

Perceptions of Competency as a Function of Accent

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ABSTRACT. Verbal communication provides explicit cues about groups and individuals (Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, & Fillenbaum, 1960). Accented speech reflects individuals' characteristics such as race, biological sex, social class, and education and functions to categorize individuals according to group membership from which stereotyped evaluations may arise (Riches & Foddy, 1989). Specifically, regional dialects elicit evaluative judgments based on preconceived stereotypes associated with a geographical region (Schenck-Hamlin, 1978). The distinctiveness of the Southern region, due in part to perceptions of its nonstandard dialect, has been consistently established in linguistic and folk dialectology research (Fridland, 2008; Fridland & Bartlett, 2006; Preston, 1993). Based on these findings, the current study evaluated the effect of the Southern accent on perceptions of speaker competency. Regional accent (i.e., Southern and neutral¹) was systematically varied in audio taped instructions presented to participants. We expected that participants would evaluate the neutral speaker's abilities more positively than the Southerner. As predicted, participants viewed the neutral accented speaker as more competent (e.g., grammatically correct, effective instructor, professional manner) than the Southerner.

Research on the formation of stereotyped evaluations has generated a plethora of empirically derived theories that offer insight into the many nuances of social interaction (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). By expanding the scope of social stereotyping to include the influence of regional dialects as a determinant of evaluative perceptions, researchers have consistently established the effect of dialect on accuracy of group identification and categorization of accented speakers' group membership (Ellis, 1967; Gardner & Taylor, 1968; Lambert et al., 1960; Miller, 1975; Riches & Foddy, 1989; Strongman & Woosley, 1967; Vorster & Proctor, 1976). The present study extends previous findings of evaluations of various American accents by investigating stereotypes of a Southern regional accent.

One area noted for its distinct accent is the southeastern region of the United States. The Southern stereotype reflects the region's unique distinctiveness characterized by exclusive "regional types" (Reed, 1986) that are both positive and negative. The Dictionary of American Regional English (Hall, 2002) identifies redneck and the American Heritage College Dictionary (Picket et al., 2002) identifies bubba as slang terms synonymous with people from the South. Both derogatory characterizations connote educational and intellectual inferiority. Moreover, Hartigan (2003, p. 96) argues that slurs associated with poor rural Whites (i.e., hillbilly, redneck, and white trash) exist within a

¹ The "neutral" accent in this study refers to the type of accent used by most national news anchors. All speech is accented; we are referring to what might be recognized as a standard mid-western accent that does not clearly reflect a particular region or speech group.

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racial construct that partially emanate from perceived “rural versus urban identity and the relative degrees of education vs. backwardness.” Stigma associated with the South also emerges from studies evaluating geographical and dialectical region distinctiveness on perceptions of regional attributes.

Sociolinguistic research focusing on dialectical mapping (Preston, 1993) substantiates the Southern region’s uniqueness. Participants in these studies consistently identified the accurate geographical boundaries of the Southern and Northern divide more often than other geographical regions. Participant evaluations for language correctness produced lower ratings for the distinctive characteristics of the Southern accent than nonSouthern accents. These participants labeled all regional speech areas, except for the South, in positive terms (i.e., standard, regular, normal, or everyday). Further supporting the potent influence of accent on evaluative judgments, Southern participants rated their own regional accent lower on language correctness and education measures than they did a non-Southern accent (Fridland, 2008; Fridland & Bartlett, 2006; Fridland, Bartlett, & Kreuz, 2005).

The well documented history of the Southern stereotype operates along a continuum that highlights the disparate range of characteristics associated with the admired Southern gentlemen and the backward redneck (Bernstein, 2000; Reed, 1986). Although many of the common Southern pejoratives have a distant historical connotation (Hartigan, 2003), mass media continue to strengthen the stereotype’s negative aspects through exploitation of the inferior Southerner (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008). For example, in 2003 a major television network cancelled pilot programming for a modern “hillbilly” reality show in response to pressure from hundreds of businesses, private and public organizations, and 44 members of the House of Representatives (Center for Rural Strategies, 2003). In fact, Senator Robert Byrd repudiated the program’s overt representation and perpetuation of the Southern stereotype (Congressional Record, 2003). Such widespread concern with programming subject matter reflects the persuasive power of both the regional stereotype and media’s portrayal of the Southerner. Moreover, according to Van Dijk (1987), mass media represent a major source of content for everyday communication and, therefore, act as an agent of attitude formation. Further establishing the entrenched position of

the Southern stereotype, Reed (1986) argues that a distinct and unique regional classification, unlike any other social categorization, emanates from historical, literary, and media representations of the Southerner.

