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Edited by Anna M. Babel

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## Awareness and Control in Sociolinguistic Research

The topic of awareness and control is an elephant in the room in sociolinguistic research. To what extent are speakers aware of sociolinguistic variables? Are there different types or levels of awareness? Is “control” of these variables a conscious or unconscious process, or is it some combination of the two? Are the variables we are aware of necessarily those we control, and vice versa? The extent to which speakers are aware of sociolinguistic information and use it strategically may drastically affect our understanding of the role that sociolinguistic cues play in the development of structural categories. This volume constitutes the first concerted effort to understand the nature of awareness and control using all the methodological and theoretical tools at our disposal. The contributors employ a variety of perspectives to address the relationship between awareness and control in sociolinguistic research.

ANNA M. BABEL is an Assistant Professor of Hispanic Linguistics at the Ohio State University.

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Anna M. Babel



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## Foreword

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Forty-five years ago, Bickerton (1971:467, fn. 9) expressed the view that:

The sociolinguistics of the future will surely be based on surreptitious recordings by trained participant-observers or by remote-control devices at present available only to government and industrial spies and divorce peepers.

From the viewpoint of today, this prediction was clearly wrong. Not just because surreptitious recordings have long been eschewed as sociolinguistic data-gathering techniques on ethical and other grounds, but also because it is clear that we need to do more than record how speakers talk when the effects of observation are minimized. Half a century of theorizing and empirical research has taught us that in order to come to grips with perception as well as production, to pursue newer interests like social meaning and the limits of agency, and to settle older debates about speech community, communicative competence, and salience, we also need to understand what people know and are aware of, as they use language. And to do *that*, we need to ask them about their competence and performance (if you will), run experiments, read in allied fields like Anthropology and Psychology, and be better thinkers, ethnographers, socio-phoneticians, socio-grammarians, and so on. These are the kinds of activities in which the contributors to this book are engaged – vastly different from the vision of a researcher armed only with a telescope and a remote listening device. But they indeed represent the vibrant present and future of sociolinguistics.

In order to illustrate why I consider this book so important, let me enlarge upon the central point of the preceding paragraph. Back in the 1970s, when I was doing my dissertation research in Guyana, I did extensive sociolinguistic interviews and conversational recordings with dozens of people in the village of Cane Walk. The group included two weeders in the sugar cane fields, Irene and Rose, who never used the acrolectal or English pronoun variants in several singular pronoun subcategories, despite having numerous opportunities to do so. For third-person singular pronoun objects, for instance, they never used *him* or *her*, always basilectal *am* or mesolectal *he, she: mi sii am/ii* “I saw him~her.” In this respect, they appeared to operate at the same (deep creole) level of the creole continuum, and to be similar kinds of sociolinguistic personas. But after

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I had finished with my informal or spontaneous recordings, I went back to all of the speakers with controlled interviews, in which, among other things, I asked them to translate or correct sample sentences from Creole to English and vice versa. Here, a dramatic difference between Rose and Irene emerged. Rose *never* supplied the acrolectal or English variant in those two (or several other) pronoun subcategories, sometimes supplying only the mesolectal variant (*he* or *she* for object forms *him* and *her*) and asking whether *ii ga ingglish moo dan dat?* “Is there anything closer to English than that?” But Irene always did, readily deploying forms like *him* and *her* that she had never attested in her spontaneous recordings (see Rickford 1987:164–5). For Irene, therefore, her non-English usage in the spontaneous recordings can be considered an act of choice or identity. For Rose, her non-English usage seems less so, and more a reflection of a competence circumscribed by her networks, education, and exposure. Sociolinguists who depend only on long-range devices and surreptitious recordings would see no difference between these individuals, and would therefore miss a distinction in control and awareness that a community member, an attentive ethnographer, or a contributor to this book would recognize.

Anna Babel, known for her fine contributions to Bolivian sociolinguistics and contact linguistics (e.g. Babel 2009, 2011, 2014) has provided an invaluable service to sociolinguistics and linguistics more generally by conceiving, assembling, and editing this book. It is the outgrowth of a session on “Awareness and Control” that she organized at the Linguistic Society of America’s 2013 annual meeting. That session featured papers by *five* scholars, most with recent or newly minted PhDs, together covering a variety of topics, methods, and emphases.

