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How Accents Affect Perception of Intelligence, Physical Attractiveness, and Trustworthiness of Middle-Eastern-, Latin-American-, British-, and Standard-American-English-Accented Speakers

Accent Prestige theory states that accents are used as cues to judge characteristics of the accented speaker. In this study, four accents were recorded and later played for the participants: Standard-American, Middle-Eastern, Latin-American, and British. Participants filled out a questionnaire rating perceived intelligence, trustworthiness, and physical attractiveness of the recorded accent, as well as a demographics questionnaire. The authors predict the following: Middle-Eastern- and Latin-accented speakers will be rated lower on the three scales than standard-American-accented speakers, and the British-accented speaker will be rated higher. Statistical significance was obtained on physical attractiveness ratings and on intelligence ratings, $p < .05$. The results do not support accent prestige theory. The authors call for further research to be conducted to discover the real affect of accent on perception.

The accent prestige theory suggests that people use a speaker's accent as a cue for judging characteristics of the accented speaker (Fuentes, Potere, and Ramirez, 2002). The theory posits that an individual who speaks with a standard accent, the accent of the dominant group in society, will be rated better than non-standard-accented speakers (regional or foreign). Any accent other than the standard accent produces a different response in the listener. This response to accented-speech leads the individual to begin to develop judgments about the speaker.

The judgments formed using accent prestige theory are divided into two categories. First, the category of status dimension contains characteristics that are used to classify a person in relation to perceived status, such as intelligence, education, social class, and success. The second, category of solidarity dimension, is used to rate the speaker in areas of friendliness, trustworthiness, and kindness. The standard accent will be rated higher in both dimensions by individuals who speak the standard accent. The non-standard-accented individuals will also give higher ratings to standard-accented speakers on the status dimension, but rate those who speak in an accent similar to their own higher on the solidarity dimension (Fuentes, Potere, and Ramirez, 2002).

However, judgments are not being made solely on the accent. Instead, the accent leads to judgments about ethnicity and socioeconomic status. The theory pur-

ports that judgments are mediated by the status and solidarity dimensions. Thus, the status and solidarity dimensions allow for judgments made not on the accent itself, but on the ethnicity and social class that the accent implies (Foon, 2001; Fuentes et al., 2002). The implications of this claim of accent prestige theory include a basis for prejudices based on accent as a clue to ethnicity and socioeconomic status. These prejudices would be applied without face-to-face contact because the judgments are based on accent. These prejudices would include both negative and positive stereotypes. Because the accent mediates judgments on ethnicity, the theory states that accents of politically and historically strong nations, as well as the dominant accent, will rank higher than other accents because the accent is a cue to less prejudiced ethnicity and higher socioeconomic status (Bayard, Gallois, Pittam, & Weatherall, 2001).

In order for the accent prestige theory to be utilized, it is important to first note that individuals have the capability to distinguish between speakers with different accents or dialects. In a study conducted by Thomas and Reaser (2004), the ability of European-American individuals to identify African-American voices was supported. This research showed that listeners used past associations between accented speech and ethnicity to make judgments about the accented individual based on preconceived judgments about individuals with that accent. By attaching these preconceived judgments to

the speaker, the listener begins to pre-judge the speaker without knowing much about the speaker.

Two studies support accent prestige theory as a vehicle to pre-judge speakers. Fuertes (2000) found that participants in the United States ranked Hispanic accented counselors poorly and were less willing to commit to long-term therapy with a Hispanic accented counselor than with a non-Hispanic counselor without an accent. This judgment was mediated by the two dimensions posited by accent prestige theory. This study supports the accent prestige theory by showing that standard-accented speakers are rated higher than non-standard-accented speakers in both the solidarity and status dimensions. In the second study by Foon (2001), standard-accented individuals were rated higher on the status dimension but lower on the solidarity dimension, especially when information about social class was given. Foon speculated that since social class was given, the raters did not use accent to form a judgment about social class. Without the need to use accent as a cue, the solidarity scores did not correspond to accent but to the given social class. This study confirms accent prestige theory by showing that where more relevant information (social class, in this study) is available, listeners will not use accent to form judgments. However, without the more relevant information, listeners fall back to judgments based on accent. These studies suggest that listeners use accent to form pre-judgments about the speakers' solidarity and status; they lead to the idea that being able to identify ethnicity by voice creates opportunities for discrimination using preconceived judgments based on ethnicity as accent prestige theory posits.

