

English Applied Linguistics PhD Program
Graduate School in Linguistics
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Balogh Erzsébet

**Language attitudes towards English accent varieties:
Hungarian secondary school students'
labeling, evaluating and commenting on foreign accented Englishes**

PhD dissertation summary

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Supervisor:
Fenyvesi Anna, PhD, dr. habil.

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1. The outline of the dissertation

The current study examines the attitudes of a Southern Hungarian, Szeged-based secondary school's students towards language varieties that are not their native, i.e. Hungarian language varieties, but accent varieties of English which they learn as a foreign language at school.

The study is presented in eight chapters as follows: after a short introductory chapter, i.e. Chapter 1, that justifies the need for the present attitude study and provides a brief outline of the research, the general literature on attitudes is reviewed in Chapter 2 with reference to the position of attitude research in the various social scientific disciplines, focusing in more detail on those (sub)fields of linguistics – that is, on second language acquisition, applied linguistics, folk linguistics, perceptual dialectology and sociolinguistics – that are relevant to the investigation underlying this dissertation. Chapter 3 provides the detailed research questions with reference to the literature presented in the previous chapter, while Chapter 4 outlines the planning, designing, piloting and finalizing procedures of the research instrument and the overall research methodology applied in the investigation. The results of the respondents' evaluation, labeling and commenting processes are presented in Chapter 5, and these findings are discussed in Chapter 6, where each research question is also responded to individually. The next chapter, i.e. Chapter 7, focuses on the follow-up parts of the study concerning overt evaluations and issues of pronunciation, while the conclusion is included in the last chapter of the dissertation, Chapter 8.

2. The dissertation in view of the reviewed literature

In the attitude study underlying this dissertation, the general definition of attitudes is accepted as the basis of the research, according to which attitudes are positive or negative evaluations of different issues or concepts (McKenzie 2006:32; Garrett 2010:23; Preston 2010:112), in this specific case, of different English accent varieties. Therefore, the main aim of my research is to investigate how favorably or unfavorably secondary school respondents evaluate five different foreign accented English varieties.

In general, applied linguistics and second language acquisition attitude research focuses on attitudes that concern issues of second or foreign language teaching and learning (McGroarty 2010:11). Thus, attitudes in this field can be measured as components of language learning motivation, that is, subjects' attitudes towards target languages and cultures can be investigated in order to enable researchers to observe participants' language learning preferences. The outcome of international research in this field reveals similar significant tendencies regarding language learners' language preferences, motivation and attitudes. Namely, first of all, the majority of studies show that English is the most preferred target language among second or foreign language learners worldwide, and other target languages, for example, German or Russian, appear lower on the target language preference hierarchy (Dörnyei et al. 2006; Nikolov 1999, 2003; Csizér and Lukács 2010). Furthermore, both attitudinal and motivational differences appear regarding the respondents' gender or age as well as the fact whether the target language is their first or second foreign language at school. In particular, research shows that female respondents' attitudes towards target languages are more favorable than male respondents' attitudes (Kobayashi 2002; Dörnyei et al. 2006; Henry and Apelgren 2008). Also, in some cases, the age of the language learners plays an important role in their positive or negative attitudes towards language learning issues, namely, primary school children and older secondary school children show more positive attitudes than primary school leavers towards target languages and their speakers and cultures (Nikolov 2003).

Finally, researchers find that the position of the target language as first or second foreign language can also influence language learners' attitudes, for example, respondents' have more positive attitudes towards English and other target languages when English is their first foreign language (Csizér and Lukács 2010); in addition, when a second foreign language is introduced into education, the positive attitudes towards the first foreign language generally decline, even if the first foreign language is English (Henry and Apelgren 2008).

The first problematic point with attitude research within the framework of applied linguistics and second language acquisition concerns the fact that second language acquisition researchers do not view attitudes as separate, individual concepts but rather as components of a more complex concept, i.e. motivation. In contrast to this, the main focus of the current

paper is not to investigate and analyze secondary school students' motivation towards language learning or their target language preferences, but to concentrate exclusively on attitudes which are considered as complex notions in themselves, and not as part of the concept of motivation.

