Language Attitudes Down Under: Attractiveness and Perceived Similarity of English Accents

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ABSTRACT

Perceived similarity is an uncommon construct in previous studies on attitudes towards accents. This study focuses on how Australian adolescents rate the attractiveness of four English accents and how similar the participants judge these accents to be to their own accent. This study uses a verbal-guise technique and a survey to question 66 Australian adolescents. The speakers used in this study represent a General American, a standard British (RP), an Australian, and a New Zealand accent. The Australians rate the Australian accent highest in attractiveness and similarity. This study found that attractiveness and similarity in this context are positively correlated.

Keywords
Perceived similarity, attitudinal evaluation, English accents, verbal-guise, attractiveness, Australia.

INTRODUCTION

Attitudes towards accents are often measured by constructs such as status, competence, solidarity, attractiveness, and integrity (Preston, 2004). Status, solidarity, and attractiveness have been of significant influence on the way participants evaluate English accents. However, how similar participants' perceive their accent to be to that of the speaker is usually disregarded. A possible explanation is that similarity is closely related to solidarity, and thus left out. Yet, studies on perceived similarity, especially in combination with other dimensions, could yield interesting results on how participants rate accents that they find similar to their own. There are studies on objective linguistic similarity of English accents, e.g. on phonetic similarity of Englishes (McMahon, A., Heggarty, McMahon, R., & Maguire, 2007) and on phonemic similarity between New Zealand English and Australian English (Watson, Harrington, & Evans, 1998). However, there is little research regarding perceived linguistic similarity between subjects and speakers. Yook and Lindemann (2013) and Paunović (2009) studied if non-native speakers of English could identify where speakers of English were from, yet did not study if the participants could identify with the speakers. Ladegaard and Sachdev (2008) asked

their (Danish) participants if they identified with the accents of the speakers, yet the participants did not show a great sense of identification with any speaker. Bayard et al. (2001) studied native subjects and asked their participants to guess the nationality of the speakers and found that 80% of Australian participants identified their own accent correctly. Bayard et al. also found that Australian participants accurately identified the nationalities belonging with the English, American, and New Zealand accents. This accuracy could possibly be explained with Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory, which argues that "pressures to evaluate one's own group positively through in-group/out-group comparisons lead social groups to attempt to differentiate themselves from each other" (pp. 40-41). McKenzie (2008) confirms Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory in the context of attitudes towards accents. McKenzie suggested that his Japanese participants rated heavily accented Japanese English (HJE) higher in social attractiveness than moderately accented Japanese English (MJE) due to the fact that "the HJE speech itself is a salient marker of in-group identity amongst the Japanese learners of English" (p. 75). Chen, Edwards, Young, and Greenberger (2001) studied if American-Asian subgroups preferred one American-Asian subgroup to another. They found that the Asian subgroups showed in-group preference. They also found that the Asian subgroups showed a gradient of preference of other subgroups. The Japanese and Chinese subgroups were preferred most frequently, possibly due to their long presence in the United States and due to their relatively high socio-economic status. Both Social Identity Theory and socio-economic status are possible explanations why one accent can be preferred over another.

Moreover, I have not been able to find studies that investigate how subjects that are native speakers of English rate similarity with the accents of the speakers within attitudinal evaluations studies towards English accents. Many studies have compared attitudes of participants towards their own accents and other accents, yet it is not always clear what participants consider to be their own accent. Thus, it has yet to be explored how similarity affects attitudes of native speakers of English towards English accents. Therefore, this study will investigate the uncommonly used dimension similarity in a native speaker context. Moreover, this study will combine the construct similarity with the frequently used construct attractiveness and investigate a possible correlation. More specifically, it

will look at the correlation between the rated attractiveness of Australian adolescents towards General American (GA), Received Pronunciation (RP), the Australian English accent (AUS), and the New Zealand English accent (NZ), and how similar Australian adolescents find their own accent to be to these accents.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The focus of this study can be subdivided into four research questions:

• *RQ1: How do Australian adolescents rate the attractiveness of GA, RP, AUS and NZ?*

It is expected that, in line with Social Identity Theory, Australian adolescents will rate AUS higher than GA, RP, and NZ.

• *RQ2: How similar do Australian adolescents regard their own accent to be to GA, RP, AUS, and NZ?*

Following Social Identity Theory, it is expected that Australians would categorise accents other than AUS as out-groups. However, to what extent RP, GA, AUS and NZ will be judged to be similar to the participant's accent or to what extent these accents will be judged as out-groups, cannot be clearly predicted, as there are no previous studies using the similarity dimension in this context. Chen et al.'s (2001) finding that out-groups can be rated following a gradient of preference, suggests that some out-groups will be judged to sound more similar to the participant's accent than other out-groups.

