I’m Tell You ‘bout I’ma: A Syntactic and Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Reduced Form of I’m Gonna

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Introduction

Background
- I’ma, meaning I am going to, is a combination of gonna (a so-contraction) and I’m (an auxiliary contraction).
- It is a single complex form consisting of multiple morphemes that is yet to be understood syntactically.
- A syntactic analysis should reconcile its phonological realization at the form level and its syntactic structure at a word level.
- It is associated with non-standard dialects of the South and with African American Vernacular English (go Def. 4e, DARE; Bradley, 1954).

Language Attitudes
- Use of reduced forms (e.g. gonna, summa) is an issue of register or style, not dialect (Finegan and Biber, 1994).
- I’ma, though it is a reduced form like gonna, is an exception because it is associated with non-standard dialects.
- Non-standard dialects are often derogated with respect to the standard dialect (Coupland and Bishop, 2007).
- Speakers of non-standard dialects tend to rate their own dialect as more pleasant compared to others’ ratings (Preston, 2000).

Study Objectives
1) Determine the syntactic properties of I’ma, a reduced form of I am going to, using a word grammar approach supplemented by native speakers’ intuitions.
2) Using a survey of language attitudes, understand how linguistic receptivity (openness to linguistic variation and change) influences judgments of I’ma.
3) Investigate how certain sociolinguistic factors like gender, regional differences, and age impact linguistic receptivity and judgments of I’ma.

Method

Overview
- Fifty-five participants (33 women) ranging in age from 18 to 63 (M = 30.56, SD = 13.53).
- Questionnaire of grammaticality judgments, linguistic receptivity, and language attitudes.

Judgments of Grammaticality
- Judgments of the correctness and artificiality of I’ma, other reduced forms, and distractors on 7-point Likert scales.
- Comparison of the perceived acceptability among I’ma, other reduced forms, and non-reduced forms.

Language Attitudes and Linguistic Receptivity
- Perceptions of speakers and their speech 7-point Likert-type scales to gauge attitudes toward the use of I’ma.
- A questionnaire of language attitudes determined openness to linguistic variation and change, i.e. linguistic receptivity.

Syntactic Analysis

Word Grammar (Hudson, 2010)
- Based on words and their dependencies rather than phrases and constituents.
- Used successfully to describe the syntactic constraints of so-contractions like gonna (Hudson, 2006).
- Reconcerns the syntactic structure of I’ma at the same time as its phonological realization is explained.

Syntactic Structure: Contraction Allowed

Syntactic Structure: No Contraction

Syntactic Constraints: Overview
- Determine under what linguistic circumstances the use of I’ma is grammatically acceptable and when it is not acceptable.
- For example, compare (1), (2), and (3):
  1) I’m going to the store.
  2) I’m gonna the store.
  3) I’m gonna stay.

Judgments of Grammaticality: Overview
- Native speakers judged the correctness of the following I’ma sentences and sentences with other reduced forms to determine the syntactic constraints of I’ma in different contexts.
- Maps two forms, I’m and gonna, onto a single complex word, I’ma.

Correctness Ratings of I’ma

Contrary to expectations, I’ma in the context of a wh-question (6) received the highest judgments of correctness on a 7-point Likert scale (M = 3.57, SD = 1.49).

As predicted, the progressive go violation (8) was judged as least correct (M = 1.37, SD = 0.81).

As expected, I’m gonna (M = 2.52, SD = 1.05) was judged as less correct than other reduced forms (M = 3.07, SD = 1.21) (r = .52, p < .001).

I’m gonna was judged as most correct (M = 6.24, SD = 1.21).

Language Attitudes

Linguistic Receptivity and I’ma Judgments

Contrary to expectations, participants gave higher ratings of perceived education level to hypothesised speakers of I’ma as compared to other speakers (t(53) = -3.06, p = .004).

Those with low linguistic receptivity scores judged I’ma as less correct (M = 2.83, SD = .98) than did those with high linguistic receptivity scores (M = 3.81, SD = 1.55).

Linguistic Receptivity and Age
- Linguistic receptivity did not decrease with age (r = -.061, p = .67).

Judgments of I’ma and Regional Differences
- High and Low Linguistic Receptivity
- I’m gonna was judged as most correct (M = 6.24, SD = 1.21).

Conclusions

Syntactic Analysis
- I’ma adopts the same sense of immediate futurity as gonna and prospective go.
- I’ma contracts when it appears before a bare infinitive and its constituent morphs are adjacent.
- Despite expectations, I’ma in declarative sentences received lower judgments of correctness than I’m a in a wh-question.

Language Attitudes
- Contrary to expectations based on past research on language attitudes toward non-standard dialects, participants judged I’ma speakers as more educated.
- However, in line with past findings, the speech of I’ma speakers was judged as more pleasant.
- Additionally, Southerners did not judge I’ma as more acceptable than non-Southerners.

Linguistic Receptivity
- Age and gender were not found to be related to linguistic receptivity.
- However, a greater degree of linguistic receptivity was associated with more accepting judgments of I’ma.

Limitations and Final Thoughts
- A lack of variety in sentence types could account for the unexpected pattern of grammaticality judgments of I’ma.
- A more diverse sample would allow for a better analysis of sociolinguistic factors and their influences on judgments of I’ma and their speakers.
- As the first attempt to examine linguistic receptivity and its influences, this study was successful.
- Future research should examine how linguistic receptivity can predict judgments of features of non-standard dialects in general.

Selected References


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