Also, when respondents' language preferences are investigated in second language acquisition research, the notion of language is interpreted in contrast with sociolinguistic claims, according to which language exists only in different varieties (Wardhaugh 2006:53). Although some effort is made, for example, by Dörnyei et al. (2006) to view the English language in varieties, in eliciting respondents' attitudes towards UK and US English, other English varieties are usually excluded from the research, and also the fact is ignored that even UK and US Englishes have different varieties. Unlike second language acquisition, the present investigation aims to treat English as a compound of different varieties, therefore, studying respondents' attitudes towards its different varieties.

Even though I disagree with how second language acquisition studies view the concept of language and attitude, I believe that the general tendencies that second language acquisition attitude research revealed concerning important variables such as age and gender are applicable to sociolinguistic attitude research as well. Therefore, the main social variables of the present study are the gender and the age of the respondents.

A further problematic issue is related to second or foreign language acquisition attitude research of the kind where attitudes to different accent varieties of the target languages are examined. With English being in the center of the majority of such research, these studies mainly ask language learner respondents to select a pronunciation model of their target language(s) they would most like to learn or are most likely to regard as acceptable. The main problem, in my opinion, lies in the fact that these studies take it for granted that language learners aim to learn one ultimate target language pronunciation. I believe that respondents should be asked if they really want to do so before they are required to indicate their pronunciation model preferences. Furthermore, these pronunciation models are often selected along a native–non-native dichotomy, especially as far as English is concerned, or attention is paid only to the UK and US varieties. In these contexts it is not surprising that the general findings of these studies show that language learners differentiate, on the one hand, between

native vs. non-native English accent varieties in terms of preferences; what is more, language learners also display different preferences concerning non-native English pronunciation model varieties. For example, language learners evaluate the native English accent varieties as the most favorable pronunciation models for language learning purposes, with special emphasis on UK and US varieties that are, at the same time, evaluated more positively than any other English native varieties, for instance, Australian or Canadian English (Janicka et al. 2005; Evans and Imai 2011). This approach is problematic, especially since there are studies that reveal that language learners are willing to accept non-native, for example, Chinese English accent varieties as pronunciation models (Sung 2013) or are able to evaluate, in some respects, their non-native accent variety speaker teachers more positively than native speaker teachers (Ling and Braine 2007).

The main aim of this dissertation is not to focus on secondary school students' preferences for English pronunciation models, still, a minor part of the actual research concentrates on some issues concerning pronunciation as this subject matter appeared to be a significant question during the piloting stage of the research for many of the respondents who participated in the pilot studies. A separate section of the research instrument contains questions that ask respondents to indicate, among other things, if they have any preferred English pronunciation models. If so, the current study does not aim to restrict the number or the scope of model pronunciations to UK or US or to any other native accent varieties, instead, it requires participants to provide their own preferences with the help of open-ended questions.

Indeed, further studies at the borderline of second language acquisition/applied linguistics and perceptual dialectology/folk linguistics also attempt to investigate the folk's attitudes towards native and non-native English accent varieties by diverse techniques that are common in perceptual dialectology or folk linguistics, for example, dialect/accent identification or map-labeling and commenting tasks (Lindemann 2005; Jenkins 2007). Unlike researchers in perceptual dialectology or folk linguistics attitude research, I want to situate this study into a main framework where attitudinal evaluations are based on acoustic stimuli in the first place for two reasons.

First, I believe that an attitude study without acoustic stimuli to which participants are asked to respond is rather artificial since respondents, especially secondary school students, will hardly encounter such a context where they are given a questionnaire with a map of the world or different countries, and then are requested to indicate where different language varieties are spoken and to evaluate them – with the exception, of course, when in an experiment their attitudes to different varieties are investigated within a perceptual dialectological or folk linguistics framework. Nevertheless, they are more likely to be involved in situations when they hear a person or more people speaking with one or more different English accent varieties, and have to judge the speakers for various – personal, or even professional – purposes. Therefore, as far as I am concerned, using acoustic stimuli in attitude research is a more suitable and relevant method to investigate respondents' attitudinal evaluations.

