○ YOU SOUND ATTRACTIVE! PERCEPTIONS OF ACCENTED ENGLISH IN A MULTI-LINGUAL ENVIRONMENT

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Sociolinguistic research on attitudes towards language has revealed that native speakers of English are drawn towards those who share their native accent and respond cautiously, perhaps negatively, towards those speaking in 'accented' English (Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner & Fillenbaum, 1960; Rubin, 1992). These perceptions greatly disadvantage migrants in competitive job and educational markets. This study investigated perceptions held by Australian university students learning foreign languages towards lecturers with non-standard English accents. The investigators used a modified matched-guised technique to test students' responses to speech samples from six speakers, one Australian born and raised and five foreign born and raised. Results contrasted clearly with those of previous studies; students rated those who they heard as 'accented' speakers highly in many personality dimensions, suggesting the students' greater readiness to accept foreign accents. The results highlight the importance of foreign language learning in fostering acceptance of linguistic and cultural difference and in facilitating mutual understanding among groups, particularly in multicultural societies.

KEY WORDS: foreign accent, perception, matched-guised technique

INTRODUCTION

Studies on intercultural encounters provide ample evidence that many listeners evaluate speakers more by non-content than by content features of the message. In other words, how

something is said can convey a stronger impression of a speaker than what the speaker actually says (Giles, Wilson & Conway, 1981). Accents are among the strongest non-content verbal cues. As a feature identifying a speaker's membership of a national, ethnic or socioeconomic group, a non-mainstream accent is likely to arouse in the hearer a perception of the generalised or stereotypical characteristics that the hearer associates with that group. This process can trigger disparaging or other negative perceptions among those who self-identify as members of the dominant speech community (Lambert et al., 1960).

This study aimed to investigate students' attitudes towards overseas born university lecturers who speak English with non-standard accents in a multicultural society, Australia. It proceeds from the recognition that reactions to foreign accents impact not only upon the lives of speakers of accented English but also upon the life of a whole community, as speakers with non-standard accents may be excluded from fully participating in and contributing to society, and thus valuable skills and resources may be lost. We therefore believe that this is a first step in promoting understanding and tolerance towards foreign accents for more beneficial verbal engagement at local, national and international levels.

BACKGROUND

Following Lambert et al.'s (1960) groundbreaking research on language attitudes, research has provided ample evidence that speakers with non-standard accents tend to be negatively evaluated, and that these evaluations tend to translate into differential treatment of these speakers and lowered expectations of their potential performance (Riches & Foddy, 1989). This trend affects employment, access to housing and educational opportunities, to mention just a few areas of disadvantage illustrated by the studies described in what follows.

Seggie, Fulmizi and Stewart (1982), for instance, have shown how differential expectations based on accents negatively influence employment opportunities. They found that Australian unseen male speakers of Cultivated English, the variety more closely associated with British Received Pronunciation, were judged more favourably than their counterpart speakers of Broad English, the variety often compared with British Cockney and strongly associated with masculinity, on most characteristics related to competence (e.g., intelligence, determination, reliability) and on a few social traits (e.g., honesty, status) but lower on most characteristics related to social attractiveness. When recordings of the two varieties of English were played to an audience of employers, cultivated speakers were rated considerably higher and judged as more suitable for training as accountants. Broad speakers were perceived as more suitable for training as storemen. Thus, speakers of less prestigious varieties of English can be disadvantaged in highly competitive job markets, as potential employers show preference for

speakers of more standard varieties of English for higher status jobs (Callan & Gallois, 1987; Lindemann, 2003; Giles, Wilson & Conway, 1981).

Systematic discrimination based narrowly on speech style and accent in the housing market has been documented by Purnell, Idsardi and Baugh (1999). In one of their studies, Baugh, a tridialectal speaker, rang the same prospective landlords on three separate occasions using African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Chicano English (ChE), or Standard American English (SAE). Results showed clearly that landlords discriminated against prospective tenants solely on the basis of their accents during telephone conversations. In areas where white residents predominated, the percentage of appointments secured to view houses was extremely low for callers using the non-standard English varieties. Moreover, a second study conducted by this team and reported in the same paper found that very little speech is needed for dialect identification. Fifty undergraduate students were able to identify one of the three accents mentioned above just by listening to the word 'hello' (duration x = 414 msec.) 72 per cent of the time. The authors conclude that discrimination based on applicants' dialects can occur on the basis of a very short sample of speech.

