

Do speech evaluation scales in a speaker evaluation experiment trigger conscious or subconscious attitudes?

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This paper reports new data to substantiate two related claims we have made in recent investigations into the attitudes triggered by accent variation in spoken Standard Dutch (Grondelaers, Van Hout & Steegs 2009 & in press):

(1) Factor-analytic investigations of attitude architecture should go beyond *Speaker Status* and *Speaker Integrity/Solidarity* as the only attitude-determining factors and also elicit perceptions of the accents themselves (in terms of aesthetics and appropriateness). Interestingly, early attitude studies *did* infer accent-related dimensions from their ratings (see Mulac, Hanley & Prigge 1974). Zahn & Hopper (1985) likewise included scales pertaining to the aesthetic qualities of varieties of American English, but these correlated into a more general dimension *Attractiveness* pertaining to “the qualities of *speakers* and their *speech*” (1985: 119; italics ours). Most recent studies typically include only scales pertaining to the social attractiveness of speakers.

(2) Subconscious accent attitudes can be elicited in a speaker evaluation experiment which includes scales pertaining to the accent *itself* rather than to its speakers. The latter especially counters Kristiansen’s (2009: 9) claim that the use of speech-scales could “direct subjects’ attention to the evaluation task as a ‘dialect thing’”, as a result of which their judgments would be conscious rather than unconscious. Kristiansen (2001, 2009) has convincingly demonstrated the significant differences between conscious and subconscious attitudes to language change in Denmark. While conscious evaluations (as shaped by standard ideology and education) confirm that *Rigsdansk* is a “better” language for public use than locally accented Danish and Modern Copenhagen speech, an investigation into subconscious attitudes reveals that the latter is awarded more prestige than the other varieties, which explains its rapid dissemination among young Danes. This conclusion leads Kristiansen to the audacious claim that conscious attitudes “apparently play no role in processes of variation and change” (2009: 4) since the latter is “governed by subconsciously held values” (2009: 20). Hence he argues that investigations into attitudes as a determinant of language change should probe the deepest and most subconscious evaluations, refraining from design choices – such as the use of speech-related scales – which could endanger this pursuit.

Yet, we have argued (Grondelaers, Van Hout & Steegs: in press) that the standard restriction to speaker scales underspecifies the architecture of accent attitudes in Dutch. Building on spontaneous speech stimuli and a wider set of scales comprising speaker *and* speech traits, we found that regional accents of Standard Dutch not only elicited social categorizations but also strongly converging perceptions of their norm status and aesthetic appreciation. In Grondelaers, Van Hout & Steegs (2009), however, we were unable to confirm these *Accent Norm*- and *Accent Aesthetics*-dimensions. This failure re-raises the question whether accent attitudes really contain speech evaluations in addition to speaker evaluations. And the fact that we included speech-related scales in our experiments raises the question whether the attitudes we found aren’t conscious evaluations rather than subconscious attitudes.

We addressed these questions in a new experiment in which 413 native listener-judges rated spontaneous speech samples representing 6 accents of Netherlandic and Belgian Dutch in 2 scale conditions. While condition 1 contained scales which pertained to the evaluation of the experimental speakers, condition 2 contained scales which differentiated between the evaluation of the speakers and the evaluation of their speech. Factor analysis returned almost identical four-factor solutions for both conditions, with the difference that what came out as a *Speaker Competence*-factor in the Speaker Condition, emerged as an *Accent Norm*-dimension in the Speaker+Speech-condition. These findings confirm, in other words, that accent attitudes towards Standard Dutch contain speaker as well as speech evaluations, and that the inclusion of speech-related scales in a speaker evaluation experiment still triggers subconscious evaluations.

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