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Between linguistics and social psychology of language: the perception of non-native accents

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Abstract

Listeners can make several attitudinal judgments about a speaker based only on his/her speech. In many cases these judgments are in line with social stereotypes which are associated with the group that is represented by a certain language variety. The matched- and verbal-guise techniques have been extensively used in the studies of language attitudes, in order to obtain reliable results on language as a marker of group identity. This paper presents a concise state-of-the art of research focusing on language attitudes, with particular attention to Italian, and provides grounds for methodological reflection through the discussion of a pilot study conducted by the author focusing on differences in how Standard Italian and three varieties of foreign accented speech (Albanian, Romanian and General American) are perceived by a sample of 97 high school students in a medium-sized city in central Italy.

Keywords: non-native accents, verbal guise techniques, stereotypes.

1. *Where speech perception and sociolinguistics intersect*

In 2005 Clopper and Pisoni claimed that «speech perception researchers and sociolinguistics have been working in almost complete isolation from one another» (Clopper and Pisoni, 2005: 314). The picture has changed considerably nowadays: not only are overt opinions and attitudes investigated by, respectively, folk linguistics and perceptual dialectology (Preston, 1999) and social psychology of language and sociolinguistics, but implicit attitudes are also scrutinised by cognitive sociolinguistics (Speelman *et al*., 2013). Direct as well as indirect techniques have been applied as measurement tools in the study of folk concepts of regional and local linguistic variation; more recently, non-native varieties have also been investigated. Direct and indirect techniques have both specific advantages and pitfalls. Direct techniques such as interviews or questionnaires typically measure consciously and deliberately constructed and expressed attitudes and they do not provide immediate access to automatically activated attitudes, while indirect techniques usually permit a higher degree of introspection. One of the most popular tools used

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in the evaluation of different speech varieties is the so-called *matched guise technique*. Developed by Lambert and his colleagues in the 1960s (Lambert *et al*., 1960), it covertly elicits individuals' attitudes towards members of different linguistic groups. The technique involves having a single speaker produce two (or more) recorded stimuli in different languages or varieties. For example, a speaker might read a passage aloud twice in English, once with a RP accent and once with an accent which is regionally or socially marked. Participants in the study are asked to listen to the recorded voices and evaluate them on a range of qualities and personal traits (for example, how intelligent, educated, friendly or trustworthy the speakers sound), most often on a bipolar semantic-differential scale[1]. Crucially, the qualities under investigation involve both status (intelligence, competence, ambition) and solidarity traits (kindness, trustworthiness, reliability). Since Wallace Lambert's first experiment, new versions of the matched-guise technique have been developed in order to overcome some of the shortcomings of the original method. In the so-called *verbal guise technique* (Giles and Powesland, 1975), the different voices can be those of different native speakers, in order to avoid the problem of finding perfect bilingual speakers; the speakers can be recorded talking freely about the same topic instead of reading the same passage, so that the reading style will not affect the judgments; the experiment can be done in natural contexts, in such a way as to avoid the influence of artificial contexts on the subjects.

In the cognitive sociolinguistics framework, different tools are now being used, offering significant methodological innovations with respect to the previously available arsenal of measurement techniques in language attitudinal research: the implicit association task (Campbell-Kibler, 2012), the go/no go association task (Nosek and Banaji, 2001) or the extrinsic affective Simon task (De Houwer, 2003). These newer tasks seem to allow the investigation of implicit sociolinguistic associations with less interference from explicit ideologies, thereby revealing automatic, spontaneous attitudes: while explicit attitudes are thoughtful reactions stemming from extensive cognitive processing, implicit attitudes represent unavoidable and immediate reactions based on pre-existing stereotypes and associations. In the work by Pantos and Perkins (2013) it was found that implicit and explicit atti-

[1] In some cases, participants are also asked to design a sort of social profile associated to every single voice they heard, with respect to jobs (for example, whether the voice might belong to a blue or a white collar), and social and cultural attributes (for example, what kind of car the voice might have, or what his/her cultural level might be).

tudes are separable attitude constructs resulting from distinct mental processes and it was suggested that language attitudes research would benefit by incorporating indirect measures.