Studies in the area of education suggest that teachers' perceptions of children's behaviours, characteristics and academic ability on the basis of children's accent may be systematically associated with stereotypes that discriminate on the basis of ethnicity against non-mainstream speakers (Anderson-Clark, Green & Henley, 2008; Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh & Holloway, 2005). In the US, African American and standard-accented teachers rated Mexican-accented children as more disadvantaged, more hesitant, and less confident than standard-accented children. Teachers' expectations of children's academic performance seem to be influenced by teachers' attitudes towards students' spoken language: the non-standard speakers are expected to perform worse academically than standard-accented students when no individual performance information is available (Williams, Whitehead & Miller, 1972). Moreover, teachers' estimations of students' ability are affected not only by foreign-sounding accents but also by speech style and dialectal differences. Eltis (1980) found that, on 12 personality characteristics, experienced teachers and student teachers evaluated unseen speakers of Cultivated (i.e., educated) Australian English more highly than unseen speakers of Broad Australian English (except for 'gentleness'). These results are of particular importance as teachers' expectations have been shown to be associated with students' success or failure (Ford, 1984).

These trends have also been identified in higher education. Academics' differential expectations of international students' performance can mean that speakers with non-standard accents are offered fewer opportunities for participation in class. In the case of

Asian students, this is often justified by claiming that they are reluctant to participate in class discussions (Devos, 2003; Liu & Jackson, 2008). Furthermore, unfavourable judgement of international students on the basis of their non-native accent can result in these students being given lower marks in speech-related activities or sidelined in classroom activities (Munro, Derwing & Sato, 2006; Nakane, 2006). Recent debates in Australia on the "dumbing down" of academic standards brought about partly by the overwhelming presence of international students in tertiary institutions (Devos, 2003) need to be re-examined in light of the findings and predictions discussed above.

The scant research on university students' acceptance of non-native English-speaking academics similarly indicates that instructors' ethnicity, manifested by a foreign accent as well as by non-linguistic factors such as Asian facial features (Rubin, 1992) can negatively affect teacher ratings and listening comprehension. A recent incident at a leading Australian university provides poignant empirical support that these claims still apply. As reported by Murray (2008) in the Brisbane daily, The Courier Mail, a "prestigious law school had to sideline a newly appointed Chinese academic because of poor English speaking skills". Specifically, the accent of this newly employed lecturer, an Oxford graduate who was deemed employable at the time of the selection interview, drew complaints from local students. Indeed, studies have shown that intelligibility plays a role in listeners' evaluations and attitudes towards speakers with non-standard accents (Bresnahan et al., 2002). In the case under discussion there is no proof of how intelligible this academic was and, since there were only four non-Anglo Saxon academics out of the 46 staff members employed by the law school in question (but only one other Asian, from Singapore), there is no evidence that other foreign-accented academics have been sidelined. However, as Lindemann (2002, p. 419) convincingly argued, '[t]he claim that a given NNS is difficult to understand often rests on the assumption that it is solely the speaker's responsibility to get her point across' and disregards the major role listeners play in conversations. Her research shows that, at least in some cases, miscommunication between interactants may be attributed to negative attitudes from native speakers rather than to linguistic incompetence of non-native speakers. A similar conclusion is reached by Lippi-Green (1994, p. 166), who argues that listeners' goodwill plays a crucial role in communication. In her view, communicative failure can often times be attributed to prejudice in listeners who 'cannot hear what a person has to say, because accent, as a mirror of social identity and a litmus test for exclusion, is more important.'

PREVIOUS STUDIES IN AUSTRALIA

The findings discussed above reveal that listener attitudes based on speakers' accents translate into differential practices that have life-altering implications for speakers of non-

standard varieties. These findings therefore have under-recognised consequences for all sectors of society in a multicultural nation such as Australia, since delimiting the ability of some to contribute to society as best they can fails to serve the common interest from which all members of society benefit.

The study of attitudes towards speakers on the basis of their accent has particular significance for nations that are strong targets for migration. Since Lambert et al. (1960) published their pioneer work in this area, a proliferation of studies has concentrated on eliciting listeners' evaluations of speakers, which are taken to reflect stereotypes associated with accents (Ball, 1983; Callan & Gallois, 1987).

Several studies in Australia have used the matched-guise technique, where bilingual speakers read passages using their real accents, to try to identify sociolinguistic attitudes towards accented English. Findings of these studies provide ample evidence that Anglo-Australians remain strongly monolingual and Anglophile in their attitudes towards 'foreign' accents when evaluating personality traits related to speakers' competence (Callan & Gallois, 1987), even though Australia is one of the most multicultural, multilingual nations on earth with the estimated number of languages spoken ranging from 349 up to a maximum of 400 languages according to the 2006 census of population (Clyne, 2008). Consistent with previous studies conducted elsewhere, research in Australia has shown that listeners perceive speakers of the standard accent to be more competent but less socially engaging than 'accented' speakers (Ball, 1983; Callan & Gallois 1982, 1983, 1987; Seggie et al., 1982).

Ball (1983), for instance, conducted a series of experiments focusing on perceptions of continental European accents. In one of his studies, high school students judged Italian, French, German, Australian and Received Pronunciation (RP) English guises. His results indicate that English RP, the form of pronunciation long perceived to be distinctively prestigious among British accents, consistently elicited stereotypes of competence and unsociability while the Australian guise suggested a good-natured but lazy and ineffective character. Of the European accents studied, French and German guises were associated with attractive and, in the German case, competent persons, and Italian with incompetence and lack of confidence, somewhat low attractiveness, but high sociability.

In another experiment conducted in Australia using the matched-guise technique, Seggie et al. (1982) compared the reactions of technical college and university students to Cultivated Australian, Broad Australian and Italian Australian accents. They discovered significant differences in participants' evaluations of the three accents. Australian participants ascribed more competence and integrity to the speaker with the Educated Australian accent. The speaker with the Italian accent was rated between speakers with the Educated and Broad

accents in terms of competence and sociability, but lower in physical attractiveness, fitness and height. Other experiments using a modified matched-guise technique found results consistent with the studies mentioned above and concluded that level of accentedness impacts on speakers' evaluation; that is, speakers with a softer foreign accent generally attract more favourable ratings, at least in some dimensions (Callan & Gallois, 1982, 1983).Very few studies conducted since the 1980s have examined reactions to non-standard Australian accents. One recent study by Bayard, Weatherall, Gallois and Pittman (2001) investigated how 400 students in New Zealand, Australia and the US evaluated speakers of New Zealand English, Australian English, American English and RP English. Focusing on the results for the Australians, Australian students generally ranked their own accents in third or fourth place for most traits. Also of interest was the finding that American English seems well on the way to equalling or even replacing RP as the prestige—or at least preferred—variety among the students. This indicates that Australians have still not succeeded in gaining respect for their version of English when compared to British or American accents (the so-called "cultural cringe") unless the point of comparison is non-native English accents.

Despite the discouraging conclusions of the studies summarised above, it is worth remembering that because attitudes towards other groups are rooted in cultural norms, these attitudes can change. Education can be the critical agent to lead this type of change. A few researchers (Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici & Carpenter, 2006) have proposed that sociolinguistic awareness of linguistic diversity can be an important step in modifying discriminatory attitudes, and suggested that teacher preparation be grounded in sociolinguistic understanding of dialect diversity to foster positive attitudes towards speakers' language varieties. Conversely, Plakans (1997) found in her study of attitudes towards non-standard accented instructors in US universities that the students with the most negative attitudes were males majoring in agriculture or business with an expected GPA in the C range who had not travelled outside the country and who lived in a rural area or small town. She called for intervention initiatives to broaden "insular students' horizons" and prepare them to deal with cultural and linguistic diversity.

Furthermore, there is growing evidence that familiarity with non-native English speakers can lead to greater acceptance of non-mainstream accented speech. On the one hand, familiarity with an accent enhances intelligibility, and intelligible accents draw more positive attitudes and affective responses than unintelligible foreign accents (Bresnahan et al., 2002, Gass & Varonis, 1984). On the other hand, there is scattered evidence indicating that attitudes towards non-native English speakers can be improved through frequent exposure and interaction. Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck and Smit (1997), for instance, have shown that students who have spent time with native speakers of the target language show more

individualised attitudes and hence more positive evaluations than students with limited exposure. Chiba, Matsuura and Yamamoto (1995), in their study of Japanese university students' attitudes towards native and non-native English accents, found that the most highly rated accents were the ones which students could easily recognise and with which they were more familiar.

Following from these findings, we can expect that university students undertaking linguistic and foreign language courses would have positive attitudes towards academics with non-standard accents. On the one hand, they have been exposed to sociolinguistic knowledge that could enhance awareness of linguistic diversity. On the other hand, they have experienced frequent exposure to non-native English-speaking instructors, as most of their courses are taught by native speakers of the target language. To illustrate this claim, at the time of writing this paper, in the School of Languages where this research was conducted 76% of full time staff were non-native speakers of English, as opposed to 30% in the School of Humanities at the same university. Furthermore, a large share of students enrolled in foreign language courses are international students, and therefore local students are frequently exposed to non-standard accented speech in their foreign-language classes.

