

An experimental study of perceptions of L2 accents: Linguistic and social stereotypes of English as a Lingua Franca

Gitte Kristiansen
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

English has slowly but steadily established itself as the lingua franca of a globalised world. This fact is giving rise to a new linguistic reality, in the context of which the status of the languages of the various European nation states is affected in various manners and to various degrees. In this paper we examine the existence of social and linguistic stereotypes when English is spoken as a L2 variety. Do social and linguistic stereotypes (Kristiansen 2003, 2010) continue to operate in systematic manners when a lingua franca, such as English within the current socio-historical and linguistic scenario, is spoken instead of the various languages of the nation states? How accurate is our perception of L2 varieties of English in Europe at different levels of abstraction? Are native speakers evaluated more positively than non-native speakers? How do young Europeans evaluate their own foreign accent?

At the same time, from the point of view of Cognitive Linguistics (Geeraerts 2008) a standard variety on the one hand embodies a rationalist cognitive model in the sense that it serves as a tool for free expression, a neutral vehicle of communication without additional connotations or values. At the same time, however, it also forms part of a romantic model, according to which dimensions such as prestige, social identity and affect become part of the picture. In this paper we examine some of the tensions behind the two models: will social identities continue to manifest themselves in English spoken as a lingua franca through our mental models of linguistic varieties?

In order to address these theoretical questions an empirical study was designed to throw light on the ability of native speakers of different European languages and regional varieties to identify and characterise members of other European nations exclusively on the basis of transfer from their mother tongue to English. In the experiments in question 12 different varieties of English (8 L2 accents and 4 native accents) are identified and evaluated by panels of 100 listeners in 10 different European countries. We present the results of a multivariate analysis of the data and discuss their theoretical implications.

References

- Kristiansen, Gitte. 2003. How to do things with allophones: Linguistic stereotypes as cognitive reference points in social cognition. In René Dirven, Roslyn Frank & Martin Pütz (eds.), *Cognitive Models in Language and Thought: Ideologies, Metaphors, and Meanings*, 69-120. Berlin/ New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Kristiansen, Gitte. 2010. Lectal acquisition and linguistic stereotype formation. In Geeraerts, Dirk, Gitte Kristiansen and Yves Peirsman (eds.) *Advances in Cognitive Sociolinguistics. Cognitive Linguistics Research* 45. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Geeraerts, Dirk. 2008. The logic of language models: rationalist and romantic ideologies and their avatars. In Kirsten Süselbeck, Ulrike Mühlischlegel and Peter Masson (eds.) *Lengua, nación e identidad : la regulación del plurilingüismo en España y América Latina*. Madrid : Iberoamericana/Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert.