

Mapping Attitudes: The Role of Linguistic Experience and Ethnic Bias Towards “Parisian French”

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Linguistic ideology and linguistic experience have been shown to affect the perception and processing of dialectal variation in speech (Niedzielski 1999, Clopper & Pisoni 2006). Little is known, however, about the impact of other psychological factors on attitudes towards language variation. The influence of ethnic prejudice, for instance, has been asserted to give way to speech-based discrimination in American English (Purnell et al. 1999); yet, the incidence of ethnic bias on speech perception, and its possible interaction with linguistic experience, has yet to be tested.

Recent studies indicate that Parisian French could provide a suitable test case for such effects as it embodies two diametrically-opposed ideological constructs. In Kuiper (2005), Parisian and provincial respondents qualified Parisian French as being “the most correct French”, though provincial subjects also downgraded the variety for containing French spoken in suburban communities with sizable poor, immigrant populations. These results mirror those of Boughton (2006) in which a middle-class male speaker from Brittany was presumed to be Parisian because his speech “connoted standardness” (295), while the regionalisms in the speech of a working-class male speaker from the same place made listeners think he was from the poorer Parisian suburbs. Thus, stereotypical representations of “Parisian French” seem to depend on listeners’ experience, impacting social attributions and speech perception.

This paper reports on the first phase of a two-part web-based experiment designed to map listeners’ socio-geographic representations of the Parisian region. Fifty Parisian residents were asked to advise a fictitious foreign couple on where to settle down in the Parisian region. Subjects saw twenty Parisian suburbs of similar geographic distribution and size via a digital, interactive map interface adapted from Google Earth. They were asked to rate each suburb on a 7-point Likert-type scale for social desirability (suitability for inhabitancy), social attractiveness (reputation) and linguistic correctness (prescriptive reputation). Afterwards, respondents completed a questionnaire that elicited socio-demographic data designed to show subjects’ linguistic experience with Parisian French through questions on residential history and group membership. A separate portion of the questionnaire measured potential ethnic bias through items adapted from a “subtle racism questionnaire” developed by social psychologists working in France (Dambrun & Guimond 2001).

Results show that the poorest suburbs are the primary attractors of negative attitudinal judgments, but that linguistic experience is not negatively correlated with such evaluations. Foreigners residing in the Parisian region for even a short time acquire the stereotypical poles of Parisian social geography, enabling them to effectively advise the fictitious couple in the contextualization vignette. Subjects scoring high on the index of ethnic bias were seen to be more likely to rely on stereotypical “good” and “bad” suburbs

when making their evaluations; those scoring lower on this index made less extreme judgments of such emblematic suburbs. Such results speak to the influence of ethnic bias and the lack of linguistic experience needed to form stereotypical mental representations of urban dialects.

References

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