



On the effects of regional accents on memory and credibility

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ABSTRACT

The information we obtain from how speakers sound—for example their accent—affects how we interpret the messages they convey. A clear example is foreign accented speech, where reduced intelligibility and speaker's social categorization (out-group member) affect memory and the credibility of the message (e.g., less trustworthiness). In the present study, we go one step further and ask whether evaluations of messages are also affected by regional accents—accents from a different region than the listener. In the current study, we report results from three experiments on immediate memory recognition and immediate credibility assessments as well as the illusory truth effect. These revealed no differences between messages conveyed in local—from the same region as the participant—and regional accents—from native speakers of a different country than the participants. Our results suggest that when the accent of a speaker has high intelligibility, social categorization by accent does not seem to negatively affect how we treat the speakers' messages.

1. Introduction

We obtain many sorts of information from the way a speaker sounds, affecting how we remember and evaluate speakers and their messages (e.g., Baus, Bas, Calabria, & Costa, 2017; Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010, 2012; McAleer, Todorov, & Belin, 2014; Ryan, Giles, & Sebastian, 1982). One of the most salient features of a spoken message is the accent with which it is conveyed, which influences listeners' evaluations. For instance, messages said in a foreign accent are remembered in less detail and are considered less credible than those produced with a native accent (Evans & Michael, 2014; Hanzlíková & Skarnitzl, 2017; Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010, 2012; and Podlipský, Šimáčková, & Petráž, 2016; but see Souza & Markman, 2013 and Stocker, 2017). Put simply, we do not remember or believe messages produced by foreign accented speakers—i.e., non-native speakers of a language—to the same extent as those produced by native speakers. This has important implications for our everyday interactions, since we often interact with people from other regions with different accents.

Here, we explore whether this reduction in memory and credibility is also present in an even more common conversational situation: interacting with someone with a different regional accent. Regional accents are those accents that mark the speaker's region of origin, but are still native accents. For example, people from Texas in the USA and from Liverpool in the UK have different regional accents, but both are native speakers of English. As we argue below, there are similarities and differences between foreign and regional accents, which are especially

relevant when assessing the generalization of accent effects on message processing. In the following, we describe the two main explanations (not mutually exclusive) why foreign accents affect memory and credibility—intelligibility reduction and social categorization—and how they might apply to regional accents.

Processing accented speech involves somewhat a reduction in message intelligibility, which affects cognitive judgments such as the credibility of the message (i.e., processing fluency hypothesis; Oppenheimer, 2008). For instance, several studies support the claim that processing difficulty is directly related to the truth value assigned to the message. The easier to process, the easier to remember, and the more credible a message is considered (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010, 2012; Reber & Schwarz, 1999). Lev-Ari and Keysar showed that listeners remember trivia statements less accurately (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2012) and evaluate them as less credible (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010) when produced with a foreign accent than when they are produced with a native accent. Importantly, foreign accents only affect memory when participants are instructed to perform a comprehension task, but not when instructed to perform a memory task (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2012). This result is interpreted as showing that the difficulty associated with processing foreign accents comes not only from a reduced intelligibility but from the linguistic expectations created by listeners about speakers (i.e., foreign speakers make more errors), leading to a less detailed processing and weaker memory representations.

The reduction in intelligibility associated with foreign accents may be taken to indicate reduced linguistic ability, and therefore a proxy for

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unrelated skills such as intellectual ability, much like a “halo effect” (cognitive bias in which an observer’s impression of a person influences the evaluation of their individual traits, Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). That is, accent serves as a cue that a speaker is a non-native speaker, which activates stereotypes—such as *foreign accented speakers are less competent and trustworthy than native speakers*—which might lead to difficulties in comprehension (Kavas & Kavas, 2008; Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, & Fillenbaum, 1960; Munro & Derwing, 1995; Ryan et al., 1982). Furthermore, non-native speakers also evaluate other non-native speakers more negatively (Hanzlíková & Skarnitzl, 2017; Podlipský et al., 2016), highlighting the importance of nativeness in credibility ratings.

The second reason why foreign accents are remembered less accurately and sound less credible than native accents is social categorization. Foreign accented speakers are categorized as out-group members, and this entails a series of cognitive biases (e.g., “the other accent effect”; Stevenage, Clarke, & McNeill, 2012). In particular, categorizing a speaker as an out-group member may reduce the attention we pay to them and to their messages, resulting in a less detailed memory representation and a reduction in confidence (Sporer, 2001)—*you do not belong to my social group, so I don't trust you*.