Whatever the methodological tools used, research on linguistic attitudes relies on the following assumptions:

(i) Naïve listeners can explicitly identify both linguistic and social categories from short speech samples;
(ii) Very little speech is needed to discriminate among linguistic varieties/accents/dialects;
(iii) Ethnic group affiliation is recoverable from speech;
(iv) Listeners evaluate variants (positively or negatively), linking them to aspects of personality such as intelligence and friendliness.

Sociolinguistic language attitudes research has typically focused on explicit attitudes toward local, regional and foreign accents. Overviews of previous research on language attitudes research on reactions to foreign accented speech can be found in Lindemann (2003) and Pantos (2012). In this respect, Italian peninsula still represents an underinvestigated area. The opposition between standard and local varieties has been investigated using matched guise technique by Baroni (1983), Volkart-Rey (1990), and Di Ferrante (2007). How local varieties are evaluated has been examined by Calamai and Ricci (2005), Biliotti and Calamai (2012), and Calamai (2011). In the last few years the perception of Italian as a foreign language has also entered the sociophonetics agenda: see, among others, Boula de Mareuil *et al*. (2004), Marotta (2008), Marotta and Boula de Mareuil (2009), Pettorino *et al*. (2013), Calamai (2015), De Meo *et al*. (2012; 2015).

2. *Stereotypes and social groups*

Language contributes to the creation of shared, own-group representations. Social labels based on sex and sexual orientation, age, ethnicity and nationality, language and accent, occupation and cultural level are often used to categorise people as *in-group* and *out-group* (Arcuri and Cadinu, 2011). In the social psychology lexicon, the so called *in-group bias* is the tendency to evaluate and treat members of the in-group more favorably than members of the out-group (Bourhis and Maas, 2005: 1588). In this respect, language acts as a relevant factor in inter-group dynamics, as it is linked to phenomena

such as stereotyping. Since language is one of the most important dimensions of group identity, «language maintenance and divergence can be used to assert in-group identity, may enhance positive social identity and result in the accentuation of inter-group boundaries between in-group and out-group others» (Bourhis and Maas, 2005: 1591).

From this perspective, the *Stereotype Content Model* (Fiske *et al*., 2006) offers a relevant framework for a better understanding of the dimensions of social cognition, also with respect to language as a valued dimension of group identity. In social cognition research, it has been found that 'warmth' and 'competence' are the main dimensions used by people in spontaneously interpreting behavior or forming impressions of others. The first dimension refers to friendliness, helpfulness, sincerity, dependability, morality; while the second refers to intelligence, skill, creativity, efficacy. They can respectively be associated to the 'solidarity' and the 'status' traits used in the matched guise experiments (see § 1). It has been found that people are more sensitive to warmth information than to competence information. Moreover, 'warmth' and 'competence' are intertwined. In fact, although they are two separate dimensions, when people judge individuals, 'warmth' and 'competence' often correlate positively in the well-known halo effect, since «people expect isolated individuals to be evaluatively consistent» (Fiske *et al*., 2006: 79). The picture changes considerably if we move from individual to group perception. When people judge social groups, 'warmth' and 'competence' often correlate negatively: many groups are judged as high on one dimension and low on the other. Such inconsistency turns out to be extremely interesting when different social groups are observed from the linguist's point of view. It is no coincidence that the high-ranking of standard languages along the status dimension is often counterbalanced by the high-ranking of local varieties along the solidarity dimension. A large number of language stereotype studies prove that the in-group language (or speech variety, or accent) is more favorably evaluated on the solidarity dimension, whereas the out-group language (or speech variety, or accent) is ranked highly for status traits when it is used by socially dominant classes.

According to the *Stereotype Content Model*, rather than uniform antipathy, many groups receive ambivalent stereotypes (Lee and Fiske, 2006). Consider the example of women: they are either competent or warm, depending on whether they are professionals or housewives. Ambivalent stereotypes are at work also in the case of immigrants, reflecting stereotypes of

their nationality or implied socioeconomic status. In general, people seem to have a limited image of immigrants who are perceived as low in competence and low in warmth. Such perceptions dramatically change when immigrant groups are specified by originating country, since they receive differentiated ratings on these two key dimensions. That is, people do not think immigrants to be equally as (in)competent as they are (not) warm but they perceive them at a particular level of competence and another level of warmth, as Lee and Fiske (2006) have proved. The authors raise the question of which dimensions are most influential in perceiving immigrants when people receive information on multiple dimensions (e.g. if Asian immigrants are competent but undocumented immigrants are not, are undocumented Asian immigrants high or low in competence?): they suspect that the more salient dimension would guide perception, which suggests that a time-based analysis would help clarify whether one dimension takes priority in judging immigrants (Lee and Fiske, 2006: 764).

