physical attack. They may also be less overt, for example inappropriately gendered speakers may find themselves less attended to, or less successful in accomplishing their social goals.

A concept which goes hand-in-hand with intelligibility is that of **access** (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003:92-97). In order to deploy a particular resource with a particular meaning, one must have access to it. Access comes in a range of forms. Different people have differential access to particular kinds of settings or conversations in which specific styles are performed and decisions made. To adopt a new style, one must witness it enough to learn how to use it felicitously. Even if a speaker learns the mechanisms of the style, however, in order for the performance to be successful, observers must accept their right to deploy that resource. An excellent example of the issues around learning and performing a style may be seen by watching young children attempt to learn to use the markers of authority employed by their parents (e.g. raised voice, emphatic diction, intonation indicating reprimand). On the one hand, they are likely to misunderstand certain aspects of the performance or circumstances for its felicitous use. On the other, even when they put together a performance that would in theory be felicitous, it is almost certain to fail. Because they lack the authority itself, they are not capable, by definition, of successfully taking an authoritative stance. Even if they have the ability to employ the linguistic resources associated with authority (as they learn them), they are unable to take an authoritative stance itself.

This limitation then has implications for their future linguistic choices. Children are likely to learn that attempting such a stance produces poor results in terms of

accomplishing the desired social goal (e.g. obtaining the wished-for item, delaying a departure, etc.). Some children will also learn that requests or demands which take a stance more appropriate to their powerless state are likely to be more successful, for example whining or crying. The choices they make about which activities to engage in and what resources to employ are shaped by the views of the world around them regarding what behaviors are appropriate to them.

These two notions, access and intelligibility, are ways of understanding the crucial role of the audience in the development of stylistic variation. Because they focus on the speaker and the influence of listener choices on the speaker, they do not place a great deal of emphasis on differences between listeners. However, these differences are very much present. The structured feedback from listeners helps shape the process of construction and this feedback is informed by the listeners' previous experiences, language ideologies, linguistic knowledge and emotional outlook.

6.2 Cognitive variation among listeners

Because we are typically more interested in differences based on broad linguistic or sociocultural divisions, linguists tend to discount more individualistic forms of variation, those which might be termed cognitive or personality based. Work on the psychology of attitudes has revealed a range of individual differences, not only in what attitudes people may hold but how they are structured. As discussed in Chapter 3, the construct attitude is considered to have three basic components: **cognitive** (a person's thoughts or beliefs about object), **affective** (a person's feelings towards an object) and **behavioral** (how they have behaved towards the object or experienced it in the past). While all of these components are intertwined, different people tend to favor different combinations. Haddock and Huskinson (2004) investigated the relationships across different people between their attitudes, beliefs and feelings about a varied set of topics. The overall attitude construct was measured by a semantic differential task rating the object or issue on scales labeled with antonym pairs (e.g. important/unimportant). The affect responses were measured by asking participants to list feelings related to the object, then rate their own responses as positive or

negative and how strongly. Cognitive stances were measured the same way, with participants listing beliefs instead of feelings. They found that some people are likely to have strong correlations between the attitude measures and either their affective or cognitive reactions to it (people who might be termed “feelers” or “thinkers” respectively) while others report a strong correlation between all three and still others have little relationship between any.

A different body of work has shown that certain individuals with a high need for affect (i.e. those who enjoy and seek out strong emotions) are more likely to hold strong attitudes towards a range of objects or issues (Maio *et al.* 2004). Similarly, some people, described as having a high need to evaluate, respond faster to questions about attitudes or are more likely to form judgments about other people (see discussion in Haddock and Huskinson (2004)).

Differences in evaluation are not limited to differences between individuals. A great deal of work has shown that a person’s mood influences the process of evaluation, both in what evaluations are given and how they are formed (see Isen (1984) for a review). Inducing positive moods can substantially improve people’s abilities to remember positive words from a memorized list but not others (Isen *et al.* 1978). Mood changes people’s evaluations of objects like consumer goods (Isen *et al.* 1978) and pictures (Isen and Shalcker 1982) (particularly those judged to be evaluatively neutral). Good moods also seem to influence general beliefs about the world, for example opinions about social issues and willingness to place blame and assign punishment in hypothetical situations (Forgas and Moylan 1988). Mood has also been shown to influence how we view other people, affecting overall judgment (Gouaux 1971) and increasing our ability to remember characteristics consistent with our moods, so that people in good moods are better at remembering positive characteristics and people in bad moods better at negative ones (Forgas and Bower 1987).

Work looking specifically at language has confirmed the importance of mood, finding that altering tapes to include white noise which interfered with a comprehension task causes listeners to downgrade the speakers on ratings for competence (Ryan and Laurie 1990) as well as the usual matched guise axes of status, solidarity and social class (Sebastian *et al.* 1980). These effects held even though listeners explicitly

identified the tape and not the speaker as the source of the difficulty.

Mood can also impact how people form attitudes. Being in a good mood functions similarly to a distraction task in causing people to respond solely to the affective, emotion-based persuasion and not the cognitive “rational arguments” of a persuasive message. In the same study, people placed in a negative mood attended to both the affective and logical aspects of the message (Bless *et al.* 1990).

None of this work specifically addresses how individuals respond to linguistic variation. Indeed, most of it does not deal with language explicitly. What it does establish clearly is that both evaluative responses and the thought processes which produce them are affected by the quirks and moods of those performing the evaluations. The present research does not look at the impact of mood and personality traits of listener evaluations, but it does reveal patterned differences in evaluative responses between listeners. This chapter discusses differences in listener reactions to (ING) which are attributable to some listeners responding in generous or positive ways to a given speaker while others are more critical. The psychology literature suggests that mood at the time of evaluation is one possible contributor to these differences. Observations from the interview phase of the study suggests another reason, based on stylistic differences. Some interview participants showed themselves to be sensitive to social norms restricting overt negative judgments of others. Other participants actively embraced the critic’s role as part of a catty or “tell it like it is” style. The goal of this chapter is to show that differences in listener reactions to speakers change the role that (ING) plays in their evaluations.

In a study of this kind, the usual role of participant variation is as noise, random variation to be minimized and generalized over. Up until now, I have followed this approach, emphasizing what was similar across the listeners in order to capture other patterns regarding (ING) in general or differences between speakers. Now I will turn my attention to the topic of variation between listeners and how interpretation contributes to the development of linguistic variation.

Excerpts from the interviews document differences in listener reaction based on stylistic and personality factors. These examples demonstrate that different listeners

respond to speakers differently and that this variation may be linked to their personalities and beliefs. Section 6.3 shows how different interview participants orient to the task of evaluation, in particular the socially awkward situation involved in sharing negative opinions.

After showing that listeners differ in their reactions to speakers and in their social strategies for dealing with negative reactions, I turn to the survey data to show that these differences impact the interpretation of (ING). Because many of the terms available to survey listeners had positive or negative connotations, we can examine how different effects of (ING) for the same speaker are attributable to listeners attending to more or less positive aspects of a single token.

6.3 On being nice

I will first consider the issue of niceness. The activity of explicitly evaluating another person is a socially loaded one. Although listeners form judgments of their interlocutors constantly as they move through the social world, it is relatively rare to articulate these reactions fully and explicitly, particularly in the presence of strangers. The novelty of this situation highlights different personality responses that exist generally in the social world, namely, that some people are more or less comfortable expressing negative opinions. Those who were uncomfortable expressing negative reactions employed different strategies to avoid doing so or to minimize the social impact. While some people might feel constraint generally over expressing negative evaluations, others may be more selective, perhaps uncomfortable calling someone dumb but comfortable saying they are annoying.

One of the questions during the interviews was whether or not the speaker was someone the participants would be likely to be friends with. This question was awkward for many participants and they used a range of strategies to address this awkwardness. (21) shows Tamika, who had responded to each speaker positively, saying she could see spending time with any of them if they were neighbors. By the fourth and final speaker, Abby, who had been less welcoming, commented on this pattern, exclaiming “you’re so nice!”. Her comment highlighted the divergent styles of the

two women, visible throughout the interview as Tamika responded positively and softened potentially negative or harsh judgments while Abby was quite comfortable with making critical comments, even enjoying it. This dynamic between these two is seen again in (29), discussed further on.

(21) **Moderator:** Is he the kind of person you might hang out with? Does he seem fun to be around?

Mary: Well, if it wasn't [?] most of my friends I had in college did skateboard a while or they used to. I do like the sport.

Abby: Not for me. Not my type.

Tamika: If he was college-age and the guy down the hall.

Moderator: (laughter)

Tamika: Not with him being well sounding as young as he could possibly be.

Abby: You're so nice. You talk to everyone on your hall.

All: (laughter)

Tamika: Why not?

Group 19, Duke. In response to Sam, recording: skateboarding,-in guise.

Other participants were more ambivalent than either of these two. In (22), both people in the interview are put on the spot by the question about socializing with the speaker. Apparently both value the social norm of being nice and wish to avoid seeming critical. However, both are disinclined to feel social connection to the speaker in question. Each takes a different approach, the first responding with a gentle negative while marking her discomfort verbally. Her interlocutor gives a vacuous positive response. The final effect of both responses is that the two work together to build an ambivalent but largely negative response to the speaker while also conveying an awareness of norms against criticism.

(22) **Moderator:** And does she seem like she'd be fun to hang out with, be around?

Alice: You kinda feel bad saying she wouldn't, but there again there were no evidence of that.

Moderator: Mhmm.

Alice: For me.

Moderator: Uhuh.

Sandeep: I, yeah I don't see her a reason that I wouldn't hang out with her so I'd say yes.

Alice: The glass is half full?

All: (laughter)

Group 18, Duke. In response to Bonnie, recording: classes, -ing guise.

In contrast to this careful maneuvering, in some groups a small but vocal (and expressive) minority took pleasure in expressing creatively negative opinions. Without examining the pattern formally, I noted that when this behavior did emerge, it tended to be among participants who had come to the interview with friends rather than alone. Example (23) is an excerpt from the most colorful group in this respect, an interview with five participants, of whom four were friends who arrived together. Unlike (21) and (22), example (23) does not occur in response to an explicit question. This negativity is spontaneously produced, as the participants explain that (ING) makes no difference in their evaluations of the speaker (Elizabeth), because they dislike her too much to attend to such a subtle factor.

(23) **Jeremy:** So, it doesn't matter, because I'm disliking what she's saying. (laughter)

Tom: I don't like hearing her talk. (laughter)

Sarah: It makes blood come out of my ears.

Group 14, UNC. In response to Elizabeth, recording: discussion, comparison phase.

The social question was not the only one which potentially put participants on the spot. They were also asked whether the speaker seemed competent or smart. This question invoke similar social norms, in that is not nice to say that someone is dumb. Participants found it somewhat more difficult to adopt a universally positive response to this question, although "she/he seems fine" or other noncommittal responses were not uncommon. In (24), the same participants from (22) give negative responses. Note that in this excerpt (which is actually from directly before (22)) they show a great deal less discomfort in sharing this evaluation, although they do provide some mitigation and in fact avoid ever explicitly saying no in response to the question.

- (24) **Moderator:** And does Bonnie seem like she'd be smart, good at the classes that she's talking about, does she kinda know what she's doing?

Sandeep: Not as much as the other-

Alice: Yeah.

Sandeep: -two or even as much as the second one.

Alice: There was just like less evidence of that.

Sandeep: Yeah.

Group 18, Duke. In response to Bonnie, recording: classes, -ing guise.

Questions regarding intelligence provide the possibility of another strategy, that of distinguishing between different forms of or uses for intelligence. In (25), a woman avoids explicitly characterizing Tricia as unintelligent by shifting the discussion to how much knowledge she was likely to “need”. While avoiding a socially awkward criticism, Marsha creates a statement with much more far-reaching consequences, invoking class divisions by juxtaposing “the type that reads books” (a type including everyone in the room where she was speaking) against those who only need “enough knowledge to get by in life”. This comment also underlines the limited exposure listeners had to the speakers. Tricia herself was entering law school a few months after her interview—an environment where she was likely to need knowledge from books, to say the least.

- (25) **Marsha:** I don't think she's the type that reads books, but I'm sure she has enough knowledge to get by in life and that's really all that counts sometimes.

Group 16, Duke. In response to Tricia, recording: cucumbers,-in guise.

Of course, for those who enjoy sharing negative opinions, intelligence provides as good a topic as general likability, although for different targets. In (26), the same participants seen in (23) share their negative opinion of Valerie's intelligence. As in the previous discussion, this example does not result from a direct question regarding how intelligent they think Valerie is, but rather comes up in a general discussion of the role of (ING) in her speech.

(26) **Adam:** I think with her dropping the g, it also goes with my statement I said earlier where she's kind of dumb.

Severl: (laughter)

Adam: She just sounded dumb to me. But then when she adds the , when she adds the g, she sounds more trying to be impressive. But she's still dumb. She's just now...

Severl: (laughter)

Sarah: She's not as dumb, she doesn't hide her dumb-

Adam: Like, she's not trying to hide her dumbness.

Severl: (laughter)

Adam: I don't know her.

Sarah: That's great.

Adam: I should stop. Sorry.

Severl: (laughter)

Sally: [too many comments?]

Tom: I mean, I agree, I'm not gonna call her dumb, but, I agree, it sounds like she's not trying to cover it up when she drops the g.

Group 14, UNC. In response to Valerie, recording: history, comparison phase.

In considering such negative comments, it is important to remember the extremely impoverished stimuli to which the participants are reacting. They are positing entire personalities and situations which these excerpts could have been taken but these imagined scenarios have little relationship to the real experiences and personalities of the speakers who generated the utterances.

The process of responding to recordings in interviews does not involve only "pure" social evaluation. Participants drew on a range of social structures, ideologies and stereotypes in explaining or elaborating their responses. Different people have different stakes in supporting or undermining specific social discourses and the stakes lead to differences in the way they respond to the speakers and their linguistic choices.

Discussions of region and accent in earlier chapters demonstrated examples of listeners distancing themselves from or sharing their discomfort with stereotypes about

Southern speakers. Throughout all of the interviews, listeners demonstrated knowledge of the stereotypes linking Southern accents to lack of education and lower intelligence.

These stereotypes were omnipresent in the interviews, either referenced directly or presupposed in various ways. But while some listeners were uncomfortable with the stereotypes and attempted to minimize their impact on the discussion, others embraced it. In (27), a participant grapples with these stereotypes. The previous discussion in the interview had dealt with the relatively low opinions that several participants held concerning the speaker's intelligence.

- (27) **Brian:** The stereotype comes to mind when you hear like a Southern accent this is not somebody who's particularly well-educated. And the way she's talking about her work somewhat reinforces that. But it's not, I mean it's like a self-conscious stereotype that comes up because I know as soon as [??] not necessarily true.

Group 3, Stanford. In response to Tricia, recording: work-school, -in guise.

He responds by introducing the stereotypes explicitly as a potential explanation for these poor opinions. In so doing, he disavows the stereotypes, while suggesting that other aspects of her performance may support the negative evaluation. Reading his comment, it is difficult to determine what his actual opinion of the speaker's intelligence is. The major purpose of his contribution appears to be to mention these stereotypes and distance himself from them.

Not everyone has an interest in disavowing such stereotypes. The interview participant in (28) draws on these same stereotypes as a source of humor, explaining that he would enjoy spending time with one of the Southern speakers, because he likes making fun of Southern accents.

- (28) **Matt:** I like people with Southern accents. So, I'd probably hang out with her and laugh at her.

Group 10, Duke. In response to Bonnie, recording: seniors, -in guise.

The ways that people engage with stereotypes are frequently much more complex. Abby, in (29), has multiple conflicting goals. On the one hand, throughout the entire

interview she enjoyed sharing critical judgments of the speakers, as we saw earlier in (21). She was particularly humorous and inclined to present a “not politically correct” persona during the interview. In this particular exchange, she maintains this persona by supporting and strengthening the description of “redneck” tentatively advanced by Tamika, the “nice one” discussed earlier. Not only did she support the description as a valid and acceptable one, but she embroiders on the theme, emphasizing the message content which matches the description and performing a stylized accent on the word “whiskey”.

(29) **Moderator:** Anything else?

Tamika: May be a redneck.

???: (laughter)

Tamika: Possibly.

(pause)

Tamika: That’s such a bad term.

Abby: No, it’s not. Perfectly acceptable to (laughter) call someone a redneck.

All: (laughter)

Abby: But he likes his football and tailgating.

Mary: And whiskey

Abby: And whiskeyyyy!! Yeah, he’s a redneck

???: (laughter)

Tamika: aw.

Abby: And no, I wouldn’t hang out with him. Although I will tell you since this is a linguistic study that, um people do like to say that once you hear Southern accent you have to subtract several intelligence points just because of the accent which is unfortunate cause there are a lot of, um smart Southern people and they have accent but people think of the Southern accent as being dumb. It just sounds dumb to a lot of people.

(pause)

Moderator: So leading into that how smart or not smart does Robert sound?

(pause)

Tamika: Well he didn’t sound like didn’t sound I guess super-intelligent but I wouldn’t say that he would be dumb.

Abby: I'm not gonna base it on the accent but the whiskey and the tailgating, football I mean I would say just average intelligence, average.

Mary: Yeah I would probably say average below average i mean slightly below average

Group 19, Duke. In response to Robert, recording: tailgate, -ing guise.

After this performance, she switches gears and addresses stereotypes around the South from a different point of view. She is herself Southern and takes this opportunity to discuss the ways in which many listeners are biased against Southern accents. Responding to an explicit question regarding the speaker's intelligence, she brings the two points of view together, claiming to base her description of the qualities she had linked to being a redneck, but explicitly disclaiming any association of lower intelligence with the Southern accent.

6.4 Listener variation in interpreting (ING)

As the preceding discussion shows, some listeners are reluctant to give negative judgments while others enjoy inventing creatively harsh comments; some disavow stereotypes while others embrace them or joke about them. This variation represents only a small fraction of the variation among listeners. This section ties this phenomenon to linguistic variation by showing how different listeners assign different meanings to the same tokens of (ING) in the same context.

One obvious way for listener variation to translate into differences in perception is for listeners to have different meanings for the variable. This is the case when, for example, speakers of different varieties disagree as to the meaning of specific features.

But even if two listeners have exactly the same sociolinguistic knowledge of a variable, their interpretations may differ if they disagree about the speaker using it or the situation it is found in. Even when their factual knowledge and assumptions about a speaker agree, they may have divergent emotional reactions. These differences can cause them to interpret things in a more or less positive light, just as participants who are in bad moods are less generous in their evaluations of others.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:130) explain the process employing linguistic meaning in interaction with the concept of **social moves**. A social interaction may be likened to a game such as chess. Each socially meaningful aspect of an utterance constitutes a move in this game. Moves may introduce meanings, proposed relevant ideologies and/or put forward a personal style. Interlocutors may or may not assign the same meanings to a move that the speaker intended to convey. Such disconnect may result from actual misunderstanding, for example differences in linguistic and social experiences leading different people to understand similar resources in different ways. It may also result from a listener accurately identifying the intended meaning of a move but applying their own interpretation to it nonetheless. For example, a listener may discount the speaker's access to a particular resource or their ability to employ it effectively. In this case, a listener may understand perfectly the meaning a speaker was hoping to convey by using a particular resource, but not accept it as a credible performance. Even if the move is understood, that is no guarantee that it will be successful.

In this section I examine three instances where listeners disagree about the impact of (ING) on their image of a given speaker. In all cases, the disagreement does not center around (ING) itself or its overall meaning, but around the right of the speaker to use it or what its use reveals about them. Each of these instances involves listeners who agree on the basic nature of the move, but disagree in their responses to it.

The first example concerns Elizabeth. In two of her recordings, her *-in* guise is more likely to be described as *condescending* and also more likely to be described as *compassionate* than her *-ing* guise. Not surprisingly, however, the sets of listeners selecting these two qualities were virtually disjoint. Table 6.1 shows the breakdown of *compassionate* and *condescending* by (ING). This data is drawn from only two

Checkbox label	% listeners selecting checkbox		
	<i>-in</i>	<i>-ing</i>	sig.
<i>compassionate</i>	30.0	7.4	0.026
<i>condescending</i>	17.5	0.0	0.022

Table 6.1: *Compassionate and condescending selections for Elizabeth, by (ING). (N = 67)*

of Elizabeth's recordings, the two which account for all but one of her selections of *condescending*. Both recordings involve her setting herself apart from the group of people primarily under discussion. (30) and (31) gives the transcripts of these two recordings.

- (30) And I don't think a lot of the people who were sort of at this lower level who were doing the data entry and who were actually ordering the things got involved in the discussions of what kind of effect this new system would have on the work and how the system could be structured to redesign the work.
- (31) And you go there and you might ride one ride and then you sit somewhere and you have a nice restaurant meal. And they're, you know, they're the family and this is the one time they're ever going to make it there and they're trying to bulldoze through the park and stand in line and dash around. And you're just kind of sitting there watching it all go by.

The topics, dealing with the behavior and feelings of others, open the door for Elizabeth to be heard as either compassionate or condescending. However, she is much more likely to be heard as either one if she uses *-in*, as shown above. To understand why this is, we need to understand a few things about Elizabeth and how she sounds to these listeners. Elizabeth inspired a range of reactions, including some of the most positive and the most negative comments found in all the interviews. She was universally described as the most dynamic of all the speakers and in the survey she was rated the most *outgoing*, with a mean of 5.21 on a six point scale. Example (23) from Section 6.3, repeated here as (32), shows a colorful example of listeners responding negatively to Elizabeth. (33), in contrast, is an extremely positive response, a listener explaining how he finds Elizabeth's animation so interesting and appealing that he does not distinguish between her (ING) guises.

- (32) **Jeremy:** So, it doesn't matter, because I'm disliking what she's saying. (laughter)
- Tom:** I don't like hearing her talk. (laughter)
- Sarah:** It makes blood come out of my ears.

Group 14, UNC. In response to Elizabeth, recording: discussion, comparison phase.

- (33) **Matt:** Because of the passion that she's talking about, like, her, you know, excitement. You really can't, you know, hear- differentiate between the first and the second. You know, to me. So she's very, you're not necessarily hearing what she's saying just looking at the way she's saying. I can just envision her, just, arms moving her animation, or (laughter) I wouldn't necessarily- (laughter) Yeah, exactly.

Group 10, Duke. In response to Elizabeth, recording: family, comparison phase.

Elizabeth was also universally understood as someone who would “normally” say *-ing*. (34) shows a typical sample of listeners agreeing that *-ing* belongs in Elizabeth's speech.

- (34) **Carlos:** The *-ing* sounds more natural.

Amy: Yeah

Tracey: mhmm

Group 7, Stanford. In response to Elizabeth, recording: hair, comparison phase.

As a “natural” *-ing* speaker, Elizabeth's use of *-in* stands out to listeners as a perceptible linguistic move. Given the ingroup/outgroup theme in these recordings, some listeners interpret that move in relation to the “others” that she is discussing. Out of these listeners, some are going to be well disposed to Elizabeth and some are going to dislike her. Depending on the listeners' opinion of the speaker and/or how generous they're feeling, they will interpret this as either condescending or compassionate. The meaning of (ING) in this context is not fixed, but varies for different listeners.

The next example of disagreement comes from Valerie. Valerie was more likely to be described as *annoying* in her *-ing* guise. Listeners were also more likely to think that she was *trying to impress* her addressee when she used *-ing*. These two descriptions also favored each other, but only in her *-ing* guise. Table 6.2 shows the three-way interaction between these two perceptions and (ING) for Valerie. All three interactions are significant, using the Chi squared test.

From these data, it seems that in her *-ing* guise, some listeners think Valerie is trying to impress her audience and are annoyed by this. This raises the question,

Checkbox label	% listeners selecting checkbox					
	<i>-in</i>			<i>-ing</i>		
	not <i>annoying</i>	<i>annoying</i>	Total	not <i>annoying</i>	<i>annoying</i>	Total
not <i>trying</i>	74.0	6.9	80.9	54.5	3.0	57.5
<i>trying</i>	19.0	0.0	19.0	28.8	13.6	42.4
Total	93.0	6.9	100.0	83.3	16.6	100.0

Table 6.2: Annoying and trying to impress selections for Valerie, by (ING).

then, in what ways they think she is trying to impress people. The evidence suggests that they hear her as trying to sound smarter than she actually is. Listeners who thought that Valerie was *annoying* rated her as less *intelligent* than those who did not and this tendency may be increased in the case of those who heard her *-ing* guise, as Table 6.3 demonstrates.

	<i>-in</i>	<i>-ing</i>
not <i>annoying</i>	3.35	3.53
<i>annoying</i>	3.00	2.36

Table 6.3: Intelligent ratings for Valerie, by (ING) and annoying (Interaction $p = 0.068$, main effect $p = 0.000$).

These data suggest that some listeners hearing Valerie’s *-ing* guise thought that she was an unintelligent young woman who was trying to impress her listeners and sound more intelligent. Further, these listeners were annoyed by this performance. This range of reactions is also reflected in the comments about her in the interviews. We saw this already in (26) above. Example (35) shows another participant responding to one of Valerie’s recordings, the one labeled “history”. In this recording, she describes some aspects of getting a history major, commenting that, unlike other fields, each time you begin study of a new area “you are starting from scratch”. She does not say in the recording whether she sees this as an asset or drawback.

- (35) **Amy:** Well I, even if she does have a degree I don’t think it was very rigorous or if it was [at a difficult?] school [??]