Although linguistic research on Southern speech (Fridland, 2008; Fridland & Bartlett, 2006; Fridland et al., 2005) adds support for Reed’s (1986) Southern regional typology, these findings emerged in the context of a repeated list of words that was synthesized to accentuate distinctive Southern and Northern vowel variations inherent in each accent. In other words, participants evaluated how Southern each word sounded and made judgments about the degree of correctness and education level of the speaker based on characteristics associated with each region. The current study is designed as a conceptual replication of Fridland and Fridland et al.’s work in that we intended to explore how a Southerner and a speaker without a discernable accent are evaluated when delivering an identical audio presentation. In order to avoid additional confounds arising from differences in individuals’ vocal characteristics and message content, we employed a modified version of Lambert et al.’s (1960) matched-guise technique in conjunction with a scripted neutral message. The matched-guise technique is designed such that a target speaker produces multiple verbal presentations using different accents. To this end, we hypothesized that a Southern accented speaker would be evaluated as less competent than a speaker with a neutral accent when explaining how to download music from a compact disc to an iPod.

Method

Participants

Twenty-one men and 43 women were recruited from a moderately sized Southeastern university. The number of participants was slightly lower than the 69 participants suggested by the power analysis. The study was advertised in psychology classes and through the university’s electronic recruiting system. Participants volunteered for this study and received required course credit or extra credit depending on their instructors’ policies as compensation for participation. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 39 ($M = 21.72$, $SD = 5.15$). Approximately 54% described themselves as White, 25% as Black, and 13% classified themselves as “other.” Eighty-three percent of participants described themselves as Southerners as defined by being raised in a Southern state.

Thirteen participants in the neutral condition incorrectly answered the manipulation check evaluating perception of the speaker's accent (i.e., Where do you think Zack is from?) resulting in the exclusion of their data. Although the excluded participants represent a large percentage of the neutral condition, the accent effect remained significant after the data was removed. Analyses reflect data from the remaining 51 participants.

Design

The design was a randomized two group experimental design. Groups comprised of a maximum of 10 participants listened to an audio recording and completed questionnaires. The type of accent was manipulated so that approximately half of the participants were exposed to a person using a Southern accent and half were exposed to a more neutral accent. After excluding data from 13 participants in the neutral condition, the remaining 18 participants comprised the neutral condition and 31 participants made up the Southern condition. Participants were similar in characteristics (i.e., sex, age, race, state where raised) across both conditions with slightly more non-Southerners ($n = 6$) in the neutral condition than the Southern condition ($n = 2$).

Materials

Participants received questionnaire packets instructing them to rate the speaker Zack on 8 competency traits: reliable source of information, grammatically correct, unknowledgeable about the subject matter, effective instructor, persuasive presenter, unprofessional manner, articulate speaker, and unsophisticated demeanor. All competencies, even if phrased negatively, were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 to 5 with the highest rating indicating a more positive evaluation (i.e., *very professional*) and the lowest rating reflecting a more negative evaluation (i.e., *very unprofessional*). The competency measure created for this study was used to explore perceptions on each of the eight characteristics associated with the quality and effectiveness of a speaker delivering an instructional audio presentation. In this study, competency items produced a Cronbach's alpha of .80. Due to the matched guise of the speaker by which voice characteristics did not vary, it is expected that any differences in competency ratings for the Southern and neutral speaker can be attributed to the manipulation of accent. Participants also answered comprehension

questions regarding the presentation content in order to bolster the cover story. Finally, participants disclosed personal information in response to questions about sex, age, and race/ethnicity, and state in which they were raised.

Procedure

Upon participants' arrival we explained the study's purported purpose evaluating the effects of verbal versus written stimuli on comprehension. Having obtained IRB approval for use of deception, we employed a cover story in order to elicit genuine responses from participants. Participants were told that they were assigned to the verbal condition, which consisted of an audio recording rather than a written transcript. Advised that participation was voluntary, participants read and signed the informed consent form indicating their voluntary participation. At this point, we randomly assigned participants to one of two possible conditions, Southern or neutral accent. Based on a modified version of Lambert et al.'s (1960) matched-guise technique, the same speaker read an identical set of instructions in both the Southern accent, characterized by the long-syllable drawl, and the neutral accent lacking specific regional distinctiveness. The speaker was a White man born and raised in the Southern United States who spoke in a Southern and neutral accent. Based on previous research investigating perceptions of male and female voices, common sex stereotypes underlie evaluative judgments based on speakers' sex (Linek, Gerjets, & Scheiter, 2010). Participants in Nass, Moon, and Green's (1997) study judged computerized female voices more competent in love and relationship issues than male voices and males voices more competent in computer knowledge than females voices. Therefore, by employing a man to deliver a computer related message, we increased the salience of accent and minimized potential confounds of speaker sex or message content. Vocal tone and pauses remained consistent in both guises, such that the speaker's voice differed only in accent. After instructing participants to listen quietly, the audio presentation was played. The recorded message for both the Southern and the neutral accented speaker was 1 min in duration and identical in content—instructions for downloading music from a CD to an iPod.

