

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE*

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0. *Introduction*

Many studies on attitude towards language have been carried out in order to establish how members of a speech community view different accents and dialects within their language. The present experiment stands within the field of studies on attitude towards language and it focuses on the oral linguistic production of Foreign Language (FL) learners. Its main concern is to establish the extent to which the social acceptance of a person may be affected by his/her degree of proficiency in speaking an FL.

The independent variable in our experiment is *English proficiency*. Thus, it might be argued that we cannot select subjects according to their proficiency because we will never be sure of what their real 'degree of proficiency' is. In our experiment, we tried to make up for this difficulty by using the TOEFL, which is widely recognized as a standard test, and by holding a short conversation in English with the candidates, since native speakers would rely on oral production to 'judge' the subjects (the terms *subjects* and *learners* will be used here exclusively to refer to the Catalan learners of English as a Foreign Language, whereas the NS judges will be identified as the *informants*). I also compensated for the difficulty in determining the subjects' proficiency by indirectly asking NS's to evaluate it (see question J below).

The hypothesis we set out to test was that language proficiency affects social acceptance of speakers by members of that particular language community. This is related to studies by Giles and Powesland (1975) on speech styles and social evaluation. In this paper, we study the social evaluation of foreign speakers with different proficiency levels rather than different varieties found among NS's. Little research has been done in this area, and it is primarily concerned with the measurement of comprehensibility and irritation in communications in the target language (TL), and the degree to which the two speakers interact (Ludwig 1982).

Jeannette Ludwig reviews different studies on the effects certain differences in foreign speakers' language have on NS's. She considers these studies to be in the line of error analysis, and she holds that "this type of error analysis focuses on the

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impressions and reactions of native speakers (NS's) rather than on the productions of learners *per se*, in an attempt to document the characteristics of successful and unsuccessful L2 communications". The studies Ludwig surveys, however, focus on describing NS reactions to different types of errors (phonological, lexical, etc.), whereas we are interested in determining to what extent errors can lead NS's to distort and distrust the whole personality of the speaker. Kathleen Y. Ensz's (1982) study is very relevant to our purposes. She carried out a major experiment in which two hundred and fifty French people reacted to taped speech samples of Americans speaking French. Ensz found that errors in grammar were considered the least tolerable. This conclusion supports our choice of a standard test (mostly based on grammar abilities) to classify the different degrees of proficiency of the subjects: the main differences between them were in grammar correctness which is what Ensz argues to be most influential on NS's reactions.

1. *Method*

The methodology used in this experiment was based on the matched-guise technique designed by Lambert (1960) and followed, among others, by Giles and Powesland (1975) in their study on speech style and social evaluations. However, as we were not measuring different accents but different proficiency levels, it was considered inconvenient for a single person to read the same text in different 'proficiency guises'. For this reason, I recorded people who had been previously classified into different 'proficiency groups', so that what they said would be representative of different ways of non-native speaking.

A standard pre-test (TOEFL) was administered to a group of 80 native Catalan speakers learning English in order to establish a general English proficiency score for the subjects. Taking into account their scores in the test, 18 subjects were selected and they were grouped into three categories (beginners, intermediate and advanced) with three men and three women in each, so as to have the three groups clearly differentiated and internally homogeneous. All subjects were studying at the University of Lleida and they were all aged between 20 and 30. Social background was presumably the same as it may be assumed that there are not many differences in the background of university students in general, and even less in the case of a university in a small town like Lleida.

Next, I tape-recorded the 18 subjects reading a short literary passage extracted from *Games at Twilight*, a collection of short stories by Anita Desai. The subjects were also asked to speak for a minute about themselves, as if they were introducing themselves to an unknown person. Again, two recordings were made, as they had to speak first in Catalan and then in English. The topic was thought to be easy to develop and containing no particularly difficult words or expressions.¹

Finally, 14 English NS's were selected to be the judges/informants of the experiment. They were all from the south of England, studying at the University of Sussex, and they were aged between 20 and 30. We assumed that at university level social background need not be considered a variable since it has probably lost most

¹ In this paper, I do not present the results obtained from the recordings of the subjects speaking freely about themselves, since they will be included in future papers.

of its influence. Educational and cultural background was presumably the same, as all of them were first year students in Linguistics, and none of them had had any close contact with either Catalan or Spanish people.

