

Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is: The Effects of Southern vs. Standard Accent on Perceptions of Speakers

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As Americans become increasingly mobile, the number of inter-regional interactions grows, therefore increasing the risk of regional clashes, particularly in employment opportunities. Despite the prevalence of American regional stereotypes, very few psychology studies have investigated regionalized social perceptions. Since accent often varies regionally and is salient in social interaction, accent may be an especially critical cue that activates regional stereotypes. Regional stereotypes, in turn, may lead to discriminatory acts in employment and other realms. Therefore, accent activated stereotypes are likely to be an important mechanism by which regional discrimination plays out in everyday social phenomena. This study investigates perceptions of voices and individuals based on regional accent variation. Southern American English is compared to a Standard American English accent. Given only a sound sample of individuals' voices, participants rate Southern accented individuals as less intelligent, less wealthy, and marginally more friendly than Standard accented individuals. These findings suggest that accent can trigger stereotypic perceptions and that low intelligence and low wealth are strong, common stereotypes associated with American Southerners.

Intensified economic globalization combined with recession can lead to increasing diversification in job applicants' geographic background. Technological advances allow job applicants to expand the radius of their hunt for employment. However, social psychological work on labor patterns suggests these changes may also leave more room for discrimination in the employment process. Stereotyping and resulting prejudicial behavior can significantly impact employment aspects, such as pay rate and even initial hiring.^{1, 2} Because stereotyped beliefs form the base on which discriminating and prejudicial behavior is

built, the study of stereotypes is particularly important.

Generally, American stereotype studies have focused on racial/ethnic and gender distinctions. Such literature is vast and has essentially proven the power of stereotypes to control attention, attribution, and perception, which go on to influence behavior.³ However, international psychology literature on stereotyping often highlights regional distinctions more than race. For example, Cairns and Duriez demonstrate that Irish-Catholic children are less likely to attend to and later remember information presented by an English teacher as opposed to an Irish teacher.⁴ Such studies have demonstrated the powerful influence of regional stereotypes on interpersonal attention, perceptions, and behavior.

In American studies, regional stereotypes (which often cross-cut race) are only rarely considered, despite the fact that such regional distinctions are salient in American culture. Stereotypes of American Southerners, for instance, are common in cultural media and artifacts, such as the cartoon "Li'l Abner," which suggests American Southerners are of low intelligence and wealth, and high aggression and friendliness.⁵ Although not the focus of their paper, Crandall, Eshleman, and O'Brien show that prejudice against white Southerners is twice as acceptable as prejudice against minority racial groups.⁶ However, the pervasiveness, strength, and even specific content of American South stereotypes have yet to be thoroughly explored empirically. Given that 1) over 100 million citizens qualify as American Southerners, 2) citizens in American South states often have lower income and job attainment outcomes when compared to citizens of other states, and 3) discriminatory stereotypes have been implicated as one factor contributing to unequal economic outcomes between other social groups, studying the potential influence of stereotypes against American Southerners becomes even more important.^{7, 8}

Our understanding of the specific American regional stereotypes that exist and pathways through which these manifest is incomplete. In racial stereotyping, it is not skin color or physical appearance per se that is stereotyped against, but rather the group category memberships that are (incorrectly) assumed to come with these salient perceptual markers. The cue is highly salient, easily accessed, and although arbitrary, conflated with stereotypical representations. But what

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cues specifically trigger regional stereotype activation? Accent may provide such a conspicuous marker.

Several international studies have suggested that not only language differences (lexicon, idioms, etc.), but accent differences alone (prosody, pronunciation) can trigger stereotype activation and subsequent social perception changes.⁹⁻¹¹ In American race studies, language has also been implicated. For instance, Carroll notes that teachers often favor white students' telling of stories over that of black students during classroom "share time," and that this is likely because of linguistic differences in narrative style.¹² Such language differences may themselves serve as triggers for other negative stereotypes that add to the teachers' dislike. Given the necessity of language in job interview processes, that accent activates stereotyping and discriminatory behavior implores more study of accent in labor processes. Might regional stereotypes in America, particularly stereotypes of the American South, be similarly triggered by accent?