The main aim of the present study was thus to examine university students' reactions to, and perceptions of, speakers with a range of non-standard English accents. To this aim, three research questions were explored:

1. Do students who study languages and linguistics have positive attitudes towards non-standard accented English speakers?

2. If so, are the positive attitudes restricted to the accents of speakers of the target foreign language, or does it extend to speakers of other languages as well?

3. Does familiarity with the accent impact on students' positive evaluations?

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this experimental study were 41 (m = 11, f = 30) native speakers of Australian English enrolled in a first-year linguistics course of the BA Languages and Linguistics at Griffith University. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 56 years (mean age was 22). To fulfil the requirements of their degree, all participants were studying at least one foreign language. The distribution of languages studied is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Distribution of participants' language(s) studied*

Spanish	Chinese	Japanese	Italian	Korean	Indonesian	French	**Total**
13	12	19	6	5	1	3	59

*Numbers do not add up to 41 as 18 students were studying two languages simultaneously.

PROCEDURE

The test was administered by the researchers during class time. Participants listened to a tape of six speakers reading a set passage in English. The recordings were played twice. In the first round, participants were exposed to all the speech samples to give them a general impression of the task. In the second round, the tape was stopped after each speaker's segment and students were given 30 seconds to rate the speaker using a 7-point semantic differential scale. The scale, adapted from Bell (1983), included 12 personality traits in random order that fall under the categories of 'competence', 'integrity' and 'social attractiveness' as shown below:

Competence	[competent, knowledgeable, intelligent, confident]
Integrity	[serious, sincere, organised]
Attractiveness	[kind, patient, friendly, cool, entertaining]

Participants were also asked to indicate their perception of the speaker's occupation and to identify his native language. These questions aimed at finding corroborating evaluation of speakers' Competence traits and also at checking for familiarity with the sampled languages, respectively. The procedure took approximately 20 minutes.

MATERIALS

The reading material was a 69-word English passage used from the set phrase in the speech accent archive developed by George Mason University (2011), which was used to study phonological and phonetic variables characteristic of foreign accents. The sentences contain phonemes and sound sequences that non-native speakers find difficult to articulate.

SPEAKERS OF STIMULUS TAPE

A modification of the matched-guise technique, pioneered by Lambert et al. (1960), was used in this study. In the original version, perfectly matched bilinguals read two guises of the same text. Using the same speaker allows researchers to control for cross-speaker variation.

However, while the matched-guise technique is effective to test a limited number of accents it would have been impossible to find speakers who can produce native-like versions of six different national accents. Rather than exposing listeners to fake guises, we decided to record six real speakers using their normal speech. Every attempt was made to keep extraneous variables constant, and thus speakers selected for the recordings were male academics and researchers, aged from 45 to 50 (except for the Farsi speaker aged 29 years), all but one then lecturing in Australian universities.

The six male academics, whose native languages are given in Table 2, read the passage. The recordings were made in a sound-treated room with high fidelity audio equipment. All speakers read the passage at a similar speed, with times ranging from 22.5 seconds to 28.5 seconds (average duration 26.2 seconds). Pitch range differed across speakers from 97Hz to 183Hz, as seen in Table 2.

Five native listeners rated the speakers' pronunciation on a scale ranging from 1 (no accent) to 9 (extremely heavy accent). Previous studies of accented speech showed accentedness ratings by trained and by untrained listeners to be fairly consistent. In other words, foreign accents are perceived quite accurately by laypeople in everyday settings and therefore these evaluations of accentedness were deemed as sufficient for the purposes of this study.

The voice characteristics of the speakers are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2
Voice characteristics of the six speakers

	Speakers' L1	Accentedness	Duration (sec)	Pitch range (Hz)
1	Australian English	1	25	143 <245-102>
2	Italian	6.4	22.5	103 <178-75>
3	Japanese	6	27.8	152 <240-88>
4	Argentinean Spanish	3.4	26.5	130 <205-75>
5	Farsi	3	28.5	97 <184-87>
6	Korean	6.2	27	183 <288-105>

Due to the restriction in the selection of participants (male academics from six different language backgrounds) it was not possible to control for speakers' accentedness and pitch range. However, the level of accentedness is not directly related to the level of intelligibility (Munro & Derwing, 1995). As all these speakers successfully fulfil their duties at university, their speech was regarded as having an acceptable level of intelligibility.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

