ABSTRACT

ATTITUDES OF SAUDI EFL STUDENTS TOWARD AMERICAN AND BRITISH ACCENTS

This thesis examined the attitudes of 63 Saudi female EFL students in Saudi Arabia toward British and American accents. The results showed a preference for British and female speakers, particularly in terms of status, despite participants' inability to distinguish British and American accents consciously. This suggests that conscious ability to distinguish speakers' dialects and identify their nationalities is not a necessary precondition to having different (unconscious) perceptions of those speakers. The bases of the unconscious perceptions found in this thesis remain a mystery.

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ATTITUDES OF SAUDI EFL STUDENTS TOWARD
AMERICAN AND BRITISH ACCENTS

by

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

One of the main concerns of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student is accent: which accent – typically American or British – is easier to understand, which is considered more “standard,” and ultimately which should EFL students try to model? This study examined the attitudes of Saudi female EFL students in the English Department at a Saudi Arabian University toward American and British accents by (1) seeing how they rate male and female speakers with each accent on various traits, such as confidence and friendliness, (2) testing their ability to identify each accent, and (3) asking directly which accent they prefer to model

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Matched Guise Technique and Verbal Guise Technique

Since the advent of the Matched Guise Technique (MGT; Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, & Fillenbaum, 1960), language attitudes – defined as “speaker-internal psychological tendencies which are expressed by evaluating particular entities (e.g. a dialect or an ethnic group) with a degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 1) – have been the topic of countless studies. Lambert et al.’s original (1960) study focused on English and French speakers in Quebec, Canada. To minimize the effects of voice and message, and thereby isolate listeners’ attitudes toward speakers of the languages in question, perfect French–English bilinguals were recorded reading the same neutral passage in each language. English- and French-speaking subjects then rated each of the English and French guises on a variety of traits, believing all had come from different speakers. Both English-speaking and French-speaking subjects rated the English-speaking guises significantly more favorably in terms of appearance, intelligence, dependability, ambition, and character. However, each language group rated its own language guises significantly more favorably in terms of kindness.

In addition to being used to compare attitudes toward different languages, such as French and English in Quebec (Genesee & Holobow, 1989; Lambert et al., 1960; Lambert, Frankel, & Tucker, 1966) and Hebrew and Arabic in the Middle East (Lambert, Anisfeld, & Yeni-Komshian, 1965), the matched guise technique has been used to compare attitudes toward standard versus non-standard varieties of the

same language, including African American English (Hensley, 1972; Johnson & Buttny, 1982) and Chicano English (Arthur, Farrar, & Bradford, 1974; Bouchard-Ryan & Carranza, 1975; Bouchard-Ryan, Carranza, & Moffie, 1977).

Despite its power, a significant limitation of the MGT is the need to find perfectly bilingual or bidialectal speakers who can produce the stimuli, since such speakers may be difficult or even impossible to find for certain pairs of languages and dialects. This limitation prompted the subsequent development of the Verbal Guise Technique (VGT; Cooper & Fishman, 1974), which is identical to the MGT except that all of the stimulus recordings come from different speakers. Both the MGT and VGT are indirect methods of measuring participants' attitudes toward different groups, and are highly useful insofar as they "can reveal prejudices that might not – or, indeed, cannot – be expressed in other contexts" (McKenzie, 2008, p. 65).

Language Attitudes of Non-Native Speakers

There is relatively little research on non-native speakers' perceptions of different native accents/dialects. Chiba, Matsuura, and Yamamoto (1995) examined 169 Japanese EFL students' perceptions of various native and non-native accents of English, including those of two American speakers and one British speaker. The Japanese listeners rated native speakers more favorably than non-native speakers, but their ratings of American speakers vs. British speakers were not significantly different. Moreover, although listeners were able to identify native vs.

non-native speakers, they could not reliably distinguish American vs. British speakers.

