

SUBJECTIVE EVALUATION OF THE HIGH VARIANTS [I] AND [U]: INDICATOR, MARKER, STEREOTYPE, OR PHENOMENON ON A CONTINUUM?

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ABSTRACT: The paper discusses Labov's (2008 [1972], 2001) classification of the categories indicator, marked, stereotype. Its object of analysis is the raising of pretonic middle vowels. The phenomenon is traditionally classified as indicator. However, the present study verifies, based on two subjective evaluation tests, that the linguistic phenomenon transits between the three categories, even when evaluated in the same linguistic community. In the subjective reaction test, the alignment falls between the indicator and marker categories. In the test of linguistic insecurity, the phenomenon is characterized as a stereotype. Based on the results, a new proposal for Labov's (2008 [1972], 2001) categories is advocated. It is postulated that linguistic phenomena should be evaluated on a continuum, just as it is intended to reflect on the role of subjective evaluation in linguistic variation and change.

The present study discusses Labov's (2008 [1972], 2001) classification of categories according to the social evaluation of linguistic change, with pretonic raising as the object of analysis. It is an example of a pandialectal phenomenon, since it occurs throughout the Brazilian territory, and language users tend to produce the pretonic vowel sometimes as closed middle (m[e]nino, b[o]nita) and sometimes as high (m[i]nino, b[u]nita).

According to Labov (2008 2001 [1972]), linguistic phenomena can be classified into three categories: indicator, marker, and stereotype. Indicators are phenomena that lie below the social consciousness and, therefore, are "difficult for linguists and laymen alike to detect". As an example, the studies on the raising of words classify it as an indicator. It is considered a marker the phenomenon that, although it is below the level of consciousness, presents relevant responses in subjective reaction tests. To illustrate, the use of raising is used in unusual contexts, such as in m[i]lhor and p[u]rtuguese. Finally, stereotypes are considered to be phenomena that are at the level of social consciousness and therefore tend to be negatively evaluated by the community, which can be observed in the cases of elevation as t[i][u]ary. In general, researchers of the phenomenon propose that pretonic raising is indicative, because it is below the level of awareness of speakers and tends to be produced by all social classes (CALLOU; LEITE, 2005, p. 82).

Labov (2008 [1972], 2001) apparently proposes that these categories are watertight, that is, a single linguistic phenomenon can only be classified into a single category. However, we argue here that it is not possible to fit the phenomena into a single category, because subjective evaluation tests show that the stress phenomenon may present characteristics of indicator, marker and stereotype. Thus, we postulate that Labov's categories (2008 [1972], 2001) are in a classification continuum, since a linguistic phenomenon such as raising can be classified in all three categories – in the same linguistic community – depending on linguistic and social conditions. Based on this, we intend to reflect on the role of subjective evaluation in linguistic variation and change. It is hypothesized that the tendency to maintain middle vowels is related to the prestigious social status attributed to their use. For the author, one of the major problems of linguistic change is evaluation, since language users tend to negatively assess linguistic variants that do not conform to the standard norm. Researchers Weinreich; Labov; Herzog (2006 [1968], p.36) advocate the importance of conducting studies that look at subjective evaluations, i.e., the covert norms of a given community, because the non-implementation of a linguistic change may be motivated by a negative evaluation of a given variant.

Thus, Weinreich; Labov; Herzog (2006 [1968]) and Labov (2008 [1972]) highlight: (i) the importance of investigating speakers' social attitudes towards language and (ii) the need to reconcile the methodology of subjective evaluation studies with Sociolinguistic Theory. Following such guidelines, to observe the attitudes and subjective evaluations of the language user regarding pretonic raising, this study presents the results of two attitude tests framed in an experimental methodology: subjective reaction and linguistic insecurity.

The subjective reaction test is based on Botassini's (2013) proposal that divides the sentences into three aspects concerning the language user under evaluation: competence (e.g., (i) *This person has a higher education level*; (ii) *This person is ashamed to speak like that*); personal integrity (e.g., (i) *This person is reliable*; (ii) *This person is rude*) and social attractiveness (e.g., (i) *This person is nice*; (ii) *This person is ugly*). The main objective of the subjective reaction test is to observe whether the participants negatively evaluate the speaker for the pretonic variant used.

