

## Research Forum

### Japanese College Students' Attitudes Toward Accents of English

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Attitudes toward accents and dialects have been investigated in a variety of studies. Though differing in scope, they have shown that accents/dialects reflect their perceived prestige value. This study examines the attitudes of Japanese L1 college students toward eight English accents/dialects. The study confirms that NNSs are able to differentiate between accents/dialects and have assigned different levels of prestige to them.

方言に対する態度の研究は数多く行われてきた。その問題とするところは異なっても、それらの共通した結論は、方言は人がそこにどのような価値を認めているかを反映するというものであった。この研究では、日本語母語話者の大学生が、8つの英語方言にどのような態度を抱いているかを調査した。その結果、非母語話者でも方言の違いは区別できること、それらの方言に異なった価値づけを行っていることがわかった。

Dialect studies have occupied a place in linguistic research for more than 100 years. During the past several decades there has appeared a significant corpus of work focusing on attitudinal variables with regard to accent and dialect. Accent means the way a particular language variant differs phonologically and phonetically. Dialect includes these distinctions as well as those of a lexical or grammatical nature (Chambers & Trudgill, 1980).

One early project was that of William Labov (cited in Wolfson, 1989), whose now classic 1962 study in three New York City department stores found that phonological difference and shifting serve as status markers. He also postulated that a speech community was composed of speakers with shared norms for speech evaluation, whatever their own dialect might be.

Subsequent research studies, including: Giles' 1970 report on the reactions of British school children to a variety of accents (cited in Edwards, 1982), an evaluation reported in 1977 of Irish, Scots, Ulster, and RP accents (Received Pronunciation, often known as "BBC English") by Milroy and McClenaghan (cited in Edwards, 1982), work on an accent continuum in Britain (Trudgill, 1974), and attitudes toward the speech of perceived low-status groups in the United States (Williams, 1973; Taylor, 1973), though differing in approach, method, and scope, have borne out the thesis that language as a social phenomenon reflects the values, attitudes, and social stratification of the groups which both use and encounter it. This occurs in spite of the fact that linguists do not consider any language or dialect to be intrinsically better than another. All have equal value as communicative systems (Wolfson, 1989).

The process in which attitudinal variables have affected language, has resulted in certain accents and dialects being accorded a higher prestige value than others within the same language group. Many languages have seen one dialect become standardized in a process Hudson (1980) calls, "the result of a direct and deliberate intervention by society" (p. 32). In 1966, Haugen (cited in Hudson, 1980) identified a four-stage process of selection, codification, elaboration of function, and acceptance by which this is achieved though others see no consistent pattern (St. Clair, 1982). Whatever the case, this standardization or degree of standardization was seen to operate as the primary determinant of language attitudes.

The other major determinant was seen to be vitality, defined in terms of:

... status, demographic strength, and institutional support. Status refers to the economic, social, and sociohistorical power wielded by the speakers of the language variety [sic]. In terms of demography, the vitality of a variant depends upon the number and distribution of its speakers within the speech community as well as upon the diversity and power of other speech communities who employ it. (Giles, Ryan, & Sebastian, 1982, p.4)

Vitality could serve to enhance the prestige of either the standard form or non-standard social and regional ones.

The prestige accorded certain speech forms is used as an important marker of group identity. Labov (cited in Wolfson, 1989) found that while speakers may vary in their own speech across dialect boundaries, often subconsciously, they were quickly aware of slight differences in the speech of others. Hudson (1980) sees a form of linguistic prejudice emerging in that: "Groups may arbitrarily define their own speech forms as better than those of other groups so that language itself becomes open to value judg-

ments rather than a source of them" (p. 199).

Some studies have focused on stereotyping as a source of this linguistic prejudice against non-standard forms. When the speech of ethnic groups seen as occupying a lower socioeconomic position in American society was assessed by members of higher status groups using semantic differential scales it was found that not only were the assessments broadly negative but also that the mere assignment of an ethnic label to a particular speaker was sufficient to trigger a stereotyped response (Williams, 1973).

Indeed, as Halliday (1978) asserts, a deeper process is going on. Judgments about standards of speech, dialects, and accents might appear on the surface to revolve around notions of esthetics, or even pragmatics, but these are only symbolic representations. At a deeper level they are not only markers of social identity but also the process by which that identity is realized.

Some more recent work has been done with non-native speaker attitudes toward the language they are studying. Eisenstein and Verdi (1985; cited in Wolfson, 1989) observed how adult ESL learners in New York City reacted to three dialects of American English. They found that learners were quickly able to distinguish between the accents and that as the learners developed in proficiency they began to adopt native speaker judgments with regard to standard and non-standard speech.

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether Japanese college-level learners of English have a ranking order with regard to international English accents. The appearance in Japan of employment advertisements that stipulate a required accent for prospective EFL teachers, however discriminatory, suggests that a rank order does exist.

### The Study

This study looked at Japanese college student attitudes toward English accents from both core and periphery English-speaking areas. Core areas were defined by Phillipson (1992) as those in which the dominant group is native-English speaking. The accents selected (and their sources) from this area were:

1. Standard North American General (CNN news)
2. RP British (BBC television)
3. Scottish (movie)
4. Australian (movie)
5. African-American urban (movie)

Phillipson includes in periphery areas such countries as the Netherlands

and Japan by virtue of the importance of English in international trade and diplomacy, a criterion which arguable could embrace nearly every country in the world. For the purposes of this study, however, periphery areas are essentially those areas in which English, important during colonial rule, has continued to enjoy widespread use and, in some cases, official status. In areas like these, English forms have attained or are approaching standardization. The English accents selected from periphery areas were:

6. Indian (movie)
7. West African (TV news broadcast)
8. Philippine (Philippine TV news)

The lack of specificity in the above labels would not satisfy dialectologists. For instance, within the category of North American General there are major regional varieties and many more local distinctions. The accent labels were simplified for the utilitarian purpose of making them comprehensible to the students being surveyed (Trudgill and Hannah, 1994).

