

# College Students' Reactions to Accents of L2 Learners of Spanish and English

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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, sociolinguistic studies in various cultures have shown that speech style is a significant factor in making judgments about a speaker's ethnicity, social class, and personality. Bourhis, Giles and Lambert (1975) have concluded that the reaction one receives from others in social interaction appears to be influenced as much by his style of speech as by any other cue expressed through face-to-face contact. In 1967, Mehrabian and Ferris concluded that only 7% of the judgments an informant makes upon hearing a speaker comes from message content. Rosenthal (1974) has concluded that these social attitudes are evident as early as five years of age.

The most renowned method of collecting data on linguistic attitudes is Lambert's matched-guise technique. My current research employs this method to determine what attitudes listeners have specifically toward second language learners of either English or Spanish. It focuses not only on language variation, but on the effects of accent on listeners' perceptions. In this study I also consider factors such as the informants' gender and the speakers' paralinguistic features, especially voice quality. The guiding hypotheses for this research were:

1. Definite attitudes toward accent and language variation will be evident in all evaluations.
2. When speaking in English, native English speakers will rate more favorably than native Spanish speakers and, conversely,
3. Native Spanish speakers will rate more favorably in their native language than English speakers.

The goal in becoming aware of these social attitudes is to analyze what bilingual educators can do to shift the listeners' judgment system to be more focused on content and less on pre-existing stereotypes based on accent or language variety.

## 2. Theory

The technique employed by this study and most related research is known as matched-guise and was first introduced by Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner and Fillenbaum in Montreal in 1960 to determine attitudes held by bilingual French Canadians toward the languages in contact. Their method involves informants listening to apparently different speakers representing their own and the other language variety reading the same neutral passage and evaluating those speakers using a bipolar adjective rating scale, providing impressions or evaluations of personality characteristics. Without the knowledge of the informant, the speaker is actually one bilingual person and the reactions elicited by each of his linguistic guises are compared statistically. According to Lambert (1967:94), this method "appears to reveal judges' more private reactions to the contrasting group than direct questionnaires do."

Since his initial study, Lambert's technique has proven highly successful in eliciting stereotypes or biases toward particular social groups. The matched-guise technique has been widely used in bicultural settings such as Quebec, as well as in cross-cultural studies and multi-ethnic societies, and it has been employed not only as an instrument in comparing attitudes toward languages, but also toward variations in dialects and accents. Research for this study also included work conducted in Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Egypt, the United States, and other countries all seeking to determine linguistic attitudes by means of the same methodology. The practical implications of these studies range from the influence of linguistic attitudes on educational and political systems to their influence on workplace environments. Typically, the findings in matched-guise studies result in less favorable ratings for speakers of lower prestige languages.

In 1966, Labov studied linguistic attitudes in New York City, concluding that informants have very strong opinions about language and are able to regularly detect the presence or absence of certain stigmatized or socially diagnostic features. His findings proved that perception is highly influenced by stereotypical views held of a particular group believed to speak in a certain way. As Suzanne Romaine (1980) found in her research on linguistic attitudes in Scotland, listeners are rarely consciously aware of these linguistic prejudices, and it is very difficult for the informant to vocalize such stereotypes without the linguistic terminology. This fact makes the bipolar adjective scale used in matched-guise studies such a valuable tool in attitude measurement. Osgood determined in 1957 that through use of the Likert scale it is indeed possible to identify linguistic attitudes.

### 3. Methodology

The matched guise technique was used in this study to allow for the isolation of particular languages and accents as variables influencing the linguistic attitudes. By using the same speaker for multiple recordings, I was able to limit the variables, achieving more conclusive results.

For my study, I recorded three women, all graduate teaching assistants in Spanish. Though there were few speakers, Labov has concluded in previous research that the patterns of linguistic structure are manifested just as reliably in a few speakers as they would be with a much larger number. I chose speakers of the same gender to further limit the variables as Lambert's study in 1967 proved that sex was a significant factor in the ratings given by informants. All three women chosen spoke both English and Spanish though their abilities varied.

The first speaker, Jane, is a native English speaker from the United States who is an advanced speaker of Spanish with extensive education in the language and fluency in it. The second speaker, Cara, is a Hispanic woman who is an immigrant from the Dominican Republic. She, too, has extensive training in her second language, English, and has a good command of it. Maria, the final speaker, is an immigrant from Chile and, while she speaks English, her ability is much more limited.

For this study, each of the three subjects was recorded speaking in both English and Spanish. They read identical, factually neutral passages translated into each language to limit the possibility of content interfering with listeners' judgments.

A questionnaire was next constructed to measure the perceptions of the evaluators (Fig.A). It consisted of a six point Likert scale measuring 12 bipolar adjectives used in describing personality characteristics. The adjectives chosen are meant to reflect stereotypically favorable personality characteristics paired with their opposites. The adjectives used in this study are largely borrowed from a similar study performed by Bradford, Farrar and Bradford in 1974 in which the authors had predetermined what characteristics listeners consider favorable.

