

Australasians Identifying Australasian Accents¹

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Background

Language attitude research has a long history and has functioned as an important interface for sociolinguistic and social psychological analyses of language (see Bayard, in press; Bradac, 1990; Cargile, Giles, Ryan & Bradac, 1994, for recent overviews). Although a variety of approaches to the topic have been taken, much research has been influenced by the work of Lambert and Giles, a legacy that has been referred to as the Lambert-Gilesian tradition in accent evaluation research (Bayard, 1991).

A key feature of research in this tradition is that it contains elements of the matched guise technique (MGT: see Lambert, 1967). Briefly, the procedure entails judges listening to a set passage delivered in different languages, dialects or accents. To control for potentially confounding speaker idiosyncrasies (e.g. pitch, speech rate), in some research the same speaker is recorded using different 'guises' of the language, dialect or accent, although this brings its own problems (see Ball, Gallois & Callan, 1989). Likert-type rating scales are used to measure judges' responses to the accents.

Despite the enormous range of studies conducted and the complexity of the results, a broad pattern of findings has emerged. Generally, speakers of a 'standard' language variety are associated more with social status traits (e.g., intelligence, confidence and power) than 'non-standard speakers'. In contrast, speakers of non-standard varieties tend to be associated more with traits relating to solidarity (e.g., social attractiveness, integrity and

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benevolence) than standard varieties (see Giles & Coupland, 1991). The association of solidarity traits with non-standard accents is theorised to be a linguistic expression of group identity. People continue to use lower prestige non-standard varieties of a language because such varieties contribute to a sense of group identity (Ryan, Hewstone & Giles, 1984).

In an extensive research programme on New Zealanders' attitudes towards accents, Bayard found that New Zealanders did not fully conform to the general pattern described by Giles & Coupland (1991; see Bayard, 1995, for a comprehensive summary of this work). Consistent with the broad pattern of results, New Zealanders did tend to rate Received Pronunciation (RP) voices highest in terms of power and status and low on solidarity traits. In Bayard's research, however, New Zealand English voices were downgraded not only on the social status measures but on the solidarity traits as well, a phenomenon he suggested was evidence of a cultural cringe.

An important but often unstated assumption of research on language attitudes is that judges can accurately identify the accent or language they are evaluating. In the case of language, where bilingual or multilingual judges are involved, this is a safe assumption. Where accents in the same language are evaluated, however, judges may or may not be able to "place" the region, ethnic background, or social class of speakers. For example, Gallois and Callan (1981) found that their Anglo-Australian listeners could distinguish between Australian and British speakers with nearly perfect accuracy, but were less able to identify French, Greek, Italian, or Vietnamese-accented English. Because researchers using the MGT attempt to obtain unobtrusive measures of attitudes (Ball et al., 1989), they are often reluctant to ask judges to identify speakers' accents. Nevertheless, the extent to which judges base their evaluations on accurate identification is a key element in interpreting these judgements, and an important empirical issue in its own right.

Bayard (1995) noted that in New Zealand there is a widely held belief that Australian accents are both hideous and easily recognisable, but his research found that most participants rated the Australian accent higher on solidarity traits than the New Zealand accents he played them. He also found that the majority of New Zealand participants could not correctly identify the single Australian accent he included amongst his stimuli.

The gulf between popular beliefs and Bayard's findings motivated the present study, which investigated Australians' and New Zealanders' attitudes towards, and ability to identify, their accents. Bayard's suggestion of the mythical nature of New Zealanders' belief about Australian accents was based on responses to only one male, middle class, general accented, Australian speaker. By his own admission (see Bayard, in press) his research confounded gender and accent. To overcome this problem, the present study used recordings of male and female speakers whose accents had been classified as lying around the broad, general or cultivated points on the accent continua. The matched guise procedure was not used because of the

likelihood that any speaker would mimic the stereotypical rather than the actual phonological aspects of the different accents.

The present study is part of a larger project investigating Australasian attitudes towards Australasian accents. This paper reports results relating to the issue of whether Australasians can correctly identify Australasian accents, and results on language attitudes are reported in detail elsewhere (Weatherall, Gallois and Pittam, forthcoming).

Few studies have systematically investigated Australasians' ability to correctly identify accents. As noted above, Gallois & Callan (1981) reported that Australians could accurately distinguish between Australian and British accents. Unfortunately, a New Zealand accent was not included amongst their stimuli. As already mentioned, Bayard (1995) found that New Zealanders were not able to correctly identify a male general Australian speaker as Australian. In addition, he found that broad New Zealand Pakeha speakers were incorrectly identified as Maori, a phenomenon that he suggested was evidence of covert racism. No studies that we are aware of focus exclusively on Australasians and Australasian accents, a situation that our research aimed to rectify.