Following the audio presentation, participants received questionnaire packets that included written directions on how to proceed. Upon completion of the questionnaires, we debriefed

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the participants regarding the true nature of the study. In addition to the formal questionnaires, immediately following the debriefing session, we asked participants what they thought about the speaker, where they thought he was from, and the reasoning in support of their perceptions. After the informal discussion, we thanked and dismissed the participants.

Results

Correlational analysis of the relationships between the dependent variables revealed statistically significant correlations (r 's ranged from .05 to .70). Therefore, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to analyze the responses to the evaluation items on the questionnaire. An alpha level of .05 was adopted for all analyses. Preliminary analyses were conducted to determine if the MANOVA assumptions were met. Box's M test was used to determine whether variances were homogeneous. The test suggested no violation of this assumption.

As predicted, the MANOVA conducted on the competency variables revealed a significant main effect for the independent variable, accent, $F(8, 40) = 7.96$, $p = .00$, $\eta_p^2 = .61$. Subsequent univariate tests indicated that accent influenced perceptions of the speaker on five of the eight competency items excluding reliable source of information, unknowledgeable about the subject matter, and persuasive presenter. Participants perceived the non-Southerner as a more effective instructor and articulate speaker than the Southerner. Further, although

the script was identical for both accent types, participants rated the neutral speaker more grammatically correct with a more professional manner and sophisticated demeanor than the Southerner. See Table 1 for univariate statistics including means, standard deviations, and effect sizes.

Discussion

We predicted a more negative evaluation of the Southern accented speaker than the neutral accented speaker due to pervasive stereotyped attitudes that consistently emerge in evaluative judgments of Southerners in previous research. As hypothesized, participants viewed the Southern speaker as less competent than the non-Southerner. This result becomes even more interesting when considering 83% of participants self-identified as Southern but stereotyped their ingroup member more negatively than the non-Southerner. Similarly, Tennessee participants in Fridland and Bartlett's (2006) research evaluated the Southern dialect more negatively than they did other regional dialects. These findings further point to the powerful effect of the Southern accent in eliciting stereotyped perceptions. Indeed, the effect size associated with accent was very large ($\eta_p^2 = .61$).

Perhaps the most surprising result is the non-Southerner sounded more grammatically correct than the Southerner even though within each speaker guise the script was identical in wording. For example, instead of using the Southern pronoun variant "y'all" both speakers used the standard grammatical form "you". Is it possible that participants in the Southern condition perceived the speaker's words differently due to their expectations of how Southerners sound? Exactly what words participants perceived the Southerner to say cannot be ascertained from the current study but presents an interesting subject for further investigation.

Future research should address several limitations encountered in this study. First, the neutral speaker may have been erroneously associated with the research team. Following the debriefing session, several participants in the neutral condition who believed the speaker was from the South suggested the speaker was a member of the research team. Perhaps these participants assumed the neutral speaker to be a Southerner because of their perceived association between the speaker and the Southern university in which the study occurred. Some participants may have evaluated the neutral speaker based on the presumed relationship with

TABLE 1

Univariate Effect: Significant Main Effects of Accent

Accent			Southern ^a	Neutral	η_p^2
	$F(1, 47)$	p	$M(SD)$	$M(SD)$	
Reliable Source of Information	.00	.99	3.98 (0.89)	4.41 (0.72)	.00
Grammatically Correct	10.07	.00	3.42 (0.99)	4.28 (0.75)	.13
Unknowledgeable About Subject Matter	.04	.84	1.69 (0.88)	1.62 (1.16)	.00
Effective Instructor	8.16	.01	3.74 (0.89)	4.44 (0.70)	.19
Persuasive Presenter	1.17	.29	3.50 (1.11)	3.92 (0.87)	.03
Unprofessional Manner	8.72	.01	3.26 (1.00)	4.22 (1.26)	.08
Articulate Speaker	54.59	.00	2.61 (1.12)	4.67 (0.49)	.55
Unsophisticated Demeanor	17.70	.00	2.87 (0.92)	4.06 (1.00)	.23

^a Greater means indicate a more positive evaluation.

the researchers rather than the speaker's voice. Therefore, disclosing more detailed information differentiating the speaker from the research team should alleviate this problem. Additionally, because stereotypes may vary between Southern rural and Southern urban accents, which may further reflect social class perceptions (Eckert, 2004; Luhman, 1990), the speaker's accent should ideally depict less distinctive social status characteristics while maintaining a strong Southern quality.