McKenzie (2008) examined the language attitudes of 558 Japanese college students toward English speakers with six different accents – vernacular Glaswegian, Standard Glaswegian, Southern U.S. (Alabama), Midwestern U.S. (Ohio), and two advanced L2 speakers with Japanese L1, one with a “heavy” Japanese accent and the other with a “moderate” Japanese accent. In terms of competence (a cover term for what are also called status traits: intelligent, confident, fluent, and clear), the two American speakers were perceived the most favorably, followed by the two Glaswegian speakers, with the two Japanese-accented speakers evaluated the least favorably. In terms of social attractiveness (a cover term for what are also called solidarity traits: gentle, pleasant, funny, and modest), the heavily accented Japanese speaker was perceived the most favorably, followed by the vernacular Glaswegian and Southern U.S. speakers (in a statistical tie for second) and then the moderately accented Japanese speaker, with the Standard Glaswegian and Midwestern U.S. speakers in a statistical tie for last place. In other words, the Japanese listeners perceived native English speakers as more competent than non-native speakers and Americans as more competent than Britons. However, the listeners perceived Japanese-accented speakers and native English speakers with less standard accents as more socially attractive than native speakers with more standard accents.

The very limited research on language attitudes of non-native speakers makes it hard to know what to expect in the present study.

Research challenging the so-called inherent value hypothesis has shown that listeners who are unfamiliar with a particular language (such as French or Greek) cannot tell which of two dialects of that language is considered 'better' by native speakers (see, e.g., Giles & Niedzielski, 1998). This may explain why the Japanese L1 participants in Chiba et al. (1995), who could not reliably distinguish American vs. British speakers, did not give significantly different ratings to American vs. British speakers. However, another group of Japanese L1 participants (in McKenzie, 2008) did give significantly different ratings to American vs. British speakers. Uncertainty remains, though, since McKenzie (2008) does not report testing whether the participants could accurately label the speakers as American or British.

The initial hypothesis is that Saudi students will rate the American and British speakers differently. It remains unclear, however, whether they will be able to distinguish American and British speakers consciously, and it is likewise unknown whether the ability to distinguish accents consciously is a necessary precondition for giving them different ratings.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

As is typical in Matched Guise and Verbal Guise research, testing this hypothesis will require a set of two studies using the same British and American stimulus recordings – the first to identify a set of relevant traits for the rating scales and the second to gather actual ratings on those scales. One could, of course, use a set of status and solidarity traits from another study or, indeed, from one's own imagination. Deriving the traits by eliciting descriptions from the target population, however, arguably makes the rating scales more relevant to that population and increases the validity and meaningfulness of the results.

Preliminary Study – Method

Participants

Participants in the preliminary study were 30 Saudi females between the ages of 21 and 22 who were students in the English department at Northern Border University in Saudi Arabia.

Materials

Consistent with the Verbal Guise Technique (VGT; Cooper & Fishman, 1974), all of the stimulus recordings were produced by different speakers – 6 native speakers of American English (3 male, 3 female) and 6 native speakers of British English (3 male, 3 female), ranging in age from 20 to 50. Note that no specific British or American dialect was targeted in this study, and the speakers who produced the stimuli were not asked about their dialects; the goal was simply to

determine whether EFL students are able to distinguish or make judgments based on broadly different accents.

The speakers were not informed of the purpose of the study, but were simply asked to read a passage, entitled 'First people in Europe,' taken from a website for teaching ESL students called 'History in Levels' (see Appendix A). This passage was chosen for its neutral content that is easy enough for non-native English speakers to understand. Each speaker was recorded using the Voice Record App. Speakers were asked to read the passage twice; the first reading was for practice and the second was actually used in the study. The recordings were subsequently edited, using Audacity, to remove hesitations and in some cases to increase or decrease the speech rate so that all 12 recordings were as similar as possible in terms of fluency.

Procedure

The preliminary study was administered by a university supervisor in a classroom setting. Participants were told that they would hear 12 native English speakers all reading the same passage and were asked to write down their impressions of each speaker's personal, social, economic, and vocational traits. Each participant was given a sheet of paper with the passage that the speakers would be heard reading (see Appendix A) and blank spaces in which to write their impressions. The 12 recordings were then played for the students in random order. Following each recording, the students were given three minutes to write down their impressions. Once all 12 recordings had been presented, the

participants were thanked for participating in the study and the papers were collected.

Preliminary Study – Results

Participants suggested different features for the British and American speakers. Ninety percent of participants described one or more of the male and female British speakers as wealthy, formal, educated, arrogant, ambitious, confident, and attractive, and 60% of participants guessed they were news reporters or broadcasters. By contrast, only 20% of participants described one or more of the British speakers as poor, disorganized, and pessimistic. On the other hand, 40% of participants described the female American speakers as humble, thin, disorganized, and careless, and 30% guessed they were housekeepers or teachers. However, 90% of participants described one or more of the male American speakers as unattractive, poor, old, and blond, while only 30% described one or more as young, tall, and humble.

