

FOREIGN ACCENT AND THE NATIVE SPEAKER

Una Cunningham-Andersson

Department of Linguistics,
Stockholm University, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of an experiment investigating a) native speaker reactions to common non-native pronunciations on the three dimensions of perceived importance of error, perceived friendliness of speaker and perceived educational level of speaker, and b) the effect of information about speakers' ethnic origin on the reactions of native speakers from two socially distinct, but otherwise comparable groups to non-native pronunciations.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is important to distinguish between, on the one hand, attitudes to ethnic groups, which can evidently be elicited using more or less accented speakers as stimuli (e.g. the classical matched-guise work of Lambert et al., [1] and on the other hand, attitudes to the non-native accents associated with these groups. Here we are concerned with the relationship between the way native speakers of Swedish see different immigrant groups and the way they react to different phonetic features of immigrants' pronunciation of Swedish.

2. EXPERIMENT 1

2.1 Hypotheses

In order to access phonetically conditioned attitudes to foreign accent, we can look at a number of non-native phonetic features which crop up in several different accents of Swedish. Our hypothesis is that different phonetic features of a certain non-native speaker's pronunciation cause native listeners to react in different ways (HYPOTHESIS 1). This kind of discrimination is clearly independent of the listener's attitude to the ethnic group he believes the speaker to represent.

We know a good deal about the way the Swedish population views various immigrant groups from investigations such as that reported in [2]. Given this, we would expect to find that native speakers will perceive non-native speech differently depending on what they know, or believe they know about the speakers' linguistic, and, therefore, ethnic, origin (HYPOTHESIS 2).

Westin [2] reports that blue-collar workers are, on average, less tolerant of immigrants than are other groups. We hypothesize that

native listeners with a lower educational standard (for example, those 17-19 year-olds studying to be blue-collar workers - electricians, mechanics, builders etc) will be more influenced by what they believe about a speaker's linguistic origin than will similar students on theoretical courses (directed at university admittance to subjects such as engineering) (HYPOTHESIS 3).

2.2 Material

From non-native readings of a short text, we listed a large number of NNPs, from which we chose five which occurred in a number of different accents. Five versions of each of these non-native pronunciations each taken from one of two places in the text, produced by non-native speakers, were chosen with the smallest possible total number of speakers, such that the maximum number of comparisons between native reactions to a single speaker's deviant pronunciations could be made. This gave us a total of 25 tokens from 11 speakers, with up to three tokens from each speaker.

In order to let us test hypothesis 3 we used two groups of native speakers: (a) 72 native Swedish students on three-year theoretical courses at upper secondary school (T3), and (b) 33 native Swedish students on two-year practical courses (P2). The only difference between groups P2 and T3 is assumed to be their educational, and therefore social status (cf [3]), in relation to the employment they will be expected to have at the end

of their studies. We have performed extensive preliminary experiments on T3-type listeners (c.f. [4], [5]).

Previous work on linguistic attitudes (for example, [6]) has shown the need for two basic dimensions to describe speaker characteristics elicited from linguistic stimuli. We have used three dimensions representing the perceived importance of eliminating each NNP as uttered by a particular speaker, and the perceived friendliness and educational level of each speaker when he or she uses particular NNPs.

2.3 Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that different phonetic features of a single non-native speaker's pronunciation cause naive native listeners to react in different ways. The NNPs spoken by different speakers were often found to be judged differently from each other as regards how important it is to eliminate each NNP. This is also true of the perceived educational level of the speakers, but the perceived friendliness of a speaker is only in one case influenced by the various NNPs he or she uses. It is, however, clearly the case that non-native pronunciations from a single speaker can be judged very differently. This gives us corroboration for hypothesis one.

Our second hypothesis was that the same phonetic feature in different non-native accents will elicit different native responses. We found that the variation between judgements of dif-

ferent non-native speakers' productions of single NNP categories is usually significantly greater than the variation within speakers. This means that our hypothesis is supported. There is no significant tendency for similar non-native pronunciations to be judged in the same way.

