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Sociolinguistic studies explore the complex aspect of language, its utilization, development, and intersection with society. At the heart of this exploration lies the study of language attitudes, which play a pivotal role in shaping linguistic interactions, personal identities, social hierarchies, and the navigation of cultural diversity (Holmes, 2013). Dating back to the mid-20th century, the study of language attitudes initially focused on how individuals assess linguistic diversity, often examining the marginalization of non-conventional dialects and inflections (Campbell, 2020). These early investigations revealed a robust correlation between regional identity and language interpretation. Locally-associated accents often garnered positive views, while those from other regions were stigmatized. For instance, England's Received Pronunciation (R.P.) dialect was traditionally associated with status, while local accents like Cockney often faced negative stereotypes (Campbell, 2020). Additionally, studies consistently highlighted that individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds may perceive and assess language variations differently. As sociolinguistic research evolved, it examined the preference for standardized variations of a language, frequently associated with higher social classes, over non-conventional variations from lower economic backgrounds. This led to discussions on linguistic status and transformation in societal settings, emphasizing the convergence of language, ethnicity, and cultural identification (Campbell, 2020). Cultural groups often upheld their linguistic customs, and cultural affiliation, alongside broader sociocultural elements, influenced their attitudes towards these languages and dialects. The English language served as a crucial focus in early research, allowing sociolinguists to explore local differences, societal group differentiations, and the impact of global integration on language attitudes (McKenzie, 2010). The extensive internal diversity of English, including its myriad accents and dialects, provided a robust platform for investigating the impact of linguistic variation on attitudes, significantly contributing to sociolinguistics. McKenzie (2010) further illuminates how academic institutions reinforced language standards, influencing how individuals perceived and utilized language in formal settings. Educated individuals often displayed more favorable dispositions towards conventional or prestigious linguistic forms. As sociolinguistic research continues to progress, modern studies have broadened their scope to encompass additional factors such as age, gender, media influence, and the effects of globalization on language attitudes. This study aims to investigate the influence of various U.K. accents on the perceptions and attitudes of non-native English-speaking Belgian secondary school students, particularly emphasizing how age and gender play a role in shaping these linguistic attitudes. Based on preliminary research and sociolinguistic theories, the hypothesis posits that younger pupils and females are likely to exhibit more positive attitudes towards U.K. accents compared to their older and male counterparts.

**Theoretical Framework**

The conceptual structure for this investigation on language attitudes is based on sociolinguistic theories and expands on pertinent research exploring judgmental responses to accents. Giles (1971) underscores the influence of age on attitudes towards accents, stressing that people's assessments of accents can shift as they age. For instance, elderly individuals may ascribe distinct character qualities and proficiency to speakers with certain accents. This study categorizes individuals into two age groups, 13 and 17, representing variables of gender, acknowledging potential shifts in language attitudes among adolescents. The selected age brackets of 13 and 17 are significant in secondary schooling, signifying transitions from intermediate to senior education, which can impact students' exposure to diverse language influences.

As participants navigate and understand their communities and those around them, they encounter stereotypes and the reasons behind them, which shape their attitudes towards specific groups. The experiences throughout this process differ between males and females, hence the need to capture these aspects. Giles (1970) also examines the importance of gender in accent assessment, suggesting that gender can influence evaluations of accents concerning attractiveness, communication effectiveness, and social standing. While these gender-based variations in language attitudes are not absolute, they imply that males and females might hold distinct perceptions of accents (Zahn & Hopper, 1985). Thus, categorizing participants into male and female groups allows for a gender-oriented analysis of language attitudes.

The research will include the four representative dialects from various nations within the UK: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The selection of these accents is crucial to the research goals and aims to encompass the abundant internal variety of English accents in the United Kingdom (CHEYNE, 1970). Received Pronunciation (RP) is selected to symbolize England, functioning as a benchmark and acclaimed English dialect (GILES, 1971). This dialect possesses cultural value and is frequently linked to power and formality. Frequently heard in British media, RP is considered the standard for "correct" English pronunciation. Nonetheless, it has also faced backlash for its exclusive implications, with some perceiving it as disconnected from England's linguistic diversity (Smith, 2017). Scottish Standard English exemplifies Scotland, displaying the diversity of English utilized in formal and educational settings (Ball, 1983). Scotland possesses a unique linguistic character, and this pronunciation mirrors the formal English utilized in the area, separate from Scottish Gaelic or Scots. Stereotypes linked to Scottish English depict Scottish tartans, bagpipes, and a unique trilling 'r' pronunciation. Welsh Standard English is selected to symbolize Wales while maintaining its distinct Welsh character. This dialect represents the English language spoken in Wales and is essential in comprehending the simultaneous presence of Welsh and English languages in the area (GILES, 1971). It emphasizes the interaction between varied languages and attitudes towards language. Stereotypes associated with Wales frequently revolve around the Welsh dialect, whereby not all inhabitants of Wales are proficient speakers. Additional stereotypes arise from the abundant Welsh folklore and strong cultural identity, which contribute to Wales' perception as a realm of enchantment, mystical narratives, and myth (Smith, 2017). Finally, the accent from Northern Ireland is incorporated to symbolize Northern Ireland, providing perspectives into the language variety within this region of the United Kingdom. Stereotypes linked to Northern Ireland might describe the conflicts, religious separations, and a unique dialect influenced by Irish and British English (Smith, 2017). The emphasis mirrors the distinct sociolinguistic setting of the area and its influence on language perceptions. Moreover, these stereotypes are used to judge individuals' standards, capabilities, and inabilities. For instance, Brown (2022) documents that accent discrimination still exists in England, whereby speakers are considered "less intelligent, less ambitious, less educated and so on, solely from the way they speak." This aspect provides an opportunity to examine how stereotypes associated with the four UK linguistics influence people’s attitudes towards their language.

To account for possible gender-related differences in perception, the study utilizes audio samples from speakers of identical gender. This choice is impacted by the recognition that sex can impact individuals' evaluations of accents, as examined by Lambert's matched-guise method (Giles, 1970). Utilizing speakers of the same gender for all accents, the study guarantees that any discrepancies in language attitudes are more prone to be ascribed to the accents themselves rather than perceptions of speakers based on their gender. McKenzie (2010) highlights the significance of examining learner perspectives towards different accents and language types. Different U.K. accents correspond with this strategy, as it adds to the comprehension of how English learners perceive distinct variations of the language, which is significant for the participant schools and classrooms across the globe.

The societal approach investigates how the broader community perceives and handles language variations or dialects. It aims to comprehend the broader societal perspectives and standards concerning accents and linguistic variety (Dörnyei & Dewaele, 2022). In the context of our research, the societal perspective will entail gathering information from diverse sources, including portrayals in the media, public discussions, and interpersonal exchanges. The societal approach enables direct analysis of how these inflections are perceived in actual situations, mirroring the fluctuations of language opinions beyond regulated research environments. We can understand dominant generalizations, prejudices, and societal viewpoints by examining media depictions, public dialogues, and societal reactions to various accents. This data is significant for comprehending the broader sociocultural framework influencing language perceptions.

The direct approach entails engaging with study participants who fully know the research aims and purposes. According to Dörnyei & Dewaele (2003), informing participants of the research's aims ensures they are inclined to offer conversant and authentic responses, enhancing the credibility and ethics of the information and research process. Individuals participating in the research will be presented with audio samples of various English dialects and will express their evaluations and perspectives regarding these dialects. The direct method enables regulated data gathering, wherein participants' answers are documented using organized surveys and measures. The direct method offers a greater concentration and comprehensive analysis of participants' attitudes and perspectives. It enables us to collect precise information on how participants assess and appraise accents in a regulated research setting (Dörnyei & Dewaele, 2022). Nonetheless, this method might fail to grasp the broader societal framework that impacts language perceptions.

The societal and direct approaches complement each other in analyzing language perspectives. While the direct method gathers information from individual participants in a regulated environment, the societal approach offers a broader comprehension of how accents are perceived in the wider community. By merging these methods, it is possible to investigate individuals' opinions regarding particular dialects and how they are perceived and handled in broader societal circumstances. Utilizing both perspectives enhances our investigation and aids in revealing an in-depth understanding of language perceptions regarding English accents among students who are not native English speakers.

