Accrual of social meaning to geographic dialect variation: The case of Malagasy emergent tone contrasts

Recent sociolinguistic research argues that the large-scale patterns of variation revealed by sociolinguistic survey studies are only indirectly related to the broad demographic categories in which they are observed; individual sociolinguistic variables are directly linked to more locally-defined and fluid social meanings, indexing personal characteristics and “stances” (Eckert 2008). Furthermore, a sociolinguistic variable (or an individual variant of that variable, cf. Campbell-Kibler 2011) does not possess a single fixed meaning but exists within an “indexical field” of related meanings, which can gradually expand and shift as speakers make ideological connections leading to use of variants in new contexts. Studies of English (Eckert 2000; Labov 1963) and Mandarin (Zhang 2005) are cited by Eckert (2008) as evidence that variables originally associated simply with geographic dialects can later develop social meaning at the local scale of interactional stance-taking, becoming indexically linked to the characteristics and stances considered typical of the people living in a location in contrast to those of people in other locations. A similar kind of finding was reported by Stanford (2009) in a study of linguistic expression of clan loyalty among the Sui people of China; however, as Stanford and Preston (2009) point out, most such work has historically been performed on English and other European languages, and sociolinguistic analysis of a wider variety of non-Western, lesser-studied languages is necessary in order to enrich our knowledge of these processes.

Much past and current work on Malagasy focuses on geographic dialect variation at various linguistic levels, including lexical, phonological, and morphosyntactic, and finds some evidence for a geographically-defined Central group of dialects (Adelaar 2013). A recent study of acoustic phonetic and perceptual data demonstrates significant interspeaker variation in the use of either modal voicing on onset consonants or pitch contrasts on following vowels as the primary phonetic cue to what is traditionally considered a phonological voicing contrast; speakers of Central dialects tend to devoice consonants and rely primarily on pitch contrasts, resulting in an emergent tone system, while speakers of Non-central dialects maintain modal voicing distinctions and have significantly smaller associated pitch contrasts (Howe 2014; 2017). The data suggest that this variation is tied to geographic dialects, but given the findings of sociolinguists described above and the fact that Malagasy speakers overtly recognize dialect variation and see a strong connection between their dialects and their ethnic identities (Botouhely 2007; Howe 2017), the current study explores whether this variation in use of modal voicing or tone to signal phonological contrasts has taken on additional social meaning beyond the geographic distinction.

Following the methods of Campbell-Kibler (2007), this study employs a version of the Matched Guise Technique, in order to isolate the effects of manipulating the variable in question, and is conducted in two phases. The first phase uses focus group discussions to determine the social associations potentially linked with the use of modal voicing and tone. Participants listen to recordings of Malagasy speakers excerpted from interviews and give their opinions concerning personal and social characteristics of the speakers based on their language use. They then hear the same recordings in which pitch and voicing have been manipulated in order to increase or decrease prominence of the use of phonological tone and are asked to consider how these changes influence their opinions of the speaker. Once a qualitative picture of the potential social meanings of the variants has been obtained, the second phase of the study uses a survey
based on these initial interview responses to collect quantitative data from a larger group of participants. In the survey, participants are unaware of the manipulations performed on the recordings and are simply asked to categorize the speakers they hear as best they can according to the provided descriptions. Demographic characteristics of the survey participants are also collected and examined to determine whether any correlation exists between listeners’ sociodemographic background and their judgements. This is a work in progress; participants in the first phase will be primarily Malagasy university students in Antananarivo, Fianarantsoa and Antsiranana, while those in the second phase will represent a wider age range and a broader set of occupations and geographic regions. The results of the survey, along with the in-depth commentary from the interviews, will provide valuable insight concerning the accrual of social meaning to linguistic variation and change in Malagasy, a language which has not previously been the subject of variationist sociolinguistic studies.

References