The linguistic insecurity test consisted of an interview. By listening to two audios with a high vowel and a middle vowel, the informant indicates which variant he identifies with. After that, the judge read the same excerpts, using the high vowel in some items. The test aims to verify the Labovian hypothesis that people's answers would reflect the way they believe they enjoy or are 'correct', but do not actually perform.

The results concerning the subjective reaction test showed that the majority of the informants did not negatively evaluate the user of the alleviated variants. However, in the Competence aspect, some negative evaluations appeared, especially if the phrases refer to the way the person speaks. Most participants positively rated the Personal Integrity of the audio speaker. At the same time, a significant number judged the speaker using the high variants negatively with regard to personal attractiveness.

In general, although there were positive evaluations, it is observed in the subjective reaction test that the speaker was also negatively evaluated. In all sentences, both positive and negative evaluations, in the three aspects observed (Competence, Personal Integrity, Personal Attractiveness), there were negative evaluations. Therefore, it is not possible to categorically state that the phenomenon is indicator, once some level of awareness is verified. The sociolinguistic analysis undertaken in the subjective reaction test allows us to propose, in this case, that the raising would be between the categories of marker and indicator, since it is a phenomenon whose change comes from below, and which is below the level of

awareness of the informant, but that presents responses “relevant to the subjective reaction tests” (cf. LABOV, 2008, p. 36).

In the linguistic insecurity test, the phenomenon is above the level of the speaker’s awareness. Participants negatively evaluated the high variants, rating them as wrong, and said they would not produce them. Considering, then, that the categories proposed by Labov (2008 [1972]) are in a continuum, it is understood that the phenomenon of raising would be between the stereotype and marker categories, since the phenomenon is above the informant’s level of consciousness. Moreover, the language user tends to judge as wrong the variants that differ or deviate from a socially established standard.

It is important to clarify that the different classifications indicator, marker, and stereotype are apparently directly related to: (i) the presence of a favoring context; and (ii) the frequency of the alteado realization in the participants’ vocabulary.

In the subjective reaction test, most of the words performed with the high variant ([I]stefani, c[u]mpadre, D[u]mingos, [I]stela, v[i]stido, b[u]nita, c[u]mida, b[i]bida, [i]mpréstimo) presented favorable context for the raising, whether syllabic locking by sibilant or nasal or the presence of a high vowel in the following syllable. The word that has no favorable context (c[u]madre) has the pretonic realized by the high variant in Rio de Janeiro speech. It is understood that the favoring context and the high frequency of the item produced by the high vowel made the participants neither perceive nor negatively evaluate the speaker, because these words are commonly stressed in their daily lives and, therefore, the stress was between the indicator and marker categories.

In the linguistic insecurity test, most words presented contexts favoring the use of the high variant: (i) hiatus (B[i]atriz); (ii) syllable structure locked by sibilant (v[i]stido, c[u]stureira); and (iii) the high vowel on the following syllable (v[i]stido, c[u]stureira, b[u]nito). All these words are often produced with [i] and [u] by the Carioca speaker. According to Batista da Silveira; Avelheda Bandeira; Souza Guerreiro (2020, p. 36), “there are cases of vocalic raising that can even constitute a stereotype: cat[i]g[u]ria, acad[i]mia, d[u]cumentos, pr[u]fissional, occurrences that are not commonly registered in Carioca speech and that cause strangeness to the respondents”.

Therefore, based on the results, we advocate the re-analysis of Labov’s (2008 [1972]) classification into discontinuous categories, since this study proved that a linguistic phenomenon evaluated in the same community – that of Rio de Janeiro speakers – can move between the three categories. Furthermore, it is proposed that subjective evaluation be included as an important conditioning to explain the

maintenance of a particular variant of a variable linguistic phenomenon. An example of the relevance of subjective evaluation is the tendency to maintain the middle vowels [e] and [o] in pretonic position, since speakers of the prestige norm – that dominated by the dominant social group and related to the South and Southeast regions – positively evaluate these variants, as attested by linguistic studies of a variationist nature, as well as by the experimental tests presented here.

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