3. *The experiment: design, sample and working hypotheses*

In order to evaluate whether ethnic stereotypes alter respondents' perception of speech and whether being explicitly informed beforehand of the speaker's nationality (real or presumed) conditions listeners' attitudes, a pilot experiment with three different test conditions was run.

Opinions were elicited via questionnaires and explicit attitudes via verbal guise. The present study thus focuses on foreign accent as an isolated independent variable and, given the use of audio recordings alone, on the verbal channel only. The elicitation of implicit attitudes goes beyond the scope of the present paper and will be the object of a future contribution.

A total of 97 subjects participated in the experiment (divided into three different groups: see *infra*). Participants were sought from Arezzo high schools and participation took place in a quiet classroom. The average age of the participants was 18 years, ranging from 17 to 22 years. The great majority of the participants self-identified their nationality as Italian, with only four designating other nationalities (Bengali = 2, Albanian = 1, Rumanian = 1).

Participants were asked to listen to four different male voices (a Standard Italian radio speaker, an Anglo-American, a Rumanian, and an Alba-

nian speaker) spontaneously conversing about parking in Arezzo. Romanian, Albanian, and American English were the three non-native accents to be tested. American English accent was chosen as a filler, and was not the main focus of the present study, although some results concerning its evaluation are given. Albanian and Romanian were chosen according to the actual distribution of ethnic groups in the Arezzo area: the most copious group being Romanian (36% with respect to the total number of immigrants), followed by Albanian (15%)[2]. Natural accents were used in order to avoid subconscious reactions that would naturally affect determinations of speaker profiles and introduce an unwanted variable into the research. The four subjects ranged from 44 to 50: the Italian and Angloamerican interviewees had a degree, while Albanian and Romanian had an high-school diploma. The non native subjects had been living in Italy for the last fifteen years. The male voices were recorded using a professional digital recorder (model M-audio Microtrack 24/96) using unidirectional microphones. The sound files were saved in .wav format and were normalized to relative loudness using audio editing software (Audacity tm). Each sample lasted approximately 18 msec, ranging from 30 to 40 words per speaker: pauses and hesitation marks were manually removed. One final .mp3 sound file was created and used for the verbal guise experiment.

Three test conditions were created from the four samples recorded by the four speakers. In all versions, the Angloamerican speaks first, followed by the Albanian and the Romanian. The Italian voice was the last to be heard by the subjects. The questionnaire was divided into three different sections: the first and the last sections were the same in all three conditions, while the second was condition-dependent (see Table 1). In the first condition, respondents were asked to identify speaker ethnicity among a list of possible choices. They were also asked to indicate on a Likert scale (1-5) to what extent they felt confident with their answer. In the second one, speaker ethnicity was erroneously indicated (with the Anglo-American labelled as 'British English', the Albanian labelled as 'Rumanian', and the Rumanian labelled as 'Albanian'). In the last condition, speaker ethnicity was overtly declared.

[2] Data on demographic flow in Arezzo area can be downloaded at the following url: *http://www.provincia.arezzo.it/politichesociali/default.asp?cnt_id=454&cnt_idpadre=147&tipodoc=1 (accessed 30 September 2015).*

<table>
<tr><th>I part</th><th>II part</th><th>III part</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">General questions about the respondents (sex, age, knowledge of foreign languages, mobility)</td><td>I condition: Questions about voices' nationality and pleasantness/ unpleasantness</td><td rowspan="3">Questions about voices' socio-cultural and economic level; questions about voices' personality traits</td></tr>
<tr><td>II condition: Questions about voices' pleasantness/ unpleasantness</td></tr>
<tr><td>III condition: Questions about voices' pleasantness/ unpleasantness</td></tr>
</table>

Table 1. *Structure of the questionnaire.*

The working hypotheses were as follows:

(i) Not all the non-native (NN) speakers are negatively evaluated on measures of solidarity ('warmth') as well as social status ('competence');
(ii) Certain non-native Italian speakers are more stigmatised than others;
(iii) The disclosure of speakers nationality influences listeners attitudes: the same voice is differently judged depending on its 'declared' origins;
(iv) The activation of particular stereotypes is closely related to speaker ethnicity which awakens different attitudes and feelings on the part of respondents.

