“He’s so smart!”: Testing listener perceptions of phrase-final pauses and speaker style in university discourse

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Traditionally, within-turn pauses have been analyzed as silences that evince the hesitancy, disfluency, or ‘social ineptitude’ of the speaker (Goldman-Eisler 1968). Yet, interlocutors’ between-turn pauses have been analyzed as meaning-potent variables that can promote or undermine those who have just spoken, as in Mendoza-Denton (1994)’s investigation of the Hill-Thomas hearings. Though ethnographic analyses have contributed to our understanding of the social meaning of linguistic features across contexts and topics (e.g., Podesva 2007), the assumption that pauses are primarily cognitively driven has hindered further study on pausing strategies and how they are received by listeners. This study tests the implications of Mendoza-Denton’s between-turn analysis on the within-turn speech of undergraduates, asking, “Do long/short phrase-final pauses affect how we perceive students’ personal qualities?”

This experiment utilized speech samples collected in a Cornell University classroom that were digitally manipulated to include long (1.6s) and short (.4s) pauses. Indeed, the results show that listeners hear short pausers as more “confident” and more “informed,” while long pausers are judged as less “confident” and less “informed.” These effects become most robust when the long pauses align with slower speech rate and the short pauses with faster speech rate such that the indexical meanings of the individual variables converge towards one coherent style. The study also shows effects for perceived gender (more “feminine” speakers of both sexes were rated as less “intelligent”) and High Rising Terminal intonation (HRT users were rated as less “intelligent” and less “confident”).

Overall, this paper unites an interest in style in Third Wave Sociolinguistics (Eckert 2005) with sociophonetic experimentation (Campbell-Kibler 2007) in order to disentangle the linguistic resources speakers draw upon in creating style. By testing naturally-occurring variants in a controlled environment, this study shows that pauses, intonation, and perceived gender are salient to listeners in the co-construction of academic styles.

References