The Social Evaluation of Second Language Speech

Pavel Trofimovich and Suzie Beaulieu

Concordia University and Université Laval

pavel.trofimovich@concordia.ca, suzie.beaulieu@lli.ulaval.ca

The Social Evaluation of Second Language Speech

Abstract

A speaker's pronunciation (generally referred to as a speaker's accent) provides a wealth of information used by people to ascribe various social judgments to that speaker. These social judgments concern various characteristics of speakers' competence, such as knowledge, ambition, and intelligence, as well as attributes of their personality, including friendliness, honesty, benevolence, and warmth. Many speakers of a second or additional language are downgraded in their social evaluations by listeners, compared to speakers whose speech corresponds to an expected, standard, or otherwise preferred language variety, and these negative evaluations often have dramatic consequences for second language speakers, for example, in terms of their employment, immigration status, career advancement, or access to post-secondary education. We provide a broad overview of research on social evaluations of speakers, with a particular focus on second language speakers, and describe general conceptual frameworks, key methodologies, and major application domains in this research area. We highlight this area as an exciting research domain which lends itself to conceptually oriented and socially relevant applications.

The Social Evaluation of Second Language Speech

Introduction

> Every person… has an accent. Your accent carries the story of who you are—who
> first held you and talked to you when you were a child, where you have lived, your
> age, the schools you attended, the languages you know, your ethnicity, whom you
> admire, your loyalties, your profession, your class position… Your self is
> inseparable from your accent. Someone who tells you they don't like the way you
> speak is quite likely telling you that they don't like you. (Matsuda, 1991, p. 1329)

The opening quote by an acclaimed American lawyer, scholar, and activist Mari Matsuda poignantly captures the essence of this entry: A speaker's accent, which broadly refers to various pronunciation features (e.g., vowel quality, intonation) marking the speaker as an insider or an outsider in a given linguistic community, conveys many details which people use to form and express various social meanings. In their totality, these social meanings represent countless attitudes that people develop, adopt, and reproduce as they experience the speech around them. Whereas some attitudes center on language, for instance, where one language or one way of speaking can be perceived as more melodious or pleasant than others, many other attitudes target the speaker as a person, such that the speaker can be labeled as sounding sophisticated or impolite. In this entry, we provide a broad overview of research on people's social evaluations of speakers, with a particular focus on second language (L2) speakers. We highlight general conceptual frameworks, key methodologies, and major application domains in this research area.

Listeners tend to downgrade L2 speakers in a variety of social evaluations, particularly compared to speakers of what listeners might consider standard, expected, or acceptable ways of speaking, such as the language of the majority or the language of education and media in a specific community (Roessel et al., 2020). For instance, L2 speakers often receive unfavorable evaluations in terms of characteristics such as knowledge, ambition, competence, intelligence, and social class (collectively known as status traits) and attributes such as friendliness, honesty, benevolence, warmth, and credibility (collectively known as solidarity traits), and these evaluations, especially those concerning status, progressively decline the more a speaker's pronunciation diverges from what is expected or valued by listeners. In fact, L2 speakers themselves often undervalue their own ways of speaking in favor of what they consider to be a more prestigious language variety (e.g., Received Pronunciation for L2 speakers of English, European French for L2 speakers of French).

Conceptual Frameworks

According to one theoretical framework, listeners' social attitudes toward language speakers arise because listeners engage in a process called social categorization, whereby they use a speaker's pronunciation to define that person's social belonging, for example, as a foreigner, immigrant, or religious minority (Lambert et al., 1960). Once listeners establish the speaker's presumed group identity, they then extend their stereotypical views associated with that group to all its members. Clearly, such group-focused stereotyping (e.g., foreigners are loud, immigrants cannot be trusted) is a learned association, meaning that people pick up such views through life experiences either directly from family members or schooling or covertly from negative portrayals of L2 speakers in media or popular culture. The social hierarchies and associated stereotypes created by listeners are often complex, in the sense that listeners

distinguish L2 speakers from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and express different attitudes toward speakers whom they consider more preferred, such as Western European L2 English speakers, versus less desirable, such as Latin, Middle Eastern, South and East Asian speakers of L2 English. In this sense, social evaluations of L2 speakers—as members of stigmatized, minoritized, or otherwise socially less prestigious or desirable groups—are similar to judgments elicited by other groups whose social identity is marked by their speech, such as speakers of a regional or non-standard language variety (vs. a more prestigious variety used in education and media), members of the LGTBQIA2S+ community (vs. heteronormative ways of speaking), or seniors (vs. younger people).

