

American Attitudes Toward Six Varieties of English in the USA and Britain

Since Giles' (1970) attitudinal study on British attitudes toward regional British varieties of English, much research has been done on examining how listeners rank varieties within their own country. Less research (Coupland & Bishop, 2007; Bayard, et al. 2001) has been done to ascertain how people from one country respond to other nations' varieties of English, and when these comparisons are done, usually only one variety (whichever is considered the standard for a particular country) is used. One exception to this is Hiraga (2005), who asked British listeners to judge both US (American) and British regional varieties of English, finding that while participants favored RP above all American varieties, they favored the American standard (Network American) over regional British varieties. They also tended to favor urban accents (both the American and British) over rural accents.

This study replicates Hiraga's approach, but does so using American college students to determine if Americans have similar perceptions of American vs. British and rural vs. urban varieties of English. It was hypothesized that, as shown in previous research, Americans would favor RP over other varieties, both British and American. However, it was hypothesized that, unlike Hiraga's British participants, American participants would rate urban varieties above rural varieties of American English, but would not have similar prejudices for British varieties since Americans may not be familiar with regional varieties of British English.

Three varieties of American English and British English—one variety representing the standard (Network American, RP), a rural accent (Alabama, West Yorkshire), and an urban (NYC, Birmingham) variety for each country—were played for 46 American college students and a survey was administered. Participants rated the varieties based on 10 traits of status ("successful," "educated," etc.) and solidarity ("friendly," "comforting," etc.) using a seven-point scale. Participants also noted where they thought each speaker was from.

Results show that participants ranked Network American and RP highest on status characteristics, but ranked Network American lowest and RP highest on solidarity characteristics, suggesting that Americans find the British standard the most prestigious. They also tended to rate rural varieties over urban ones for solidarity characteristics and urban over rural for status characteristics. These results demonstrate that Americans were able to recognize and have opinions about British regional varieties, and that they attach the same biases towards them as did the British participants in Hiraga's (2005) study, regardless of whether they could accurately identify the variety or not.

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