A factor analysis, using Principals Component extraction and Varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization, was conducted to see if 12 personality traits did group into three dimensions Competence, Integrity and Attractiveness. Factors were identified where Eigen values were >1. A Chi-square was used to test the relationship between the total deviance in response by language group as it is suitable to assess categorical data of a small size. SPSS Version 15 was used for all analyses.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

IDENTIFYING SPEAKERS' LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

In the demographic section of the questionnaire, an open-ended question asked participants to identify the speaker's native language to check for familiarity with the accents. The aim was to gauge whether participants provided evaluations based on the speaker's sample speech or on salient characteristics of the target group. Results show low rates of correct accent identification, even though all participants were linguistics students and many were studying one or more of the languages represented in the recordings. Table 3 shows the number and percentages of students who correctly identified the speakers' native languages.

Table 3
Participants' accent identification

Accent	Correct identification
Australian English	39 (95%)
Italian	19 (46%)
Japanese	20 (49%)
Spanish	14 (34%)
Farsi	0
Korean	11 (27%)

Two participants identified the Farsi accent as 'Middle Eastern', but 12 believed the speaker to be a native speaker of English and a further 12 thought he was a speaker of some European language. Participants who misidentified the speaker as a native speaker of English commented that the accent sounded 'strange', 'fake' or 'artificial'.

Data in Table 4 indicate accent identification by learners of the languages tested. Since Farsi is not taught at the university, only four languages are shown in the table.

Table 4
Identification of language as a factor of language learning

	Identified accent		
	Learning the language	**Learning other languages**	**Total**
Italian	2	17	19
Japanese	11	9	20
Spanish	7	7	14
Korean	5	6	11

PERSONALITY TRAITS

Before examining the result from each language group, a factor analysis was carried out to examine whether the 12 personality traits selected for this test cluster into the dimensions classified under the labels Competence, Integrity and Attractiveness. These results should be taken as exploratory and tentative, given the small sample size.

Table 5
Varimax-rotated factor analysis with Kaiser normalization of participants* (N=41)

	Factor 1 Competence (28.5%)	Factor 2 Attractiveness (24.6%)	Factor3 Integrity (12.9%)
competent	.839		
knowledgeable	.769		
intelligent	.763		
confident	.754		
organised	.749		
serious	.563		.443
kind		.852	
friendly		.852	
patient		.850	
sincere		.727	
entertaining			.823
cool			.681

*Loadings less than .4 are not listed

As Table 5 indicates a clear clustering of the variables into the proposed dimensions was observed in Competence and Attractiveness, but not in Integrity. The label 'Serious' loaded as expected, under 'Integrity'. However, it also loaded under 'Competence'. Similarly, the labels 'Entertaining' and 'Cool' loaded under 'Integrity' instead of 'Attractiveness'. Lastly, the labels 'Sincere' and 'Organised' did not load under 'Integrity'. Instead, they loaded under 'Attractiveness' and 'Competence', respectively. These unexpected loadings may be reflections of different interpretations of the labels by the participants.

The personality traits ratings for the six speakers are given in Table 6.

Table 6
Average score for each speaker given by 41 participants

	Native	**Italian**	**Japanese**	**Spanish**	**Farsi**	**Korean**
Competence	5.142 (0.44)*	4.743 (0.27)	4.293 (0.25)	5.244 (0.14)	4.402 (0.17)	4.409 (0.15)
Integrity	4.887 (0.33)	4.757 (0.70)	4.553 (0.30)	4.919 (0.33)	4.431 (0.30)	4.598 (0.33)
Attractiveness	4.056 (0.80)	3.646 (0.38)	5.078 (0.70)	4.346 (0.52)	3.707 (0.35)	4.697 (0.53)

*Standard deviation in brackets

As Table 6 shows, the native speaker's speech was not rated the highest in every aspect. This finding is consistent with results from previous studies, which show that native speakers are rated more highly in certain traits, in particular those related to Competence and Integrity, but lower in Social Attractiveness. On this basis, Ball (1983) concluded that in Australia there is no across-the-board denigration of speakers with non-standard and non-local accents. While listeners are 'discriminating enough to recognize both negative and positive qualities in the ethnic guises' (Ball, 1983, p. 178), they tend to rate native speakers more favourably than other speakers. The finding of our study is that at least one accented speaker (Spanish) was judged as highly as the native speaker for Competence and Integrity.

