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Language & Communication

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

Person perception and language: A case of English words in Croatian



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 21 December 2016

Keywords:

Language attitudes
Lexical borrowing
Social attractiveness
Positive characteristics
Negative characteristics

ABSTRACT

Research on language attitudes has shown that speech style plays an important role in social evaluation. In Croatia, English words commonly occur in everyday communication, which could affect the way we perceive other people. This study aims to investigate the relation between English words and person perception. 200 Croatian elementary school students, adolescents and young adults were given one of the three versions of the same text, varying in the frequency of English words, and a questionnaire to evaluate personal characteristics of the author of the text. The results showed that frequent use of English words was related to higher estimations of social attractiveness, indicating that the use of English words has become an important cue in person perception.

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1. Introduction

With English being the lingua franca of today's society, its influence on other languages, including Croatian, is becoming more and more evident, especially on the lexical level. Many people, especially adolescents and young adults, use English words in their everyday communication. Research on language attitudes has shown that a person's speech style plays an important role in social evaluation. This paper aims at investigating whether the use of English words in Croatian adolescents and young adults affects language attitudes and person perception.

1.1. Person perception and language

There are many factors that shape our perception of another person. For example, visual information, such as physical characteristics and nonverbal communication, are very important for the development of first impressions. A vast body of research has stressed the relevance of language in person perception (e.g. Cargile et al., 1994; Giles and Billings, 2004; Giles et al., 2006; Gluszek and Hansen, 2013; Rakić, Steffans & Mummendey, 2011a). First impressions about other people are formed very quickly, which means that the process must include certain mechanisms that facilitate cognitive processing of available information. One of them includes language - a semiotic tool that facilitates cognitive operations in person categorization (Holtgraves and Kashima, 2008).

Research on language and person perception is often related to language attitudes. Language attitudes are defined as social evaluation of speech styles (Dragojevic et al., 2015; Dragojevic and Giles, 2014), as well as feelings/beliefs toward variations of

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one's own and foreign languages (Noels et al., 2014). It seems that language can have greater impact on social categorization than a person's physical appearance. In their study, Rakić, Steffans & Mummendey (2011a) investigated the role of auditory and visual stimuli on person perception. Different accents were used as auditory stimuli, while physical characteristics were used as visual stimuli. The results showed a significant advantage of auditory over visual input in social categorization.

A great amount of data on person perception and language attitudes, collected from empirical research in the past three decades, has given a relatively unique pattern: language attitudes are mostly associated with two main dimensions of social evaluation: *status* and *solidarity* (e.g. Cavallaro and Chin, 2009; Dragojević et al., 2015; El-Dash and Busnardo, 2001), also known as *competence* and *warmth* (e.g. Berry et al., 1997; Fiske et al., 2002). Some researchers describe other dimensions of social evaluation (for an overview see Fuertes et al., 2012; Giles and Billings, 2004), such as *dynamism* (e.g. Mulac et al., 1974), which refers to a person's level of activity, *dominance* (e.g. Berry et al., 1997) and *social attractiveness* (e.g. Coupland and Bishop, 2007). *Social attractiveness* is sometimes seen as a dimension equal to *solidarity* (e.g. Grondelaers and van Hout, 2010; Zhang, 2011). In contrast, a global instrument named Attitudes Towards Languages Scale (AToL) (Schoel et al., 2013) founded the following dimensions: *value*, *sound* and *structure*, with *value* being a superordinate factor. It needs to be stressed that there is no consensus among researchers regarding language attitudes dimensions, and that the described dimensions were found based on participants' evaluations of speakers with different accents or different national identities. Thus, it is not clear which dimensions would load if an evaluation of a person was made on the basis of frequency of foreign words. Also, research has shown that Croatian participants tend to make evaluations in terms of positive and negative dimensions (Brumini et al., 2012; Jelić, 2009). Since Croatian participants were not included in the AToL, there is no data to rely on regarding language attitudes research in Croatia.

One of the most investigated topics in the field is related to accents and their role in social evaluation (e.g. Cargile and Giles, 1997; Cargile et al., 2010; Dailey et al., 2005; Fuertes et al., 2002; Hosoda et al., 2007). The impact of different accents on language attitudes can be seen in everyday life. For example, research has shown that job interview outcomes are negatively influenced by the use of non-standard accents (Hosoda and Stone-Romero, 2010; Segrest-Purkiss et al., 2006), with the *status* dimension being rated lower for non-standard speakers (Rakić, Steffans & Mummendey, 2011b). Accents also play an important role in stereotyping (Kristiansen, 2001). They affect the evaluation of a person's credibility (Frumkin, 2007; Lev-Ari and Keysar, 2010), deceptiveness and the degree of guilt in eyewitness testimonies (Frumkin, 2007). The influence of non-standard accents is not limited to adulthood - it significantly affects children's social preferences as well (Kinzler et al., 2009). Another example is negative concord, a grammatical form that is not allowed in standard English (e.g. *He don't have no friends*). Wolfram (2004) found that the use of negative concord had a negative influence on job interview outcomes. However, experimental research has shown that if participants are asked to speak in a non-standard (or second) language before the experiment, their tendency to discriminate non-standard speakers of their own language is significantly reduced (e.g. Hansen et al., 2014). These findings suggest that language attitudes are not constant; they dynamically shift with the change of the context (Dragojević and Giles, 2014).

1.2. English words in Croatian

Research on language attitudes has mainly been focused on accents, non-standard language styles and dialects. However, little attention has been given to the influence of vocabulary (including anglicisms and unadapted English words) on person perception (e.g. El-Dash and Busnardo, 2001).

Languages have always been in contact, influencing each other on all linguistic levels. One example of such an influence is lexical borrowing. Reasons for borrowing are numerous and the most sensitive is lexis. The phenomenon can in part be attributed to the basic need of linguistic borrowing that is, filling lexical gaps for conceptual innovations due to new developments (Drljača Margić, 2009). It is more likely for the speakers to use the already existing borrowed word than to create a completely new one.

Lexical borrowing is not a new phenomenon. Throughout the history, Croatian was influenced by many languages - Latin, Italian, German, Hungarian, Turkish, Russian, etc. Today, Croatian has become most receptive to borrowing from the English language (Geld and Mihaljević Djigunović, 2003). English words have become a part of Croatian everyday communication. When talking about sports and recreation, we can find words like *bungee jumping*, *paragliding* and *snowboard*. Fashion shows and magazines use expressions such as *nail art* and *makeover*. In music industry we talk about *hip-hop* and *acid jazz* (Nikolić-Hoyt, 2005). Newspaper ads look for *sales representatives* and *assistant managers*, offer *last minute* arrangements and advertise *wellness* and *spa centers*.

However, a distinction should be made between anglicisms and English words. Anglicisms are words that originate from the English language, but they have adapted (more or less) to the recipient language. Some examples in Croatian are words like *ček* (check, *n.*), *tim* (team) and *film* (film), which have adapted to Croatian by transphonemization (phoneme substitution). Anglicisms can also include words that are not English in origin, but they have fully adapted to the rules of the English language and have become an integral part of its vocabulary (Filipović, 1990). Thus, words like *televizija* (television) and *radio* whose formative units originate from Latin and Greek can also be termed anglicisms (Fink, 1992). English words also come from English, but, unlike anglicisms, they have not adapted to the Croatian orthographic, phonological or morphological rules. Some examples of English words are *browser* and *e-mail*. Sometimes, English words are used with Croatian affixes (e.g. *eventi*), and such words are called pseudoanglicisms (Filipović, 1990).

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