*Babel’s* own paper provided a good introduction to awareness and control, outlining three primary methods of studying it (experiments, as in sociophonetics; ethnographic observations of linguistic variation/style shifting; and elicitations of language attitudes and ideologies), and emphasizing the importance of considering the larger social and cultural environment. Drawing on ethnographic data from Bolivia, she demonstrated that women’s reluctance or refusal to participate in the formal male-dominated *oratoria* style at meetings and to shift the genre to discourse styles in which they feel more comfortable doesn’t represent “lack of control” in the strict sense, but “a different kind of monitoring” and activism.

*Carmichael* used Matched Guise and other experimental tasks with sixty-one Ohio State undergrads to gauge their reactions to speakers said to be from Columbus, New York City, or Birmingham (although they were actually from other cities in Southern, Midlands, Western, and Mid-Atlantic dialect areas). Their ratings of these speakers on Status, Solidarity, Accentedness and City-Country dimensions revealed a deterministic role of place expectations and awareness based on personal experience and impressions from TV and the

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movies. The relevance of popular media in her paper (as in Drager and Kirtley's and McGowan's) suggests that we should pay more attention to these as potential influences on the production and perception of sociolinguistic variation than we normally do.

In *McGowan's* perception experiment with eighty-seven undergrads, more experienced listeners were better than less experienced listeners at distinguishing authentic speakers of Mandarin English from monolingual English speakers imitating Chinese accents, suggesting that the two groups of listeners drew on different forms of linguistic/social knowledge. But the stereotypes used by less experienced listeners helped them perform "better than chance," and in a separate production experiment, five English-speaking actors imitating Chinese-sounding English didn't restrict themselves to "highly salient, stereotypical features" of Mandarin-accented English, but variably used features associated with a broader "pan-Asian" accent.

*Nycz* examined the relation between awareness and control in the English of seventeen speakers of Canadian English who lived in the New York City area from one to thirty years (one for forty-four years), and found that high awareness of a feature (as with Canadian Raising) did not automatically lead to high control, and that good control did not require high awareness (as with Low Back Merger). This finding counters claims that in order to be acquired, the features of a second dialect ( $D_2$ ) must be noticed and/or be salient to first dialect ( $D_1$ ) speakers, and it also supports to some extent Labov's (1966) contention (see Labov 1972:104) that awareness and agency have limits when it comes to production, at least for adult speakers.

In the only paper dealing with morphosyntactic/socio-grammatical variation, *Squires* reported on participants' reactions to *standard* plural, *standard* singular, *nonstandard*, and *uncommon* variants of test sentences ("After eating, the turtle(s) *don't/doesn't* walk very fast") embedded in filler sentences. *Perceiving* was measured by reading time/speed (slowest in uncommon condition; fastest in standard; intermediate in nonstandard); and *awareness* by post-experiment metalinguistic comments. Results over three different experiments were consistent enough to confirm that *perceiving and noticing are separate cognitive processes*.

In addition to these five initial conference papers, Babel sought out six more for the book, and they add considerably to the novelty and variety of situations and variables covered in this publication, and to its theoretical heft.

*Beck* reports on experiments with young children, a segment of the population relatively understudied in sociolinguistics, especially in relation to language perception. She shows that 5- and 6-year-olds in a town near Philadelphia can discriminate between familiar and unfamiliar regional accents on an Awareness Task, although "insiders" (at least one parent speaks the local dialect) do better than "outsiders" (no parents speak the local dialect).

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On an ABX discrimination task, however, both “insider” and “outsider” children performed quite well, without significant inter-group differences, suggesting that children at this age “are not heavily influenced by social knowledge in perception of regional accents.”

