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# Making language variation possible: insights from social cognitive psychology

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# More specifically...

- What is social cognitive psychology?
- How can it be used in linguistics?
- What does it mean for our understanding of language variation?
- (And then a bit about my current research)

# Social cognitive psychology

What is it?

- Social: something to do with people in interaction
- Cognitive: something to do with mental processes/the mind
- Psychology: something to do with human behaviour
- → Definition: *the study of the mental processes which govern human behaviour in instances of interaction*
- And how can it be used in linguistics?

# (Socio-)Cognitive Linguistics

A very brief outline...

- Language processing in CL: no different than and not separate from processing of other input (Langacker 2007)
- Kristiansen (2006, 2008)
  - LANGUAGE STANDS FOR SOCIAL IDENTITIES
  - LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR CONVEYING SOCIAL MEANING AND EXPRESSING SOCIAL IDENTITIES
- Linguistic signal + socio-psychological dimension = social information conveyed by the linguistic signal and psychological reactions to this information is processed as a cognitive whole

# This is nothing new, by the way...

And not limited to cognitive linguistics either.

- Tajfel (1969, 1981), Social Identity Theory: stereotyping constitutes an inevitable and natural side-effect of the general process of categorization.
- Le Page (1980): speech is not just a reflection of identity, but a projection of it.
- Eckert (2004): style does not just reflect social meaning, but actively construes it.
  
- The approach that (socio-)cognitive linguistics takes, though, is one more focused on the actual processes in the mind rather than one of social processes and identity.
- → Expanded definition of social cognitive psychology in linguistics: *the study of the mental processes which govern human behaviour in instances of interaction THROUGH LANGUAGE*

# What does it mean for our understanding of language variation?

- The perception of variable forms
- → Exemplar theory
  - Ultimate usage-based model of speech perception, supports socio-cognitive approach to language

# Exemplar theory

- Smith and Zárate (1992): exemplar-based model of social judgment
- Pierrehumbert (2001): cognitive category clouds of remembered tokens
- Hay, Warren and Drager (2006): social information affects speech processing – social indexing of exemplars
- Foulkes and Docherty (2006): exemplar-based model of phonological knowledge offers the most productive means of modelling socio-phonetic variation

- “the interweaving of sociophonetic and linguistic information in speech is so complete that no natural human utterance can offer linguistic information without simultaneously indexing one or more social factor” (Foulkes and Docherty 2006:419)

# Practical applications of this approach

(or my current research)

- “Salience in language change: A socio-cognitive study of Tyneside English”
- Salience – what is it (part I):
  - According to the Oxford English Dictionary, if something is salient it “stand[s] out from the rest; prominent, conspicuous”
  - In social cognitive psychology salience is defined as “[a] property of a stimulus that makes it stand out in relation to other stimuli and attract attention.” (Hogg and Vaughan 2008:61)
  - In linguistics, salience is “a notion which seems to lie at the cusp of language internal, external and extra-linguistic motivation [ ] which we can provisionally define rather simply as a property of a linguistic item or feature that makes it in some way perceptually and cognitively prominent.” (Kerwill and Williams 2002: 81).

# Salience – what is it? (part II)

- Linguistic form > < linguistic meaning
- Linguistic form: arbitrary, does not carry (lexical) meaning
  - English: *chair*
  - Danish: *stol*
  - Arabic: كرسي
- Linguistic form (from a socio-psychological and socio-cognitive perspective):  
*sociolinguistic meaning* (the indexing of social characteristics of the speaker)

# Salience vs. non-salience

- Linguistic indicators, markers, and stereotypes form a hierarchy of salience which is outlined in the table below. The table outlines both factors relating to sociolinguistic groupings of speakers and to language use (stylistics). A simple + or – indicates whether the factors are relevant to the particular classification.
- Indicators, markers, and stereotypes

	In-group salience	Out-group salience	Social variation	Stylistic variation	Change
Stereotype	+	+	+	+	+/-
Marker	+	-	+	+	+
Indicator	-	-	+	-	+/-

- (adapted from Labov 1972, 1994 and Trudgill 1986)

