

The Effect of Priming on Accent Attitudes: An Investigation of their Affective and Cognitive Bases

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In this talk, I will present my study on the formation of accent attitudes. According to the tripartite model (Fazio, 2009; Eagly and Chaiken, 1998), attitudes are formed from cognition/beliefs, affect/feelings, and behaviours towards an attitude object. My study focused on the impact of cognition and affect on accent attitudes. The cognitive influence was regarded as the social cognition or beliefs/norms about accents that consciously or unconsciously guide or are imposed upon individual accent evaluations (e.g. Giles et al., 1974). This cognitive influence was tested against that of positive, negative, and neutral affective prime stimuli (images taken from Lang, Bradley, and Cuthbert, 2008) on attitudes toward three British English vocal samples, performed by one speaker: Received Pronunciation (RP), Birmingham English, and (standard) Edinburgh English. According to previous research, RP generally occupies the highest evaluative ranks, Edinburgh English the middle, and Birmingham English the lowest (e.g. Bishop, Coupland, and Garrett, 2005; Giles, 1970).

Research questions:

- (1) Can accent attitudes toward RP, standard Edinburgh English, and Birmingham English be affectively primed?
- (2) Does affective priming influence the attitudes toward the three varieties in the same way?
- (3) How does affective priming relate to the roles that cognition and affect play in the formation of the attitudes toward the three varieties?

The study was distributed as an online survey. The participants were 68 undergraduate students from the University of York, who were born and raised in the United Kingdom. Only one participant from Birmingham and none from Edinburgh completed the study. One of three prime-stimuli images – positive (beach), negative (man vomiting), and neutral (rolling pin) valences – appeared before each of the nine target stimuli: three accent recordings and six neutral images (e.g. zipper), which distracted the participants' attention away from the recordings. The accent evaluation was conducted on eight personality-trait scales, split between the semantic categories of 'solidarity' and 'status', based on prior studies (e.g. Bishop, Coupland, and Garrett, 2005; Cargile et al., 1994).

The results showed that accent attitudes can be affectively primed, but statistically significant differences between negatively and positively primed attitudes were only found for the non-standard variety, Birmingham English, and not for the standard ones, RP and Edinburgh. A connection was thus drawn between standardness and attitudinal cognition, and non-standardness and attitudinal affect. Differently put, the statistically successful affective priming of the non-standard Birmingham variety points to affectively-formed attitudes toward non-standard accents, while the statistically unsuccessful priming of the two standard varieties suggests a more cognitive basis for attitudes toward standard accents. For the Birmingham variety, a further distinction was made between the two trait dimensions: whereas the solidarity dimension was significantly primed, the status dimension showed a non-significant priming tendency, which relates solidarity to affect, and status to cognition.

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