Moderator: Anything in particular that gave you that impression?

Amy: Oh it was just that she stammered after she was talking about the different types majors and how you people [??] different cultures and [??] it was just kind of disjointed.

Amelia: Yeah, I don't think she's very smart. (laughter)

Severl: (laughter)

Group 7, Stanford. In response to Valerie, recording: history, -ing guise.

As discussed above, when participants responded to Elizabeth described her as usually saying *-ing*, casting the *-in* variant as the one which constituted the social move. Valerie's case is somewhat different in that the divergent reactions are elicited by her *-ing* guise, the variant which most listeners "assigned" to her in the interviews as the more natural one for her speech. This raises the question whether *-ing* can be a social move for Valerie, since listeners seem to expect her to use it. I do not think that the *-ing* is the social move which is eliciting their reactions. Rather, I think that listeners hearing her *-ing* guise are perceiving an entire style and responding to it. While it is difficult to pinpoint other specific variables, the overall impression that Valerie gives is of a very young woman who is projecting a strong core of confidence, even presenting herself as an expert on several of the topics in the recordings.

Some listeners accept this confidence and read her as an interesting and vibrant person, as in (36). Greg was very impressed with Valerie and felt that she was knowledgeable about the topics of her discussions. He did not see her as making an effort to impress, as (36) shows.

- (36) **Greg:** She does seem smart actually. Smart in a humble, she seems like a very humble person. I like that. and uh, doesn't sound too, uh you know, eager to impress or please or anything like that just kinda being herself and I really I really like that. It's definitely what I'm attracted to. In terms of a friend or something.

Group 21, Duke. In response to Valerie, recording: backpacking, -in guise.

Others see her confidence as a result of her racial or class background. In (37), two participants identified her as belonging to a familiar type at Duke. They are less

interested in Valerie's personal qualities and more focused on her background and what it conveys about her. Later in the discussion they note that such women are not dumb, but merely "smart enough", for example smart enough to get good grades so that her father will take her to Norway.

(37) **Matt:** Oh, that is so like the Duke girls here.

All: (laughter)

Matt: It's just the Duke White girls, is just what it screams.

Moderator: Okay, tell me more about why she sounds like them.

Matt: Um, the use of like. Um, Using Daddy's money and backpacking.

Rob: The context of Daddy's little girl, you know.

Matt: Yeah.

Rob: Not just the White, in college. But lot of girls who are just just Daddy's little girl.

Matt: Backpacking through Norway.

Group 10, Duke. In response to Valerie, recording: backpacking, -ing guise.

Still others see her as at a disadvantage. The listeners in (38) interpret her explanations regarding the history major as compensating for a poor performance in her classes. These participants are the same ones from (26), a conversation which takes place later in the interview, as they explain how *-ing* does not improve the Valerie's apparent intelligence, but simply makes her sound "like she's trying to cover [her lack of intelligence] up".

(38) **Jeremy:** It's like she's trying to explain the history major and why it's difficult to somebody. So you get the impression that that's her major. And she's having trouble with it. She's kind of defending why, I think.

Sarah: To build on that, probably not so smart because she's saying the obvious. Or she just, or she may be in a situation where she's not comfortable so she kind of just says whatever comes to mind.

Adam: Yeah, I agree. It sounded like she really didn't know what to say. And just kind of spat something out.

Moderator: Okay.

Jeremy: Yeah, it's definitely, like I get the impression that she's not doing well in history.

Group 14, UNC. In response to Valerie, recording: history, -ing guise.

As for Elizabeth, *-in*, the unexpected form, is the one that can be most reasonably seen as its own social move. In Valerie's speech the effect of the move is to disrupt an existing style. For some listeners, Valerie's self presentation reads as someone who is trying too hard to sound smart. Because *-in* is an out-of-place and thus noticeable marker of not being articulate or not trying to be articulate, it disrupts this style, reducing or eliminating this subset of listener reactions.

The last example of listener divergence I will be discussing concerns Sam, one of the West Coast men. Like Valerie, Sam comes across as extremely young but he also sounds somewhat hesitant, with many long pauses in his speech. Two of Sam's recordings discuss his hobbies. In the one labeled "skateboarding", he describes going to parking structures at night to skateboard down the ramps. In "physical", he talks about how physical activity is enjoyable and relaxing for him. In the responses to these two recordings, listeners who heard Sam's *-in* guise were significantly more likely to mark him as *annoying* and as *trying to impress* his audience. Table 6.4 gives the percentages and significance (using the Chi squared test) for these two descriptions.