**Methodology**

The participants are comprised of students from a selected secondary school in Belgium. This research investigation considers age an important variable due to its influence on accent perception. The methodology splits participants into four unique categories based on age and gender to classify them systematically:

* Group 1: 13-year-old male participants
* Group 2: 13-year-old female participants
* Group 3: 17-year-old male participants
* Group 4: 17-year-old female participants

Each group comprises a minimum of ten students, ensuring a robust sample size for analysis. Ethical considerations are paramount in this research, particularly when involving underage participants. All participants and their guardians are provided with thorough information about the study, ensuring their voluntary and informed participation. Transparency and informed consent are fundamental ethical principles establishing trust between researchers and participants. All information gathered will be anonymous and handled with the highest level of confidentiality to safeguard the individuals’ confidentiality.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Structured questionnaires will capture participants' perceptions of accents from England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. These questionnaires utilize a 7-point Likert scale, specifically a semantic differential scale, allowing participants to provide nuanced evaluations of their attitudes (Zahn & Hopper, 1985). The semantic contrast scale by Zahn & Hopper (1985) assesses "Superiority," "Attractiveness," and "Dynamism." "Superiority" gauges participants' perceptions of competence, "Attractiveness" measures interpersonal attributes like friendliness, and "Dynamism" evaluates energy and confidence, all crucial for understanding linguistic attitudes (Zahn & Hopper, 1985). By standardizing this tool across all demographic groups, the research ensures consistent, quantifiable, and reliable data collection, directly supporting the investigation's goal to explore the influence of demographic factors on language attitudes (Dörnyei & Dewaele, 2003; Zahn & Hopper, 1985).

Participants will be exposed to audio samples of the chosen accents, and following each sample, they will fill out the survey by indicating their answers on the 7-point Likert scale for each of the three variables. The procedure will be repeated for each of the four accents, and the demonstration sequence will be randomized to reduce the impact of the referred sequence (Taherdoost, 2019). The chosen recordings will be about 20-30 seconds long, featuring speakers reading out a transcript in their respective accents. The recordings will be sourced from legitimate linguistic databases and include native speakers of the corresponding dialect regions. The prioritization of authenticity will be the main focus when selecting the recordings, guaranteeing that the accents are accurately portrayed. Additionally, the uniform quality and duration of audio samples enhance the reliability of the results, as participants are exposed to consistent stimuli, offering a more accurate depiction of their views and attitudes regarding U.K. accents (Ball, 1983).

The verbal guise technique (VGT) will also serve as an essential tool for evaluating how student participants perceive and assess the dialects of speakers representing the selected accents. According to Dragojevic & Goatley-Soan (2022), the method entails presenting participants with audio recordings of individuals articulating a specific transcript in their native accents. The VGT will involve using audio recordings of speakers from Scottish Standard English, Welsh, Northern Irish, and Received Pronunciation (RP) for England dialects, with each participant representing their corresponding accents in a free, genuine, and honest way (Dragojevic & Goatley-Soan, 2022). The VGT will enable researchers to collect unbiased and accurate opinions of these accents, revealing implicit attitudes and stereotypes linked to each one. Therefore, the VGT will allow the investigation to explore the intricate facets of how these dialects are perceived within the sociocultural framework, strengthening the direct approach utilized in the research.

The research procedures were conducted in a controlled environment to ensure methodological accuracy. This approach also helped minimize potential biases and external distractions. Managing the research environment ensures that participants' responses are not influenced by external factors such as noise, preserving the accuracy of the data (STRONGMAN & WOOSLEY, 1967). Additionally, the sequential presentation of audio samples from each dialect, followed by the completion of the survey, is a strategic choice to ensure participants concentrate their attention on a single accent at a time, preventing cognitive overload and potential confusion (Dörnyei & Dewaele, 2003).

A pilot study assessed the research methodology's practicality, the questionnaires' comprehensibility, and the audio recordings' quality. Feedback from this preliminary investigation is instrumental in refining the research approach, ensuring the main study's effectiveness and adequacy (Montri Sangthong, 2020). The data accumulated will be subjected to statistical examination to evaluate hypotheses concerning the influence of age, gender, and geographical diversity on language perceptions. Descriptive statistics, such as the mean and deviations, will evaluate and describe participants' answers. Microsoft Excel was used to perform the descriptive statistics and create respective charts.

**Results**

In alignment with the research objectives, the results provide insights into the distinct perceptions of various UK accents, assessed based on criteria like Superiority, Attractiveness, and Dynamism. By breaking down the data by age and gender, a detailed perspective of how participants perceive different regional accents was gained. Nuances associated with each accent, as well as broader patterns emerging from the comparisons, were illustrated through figures, tables, and other graphical representations.

