

# Evaluating and Imitating English Pronunciation Models: Language Attitudes and Language Use amongst Learners in Spain

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## Abstract

Non-native-speaking students learning English at university generally strive for and are encouraged to achieve a native-like accent. This paper investigates the ways in which Spanish learners of English evaluate and imitate those varieties of English which are typically presented to them as British and American pronunciation models. The analysis is based on empirical data collected by means of questionnaire and sociolinguistic interview from a sample of 71 Spanish university students at various stages of their English language degrees. British English speech was evaluated more positively for features of *competence*, though American English speech competed strongly on the dimension of *social attractiveness*. British English speakers were rated as being significantly more competent than socially attractive, whereas the ratings of American English speakers did not differ significantly on the two dimensions. An investigation into learners' pronunciation of the /t/ variable indicated that respondents' realizations correlated significantly with sex, visits to Great Britain, usefulness of speech variety, variety of English taught at school and university, and preference for pronunciation class and accent. By adapting a model from Social Psychology, this study has revealed that learners' attitudes are linked with their language use and are mediated by social and psychological factors.

Key words: attitudes, behaviour, pronunciation models, Spain

## Introduction

Dalton-Puffer *et al.* assert that, for foreign learners of English in university contexts in Austria, 'the implicit aim [...] is for students to achieve a native-like accent (i.e., Received Pronunciation or General American)' (1997: 115-116). This can be said to be true of many higher education contexts in which English is being taught and learnt as a foreign or second language, and the view that American and British varieties of English constitute the most legitimate models is one which is held by educators, policy-makers and language learners themselves (McKenzie 2010: 3). It comes as no surprise, then, that language attitude studies have often found these varieties of English to be those with which learners tend to be most familiar and which they find most easy to recognise.

Whilst they are able to recognise both varieties, the preference for British English speech amongst non-native-speaking respondents is striking. Dalton-Puffer *et al.*'s (1997: 115) findings suggest that learners recognise the geographical and political links shared between Austria and Great Britain and view RP as a traditional and historically valid variety of English. Ladegaard concludes that, in Denmark, 'RP appears to be the unsurpassed prestige variety [...]; it is rated most favourably on all status and competence dimensions, and it is seen as the most efficient, beautiful and correct accent of English.' (1998: 265). In Norway, Rindal (2010: 240) found evidence of learners crediting British English speech with historical authenticity

and/or recognising the geographical, political and cultural ties with Great Britain which result from being part of the European community.

Garrett *et al.* define variety recognition as the cognitive mapping of linguistic features on to records of the usage norms of certain speech communities (2003: 208). Respondents in the present study attended to phonological variation when categorising the speech varieties, including the [t]~[r] distinction for the intervocalic /t/ variable. This supports McKenzie's assertion that learners retain representations of English speech varieties and draw upon this resource in order to complete the recognition task (2008: 151).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss, in more detail, the fact that variety recognition gives insight into how speech varieties are conceptualised by learners, since the principal aim of this paper is to investigate how language attitudes relate to language use. Ajzen's (2005) social-psychological model has been adapted for the analyses in an attempt to stretch the parameters of language attitude research and to bridge the gap between the disciplines of Sociolinguistics and Social Psychology which have, thus far, investigated the attitude construct in relative isolation from one another (Cooper and Fishman 1974: 5).

## **Methodology**

The present study was conducted with learners of English at the Universities of Salamanca and Valladolid (N=71). The sample consisted of 19 males (26.8%) and 52 females (73.2%). The mean age of respondents was 21.2 years. The mean length of time respondents had spent learning English was 12.4 years. All respondents were undergraduate students and represented five years of study.

### **The Research Instrument**

Respondents were required to complete a questionnaire which was made up of three main sections: (i) items relating to their backgrounds and relevant social and psychological variables, (ii) the verbal-guise experiment, and (iii) items specifically designed to elicit information on respondents' *attitudes* (consisting of cognitive, affective and conative evaluations), perceptions of *subjective norm* (the perceived social pressure to engage or not to engage in a given behaviour), *perceived behavioural control* (their perception of the ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour in question) and *behavioural intention* (their readiness to perform the behaviour in question). Upon completion of the questionnaire, respondents participated in a paired sociolinguistic interview, the main object of which was to have them read aloud a list of sentences designed to reveal their realizations of the intervocalic /t/ variable.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

### **Verbal Guise Experiment**

This section of the questionnaire required respondents to rate four native speakers (one male and one female representing each speech variety) according to nine traits: *responsible, serious, confident, arrogant, calm, gentle, kind, intelligent* and *boring*.

