

Dialects and Perceptions of Humor: Dialectal Stereotypes

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The author contributes to the notion that foreign dialects are stereotypically more humorous than native dialects in the realm of humor. Limiting her study to a focus on British, American, and Scottish dialects in the form of audio recordings, she tests this theory and hypothesizes that her listeners, who are mostly American, will find the other two dialects more humorous than their own. Though she admits to several limitations, her findings support her original hypothesis that the speakers of one dialect (American) will find other dialects (British and Scottish) more humorous.

Introduction

Everyone loves that one hilarious character in the movie: the sidekick friend whose whole purpose in the film is to make the audience laugh. Under close observation, many of these characters possess a common trait—a foreign accent. Whether it’s Gimli from *The Lord of the Rings*, Fez on *That 70s Show*, or Fat Amy from *Pitch Perfect*, comedic relief often talks a little differently. The following study is intended to use linguistic methods to see if this dialectal difference influences the average North American listener’s perception of humor and to see what stereotypes exist regarding the kinds of senses of humor associated with the certain American, British, and Scottish dialects.

Many studies have been conducted in the field of perceptual dialectology, the pioneer in this area of research being W. E. Lambert. Lambert created a research method that came to be known as the Matched-Guise Technique (Lambert, 1960). This method of research evaluates listeners’ perception of different languages or dialects by having them first listen to an audio recording and then rate that speaker on certain characteristics such as attractiveness, success, and intelligence. Lambert pioneered this method with a study comparing perceptions of English and French by speakers of both languages, and it has since been used by many other linguists to study perceptions of many different languages and dialects, such as perceptions of Canadian French versus European French (Remillard, et al., 1973) or between different British dialects in the UK (Giles, et al., 1981).

Many studies have also been conducted in the area of humor, though from more of an armchair linguist point of view. Humor has long fascinated linguists, and research is easy to find on any aspect from puns to sarcasm, as *The Primer of Humor Research* (2008) and “Introduction: Cognitive Linguistic Approaches to Humor” (Brone, et al., 2006) illustrate. However, there is something missing. Very little has been studied in the gap connecting the two (perceptual dialectology and the study of humor) besides maybe a box to check in a study by Lambert. However, there is a strong correlation between the two. In addition, stereotypes, whether positive or negative, do exist and remain to be explained. It is the purpose of this study to discover the strength of this

connection and to answer the following question: to what extent do listeners perceive other dialects to be more humorous than their own?

Method

A group of twenty-five people participated in this study. Native and non-native speakers of English from various countries were included. They indicated this information at the beginning of the survey. Of the participants, eighty percent were Americans, sixteen percent were Canadians and four percent were from an unspecified country. Twenty-three of the twenty-five participants were native English speakers. To support the study's hypothesis, the results would need to show that people find dialects that are different from their native dialects to be more humorous. As the majority of the participants were Americans, an expected result would show that the American dialect is the least humorous.

This study is modeled after Lambert's matched-guise technique with some modifications due to a lack of resources. Participants took a survey created in Qualtrics, which contained three audio recordings with the same script being read by speakers of different dialects. The audio recordings were from a collection of audio recordings called "The Speech Accent Archive" on the George Mason University website. The first speaker was a thirty-year-old male from West Jordan, Utah. He spoke a dialect very similar to the majority of the study's participants. The next speaker was a twenty-seven-year-old male from Littlehampton in the southern UK, and the final recording was done by a thirty-five-year-old male from Edinburgh, Scotland. All the speakers were males of similar age so as to remove as much bias caused by age or gender as possible.

