Speech on YouTube – Vloggers and theories of style

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The configuration of most online video sharing platforms creates a new interaction context within which juxtaposing theories of speech style in relation to audience can be tested. Here, there is a lack of control over who views the video, so the speaker knows little about their audience (Wesch 2009). Yet, direct feedback is received through the comments, with audience members giving opinions and information about themselves. Thus, there is a tension between the overtness of comments and the uncertainty of who they are from.

Audience Design assumes that intraspeaker variation is a largely automatic response to known/assumed knowledge of one's audience (Bell 2011). Under this premise, a vlogger may adjust their speech as they gain information about their audience via the comments. In contrast, Speaker Design posits that speakers actively construct their identity through speech resources (Schilling 2013). If so, a vlogger may not be influenced by audience feedback, thus there should be no correlation between the use of speech resources and the content of the comments. A third hypothesis is the patterning of the data may be indistinct, indicating that both speaker internal and external factors influence speech style.

This study is a quantitative analysis of (i) the feedback in YouTube comments and (ii) uptalk, i.e. a rising tone on declaratives (Warren 2016), and explores the relationship between them. 58 videos over 6 years (where type of content and filming location is consistent) were drawn from the vlogger Zoella (Sugg 2017). 118,982 comments were collected via Youtube's API and examined using Quantified Content Analysis. The comments contained general positive adjectives (e.g. "cool", "great"), but also continual reference to youthful femininity (e.g "cute", "sweet") accounting for as much as 12% of comments posted on a video. Sound symbolism theory associates uptalk with these qualities (Ohala 1983). Declarative phrases were labelled using the ToBi system during three periods that exemplify her transition over the 6 years from (i) *amateur*, to (ii) *professional vlogger*, and then (iii) *international phenomenon*. Analysis of the relationship between comments and uptalk across time gives insight into two opposing theoretical positions of speech style in relation to audience, and thus the motivation for intra-speaker variation.

References

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