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Social and linguistic stereotyping: A cognitive approach to accents

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 1960s, labels such as **social markers** and **markers of social identity** have been used to explain the findings of a large number of sociolinguistic quantitative studies. Recently, also the notion of **linguistic stereotyping** has appeared in a few works on accents, ideology and identity. This article examines the language-identity link from the point of view of Social Identity Theory and Prototype Theory. Special attention will be given to the notion of **stereotyping,** a central issue in Social Psychology. The hypothesis is that if we consider both the cognitive process of accentuation and the cognitive model of metonymy to be operative also on the level of accentual features, we shall come closer to an understanding of how and why accents may be socially diagnostic: a combination of both processes will enable language users to establish links between linguistic features and social identities in rapid, effective ways.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Language and the social dimension

In the early 1960s, sociolinguistic quantitative studies managed to prove, for the first time in a systematic and empirical way, that linguistic variation may be socially significant. When linguistic variables were correlated with independent social variables, "free" or "random" variation turned out to be systematic, patterned and context-dependent. An avalanche of empirical research based on Labovian methodology soon described this kind of variation

in terms of socially ordered and structured heterogeneity. Following Labov, many scholars interpreted their findings in terms of social groups using linguistic variants as **social markers**, or **markers of social identity**, to distance themselves from other groups or imitate more prestigious groups.

More recently the notion of **social stereotyping** has also appeared in a few works on accents, ideology and the social dimensions, as will be exemplified below. The authors relate the existence of social stereotypes with the idea that accents evoke attitudes towards their users. Nowhere, however, do we find a technical description of the steps involved in processes of stereotyping, nor is the language-social identity link examined in detail. As in many other socio-linguistic accounts it is simply taken for granted that linguistic variants **can** mark social identities and evoke attitudes.

This article aims at exploring how the links between social identity, social stereotyping and language may be explained from a cognitive point of view. In order to do so, I shall turn to the fields of social psychology (Social Identity Theory) and cognitive linguistics (Prototype Theory). Then I shall move on to more unexplored areas, towards an attempt at applying the general cognitive process of stereotyping also to linguistic continua on the level of pronunciation. The hypothesis is that both the cognitive process of accentuation and the cognitive model of metonymy are operative also on the level of accentual features, and that a combination of both processes enables language users to establish links between linguistic features and social identities in rapid, effective ways, thus allowing **accents** to become **socially diagnostic**.

Let us in the first place consider a few passages from Paul Coggle's (1993) *Do You Speak Estuary? The new Standard English – How to spot it and speak it:*

> Just as upper-class English ***evokes*** in many people´s minds ***an image*** of Hooray Henry´s and Henriettas, chinless wonders, Land Rovers, green wellies and – in the case of the women – Jacqmar scarves and velvet headbands, so Estuary English ***evokes*** a similarly ***stereotypical image*** of shell suits, beer bellies, Ford Escorts, chunky gold chains, flats in Marbella (at least for those at the dodgy dealings end of the spectrum) and – again in the case of the women – white, high-heeled shoes preferably worn with no tights.
>
> The stereotypes are the living reminders of Britain's continuing ***class system***. They are there to enable members of British society to go on disdaining each other in the age-old manner. […] The stereotype assumes that Estuary English ***marks*** its speakers as ***members*** of the lower strata of British society. (p. 73)
>
> Just as there is a ***spectrum*** extending from conservative RP at one end through various ***degrees of Estuary English*** to Cockney at the other end, there is also a ***matching spectrum*** for the way in which a given speaker is perceived. (p. 85)

> It cannot be overemphasised that these ***perceptions*** are entirely ***subjective.*** What is perceived by one ***group*** of people as elegant will be perceived by another group as elitist and exclusive. […] ***The markers of personal identity*** –particularly those of social class, age and sexuality– provide us with numerous reasons why Estuary English is so popular. Upper- and middle-class young people often feel that a flavour of Estuary ***identifies*** them as being more ordinary and less privileged than they really are. Women may feel that a hint of Estuary helps them ***come over*** as tougher and more positive, and so on. […] The difficulty is in striking the right balance in order to achieve ***a positive image.*** There is a delicate path to tread between avoiding the negative ***connotations*** of conservative RP on the one hand and the totally but equally negative connotations of broad Cockney on the other. (pp. 86-87)

The words in italics (which are mine) all put forward a series of interesting claims about the relationship between language and social identity; links which are not, however, explained in a "technical" way.

