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The influence of ethnocentrism on social perceptions of nonnative accents

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between ethnocentrism and perceptions of nonnative accents. Participants were assigned to either an experimental or a control group. After completing a measure of ethnocentrism, participants in both groups were exposed to one of two videos of the same speaker delivering a speech on the benefits of exercise. The videos were identical except that the speaker in the video viewed by the experimental group spoke with a nonnative accent while the speaker viewed by the control group spoke with a standard American accent. For the experimental group, ethnocentrism was negatively and significantly correlated with perceptions of the speaker's physical, social, and task attractiveness, his credibility, and perceived homophily. For the control group, none of the correlations were significant.

1. Introduction

In the past 60 years a substantial body of research has accumulated in the social sciences regarding the social and psychological impact of speaking with a nonnative accent. Much of this research supports the argument that the manner and style in which one speaks, including one's accent, plays a central role in creating and maintaining one's social makeup while communicating to others meaningful social data (Giles, 1970; Giles and Johnson, 1987; Gluszek and Dovidio, 2010b). Most researchers in this area agree that a nonnative accent often stigmatizes a person as foreign born and one who does not apply the language competently (cf. Cargile and Giles, 1997; Dixon et al., 2002; Giles, 1970; Edwards, 1999; Giles and Billings, 2004; Gluszek and Dovidio, 2010a,b; Lippi-Green, 1994; Stewart et al., 1985). Gluszek and Dovidio (2010b) point out that while speakers often do not recognize it in themselves, everyone speaks with an accent. Following the pioneering work of Giles (1970), an accent represents a manner or style of pronunciation and is distinct from a speaker's dialect. According to Giles (1970), dialect refers to differences in grammar and vocabulary among different versions of the same language, whereas an accent is the paralinguistic component including the phonological and intonation features of the spoken word; that is, its sound. Hence, speakers with different accents may share the same grammar, syntax, and lexicon but sound very different in their usage (Giles, 1970; Gluszek and Dovidio, 2010a,b). Such paralinguistic differences often prompt social perceptions about others. As Kinzler et al. (2009) note, an accent is a cue to one's social origins and a powerful ingroup/outgroup indicator as it provides information about another's national and/or regional origins, ethic group membership, social standing, and class. Kinzler et al. (2009) also point to research that shows that people often use accent to deduce another's intelligence, warmth, and height even for persons with whom they have never interacted or met. Moreover, such cues are recognized early in life. In their research, Kinzler et al. (2009) found that 5-month-old infants gazed longer at someone

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speaking their native language with a native accent relative to someone speaking a foreign language or foreign accent. In that same study, they found that 10-month-old infants preferred toys from individuals who had previously spoke the infants' native language even though the individual was silent at the time of the toy offering (see also Kinzler et al., 2007). As Kinzler et al. (2009) note, from early in their development, infants and children are conscientious of language and accent differences which affect their social cognitions and perceptions. Unfortunately, these cognitions and perceptions of the nonnative accent speaker are often negative, although not always. As Gluszek and Dovidio (2010b) have shown, nonnative speakers face both prejudice and stereotypes as a function of their nonnative accent. Specifically, Gluszek and Dovidio (2010b) review research that demonstrates that speakers with nonnative accents are perceived by others as (a) less intelligent, (b) less loyal, (c) less competent, (d) of lower status, and (e) as speaking the language poorly, even though their actual language competency may be above reproach. To be sure, some of these prejudices and stereotypes are linked with a particular social or cultural group, but other research has found that listeners holding such stereotypes need not accurately identify the ethnic or national origins of an accent to make such judgments (Giles et al., 1995; Milroy and McClenaghan, 1977). Gluszek and Dovidio (2010b) also cite research that shows that persons with nonnative accents often experience discrimination in (a) housing, (b) the courts, and (c) employee compensation/salary. Lippi-Green (1994) points out that in contrast to racial, ethnic, or sex discrimination, which Title VII of the US Civil Rights Act clearly forbids, employers (and others) have considerable latitude when discriminating against people with nonnative accents. She maintains that one's accent actually becomes a manner and a means for exclusion. Lippi-Green (1994) also asserts that when an accent is rejected, the identity of the person speaking it is also rejected which usually includes the speaker's race, ethnicity, and/or social class.