The 14 NS's were asked to listen to the recordings of Catalan people reading and speaking in English and complete the following questionnaire taken from Woolard (1992), the only difference being that I added question J to the original set because I was specially interested in finding any correlation between the informants' attitudes towards the speakers and their conscious evaluation of the speakers' proficiency in English.

Speaker No.....

Do you think the person speaking

	NOT VERY				VERY	
A. is intelligent?	1	2	3	4	5	6
B. is likeable?	1	2	3	4	5	6
C. is well-educated?	1	2	3	4	5	6
D. is physically attractive?	1	2	3	4	5	6
E. is trustworthy?	1	2	3	4	5	6
F. has a sense of humour?	1	2	3	4	5	6
G. is ambitious?	1	2	3	4	5	6
H. is open?	1	2	3	4	5	6
I. is self-confident?	1	2	3	4	5	6
J. has a good command of English?	1	2	3	4	5	6
K. is progressive?	1	2	3	4	5	6
L. is generous?	1	2	3	4	5	6
M. has leadership ability?	1	2	3	4	5	6
N. is amusing?	1	2	3	4	5	6
O. is hard-working?	1	2	3	4	5	6
P. is proud?	1	2	3	4	5	6

2. Results

The sixteen questions in the questionnaire were assigned a number so that I had sixteen variables to work with. These are the equivalences:

V1 = Good command of English.

V2 = Ambitious.

V3 = Amusing.

V4 = Attractive.

V5 = Generous.

V6 = Hard-working.

V7 = Sense of humour.

V8 = Intelligent.

V9 = Leadership ability.

V10 = Likeable.

V11 = Open.

V12 = Progressive.

V13 = Proud.

V14 = Self-confident.

V15 = Trustworthy.

V16 = Well-educated.

A Principal Component Analysis was used to determine any common trait in any possible group of variables. Principal Component Analysis is mainly a way of reducing the amount of variables and obtaining the essential ones. To illustrate the importance of this kind of analysis, we can imagine a situation in which whenever A receives high scores, so do E and F, and whenever B receives high scores, so do C, D and G. Then we can postulate that there is a common Component that stands at the origin of A, E and F, and another one that originates B, C, D and G. Component 1 would account for the first three different factors, and Component 2 would explain the rest. This is particularly useful because it allows you to make generalizations out of the numerical results.

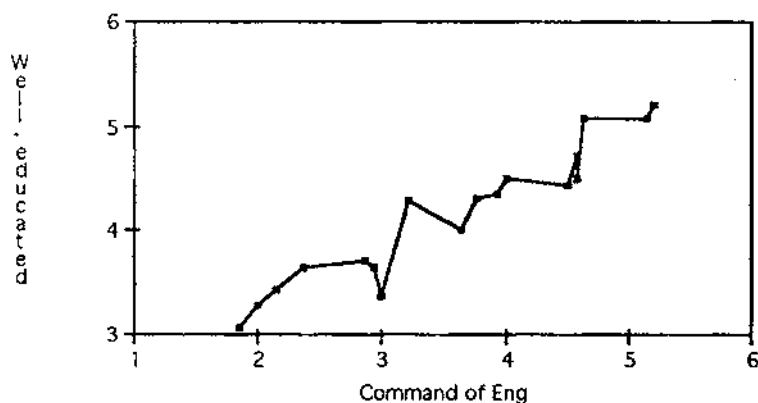
The Analysis revealed that Component 1 explained the sixteen variables at 69%, and Components 1 and 2 explained them at 83%. These percentages mean that with these two components we can explain most results. Component 1 was specially connected to V12 (progressive), V16 (well-educated), V1 (good command of English), and V8 (intelligent). These four factors can therefore be considered as belonging to the same group that we will name *intellectual competence*. Component 2, on the other hand, was mainly related to V5 (generous), and also to V7 (sense of humour) and V3 (amusing), constituting a group that we will name *personal charm*. However, the analysis did not reveal enough differences among the 16 variables. The reactions to the sixteen questions were not different enough, and consequently other ways of analysing the data had to be tried.