Similar claims are to be found in Rosina Lippi-Green's (1997) *English with an Accent. Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States.* In chapter 5, *Teaching children how to discriminate. What we learn from the Big Bad Wolf,* she examines the way in which Walt Disney´s animators have exploited accents to create characters. Her argument is that children learn to ethnocentrically discriminate when they hear the "villains" speak marked, foreign accents: The wolf in *Three Little Pigs* originally spoke with a Yiddish accent, and Scar in *The Lion King* and Jafar in *Aladdin* both have British accents, in contrast with the more homely General American accents of the "good" characters. According to Lippi-Green:

> In animated film, even more so than is the case with live-action entertainment, ***language is used as a quick way to build character*** and ***reaffirm stereotype.*** […] the hypothesis is a simple one: animated films entertain, but they are also a way to teach children to ***associate specific characters and life styles with specific social groups, by means of language variation.*** […] On the surface it is quite obvious that Disney films present children with a range of ***social and linguistic stereotypes,*** from *Lady and the Tramp´*s cheerful, musical Italian chefs to *Treasure of the lost Lamp´*s stingy, Scottish-accented McScrooge. (1997: 85. My italics)

The keywords are basically the same as in Coggle (*language, social group, social stereotype, character, associate*), and now we may even add *linguistic stereotypes* to the list. This notion is not commonly used in linguistic terminology, but it does appear in Honey's (1997) classification of accentual components:

1.2. The Components of Accents: indicators, markers and stereotypes

In his Sociophonology, John Honey (1997: 99) classifies accentual features into:

— indicators: variants with little or no social message attached
— markers: salient variants which are socially significant
— stereotypes: popular, but imprecise characterizations of speech as used by social groups.

Linguistic stereotypes, then, may be imprecise perceptions from the point of view of linguists, but useful for laymen; if structured and reduced bundles of markers are associated with particular social groups, we establish a link between language and social identities. Such a claim, however, inevitably raises a series of new issues:

— How can accents have negative (or positive) connotations? (Coggle 1993: 87).
— How can language be "a quick way to build character and reaffirm stereotype"? In what ways do we "associate specific characters and life styles with specific social groups, by means of language variation"? (Lippi-Green 1997: 85) How can accents "evoke a stereotypical image"? (Coggle 1993: 73).
— what is *a social group*? What is *social identity*?

Social Identity Theory constitutes a theoretical frame which provides answers to all these questions, but perhaps it would be useful first to consider the issues of connotation and characterization. Honey (1997: 101) suggests that linguistic markers and stereotypes may "encode value systems", an idea which is consistent with the ways in which William Labov (and a large number of scholars using quantitative methodology) interpreted their findings: linguistic variants may be used by social groups as social markers –markers of social identity– to distance themselves from other groups or imitate more prestigious groups. As numerous sociolinguistic studies have shown, languages users have the ability to change (though only to a certain extent) the features that compose their accent, and this way reflect their **attitude** towards other speakers:

2. ACCENTS, ATTITUDES AND EVALUATION

Attitudes have recently been described as (Hogg and Terry (eds.) 2000: 1) "the apotheosis of social cognition, because they are unobservable social

constructs that are socially learned, socially changed and socially expressed". Studies on attitudes towards linguistic varieties and ultimately towards the users of such varieties began in a systematic way in 1960, when Wallace Lambert developed his **matched-guise technique.** The procedure was, as Giles and Coupland (1991: 34) explain:

> built on the assumption that speech style triggers certain social categorizations which will lead to a set of group-related trait inferences. In other words, hearing a voice which is classified as ´French Canadian' will predispose listeners (depending, of course, on their own group memberships) to infer a particular set of personality attributes.