Method

Participants

Participants included 49 students (14 men, 35 women) who self-identified as being New Zealanders and were enrolled in a third year language and social psychology course at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Another 66 students (24 men, 42 women) who self-identified as being Australian and were enrolled in an introductory psychology course at The University of Queensland, Australia, were also participants. The average age of the Australian sample (mean=18.5 years) was younger than the average age of the New Zealand sample (mean=22.8 years).

Materials

A questionnaire based on previous language attitude research was used to record demographic information about the participants and record their impressions of the speakers (see Giles and Coupland, 1991). Participants rated their impressions of each speaker on 18, six-point semantic differential scales with anchors of 'not at all' and 'very'. They also rated their impressions of the person's speech on six, 6-point semantic differential scales. Finally, participants were asked to indicate the perceived age, ethnicity, educational level, occupation, annual income and social class of the participants on a set of fixed options.

Six Australian speakers and six New Zealand speakers were used as stimuli. The speakers were recorded reading a short extract that had been designed to include the vowel sounds that typify New Zealand speakers with broad, general and cultivated accents (see Gordon and Deverson, 1989). Out of a larger pool of speakers we selected one man and one woman in each

national group, whose accents had been judged as lying around the broad, general or cultivated areas of the accent continua.

The judgement was made by classifying the speakers as mostly broad, mostly general or mostly cultivated on each of the phonological variables /i/, /u/, /ei/, /ou/, /ai/, /au/ and /-l/ (see Bayard, 1995), and on whether they merged or kept distinct 'really' and 'rarely'. Speakers were then ranked for how many broad, general and cultivated variants were present in their speech, and the speakers that had the most characteristics typical of each accent were then selected. In addition, the classification was checked with an impressionistic rating of the voice. Finally, we examined the social class attributed to each speaker by participants. Consistent with the auditory analysis, the broad speakers from both countries were classified as being from the lowest social class, followed by the general speakers, with the cultivated speakers receiving the highest social class ratings.

As far as possible, the speakers selected spoke at a similar speed and demonstrated a similar proficiency at reading the stimulus paragraph. However, there was only one female and one male speaker of each accent type, so individual voice characteristics may have influenced listeners' judgements. The use of twelve different voices was considered the best compromise between using a matched guise design where the accents may not have been authentic and using more speakers of each accent type, but saturated our participant's patience for making valid judgements.

Procedure

Participants were played one of four tape orders containing 13 speakers. The first speaker was a practice trial, and had an accent from the same country as the participants. After listening to each speaker, participants rated him or her on the semantic differential scales. On a second hearing, participants responded to the fixed format questions about the speakers' age, ethnicity and so forth. The procedure took approximately 30 minutes.

Results

One of the questionnaire items asked participants to identify the speaker's ethnic group from a list of 11 possibilities (New Zealand European, American, Maori, Canadian, Polynesian, English, Australian European, South African, Australian Aborigine, Irish and Other European). Responses were recoded onto one of four categories. New Zealand European and Maori responses were recoded as guessing the speaker was a New Zealander. Australian European and Australian Aborigine responses were recoded as guessing the speaker was Australian. The English category was left intact. The remaining responses were recoded as guessing that the speaker was an 'other' ethnicity.

Before presenting the recoded responses, it should be noted that all of the New Zealand speakers were non-Maori. New Zealanders did, however, guess the ethnicity of some of the voices as Maori. For the New Zealand broad male accent, 11.6% (n=5/43) of the New Zealander guesses

were Maori. For the broad female accent, 9.1% (n=4/44) of the guesses were Maori. Interestingly, the Maori guesses were higher for the New Zealand general than for the New Zealand broad accents. For the general male accent 12.2% (n=5/41) of the guesses were Maori and for the general female accent 22.9% (n=11/48) of the guesses were Maori. At 26.1% (n=12/46), the percentage of Maori guesses was highest for the cultivated male speaker. No-one thought that the New Zealand cultivated female accent was Maori. No New Zealanders thought that any of the Australian accents were Maori. The Australians also guessed that some of the New Zealand speakers were Maori, with numbers ranging from 27.0% (10/37) for the New Zealand broad male speaker, to 7.7% (4/52) for the New Zealand broad female speaker. No Australians thought that the New Zealand cultivated speakers were Maori.

Far fewer participants thought that the Australian speakers, who were all of Anglo-Celtic ethnicity, were Aborigines. Only one Australian judge rated the Australian broad male speaker as Aboriginal, and two New Zealand judges rated the Australian broad female speaker similarly. Nor did many participants think the speakers were Polynesian. One Australian judge used the Polynesian category and that was for the Australian cultivated female speaker. Only one New Zealand judge thought an Australian accent was Polynesian (the broad female speaker). More New Zealand judges thought that New Zealand speakers were Polynesian, but the number of Polynesian guesses was no more than two for any New Zealand accent. Only the New Zealand cultivated female speaker was never guessed as Polynesian.