Second, providing respondents with speech samples by labels (Preston 1999a:xxxviii) or asking them to complete a map-labeling task rather than relying on acoustic speech sample stimuli would eventually prove to be inefficient with adolescent participants due to their presumably insufficient knowledge concerning both several different English accent varieties or geographical knowledge to locate English accent varieties around the world. As Jenkins (2007:151) claims, in her study, non-native English teachers around the world found it rather difficult, owing to lack of sufficient knowledge in geography, to associate different international English accent varieties with their particular country of origin. Therefore, I believe, if teachers of English cannot or should not be expected to be able to complete such tasks, secondary school students cannot be either.

At the same time, I believe that some elements of perceptual dialectology and folk linguistics methodology, in particular, operational techniques, should appear in the present study, as they can complement the main data collection method, i.e. the matched-guise technique, to a considerable extent. Namely, an identification or labeling task makes it possible to gain a more precise picture of which varieties the respondents claim they evaluate in actual fact. In addition, a final task of commenting enables respondents to add any further remarks to the previously completed evaluations and quasi-commenting task concerning the speaker of the individual accent varieties.

Following sociolinguistic research traditions, in order to examine people's attitudinal reactions to different language varieties, the matched-guise technique, or its modifications, for example, the verbal-guise technique, is frequently employed (see, for example, Ball 1983; Bresnahan et al. 2002; Ladegaard and Sachdev 2005; McKenzie 2010). With the help of these methods, researchers gain quantitative data that reveals how respondents evaluate different English accent varieties or the speakers of these varieties. Nevertheless, sociolinguists themselves often criticize these techniques; the matched-guise technique for its artificiality, and the verbal-guise technique for the lack of control for the speakers' phonetic variables (Hiraga 2005; Garrett 2010; McKenzie 2010). As far as I am concerned, when attitudes towards different varieties of a language are examined, controlling for phonetic variables is inevitably necessary. Therefore, as the main aim of this study is to investigate Hungarian secondary school students' English accent evaluations, the central method of investigation is the matched-guise technique.

Furthermore, in general, the analysis of the attitudinal evaluations in sociolinguistics shows different patterns, that is, attitudinal evaluations can be organized into different dimensions, mostly of the solidarity and status dichotomy (Ryan et al. 1982:8; Preston 1989:93; Hiraga 2005:297, Jenkins 2009:203–204). Nevertheless, other patterns and dimensions might exist, and sociolinguistic attitude research ought to attempt to find universal dimensions (Garrett 2010:56), or at least ought to examine the evaluation patterns in the case of every attitude study conducted. Besides investigating the overall English accent variety evaluations provided by the Hungarian secondary school respondents, a further aim of the present study is to analyze the patterns along which these evaluations are organized.

Finally, the study aims to target a respondent population that has not been thoroughly researched so far. For example, the respondents in the Lindemann (2005) study are native English speakers, i.e. American university students, while the participants in Jenkins' study (2007) are non-native English speakers, i.e. English teachers from all around the world. In the current investigation, however, respondents are non-native English speakers, that is, Hungarian secondary school students who learn English as a foreign language at school. The reasons for selecting secondary school respondents are clear-cut; first of all, as a secondary school English teacher, I have access to a large number of secondary school students, and

even though a study involving non-native English teachers would have been very interesting, lack of access to a great number of both Hungarian and international non-native English teachers would have impeded the possibility of conducting a valid large-scale study. Moreover, during my English teaching experience in the past years I have encountered several manifestations of naturally occurring attitudes towards different English accent varieties in the classroom settings. In fact, the most common example of such attitude expressions is when foreign-accented English speakers are evaluated negatively or positively by the students during listening tasks. Consequently, the need for empirical research emerged which enabled me to investigate this phenomenon more accurately among the students population with which I have the most frequent interaction. Finally, adolescence appears to be the key period when people's positive or negative attitudes develop (Williams at al. 1999:346), therefore, if research detects negative attitudes towards particular issues, this is probably the best time period also for shaping or changing the negative attitudes into positive ones.

3. Research questions

In line with the above considerations, the following research questions are investigated in this dissertation.

Research Question 1: On the basis of acoustic stimuli, how do Hungarian secondary school students evaluate five different English accent varieties, more precisely, the speakers of these varieties, in terms of personality character traits?

Research Question 2: Can Hungarian secondary school students label the different English accent varieties in question? What factors, i.e. age, gender, listening or speaking habits might affect respondents' recognitions of the individual varieties in line with the imitator's intention? Do the respondents' evaluations display any differences based on the labels as compared with the evaluations by acoustic stimuli?