Anthropologists *Choksi and Meek* focus on salience via orthographic representations of indigenous minority languages – a topic rare in sociolinguistics, but commoner in their subfield. Salience for them is “that which is susceptible to being noticed but not merely as a property of perception or language . . . [but] also or mutually as a result of the socio-cultural context . . .” Examples come from Native American languages in Yukon, Canada, and Santali in eastern India. Santals place great store on writing their language with Murmu’s distinct 1925 “Ol-Chiki” script, or with modifications of Roman or other scripts that preserve their distinctive mid-central vowel. Ideologically, this is a salient symbol of their political and linguistic distinctness from Bengali and other non-indigenous neighbors, and of their aspirations for statehood.

*Zimman* takes us to another area insufficiently considered by sociolinguists – transgender individuals and the role of agency, power, and ideology in their transitions. Drawing on two years of ethnographic work with fifteen trans men (“female-to-male-trans people”), whose trans voices are more easily changed by hormone therapy than trans women, but who are also less studied, he encounters some apparent paradoxes. Confident that testosterone will eventually lower their vocal pitch, without inhibiting their “true, inner self,” they reject attempts to “pass” as men by agentive means like avoiding upward inflections, while claiming agency in other respects. Given these complexities, *Zimman* suggests we look more critically at how agency, awareness, and control work for speakers in other situations.

Although virtually every paper in this volume includes some theoretical component, or at least a discussion of the broader implications of its ideas or findings, three of the new papers are devoted almost entirely to larger theoretical questions about awareness and control and how to model them in sociolinguistics.

*Campbell-Kibler* argues that Labov *et al.*’s (2001) “Sociolinguistic Monitor” [SLM] is too limited to socioeconomic class and standard vs. non-standard speech, and needs updating to represent variation by local group, sexual orientation, persona, stance, and other dimensions revealed by Third Wave and other sociolinguistic research, while incorporating insights from work in language processing, cognition, neuroscience, and social psychology. After summarizing some of the key ideas and findings from such work, she outlines what should be in an updated model of socio-linguistic cognition. Her list includes the *grammar* itself, as in the SLM, but also a variety of social features of speech context, linked to the grammar through rapid, automatic associative indexical links, as well as slower, more effortful and conscious processes of *self-regulation*. A *person perception system* is the third key element.



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*Drager and Kirtley* explain how awareness, salience, and stereotypes of sociolinguistic variables are accounted for in exemplar models of speech perception and production in (socio-)linguistics. Individual utterances of words, their meanings and phonetics are stored cognitively as Exemplar Clouds, with social, stylistic, and other information about their contexts. Because of the automatic storage of linguistic and social information in exemplar models, speakers don't need to be consciously *aware* to perceive or process sociolinguistic variation, even for stereotypes. But exemplar weights can be used to represent *salience* or heightened attention to certain exemplars, related to their frequency and recency of activation. The authors use their own and others' sociophonetic examples as illustrations, noting in closing that Exemplar models require further development and testing.

*Preston* has long been a leading figure in perceptual dialectology, the study of what, how, and why non-linguists notice and think about people's speech. In this chapter he repeats a distinction between four aspects of folk *awareness* (its Availability, Accuracy, Detail, and Control) that he first drew in *Preston* (1996), but he also explores the conscious-unconscious distinction and other aspects of folk linguistics and language attitude studies not in the earlier account. How people notice and classify language features, he notes, varies according to their prior beliefs and attitudes about languages and their speakers, by elicitation conditions, and other factors. He outlines the structure of attitudinal cognitoria in general, with a specific illustration of a southeastern Michigan cognitorium for "Southern," and calls for subtler techniques for teasing out beliefs and attitudes, conscious and unconscious.

I'll close this foreword with a couple of final observations.

The first is that while every chapter covers *awareness* to some extent, several of them citing Silverstein's important (1981) paper on this subject, only about nine (Babel, Campbell-Kibler, Carmichael, Choksi and Meek, Drager and Kirtley, McGowan, Nycz, Preston, and Zimman) cover *control* too. Even among those that attend to both concepts, *control* receives less attention than *awareness*. This is interesting, given that most sociolinguistic work has been on production rather than perception, but it perhaps reflects the fact that theorizing about sociolinguistic cognition has been stronger (see Labov *et al.* 2011, Campbell-Kibler in this volume) in relation to perception than production.