Table 1 presents the frequencies for the recoded guesses of ethnicity for each of the 12 speakers.

Table 1 shows that Australians, on the whole, correctly identified Australian speakers. The broad male accent was correctly identified by 90.9% of Australians, and 78.8% of the Australian sample guessed that the broad female accent was Australian. The large majority of the Australian sample also correctly identified the general and cultivated male and general female accents. The cultivated male accent was correctly identified as Australian by 81.8% of the sample. The cultivated female accent, however, was only identified as Australian by 30.3% of the sample, with 25.8% guessing the Australian cultivated female was a New Zealander and 34.8% guessing that she was English. Thus, it appears that the Australians in our sample could accurately identify their own accents, with the exception of the Australian cultivated female accent.

The pattern of results for New Zealanders' identifying New Zealand accents was very similar to that of the Australians guessing Australian accents. The New Zealand broad and general male and female speakers were correctly recognised by the large majority of New Zealand participants. The cultivated female speaker, however, was correctly identified only by 20.4% of the sample, with 36.7% thinking that she was an Australian and 34.7% of the sample thinking that she was English. Like the Australian results, the

<i>Accent</i>	<i>Guess</i>	Sample			
		<i>Australians</i>		<i>New Zealanders</i>	
		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Australian Broad Male	New Zealander	2	3.0%	13	26.5%
	Australian	60	90.9%	36	73.5%
	English	1	1.5%		
	Other	3	4.5%		
Australian Broad Female	New Zealander	11	16.7%	14	28.6%
	Australian	52	78.8%	32	65.3%
	English	1	1.5%		
	Other	2	3.0%	3	6.1%
Australian General Male	New Zealander	2	3.0%	29	59.2%
	Australian	48	72.7%	17	34.7%
	English	10	15.2%	2	4.1%
	Other	6	9.1%	1	2.0%
Australian General Female	New Zealander	3	4.5%	5	10.2%
	Australian	56	84.8%	43	87.8%
	English	5	7.6%		
	Other	2	3.0%	1	2.0%
Australian Cultivated Male	New Zealander	3	4.5%	41	83.7%
	Australian	54	81.8%	4	8.2%
	English	6	9.1%	2	4.1%
	Other	3	4.5%	2	4.1%
Australian Cultivated Female	New Zealander	17	25.8%	35	71.4%
	Australian	20	30.3%		
	English	23	34.8%	14	28.6%
	Other	6	9.1%		
New Zealand Broad Male	New Zealander	37	56.1%	43	87.8%
	Australian	27	40.9%	3	6.1%
	English	1	1.5%	1	2.0%
	Other	1	1.5%	2	4.1%
New Zealand Broad Female	New Zealander	52	78.8%	44	89.8%
	Australian	7	10.6%	3	6.1%
	English	2	3.0%	2	4.1%
	Other	5	7.6%		
New Zealand General Male	New Zealander	28	42.4%	41	83.7%
	Australian	35	53.0%	4	8.2%
	English	1	1.5%	1	2.0%
	Other	2	3.0%	3	6.1%

(Continued)

Australasians Identifying Australasian Accents

<i>Accent</i>	<i>Guess</i>	<i>Sample</i>			
		<i>Australians</i>		<i>New Zealanders</i>	
		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
New Zealand General Female	New Zealander	49	74.2%	48	98.0%
	Australian	9	13.6%		
	English	3	4.5%		
	Other	5	7.6%	1	2.0%
New Zealand Cultivated Male	New Zealander	31	47.0%	46	93.9%
	Australian	32	48.5%		
	Other	3	4.5%	3	6.1%
New Zealand Cultivated Female	New Zealander	3	4.5%	10	20.4%
	Australian	39	59.1%	18	36.7%
	English	19	28.8%	17	34.7%
	Other	5	7.6%	4	8.2%

Table 1. Australasians' Guesses about Australasian Speakers

New Zealanders in our sample could accurately identify their own accents, with the exception of the cultivated female speaker. Both Australians and New Zealanders correctly identified five out of six of their own accents.

The accuracy of guesses decreased somewhat for accents that were from the other country, especially for the general male and the cultivated accents. The majority of New Zealanders correctly identified the broad male and broad female Australian accents as Australians. Most New Zealanders also accurately identified the Australian general female accent as Australian. The Australian general male accent, however, was identified more often as a New Zealander than an Australian. The majority of New Zealanders also incorrectly guessed that the Australian cultivated male speaker was a New Zealander. No New Zealander guessed that the cultivated female accent was Australian; most guessed she was a New Zealander with some guessing that she was English.