• *RQ3: Is there a correlation between the attractiveness of GA, RP, AUS, and NZ as rated by Australian adolescents and how similar Australian adolescents regard their own accent to be to GA, RP, AUS, and NZ?*

It is expected that the Australian participants rate AUS highest on both the attractiveness scale and the similarity scale. However, the sequence in which RP, GA, and NZ will be rated on attractiveness and similarity is unclear. Thus, given the number of potentially conflicting influences on each scale, there is no clear hypothesis predicting a potential correlation between rated attractiveness and rated similarity of RP, GA, AUS, and NZ as judged by Australian adolescents.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 66 Australian adolescents. The participants were born and raised in Australia, or had lived in Australia for most of their lives, and spoke English as their native language. Most of the participants lived in or around Wollongong, New South Wales. 38 of the subjects were male and 28 of the subjects were female. The participants were aged 18-27 and 86.4 % of the participants was aged 18-21. 59 of the subjects were students, 5 subjects had a full-time job, and 2 subjects had another occupation, namely 'unemployed' and 'student and part-time job', respectively.

Materials

A survey was used to question the respondents. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of general questions about age, gender, occupation, nationality, and native languages. The second part of the survey consisted of 8 sound files, each presented with the same 8 statements. This study used the verbal guise method. Therefore, each sound file represented one speaker with an AUS, NZ, RP, or GA accent. Each accent was used twice. All speakers were young female adolescents and talked about tasting candy. They all sounded excited about this topic, in order to control for the mood of the speakers. The researcher and a second expert rater judged the speakers to be representative of the accent they were ought to represent, and sufficiently equal in content, mood, and age group. The participants were not informed about which accents they listened to, nor were they told about the aim of this study. Each sound file the participants listened to was followed by 8 statements that the participants rated on a 5-point Likert scale. This scale included the answers strongly agree (1), agree (2), neutral (3), disagree (4), and strongly disagree (5). The same statements were used for each sound file. The 8 statements consisted of 4 items that represented the construct attractiveness and 4 items that represented the construct similarity.

Instruments

LimeSurvey (LimeSurvey Project Team, 2015) was used to create the survey used in this study. The results of the survey were processed in SPSS Version 24.0 (IBM Corporations, 2016). Statistical analyses were also done in SPSS. Initial reliability tests showed that both attractiveness and similarity were shown to be reliable constructs and were used for further calculations

Procedure

The survey was distributed via Facebook. The participants were approached generally, via a public Facebook timeline post, and individually, via personal messages.

RESULTS

A ranking of the attractiveness scores can be found in Table 1. The ranking shows that the Australian accent is rated to be the most attractive with average scores of 2.356 (AUS1) and 2.549 (AUS2). The General American accents are rated to be the least attractive, with average scores of 3.072 (GA1) and 3.417 (GA2). However, with exception of AUS1, all accents are rated relatively neutral on the scale of attractiveness with scores around 3.

Table 1
Average attractiveness score in sequence from highest rated attractiveness to lowest rated attractiveness

	Accent	Average attractiveness score
1	AUS1	2.356
2	AUS2	2.549
3	RP1	2.587
4	NZ1	2.724
5	NZ2	2.758
6	RP2	2.803
7	GA1	3.072
8	GA2	3.417

The similarity scores are listed in Table 2. AUS average scores equal 2, NZ average scores equal 3, and GA and RP scores equal 4. Thus, the subjects agree with the similarity of AUS to their own accent, they disagree with the similarity of GA and RP to their own accent, and they have a relatively neutral position regarding the similarity of NZ to their own accent.

Table 2
Average similarity score in sequence from highest rated similarity to lowest rated similarity

	Accent	Average similarity score
1	AUS2	1.8561
2	AUS1	2.0530
3	NZ2	3.1326
4	NZ1	3.3826
5	GA1	3.6364
6	RP1	3.6553
7	RP2	3.7121
8	GA2	3.9432

A MANOVA test (Bonferroni Multivariance) was done to calculate the significant differences in attractiveness and similarity scores between the speakers. The test includes two dependent variables, attractiveness and similarity, and the results are significant if $p < .025$. The results of the MANOVA test indicate that there are no significant differences in rated attractiveness and similarity between two speakers of the same accent. Two speakers of the same accent are thus rated similarly. According to the MANOVA test, GA2 is the only speaker that is rated to be significantly less attractive than the speakers of the other accents. Thus, GA2 is rated to be statistically less attractive than the RP, NZ, and AUS voices. Furthermore, both AUS speakers differ significantly in attractiveness ratings from both GA speakers. GA is thus found to be significantly less attractive than AUS. Moreover, the MANOVA test results indicate that AUS1, AUS2, and NZ2 are the only speakers that differ significantly from all other accents in similarity. Thus, the AUS accent is judged to be completely dissimilar to all other accents. The similar pattern of NZ2 to AUS1 and AUS2 suggests that NZ2 is considered to sound more Australian than the other speakers, yet still significantly unequal to Australian.

A Pearson's Correlation Test showed a positive linear relationship between attractiveness and similarity, with a Pearson correlation coefficient $r=.531$ ($p=.000$). Hence, the attractiveness and similarity constructs are positively correlated

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how Australian adolescents rate GA, RP, AUS, and NZ in terms of attractiveness and perceived similarity, and explored a potential correlation between rated attractiveness of GA, RP, AUS, and NZ and how similar Australian adolescents' rate their own accent to be to GA, RP, AUS, and NZ.

