

Accent or Expectation? Investigating the Relationship Between Accented English and Psychological Valence Perception

Mariam Bekhet, Daniel Pape & Nadia Lana, McMaster University

Whether we realize it or not, our expectations of accented speakers go beyond the actual phonetic and acoustic differences of their speech. We might associate some English accents with romance and charm, whereas other accents could be perceived as aggressive and unpleasant. Television and films in Western culture have frequently presented Arabic and Russian-accented English as antagonistic or villainous, which implicitly influences our internal categorization of anyone with these accents. Previous research (Hatzidaki et al., 2015) suggests that accents can hinder the perception of positive valence. But what happens when there's no phonetic or acoustic difference in the English sentences we perceive, but rather just the label or expectation of a certain accent is modified?

This research project aims to investigate how psychological valence and labels can influence the perception of accented and unaccented speech. This study explores how different phonetic parameters (i.e. accents) of the same emotional (positive, neutral or negative) sentence influence perception of emotion. We also investigate how different 'accent' labels influence the perception of emotionality, and thus whether the accent or simply the expectation or label of an accent would influence valence perception.

We use recordings of both monolingual English speakers and bilingual Russian/English and Arabic/English heritage speakers. For the purpose of this study, the same heritage speaker provides sentences in (1) their natural unaccented English and (2) a truthful imitation of a strongly accented speaker (Arabic or Russian). This procedure was chosen to exclude all speaker-specific effects when comparing the effects of accent on listener ratings. The monolingual English speaker productions are used as filler stimuli and provide a baseline (however including speaker-specific differences). Participants are presented with mismatched recordings and labels (i.e. 'Arabic Speaker', 'Canadian Speaker', 'Russian Speaker', 'English Speaker', and 'Speaker') and then asked to rate the valence of each sentence on a scale of 1 (negative) to 9 (positive). Furthermore, participants are presented with two questionnaires to establish language experience (Marian et al., 2007) and to measure accent prejudice (Ura et al., 2015). Participants are currently being recruited through the departmental undergraduate participation system, and preliminary results will be presented at this conference.

We predict that participants will respond more negatively to accented stimuli, but responses will be exacerbated with prior experience for that specific accent for each participant. We also expect to see a relationship between accent labels and valence ratings, hypothesizing that accents frequently presented in media as villainous will be rated more negatively overall, whether that accent is acoustically present in the audio signal or, in contrast, just provided as a label

References

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