A categorical principal components analysis revealed that respondents' evaluations were based on two main dimensions: *competence* and *social attractiveness*.<sup>1</sup>

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA revealed that overall evaluations of each speaker differed significantly ( $F_{(3,207)}=10.15$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Female speakers were rated more positively than male speakers ( $p<0.01$ ).<sup>2</sup> There was no significant difference between overall ratings for MAE and MBE (though, when grouped by sex, the MBE variety was always rated more positively). Significant differences existed between evaluations of speakers based on *competence* ( $F_{(3,207)}=9.43$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and *social attractiveness* ( $F_{(3,182)}=5.62$ ,  $p<0.01$ ): (i) the British female was always preferred but (ii) while the British male was considered to be more competent, the American male was considered to be more socially attractive. Evaluations of individual speakers on each dimension also differed significantly ( $F_{(5,367)}=9.43$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Both the male and female MBE speakers were rated as more competent than socially attractive ( $p<0.05$ ). The ratings of MAE speakers did not differ significantly on each dimension.

### **Attitude-Behaviour Relations in Language**

The present analyses focus on respondents' realizations of the intervocalic /t/ variable, as performed in the reading task during the sociolinguistic interview. Respondents' realizations of [t] were categorised as MBE and of [r] were categorised as MAE.

Realizations of MAE and MBE tokens correlated significantly with a number of factors, including sex, visits to Great Britain, usefulness of speech variety, variety of English taught at school and university, and preference for pronunciation class and accent. As regards sex, male respondents produced significantly more realizations of [t] than did female respondents ( $p<0.05$ ). Respondents who had visited Great Britain realized significantly fewer tokens of [r] ( $p<0.05$ ).<sup>3</sup> Other significant correlations have revealed that those respondents who (i) believed that a speech variety was more useful for fulfilling learner orientations or for becoming an English teacher realized more tokens of the variant associated with that variety ( $p<0.05$ ), (ii) were taught American English at school and university realized more tokens of [r] than those who were taught British English ( $p<0.05$ ), and (iii) preferred an accent and would prefer to attend a pronunciation class to learn that accent realized more tokens of the variant associated with the accent ( $p<0.05$ ).

Measures of respondents' *attitudes*, *subjective norm*, *perceived behavioural control* and *behavioural intention* were processed through the adapted *theory of planned behaviour* model, rendering respondents able to be categorised as either 'GB-aimers' or 'US-aimers' (Rindal 2010). A multivariate analysis of variance demonstrated that the number of [t] tokens and of [r] tokens realized by GB- and US-aimers differed significantly ( $F_{(4,136)}=4.66$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). As expected, GB-aimers realized significantly more tokens of [t] than did US-aimers ( $p<0.01$ ) and US-aimers realized significantly more tokens of [r] than did GB-aimers ( $p<0.01$ ).

## **Conclusions**

The results of the present study have revealed that learners of English in Spanish university contexts evaluate American and British English speech stimuli in a similar way to learners in other contexts; i.e., on the dimensions of *competence* and *social attractiveness*, with British English speech tending to be rated more positively overall but particularly for *competence*. They have also revealed that respondents' realizations of the intervocalic /t/ variable as [t] and [r] were not only conditioned by their sex or their exposure to speech varieties through education or visits to Great Britain, but were also linked with a number of psychological factors. Where respondents viewed a speech variety as being useful to them or expressed a specific preference for that variety, they inevitably imitated the phonological variant associated with that variety. The key finding of this study has been the significant link established between language attitudes and language use; in this language-learning context, it has been possible to predict learners' tendencies to realize the /t/ variable as either [t] or [r] by taking measures of the various components of the *theory of planned behaviour* model. Further investigations in other contexts and with other linguistic variables are needed to provide a fuller picture of attitude-behaviour relations in language.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The salience of these two dimensions is in keeping with the findings of other language attitude studies.
- <sup>2</sup> It has been advanced elsewhere that speaker sex may be an influential factor in impression formation (see Bayard 1991).
- <sup>3</sup> Visits to the United States are likely to have not been significant here due to the particularly low percentage of respondents who had visited the United States (15.5%).

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