The learned associations between L2 speakers' presumed memberships in groups such as foreigners, immigrants, or religious minorities and various stereotypes ascribed to those groups are often so strong that they can be activated in the absence of any direct evidence from the speaker's actual pronunciation (Kang & Rubin, 2014). In a classic study, for example, one group of English-speaking university students was led to believe that the speaker they heard was Asian. These students downgraded the speaker in social evaluations and showed diminished understanding of the speaker's speech, compared to another group of students who were told that the speaker was Caucasian. Importantly, in both cases, the speaker was identical—a speaker of American English with no obvious signs of L2 accent (Rubin, 1992). In essence, listeners can also ascribe (often negative) judgments to speakers through engaging in what is called reverse linguistic stereotyping, meaning that they attribute social meaning to speakers based on assumptions alone, without any direct linguistic evidence.

Another pathway for listeners to engage in evaluative behaviors, which often result in L2 speakers being downgraded or undervalued in social evaluations, is experiential (Dragojevic,

2020). According to this view, listeners might experience difficulty understanding some L2 speakers—for example, those who come from unfamiliar linguistic backgrounds or whose L2 accent is particularly strong—and this increased cognitive effort might lead to listeners feeling aggravated, irritated, or generally negative toward L2 speakers, resulting in unfavorable evaluations. Essentially, listeners appear to "blame" the speaker for the communication difficulty they have experienced, evaluating a person who is more difficult to understand as less intelligent, successful, friendly, and compassionate, compared to a more comprehensible person.

Finally, listeners' social evaluations of L2 speakers also arise from a complex interplay between listeners' expectations about a speaker and that speaker's actual linguistic performance (Burgoon & Burgoon, 2001). According to this perspective, L2 speakers might receive more positive social evaluations if they surpass what is expected of them, compared to when expectations are met. In contrast, they might elicit more negative evaluations if they underwhelm listeners' expectations compared to when expectations are met. For instance, in a job interview context, an L2-speaking job candidate might be evaluated more favorably in terms of employability or personal characteristics if this candidate performs better than expected, such as when the person speaks fluently and comprehensibly or uses a prestigious language variety. Another L2-speaking job candidate might receive a disproportionately harsh evaluation if this applicant's performance violates listeners' expectations negatively, such as when the person sounds strongly accented and dysfluent or uses a regional, colloquial, or otherwise dispreferred language variety. In this sense, the outcomes of listeners' social evaluations of L2 speakers depend not just on listeners' beliefs about certain groups but on whether and how these beliefs are supported or contradicted by L2 speakers' linguistic performance.

Key Methodological Approaches

To document people's social reactions to language speakers, including L2 speakers, researchers use various methods and techniques (Kircher & Zipp, 2022). One method involves explicitly asking study participants to provide their views about L2 speakers or their ways of speaking. For instance, researchers might administer surveys and questionnaires or conduct interviews and focus group discussions, where participants are asked directly about their perceptions of L2 speakers. Sometimes participants are given geographic maps and are asked to provide open-ended descriptions of the speakers and their language, as used in a given location (Lam & O'Brien, 2014). Whereas these research techniques yield rich, descriptive data, such methods have a serious weakness, namely, that participants might respond in socially desirable ways, essentially saying what they think is appropriate or what the researcher wants to hear, not what the participants really believe.

To minimize these concerns, researchers frequently opt for indirect approaches to examining people's social evaluations of speakers. The most common among these approaches is the matched or verbal guise method. First developed by Lambert et al. (1960), this technique involves presenting several audio recordings for evaluation by research participants, where they listen to and assess each speaker along one or more social dimensions, often using numeric *agree–disagree* statements or scales (e.g., *not intelligent* 1 2 3 4 5 6 *very intelligent*). Importantly, the recordings are matched, in the sense that they are similar in many respects, except for one feature of particular interest to a researcher. For example, the target feature might involve a difference in language (e.g., when some speakers use Spanish while others speak English), a difference in language variety (e.g., when some speakers speak Japanese as their first language while for others it is a language learned after immigration), or a difference in a specific

performance characteristic (e.g., when some speakers are more fluent than others, or some speakers overuse *like* as a discourse marker while others do not use *like* excessively). In other cases, the exact same recording is paired with two or more guises, for instance, where the same bilingual speaker is recorded speaking in two languages. Because all recordings are presented to listeners for evaluation in a relatively long sequence of audio samples coming from multiple speakers, who themselves differ along various dimensions, such as voice quality, pitch, and speaking rate, the key distinction between the contrasted audio recordings is often not obvious to participants, which minimizes the chances of their providing socially desirable or expected responses.