Research Question 3: Apart from evaluating the English varieties and their speakers in terms of personality character traits, what other characteristics (appearance, personal preferences, family status) do they associate with the speakers of the varieties?

Research Question 4: What are Hungarian secondary school students' beliefs and

opinions concerning several issues of pronunciation such as its importance during learning English, the reasons and methods of how pronunciation can be improved, as well as what are the subjects' preferences in terms of English pronunciation models?

Research Question 5: Are Hungarian secondary school students able to reflect consciously on the processes of and reasons behind their identifications and evaluations of the different English accent varieties?

4. Methodology

In order to be able to answer the research questions of the dissertation, the following methodology and techniques are applied. Regarding the main research question, that is, how respondents evaluate different English accent varieties and the speakers of these varieties, first, five English accent varieties were selected towards which respondents' attitudes were measured. Subsequently, a matched-guise experiment was designed with the help of which the attitudinal data was eventually collected. Concerning the second research question, i.e. how respondents of the study label different English accent varieties, a labeling task was designed and employed. Furthermore, with reference to the third research question, i.e. what other features including appearance, personal preferences and family status participants attribute to the speakers apart from the personality traits of the matched-guise study, an open and closed commenting task was assigned to the respondents where they could indicate the speaker's other features, both in forms of selecting these features from previously determined, controlled and limited sets of phrases based on the results of the pilot studies as well as of being able to provide any additional comments they feel necessary to characterize the speaker of the given variety.

To answer Research Question 4 concerning various pronunciation issues, an open-ended question task was created and attached to the main research questionnaire where respondents were able to provide their opinions, beliefs and preferences with reference to different questions regarding pronunciation. The attempt and failure of the group discussions that were conducted with the participants in the piloting phase of the research are also described in detail, and information is provided concerning the final research question,

namely, whether respondents are able to reflect on the processes that operate their recognition and evaluation of foreign accented English varieties.

In selecting the participants of the study, the general aim was to measure the attitudes of the entire student population of a Hungarian secondary school, naturally, on a voluntary basis. An adolescent population was chosen for two reasons, namely, the practical reason behind selecting this particular age group of respondents was that I had access to a great number of respondents this way. However, according to attitude research findings, adolescence is the period when attitudes are developing, that is, adolescents aged 12-18 start to be sensitive and aware of the extent to which their own language varieties have social significance, and that there are differences concerning early (aged 12) and late (aged 17) adolescents in their attitudinal evaluations of different language varieties (Ball 1983:170; Williams et al. 1999:346). Thus, research showing that the sensitivity and awareness of the social significance of one's own language variety evolves during adolescence raises an interesting question, namely, whether the period of adolescence is meaningful in attitude formation only with reference to the language variety adolescents speak as a native language, or whether this phenomenon can also be observed among adolescents concerning different varieties of a foreign language or foreign languages they learn at school. Therefore, respondents were chosen from a Hungarian secondary school, from the adolescent student population between the ages of 15 and 19 (N=402).

Before the final data collection, two pilot studies were conducted to test the research instrument. After some raw analysis of the data, the two pilot studies for the group discussions were organized and conducted. As this form of data collection did not prove to be successful, no further data collection sessions were arranged.

5. Summary of the results

This part aims to summarize the responses to Research Questions 1, 2 and 3 of the study. First, the objective of the main research question of this study has been to examine how Hungarian secondary school students evaluate the speakers of five English accent varieties. All in all, the results reveal that the respondents of the study clearly differentiate between the

different English accents and judge the speakers of the particular varieties more positively or more negatively compared to each other. The evaluations also show different patterns along different character traits, namely, the participants of the study evaluate the speakers of the different English accent varieties diversely along three different dimensions. That is, the evaluations along the three factors rank order the English accent varieties differently, still, in a hierarchical manner. Furthermore, the outcome of the evaluations indicates that while the age of the participants does not seem to affect the evaluations, the variable of gender contributes to the different judgments of the speakers, that is, the female respondents evaluate the speakers generally more positively along all dimensions than the male respondents.

