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# EVALUATING ENGLISH ACCENTS WORLDWIDE<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper reports the findings of perhaps the largest international study considering how different English accents are perceived cross-culturally. Participants heard the same standardized recordings of Australian, New Zealand, North American, and English English accents in 19 countries. Relative to previous research, it would appear the prestige of English English is somewhat diminished, and that the North American accent is in the ascendant most everywhere. In addition to a summary of results by region, the influence of the media and intonation are briefly considered.

## 1. Introduction

The Evaluating English Accents WorldWide (EEAWW) project is a multinational collaborative research project into the perception of standard varieties of several national accents: New Zealand English (NZE), Australian English (AusE), Northern American English (NAE), and English English (EE). It has encompassed five continents, 19 countries, and over 20 academic participants, implementing the same research design in each country.

The project has its roots in earlier research on accent evaluations. Giles and Powesland (1975) found that regional accents were rated as being more friendly, but that prestige accents such as RP were rated higher in terms of

power/status. Stewart, Ryan, and Giles (1985) found that even American undergraduates perceived RP to be higher in status than their own accent. Similar research has been conducted in other countries and considering other English accents (e.g., Gallois and Callan 1981, 1985; Ball 1983).

Donn Bayard became interested in New Zealanders' attitudes towards the New Zealand accent in the 1980s (e.g., Bayard, 1990, 1991a, 1991b). An additional point of interest became the extent to which New Zealanders could distinguish their own accent from those of Australians. While most New Zealanders are adamant that they can identify Australian accents, the empirical evidence was less clear. Ann Weatherall (Victoria University of Wellington) and some of her students became interested in the 1990s, and collected some data of their own. Cynthia Gallois and Jeffrey Pittam (both of the University of Queensland) collaborated with Ann Weatherall to consider the corresponding questions as to whether Australians could distinguish their own accent from New Zealanders (Weatherall, Gallois and Pittam 2000). At this point, the scope was widened further, with the added involvement of George Ray (Cleveland State University) and Kirk Sullivan (Umeå, Sweden).

Through results published on the internet, people made contact with Donn, and then, infected by his enthusiasm, would join the project. Conferences, both local and international, were also a seeding ground. As of 2006, the most under-represented areas were Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe.

## 2. Methodology

The basic research format of the project's research involved participants listening to a series of nine voices, usually in a class group. The first voice was a 'practice' that was not analysed (the practice voice was NZE, except for data collected in North America where an NAm accent was used). The target voices were a male and female from each of Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom, ranging in age from 30–60, all reading the same passage. The selected speakers were to have an average or general accent representative of the country. Thus the AusE and NZE accents were 'general', that is, neither excessively broad nor cultivated. The NAm were similar to the Inland Northern dialect, a type frequently used by broadcasters, and less distinctive accent as compared to strongly regional accents found in New York or the Mid-west, for example. The EE accents were middle to innovative RP.

Participants heard the nine voices twice in the same order. On the first listening, participants rated each accent on a series of Likert scales anchored at 1 (Not at all) to 6 (Very) for the following traits: reliable, ambitious, humourous, authoritative, competent, cheerful, friendly, dominant, intelligent, assertive, controlling, warm, hardworking, pleasant, attractive, powerful, strong, and educated. Participants then heard the voices a second time round, and indicated their perceptions of the speaker's age, ethnicity, education level, occupation group, salary bracket, and social class, on a series of multiple choice questions. With the exception of ethnicity perception, the remaining questions generally cluster into four groups: power, status, competence, and solidarity (friendliness, warmth etc.), and the results presented here are described in these general groups rather than as individual indicators.

As the study extended to non-English speaking countries, a further 'easy to understand' variable was added to the first section. Later samples also included questions on television viewing habits (hours of English-language TV watched per week, three favourite programs), and for non-native English-speaking participants, questions on English-speaking countries visited and time spent in those countries.

Where possible the questionnaire was back-translated into the local language, and options on the demographic questions (e.g., income brackets, education levels) were made locally relevant. Greater levels of methodological detail are available in Bayard, Weatherall, Gallois, and Pittam (2001) and on the project website, <http://www.otago.ac.nz/anthropology/Linguistic/Accents.html>).

Sample groups ranged in size from eight (Scotland, not reported due to small sample size) through to 257 in New Zealand, for a total in excess of 1700 participants (This slightly underestimates the total number of participants, as most samples have a number of non-local participants, such as exchange students, who were excluded from reported results).

### 3. Regional results

The following represents a brief overview. For more details, including participants' accuracy at identifying accents, and 'confuse-a-grams' (i.e., information on individual traits) see the project website.

#### *3.1 English-speaking countries*

Samples from New Zealand (Dunedin and Wellington), Australia (Brisbane),

USA (Cleveland, Ohio), England (Cornwall and York), Ireland (Dublin), and Scotland (Aberdeen) were collected. Comprehensive results from the first three samples are reported in Bayard et al. (2001). The key trends to emerge were the dominance of the NAm accent on most of the personality traits. Both the NAm and UK accents were readily identified by all of the samples. NZ and Australian participants were generally able to distinguish between the Australasian accents, a skill, unsurprisingly, not found in other samples (except Fiji, see 2.4).

### *3.2 Europe*

Samples collected in Sweden (Umeå), Germany (Tübingen), and Finland (Helsinki) again found overall higher ratings for the NAm accent in solidarity, and again, with the EE and NAm accents both well recognised. The male EE accent still retained an edge of prestige with high scores in status, prestige, and power. More detailed results from Sweden are presented in Bayard and Sullivan (2005). Results from Norway are forthcoming.