Regional accents differ somewhat from foreign accents in the described characteristics. For one thing, regional accents often affect comprehension, although to a lesser extent than foreign accents do (e.g., Floccia, Goslin, Girard, & Konopczynski, 2006; Goslin, Duffy, & Floccia, 2012; Brunellière & Soto-Faraco, 2013). Importantly, even if intelligibility is affected, this cannot be interpreted as reduced linguistic competence, since regional accents respond to geographical variables—people with an unfamiliar regional accent come from a different region or country—and not to intellectual ones (although regional accents vary in terms of prestige, see below). Hence, to the extent that the origin of this foreign accent effect is tied to a reduction in intelligibility that signals reduced competence, one may expect memory and credibility effects to diminish or even disappear with regionally accented messages—*why should an American consider a British speaker less linguistically skilled and hence less intelligent because of his accent?*

In contrast, regional accents do certainly signal that the speaker is an out-group member in terms of both heritage and language use—e.g., the speaker is from the UK and not from the US. Could this social categorization lead to a reduction in memory and credibility? In fact, we do have some indirect evidence to answer this question. Interactions matching the listener’s own accent increase customer satisfaction with the company and purchase intention (Mai & Hoffmann, 2011), as well as memory for the product name (Morales, Scott, & Yorkston, 2012).

One of the problems when exploring the impact of regional accents is that sometimes they are also associated with prestige, which affects the way the message is considered. For example, more prestigious accents—e.g., standard accents—lead to greater satisfaction with the individual (Mai & Hoffmann, 2011) and increased product preference (Morales et al., 2012). Other studies have supported the idea that prestigious accents lead to higher assessments of competence and respectability (St. Clair & Giles, 1980), as well as social attractiveness and positive personality characteristics (Fuertes, Potere, & Ramirez, 2002). In fact, the importance of prestige is clear when considering that indeed American listeners judge British accents as more prestigious than American ones, despite the latter being the listener’s own-accent (Stewart, Ryan, & Giles, 1985). Thus, when considering the effect of regional accent, it is important to control for other factors, such as prestige, that might play an important role during the evaluation of the speaker’s message.

In sum, given the similarities and differences between foreign and regional accents in terms of intelligibility and categorization, it is not immediately obvious that regional accents affect the memory and credibility of messages in the same way that foreign accents do. The goal of this study is to explore these issues. Specifically, we focus on the particular case of regional accents from different countries—i.e.,

Spanish speakers from Spain versus Spanish speakers from Latin-America—in order to look at regional accents that are both the most distinct and the most culturally distant. At the same time, to reduce the impact of prestige in the present study, we selected accents from Latin-America that tend to be minimally associated with low-prestige stereotypes.

1.1. The current study

We assessed the memory and credibility afforded to statements presented in local or regional accents in three experiments. In Experiment 1, we presented statements that were presumably unknown to the participants, and subsequently assessed their ability to recognize them in an old/new paradigm. Following Lev-Ari and Keysar (2012), memory was assessed indirectly. Participants were instructed at the beginning of the experiment that they would be performing a comprehension task. Additionally, the same materials were tested directly in a memory task to discard the possibility that the foreign accent effect was uniquely due to intelligibility differences between accents. In Experiment 2, participants assessed how credible these same statements were, immediately after hearing them once. Finally, in Experiment 3, we measured credibility in a more indirect way by assessing the influence of regional accents on the illusory truth effect. Illusory truth refers to the observation that (among other things) repeating a statement makes it sound more truthful. All the experiments were conducted in Spanish, with the Barcelona accent as the local and various Latin-American accents as the regional ones.

To advance the results, we found that regional accents do not impact the memory or credibility of the message and lead to similar levels of illusory truth than the listener’s own accent.

2. Experiment 1: memory for local and regional accents

The purpose of Experiment 1 was to explore whether people remember phrases said in regional accents as much as those in the local accent, by having participants listen to statements and then assess whether they had heard them before in an old/new paradigm. Importantly, memory was evaluated following the procedure in Lev-Ari and Keysar (2012). That is, participants were instructed at the beginning of the experiment that their task would be a comprehension task. In doing so, we were able to distinguish if differences in accent are due to speaker-induced expectations or to reduced intelligibility of regional relative to local accents.

2.1. Methods

2.1.1. Participants

Thirty native Spanish speakers from Barcelona (six male), students at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, took part in this study. Their average age was 22.3 ($SD = 4.6$). Participation was voluntary and compensated with 5€ for 30 min of participation. Due to technical issues, one participant had to be excluded from the experiment, leaving a final pool of 29 participants.

2.1.2. Materials

Sixty sentences were created using trivia facts (translated and reworded from various trivia websites), avoiding geographic and historic trivia from Latin-America and Spain. In order to be able to ask participants about whether they had seen a phrase or not in a recognition task, we had to create foils that they had not been exposed to before—new statement—but that were very similar to the repeated—old—statements. As a first step for creating the foils, the sentences were worded such that the key word was the last word in the sentence. For example, “The French gave the name the apple of love to tomatoes” and “In 1719, in North America, there first appeared potatoes”. Next, in order to create the new statements—foils created for the

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