Lambert and his associates tape-recorded a number of balanced bilinguals reading passages first in English Canadian, then in French Canadian. Their English and Canadian guises were then separated by a series of passages read by other speakers, so as not to be identified as produced by the same individuals. Finally a panel of French and English Canadian listeners were asked to rate the speakers along a series of non-linguistic dimensions such as *sincerity, ambition, friendliness, intelligence, confidence* and *generosity*.

The result was that English Canadian listeners judged speakers of their own ethnic group more favourably on half of the fourteen traits involved, and French Canadian listeners judged the *same* group (their own *outgroup*) also more favourably, now on as many as ten out of the fourteen traits. Such reactions were interpreted in terms of generalized status-related social associations. A large number of subsequent studies have shown similar results and suggest the existence of a hierarchy among accents as regards prestige. A study carried out by Giles (1971) among British schoolchildren suggests that the ability to use accentual features and combinations to rate speakers on a social dimension is a rather early acquisition. For an overview of findings showing how upward social mobility may be severely conditioned, in negative or positive ways, by having the "right" or the "wrong" accent, see Giles and Coupland (1991: 32-59).

But prestige, status and power may not be everything. The tendency is not for all less prestigious (non-standard) dialects to converge towards the most prestigious (standard) dialects, and non-standard varieties thus seem to be appreciated for other reasons. What is interesting about Lambert's view is precisely the assumption that language users establish links between linguistic varieties, social categorizations and sets of personality traits, by means of a series of subsequent associations. In order to look at such processes in a more detailed and technical way, we shall now turn to an approach which is based on cognitive and social mechanisms alike:

3. SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

3.1. Social categorization, social identity and social comparison

Social Identity Theory (henceforth SIT) was developed in Bristol during the 1970s by Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, and now there is quite a breath-taking amount of literature related to it. In the following section only the main points will be highlighted.

The novelty of Tajfel and Turner's approach consisted in accounting for intergroup relations as being consequences of a general **cognitive** process, that of categorization, in this way avoiding a discussion of "real" conflicts of interest. It was perhaps no coincidence that Tajfel should spend most of his life working on issues such as group formation, intergroup conflicts, social stereotypes and prejudice:

> [...] together with many people of my generation, I share memories of a raging storm which – it seemed at the time – would never stop. Amongst those who died then, there were millions who formed, in the most concrete sense of the term, my 'social background': the generations of European Jews who were born in the half-century straddling the eighteen and nineteen hundreds. […] In May 1945, after I had been disgorged with hundreds of others from a special train arriving at the Gare d'Orsay in Paris with its crammed load of prisoners-of-war returning from camps in Germany, I soon discovered that hardly anyone I knew in 1939 – including my family – was left alive. (Tajfel 1981: 1)

SIT involves three central ideas: Categorization, Identification and Comparison. **Group** in SIT denotes a cognitive entity, the knowledge that one belongs to a group, or *category,* the outcome of the process of **Social Categorizations**, defined as:

> cognitive tools that segment, classify, and order the social environment, and thus enable the individual to undertake many forms of social actions. But they do not merely systematize the social world; they also provide a system of orientation for *self*-reference: they create and define the individual´s place in society. Social groups, understood in this sense, provide their members with an identification of themselves in social terms. These identifications are to a very large extent relational and comparative: they define the individual as similar to or different from, as "better" or "worse" than, members of other groups […] It is in a strictly limited sense, arising from these considerations, that we use the term *social identity.* (Tajfel and Turner 1979: 40)

Social identity is defined as "that *part* of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that

membership" (Tajfel 1978: 63). Consequently, the social identity of an individual can "only be defined through the effects of social categorizations segmenting an individual´s social environment into his group and others" (1978: 67). Both SIT and Self-categorization theory (Turner *et al.* 1987), based on SIT, claim that our social identities (derived from multiple group memberships) may be as important and true to the self as our personal identity (the perception of oneself as a unique individual). Self-categorization theory furthermore proposes that when we perceive ourselves as members of a group (i.e. when social identity is *salient*) a flexible process of depersonalisation is carried out, enabling us to regard ourselves as interchangeable, in terms of attitudes and beliefs, with other members of the group.