The adjectives in my study were arranged in such a way that a higher numerical rating was not necessarily more favorable. This variance required increased attention on the part of the evaluators. Also included were three open-ended questions to allow evaluators to judge origin and occupation and also to add any additional impressions.

**Figure A**

1. boring	1	2	3	4	5	6	interesting
2. uneducated	1	2	3	4	5	6	very educated
3. mean	1	2	3	4	5	6	friendly
4. shy	1	2	3	4	5	6	outgoing
5. lazy	1	2	3	4	5	6	hardworking
6. poor	1	2	3	4	5	6	rich
7. serious	1	2	3	4	5	6	humorous
8. popular	1	2	3	4	5	6	unpopular
9. overweight	1	2	3	4	5	6	thin
10. unhappy	1	2	3	4	5	6	happy
11. physically attractive	1	2	3	4	5	6	unattractive
12. unattractive voice	1	2	3	4	5	6	attractive voice

13. Where do you think this person is from?
14. What occupation do you think this person might have?
15. Additional comments or impressions:

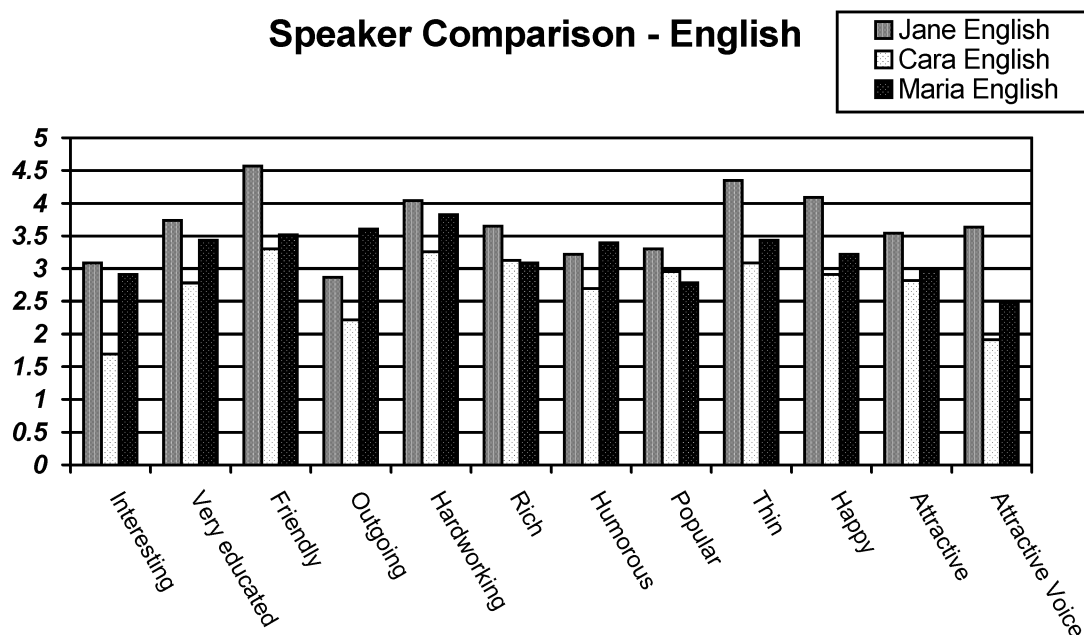
The final stage in the study involved testing the students' perceptions. 23 students were chosen, nine males and fourteen females, ranging in age from 18 to 21, all relatively homogeneous in background, and primarily native English speakers in the process of learning Spanish as a second language. I chose this group of informants with a question proposed by Lambert in mind. Lambert conducted his research seeking to conclude whether participation in a bilingual education program influenced students' attitudes toward the various forms of French, and if so, in what direction. By choosing a group of Spanish students, I was able to analyze the effect the second language program has on influencing perceptions of the Spanish language and accents and to judge whether their exposure has helped to develop a positive attitude toward the Hispanic community.

The six recordings were played in random order to further prevent the matched guises from being realized. The listeners were led to believe that they were being tested on their ability to determine personality characteristics of each speaker based on speech alone. The content and language variation or accents were deemed insignificant. The informants were told that the task was similar to judging personality based on hearing a voice on the radio or over the phone. Upon completion of the questionnaire, all data was collected and recorded.