The speaker in the current study spoke with a Southern rural accent in order to ensure a strong manipulation. While the accent manipulation check confirmed that all the participants in the Southern condition identified the speaker as Southern, the rural accent may have prompted stereotypical thinking associated with economically deprived regions historically known for underperforming schools (MDC Inc., 2004). Indeed, Hartigan (2003) pointed out that one common distinction made between rural and urban regions reflect notions of the uneducated and educated Southerner, respectively. The negative evaluations in the current study may have been elicited because participants perceived the rural Southerner as uneducated. Therefore, the speaker's accent should ideally depict less distinctive rural characteristics associated with lower socioeconomic status. Future research should also focus on more realistic encounters as opposed to the scripted speech used in this study that may not generalize to more natural, spontaneous conversation styles. The scope of this study pertained to limited aspects related to perceptions of a Southern accented speaker amongst a small sample of college students. However, these results, taken with previous findings, warrant further investigation as opportunities to interact with diverse accented individuals continue to increase due to rapidly advancing digital communication technologies.

This study's results pertain to global communication dynamics and its impact on social and business networking in which electronic voice interaction may, in some cases, be as prevalent as face-to-face encounters. When initial contacts occur via electronic means, first impressions based on speech characteristics, such as accent, likely result in perceptions of group membership within a geographical region. If individuals hold prejudices about a particular regional accented group, akin to Reed's (1986) distinct regional typology, stereotyped evaluations may follow.

Due to burgeoning communication

technologies, dialects and accents extend beyond geographical boundaries at a greater rate than before the digital age. However, despite negative Southern stereotypes, some Southerners gained prestige and renown such as the 15 Southern American Presidents (The White House, n.d.). Perhaps these presidential candidates' exceptional educational achievements, prominent social status, or other sociodemographic characteristics exceeded and violated stereotypical assumptions about Southerners' inferior standing. Although complex processes beyond the scope of this study's design affect perceptions of presidential candidates differently than a single exposure to a Southern speaker, an important question remains. Do Southerners with less prestigious status than elected presidents have the ability to escape negative stereotypes associated with their accent?

This question not only pertains to Southerners but individuals with other nonstandard accents whether regional or foreign. In their study investigating ethnicity, nonstandard English accents, and employability, Carlson and McHenry (2006) found that nonstandard accented speakers (i.e., African American Vernacular English, Spanish and Asian influenced English) received lower status and employability ratings than standard American English speakers, regardless of speaker ethnicity. These authors suggested that individuals with a nonstandard accent who seek employment should avail themselves to speech modification therapies in order to become bidialectical. Amid the current milieu of diversity and pluralism awareness campaigns in employment and educational settings, the suggestion to modify an inherently unique characteristic indelibly linked to one's culture, ethnicity, and geographical region seems antiquated. As early as 1990, Reed lamented the rising trend of university courses designed to train-out Southern accents based on the assumption that standard American English speech provides more opportunity for success. According to Matsuda (1991), an attorney who argued in the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals for the protection of accented individuals from discriminatory hiring practices, "accent discrimination" remains alive and well.

While Reed (1990) spoke of intolerance for Southern accents and Matsuda (1991) of foreign accent discrimination, both argued that true cultural diversity necessarily includes linguistic pluralism as dialect and accent reveals place of origin. Similarly, O'Hara (2007) suggested that regionalism may be one of the remaining

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acceptable “isms” left in tact despite mounting societal efforts to expunge many forms of repugnant discriminatory behavior. As a teacher educator on the subject of diversity in educational settings, O’Hara (2007) provided an informative perspective on strategies to overcome dialect discrimination and regionalism within the classroom. Based on her qualitative study in which teacher interns read about and responded to region and dialect based biases, O’Hara concluded that one of the most important endeavors for future educators is to provide a safe learning environment in which students are made aware of negative biases and regional stereotypes. In this way, educators would expose regional and accent discrimination as a form of bigotry such that these behaviors would be added to the long list of unacceptable discriminatory practices.

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