Leon Festinger's (1954) notion of **Social Comparison** is one of the cornerstones in SIT. As Tajfel and Turner explain (1979: 40), their argument was based on the following general assumptions:

1. Individuals strive to maintain or enhance their self-esteem; they strive for a positive self-concept.
2. Social groups or categories and the membership of them are associated with positive or negative value connotations. […]
3. The evaluation of one's own group is determined with reference to specific other groups through social comparisons in terms of value-laden attributes and characteristics […]

One way of gaining self-esteem is seeing ourselves as members of a prestigious group, and group members, in order to define their group as positively differentiated or distinct, compare it with relevant out-groups in ways that *reflect positively* on themselves:

1. Individuals strive to achieve or to maintain positive social identity.
2. Positive social identity is based to a large extent on favourable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and some relevant out-groups: the in-group must be perceived as positively differentiated or distinct from the relevant out-groups.
3. When social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals will strive either to leave their existing group and join some more positively distinct group and/or to make their existing group more positively distinct.

> The basic hypothesis, then, is that pressures to evaluate one´s own group positively through in-group/out- group comparisons lead social groups to attempt to differentiate themselves from each other. […] The aim of differentiation is to maintain or achieve superiority over an out-group on some dimensions. Any such act, therefore, is essentially competitive. This competition requires a situation of mutual comparison and differentiation on a shared value dimension. (Tajfel and Turner 1979: 40-41)

Differentiation is important because one of the dimensions on which groups may differentiate themselves is **language:** "an especially salient dimension of separate identity in French Canada, Wales, and Belgium […]", as Tajfel and Turner (1979: 41) acknowledged in the paper that served to launch SIT. Such a claim was based on research, recently carried out by Howard Giles and other scholars within the field of the social psychology of language. SIT, in turn, proved a valuable theoretical framework for subsequent empirical studies and theoretical approaches in this area: when Giles and other scholars elaborated Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory and Speech Accommodation Theory, they drew on Tajfel and Turner´s theories of intergroup distinctiveness. This I shall comment briefly on below, but first there is yet another important component of social identity theory to consider: the fact that social categorization may lead to the creation of **social stereotypes**.

3.2. Categorization, accentuation and social stereotyping

Social categorization enables us to understand our social environment: just as we categorize objects in order to understand them, we also categorize others and ourselves into large or small groups: blacks, whites, Canadians, Muslims, doctors, socialists, friends, housewives etc. But categorization is more than just a general cognitive process that serves to simplify and systematize information:

> Categorization is believed to produce two basic, relatively automatic effects: the distortion of perception such that intragroup similarity and intergroup difference are accentuated, and evaluative and behavioural discrimination favouring the ingroup. Both are considered fundamental to stereotyping. (Oakes *et al.* 1994: 37)

Categorization, then, as a general cognitive process implies accentuation and accentuation leads to stereotyping. Scientific approaches to stereotyping differ from the more negative, popular view, that stereotypes are no more than *distorting* images: "an exaggerated belief associated with a category", as Allport (1954: 191) once defined it. In the early 1960s, Tajfel conducted a series of empirical studies, which enabled him to adopt a revolutionary approach to the mechanisms of stereotyping: he interpreted *exaggeration* as the outcome of the processes of categorization and accentuation; normal cognitive processes, which are common to all human beings:

> Stereotypes arise from a process of categorization. They introduce simplicity and order where there is complexity and nearly random variation. They can help us cope only if fuzzy differences between groups are transmuted into clear ones, or new differences created where none exist. […] in each relevant situation we shall achieve as much stereotyped simplification as we can without doing unnecessary violence to the fact. […] When a classification is correlated with a continuous dimension, there will be a tendency to exaggerate the differences on that dimension between items which fall into different classes, and to minimize these differences within each of the classes. (1969: 82-83)