Current Study

Although many stereotypes against American Southerners have been noted in other fields, psychological explorations have been generally limited to studies of aggression.^{13, 14} No study has yet focused specifically on the pathways through which American regional stereotypes manifest themselves, although several international studies suggest language could be such a path.^{4, 11} Accent alone may be as salient and arbitrary a personal characteristic cue as skin tone, making it potentially powerful. For instance, Tucker & Lambert show that Northern accents are evaluated more highly than are Southern accents.¹⁵ Can accent trigger regional stereotypes, and if so, what are the stereotypes activated and to what degree?

This study hypothesizes that Southern accented speakers will be perceived as more friendly, less wealthy, more aggressive, and less intelligent than Standard accented speakers. These hypotheses are based on Southern stereotypes prevalent in American cultural artifacts as well as on international studies showing that language alone can trigger stereotype activation.^{4, 13} Overall, these hypotheses take the theoretical approach of many race-based stereotype studies that suggest socially salient cues activate stereotypes, leading to perceptual shifts. In cases of regional stereotyping, accent alone may trigger such powerful social perceptions.

Methods

Participants

10 Stanford University undergraduates (age 18-22 years) volunteered to participate in the study. Gender was counterbalanced. Participants were American citizens living in California continuously since first entering middle school to reduce participants' differential accent exposure. Participant race reflected the Stanford undergraduate population.

Materials

The independent variable accent type was manipulated to create 2 conditions, making a 1 x 2 (Southern vs. Standard) within-subjects design. These manipulations used four distinct voices, pre-tested as discussed to ensure their perceived Southernness vs. Standardness. Voices were balanced by gender and accent, resulting in 1 male Southern, 1 male Standard, 1 female Southern, and 1 female Standard voice. Each person providing a voice recording was asked to read the descriptive violin passage as if "reading aloud in a classroom" and was given as many recording sessions as needed to capture a fluent reading. The intention of recording accented speech was not mentioned and accent as a topic was avoided so as to secure valid examples of accented speech without exaggeration or self-censoring.

To check manipulations, four independent judges listened to each of the four voices and then rated each voice's accent on a scale from 1-7, with 1 indicating no accent and 7 indicating a strong accent. Judges were all Stanford undergraduates who had lived in California continuously since entering middle school (2 male, 2 female). The results showed that the Southern voices ($M = 4.125$) were perceived as different from the Standard voices ($M = 1.125$), but that within the Standard and Southern categories, voices were not perceived as different. In an open response measure, all voices were distinguished as either "Southern" or "no accent," with one exception in which the female Southern voice was perceived as "no accent." Overall, the voice materials proved sufficiently valid (i.e., distinguishable) for this experiment.

Procedure

Participants were asked to "listen to some voices and then answer questions about them for a language study." They were then asked to familiarize themselves with a printing of the emotionally-neutral violin passage, to help limit any effects that may have

occurred due to differential familiarity with the passage between the first voice presentation and the three subsequent presentations. Participants were then given headphones and asked to listen carefully to the voice presented.

Immediately after the first voice was presented, participants were given a survey to complete. The survey was used to measure the effects of the independent variable, accent type (Standard American English vs. Southern American English), on participants' judgments of the target person, the main dependent variable. Friendliness, wealth, aggression, and intelligence were the four dependent constructs investigated. The survey gave a series of descriptions relating to the voice (smart, angry) and a series of statements relating to the person whose voice they had heard (this person is intelligent, this person is employable). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with each description on a scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). In total, 23 statements and/or descriptions were tested. 14 statements related to friendliness, wealth, aggression, or intelligence. The final statements measured other descriptions such as "healthiness" to control for participants' truthfulness as well as to test unexpected stereotypes. Once finished, the second voice was presented, followed by a new copy of the survey. The experiment continued in this way until each participant had heard and responded to all four voices. Voice presentation order was randomized between participants to control any ordering confounds.

Results

The average difference between Southern and Standard voices within participants' friendliness ratings was .31 (SD=1.23; Southern minus Standard). This suggests that Southern accent alone might trigger small differences in social perception of friendliness. It also suggests that these differences are in the direction of the stereotype, but that either accent only has a weak influence or that the stereotype itself is weak. However, the average difference between Southern and Standard voices within participants' aggression ratings was -0.05 (SD=.92; Southern minus Standard). This suggests that Southern accent has no effect on perceptions of aggression.