Based on these results, the following traits were identified for use as rating-scale endpoints in the main study: attractive, confident, wealthy, educated, polite, humble, courteous, and friendly. Note that the first four are status traits and the latter four are solidarity traits.

Main Study – Method

Participants

Participants in the main study were 63 Saudi females, born and raised in Saudi Arabia, between the ages of 19 and 22 who were students in the English department at Northern Border University in Saudi

Arabia, none of whom participated in the preliminary study. Data from another 132 participants were excluded because they failed to complete the rating task. The students' English instructors were all female non-native speakers from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, India, and Jordan.

Materials

The stimuli were the same 12 recordings of male and female British and American speakers that were used in the preliminary study.

Procedure

The main study was administered by the students' English teachers in a classroom setting. Participants were first given the rating sheet, which included instructions, the passage that the speakers would be heard reading, the 12 sets of rating scales, and a space for participants to indicate whether they thought each speaker was British or American. The instructions said, "As you listen to the speaker, please try to form an impression of them in your mind. Then, indicate where you would put them on each of the scales below, and also try to guess their English accents." The rating scales were 6-point, partially anchored Likert scales (see, e.g., Davies, 2008), whose endpoint labels consisted of the 8 traits that were selected based on the preliminary study and the negative forms of those traits (e.g., attractive – not attractive; see Appendix B). A 6-point scale is within Cox's (1980) optimal range of 5 to 9 points and lacks a middle point, which respondents tend to overuse (Cox, 1980).

Upon being given the questionnaire, participants were first thanked for choosing to participate and then told that they would be

hearing 12 recordings of native English speakers all reading the same passage and would be asked to rate each speaker on a certain set of traits. After each recording was played, participants were given 2 minutes to rate the speaker before the next recording was played. After all 12 recordings had been played and rated, participants were asked to indicate and write on the sheet their favorite accent (British or American) and how long they had studied English. No other favorite-accent options were officially available, making it a sort of forced-choice question, though one student did write “both.” Lastly, each of the 12 recordings was played again, in the same order, and participants were asked to identify each speaker’s accent as either British or American. During this task, participants were given 30 seconds after each recording was played. After completing the questionnaire, the students were thanked for participating in the study and the forms were collected.

To address the possibility of order effects, the 12 recordings were presented in a different order in each of the four classes. Moreover, the left and right rating scale endpoints were reversed on half of the rating forms.

Main Study – Results

Of the 63 participants who completed the rating task, only 37 completed the task of identifying the speakers’ accents and indicated how long they had been studying English, and only 33 of those 37 indicated which accent – British or American – they preferred. The 37 participants who completed the accent identification task did so with an average accuracy of 52.93% (SD 21.63; range 16.67% – 91.67%), which a

t-test revealed to be statistically no better than chance. The same 37 participants reported having studied English for an average of 8.24 years (SD 3.33; range 1 – 14 years). Of the 33 who indicated a preferred accent, 16 reported preferring British, 16 American, and one said “both.”

Bivariate (Pearson) correlation analyses of the above data revealed no statistically significant relationship among participants’ accuracy in identifying the speakers’ accents, their years of study, and their preferred accent. Moreover, multiple regression analyses showed no statistically significant interaction between participants’ accuracy in identifying the speakers’ accents, their years of study, or their preferred accent and their ratings of the 12 speakers. These findings suggest that the accent identification, years of study, and preferred accent data are unimportant, so the scale-rating data from all 63 participants who completed the rating task were analyzed together.

As is customary in verbal guise research, each of the eight rating scales was treated as a separate dependent variable for the purposes of analysis. Consequently, eight 2 (gender: male, female) $\times$ 2 (nationality: American, British) ANOVAs were conducted. These ANOVAs revealed a significant main effect of gender on five of the eight traits – all in favor of the female speakers. Specifically, the female speakers were rated significantly more attractive, confident, educated, polite, and friendly. The analyses also revealed significant main effects of nationality on five traits – all in favor of the British speakers, who were rated significantly more attractive, confident, wealthy, educated, and friendly. There were also two sets of ratings that showed statistically significant interactions between gender and nationality, namely, confident and wealthy. These

interactions are driven by the relatively more favorable ratings given the female British speakers. Table 1 shows the statistically significant *p*-values, and Figures 1 through 7 show the significant differences graphically.

