Imitation and the Perception of Variation

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Imitation is a valuable and yet neglected approach in the investigation of variation and speech perception. Though the connection between imitation and perceptual salience has been recognized for many years (e.g. Trudgill 1986, Preston 1989), little research has been conducted on imitations. While sociolinguists have been richly rewarded by interview-style research where the speaker is less aware of their speech, there is also much to be learned from performance speech, where the speaker is highly aware of their speech (Schilling-Estes 1998). The primary difficulty in interpreting imitation performances is teasing apart to what degree the imitation reflects actual speech perception versus preconceived linguistic stereotypes. Preston 1992 discusses several other complicating factors in imitation research. The present study acknowledges these and other issues and presents work that suggests imitation can nonetheless be valuable to variation studies.

In this investigation, twenty speakers read a short passage in English. Ten were non-native speakers with L1s of Spanish, Mandarin, German, French, and Hindi, and ten were native speakers imitating these accents. Each native speaker performed both free imitations (spontaneous) and modeled imitations (following exposure to the accent), with the goal of eliciting stereotyped performances and performances that reflected speech perception separately. Listeners were presented with these speech samples and asked to determine what the accent was and if it was an imitation. Initial results of 24 listeners refute common concerns with imitation research. One argument against using imitations is that speakers are not good at it, and they may just produce a generic “foreign” accent; however, listeners consistently recognized the target accent of most imitations. Another frequent sentiment is that imitations are easy to distinguish from actual accents; however, these results show that listeners generally cannot differentiate between authentic and imitated accents, as suggested by Neuhauser & Simpson 2007.

References