Stereotyping, then, is a functional cognitive device by means of which we systematize our social environment, creating distinct and apparently homogeneous categories. Exaggeration is a by-product of **accentuation**, itself a categorization effect. If stereotyping is "the process of ascribing characteristics to people on the basis of their group memberships" (Oakes *et al*. 1994: 1), such characteristics – in the form of general psychological attributes – are often continuous dimensions, something one can be to a certain degree and only in comparison with other people (cf. Zadeh's (1965) fuzzy set theory): dark-fair, progressive-conservative, religious-irreligious, sociable-unsociable, talkative-taciturn etc. In that case there will be a tendency to exaggerate the differences on that dimension between items which fall into distinct categories and minimize differences among members which fall within the same category. This way related categories which compete on the dimension in question become both distinct and homogeneous:

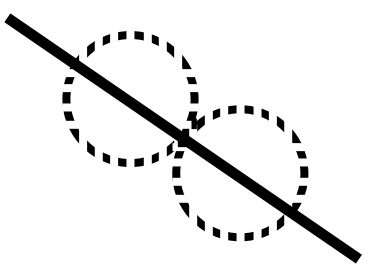

Figure 1

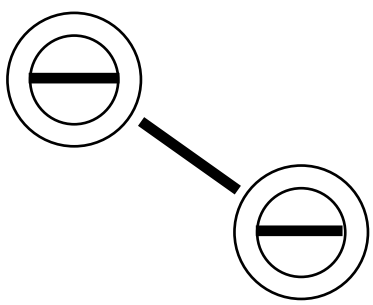

Figure 2

In Figure 1, the sloping line represents a continuous dimension on which social categories, represented by circles, either compete, establishing comparisons, or differentiate themselves. In Figure 2, the horizontal lines within the inner circles of each category (the stereotyped content) symbolize the so-called outgroup homogeneity effect: the tendency to see members of outgroups as more similar to each other than members of ingroups. The distance between categories in Figure 2 reflects the exaggeration of differences between members of different categories.

Notice that Lambert's 1960 study was based on polar contrasts ascribed by a panel of "judges" to two social categories, which competed on certain dimensions. It was on these relevant dimensions, but not on others, that differences between categories were accentuated. In the next section I shall turn to the claim that linguistic variants can make up such a set of attributes assigned to social groups, but there are still a few more comments on stereotyping to be made:

First, the process of categorization implies a cognitive grouping of objects, people or events as relatively interchangeable, homogeneity within categories being achieved through processes of accentuation. In this respect, stereotypes may be defined as a *shared* set of beliefs (and disbeliefs) about a cognitive group. And stereotypes may in part derive from cognitive processes, but they are *socially* and *contextually* determined as well. This Tajfel was well aware of: stereotyping is ultimately linked with attitudes and thus also socially constructed and socially changed. It is often assumed that stereotypes form fixed and enduring mental constructs, which are relatively resistant to change (*stereos* derives from Greek 'firm', 'solid'), but perhaps they just drag a bit behind with respect to changes taking place in our social environment. The stereotype associated with Germans during and immediately after World War II has luckily given way to a generally more positive one, although the former is still activated from time to time.

Second, stereotypes are socially *relative* constructs, in the sense that different social groups are likely to create different stereotypical images of the same target.

And third, it would be an oversimplification not to take into account individual experience, too. Shared beliefs may be shared and believed *to a certain extent* and modified through the positive or negative contact an individual has with members of any given outgroup.

3.3. Social stereotyping as a case of metonymy

According to Lakoff (1987: 71) a major source of prototype effects (which are surface phenomena) is metonymy, defined as:

> A situation in which some subcategory or member or submodel is used (often for some limited and immediate purpose) to comprehend the category as a whole. In other words, there are cases where a part (a subcategory or member or submodel) stands for the whole category – in reasoning, recognition, and so on. Within the theory of cognitive models, such cases are represented by metonymic models.