Those taking the survey were asked to listen to an audio recording and then answer two questions about their perceptions of the speaker before moving on to the next recording. The first question asked, "Based on the audio recording, what traits would you expect the speaker to possess?" Participants then rated the speaker on seven separate traits on an interval scale, with five being a strong possession of the trait and one being very little possession of the trait. The traits included were intelligence, good

looks, height, sense of humor, kindness, likeability, and level of entertainment. Though the study was of perceptions of humor, more traits were included to keep the focus off one single trait and have participants answer more naturally. The second question asked, “What kind of sense of humor would you expect the speaker to have?” with the multiple-choice answers being sarcastic, dry, witty, goofy, and serious. Both of these questions were asked after each of the three recordings.

Results were recorded in Qualtrics and analyzed using Microsoft Excel. All responses were averaged and displayed in various bar graphs to numerically and visually show the differences in listeners’ responses. All data not relevant to the subject of humor was ignored and only the two main questions listed above regarding level of humor and what kind of sense of humor the speakers possessed were studied.

Results

The results pertinent to the research question were gathered from two of the survey questions. The first question had participants rate the speaker on what they perceived the speaker’s sense of humor would be, five being the highest rating and one being the lowest. The American dialect scored the lowest at an average of 2.08, followed by British at 3.29 and Scottish at 3.83. The results are better understood when seen visually, as in the graph below.

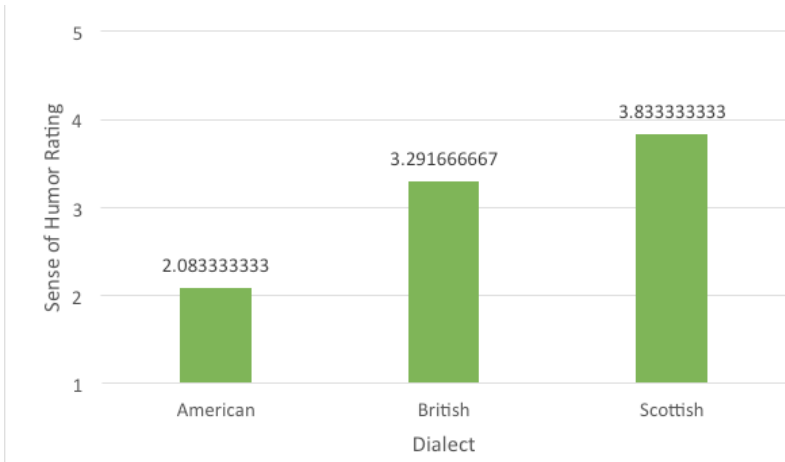


Table 1 Dialect and Humor Rating

The results were also run through a t-test to see if the results were different enough statistically to be more than the result of chance. When the American and Scottish dialects were compared, the p value came to 6.9001E-7, a statistically significant result. Even the difference between the American and British dialects, 3.80722E-5, was significant enough to rule out chance.

The second question asked participants about the kind of sense of humor the listener expected the speaker of each dialect to have. The question was phrased in multiple-choice form, with each participant able to pick only one answer. Results varied but showed some stronger bias in certain areas for the British and Scottish dialects, as shown in the graph below.