It was hypothesized that a status ranking system would emerge, with certain accents receiving more favorable attitudes than others. It was further hypothesized that the North American and British accents would be placed at the top of the scale.

### Method

*Subjects:* Ninety-four Japanese college students (89 women and 5 men), the entire the first-year Intensive English Studies student body at Kansai University of Foreign Languages (Hotani campus), participated in this survey. The students were assumed to be members of a definable Japanese L1/English interlanguage speech community because of their broadly similar levels of proficiency (mean TOEFL score 440, SD 29.76) and socioeconomic background. Additionally, all expressed a strong desire to be able to use English in the future.

Sampling was both purposive and convenient (Nunan, 1992), but as Chaika (1989) notes: "Strict random sampling, taking so many persons in a community (every fourth or every twentieth) is rarely of use in a sociolinguistic study since speech behavior correlates with social stratification and attitudes" (p.34).

*Procedures:* Direct measurement of attitudinal variables was conducted via a questionnaire (Table 1). The questionnaire was administered first in order to focus attention on the task at hand.<sup>1</sup> This was followed by

two evaluation sessions, 30 minutes apart (Table 2). In each evaluation session the same tape, consisting of eight different males speaking for 15 seconds each in a different English accent, was played. Speech with lexical clues as to accent origin was avoided. The matched guise technique was not used because it can produce exaggerated accents (Chaika, 1989), and using different speakers produces the same results (Hudson, 1980). The order of the speakers on the tape was selected at random. All subjects heard the same sequence during both sessions as the variable being tested was the effect of labeling.

In order to mitigate the "anonymous males" problem (Giles and Ryan, 1982), the participants were told that all speakers were either actors, reporters, or television personalities. In the first session the students were not told the accents' origins but in the second they were, to see how labeling might affect attitudes.

The evaluation sessions were subjective reaction ones. Participants were directed to make assessments on a 1-7 rank-order scale based on adjectival opposites. The categories chosen were status, attractiveness, and clarity, which were thought to be indicative of the participants' potential ease of interaction with speakers with those accents (Edwards, 1982). Results from these three categories were calculated on the basis of median scores, as strongly recommended by Hatch and Lazarton (1991), and then rounded off. Aggregate scores, the sum of the three variables, were tabulated to give a general ease of interaction variable and to show rank.

### Results and Discussion

The results from the questionnaire were not unexpected given the extensive range of reciprocal arrangements the Kansai Gaidai (University of Foreign Languages) system has with foreign, primarily American, institutions (currently 147 schools). What was interesting was that almost half of the participants felt a desire to acquire their teachers' accents. Whether this is suggestive of an integrative motivating factor or some other variable would require further analysis.

The results from the evaluation sessions, when considered together with those from the questionnaire, would appear to bear out the hypothesis that an accent rank order, indeed a clearly delineated one, exists, certainly among the target group. With the exception of the British and Scottish accents, where labeling appeared to have a significant effect, broadly similar results were obtained from both sessions. Although the ability to recognize accents was not tested, it might be as-



Table 2: Accent Attitude Evaluation Sessions

First Session				
Rank	Status	Attractiveness	Clarity	Aggregate
1. North American	6.5	6.5	6.5	19.5
2. British RP	5.5	5.0	5.5	16.0
3. Scottish	4.5	4.0	4.5	13.0
4. Australian	4.0	4.5	4.0	12.5
5. Afro-American	3.5	3.5	3.5	10.5
6. West African	3.5	3.5	3.5	10.5
7. Philippine	3.5	3.0	3.0	9.5
8. Indian	3.0	2.5	3.0	8.5

Second Session				
Rank	Status	Attractiveness	Clarity	Aggregate (change)
1. North American	6.5	6.5	6.5	19.5 (0)
2. British RP	6.0	6.0	6.5	18.5 (+2.5)
3. Australian	4.0	4.0	4.0	12.5 (0)
4. Scottish	4.5	4.0	3.5	11.5 (-1.5)
5. Afro-American	3.5	3.5	3.5	10.0 (0)
6. West African	3.5	3.0	3.5	10.0 (-0.5)
7. Philippine	3.5	3.0	3.0	9.5 (0)
8. Indian	3.0	3.0	3.0	9.0 (+0.5)

Note: Status, attractiveness, and clarity were rated on a 1-7 scale. The aggregate figure is the sum of the three variables and is listed to give an ease of interaction index, as well as rank.

sumed that prior exposure to a range of accents combined with successful guessing was involved. A 1974 study by Rosenthal (cited in Hudson, 1980) showed that British children, as young as three years old, were able to distinguish between two American accents and to make substantially correct assumptions as to those accents' relative status.

Whether or not the attitudes held by participants in studies such as these are logical, let alone fair, is a highly charged issue. In an ideal world no accent, dialect, or language would be regarded as intrinsically better than another. To understand clearly the root causes of the attitudes shown in this study, perhaps with the idea of modifying them,

further research would be needed. Some possible directions might include; (a) whether such attitudes as these are particular to one group in society (college students) or society as a whole; (b) whether these attitudes derive from elements indigenous to Japanese society and culture, are a result of the importation of foreign attitudes and stereotypes, or both; and (c) to what extent people would be willing to modify their attitudes and how this might be achieved.

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#### Note

1. The steps suggested by Brown (1988) to control a possible reactivity effect are (a) a careful study of the measure and (b) a thorough review of the literature. Essentially, it was through review of accent literature in sociolinguistics and reference to publications on research methodology that the project was developed.

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