In the following section the main results obtained in the three different test conditions are discussed.

4. *Results*

After a comparison of the social portraits associated with the four voices in the first experimental condition (§ 4.1), some space is devoted to the discussion of the results stemming from the other two conditions (§§ 4.2 and 4.3).

4.1. *The portraits of the four voices*

As already mentioned, in the first condition the information about the origin of the speakers was not provided to the participants, in order to avoid introducing a variable based on ethnic or local identity. Participants were asked to state the nationality of the speaker they just heard in a multiple

choice task (choosing among the following labels: Italian, Britain, Russian, Albanian, German, Romanian, American).The first condition questionnaire thus verifies both the ability to recognize the dialect of the speaker and the attitude judgements made by the listeners – following the suggestions and remarks by Lindemann (2003: 349) and Clopper and Pisoni (2005: 317).

Listeners were first asked to identify where the speaker was from before making their attitudinal response and then they were asked to figure out a profile of the speaker. Not all the non-native voices were correctly labelled with the right nationality. For this reason, it is important to underline that all the percentages are given with respect to the total of correct answers and not with respect to the whole sample: in this sense, the test really measures explicit attitudes towards the intended group.

The Italian voice was recognised by the whole sample (with the maximum of confidence rate in the answers) and is thought to belong to someone who has a degree (77%). The speaker is mostly thought to be employed in an intellectual job (56%); some students believe that he has a clerical or commercial job (39%). The speaker could have a managerial job according to most of the sample (81%), since he is very committed to his work (86%).

The Romanian voice was recognised by 82% of the subjects and the confidence rate was high or very high in 62% of the answers. 57% of the students do not like it. The voice is thought to belong to someone with a middle-school certificate (49%) or a primary school certificate (34%). The Romanian speaker is thought to hold a manual job by most of the students (91%). According to 83% of the subjects, the speaker could not hold an important job position, as his commitment is discontinuous (51%).

The Albanian voice was recognised by 60% of the students; the confidence rate was high or very high in only 37% of the answers. Most of the respondents do not like it (82%). The voice is thought to belong to someone with a middle-school certificate (62%). The Albanian speaker is believed to head a manual job by 91% of the students. The speaker could not hold an important job position (85%), as his commitment is discontinuous (53%).

The voice from United States was recognised as belonging to an American English speaker only by 26% of the subjects; the confidence rate was high or very high in 70% of the answers. 61% of the students like it. The American English voice is thought to belong to someone who has a middle-school certificate (48%), or a degree (46%). The speaker is mostly thought to be employed in a clerical or commercial job (50%); some students believe that he has an intellectual job (41%). The speaker could have a managerial

job according to most of the sample (59%), since he is very committed to his work (76%).

As for the personality traits, the voice from Italy is thought to belong to someone who is, in this order, self-confident (95%), and self-important (67%), but also unpleasant (59%) and unsociable (56%); while the voice from the United States is thought to belong to someone who is self-confident (85%), self-important (63%), pleasant (59%) but unsociable (58%). The voices from Albania and Romania are thought to belong to someone who is nice (68% in both cases), and sociable (62% and 57%, respectively); the Albanian voice appears more insecure (68%) than Romanian (47%).

Although the picture appears rather difficult to disentangle, the results indicate a clear pro-Italian accent bias, while the evaluation of non-native accents shows rather negative attitudes. This finding appears unquestionable with respect to the status/competence dimension, while it turns out to be more disputable with respect to the solidarity/warmth dimension, with Standard Italian eliciting lower scores than non-native accents. On the whole, the American voice appears to be better evaluated than Albanian and Romanian voices, which seem to elicit rather similar judgements in the 'hidden nationalities' condition.

