

My doctor said what?  
A study of language attitudes  
towards the double modal

J. Daniel Hasty  
Michigan State University  
hastyjam@msu.edu

# Language Attitudes

- Little known of language attitudes towards individual linguistic features
  - Holistic approach involving a set of features
  - Whole languages taken as monolithic
- Even fewer studies of morphosyntactic features
  - Bender (2005) copula absence in AAE
  - Campbell-Kibler (2007) (-ing)
- No previous studies of attitudes towards the double modal

# Double Modal

- Examples:
  - You know what **might could** help that is losing some weight. (Verilogue id:53207)
  - My bones **might not can** take that. (Verilogue id: 33896)
  - We **may can** just hold it for a while.
- Pragmatic conditioning
  - Preserving face in the negotiation of wants or needs (Mishoe and Montgomery 1994:12)

# Previous Studies of Double Modals

- Focus on the syntactic structure
  - Pampel 1975, Coleman 1975, Butters 1973, Boertien 1986, Di Paolo 1989, Battistella 1995, Hasty in press
- Social conditioning
  - Indication that DMs used by all social classes
    - Feagin 1979, Di Paolo 1989
  - Used by doctors
    - 63% of double modals in Verilogue corpus used by doctors (Hasty et al. 2011)
- Possible low prestige evaluation
  - Acceptability judgment show Age, Education and Gender conditioning
    - With the 20-30 year olds most likely to accept a dm
    - Men and the respondents without a college education

# Research Question

- How do community members evaluate someone who uses a double modal?
- Hypothesis:
  - Based on the association of dm acceptance with men and lack of education and its status as a nonstandard feature
  - Double modal carries a low prestige evaluation
  - Language attitudes would exhibit a mixture of linguistic insecurity and covert prestige

# Methodology

- Verilogue Inc. Database
  - Doctor-patient interactions in over 45,000 office visits across the US
- 4 30-second recordings of doctors using double modals (2 male, 2 female)
- Matched Guise Technique (Lambert et al. 1960)
  - Experimental Guise: double modal (*may can*)
  - Control guise: digitally removed second modal (*may can to may*)

# Stimuli

- We may can just hold it for a while...(male)



- We may can always add...(female)



- Isolation of the double modal

# Evaluation

- Between subjects design
  - Experimental group (n 20)
  - Control group (n 20)
- Evaluated speaker for 19 paired, polar opposite adjectives
- In response to the frame of evaluating the doctor's bedside manner



# Adjectives

- Polite—impolite
- Confident—not confident
- Genuine—not genuine
- Educated—uneducated
- Trustworthy—not trustworthy
- Friendly—unfriendly
- Honest—dishonest
- Responsible—not responsible
- Comfortable—uncomfortable
- Likable—not likable
- Intelligent—not intelligent
- Helpful—not helpful
- Thoughtful—not thoughtful
- Above average—below average
- Good manners—bad manners
- Humble—not humble
- Easy going—not easy going
- Successful—not successful
- Sociable—unsociable

# Speaker Questions

- State of origin
- Urban, suburban, or rural area
- Overall impression of the doctor:
  - Excellent, above average, average, below average, or poor

# Respondents

- Previous studies of Language attitudes use groups of college students
  - Accessible, large amount of data
  - Yields a homogeneous sample
- 40 respondents from Northeast Tennessee
  - Balanced by gender, education, and with a mixture of ages

# Findings

- Overall a significant difference for adjectives measuring solidarity ( $p < 0.01$ )
- No difference for Competence adjectives
- No observable social differences among respondents

