

Loanword variation and perception: A case of methodological choices and experimental outcomes

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Previous studies of speech *production* have examined the variation of loanwords, suggesting the usage of unnativized variants to pattern with higher socioeconomic status [1], liberal political identities and stances [3,4], self-reported multilingualism [8], and globalist ideologies [5]. To provide a fuller picture, this study examines speech *perception* to test whether a speaker is *evaluated* in similar ways based on which variant they use. It also examines differing *methods* of eliciting such evaluations—matched-guise versus metalinguistic commentary—to test whether listeners evaluate a variable differently depending on their awareness of it. Results demonstrate that when listeners provide metalinguistic commentary about a variable, it does not perfectly reflect how it is perceived and evaluated in actual usage. This encourages the growing field of experimental sociolinguistics to be mindful about methodological choices.

An online experiment (400 participants) was administered on Amazon’s MTurk. First, in a matched-guise method [e.g., 2,6,7], participants hear a news report in Mainstream US English regarding international commerce and incorporating multiple variable placenames. They hear either a version of the stimulus in which the reporter uses all nativized (^N) or all unnativized (^U) variants:

Budapest ([ˈbʊdəpɛst] ^N ~ [ˈbʊdəpɛft] ^U)	Colombia ([kəˈlʌmbiə] ^N ~ [koˈlombiə] ^U)
Tokyo ([ˈtɒkiə] ^N ~ [ˈtɒkjə] ^U)	Tanzania ([tænzəˈniə] ^N ~ [tanzəˈniə] ^U)
Shanghai ([ˈʃæŋhaɪ] ^N ~ [ˈʃɑŋhaɪ] ^U)	Iraq ([aɪˈræk] ^N ~ [ɪˈræk] ^U)
Paraguay ([ˈpær.əgwɛɪ] ^N ~ [ˈpɑ.ɪgwɑɪ] ^U)	Pakistan ([ˈpækɪstæn] ^N ~ [ˈpækɪstæn] ^U)
Chile ([ˈtʃɪli] ^N ~ [ˈtʃɪle] ^U)	Quebec ([kwəˈbɛk] ^N ~ [kɛˈbɛk] ^U)

Participants then provide Likert ratings of the reporter and report along social dimensions like those highlighted above: e.g., political leaning, multilingualism, globalism. In the second part, participants are asked to provide direct, metalinguistic evaluations of loanword variation: “If you heard someone speaking English pronounce ‘Iraq’, ‘Quebec’, and ‘Chile’, for example, as /ear-rock/, /keh-beck/, and /chee-lay/ instead of /eye-rack/, /kwuh-beck/, and /chill-ee/, how might you think about them along the following factors?” (or vice versa), eliciting Likert ratings along similar social spectra.

Results from the matched-guise experiment suggest that, just as it exhibits meaningful sociolinguistic patterning in production, loanword variation also significantly influences subjective evaluations. Listeners significantly associate a reporter’s usage of unnativized variants with multilingualism, reporting experience, and targeting toward a more global audience. This intersection suggests unnativization to hold capital in the global linguistic marketplace.

When asked to comment *explicitly* on loanword variation, participants significantly associate the usage of unnativized variants with similar indexations: multilingualism, higher socioeconomic status, and open-mindedness. However, results also show that listeners behave differently when evaluating a speaker versus evaluating a variable, by highlighting an additional significant effect: unnativization is significantly associated with liberal political leaning, a pattern found in previous production studies. This effect only surfacing in the latter task suggests that, when listeners are asked to comment metalinguistically on the variable, they are adding evaluations that may in fact be indexed, but in a second-order fashion [9]: by association with the more direct, primary social indexations. This shows the importance of being aware that metalinguistic commentary may reveal a broader array of indexations associated with a variable, but it may miss the nuanced relationship of those indexations and how some may be more primary than others. This can be complemented by methods designed to avoid transparency of the variable, isolating how a variable is indexed and evaluated when encountered in actual usage.

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