4.2. *Albanian is better than Romanian although it is not Albanian*

According to the results displayed in § 4.1, both Albanian and Romanian voices seem to be negatively evaluated by the sample of students. In order to verify whether certain non-native accents are more stigmatized than others, let us concentrated on the other experimental conditions. If both non-native accents were equally negatively evaluated, there should be no differences in the distribution of the answers with respect to the three different experimental conditions. On the contrary, their comparison reveals an evident stigma towards Romanian accent. Some of the most clear-cut responses elicited to the same question in the three different conditions are presented and commented below[3]. In Table 2 the percentages for the yes/no question "Do you like this way of speaking?" are displayed. Alleged Albanian is certainly more appreciated than alleged Romanian:

[3] In the following tables percentages are given. Unanswered question are not displayed, being rather sporadic.

Condition	*Albanian*		*Romanian*	
	yes	*no*	*yes*	*no*
1st (hidden nationalities)	3	80	24	60
2nd (true nationalities)	32	68	24	76
3rd (false nationalities)	87	13	7	93

Table 2. *"Do you like this way of speaking?" question.*

The answers to the questions related to educational and cultural level reveal a rather consistent picture. On the whole, both the true or alleged Albanian voices are perceived as belong to a speaker with a higher educational level than the true or alleged Romanian ones. As is displayed in Table 3, 93% of the students confers a university degree on the alleged Albanian voice.

Condition	*Albanian*				*Romanian*			
	L	*MS*	*MI*	*E*	*L*	*MS*	*MI*	*E*
1st (hidden nationalities)	3	13	67	17	2	15	49	33
2nd (true nationalities)	0	36	32	32	0	24	36	40
3rd (false nationalities)	93	7	–	–	0	40	53	7

Table 3. *"What kind of educational qualification might he have?" question.*
(L = laurea*, degree; MS* = media superiore*, high-school degree, MI* = media inferiore*, middle-school degree, E* = elementare*, elementary school degree)*

Consequently, the alleged Albanian voice is cultivated and the speaker habitually reads newspapers, as is shown in Tables 4-5, respectively:

Condition	*Albanian*		*Romanian*	
	cultivated	*uncultivated*	*cultivated*	*uncultivated*
1st (hidden nationalities)	3	97	9	91
2nd (true nationalities)	8	88	8	88
3rd (false nationalities)	100	0	13	87

Table 4. *"What kind of person might he be? Cultivated - Uncultivated" question.*

Condition	*Albanian*		*Romanian*	
	yes	*no*	*yes*	*no*
1st (hidden nationalities)	10	90	27	73
2nd (true nationalities)	16	84	44	56
3rd (false nationalities)	93	7	53	47

Table 5. *"Do you think he usually read newspapers?" question.*

The questions related to the socio-economical profile also elicit a more positive profile regarding alleged Albanian voice. As far as occupation is concerned, alleged Albanian voice may have a clerical or commercial job, while alleged Romanian voice may not (Table 6):

Condition	*Albanian*			*Romanian*		
	I	*C/C*	*M*	*I*	*C/C*	*M*
1st (hidden nationalities)	3	3	93	2	7	91
2nd (true nationalities)	0	16	84	4	24	72
3rd (false nationalities)	33	67	0	0	13	87

Table 6. *"What kind of job do you think he has?" question.*
(I = intellectual job, C/C = clerical or commercial job, M = manual job)

Alleged Albanian voice could have a managerial job, while alleged Romanian voice could have one only in 20% of the cases (Table 7):

Condition	*Albanian*		*Romanian*	
	yes	*no*	*yes*	*no*
1st (hidden nationalities)	17	83	16	84
2nd (true nationalities)	20	80	8	92
3rd (false nationalities)	100	0	20	80

Table 7. *"Could he be a manager?" question.*

On the whole, Albanian voice could achieve resounding success in his work more often than Romanian one (Table 8):

Condition	*Albanian*			*Romanian*		
	never	*sometimes*	*always*	*never*	*sometimes*	*always*
1st (hidden nationalities)	13	83	3	40	56	4
2nd (true nationalities)	40	60	0	32	68	0
3rd (false nationalities)	0	33	68	20	80	0

Table 8. *"How successful do you think he is?" question.*

With respect to personal qualities, the results show the expected disjuncture between the solidarity/warmth dimension on the one hand and the status/competence dimension on the other hand. The percentage distribution with respect to the solidarity/warmth dimension appears to be rather homogeneous in the three conditions, with alleged Romanian judged more pleasant and nice than alleged Albanian (see Tables 9-10):