A possible explanation for the positive evaluation of speakers with accented speech may be that participants are constantly exposed to foreign-accented speech in their classrooms, which accommodate a higher proportion of academics and students from non-English speaking backgrounds than other disciplines in the university. This environment could have fostered a favourable attitude towards speakers of accented English and provided students with compelling evidence that foreign accents do not reflect the level of intelligence or capability of the speaker.

Speakers with heavy non-standard accents (in our sample, Italian, Japanese, Korean) generally attracted negative rates. However, the Japanese and Korean speakers in our study were considered more socially attractive than the native-speaker, despite their relatively high levels of accentedness. The Italian speaker did not receive the same evaluation, consistent with findings of a study conducted in Australia in the early 1980s (Seggie et al., 1982). It should be noted that the rate of identification for Italian language was high, and therefore negative evaluations of the speaker did not stem from lack of familiarity. Whether the speaker's evaluations were due to negative stereotypical images of Italians, the faster speech rate, or the slightly monotonous tone of this particular Italian speaker's reading voice needs further investigation.

Let us now consider the responses of each language group to examine whether there is a relationship between correct accent identification and language learning, and attitudes towards the speaker of the language the students were studying. The two largest groups of participants, namely, students of Japanese and Spanish language, were chosen for this purpose, as other groups were not large enough and the Chinese accent was not included in the stimulus tape.

JAPANESE

As shown in Table 4, only 11 of the 19 Japanese learners correctly identified the speaker's accent. The remaining eight students did not recognise Japanese accented speech and thought the speaker was Chinese, Korean or Spanish. Students' ratings of what they perceived to be the speaker's personal qualities were averaged and compared across three groups: 1) students studying Japanese who identified speaker's accent (n=11); 2) students studying languages other than Japanese who identified the accent (n=9); and 3) all students who did not identify the accent (n=21). Figure 1 presents a graph of these results.
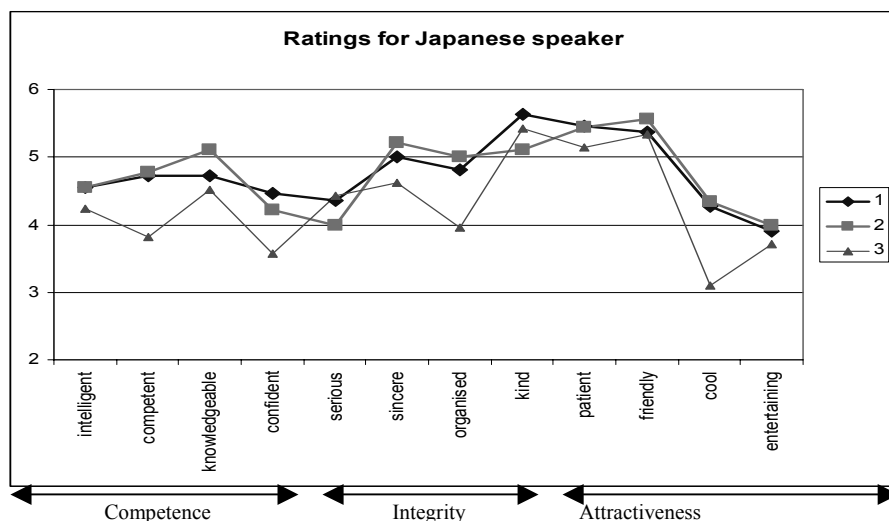
Ratings for Japanese speaker

Figure 1 Ratings for Japanese speaker

In general, students who identified the speaker as Japanese rated his personal qualities more highly than those who did not. This was particularly evident on the traits 'confident' and 'kind'. The result could indicate that, despite the high level of speaker's accentedness (i.e., 6), listeners rate the speaker highly on personal qualities if they are familiar with the speaker's accent. This is consistent with findings reported in Gass and Varonis (1984). Differences were noted across all traits, except for 'serious'. As for participants who identified the accent, we also see differences when comparing the ratings of those who were studying Japanese and those who were not. Again, students who were studying Japanese rated the speaker more favourably on almost all traits (except 'confident' and 'serious') than students who were not, although here the differences between the three groups were not significant.

We turn now to the data on the Spanish speaker to further explore the relationship between accent identification, language learning and attitudes towards speakers.

