Division of linguistic labor and panning between vantages: *Estuary English* as a test case for processes of holistic and analytic categorization in language

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My bird-watching friends are all extremely nice people, but they do have this annoying habit, as soon as anyone utters the word seagull, of chanting the mantra "There's no such thing as a seagull" (Trudgill 2017, 117).

In this amusing little piece, Trudgill provides an excellent example of what happens when experts and laypeople share the same terminology. In Putnam's (1975) terms, this is a case of "division of linguistic labor" (146). It affects those "terms whose associated criteria are known only to a subset of the speakers who acquire the terms" (146) whereas the "'average' speaker […] does not acquire anything that fixes [their] extension" (146). As a result, laypeople without sufficient ornithological knowledge call "gulls" "seagulls" although they should distinguish among "herring gulls, black-capped gulls, lesser black-backed gulls etc." (Trudgill, p.c.).

This paper will present another case of socio-semantic conflict between experts and laypeople, this time over a meta-linguistic concept, the notion of 'Estuary English' (Przedlacka 2002, Altendorf 2003). Like the ornithologists in the case of seagulls, linguists prefer not to use this cover term but to distinguish among popular London English, Essex English, modern Glaswegian, advanced RP etc.

In this paper I will argue that the basis of both conflicts is of epistemological nature and concerns the categorization of experience in the respective areas. Experts take an analytic approachand favour Aristotelian categories, well-defined by necessary and sufficient criteria. Laypeople tend to take a bird's-eye view on their(partly impoverished) input and to form holistic categories. EE is the name for such a holistic category. The characteristics ascribed to it form the core of a perceptual prototype category that includes, as better or poorer examples, the (sub-)categories listed above. However, its core attributesare also widespread outside the category and therefore have low cue validity. That this heuristic was nevertheless formed in the first place and seems to function well for lay speakers can be explained in terms of Vantage Theory.

In support of these hypotheses, I will present data from an on-going project in perceptual dialectology. 300 listeners from the South-East of England, East Anglia, the Midlands and Glasgow are asked to place speech samples of 3 young MC speakers from 3 south-eastern towns locally and regionally. No informant, not even those from the South-East, was able to place all speakers correctly at the local level. Thisshows the less accurate picture conveyed by the prototype category. On the other hand, the majority of informants, even those from outside the South-East, were able to place the speakers correctly at the regional level. In terms of Vantage Theory, this shows the adeptness with which even lay speakers can "pan" between the dominant vantage that focuseson similarity and the recessive vantage focusing on difference (Preston 1994, 307).

References

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