Condition	*Albanian*		*Romanian*	
	friendly	*detached*	*friendly*	*detached*
1st (hidden nationalities)	63	37	58	42
2nd (true nationalities)	56	40	40	56
3rd (false nationalities)	73	27	67	33

Table 9. *"What kind of person might he be? Friendly – Detached" question.*

Condition	*Albanian*		*Romanian*	
	nice	*unpleasant*	*nice*	*unpleasant*
1st (hidden nationalities)	67	30	69	29
2nd (true nationalities)	64	24	48	48
3rd (false nationalities)	40	60	93	7

Table 10. *"What kind of person might he be? Nice – Unpleasant" question.*

On the contrary, as for the status/competence dimension, alleged Albanian clearly comes out ahead, as shown in Table 11:

Condition	*Albanian*		*Romanian*	
	secure	*insecure*	*secure*	*insecure*
1st (hidden nationalities)	30	67	53	47
2nd (true nationalities)	52	48	64	32
3rd (false nationalities)	100	0	53	47

Table 11. *"What kind of person might he be? Secure – Insecure" question.*

4.3. *Ambivalent stereotypes towards English*

As anticipated in § 3.1, American English voice was labelled as British English by 72% of the students. Although the evaluation of English was not the main topic of the paper, an examination of the responses proved from a rather different point of view how divergent social portraits can be given to the very same voice. English speakers are usually not thought of as immigrants in the same sense as Albanians or Romanians: notwithstanding, the voice in question received ambivalent stereotypes.

Tables 12 to 16 are laid out as follows: in the first condition, the answers are split on the basis of the speaker's supposed origin; in the second and third condition, they refer to American and British English respectively.

As concerns level of education, the voice labelled as 'British English' is thought to be more cultivated than the voice labelled as 'American English' (Table 12):

Condition	*British English*				*American English*			
	L	*MS*	*MI*	*E*	*L*	*MS*	*MI*	*E*
1st (hidden nationalities)	46	51	0	3	50	36	14	0
2nd (true nationalities)	–	–	–	–	16	68	12	4
3rd (false nationalities)	67	27	7	0	–	–	–	–

Table 12. *"What kind of educational qualification might he have?" question.*
(L = laurea*, degree; MS* = media superiore, *high-school degree, MI* = media inferiore, *middle-school degree, E* = elementare, *elementary school degree)*

A rather similar picture emerges from the percentages regarding occupation (Table 13), with the American voice associated more with a manual than intellectual job:

Condition	*British English*			*American English*		
	I	*C/C*	*M*	*I*	*C/C*	*M*
1st condition	49	49	3	21	57	21
2nd (true nationalities)	–	–	–	16	60	24
3rd (false nationalities)	27	67	7	–	–	–

Table 13. *"What kind of job do you think he has?" question.*
(I = intellectual job, C/C = clerical or commercial job, M = manual job)

Moreover, supposed or alleged British English voice appears more suitable for a managerial job with respect to the American English voice, as is shown in Table 14:

Condition	*British English*		*American English*	
	yes	*no*	*yes*	*no*
1st condition	59	41	57	43
2nd (true nationalities)	–	–	32	68
3rd (false nationalities)	67	33	–	–

Table 14. *"Would you give him a managerial job?" question.*

While the distribution with respect to 'self-confidence' does not show any differences among the three conditions, the questions related to other personal traits reveal the well-known dichotomy between 'warmth' and 'competence': the supposed or alleged British English voice is detached and unsociable, while the American English voice appears friendly and sociable (see Tables 15-16):

Condition	*British English*		*American English*	
	friendly	*detached*	*friendly*	*detached*
1st condition	41	59	50	36
2nd (true nationalities)	–	–	64	36
3rd (false nationalities)	47	53	–	–

Table 15. *"What kind of person might he be? Friendly – Detached" question.*

Condition	*British English*		*American English*	
	sociable	*unsociable*	*sociable*	*unsociable*
1st condition	38	59	57	35
2nd (true nationalities)	–	–	72	28
3rd (false nationalities)	40	53	–	–

