'Do I look like I sound Frisian?'
A new methodology to assess stereotypes surrounding accents

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Researchers from different fields have long been interested in the perception of and attitudes towards accents and appearances. To date, however, little research has been done into the potential link between the two. This is surprising considering the fact that they are intrinsically linked: when rating vocal attractiveness, people are influenced by physical attractiveness and vice versa (Zuckerman et al. 1991, p. 545). This opens up the possibility to use the perception of accent and appearance to reveal implicit attitudes held towards certain accents. Continuing the work done by Haveman (2018), the present study aims to examine and use the interaction between accent and appearance to devise a new methodology to test implicit language attitudes.

For the present purposes, we compared standard Randstad accented Dutch to regional Frisian accented Dutch, the latter of which is often rated more negatively and relatively less attractive (e.g., Hilton and Gooskens, 2013). Our new methodology is based on the matched-guise technique which uses recordings of the same speaker(s) in two different languages or dialects (Lambert et al., 1960). Instead of asking listeners to judge the voices explicitly (e.g., on attractiveness), the present project devised a methodology in which listeners had to pair each voice up with one of a pair of pictures, which were edited to either look more or less attractive.

To ensure the variable of attractiveness was both as objective as possible as well as cross-culturally valid, the choice was made to base it on evolutionary facial attractiveness. Masculinizing facial secondary sex characteristics (e.g. strength of jawbone, prominence of cheekbones, size of lips) has been shown to lead to a decrease in attractiveness in women, whilst feminizing them caused an increase in attractiveness (Perret et al. 1998, p. 886). Based on these facts, participants were shown a feminized and a masculinized photograph of a woman while hearing a recording of a story in either Frisian accented Dutch or Randstad accented Dutch. They were then asked to choose who they thought the voice they heard belonged to.

A mixed effects logistic regression model confirmed our hypotheses and revealed that the feminized photograph was more often paired with the more standard, and often rated as more attractive, Randstad accent, while the regional and less attractive Frisian accent was more often paired with the masculinized photograph. These results reveal the subconscious association between attractiveness and attitudes towards these different accents and confirms our hypothesis that appearance can be used to unveil implicit accent bias. Because of the universality at the base of the experiment, we believe this method could be transposed to other accents, dialects and languages with relative ease and promises to be a useful new technique to assess implicit attitudes towards accents.

References

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