#### 4. Results

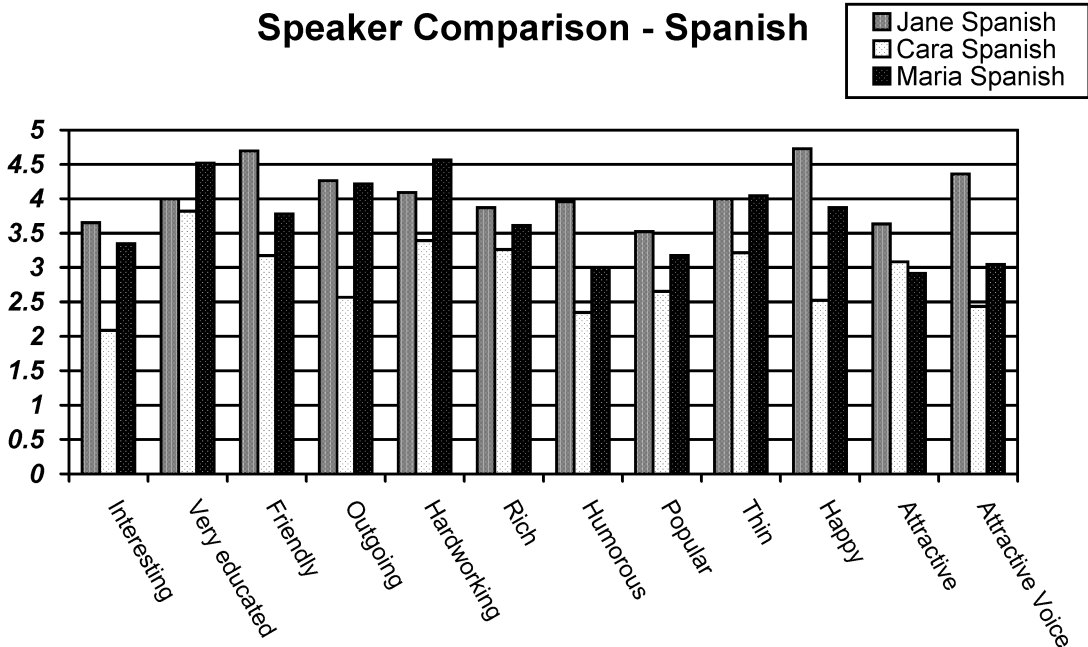
My findings were the following: When speaking English, Jane, the native English speaker, rated the highest in all categories except for "outgoing" and "humorous." These were the results I had anticipated, as the evaluators, also being primarily native English speakers, identified with her. This level of ethnocentrism on the informants' part was also noted by Giles' research (1971). When questioned as to her occupation, several students proposed Jane as being a Spanish teacher, which I link to their identification with their own non-native Spanish teacher. This data also confirmed Giles' findings that the speaker using the standard variety will rate higher in terms of competence, while the speaker of the regional variety will rate more favorably in terms of integrity and social attractiveness, including characteristics such as humorousness.

Figure B



Unexpected was the fact that Maria, the speaker having the least ability in English, was rated more favorably than Cara. This triggered my suspicion of the effects of paralinguistics, specifically voice quality, on the results. Though it was not an intended variable in my research, Cara had a considerably lower voice than the other women. Conversely, Maria had the highest voice and also spoke at the fastest pace. Brown, Strong, and Rencher (1975) have noted the undoubted effects acoustic qualities have on judges' perceptions. In their study, it was found that tone of voice was a major determinant of listeners' reactions based on speech.

Figure C



When speaking in Spanish, again Jane achieved the overall highest ratings, falling short only significantly on “hardworking” and “very educated.” Initially I was surprised that the results proved that ability was not the dominant factor in determining attitude. This outcome returns to the significance of identification and ethnocentrism on the part of the informants. Perhaps the lower rating in “hardworking” may be equated with the errors committed in Spanish, implying she applied less effort in her speech. Again the factor of tonal qualities may be considered in terms of the ratings of the two other speakers.

In terms of gender, there was little significant difference between the scoring of males versus females in response to any of the three speakers. The greatest difference was in the evaluation of Maria speaking in English. The females rated her more favorably in eleven of the twelve categories. This outcome was not seen, however, when Maria spoke in Spanish. This data implies that females hold more positive attitudes than males in respect to Spanish speakers with limited ability in English. Brown, Strong and Rencher (1975) attribute gender differences in evaluations to their findings that females rating female speakers rely more heavily on vocal qualities, while male judges are more conscious of content. By manipulating pitch and rate, the researchers were able to measure the effects of acoustic variables and further prove these findings. The implication would therefore be that Maria's vocal qualities had a significant effect on the scoring by females.

## 5. Conclusions

I find my investigation successful in proving that both language choice and accent are undoubtedly influential on the linguistic attitudes of listeners. The data leads to the conclusion that listeners are, in fact, ethnocentric in their judgments and will consistently rate those speakers with

whom they identify the highest, regardless of the language of choice. This also implies that ability is insignificant when judging a member of their own group. Furthermore, the research proves that ability is not the dominant consideration when evaluating a non-native speaker of a given language. This was proven with the case of Maria rating more favorably in English.

With respect to judging the influence of being a part of the Spanish program on attitude, the results were not conclusive in proving that the students had positive reactions due to their exposure to the language. In their research, Lambert, Giles and Picard (1975) concluded that students with experience in a bilingual education program rated the non-standard variety much more favorably. Based on their work it is unequivocal that bilingual education programs do have positive influences on cultural and linguistic attitudes. Perhaps the same would be found if this study were expanded to compare reactions of advanced Spanish students as well as those with no exposure to the language.

The weakness in this study is perhaps the unanticipated influence of paralinguistic features, especially voice quality. This dilemma may be resolved by expanding the study to include more speakers, making individual variances in tone less significant.

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