Table 16. *"What kind of person might he be? Sociable – Unsociable" question.*

5. *Discussion and conclusion*

The study reported here used a verbal guise task to elicit evaluation of several non-native voices with an additional component required listeners to identify the speaker's ethnicity. It investigated the relative status of three different identifiable foreign accents, together with the status of a particular identifiable native accent, namely Standard Italian. It revealed that the listener's belief about a speaker can have a significant impact, both on the perception of the linguistic information and on the social profile attributed to the speaker, as Niedzielski (1999) and Strand (1999), among others, have shown (the former study revealed that people identify phonetic details based on stereotypes about the regions from which speakers come, while the latter demonstrated that listeners' stereotypes about gender, as activated by the faces and voices of speakers, alter the boundaries between minimal pairs).

Most assuredly, it will be necessary to collect a larger amount of perception data to determine the effective *facies* of ambivalent stereotypes towards non-native accents. Moreover, in the evaluation of the results, several methodological limits are to be considered. First, as anticipated in § 1, matched and verbal guise techniques elicit explicit attitudes, whereas other experimental tools are needed to detect implicit attitudes, which on the other hand may differ considerably. Second, it is not possible on the basis of the current study to determine what features listeners rely on when carrying out the identification and the evaluation tasks, since not all acoustic characteristics in the signal are also perceptual cues. As is known, not all the acoustic details play a relevant role in social category construction; likewise not all the phonological and phonetic variants are considered equally salient by naïve listeners. Moreover, in the verbal guise experiment, there were unavoidable paralinguistic and non-linguistic cues which may have influenced respondents' evaluations. For instance, the speech rate, intonation and/or pitch of speaking in the speech samples, the setting in which the verbal guise test was conducted, the respondents' unfamiliarity with the test and its procedures, may all have affected the respondents' evaluations. Finally, the possibility of a voice order-effect should be considered, alongside a possible subject-effect, since people are not usually asked to judge people on their voices only.

Issues related to ethnic identification of voices have real implications in social terms (see for instance Purnell *et al.*, 1999, on Afro-American speech), and have to be more clearly understood since the languages of migrants are coloring the European linguistic landscape more and more.

Although the present study is explorative in nature, and any conclusive statements must await further experimental research, some tentative conclusions may be advanced. A considerable amount of variation has been found in listener attitudes toward the same non-native speaker in three different experimental conditions in which, however, a number of factors were held constant (in all three cases, the data were elicited via a verbal guise run in a classroom with high school students). The variation can be explained with respect to the ambivalent nature of stereotypes, according to the Stereotypes Content Model (Fiske *et al*., 2006). The Italian voice was the most positively judged from the socioeconomic and professional point of view. Not all non-native voices were necessarily stigmatized. The Romanian speaker appeared to be the most stigmatised as far as socioeconomic condition and professional reliability were concerned. This negative profile was reinforced in the third condition where the genuine ethnicity was declared and further confirmed in the second condition with the false ethnicity (the Albanian labelled as 'Rumanian').

There is no question that the disclosure of speaker nationality influenced listener attitudes: the same voice was judged differently depending on its 'declared' or 'assumed' origins. As for the evaluations of the Anglo-American speaker, two starkly different portraits of the same speaker emerged. The voice labelled as 'British' was more positively evaluated from the cultural point of view, while the voice tagged as 'American' came in ahead in terms of cordiality and sociability. These results are in line with previous research on English as a Foreign Language: it has been found that, at least in the European context, Received Pronunciation is generally regarded highly on all status/competence dimensions among learners of English (Dalton-Puffer *et al*., 1997; Ladegaard, 1998; Garret, 2010).

Without a doubt, in evaluating the results of perception studies, it is important to consider both the listener's experience with specific varieties and the beliefs that he/she holds about the speaker (Clopper, 2010). In this respect, one might argue that the more favorable attitudes towards the Albanian voice found in the present study can be traced to the different status that Albanian immigrants have achieved in Italian society in recent years and the still more recent influx of Romanian immigrants in the wake of the 2007 EU enlargement: as noted in the headline of an article published in a well-known Italian newspaper: *Quando i rumeni erano gli albanesi* (E. Pugliese, *il Manifesto*, 7 May 2008), today's Romanians are in many respects yesterday's Albanians.

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