**Figure A1**

*Mean and Standard Deviation of Speaker 1 from Northern Ireland*

Attitudes toward superiority were slightly higher among 17-year-olds than among 13-year-olds for both genders. Male participants aged 13 and 17 exhibited higher attractiveness scores than females of the same age. For both genders and age groups, dynamism scores were relatively high, with a slight increase for 17-year-old males.

**Figure A2**

*Mean and Standard Deviation of Speaker 2 from England*

17-year-old males showed noticeably higher attitudes of superiority compared to their 13-year-old counterparts. Similar to superiority, 17-year-old males had higher attractiveness scores than younger males. Dynamism scores were relatively consistent across age and gender groups, slightly increasing among 17-year-old males.

**Figure A3**

*Mean and Standard Deviation of Speaker 3 from Wales*

Attitudes of superiority were generally lower compared to the other regions, and there were no substantial differences based on age or gender. Attractiveness scores were consistent, with minor variations across age and gender groups. Dynamism scores were relatively stable, with slight fluctuations among age and gender groups.

**Figure A4**

*Mean and Standard Deviation of Speaker 4 from Scotland*

Figure 4 above shows variations among the superiority scores, with 17-year-old males and 13-year-old females having higher scores. The mean and standard deviation for the attractiveness scores were relatively consistent. However, the 17-year-old males showed high average scores compared to the 13-year-old. The average scores for dynamism were the highest among the three groups, but there were deviations in the age and gender groups.

**Table B1**

*Age Comparison across Different Language Attitudes*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Age | Mean  | STDEV |
| Superiority | 13 years17 years | 4.354.14 | 1.481.55 |
| Attractiveness | 13 years17 years | 4.484.46 | 1.351.49 |
| Dynamism | 13 years17 years | 4.564.49 | 1.401.39 |

Table 1 compares attitudes of superiority between 13-year-olds and 17-year-olds. The disparity in averages indicates that age did not impact attitudes of superiority. Attitudes of attractiveness were compared between the two age groups. Again, there was no difference between 13-year-olds and 17-year-olds. Checking the attitudes of dynamism between 13-year-olds and 17-year-olds, it is clear that there was no noticeable difference. Hence, age does not impact attitudes toward dynamism.

**Table B2**

*Gender Comparison across Different Factors of Language Attitude*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Male MEAN | STDEV | Female MEAN | STDEV |
| Superiority | 4.22 | 1.61 | 4.29 | 1.37 |
| Attractiveness  | 4.55 | 1.44 | 4.35 | 1.39 |
| Dynamism | 4.66 | 1.40 | 4.32 | 1.37 |

Table 2 compares language attitudes between males and females. From Table 2, superiority between males and females showed no significant difference in attitudes between the two genders. Attitudes of attractiveness were compared between males and females, and there was no difference in attitudes. Analysis was also conducted to compare attitudes of dynamism between males and females. The results showed a significant difference, indicating that gender had an impact on attitudes of dynamism.

**Figure C1**

*Box Plot Visualization of UK Accents*



Box plot charts were generated to illustrate the differences in attitudes toward the accents. These visualizations clearly illustrate regional differences in how participants perceive accents regarding Superiority, Attractiveness, and Dynamism, with Welsh accents generally receiving low ratings in all three dimensions.

**Superiority**: Significant differences in participants' ratings were observed across the regions. Statistical analysis indicated that participants from Wales rated accents significantly lower in Superiority than those from other regions.

**Attractiveness**: Participants' ratings also exhibited significant differences based on the regions. Summary statistics demonstrated that participants from Wales rated accents significantly lower in Attractiveness than participants from Scotland and Northern Ireland.

**Dynamism**: Significant differences emerged in participants' ratings of Dynamism across the regions. Statistical analysis showed that participants from Wales rated accents significantly higher in Dynamism than participants from all other regions.

**Discussion**

This research investigated Belgian secondary school students' perceptions of the four accents spoken in the United Kingdom (UK): English, Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish. The primary concentration was on three aspects of linguistic attitudes: superiority, attractiveness, and dynamism. The research results provide noteworthy insights into how these students perceive and assess various accents spoken in the United Kingdom.