# Saliency and language change

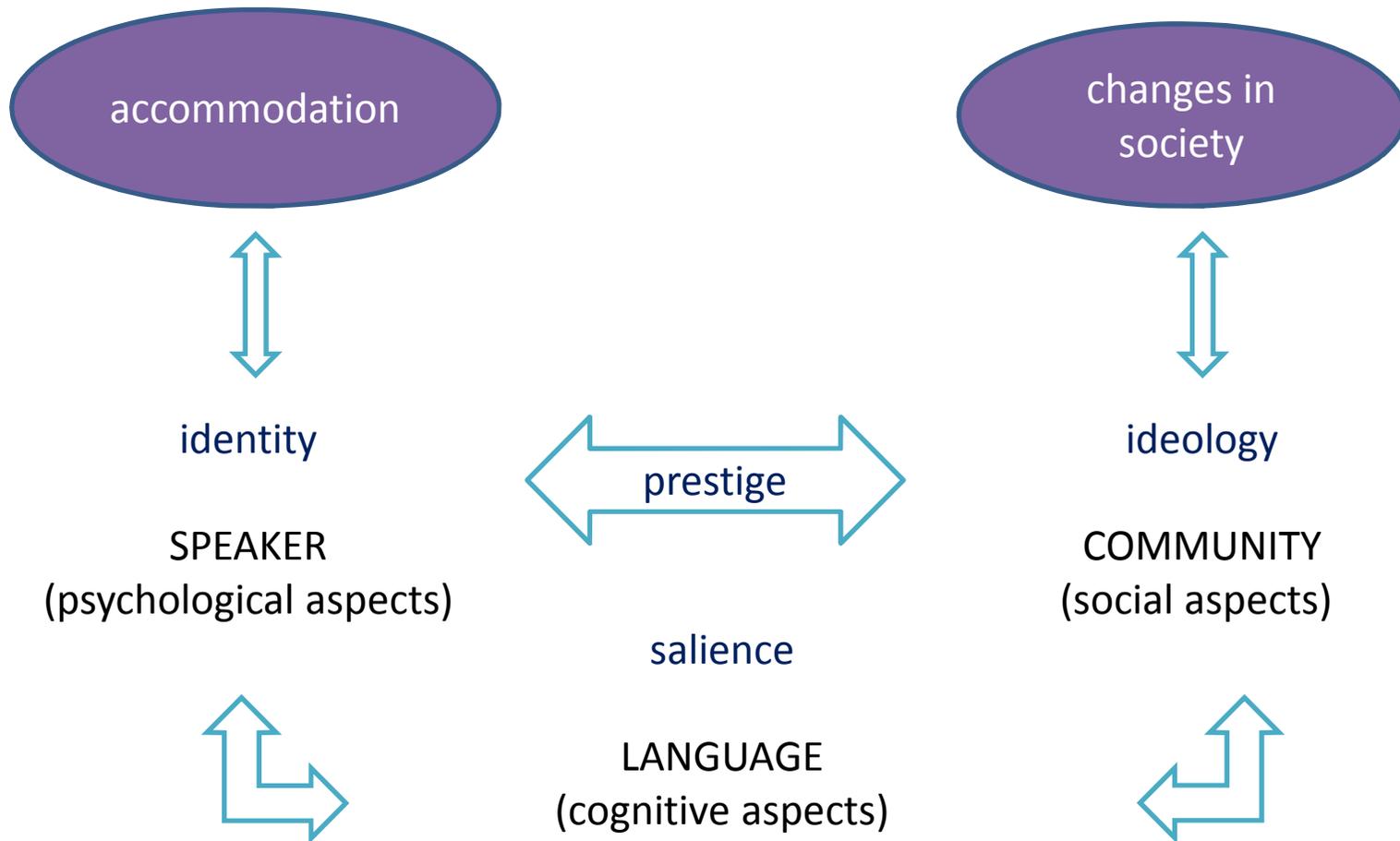
## – a model

- Any operationalization of the saliency notion must involve a match between three components:
  - 1) Language change through diffusion of forms from one variety to another the explanation of which is suspected to be due to saliency of the feature involved.
  - 2) Language-internal explanations (e.g. phonological contrast, semantic transparency, syntactic environment)
  - 3) Extra-linguistic factors (e.g. cognitive, pragmatic, socio-psychological) which are linked with the linguistic feature undergoing change.
    - (Kerswill and Williams 2002: 105)
- It seems that the presence of a language internal explanation (component 2) is a precondition for saliency and that the presence of extra-linguistic factors (component 3) are not only crucial in order to avoid circularity but also “ultimately the cause of saliency” (*ibid*: 105) as these directly influence speaker behaviour.

# Salience – what is it? (part III)

- Based on the definition of salience in social cognitive psychology, we can initially define salience within socio-cognitive linguistics as: **the property of a linguistic form which makes it prominent relative to other forms in the cognitive domain.**
- The socio-cognitive framework allows for the crucial unification of structural, sociolinguistic and psychological aspects of language change needed in the conceptualisation of this complex construct.

# Model of factors in language change



# Tyneside study

- Corpus study: investigating change in morphosyntactic variables over time
- Interviewer-led questionnaire: information about extra-linguistic factors such as attitudes to and awareness of linguistic forms

# Summing up...

- Social cognitive psychology in linguistics: the study of the mental processes which govern human behaviour in instances of interaction through language
- Exemplar theory
  - “the interweaving of sociophonetic and linguistic information in speech is so complete that no natural human utterance can offer linguistic information without simultaneously indexing one or more social factor”  
(Foulkes and Docherty 2006:419)
- Salience: the property of a linguistic form which makes it prominent relative to other forms in the cognitive domain.

- Thank you!

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