Do speech evaluation scales in a speaker evaluation experiment trigger conscious or subconscious attitudes?

Stefan Grondelaers & Roeland Van Hout (*Radboud University Nijmegen*)

In contrast to early experimental attitude investigations (cf. Mulac et al. 1974), many recent studies typically include only scales pertaining to the status and attractiveness of the *speakers* of the language variety whose perception is investigated. A possible explanation for this restriction is Kristiansen’s (2009) contention that the use of scales pertaining to the variety *itself* could make listener-judges aware of the research purpose, as a result of which their perceptions would be conscious rather than unconscious language attitudes. Kristiansen (idem) has convincingly argued that it is *subconscious* attitudes which motor language variation and change, not conscious perceptions.

While we basically agree with the latter argument, we have argued in earlier work (Grondelaers et al.: in press) that a restriction to speaker personality traits underspecifies the architecture of accent attitudes in Netherlandic Standard Dutch: in addition to social categorizations, regional accents were also found to elicit strongly converging perceptions of their norm status and aesthetic appreciation. A pivotal question which arises in the light of Kristiansen (2009) is whether the presence of speech-related scales in our experiments lead to the extraction of conscious rather than unconscious attitudes.

We addressed this question in a new experiment in which 413 native listener-judges rated spontaneous speech samples representing 6 accents of Netherlandic and Belgian Dutch in 2 scale conditions. While condition 1 contained scales which pertained to the evaluation of the experimental speakers, condition 2 contained scales which differentiated between the evaluation of the speakers and the evaluation of their speech. Factor analysis returned almost identical four-factor solutions for both conditions, with the difference that what came out as a *Speaker Competence*-factor in condition 1 emerged as an *Accent Norm*-dimension in condition 2. These findings confirm, in other words, that the presence of speech-related scales in a speaker evaluation experiment need not render language attitudes conscious instead of subconscious.

References