Secondly, while all but three papers cite Labov's (1972) distinction between linguistic variables that are *indicators*, *markers*, and *stereotypes*, representing different levels of awareness (none, some, and a lot respectively), no one comments on Bell's (1984:151–2) "audience design" derivation of *markers*, which show interspeaker and intraspeaker variation, from *indicators*, which show only inter-speaker variation. This is surely one kind of synchronic and diachronic "fact" for which a sociolinguistic cognition model of language variation and change should account. And while *stereotypes* "under extreme

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stigmatization . . . may become the overt topic of social comment” and “may become increasingly divorced from the forms actually used in speech” (Labov 1972:180), no one comments on the fact that the extent to which this is true (i.e. the gap between stereotypical characterization and reality) will vary from one variable to another. One could fruitfully investigate this in terms of Preston’s (this volume) “accuracy” factor (“Does the folk account mirror the linguistic facts?”) and try to develop hypotheses about the conditions under which sociolinguistic stereotypes become more or less divorced from reality.

In pointing to aspects of awareness or control like these that are under- or unrepresented, I intend no substantive critique. This book is full of many rich observations and insights that its authors do contribute, and my parting comments should be taken as representative of additional questions that the book will stimulate readers to consider, and hopefully pursue. Issues of awareness and control are central to the development of sociolinguistic theory, and it is likely that this book will shape research on sociolinguistic variation for years to come.

JOHN R. RICKFORD, STANFORD UNIVERSITY

February 2016

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## Preface

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Awareness and control touches on every aspect of sociolinguistic work. Although scholars often refer to awareness casually or impressionistically as a side-note to other types of analysis, the practice of systematically investigating and reporting on participants' awareness of a sociolinguistic feature should be as routine as reporting on its distribution in a community of speakers. This is important because linguistic features behave differently depending on how people perceive them: highly stereotyped features will often be used selectively and with a high degree of intentionality or consciousness, while those that are lower on the scales of awareness may escape notice until some circumstance calls attention to them. And of course, no linguistic feature acts in isolation, but rather as part of a pattern of use and meaning that may be interpreted differently in different situations or from varying points of view. A linguistic feature that is highly salient in the speech of one speaker may be unremarkable in the speech of another. Listeners, too, vary – what leaps out to one person may pass completely unnoticed for another. Our perceptions of meaningful variation are shaped by our experiences, identifications, and (inter)subjectivities. Indeed, there is little doubt that even the linguistic features that we as scholars choose to study are guided by our own patterns of awareness, including how that awareness may have been shaped by our academic training.

Awareness and control has been considered an intractable problem because for several decades the dominant theoretical models in the field have enforced a separation of linguistic and social factors. Yet we need look no further than children, who have extensive input from their parents but learn to speak like their peers, to see that people perceive and produce language through the lens of social categories. The increasing prevalence and diversity of theoretical models that question this dichotomy means that we have a new opportunity to reassess our approach to the topic.

This volume brings together work on awareness and control from many perspectives in sociolinguistic research, but more than that, it brings together the work of a group of scholars who are interested in pushing the boundaries of the discipline by working beyond and across their own subdisciplinary homes.

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From sociophonetics to language processing to psycholinguistics to language acquisition to perceptual dialectology to linguistic anthropology, the contributors to this volume work with a broad variety of theoretical frameworks and a range of methodological tools. The authors largely refer to a common set of sociolinguistic literature on awareness and control, including centrally Labov (1972), Silverstein (1981), and Preston (1996). Crucially, all three of these works treat awareness and control as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon in which awareness of linguistic variation is fully integrated with systems of social relations and meaning-making. This common orientation gives the volume a theoretical coherence, and allows the contributors to speak to each other across theoretical and methodological differences.