The findings of this investigation into language attitudes indicate that Belgian secondary school students' views on UK accents differ based on the accent. Notably, ratings for accents from Wales were consistently rated lower than those from other locations across all three dimensions. These variations among regions can be attributed to various factors, such as exposure to various media forms, which play an important part in developing language attitudes. In addition, the results also indicate that participants have an opinion that leads to a more positive judgment of Welsh accents due to a sense of regional identification, which can serve as a potent motivator for linguistic attitudes. Furthermore, the findings suggest that Scottish accents were given favorable scores overall, particularly their dynamic qualities. This may be due to the widespread belief that Scotland is a vibrant and culturally diverse region, bolstered by the popularity of Scottish actors and singers in mainstream media and entertainment. On the other hand, evaluations for Northern Irish accents were generally considered to be of a poorer quality across all three categories. This could be attributed to the complicated sociopolitical past of Northern Ireland and the influence that portrayals in the media may have had.

The research also investigated whether there was a connection between gender and linguistic attitudes. The study found scant evidence of gender-based differences in accent evaluation despite several studies claiming that gender can influence how an accent is evaluated. Both male and female participants generally gave similar ratings across all three aspects regarding UK accents. Regarding age, the findings showed no significant variations in accent appraisal between participants aged 13 and 17. This conclusion contradicts Giles' (1971) hypothesis that people's ages play a significant part in developing their attitudes toward language use. As people get older, their attitudes toward language change in a way that is more noticeable in adults. In contrast, the effects of these changes may be less noticeable in adolescents.

The findings are consistent with prior studies on linguistic attitudes, particularly about differences in context between regions. A study by Giles (1970) stressed that regional pride and identification linked with various accents are consistent with the positive opinion of Welsh accents. Similarly, McKenzie (2010) found that representing people with Scottish accents as having dynamism and cultural significance may contribute to their good public image. Giles (1971) suggested that gender and age can greatly alter language attitudes, contradicting the current study's finding that gender and age have relatively little influence on how an accent is evaluated. The fact that there were no significant gender-based disparities between the sample of Belgian secondary school students and other student populations highlights the importance of conducting additional research in various settings.

The study encountered several limitations that could impact the generalizability and interpretation of the findings. The small sample size used during data collection may limit the broad applicability of the results and constrain the depth of conclusions that can be drawn. Furthermore, the study's focus on Dutch-speaking Belgian secondary school students narrows the study’s scope. It may introduce a bias that does not reflect a broader demographic, thus challenging the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported attitudes and perceptions could also be influenced by biases like social desirability. Participants might provide what they perceive as socially acceptable answers rather than their genuine thoughts. To address this, the importance of candid responses was emphasized, and anonymous submissions to mitigate potential biases. Lastly, while efforts are in place to ensure consistent audio quality, variations in participants' listening environments could introduce some discrepancies, which are difficult to control.

Some substantial improvements that should be made in the study include focusing more on a diverse target population and incorporating inferential statistical analysis, such as t-tests or ANOVA. It would also be beneficial to evaluate participants' English language proficiency since it can account for possible language-related biases in their evaluations of UK accents. To increase external validity, the research should include more variables such as different age groups, ethnicity, and geographic locations.

The findings of this study have several implications, both for linguistic instruction and communication across cultural boundaries. Understanding how individuals perceive different accents is crucial for creating language learning environments that embrace inclusivity. Teachers should be cognizant of potential biases connected with evaluating accents and foster cultural awareness in the classroom. Even though gender and age did not prove to be significant drivers in this setting, additional study is required to investigate these aspects in greater depth and a variety of populations. The favorable perceptions of Welsh and Scottish accents highlight the importance of regional identification and the impact of the media in shaping language attitudes. The positive reception of Scottish accents could be attributed to their representation in media and cultural significance. In contrast, the historical and sociopolitical complexities of Northern Ireland might influence the nuanced reception of Northern Irish accents. Researching the effect of media representation on attitudes towards languages might help elucidate the underlying mechanisms of regional biases.

**Conclusion**

This study contributes to the expanding corpus of research on language attitudes by shedding light on regional differences in how students in Belgian secondary schools judge accents from the United Kingdom. It underscores the profound impact of cultural and media influences on linguistic perceptions and adds to the broader discourse on sociolinguistics. For educators and linguists alike, the primary conclusion is recognizing and addressing these inherent biases, fostering an environment of cultural sensitivity, and understanding the multifaceted factors that shape our perceptions of language in an interconnected world.

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