As mentioned earlier, accent prestige theory suggests that individuals with accents from historically and politically strong nations will be rated higher by individuals who speak the majority and the minority accents. For example, Latin-American accented individuals would rate standard-American accents higher because America is perceived as a politically stronger nation. However, in the study where Hispanic and non-Hispanic counselors were rated, Hispanic participants did not rank Hispanic counselors differently than Caucasian counselors, suggesting that accent may not affect perception due to historical or political considerations (Fuertes, 1999). However, findings from a contradictory study suggest that visual cues were used instead of purely audio cues. In this study, nine Mexican-American

readers with different levels of accentedness were evaluated by 43 Mexican-American and 37 Anglo-American high school students. As the level of accentedness increased from speaker to speaker, the raters gave significantly lower status ratings. This study suggests that Mexican-Americans with the same accent as the speaker will rate Mexican-Americans lower based on their level of accentedness.

A third supporting study was done in Australia to measure the perceptions of British-, American-, Australian-, and New Zealand-English accented speakers. The researchers discovered that the participants rated their native accent below speakers of British-English and American-English, yet above New Zealand-English speakers (Bayard et al., 2001). These results are consistent with accent prestige theory because England and America can be considered more politically powerful than New Zealand. The latter two studies' findings fit the concept of the accent prestige theory that accents of politically and historically stronger nations will rank higher than others.

There are three main gaps in the research on accent perception. First, much of the research about accent and perception is out-dated, as can be seen by looking at the reference section of the few contemporary articles on the subject (Foon, 2001; Fuertes et al., 2002; Podberesky, Deluty, & Feldstein, 1990). Much of the research was done in the 1960s and 1970s, and prejudices have since changed. Due to the thirty-year gap in research, it is likely that ethnic minorities are viewed differently than they once were. Continuing research on accent perception will allow a more accurate assessment of current prejudices. Likewise, many of the accents studied in past research have entered the U.S. mainstream; and, with the current political backdrop, research needs to be done on other accents such as Middle Eastern accents. The attack of September 11, 2001 and the war in Iraq have radically changed the political climate, and discrimination against people with a Middle East background may have resulted. Furthermore, the current debate over immigration laws may have affected perceptions of Latin-American individuals. Thus, we have included a Middle-Eastern and a Latin-American English accent in the study. Second, as the review of previous research shows, there is still debate about how accent affects perceptions as discussed in the preceding paragraph. Further research must be done to conclude what impact accent has on perceptions because of the

confusion in previous and current research. For this reason, we include British accent to represent a country of historical and political importance. Third, research also lacks investigations about what effect increased contact with other ethnicities might have on perceptions resulting from accent. Since the sample population includes participants who have served missions for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) among other ethnicities, the current study may be able to draw some conclusions about the effects of contact with other ethnicities. The research under consideration will shed light upon all three concerns.

We hypothesized that Latin-American speakers would be rated lowest on the trait of intelligence with Middle-Eastern speakers next, followed by standard-accented speakers, and then British-English speakers. Intelligence represents the status dimension. Latin-American speakers were hypothesized to be lowest because most Americans have contact with Latin-American speakers and prejudices against Latin-Americans. This increased contact with prejudices against Latin-Americans may result in them being viewed as less intelligence because of the susceptibility to prejudices. Middle-Eastern speakers followed because of the current political climate. We hypothesized that British-speakers would be rated highest because the accent represents a country of political and historical importance. On the trait of trustworthiness, the lowest ratings would be given to the accent of the Middle-East (because of the current political climate), followed by the accent of Latin-America (minority accent), and then the accent of Great Britain, and last, the accent of standard-American. Trustworthiness represents the solidarity dimension. The standard-American accent was hypothesized highest to test the supposition that nations of political and historical importance would rate higher. In this case, the hypothesis represents a counter to the predictions of accent prestige theory. Finally, on the trait of physical attractiveness, Middle-Eastern accent would be rated lowest, Latin American next, then standard-American, and finally, British accent rated highest. The Middle-Eastern and Latin-American accent were hypothesized as lowest because of the political climate, and the British accent as highest because cultural stereotypes that individuals with a British accent are more attractive.

Method

Instruments

Accented recording. The recording included a voice speaking about a calculator. The recording was played in one of four accents: Standard-American, Middle-Eastern, Latin-American, or British. Four males were used to record the four accents and the vocal characteristics were not controlled because we did not have the equipment to do this. The recordings did not differ in any other significant way.

First Perception of Accented Speech Questionnaire. A 20-item questionnaire was developed and given out to participants to test their perceptions of a certain accent. The scale is composed of a 7-level rating system, with one being "extremely high", four being "moderate", and seven being "extremely low". Participants were given instructions to rate the speaker solely by what they heard on the audio clip. The questions were designed to test levels of intelligence (questions 1, 4, 5, 10, 14, and 15), physical attractiveness (questions 2, 9, and 13), and trustworthiness (questions 6, 8, 11, 16, 18, and 20). Using Cronbach's alpha, internal reliability for the questionnaire was established with scores of .891, .822, and .582, respectively. The remaining questions were dummy questions intended to disguise the true purpose of the questionnaire.

Demographics questionnaire. Participants filled out requested demographic information about their current year in school, ethnicity, age, gender, if they served a religious mission, if they speak another language, if they have lived in an area where foreign-accented English speech is common, and if they have lived outside of the United States.

Participants

A sample of 123 Brigham Young University (BYU) students ranging from freshman to seniors was recruited. Three participants live in Provo, Utah but do not attend BYU. Total number of participants is 126. Participants were volunteers from various psychology classes and an economics class at Brigham Young University. Some participants were also obtained through off-campus religious groups. Each volunteer received a free brownie for his or her participation.

Procedures

The participants were randomly divided into four groups which listened to one of the following accents: Standard-American accent, Middle-Eastern accent,

Latin-American accent, and British accent. The experiment was done on two different days with two accents being presented in two separate classrooms each day. The administrator informed the students that research was being done on the psychology of marketing techniques, and, therefore, the participants would be listening to a tape about a calculator. The informed consent form was then handed out and each participant filled one out; then, the form was collected. Next, the participants listened to the accented tape recording. After the recording, the participants were given a questionnaire asking them to rate the following traits of the accented voice: intelligence, trustworthiness, and physical attractiveness. Also, some questions asked about marketing techniques to mask the real intent of the questionnaire. After this questionnaire was completed and collected, the participants were given a demographics questionnaire to complete. This questionnaire was also completed and collected. The participants were then debriefed on their participation in the research, thanked, and dismissed. They were asked not to speak with other people concerning the research until after all groups had participated. For each group, the entire procedure was finished in approximately 20 minutes.

Results

The independent variables in this study are the four accents (of Middle-Eastern, Latin-American, British, and Standard-American), serving a mission for the LDS church, speaking a foreign language, living in an area with accented English speech, and having lived outside the United States (3 months or more). The dependent variables were analyzed using independent factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA). For the post hoc examination, Tukey HSD was used. The criteria for statistical significance was an alpha level of .05 ($p < .05$). All four groups fit a bell curve as a whole and when divided into the subgroups of intelligence, trustworthiness, and physical attractiveness. Missing data was deleted because participants did not complete entire survey ($n=2$).

The number of participants per group is as follows: standard-American accent, $n=30$; Middle-Eastern accent, $n=32$; British accent, $n=34$; and Latin-American accent, $n=30$. See Table 1 for the mean and standard de-

viation of each rating, and average age of each group.

The physical attractiveness scale was the only scale that showed any significant differences between accents, with the Middle-Eastern accent being rated higher than the standard-American accent, $p=.005$ and $df=3,126$. The Middle-Eastern accent was rated as more physically attractive than the standard-American accent (see Table 1). Also, on the physical attractiveness scale, the rating between the standard-American accent and the British accent approached significance at $p=.058$, and the rating between the Latin-American accent and the Middle-Eastern accent approached significance at $p=.052$.

The groups are similar regarding other aspects that could affect the results. Participants who served a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints did not differ significantly from participants who did not serve a mission. Neither did ratings of participants who speak a foreign language differ from ratings of participants who do not. Likewise, participants who lived in an area where an accented-American speech was heard did not rate differently than participants who had not lived in such an area. However, participants who have lived outside the United States did have an interaction on the intelligence scale with the British accent, $p=.024$ ($df=3,126$). People who have lived outside the United States rated the standard, Middle-Eastern, and Latin-American accents higher than those who had never lived out of the country. However, the British accent was rated lower by people who have lived outside the United States (see Figure 1)

Discussion

The purpose of our research was to investigate the influence of standard-American, British, Latin-American, and Middle-Eastern accents on listener's perceptions of intelligence, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. Our research tested three hypotheses. First, we hypothesized that persons with British-accented speech would be perceived as more intelligent, attractive, and trustworthy than persons with standard-American accents. Second, we hypothesized that persons with Latin-American accented speech would be perceived as the lowest relative to all accents in intelligence and attractiveness. Third, we hypothesized that persons

with Middle-Eastern accented speech would be rated lower than persons with standard-American accented speech in the categories of intelligence and attractiveness, and be rated lowest relative to all accents in terms of trustworthiness. All findings were non-significant, with the exception of persons with Middle-Eastern-accented speech being rated significantly higher than persons with standard-American-accented speech in terms of attractiveness. This finding is counter to what was hypothesized. The first hypothesis was not confirmed with significant statistical findings; however, persons with British-accent speech were rated higher than persons with standard-American accents in all categories. The second hypothesis was also not confirmed with significant statistical findings. In fact, persons with Latin-American-accented speech were not perceived as lowest in any category. The third hypothesis also was not confirmed with significant statistical findings. It was, however, found that persons with Middle-Eastern-accented speech were rated statistically significantly higher than persons with standard-American-accented speech. The above results indicate that revisions to the third hypothesis are necessary.

In a secondary analysis it was found that persons who had lived outside of the United States perceived persons with British-accented speech as lower in intelligence than people who had never lived outside of the United States. This finding was statistically significant, and was not part of any of our three hypotheses and suggests that revisions to the hypotheses need to account for demographic variations in the background of the listener, specifically in terms of having lived outside

of the United States.

The above findings do not agree with past research on accent perception. Recent research done in the area of accent prestige theory suggests that, in the United States, persons with standard-American speech will be rated higher than those without standard-American speech (Fuertes et al., 2002). Based on our findings, accent prestige theory was not supported and, overall, persons with standard-American-accented speech were not rated higher than others. Accent prestige theory also claims that persons with accents from politically and historically strong nations will tend to be rated higher than persons from countries that are considered lower in status. This claim was not supported since the accent, British, representing a politically and historical strong nation was not significantly higher than any other accents. However, British accented speech was rated higher than standard-American accented speech (see also Baryard et al., 2001) in accordance with predictions of accent prestige theory. The theory also purports that judgments are not being made on the accent itself, but on the ethnicity and social class that the accent implies (Foon, 2001; Fuertes et al., 2002). Our findings do not support accents as clue to social class based on ethnicity due to the fact that persons with Middle-Eastern and Latin-American accents were rated higher in many categories than persons with standard-American and British accents. The findings are probably valid for the population studied. There are a few confounds and limitations that are addressed in subsequent sections.

Confounds

	Perceived Intelligence		Perceived Trustworthiness		Perceived Physical Attractiveness		Average Age of Participant
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Standard American Accent (n=30)	4.217	1.260	3.983	0.944	2.911	1.259	21.167
Middle-Eastern Accent (n=32)	4.538	1.021	4.448	0.853	3.969	1.225	23.000
British Accent (n=34)	4.387	1.161	4.456	1.009	3.775	1.444	21.177
Latin-American Accent (n=30)	4.372	1.102	3.994	1.023	3.078	1.467	20.500

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of All Four Accents on All Three Trait Categories.