The first research question asked how Australian adolescents rate the attractiveness of GA, RP, AUS, and NZ. The results show that all accents are rated relatively neutral on the attractiveness scale. Following Social Identity Theory, it was hypothesised that Australian adolescents would rate their own accent highest in the attractiveness dimension. The MANOVA test showed that only GA2 is rated to be significantly different from other accents. Thus, the speaker of GA2 is judged to be statistically less attractive than the other speakers. AUS only differs significantly in attractiveness ratings from GA. Therefore, statistically, the Australian subjects rated solely the attractiveness of General American speakers according to in-group/ out-group ideas. Thus, Social Identity Theory is not completely supported by the results. Moreover, the subjects of this study have a relatively neutral standpoint regarding the attractiveness of the different English accents. Only the attractiveness score of one of the Australian speakers is found agreeably attractive. However, this accent is not consistently rated to be statistically different from the other speakers. Consequently, the hypothesis that AUS would be rated higher than the other accents does not hold. Possibly, GA is seen as an out-group due to the threat of increased use of GA in the media. RP and NZ are not considered to be strong out-groups, possibly due to NZ's geographical and social closeness and UK's royal connections to Australia.

The second research question regarded how similar the participants rate GA, RP, AUS, and NZ to be to their own accent. It was hypothesised that, following Social Identity Theory, Australian adolescents would identify themselves as an in-group and rate AUS high in similarity. GA, RP, and NZ would then be classified as out-groups and rated lower than AUS in similarity. The results in Table 2 show a pattern that agrees with the hypothesis. AUS scores highest in similarity and the other accents are rated lower than AUS. The Australian subjects rated the New Zealand speakers to sound closer to their own accent than the other speakers (averaging neutral). This is likely due to the linguistic closeness of NZ to AUS. RP and GA average around 4 (disagree), and are found to be dissimilar to AUS. The fact that RP is rated to be more similar than GA2 could be due to the British features of Australian English. However, GA1 is rated higher than RP, which suggests the influence of American English features on AUS. Furthermore, statistically, the hypothesis holds. The results show that the AUS speakers are rated to be significantly more similar to the participants' accents than GA, RP, or NZ. Among the latter accents there are few significant differences in similarity ratings, with exception of NZ2. NZ2 is rated significantly different from all other accents. Perhaps few participants confused NZ2 to be AUS, which would explain why NZ2 is rated to sound more similar to AUS than NZ1 (yet still significantly less similar than AUS).

The third research question considered the correlation between attractiveness and similarity. It was unclear whether rated attractiveness of GA, RP, AUS, and NZ and rated similarity of GA, RP, AUS, and NZ were correlated.

The results of the Pearson Correlation Test show a positive linear relationship between the two constructs. Thus, a high rating in similarity of GA, RP, AUS, and NZ is positively correlated with a high rating in attractiveness of GA, RP, AUS, and NZ. Consequently, Australian adolescents rate accents that they find similar to their own accent to be more attractive than accents they find dissimilar to their own accent. These results agree with Social Identity Theory. In line with Chen et al.'s (2001) findings that out-groups can be judged following a gradient line, the overall results indicate that Australians adolescents agree less strongly with NZ and RP as out-groups than they agree with GA as an out-group. The results show that GA is rated to come in last place regarding out-group rating, RP comes in third, and NZ in second place.

The results of this study are important for speakers of English, since they indicate the way speakers with different English accents are perceived. These results could be useful for business people visiting Australia, as they way they are perceived by colleagues and clients is significant for business. Additionally, the use of perceived similarity in attitudinal evaluations of accents is fairly novel, this results of this study can be used as stepping stones for further accent studies investigating perceived similarity. The theory that Australian adolescents rate accents that they find similar to their own to be more attractive than accents they find dissimilar to their own accent could be used and built on in further research on attitudes to accents. Furthermore, this study has several limitations and has potential to be elaborated. Due to a limited amount of time and resources, no more than 66 participants could be included in this study. Researching more subjects from different areas in Australia could increase the representativeness of this study. Additionally, to avoid fatiguing the participants, no more than 2 speakers of 4 accents could be included. Including more speakers, and more accents would increase the reliability and thoroughness of this study. Moreover, the limited amount of time excluded the possibility to recode the ratings of 8 speakers into 4 accents and to investigate and test the data using 4 accents rather than 8 speakers. Besides, as the perceived similarity dimension is yet to be explored, further research can be done using this construct. Combining similarity with status, solidarity or other frequently used dimensions in attitudinal evaluations studies can shed light on how the different dimensions correlate. This could be done in both native-speaker and non-native-speaker contexts.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT
Ellen 't Hooft was an undergraduate student working under the supervision of dr. Nynke de Haas when the research in this report was performed. The topic was proposed by the student, the design of the questionnaire and the collecting of the data were done by the student as well. The selection of the speakers was done by both the student and the supervisor. The processing of the results, the formulation of the conclusions and the writing were done by the student.

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