A metonymic model in general has the following characteristics:

> There is a "target" concept A to be understood for some purpose in some context.
>
> There is a conceptual structure containing both A and another concept B.
>
> B is either part of A, or is closely associated with it in that conceptual structure. Typically, a choice of B will uniquely determine A, within that conceptual structure.
>
> Compared to A, B is either easier to understand, easier to remember, easier to recognize, or more immediately useful for the given purpose in the given context.
>
> A metonymic model is a model of how A and B are related in a conceptual structure; the relationship is specified by a function from B to A. (p. 76)

Lakoff considers **social stereotypes** within such a metonymic model, as standing for a category as a whole: "Social stereotypes are cases of metonymy – where a subcategory has a socially recognized status as standing for the category as a whole, usually for the purpose of making quick judgements about people" (p. 71). Such a case is the housewife-mother subcategory, which yields prototype effects, since housewife-mothers are better examples of mothers than non-housewife mothers. SIT, then, provided us with a description of the mechanisms involved in stereotype *formation*: accentuation of perceived similarities and differences (leading to differentiation) and outgroup homogeneity effects. Lakoff's approach, in turn, focuses less on stereotype formation and more on the functions and effects of stereotyping, once it has been produced. In section 4.2 I shall turn to the question of *linguistic* stereotype formation and to the implications of also applying a metonymic model to linguistic features.

4. LINGUISTIC VARIANTS, SOCIAL IDENTITY AND LINGUISTIC STEREOTYPES

4.1. Linguistic variants as central criterial attributes for social identity

As Sachdev and Bourhis (1990: 217) point out, not all scholars assign a central role to language in matters of social identifications: "the role that languages play in identity maintenance is minimized by equating it with other symbolic markers such as ethnic dress, ornamentation, dance and song." Other scholars (H. Giles, N. Coupland, R. Y. Bourhis, D. Taylor, I. Sachdev, P. Powesland and W. Gudykunst to mention just a few) claim language to be a **central criterial attribute** for group identity. Language is seen as a potent - often the *most* potent - dimension of identity. Social identifications are mediated by cognitive processes and manifested linguistically. And more than just manifested: languages, dialects and accents may function, not just as **markers** of social categories, but also as **makers** of social categories:

> Language seems to simultaneously act as a dependent variable reflecting social identifications and as an independent variable actively creating and defining those identifications. […] Much social-psychological research has suggested that language and identity appear to be reciprocally related: language-use influences the formation of group identity and group identity influences patterns of language attitudes and usage.
>
> (Sachdev and Bourhis, 1990: 216)

The two most integrative theories on the social and psychological processes underlying the language-identity link will not be considered in this article. Suffice it to say that both of them were, not surprisingly, based on SIT: Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (Giles, Bourhis and Taylor, 1977; Giles and Johnson, 1981; Giles and Johnson, 1987) and Speech Accommodation Theory (cf. especially Giles, Mulac, Bradac and Johnson, 1987).

4.2. Linguistic stereotyping

Social stereotyping, then, involves the activation of a *set* of particular and socially determined psychological characteristics; a structured combination of attributes. And "these correlated attributes, which are associated in an

orderly fashion with the categorial division *need not* be the original criteria for the categorization" (Tajfel 1981: 148). If linguistic continua, in the form of progressive accentual differences throughout the social and regional dimensions, undergo the same processes of accentuation as other continuous dimensions, the end-result is a series of apparently homogeneous and distinct linguistic subcategories, or stereotypes. This theoretical assumption has at least the following implications:

First, If **accentuation** is applied also to linguistic continua of phonetic variants, the set of features contained in each linguistic stereotype will make up a functional tool for intergroup *differentiation*. As Honey pointed out above, the features non-linguists perceive as socially diagnostic are no more than a limited selection and combination of features from among the multiple phonetic and suprasegmental components of an accent. The use of one linguistic cue does not link a speaker with any particular social group. It is the presence of several features, a pattern consisting of a particular combination of a limited number of variants, that form a linguistic stereotype. If such selections and combinations are perceptually and cognitively distinct, they become *socially diagnostic* in the sense that they are *socially distinctive*.

Differentiation, furthermore, implies in itself a *need* for perceptually salient phonetic variants, distinctive on the social dimension, but not, of course, on the phonological level. Taylor (1989: 221-30) suggests that phonemes form categories in which phonetic variants cluster around a central, prototypical member. Such categories would be characterized by family resemblance and chaining relationships, not all members having the same property in common. I should like to add to Taylor's analysis, that such categories may also be interpreted in terms of linguistic variables, whose variants are similar enough to become assigned to the same functional slot in the phonological system, but different enough to become distinctive on the social dimension.