Like the New Zealanders' guesses about the Australian speakers, the Australians' accuracy decreased for New Zealand speakers. The majority of Australians correctly identified the broad male and female accents as New Zealand speakers. More Australians in the sample thought the New Zealand general male accent was Australian, although accuracy was higher for the general female accent, with most Australians guessing she was a New Zealander. Accuracy was lowest for identifying the New Zealand cultivated speakers. Only 4.5% of Australians correctly identified the female cultivated speaker as a New Zealander, with the majority thinking she was Australian and over a quarter thinking she was English. The New Zealand cultivated male was identified as a New Zealander by 47.0% of Australians, with 48.5% thinking he was Australian. Overall, where mistakes were made for

male speakers, they tended to be incorrectly identified as coming from the judges' own country. In the case of the two cultivated female accents, however, the speaker from the other country was more often identified as being from the participants' own country.

Discussion

Australian and New Zealand accent stereotypes have two components. One is that the other nation's accents are unpleasant to listen to, and the other is that they are readily identifiable. The results reported in this paper provide some insights into the issue of how accurately Australasians can identify Australian and New Zealand accents.

Overall, New Zealanders and Australians were able to identify New Zealand and Australian accents fairly accurately. Accuracy was highest for accents from one's own country. Both Australians and New Zealanders correctly identified five out of six accents from their own country. In both cases, the accent that participants failed to identify as one of their own was the female cultivated accent. The reluctance of New Zealanders and Australians to include the female cultivated speakers as a member of their own national group could be because those accents are just hard to distinguish. However, the pattern of results could also be an indication of covert sexism. As described in the introduction, cultivated accents tend to be upgraded on status measures such as competence and intelligence. Thus, it is possible that women who are perceived as being high status by virtue of their accents may be ostracised by not being embraced as part of their own national group. On the other hand, a large number of judges from both national groups evaluated the other group's cultivated female speaker as belonging to their own group, and a large number of both New Zealand and Australian judges rated the cultivated female speakers as English. Both could suggest a perceived higher status.

Accuracy at identifying accents decreased when speakers were from the other Australasian country. Nevertheless, both Australians and New Zealanders could correctly recognise the broad male and female and general female accents of the other country. Both Australasian groups demonstrated a tendency to over-identify the general and cultivated male accents as from their own country. This result is consistent with Bayard (1991), who found that New Zealanders tended to identify an Australian general male speaker as being from New Zealand. For both Australasian groups the female cultivated speaker from the other country was incorrectly identified as English or as belonging to their own national group. Overall, when errors were made, there was a bias to over-identify accents as belonging to one's own national group.

Consistent with Bayard (1995) we found that the Australian general male speaker was mistaken as a New Zealander by New Zealanders. Bayard's conclusion, however, is not supported by our results. New Zealanders were able to identify Australian accents, especially broad

accents, correctly. Similarly, Australians were able to accurately identify New Zealand broad accents, and the New Zealand general female accent was recognised by Australians.

The stimuli used in this study were recordings of speakers reading the same passage. If samples of free speech were used as stimuli instead of a set passage then it seems likely that identification accuracy would be even better. In free speech, listeners may be exposed to vowel sounds or lexical items that make it more obvious where the speaker is from. Thus if anything, the results of the present study are a conservative indication of Australasians' ability to identify their accents.

Overall, New Zealanders and Australians were very similar in the accuracy and the types of mistakes they made in the identification of New Zealand and Australian accents. One difference found between New Zealanders and Australians was that some New Zealand voices were guessed to be Maori. In contrast to the Australians, New Zealanders tended to over identify the general and cultivated male speakers as Maori. Bayard (1995) interpreted the over identification of New Zealand broad accents as Maori, in his research, as being an indication of racism because broad accents are typically downgraded on traits relating to intelligence and competence. If a similar reasoning is used to interpret the over-identification of general and cultivated male speakers as Maori by New Zealanders in this study, the New Zealand results suggest quite positive attitudes towards Maori. The difference between the results relating to Maori guesses in the present study and Bayard's work may indicate a change in attitudes towards Maori or a difference in attitudes between New Zealanders in the North Island and New Zealanders in the South Island. In order to strengthen the validity of such interpretations other studies using a similar sample of accents are needed. When a consistent pattern of results is found across a number of studies then we can be more confident that the idiosyncrasies of any one speaker are not the primary cause of the listener judgements.

In summary, the results from this study were consistent with Bayard's findings in that New Zealanders did tend to mistake a male general Australian accent as being from New Zealand. However, the conclusion reached by Bayard that New Zealanders could not detect the difference between Australasian accents, was not supported. Overall, the New Zealanders and Australians who participated in this study were quite accurate at identifying Australasian accents. The extent to which these identifications are linked to their judgements of the speakers as people is a question for future research.

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