The Role of Foreign Accents in Humor Appreciation: An Exploratory Perception Study

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1. Introduction

Previous research has found that speakers with a standard accent were perceived significantly more positively than those with a non-standard, or foreign accent [1]. This study examines the effects of foreign accent on humour perception using the matched-guise technique with storytelling of humorous stories (i.e., the same speakers read the stories in both *accented* and in *unaccented* version in the same speaking style). Based on the previous research, our hypothesis is that foreign accent will negatively affect the perception of humour. We furthermore examine (1) whether higher accented English prejudice scores predict lower humour ratings and (2) whether humour ratings change based on how often listeners were exposed to the same story (i.e., first time exposure or repetition). In sum, the main aim of this study is to examine whether humor perception changes depending on the presence of accented speech, and how different languages from several language families influence that rating.

2. Methods

Audio files of 21 different (longer and shorter) humorous stories were recorded by four heritage bilingual speakers from four different language backgrounds (Arabic, Mandarin, Punjabi, Russian). Using a matched-guise technique, each story was recorded in an accented and unaccented version. Each speaker was carefully selected to be a highly proficient (heritage) speaker of one of the target languages examined in this project (Arabic, Russian, Mandarin, Punjabi), but also to speak unaccented English (as evidenced by their peers and authors of this study) due to their complete raising/education in the Canadian English system. Each speaker was asked to produce a foreign accent by including features of their specific heritage languages into English.

We created a between-subjects perception task in which 41 participants (all undergraduate *Linguistics* or *Cognitive Science of Language* students at McMaster University with self-reported normal hearing) were asked to rate their humour response to each auditorily presented story on a continuous sliding scale ranging from 0% to 100% ("*How funny did you find this audio?*"). Participants heard a full version of the experiment once, and a small subset of the experiment a second time in order to test for their rating difference with repeated exposure to the same story. Participants also filled out a *Measure of Prejudice Against Accented English* (MPAAE) scale to get an accurate measurement of their biases against accented English.

3. Results and Discussion

Results as displayed in Fig.1 showed that there is a significant difference in response between accented and unaccented stories ($F(1,675) = 4.46$), $p = 0.03$) which interacted with foreign language identity ($F(3,675) = 5.09$, $p = 0.002$). Post-hoc comparisons showed that, out of the four languages, only Punjabi-accented English was rated lower than its unaccented counterpart ($p = 0.037$). Thus, differences between accented and unaccented matched stories appeared in only one out of four language pairs examined in this study, so we cannot attribute this effect to the overall presence of foreign accent. Therefore, the lack of significant differences across the other three languages does not align with results from previous research. Interestingly, neither higher MPAAE scores nor number of exposures to the same story predicted ratings on accented stories.

Finally, please note that our choice of examined languages was based on the availability of highly proficient unaccented bilingual speakers, so studies with other languages/accents might show differing results, especially given the variation in responses that we find across languages. However, performing interlanguage comparisons from typologically distinct languages is a robust starting point (with respect to inter-language sampling) to examine the effect of foreign accents for humour perception further.
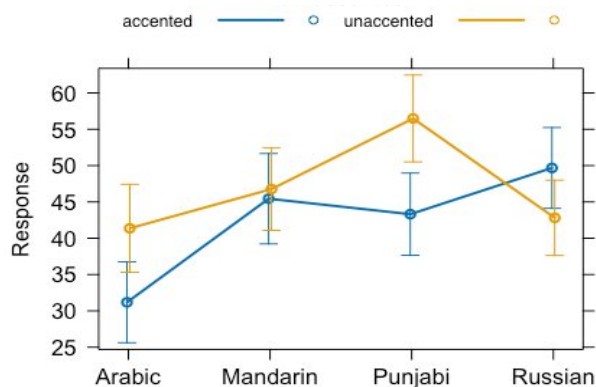

Figure 1. *Humor ratings by participants (in percent on y-axis) split by language (x-axis) and accent condition (colours).*

4. References

[1] Fuertes, J. N., Gottdiener, W. H., Martin, H., Gilbert, T. C. and Giles, H. "A meta-analysis of the effects of speakers' accents on interpersonal evaluations," Eur. J. Soc. Psych., vol. 42, no. 1, 2012