Second, stereotypes, as we saw above, may also be considered as cases of **metonymy**, where "a subcategory has a socially recognized status as standing for the category as a whole, usually for the purpose of making quick judgements about people" (Lakoff 1987: 71). They form part of a **metonymic model**, according to which " there is a conceptual structure containing both A and another concept B. B is either part of A, or is closely associated with it in that conceptual structure. Typically, a choice of B will uniquely determine A, within that conceptual structure". And Lakoff continues: "...B may be used to stand, metonymically, for A. If A is a category, the result is a metonymic model of the category, and prototype effects commonly arise" (p. 76). A social stereotype, in other words, is an image which is imposed upon all the members of a given social category. And if the stereotypical cha-

racteristics are assigned to all the members, these will have equal status within the category. This is perfectly consistent with the so-called outgroup homogeneity effect (the tendency to see members of outgroups as more similar to each other than members of ingroups), but it is not that consistent with prototype theory and the notion of centrality gradience. We all realize, of course, that far from all members of a social group conform to the stereotypical image associated with it. Rather it is a subcategory with a special status. Prototypes apart, the metonymic function of stereotypes is interesting for other reasons as well:

If we have a conceptual structure containing both A (which may be a social category as Lakoff implies) and B (which may be a stereotype) and B is part of A or closely associated with it, a choice of B will uniquely determine A. It is this, almost *indexical* function of metonymy which is interesting and may serve to provide a series of tentative answers to the questions asked in section 1.2:

> — How can accents have negative (or positive) connotations? (Coggle 1993: 87)
>
> — How can language be "a quick way to build character and reaffirm stereotype"? In what ways do we "associate specific characters and life styles with specific social groups, by means of language variation"? (Lippi-Green 1997: 85) How can accents "evoke a stereotypical image"? (Coggle 1993: 73)

If a choice of a particular linguistic stereotype (or a nearby variant of it) leads us psychologically to the whole of a social category through a process of metonymy, it will also evoke the corresponding social stereotype. In other words, both social and linguistic stereotypes may be associated with social categories and work metonymically with respect to the category as a whole. Now it becomes easier to understand Lippi-Green's claims about the way accents are used in the film industry:

> […] in some cases, accent is used as a shortcut for those roles where stereotype serves as a shortcut to characterization. Actors contrive accents primarily as a characterization tool […] (1997: 84)

SIT assumes that social groups or categories and the membership of them may be associated with positive or negative value connotations, and even accompanied by emotional components. The emotional reactions we often experience towards linguistic variation, in particular our sensitivity to social variation may, according to this approach, ultimately be explained in terms

of sensitivity to our social context, as reactions to the values represented by social categories.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This article aimed at exploring the links between social identity, social stereotyping and language from a cognitive point of view. The hypothesis was that if we considered both the cognitive process of accentuation and the cognitive model of metonymy to be operative also on the level of accentual features, we would come closer to an understanding of how and why accents may be socially diagnostic: a combination of both processes would enable language users to establish links between linguistic features and social identities in rapid, effective ways.

I have used notions from Social Identity Theory to explain the process of linguistic stereotype formation and I have also drawn attention to some of the effects: differentiation and distinctiveness. Then I have used Lakoff's cognitive models to suggest that not only social, but also linguistic stereotyping may relate metonymically to social categories – and interrelate as components of the same conceptual structure. As a consequence, linguistic stereotypes may be perceived as distinctive, indexical units with respect to social categories.

To conclude, the following remark is only in order: I am quite aware of the drawbacks of models based on cognitive assumptions: eventually one works around assumptions and theories based on underlying mental schemes and mechanisms which are difficult to prove in an empirical way. Conclusions of the kind "phenomenon B, observed in linguistic performance, is due to the presence of underlying mental process A" prove little. Instead they suggest, and it is as a suggestion that the content of this article should be interpreted. After all, a number of widely accepted language-internal causes of change, such as intra-systemic pressures and processes of analogy, are ultimately based on similar cognitive assumptions.

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