Although the research cited above suggests that speakers of nonnative accents are evaluated negatively (by speakers of the native language) the specific variety of nonnative accent plays a role in such evaluation. For example, Lindemann (2005) asked US undergraduates, all native speakers of English, to perform a number of tasks including the rating of nonnative speakers of English from across the globe, including Australia, Canada, China, England, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, Russia, and Spain. She found significant differences in the evaluations of specific varieties of nonnative English. Specifically, nonnative English speakers from Mexico and China were described speaking the most incorrectly and were negatively stigmatized. Nonnative speakers of English from France, Italy, and Germany were evaluated as speaking English most correctly and were the least stigmatized. Lindemann (2005) is careful to point out that sociopolitical factors and familiarity may explain the positive and negative evaluation of the nonnative speakers of English in these countries, with those countries that are identified as adversaries of the US and less familiar countries being rated most negatively.

To be sure, there are cases where one's accent carries positive connotations. For example, Lippi-Green (1994) points out that western European accents are generally perceived as positive compared to Asian or Hispanic accents. In their study of Australian children, Nesdale and Rooney (1996) found that the accents of the majority or dominant group were perceived as more prestigious than the accents of the ethnic minority groups. Kalin et al. (1980) asked students to match job applicants' accent with high or low status jobs. For the high status job, students rated English first followed by German, South Asian, and West Indian accents, in that order. In a more recent study, Hosoda et al. (2007) found that compared to an Asian accent, Standard American English (operationalized as nonaccented English) evoked more positive affect among a diverse group of study participants, including Asian, Euro-American, Hispanic American, African American and mixed-ethnicity.

Gluszek and Dovidio (2010b) assert that much of the research on nonnative accents, especially that which focuses on prejudice and discrimination, has taken a listener focus; that is, such research has been approached from person-perception perspective where the center of attention is on the listener's responses to and evaluation of another's nonnative accent. Likewise, Cargile and Giles (1997) note that the majority of research on language attitudes has focused on documenting listeners' evaluative responses to accents and languages. In addition, Cargile and Giles (1997) maintain that reactions to nonnative accents can be cognitive or affective, or both. They contend that we may think something about another's accent (e.g., *British people are so smart*) and/or we may feel something about the accent (e.g., *I hate the sound of New Yorkers*).

Edwards (1999), too, argues that language and accent are important social makers and that people in virtually every culture hold very potent attitudes about their native language and the language of others. Generally, according to Edwards (1999), positive attitudes are held about one's native language, including accent, while negative attitudes are held about nonnative languages, although this is not always the case (see Stewart et al., 1985). Edwards (1999) posits three reasons why people might hold such powerful attitudes about language, and especially accent and dialect. One possibility, according to Edwards (1999), is that the speakers of a particular language actually believe their language, accent, or dialect is superior to another. Indeed, the central tenets of the Muted Group Theory stress that members of the dominant cultural group prefer and sometimes even legislate the use of their language as the favored code over that of a subordinate cultural group's whose language is thought to be substandard and is often denigrated by the dominant group (cf. Ardener, 1975; Kramarae, 1981). Yet, contemporary linguists clearly have established that no variant of the human language is inherently superior to any other variant (Chomsky, 1972; Fodor, 1981; Pinker, 1994, 2002, 2007). Another possibility, according to Edwards (1999), is that the speakers of a particular language prefer their language and/or accent to others because it possesses some inherent paralinguistic aesthetic quality. But Giles and his associates (Cargile and Giles, 1997; Giles and Billings, 2004; Giles et al., 1974; Stewart et al., 1985) have argued convincingly that attitudinal preferences for one language over another are not based on any intrinsic aesthetic quality that a particular language might possess. Instead, and here is the third possibility, according to Edwards (1999) and others, attitudes about a given language or accent are based on the social perceptions of the speakers of that language and/or accent rather than on the language itself (Giles and Billings, 2004; Giles et al., 1974; Giles and Ryan, 1982). Hence, as the review or literature above suggests, and as Gluszek and Dovidio (2010b) point out, the way one speaks,