Participants in the Southern condition reported a wealthy rating of 3.3 (SD=1.08) on average, while participants in the Standard condition had a mean wealthy rating of 4.7 (SD=.80). For this measure, a

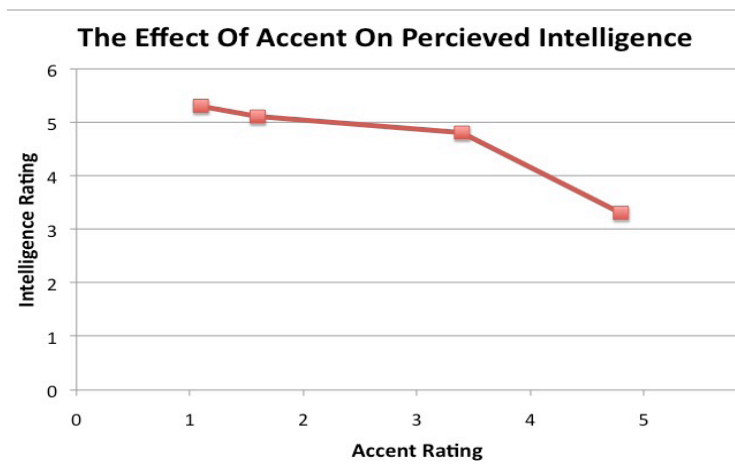


Figure 1 Voices rated the most standard/neutral were perceived as the most intelligent when participants were asked explicitly to rank the intelligence of the voices.

low rating indicated a low degree of perceived wealth. Participants' average difference in wealthy ratings between Southern and Standard voices was -1.4 (SD=1.02; Southern minus Standard), suggesting that Southern accents do trigger perceptions of less wealth when compared to the neutral condition.

Southern condition participants rated intelligence on average 3.2 (SD=1.36), while Standard condition participants rated intelligence on average 4.8 (SD=1.23). On the specific measure that asked participants explicitly to rank intelligence, the Southern voices received an average rating of 3.05 (SD=1.43), while Standard voices received an average rating of 5.25 (SD=1.16). The average difference between Southern and Standard voices within participants' intelligence ratings was -1.6 (SD=1.12; Southern minus Standard). For the explicit intelligence measure, this average difference increased to -2.2 (SD=1.18). This suggests that Southern accent does trigger differences in social perception of intelligence, and that these differences are both strong and in the direction of the stereotype. It also suggests that accent type has a larger influence on perceptions of intelligence and wealth than on friendliness or aggression.

Additional constructs measured show that a trend might exist in which Southern accent influences social perception of health and attractiveness, with Southern accented speakers being judged lower on both measures (M(South health) = 4.65, M(Standard health) = 5.4; M(South attractiveness) = 3.4, M(Standard attractiveness) = 4.53). Also noteworthy was the

difference in extent of accent's influence between voice description measures and interpersonal behavior measures. Across all constructs, measures that asked about willingness to engage with the speaker showed less disparity between accents, while measures that asked about perceptions of the speaker's voice showed more disparity. 10 of 13 descriptive perception measures (77%) showed differences between Southern and Standard accent conditions of greater than or equal to .5 rating points, while only 5 of 10 interpersonal measures (50%) showed rating differences of .5 or above. 3 of these 5 interpersonal measures with rating differences at or above .5 were related to intelligence (willingness to study together, etc.). This suggests that social perceptions might be more easily influenced by accent in descriptive contexts but that accent has less influence on social perceptions when interpersonal interaction is considered. It also suggests that interpersonal perceptions may be more influenced by accent only in the case of especially strong stereotypes, like Southerners' lack of intelligence.