### *3.3 Asia*

An initial sample from Hong Kong found high evaluations across all indicators for the NAm accent (followed by the AusE accent). An immediate question of interest would be whether such an effect still held true in parts of China less exposed to western influences. However, a subsequent sample from Luoyang confirmed that the NAm accent was popular even in Mainland China. Samples from Singapore, Japan (Tokyo), Malaysia, and Indonesia (Surabaya) further confirmed the high rating of the NAm accent through Asia. Another feature of these samples is that, in addition to not rating the male NZE accent highly, the EE voices were given quite low ratings. The low ranking of the EE accent included power and status variables, typically a strength for the EE accents in English-speaking countries. However, it would appear that this is independent of their ability to identify them, as no Asian sample managed to correctly identify the EE voices as being English. This included Hong Kong, despite the relatively recent departure of the official British presence. Singapore showed a slightly different pattern of results, with the UK voices, especially the male, faring slightly more strongly with respect to status and power, but again, without an ability to identify the accent as English.

### *3.4 The Pacific*

Aside from Australia and New Zealand, the only other Pacific sample is from

Fiji. The pacific tie was clearly evident in the results, with the female NZE voice being rated more highly than usual, close to the NAM accents. Further, accent identification was high, including differentiation between New Zealand and Australia, especially for ethnic Fijians. More details of the Fijian sample are available in Mugler (2002).

### *3.5 South America*

Not unsurprisingly, given the weak ties of Britain, Australia, and New Zealand to Brazil (São Paulo) and Argentina (Buenos Aires), participants from these countries struggled to identify any accents other than the NAM. The NAM accents were rated in a typically positive fashion, with the EE accents being rated negatively in terms of solidarity.

## **4. Media influence**

The consistent theme emerging from participants' English-language television experience is the overwhelming North American origin of the content (and that some confess to watching rather a lot). This includes participants from England, Scotland, and Ireland, although these countries do have a good proportion of non-American television in their 'diet'. This may go some way to explaining the dominance of the NAM accents, especially through solidarity ratings. Interestingly, even in Mainland China, American television is well watched.

As noted in Mugler (2002), the presence of New Zealand programming in Fiji might underlie part of the difference in perception by Fijians of the New Zealand accent relative to other countries. However, it is hard to disentangle this influence from the influence of other links between Fiji and New Zealand.

## **5. Intonation influence**

Another explanation for some of the variation in ratings that has been explored is the impact of intonation. The variety within the accent stimuli ranges from the NZE male, who has been described as monotonic (Bayard et al. 2001), through to the NAM female whose intonation changes are quite pronounced. To consider these changes, Kirk Sullivan digitally manipulated the stimuli, and initially removed the fundamental frequency ( $F_0$ ) from the samples (flat

intonation), and then mapped the NAm intonation patterns on to them (expressive intonation). Flat intonation lowered the ratings for all accents, except for the NZE male who rated *higher* with flat intonation (which may be related to the lack of intonation *prior* to the removal of  $F_0$ ). The influence of expressive intonation on perceptions of the accents were less clear cut (Sullivan, Bayard, and Green 2002).

## 6. Future directions

There are still a number of opportunities for further analysis of the extant data. In many respects, such a large set lends itself to deeper investigation, and a number of avenues remain to be explored. These include whether perceiving an accent as being a certain ethnicity (not what ethnicity the accent is) influences participants' ratings of the voice. That is, to measure the influence of stereotypes on evaluation, not just the acoustic properties of the accent.

Donn was also keen on considering whether different cultures grouped the measured traits in different ways, and had conducted some exploratory factor analyses suggesting that this was the case (Bayard and Green 2002). However, considering how each accent was evaluated, rather than considering only an average across participants, could lend greater strength to this argument.

Beyond the possibility that some data might be collected in Africa or India, other opportunities obviously exist outside the framework of EEAWW. A project with such an extensive geographic scope is generally going to be limited in the depth of methodology adopted. Additionally, the rapid expansion of the project required that, for cross-cultural comparisons to be most effective, the methodology be crystallised early on. Thus, was the project be started over, more extensive work would be undertaken with the selection and preparation of the voice samples themselves. The intonation of the New Zealand male in particular has come in for attention (see Bayard et al. 2001, for details), and it is acknowledged that the recording quality of the UK voices is not ideal.

As such, further research using different paradigms will clearly be a key to future understanding. For example, a closed question Likert scale may not accurately tap attitude perception. That is, a voice perceived as assertive and educated on fixed items does not indicate the extent to which it might also be perceived as 'snobby'. Further, a high rating on ambitious may not be positive per se, and in a similar fashion, being 'not at all hardworking' might equate to 'laidback', which might be a positive attribute.

## 7. Conclusions

The core strength of the project is in its geographic scope, methodology and using the same accent stimuli in each country. The key finding is clearly the extent to which the Northern American accent is evaluated favourably, especially in terms of solidarity, even in countries like China, where this would not necessarily be expected. The status of RP as the dominant prestige form, corresponding to higher power and status ratings, also appears to be waning relative to the findings of older research (e.g., Gallois and Callan 1985; Stewart, Ryan, and Giles 1985). Thus, it would appear that English is not just becoming perhaps *the* dominant world language, but that in the future it may be *American-accented* English. However, given the apparent changes in perceptions in the last twenty years, and changes in the accents themselves, a follow-up in the future would yield a fascinating comparison.

## Notes

1. The ideas and findings presented in this paper are largely the work of Donn Bayard; however, any mistakes or misrepresentations are the second author's. We also gratefully acknowledge the contributions of all who have worked on this project.

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