

I'ma 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 *to*-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*, *wanna*) 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 outsiders' ratings (Preston, 2000).

Study Objectives

- 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.
- Using a survey of language attitudes, understand how *linguistic receptivity* (openness to linguistic variation and change) influences judgments of *I'ma*.
- 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 distracters 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.

Predictions

- That *I'ma* would be judged as less correct than other reduced forms.
- That speakers of *I'ma* would be judged as less educated but their speech as more pleasant.
- That greater linguistic receptivity would be associated with more favorable judgments of *I'ma*.

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):

- I'm going to the store.
- *I'm gonna the store.
- I'm gonna stay.

Going to contracts in contexts where it is followed by a bare infinitive, i.e. *prospective go* (Pullum, 1997). Here it carries a sense of immediate futurity.

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:

- I'ma head to the store.
- I'm tired so I'ma come home early tonight.
- % What I'ma do when you're gone?
- % I told myself I'ma not stay up past midnight.
- * John believes I'ma Europe this summer.

In sentence (6), *I'ma* does not allow auxiliary inversion (cf. *What am I gonna do?*).

In sentence (7), *I'ma* blocks negation (cf. *I'm not gonna stay up past midnight*).

Sentence (8) is unacceptable because a bare infinitive does not follow *I'ma*. This violates the *prospective go* nature of *I'ma*.

The morphs of *I'ma* must be adjacent to contract.

Syntactic Analysis

Word Grammar (Hudson, 2010)

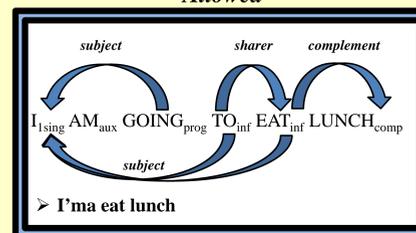
Based on words and their dependencies rather than phrases and constituents.

Used successfully to describe the syntactic constraints of *to*-contractions like *wanna* (Hudson, 2006).

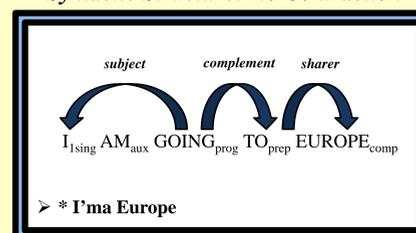
Reconciles the syntactic structure of *I'ma* at the same time as its phonological realization is explained.

Maps two forms, *I'm* and *gonna*, onto a single complex word, *I'ma*.

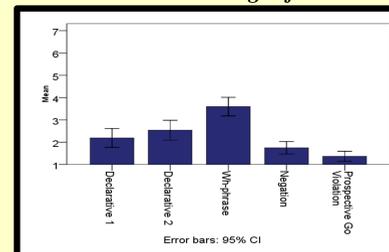
Syntactic Structure: Contraction Allowed



Syntactic Structure: No Contraction



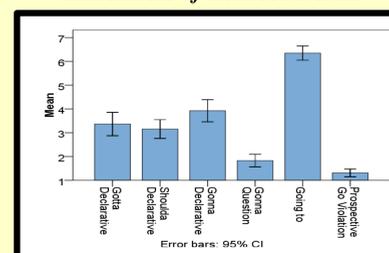
Correctness Ratings of I'ma



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 *prospective go* violation (8) was judged as least correct ($M = 1.37$, $SD = .81$).

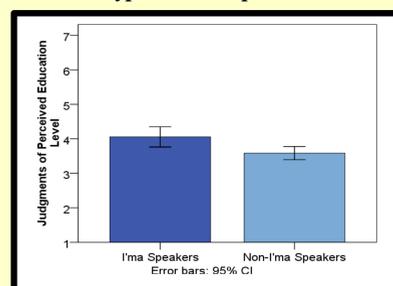
Correctness of Reduced Forms



As expected, *I'ma* ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.05$) was judged as less correct than other reduced forms ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.21$) ($t(52) = -5.07$, $p < .001$).

The unreduced *going to* was judged as most correct ($M = 6.24$, $SD = 1.21$).

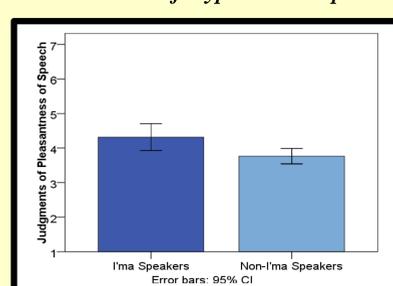
Perceived Education Level of Hypothetical Speakers



Contrary to expectations, participants gave higher ratings of perceived education level to hypothetical speakers of *I'ma* as compared to other speakers ($t(53) = -3.57$, $p = .001$).

Ratings of perceived education level of hypothetical speakers were based only on one sentence (6). This could account for the surprising results.

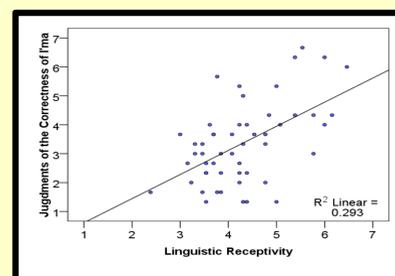
Pleasantness of Hypothetical Speech



Agreeing with predictions, participants rated the speech of *I'ma* speakers as more pleasant than that of non-*I'ma* speakers ($t(53) = -3.06$, $p = .004$).

Language Attitudes

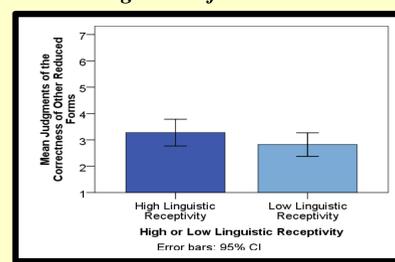
Linguistic Receptivity and I'ma Judgments



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 ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.55$).

Higher linguistic receptivity was significantly associated with more accepting judgments of *I'ma* ($r = .542$, $p < .001$).

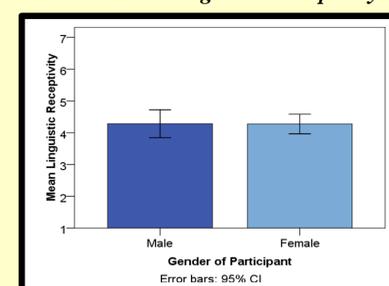
High and Low Linguistic Receptivity and Judgments of Reduced Forms



A median split was used to divide participants into high and low linguistic receptivity.

As predicted, linguistic receptivity was not associated with judgments of other reduced forms ($t(50) = -1.36$, $p = .18$).

Gender and Linguistic Receptivity

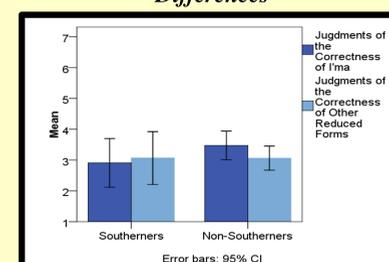


Men ($M = 4.28$, $SD = .99$) and women ($M = 4.27$, $SD = .87$) were equally linguistically receptive ($t(53) = .042$, $p = .967$).

Linguistic Receptivity and Age

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

Judgments of I'ma and Regional Differences



Unexpectedly, Southerners and non-Southerners did not differ in their judgments of the correctness of *I'ma* ($t(49) = -1.19$, $p = .24$).

As predicted, Southerners and non-Southerners did not differ in their judgments of other reduced forms ($t(49) = .01$, $p = .99$).

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'ma* 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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