Moreover, the second research question aims to observe how Hungarian secondary school students label the English accent varieties under investigation. In four of five cases, the respondents label the variety for a variety that the imitator intended it to be. The results reveal that the age, the gender and the listening and speaking habits of the respondents do not appear to have any effect on what labels subjects attach to the varieties. The other factors that might be responsible for the recognition of the accent varieties include geographical proximity to the country where the accent varieties in question are spoken, and familiarity with the actual language on which the English varieties are based. Besides, when the evaluation results are compared by acoustic stimuli and labels, the factors along which evaluations are distributed show similarities; however, different varieties occupy different positions in the hierarchy based on the evaluations by acoustic stimuli vs. by labels.

The third research question has attempted to examine what other characteristic features Hungarian secondary school respondents associate with the speakers of the different English varieties. The results show that, apart from evaluating the speakers differently on personality character traits, the participants of the study assign different features to the individual speakers based on the stereotypes they possess in connection with the assumed nationality of the speakers. Respondents seem to pay special attention to additional negative characteristic features of the speakers. Also, the speakers' language and language-related features are specifically judged by the respondents, that is, in the case of all five accent varieties, the speaker is commented on and evaluated mostly negatively with reference to his pronunciation, voice, general speech style as well as to the general intelligibility of his speech.

All in all, it can be concluded that when the Hungarian secondary school students who participated in the present study hear people speaking English with different accents, most of them can recognize where the speaker comes from. Even though not all of them are able to identify precisely the speaker's country of origin, in most cases these secondary school students are able to recognize the general geographical region where the speaker is from. Beyond recognizing where the speaker comes from, the Hungarian secondary school students participating in the study attach different personality traits to the same speaker depending on which English accent he speaks in that particular instance. Nevertheless, they do not assess speakers entirely positively or entirely negatively on the basis of their accented Englishes, but they rate a speaker more favorably in terms of certain personality traits, while, at the same time, they judge the same speaker more unfavorably in other personality traits. In addition, the subjects consider the speaker's physical characteristics, appearance, personal preferences, and speech characteristics just as important as his personality. Still, apart from some basic stereotypes, for example, that German people are blond and Asian people like sushi, in general, respondents of the study do not differentiate further among the speakers of different English accents in terms of physical characteristics or appearance. Also, the Hungarian secondary school respondents tend to highlight the negative aspects of the speaker's speech characteristics, linking the difference accent features to speech impediment(s), to incorrectness and unintelligibility.

6. Conclusion

The most important findings of the study are, first of all, that the Hungarian secondary school student participants have displayed different attitudes towards the different English accent varieties they listened to during the experiment, which shows that these language learners are likely to have different, either positive or negative attitudes towards varieties of a particular language that is not their native language, but a target language they study at school as a foreign language.

Second, the study has clearly demonstrated that the gender variable has played an important role in language attitudes towards English accent varieties. Namely, female

respondents of the present study evaluated the individual English varieties generally more positively than the male respondents, which is in line with previous research (see, for example, Dörnyei et al. 2006, or Henry and Apelgren 2008). In addition to more favorable attitudes, female vs. male participants behaved differently when they were asked to identify where different English accent varieties came from. That is, male respondents tended to offer a wider range of potential countries or nationalities when they labeled varieties than the female respondents.

Third, respondents of the study have turned out to be motivated to evaluate the speakers of the different English accent varieties even beyond the required tasks. In other words, participants were willing to evaluate the speakers of the different varieties in terms of personal characteristics, in terms of physical characteristics, dress and other positive or negative qualities, as well as in terms of the language-related features the speakers displayed, for example, the speaker's voice quality, intonation, pronunciation, and the intelligibility of his speech. This provides some implications for further research, namely, beyond evaluating personal and physical characteristics, which technique is commonly applied in attitude research at present, tasks need to be included in the studies that ask respondents to evaluate the speech characteristics of the speakers as well.

Finally, even though through a post hoc analysis of the speaker evaluations by labels interesting results emerge which otherwise might not be elicited, for example, comparing British and American accent varieties by acoustic stimuli in a matched-guise study is rather problematic, the two types of evaluations in attitude research ought to be handled differently. Also, preference should be given to acoustic stimuli evaluations since respondents are more likely to encounter different English accent variety speakers than having to evaluate English varieties on the basis of different labels of a country or a nationality.

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