Finally, research evidence about social evaluations of L2 speakers need not be gathered by directly involving participants in an experiment. Such evidence can instead be inferred from how L2 speakers and their language are discussed and portrayed in print or social media and in written or spoken interactions. For instance, researchers might use such methods as discourse and content analysis, direct observation, and ethnographic work to document how different people, government bodies, business entities, or entire nations express various social attitudes toward L2 speakers.

Application Domains

Setting aside conceptual frameworks and research methodologies, the key value of research on social evaluations of L2 speech lies in its potential to uncover various social biases, to distinguish them from listener reactions to L2 speakers' actual communication difficulties, and ultimately to rectify those biases. There is a growing body of evidence showing that attitudes toward L2 speakers can impact various aspects of those speakers' daily lives. For instance, international students studying in L2-medium universities report being mocked for their

language errors, feeling excluded from course activities due to their accent, and experiencing harassment over their pronunciation, which for some students leads to depression and suicidal thoughts (Dryden & Dovchin, 2022). In pre-employment situations, L2-speaking applicants are less likely to be interviewed than speakers of a more prestigious language variety, and they are downgraded in job suitability, often regardless of their actual qualifications (Spence et al., 2022). In the workplace, L2-speaking employees can be seen as lacking adequate professional skills, preparedness, and intelligence, and are often targeted through belittling behaviors by coworkers (Ramjattan, 2022). In legal contexts, L2 speakers are frequently perceived as less credible eyewitnesses, compared to speakers of standard or prestigious language varieties, and in some of the world's jurisdictions, undocumented asylum seekers are either granted or denied legal status or right to remain in a country based on whether listeners can accurately evaluate their ethnic origin (Fraser, 2019).

Against this backdrop, it is of key importance for researchers to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of various instructional interventions and other activities whose goal is to mitigate accent- and pronunciation-focused attitudes targeting L2 speakers (Taylor Reid et al., 2022). Such interventions often take the form of awareness-raising activities, where people learn about and discuss various social biases, and perspective-taking interventions, where people take on the perspective of another individual, for example, imagining a day in the life of a recent immigrant. Bias-mitigation strategies also involve increased contact opportunities for members of different groups to get to know one another through social activities. Finally, other interventions include various practice tasks, such as when listeners—especially those whose decisions might carry particularly high stakes, such as language assessors and immigration officers—practice completing tasks similar to those they are assessing so that they become aware of potential biases

that can influence their decision-making and establish or refresh their understanding of relevant performance benchmarks. Needless to say, activities promoting the diversity of L2 speakers' accent and pronunciation need not be initiated by researchers. For example, in professional settings, hiring and evaluation committees might choose to include an extra step in their decision-making process, where they might read other people's narratives or share their own stories about experiencing prejudice or empathy from their interlocutors based on their linguistic performance. And in workplaces with a significant multilingual, multicultural workforce, employees can participate in formal or informal activities such as happy hours, sharing circles, or language classes, with the goal of promoting communication skills and group cohesion.

Conclusion

We conclude our entry on social evaluations of L2 speech by referring back to Mari Matsuda's impassioned plea for a society, where "[t]he presence of a variety of accents in schools, in the workplace, in the media, in all public spaces, promotes the value of tolerance" and where "linguistic pluralism represents our… generous and tolerant self that marvels at difference and feels no need to destroy individual variability in the process of self-definition" (p. 1387). From this standpoint, research on social evaluations of L2 speech takes on particular societal significance, because it once again emphasizes that matters of language—and accent in particular—are a central part of our experience as humans with a multiplicity of voices, identities, languages, and beliefs.

Cross-References

Language and Identity; Multilingualism and Attitudes; Multilingualism and Language Rights;

World Englishes and Identity; Intercultural Communication in Legal Contexts; The

Sociophonetics of L2 Speech

References

Burgoon, J. K., & Burgoon, M. (2001). Expectancy theories. In W. P. Robinson & H. Giles
(Eds.), *The new handbook of language and social psychology* (2 ed., pp. 79–102). Wiley.