SPANISH

As shown in Table 4, the level of participants' recognition of the Spanish speaker's accent was lower than for their recognition of the Japanese speaker's accent. As with the data for the Japanese speaker, ratings by students studying Spanish and by students studying languages

other than Spanish were averaged and compared as three different groups: 1) students studying Spanish who identified the speaker's accent (n=7); 2) students studying languages other than Spanish who identified the accent (n=7); and 3) all students who did not identify the accent (n=27). Data are in the Figure 2 graph.
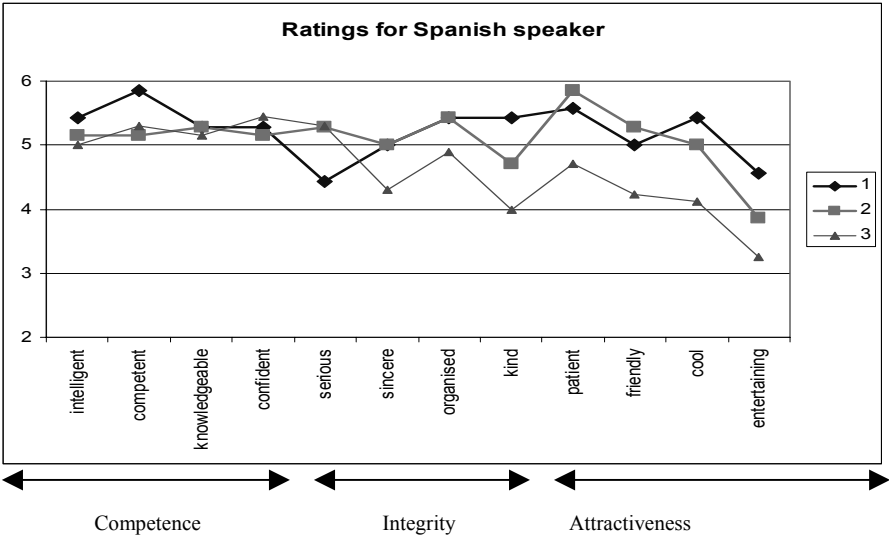

Figure 2 Ratings for Spanish speaker

Participants in all three groups rated the Spanish speaker highly in terms of 'competence' and 'integrity'. The scores on all the personality traits were higher for Groups 1 and 2, with the exception of 'serious'. Participants who did not identify the accent rated the speaker lower on 'attractiveness'. Previous studies have shown that native speakers are usually rated lower on 'attractiveness' than non-native speakers, which implies that non-accentedness is associated with unattractive images. We may thus speculate that the result of our study stems from the Spanish speaker's low rate of accentedness (i.e., 3.4). However, the results show that familiarity with the accent brings high overall ratings. Whether participants developed positive evaluations of Japanese and Spanish speakers as a result of studying these languages, or whether a positive predisposition towards speakers of Japanese or Spanish influenced their decision to learn this particular language, is a conceptually and practically interesting question, although it was beyond the scope of our study.

As shown by the ratings of the third group of participants for both the Japanese and Spanish speakers, students who did not identify these speakers' accents generally rated these speakers less positively. Consistent evidence is provided by the participants' ratings for the Farsi speaker. This speaker, who had the lowest accent identification rate (0 per cent), received the lowest ratings in most character traits.

To summarise the results so far: Ratings for the speakers of the two languages learned by the largest numbers of students participating in our study—Japanese and Spanish—indicate that a listener's familiarity with the accent of the speaker seems to foster acceptance and favourable attitudes towards the particular accented speech and its speaker. Conversely, results appear to suggest that when listeners cannot identify the speaker's ethnic speech identity, they have less positive attitudes towards the speaker regardless of the level of accentedness of their speech.

Originally, we expected that speakers of traditional foreign languages in Australia, such as Italian and Spanish, would be rated more favourably than speakers of languages of newly arrived groups, such as Korean and Japanese. This expectation was not borne out among this study's university-student participants, as can be seen from the results elicited for the Italian and Japanese speakers. Interestingly, there was no significant difference in recognition of accents for the Italian speaker (recognised by 46 per cent of participants) and the Japanese speaker (recognised by 49 per cent). The lack of difference in language recognition by young participants, most of whom were born in the last few decades, seems to reflect both the demographic changes of the international population at Australian universities and the increasingly multicultural demography of the Australian population, particularly in the past 20 years.

STATUS EVALUATION – SPEAKERS' OCCUPATIONS

Study participants were asked in the task sheet to imagine the speakers' occupations. This question was included as an additional measure of speakers' Competence. It aimed to provide corroborating evidence that learners could attribute status-related qualities, such as suitability for higher-status jobs, to speakers with non-standard accents. We categorized occupations into 'high' and 'low' status depending on the requirement of a university degree to obtain the job. Table 7 shows the number of participants who guessed the job of the Japanese and Spanish speakers in comparison to the Australian English speakers.