	<i>-in</i>	<i>-ing</i>	sig.
<i>annoying</i>	15.15	1.72	0.009
<i>trying to impress</i>	39.5	16.0	0.047

Table 6.4: Annoying and trying to impress selections for Sam, by (ING).

As one of the non-Southern speakers, Sam was generally expected to use *-ing* by interview participants. It seems likely, then, that or as for the other two, *-in* is the noticeable choice, the one it makes more sense to think of as a social move. The question is, what is the move and why are some listeners annoyed by it? The explanation may be found in Sam's masculinity ratings.

Table 6.5 shows that listeners who were annoyed by Sam thought that he was less masculine than others did. This table does not include (ING) as a factor because

	not <i>annoying</i>	<i>annoying</i>
<i>masculine</i>	3.62	2.85

Table 6.5: Masculine ratings for Sam, by annoying. Recordings “skateboarding” and “physical” only ($p = 0.004$).

there is only one listener who selected annoying in response to Sam’s *-ing* guise, making it impossible to test the interaction of the two factors. However, the ratings of masculinity among those who did not find Sam annoying are the same regardless of (ING), making the interaction for Sam between (ING), *annoying* and *masculine* essentially the same as Valerie’s interaction between *annoying* and *intelligent*, although the variant of (ING) is switched.

Based on these numbers, I think that when listeners heard Sam in his *-in* guise, talking about skateboarding and physical activity, a subset of them heard him as making an unsuccessful bid to sound more masculine, in much the way some listeners heard Valerie as trying to sound smart. Unlike with Valerie, there was no significant relationship between listeners finding him annoying and those thinking he was trying to impress, although I suspect that this is a result of insufficient data and that they are actually part of the same larger phenomenon.

In each of these three examples, the overall performance is set up in such a way as to allow (ING) to constitute or help to construct a social move. Because listeners are more or less positively inclined to the speaker, they interpret that move differently. This is variation in perceptions stemming not solely from linguistic differences but based in the social traits and interactions of the people involved. These reactions do have linguistic repercussions, however, as speakers learn over time how different categories and personalities of listener respond to particular moves. Likewise, a portion of the reactions in question are embedded in language and language ideologies. The perception that these speakers, being “from anywhere”, would naturally say *-ing* is fundamental to the logic of these reactions.

It is notable that the clearest examples of this behavior come from data concerning West Coast speakers. This does not mean that these listeners did not disagree about the Southerners. This data set is extremely rich and there is much more to explore

in it. Nonetheless, the West Coast speakers seem to have elicited more or perhaps clearer forms of disagreement, regardless of where the listeners were from themselves. This may relate to the unmarked status of their speech, allowing the more marked form *-in* to stand out as a more salient move. The Southern speakers have less of a clear division of markedness between the two forms, as *-ing* is unmarked generally for these listeners but somewhat marked by being unexpected in the speech of Southern speakers. Conversely, *-in* is unmarked in seeming “natural” in the context of Southerners speech but marked in the more general paradigm.

6.5 Summary

Listeners’ social and emotional orientations, both generally and towards specific speakers, play a role in the development of an evaluation and the place of individual variables in it. As linguists, we are apt to dismiss the sociolinguistic work accomplished by listening and reacting to linguistic performances. Even when we do consider the listener, it tends to be as an idealized, abstract figure, posited in order to make the theoretical point about speaking.

If we are to understand how and why linguistic variation can operate in a range of complex and interlinked ways, we must let go of this idealization. Just as we struggle to an awareness of speakers as messy, contradictory social beings with multiple agendas and imperfect knowledge, we must do the same for listeners. They are active participants in the process of interpretation, not passive receivers decoding the information as transmitted by the speaker.

This research begins this process by taking the most basic of social reactions: positive or negative disposition and documenting how it shapes the contribution of a single variable in the perception of linguistic performance. This process can be confusing, as the variable being studied necessarily forms part of the larger performance, inspiring the positive and negative reaction. It is, however, only a small portion of it, whose influence is combined with a multitude of other sources of information.

There are many other reactions a listener might have and many of them may be more complicated than simple positive or negative. As our understanding of these

processes deepens, we will be able to examine more and more complex ways that the reactions and assumptions of listeners impact the reception of day-to-day linguistic performances.