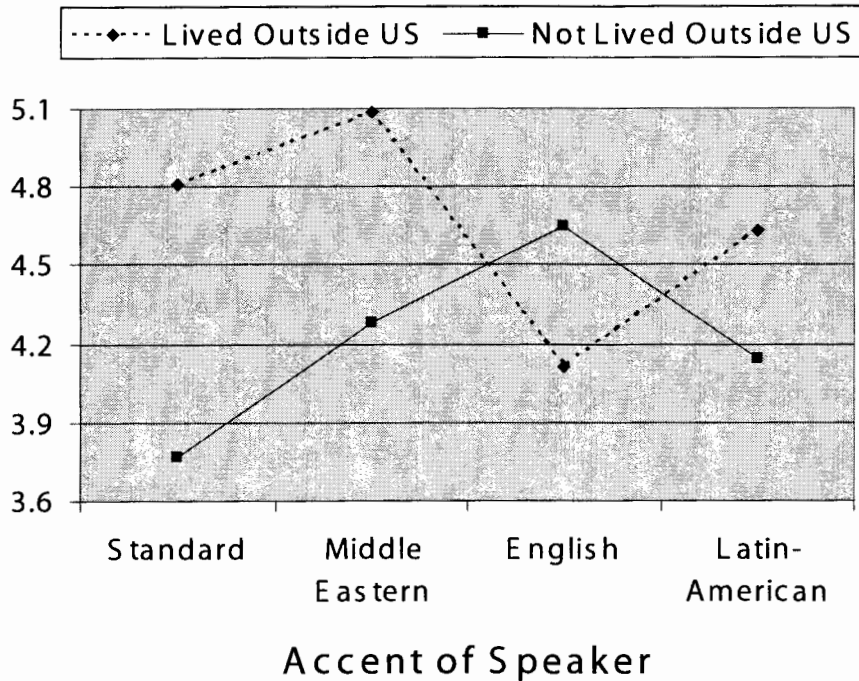


Figure 1. Interaction Between People Who Have Lived Outside the United States and Ratings of Intelligence.

A possible confound of the present study was failure of the deception technique. The audio sample presented to the participants was somewhat obscure in subject matter. The participants were told they were participating in a study concerning marketing techniques, but many questioned the purpose of the study during the study and commented about how the questions did not relate to marketing. It is possible that many quickly inferred that the true subject matter of the experiment was related to accent perceptions. This inference may have created bias because the experiment's true nature was easily identifiable. If the subject were able to identify that accent perceptions were being studied then responses given might not reflect the true perception of the subject.

Another possible confound of the present experiment could be the audio recording. The persons reading the script did not read at the same pace. The difference in pace may have affected ratings on perception, especially intelligence. Of the four accents studied the Middle-Eastern accent was read at the slowest pace. This difference may have made it easier for listeners to understand the person on the recording, which may have produced higher ratings for that accent. Also, a slower pace might allow for listeners to focus on the content of the recording rather than the accent itself. The content of the script was intended to be neutral,

and should not have been the focus of the participants. If the participants focused too highly on the content of the recorded script then it did not fulfill its purpose and therefore could have affected results of the Middle-Eastern accent.

Limitations

A limitation of the study is the sample. The sample used consisted of students from a private university with a strong religious affiliation. The majority of participants in the study were of one race and one religion. Therefore, the results may not generalize to population of the United States. However, the sample does represent the religious population at the university. In a world religion that teaches tolerance, it would be expected to find less prejudice.

Another limitation is the script of the audio recording. Because the script contains instructions on the care and maintenance of calculators, there is lower external validity. Daily contact with others does not deal with calculators. A more generalized topic would result in higher external validity.

Implications

The perceptions of accented speech may influence our personal and professional relationships. Listeners are unconsciously, or perhaps even consciously, influ-

enced by the presence of accents when making judgments about physical attractiveness and maybe other personal characteristics. Future research in this area should be focused on increasing awareness and dispelling stereotypes of accented speech. The more aware we become of the way we judge others, whether consciously or unconsciously, the closer we come toward alleviating stereotypes and prejudices. Accents in particular are frequently encountered in our society, and we must have a clear picture of the effect these accents have on the various types of people that make up our multicultural society.

It is interesting to find that despite the political atmosphere, prejudices against Latin-Americans and Middle-Easterners have not surfaced on the whole. We found no evidence to support the prevalence of prejudice in any part of the study. This is surprising given the political climate. We are at war in the Middle East, and in the middle of new legislation on immigration due to the millions of illegal aliens that have crossed the border from Latin America. Despite these political issues we found that the hypothesized prejudices were not upheld in our sample population.

Future Research

While the results of this study are encouraging to believe prejudices are not strongly prevalent, further research must be done to truly confirm this idea. A parallel study could be conducted at a university with no religious affiliation to see if religion truly did influence the results. On a broader scale, it would be interesting to see if these results are localized to America or if there are global implications. For example, the French are known for their nationalism and pride in their language. At the same time, France has a very large population of African and Middle-Eastern immigrants. A study of this magnitude may have global implications in world where cultural boundaries are dissolving.

Interestingly, our findings supported this idea of cultural boundaries dissolving because people who have lived outside the United States seemed less susceptible to making judgments based on accent. Because this finding was not a hypothesis in the current research, further research needs to directly test this finding. If further research does support this finding, it may mean that as individuals encounter customs and lifestyles of other cultures, prejudice will decrease.

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