Table 7
Participants' evaluations of speakers' job status

Accentedness	High status	Low status	No reply

Japanese	6	Participants who recognised accent	15	3	2
		Participants who **did not** recognise accent	10	6	4
Spanish	3.4	Participants who recognised accent	12	1	1
		Participants who **did not** recognise accent	7	13	7
Australian English	1	Participants who recognised accent	20	16	5

The chi-squared values of the data in the highlighted columns were 1.87 and 10.57 for the Japanese and Spanish speakers respectively, after excluding the 'no reply' answers. As the critical value is 3.84 if tested at the .05 level of significance, responses to the Japanese speaker clearly show no evidence of difference between participants who recognised the accent and those who did not, while responses to the Spanish speaker show differences between these two groups. It is particularly noteworthy that many participants rated the Japanese speaker, judged as one of the most heavily accented of the six speakers, as having a high-status job, regardless of familiarity with the accent. However, a clear distinction in status evaluation is evident in the ratings for the Spanish speaker, one of the less accented speakers, based on accent identification. Judgement of the native speaker's status was evenly distributed between high and low. These results suggest that speakers' levels of accentedness were not a determining factor in participants' evaluations of speakers' occupations. Participants attributed high status to speakers with strong non-standard accents as readily as to the native speaker.

As for accentedness, the following picture emerges. This cohort of students seems to believe that native or native-like speakers can have any occupation, but these students also believed that the speakers with non-standard accents discussed above have high-status jobs. This could be an overestimation that stems from the life experience of these participants who, as full-time university students of foreign languages, were regularly exposed to non-native English-speaking language teachers. Moreover, as adult language learners, all participants were aware of the difficulties associated with foreign language acquisition after puberty and may therefore have particularly appreciated the speakers' ability to perform competently in a language other than their native language.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the reactions of a particular cohort of university students to non-standard accented English exclusively on the basis of sound and without visual or other sensory cues. The main aim was to find whether, contrary to previous studies, languages and linguistics students display positive attitudes towards accented English speakers (question 1), whether positive attitudes were restricted to the accents of speakers of the target foreign language (question 2), and whether familiarity with the accent impacts on students' evaluations (question 3).

In contrast with previous studies in Australia, the results indicate that students who study foreign languages showed favourable attitudes towards unseen speakers with non-standard accents (question 1), regardless of the language they study (question 2) and the level of accentedness of the speaker. However, the students' judgement tends to become less positive when they cannot identify the speaker's linguistic background (question 3). This was shown clearly in the low evaluation of speakers' attractiveness by those participants who did not recognize the Spanish accent and by the whole cohort in the evaluation of the Farsi speaker whose accent no participants recognised. As for level of accentedness, less accented speech was considered less socially attractive. This result is consistent with previous studies (Ball, 1983; Seggie et al., 1982). Some exceptions were found in responses to the Italian speaker, which could be attributed to his faster speech rate and monotonous tone, and the results of the Japanese speaker who received high ratings regardless of the listeners' familiarity with the accent. This point needs further investigation using more samples for each of the languages tested.

When a listener engages with a speaker who has a dialect or accent different from their own, the listener's adjustment to the unfamiliar speech style can be very rapid even if the listener initially has difficulty understanding the speaker. Within minutes, listeners can begin to familiarise themselves with a new accent and hence understand more of what the speaker is communicating. This process is fairly common and automatic. People who complain about the lack of intelligibility of foreign accents are, consciously or not, locating responsibility for effective communication upon the speaker rather than recognising the shared responsibility that involves themselves as listener (Lindemann, 2002). Often they are refusing to let their perceptual organ adapt to the variation of a few particular sounds in the utterance. This stems from various factors, including lack of flexibility, lack of familiarity or experience with speakers with non-standard accents, and personal prejudice (Lippi-Green, 1994).

Officially recognised statistics forecast that only 5 per cent of the world population will be native English speakers by 2050, down from approximately 7 per cent of the entire population on the earth (Graddol, 2004). It is therefore important for the many Australians and others who

are monolingual English speakers to gain exposure to various types of accented English in order to communicate effectively and comfortably in the multicultural world of the 21st century. In other words, while all community members have a vested interest in understanding each other, in particular language educators need to provide the appropriate environments and skills to students who will be part of the workforce in multilingual societies. To this end, employment of non-native speakers within the education system and the introduction of compulsory foreign language study into school curricula will help to broaden people's perceptions of foreign-accented speech from an early age when world views are formed. Pursuing this practice at university level will also contribute to this end.

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