At the same time, the contributors share a common quality that one reviewer referred to as “voraciousness” in exploring work in related disciplines. This theoretical voraciousness, perhaps even omnivorousness, is key to our ability to advance this topic now. The study of awareness and control pushes us to move beyond boundaries that we have found easy and convenient, and perhaps useful for a time – “internal” versus “external” factors, experimental versus ethnographic methodologies, theoretical versus empirical approaches. Awareness and control is a topic that will not submit to these dichotomies. It cuts across all levels of linguistic structure and types of analysis. It provides a forum in which to think broadly about the whole of language, encompassing structure and ideology. By the same token, precisely because awareness and control is complicated and context-dependent, it resists separation into distinct areas of study. We all need to work together to understand this very complex, typically human problem.

The study of awareness and control brings together not just subfields of linguistics, but also has implications for psychology, biology, cognitive science, and social theory. However, the way in which we define and measure awareness and control in different fields varies considerably. For example, while anthropologists and social theorists have treated awareness as a dimension of consciousness at a societal or intersubjective level, drawing on philosophy and Marxist theory, psychologists and cognitive scientists have approached awareness as a quality of individuals, albeit individuals conditioned by their social *milieu*, that can be studied experimentally and in isolation from interaction. This tension between the individual and the sociocultural is a persistent theme that divides cultural studies from cognitive types of approaches.

Much work remains to be done in bridging disciplinary and subdisciplinary boundaries. In particular, there is a need for more engagement between the two areas that can be broadly labeled as cognitive science and social theory. Cognitive research *is* social research, and it is imperative that we approach cognitive science with models of social interaction that are as detailed and subtle as is our understanding of linguistic structure. In the academic sphere, a

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popular ideology that places scientism and STEM fields in opposition to the humanities and social research seems to be reinforcing the division between these purportedly distinct orientations. Since language is a social as well as an individual phenomenon, linguists are of necessity *both* cognitive scientists and social theorists, and we must work to contest these discourses. The study of awareness and control has the potential to bridge these differences. Moreover, it has the potential to move towards a holistic understanding of human experience, joining the kaleidoscopic shards of our collective partial understandings into a single coherent image.

It is clear that a continuing commitment to methodological diversity, to epistemological tolerance, and to open communication are essential to our progress in the study of awareness and control. Given that these conditions are met, where do we go next? Here are a few ideas that have emerged from this volume that will undoubtedly lead to future work:

We speak of different “levels” of awareness and control. What are these “levels” (Squires)? Are they connected, and if so, what are the connections between them? Is this the right metaphor for the different types and qualities of awareness that we can observe through our research? Are there varying degrees or intensities of awareness? How might these be related to scales of awareness (Preston)?

How do people acquire awareness and control? How does awareness and control change over the lifespan (Beck) and through different kinds of experiences, such as migration processes (Nycz) or educational institutions? How do our expectations of typical speech affect our awareness and evaluation of particular variables (Carmichael)? Is there cross-linguistic diversity in awareness and control? How do these processes work in standard language environments versus in non-standardized languages, and how are they embedded in cultural artifacts such as systems of orthography (Choksi and Meek)? How might we model the cognitive processes that underlie our ability to perceive links between language and social categorization (Campbell-Kibler, Drager and Kirtley)? How are concepts such as agency and intentionality integrated in our perception and production of linguistic features (Zimman)?

How can we use the study of awareness and control to develop links between perception and production (Babel)? People can perceive features that they do not control, as anyone who has attempted to imitate someone else’s accent can attest. People also control features of which they are not aware – bidialectal speakers are often unaware of the way in which they accommodate to different types of interlocutors, as when an adult speaks to childhood friends or relatives in a way that is distinct from her normal style of speech. Yet at some level, we *must* be aware of these features in order to control them. How does our experience with language translate into an ability to perceive and produce speech (McGowan)?

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I am truly grateful to all of the contributors to this volume for their generosity with their work and their great patience with me in my editorial role. The excitement and interest that this project inspires in me has only grown as I've had the opportunity to delve deeper into these topics, and I am constantly impressed and humbled by the excellence and dedication of my fellow scholars. In conclusion, I would like to offer special thanks – from all of us – to John Rickford for his encouragement and for the idea of turning our LSA session on this topic into an edited volume. It has been a rewarding experience, and I hope that this will be a useful and thought-provoking resource for other readers in the future.

ANNA M. BABEL

February 2016

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