Discussion

In general, the data show that Southern accent has a more significant influence on observers' perceptions of the speakers' intelligence and wealth than on friendliness, aggression, or other constructs. The data support previous findings that accent alone is a social cue strong enough to trigger shifts in the social perception of speakers. Data also support this study's second and fourth hypotheses, that Southern accented speakers would be perceived as less wealthy and less intelligent than Standard accented speakers. However, the first hypothesis, that Southern accented speakers would be judged friendlier than Standard accented speakers, was not supported significantly (although a weak confirming trend was observed). Finally, the third hypothesis, that Southern accented speakers would be perceived as more aggressive, was not supported.

Although the results show that some social perception differences are triggered by accent, some mechanism must be providing the content for the relationship between accent and social perception. The observed differences in social perception that were significant match the direction of common American South stereotypes. Therefore, these results imply that American South stereotypes might be this

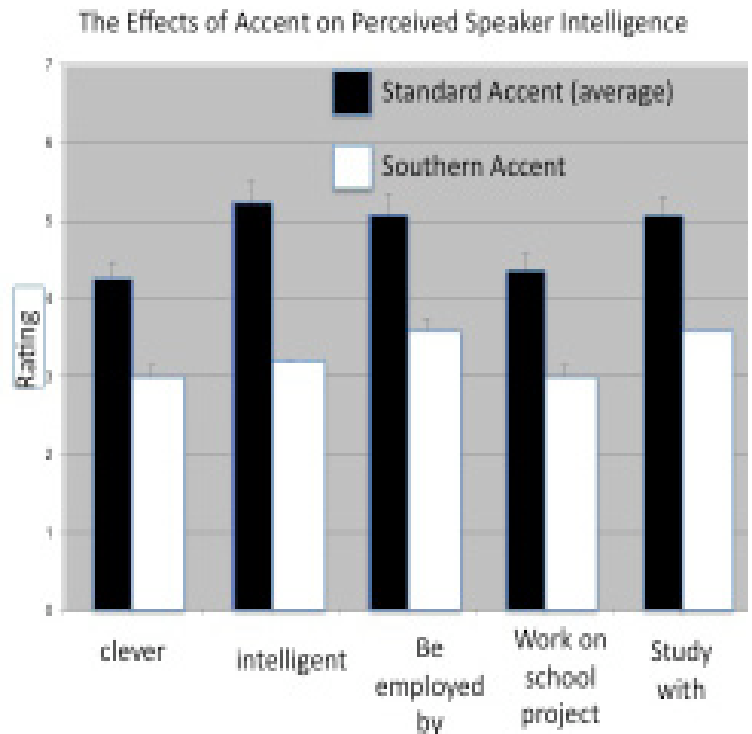


Figure 2 Southern accented voices were perceived as less intelligent than Standard accented voices on both descriptive and behavioral measures of intelligence.

mechanism, particularly the stereotype of Southerners' low intelligence. This study provides evidence that the single social cue of accent is salient and powerful enough to influence observers' social perceptions of speakers, serving as a path through which American South regional stereotypes can be triggered.

However, an interesting, unpredicted distinction in the modalities in which accent had an influence was also found. This study implies that interpersonal behavior perceptions are less influenced by accent than more purely descriptive perceptions. Therefore, the relationship between accent and social perceptions might be moderated by interaction context, which has interesting implications for the role of American Southern stereotypes in determining behaviors, such as willingness to employ. Imagined behaviors are not the same as enacted behaviors, and so the influence of accent on real behaviors in complex social situations may be different than is suggested by this study's results. More emotional and personal contexts may heighten the accessibility of stereotypes, so stronger effects might be expected in a more naturalistic accent stereotyping study (16). Future research should address these questions and further investigate generalizability by using more varied

speakers in both the Standard and Southern conditions as well as a diversified participant pool (17).

All together, this study demonstrates the power of language to influence nonlinguistic modalities of thought, such as social perception, and suggests that accent might be more influential during certain types of social perception, like direct description. The findings suggest that, when triggered by accent, American South stereotypes can influence perceptions, implying that behavior based on these perceptions might also be influenced. Particularly, the negative perceptions of intelligence and employability suggest that having a Southern accent may in fact be an obstacle to successful interviewing. This study suggests that a social cue as arbitrary as accent may influence discrimination in the job market, since accent can activate stereotypes, negative social perceptions, and therefore behavior influenced by these social perceptions.

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