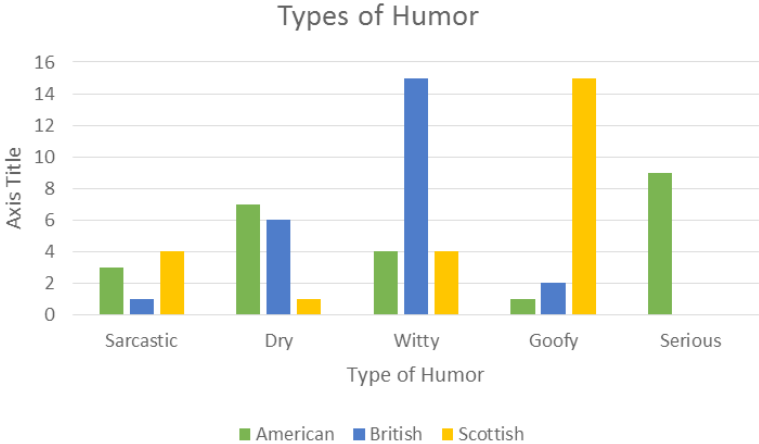


Table 2 Comparisons of Types of Humor

Discussion

The study provided some very interesting results in support of the hypothesis made. The American dialect (the dialect spoken by the majority of participants in the survey) had a far lower humor rating, averaging out to 2.08 on the one to five interval scale, with five being the highest rating possible. This result means that the majority of listeners did not find the American speaker very funny. Three was the median choice, representing an average humor level, and both the British and Scottish accents scored above average at 3.29 and 3.83 respectively. As we can see from these results, there is a substantial difference between the humor ratings for each dialect.

This supports the hypothesis that listeners find dialects different than their own to be more humorous.

Participants' responses regarding the types of humor each speaker would possess were also very interesting in the research of dialect stereotypes in humor. The results indicate that there are well-established stereotypes connected to dialects. For example, the majority of participants estimated that the British speaker would have a witty sense of humor and the Scottish speaker would have a more goofy sense of humor. At the same time, the American dialect had answers in all categories, and was the only dialect guessed to be serious. Because American is the native dialect of the majority of participants, this implies that preconceived stereotypes would not exist for most of the participants, as they are familiar and comfortable with that dialect. Meanwhile, their knowledge of the humor of British and Scottish dialect speakers would be limited, heightening any preconceived stereotypes. It can be generally assumed, because of the distance between the areas where these dialects are spoken, that the majority of contact with these other two dialects would come from media sources such as movies and television.

Despite attempts to remove bias, limitations existed in the study. In Lambert's study, all the audio recordings were done by the same person to reduce any bias caused by differences in voice or manner of speaking. Due to limited resources, this element was not repeated in this experiment; instead, recordings were made of the same reading but by different speakers. Differences in depth and pitch of the voices may have caused some participants to answer differently than they would have if the recordings had been done by the same speaker. An attempt was made to remove as much bias as possible by using all males who were close in age, but this could not completely remove every possibility for bias.

Another limitation may exist because all three recordings were listened to in close succession. In the study by Lambert the same script was read but there was some filler dialogue and time lapse to make it seem like they weren't listening to the same script over again. Listening to the

same dialogue three times in a row may have altered results if the script was what influenced the listeners' perception of humor. It would not have been as funny to listen to for a third time.

The final limitation would be the small size of survey participants, as only twenty-five people took the survey. A larger sample size would produce more accurate results. As well, further study could be done building on this research by repeating the same study with a group of speakers either of the British or Scottish dialects. A higher humor rating for the American dialect and lower humor rating for the native dialect of the majority of the participants would be further evidence in favor of this study's hypothesis.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to determine whether or not certain dialects are perceived as more humorous than others. The hypothesis was that dialects that were more distinct or further removed from one's native dialect would be seen as more humorous to the listener than his or her own native dialect. This research was conducted on a group of mainly American and North American native English speakers, and the results supported the above hypothesis. Participants listened to and rated three recordings with the same script, read by speakers of three distinct dialects from the United States, England, and Scotland. As the American dialect was perceived to be the least humorous of the three and the British and Scottish were rated significantly more humorous, the results were evidence in favor of the proposed hypothesis.

Many ideas can be put forth as to why this was the case and what the cause of these dialectal stereotypes was. More research could be done to gather further evidence supporting the connection between dialect and humor. It is this linguist's theory that dialect stereotypes in the realm of humor are mainly caused by the media's portrayal of movie and television characters within certain roles and with these stereotypical types of humor. For example, goofy Gimli, the comedic relief in the epic *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, was cast to speak with a Scottish accent. The majority of BBC films out of the UK have a greater amount

of witty humor and use speakers of the Received Pronunciation dialect of England—a kind of standard British accent used in the media register. Trends such as these subconsciously build stereotypes in the minds of Americans and have resulted in wide spread beliefs about the humor of each culture, as seen in this study.

Works Cited

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