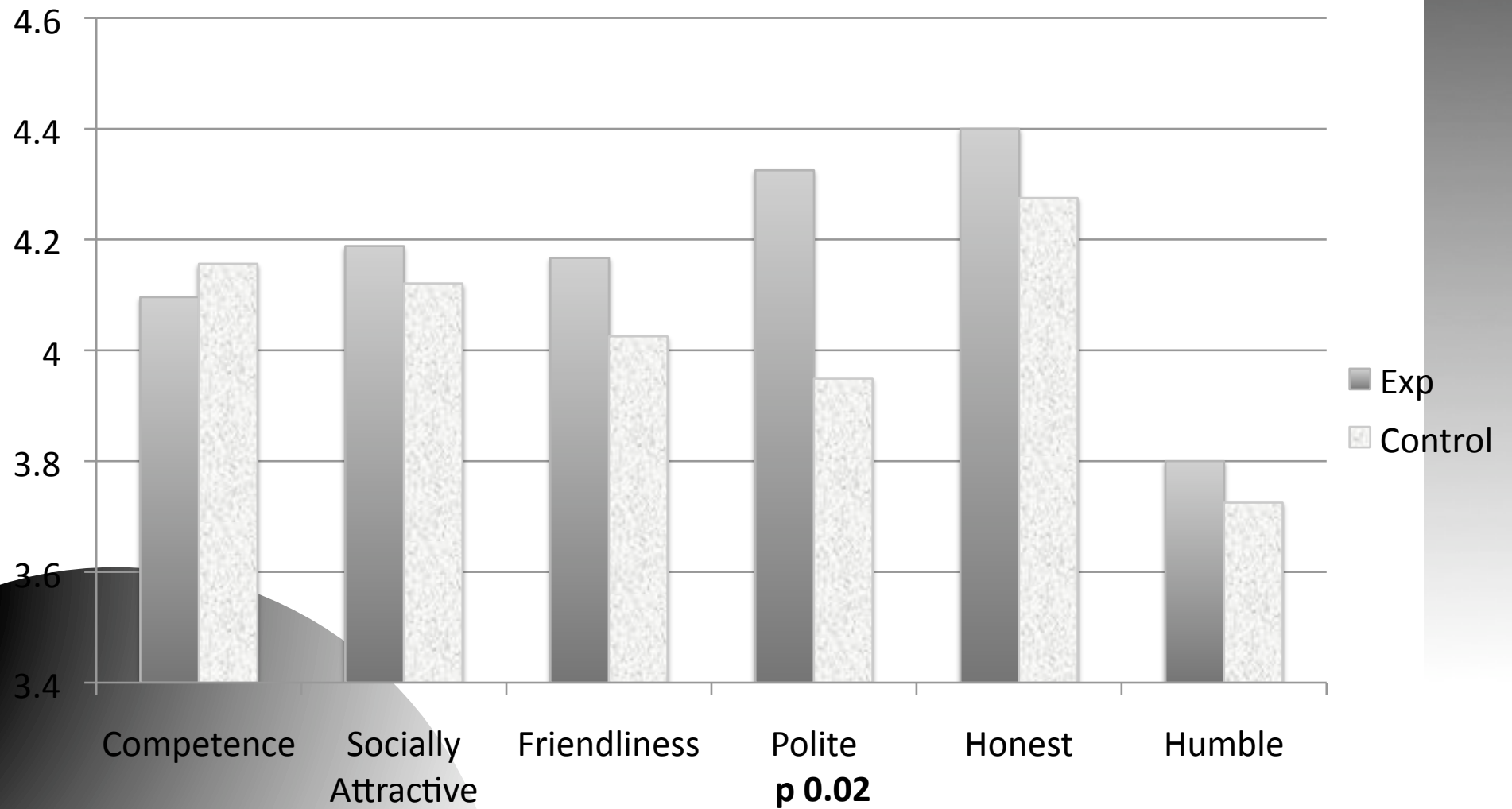
# Competence

- No observable downgrading of a doctor's competence based on the use of a double modal
- Explanation:
  - The respondents knew that the speaker was a doctor:
    - A highly educated and successful profession

# Factor Analysis

- Competence
  - Educated 0.84
  - Successful 0.63
  - Responsible 0.59
  - Confident 0.58
- Socially Attractive
  - Likeable 0.72
  - Comfortable 0.68
  - Genuine 0.58
  - Above.average 0.54
  - Helpful 0.53
  - Confident 0.51
- Friendliness
  - Friendly 0.91
  - Easy.going 0.58
  - Likeable 0.5
- Independent
  - Polite
  - Honest
  - Humble

# Specific Factors



# Politeness Upgrade

	estimate	t value	Sig
(intercept)	3.95	33.09	0.001
experimental group	0.39	2.30	0.02

R-squared 0.05

p 0.02



# Discussion

- Double modal is associated with politeness
  - When used by a doctor
- Face preservation
  - Confirms analysis of Mishoe and Montgomery (1994)

# Areas for expansion

- Social meaning of double modal in different social situations
  - No negative reaction for doctor but perhaps for other interactions
- No social differences among the respondents
  - Expand study to include greater numbers of respondents
- Single instance of a double modal produce a significant difference in language attitudes ratings
  - Encouragement for studying other low frequency morphosyntactic features

# Acknowledgements

- Suzanne Evans Wagner, Alan Munn, Gabriela Alfaraz, Carol Myers-Scotton, Anne Violin-Wigent, Bob Lannon, and Verilogue Inc.
- To all my friends, family, and new friends in Tennessee who participated in the study

# References

- Battistella, Edwin. 1995. The syntax of the double modal construction. *Linguistic Atlantica: Journal of the Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association* 17: 19-44.
- Bender, Emily. 2005. On the boundaries of linguistic competence: matched-guise experiments as evidence of knowledge of grammar. *Lingua* 115: 1579-1598.
- Boertien, Harmon. 1986. Constituent structure of double modals. In Michael Montgomery and Guy Bailey (eds.) *Language variety in the South: Perspectives in Black and White*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 294-318.
- Campbell-Kibler, Katherine. 2007. Accent, (ing), and the social logic of listener perceptions. *American Speech* 82: 32-64.
- Coleman, William L. 1975. Multiple modals in Southern States English. Indiana University Ph.D. dissertation.
- Di Paolo, Marianna. 1989. Double modals as a single lexical item. *American Speech* 64.3: 195- 224.
- Feagin, Crawford. 1979. *Variation and change in Alabama English: A sociolinguistic study of the White community*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Garrett, Peter. 2001. Language attitudes and sociolinguistics. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 5.4: 626-31.
- Hasty, J. Daniel, Ashley Hesson, Suzanne Wagner, and Robert Lannon. 2011. Finding needles in the right haystack: Double modals in medical consultations. Poster presented at *New Ways of Analyzing Variation (NWAV) 40*. October 2011. Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.
- Hasty, J. Daniel. Under review. We might should oughta take a second look at this: A syntactic re-analysis of double modals in Southern United States English. Ms, under review at *Lingua*.
- Lambert, Wallace, R. Hodgson, R. C. Gardner, and S. Fillenbaum. 1960. Evaluational reactions to spoken languages. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 60: 44-51.
- Mishoe, Margaret and Michael Montgomery. 1994. The pragmatics of multiple modal variation in North and South Carolina. *American Speech* 69.1: 3-29.
- Montgomery, Michael and Stephen Nagle. 1993. Double modals in Scotland and the Southern United States: Transatlantic inheritance or independent development. *Folia Linguistica Historica* 14.1-2: 91-107.
- Nagle, Stephen. 1994. The English double modal conspiracy. *Diachronica* 11.2: 199-212.
- Pampell, John. 1975. More on double modals. *Texas Linguistic Forum* 2: 110-121.