Dragojevic, M. (2020). Extending the fluency principle: Factors that increase listeners'
processing fluency positively bias their language attitudes. *Communication Monographs*,
87(2), 158–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2019.1663543

Dryden, S., & Dovchin, S. (2022). Translingual English discrimination: Loss of academic sense
of belonging, the hiring order of things, and students from the Global South. *Applied
Linguistics Review*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2022-
0065

Fraser, H. (2019). The role of native speakers in LADO: Are we missing a more important
question? In P. L. Patrick, M. S. Schmid, & K Zwaan (Eds.), *Language analysis for the
determination of origin: Current perspectives and new directions* (pp. 71–89). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-79003-9_5

Kang, O., & Rubin, D. (2014). Listener expectations, reverse linguistic stereotyping, and
individual background factors in social judgments and oral performance assessment. In J.
M. Levis & A. Moyer (Eds.), *Social dynamics in second language accent* (pp. 239–254).
De Gruyter Mouton. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614511762.239

Lam, H., & O'Brien, M. G. (2014). Perceptual dialectology in second language learners of

   German. *System*, *46*, 151–162. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2014.08.006

Lambert, W. E., Hodgson, R. C., Gardner, R. C., & Fillenbaum, S. (1960). Evaluational reactions

   to spoken languages. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *60*(1), 44–51.

   https://doi.org/10.1037/h0044430

Matsuda, M. J. (1991). Voices of America: Accent, antidiscrimination law, and a jurisprudence

   for the last reconstruction. *The Yale Law Journal*, *100*(5), 1329–1407.

   https://doi.org/10.2307/796694

Ramjattan, V. (2022). Accenting racism in labour migration. *Annual Review of Applied*

   Linguistics, *42*, 87–92. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190521000143

Roessel, J., Schoel, C., & Stahlberg, D. (2020). Modern notions of accent-ism: Findings,

   conceptualizations, and implications for interventions and research on nonnative accents.

   Journal of Language and Social Psychology, *39*(1), 87–111.

   https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X19884619

Rubin, D. L. (1992). Nonlanguage factors affecting undergraduates' judgments of nonnative

   English-speaking teaching assistants. *Research in Higher Education*, *33*, 511–531.

   https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00973770

Spence, J. L., Hornsey, M. J., Stephensen, E. M., & Imuta, K. (2022). Is your accent right for the

   job? A meta-analysis on accent bias in hiring decisions. *Personality and Social*

   Psychology Bulletin. Advance online publication.

   https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672221130595

Taylor Reid, K., Trofimovich, P., & O'Brien, M. G. (2022). The malleability of listener

   judgments of second language speech. In V. Sardegna & A. Jarosz (Eds.), *Theoretical*

and practical developments in English speech assessment, research, and training (pp. 11–26). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-98218-8_2

Suggested Readings

Barrett, R., Cramer, J., & McGowan, K. B. (2022). *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States* (3rd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003332886 This is the third (expanded and updated) edition of a classic book introducing the social value of accent and highlighting accent as a power social cue which is frequently associated with negative consequences for second language speakers.

Kinzler, K. D. (2021). Language as a social cue. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *72*(1), 241–264. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010418-103034 This comprehensive overview provides a detailed description of language as a source of rich social information. This work not only provides a thorough description of social categorization based on language but also includes a comprehensive review of how social categorization evolves throughout child development.

Kircher, R., & Zipp, L. (Eds.) (2022). *Research methods in language attitudes*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108867788 This edited volume provides a comprehensive overview of various research methods and techniques used to elicit and analyze social evaluations of speech.

Roberts, C. (2021). *Linguistic penalties and the job interview*. Equinox. This book provides an excellent overview of the role of language in pre-employment contexts.

Contributor Bio

Pavel Trofimovich is a Professor of Applied Linguistics in the Department of Education at Concordia University in Montréal, Québec, Canada. He has served as Associate Editor for *Canadian Modern Language Review* and *Language Learning*, and as Journal Editor for *Language Learning* (2015–2019, 2022–2023). He has published extensively in many top scholarly venues in the fields of language learning, cognitive psychology, and language teaching, with over 170 journal articles, chapters, and conference proceedings published, and is an author of three books on the use of cognitive psycholinguistic research methods in second language research and assessment of second language pronunciation.

Suzie Beaulieu is a teacher educator and researcher at Université Laval in Québec City, Canada. Her research interests focus on the acquisition of second language French in adulthood, particularly on the oral skills required for learners to successfully integrate into French-speaking communities of practice. More specifically, she has investigated the language attitudes of Canadian French speakers toward second language speakers of French, the development of second language oral skills among (low) literate adult learners, and the explicit teaching of Canadian French sociolinguistic and pragmatic norms.