Table 1

Summary of Statistical Significant p-Values

Trait	Main Effect of Gender	Main Effect of Nationality	Interaction
Attractive	.001*	.001*	
Confident	.007	.010	.004
Wealthy		.037	.007
Educated	.001*	.005*	
Polite	.012		
Humble			
Courteous			
Friendly	.002*	.007	

*Statistically significant even if the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons is applied, thus moving the alpha-level from .05 to .006.

Figure 1. Mean attractive
Visualization of participants' ratings of speaker attractiveness, showing the significant main effects of gender (female > male) and nationality (British > American).

Figure 2. Mean confident

Visualization of participants' ratings of speaker confidence showing the significant main effects of gender (female > male) and nationality (British > American), as well as the significant interaction between gender and nationality. Note that all three effects appear to be driven by the high ratings of the female British speakers.

Figure 3. Mean wealthiness

Visualization of participants' ratings of speaker wealthiness, showing the significant main effect of nationality (British > American), as well as the significant interaction between gender and nationality. Again, both effects appear to be driven by the high ratings of the female British speakers.

Figure 4. Mean educated

Visualization of participants' ratings of speaker educatedness, showing the significant main effects of gender (female > male) and nationality (British > American).

Figure 5. Mean polite

Visualization of participants' ratings of speaker politeness, showing the significant main effect of gender (female > male). The mean gender difference is larger for the British speakers than the American speakers, but both go in the same direction – favoring female speakers.

Figure 6. Mean friendly

Visualization of participants' ratings of speaker friendliness, showing the significant main effects of gender (female > male) and nationality (British > American). It seems that American males are driving the effects here.

Figure 7. Mean rating

Visualization of participants' ratings of the speakers based on all eight rating scales averaged together, showing significant main effects of gender (female > male) and nationality (British > American).

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

Despite participants' inability to distinguish British and American accents, which parallels Chiba et al.'s (1995) findings for Japanese, the results show that participants perceived the British speakers significantly more favorably than the American speakers on a variety of traits and did not favor the American speakers on any. This strict uniformity in the direction of the effect seems unlikely to be a coincidence, and suggests that conscious ability to distinguish speakers' dialects and identify their nationalities is not a necessary precondition to having different (unconscious) perceptions of those speakers. The bases of the unconscious perceptions found in this study remain a mystery.

Also striking is the difference between the status traits (attractive, confident, wealthy, educated; the top four in Table 1) and the solidarity traits (polite, humble, courteous, and friendly; the bottom four in Table 1). In particular, participants' ratings on all four status scales show significant main effects of nationality, and all but one (wealthy) show significant main effects of gender. Of the four solidarity scales, on the other hand, only one (polite) shows a significant main effect of nationality, and only two (polite and friendly) show significant main effects of gender. This suggests that whatever difference these Saudi listeners unconsciously perceived between American and British speakers had much more to do with status than solidarity.

CHAPTER 5: LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Limitations

Perhaps the biggest limitation of the present study is the inclusion of only female participants. Another study would be needed to explore male perceptions of male and female British and American speakers. The other major limitation is that the researcher was in the U.S. during data collection and, thus, could not oversee the procedure. As a result, some of those collecting the data did not follow the procedure, and many participants' data could not be used.

Conclusions

Despite their inability to distinguish British and American accents, the Saudi female EFL students studied showed a significant preference for British speakers over American speakers and female speakers over male speakers, particularly in terms of the speakers' status. This suggests that conscious ability to distinguish speakers' dialects and identify their nationalities is not a necessary precondition to having different (unconscious) perceptions of those speakers.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: TEXT OF THE PASSAGE READ BY SPEAKERS

The oldest human footprints outside of Africa have been discovered in Britain, dating back around a million years. They were found on a beach on the Norfolk coast and are direct evidence of the earliest known humans in Northern Europe.

APPENDIX B: RATING SCALE

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Confident							Not confident
Not Attractive							Attractive
Wealth							Not wealth
Not educated							Educated
Humble							Not humble
Not polite							Polite
Friendly							Not friendly
Not courteous							Courteous

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