The third hypothesis predicts that a speaker's pronunciation will be judged differently depending on what the native informants know, or believe they know about the speakers' linguistic origin. This was tested by comparing the judgements of stimuli where the same NNP from the same speaker is presented more than once with conflicting information about the speakers' linguistic backgrounds). The fact that the listeners accepted this information is a reflection of their limited capabilities of identification of foreign accents, as mentioned above. Hypothesis 3 is not corroborated for either listener group on any dimension. There are very few significant differences between the judgements of the speaker guises. This means that, while the listeners were not aware that they were hearing the same speaker more than once, they were uninfluenced by the information about the speakers' backgrounds when making their judgements.

2.4 Discussion

We have here a clear case of distinct phonetically conditioned attitudes to different non-native pronunciation features. A single speaker's NNPs can be judged differently by

naive native listeners as regards the importance of the NNPs used and, more surprisingly, how friendly (in one case) and highly educated the speaker is perceived to be. If a non-native speaker is perceived as having a lower level of education when he or she lets a final velar nasal be followed by a voiced velar stop than when he or she inserts a vowel in a consonant cluster this can have serious social consequences for the speaker. This has, therefore, implications for the teaching of Swedish as a second language, and is an important finding, since it shows that impressions of accent strength may change while hearing a speaker, and indicates that these impressions may be influenced by the systematic elimination of stigmatized non-native features from the individual's speech.

It would clearly be useful for immigrants to learn to avoid the stigmatized NNPs. Our five NNP categories can only give an indication that differences exist here. Obviously we must have more NNP categories if we are to investigate this area in more detail. The following experiment is an attempt to establish which kinds of NNPs elicit the least favourable reactions from native listeners.

3. EXPERIMENT 2

NNPs occurring in both the readings of texts (once again, "The North Wind and the Sun") and in spontaneous speech (the speaker was encouraged to tell the "story of his life") were extracted from the data base, along with as little

accompanying material as was deemed appropriate. The NNPs were divided into categories. All in all, 94 stimulus tokens were selected, falling into 26 NNP categories. 21 speakers of 13 languages were involved.

Only one listener group was used for this experiment, although they were tested in smaller groups of 20-30. This group was composed of 91 of the same kinds of upper secondary school students of technical subjects in the final year of a three-year theoretical course as the T3 group in the last experiment, although none of the students took part in both experiments. The same three judgement dimensions were used as in the first experiment: NNP importance, friendliness and education.

The second experiment showed again that there was more difference between the judgements made by a new listener group (similar to the T3 group) of the speakers than of the various NNPs. A list of the speakers and a list of the NNPs occurring in our material were compiled in the order of the judgements they elicited from the listeners. The NNPs associated with the least favourable overall impressions would, naturally, be worth avoiding for non-native speakers. These results have obvious pedagogical implications.

4. REFERENCES

[1] LAMBERT, W., R. HODGSON, R. GARDNER & S. FILLINBAUM (1960) "Evaluational reactions to spoken languages". *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychol-*

ogy 60 (Jan) 44-51.

[2] WESTIN, C. (1984) "Majoritet om minoritet, en studie i etnisk tolerans i 80-talets Sverige". En rapport från Diskrimineringsutredningen. Stockholm: LiberFörlag.

[3] FARINGER, G. (1982) "Språk och social identifikation - en undersökning bland gymnasieelever i Stockholmsområdet". (FUMS rapport nr 106.) Uppsala.

[4] CUNNINGHAM-ANDERSSON, U. & O. ENGSTRAND (1988) "Attitudes to immigrant Swedish - A literature review and preparatory experiments", *Phonetic Experimental Research at the Institute of Linguistics, University of Stockholm (PERILUS) 8*, 103-152.

[5] CUNNINGHAM-ANDERSSON, U. & O. ENGSTRAND (1989) "Perceived strength and identity of foreign accent in Swedish", *Phonetica 46*, 138-154.

[6] LAMBERT, W., H. GILES & O. PICARD (1975) "Language attitudes in a French-American community". *International Journal of the Sociology of Language 4*, 127-152.