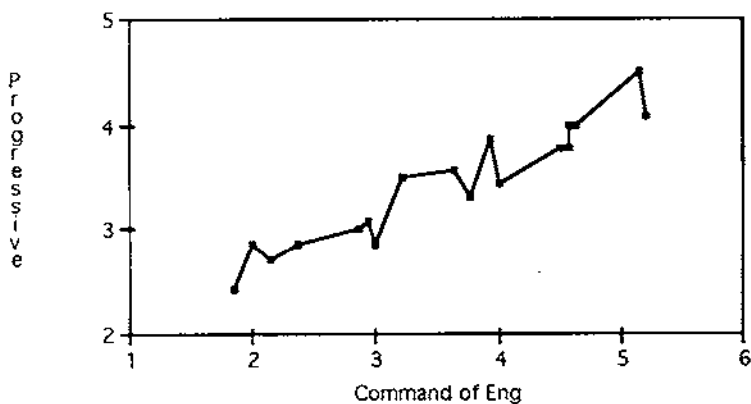
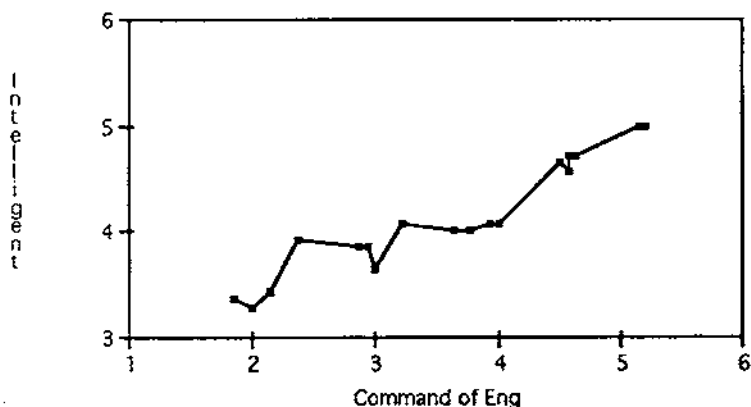
In order to look into the particular relations between different pairs of variables, a Correlation Matrix was made. We paid particular attention to the correlation between V1 (Good Command of English) and any other variable. V1 was aimed at showing the NS's perception of the subjects' English proficiency, which acted as the Independent Variable of the experiment. So, any possible correlation between V1 and the other variables could be interpreted as a correlation between the Independent Variable and the Dependent Variables (the attitudes of NS listeners towards different non-native speakers). The results greatly clarified the situation, since V1 correlated at a level higher than 0,9 with V16, V8 and V12, and at a level higher than 0,8 with V9, V14, V2, V4 and V6. The logical conclusion, then, is that English Proficiency (V1) positively affects the perception of the speaker's education (V16), intelligence (V8), progressiveness (V12) and, to a lesser degree, the perception of him/her as self-confident (V14), ambitious (V2), attractive (V4), hard-working (V6) and having leadership ability (V9).

Correlation Matrix

	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10	V11	V12	V13	V14	V15	V16
V1	1.000	0.861	0.442	0.860	0.383	0.827	0.495	0.952	0.888	0.753	0.530	0.950	0.691	0.871	0.708	0.952
V2	0.861	1.000	0.291	0.745	0.248	0.813	0.328	0.872	0.887	0.618	0.468	0.885	0.736	0.896	0.622	0.891
V3	0.442	0.291	1.000	0.564	0.708	0.331	0.874	0.372	0.457	0.558	0.618	0.486	0.388	0.425	0.288	0.373
V4	0.860	0.745	0.564	1.000	0.616	0.726	0.667	0.864	0.717	0.852	0.638	0.907	0.526	0.731	0.750	0.837
V5	0.383	0.248	0.708	0.616	1.000	0.524	0.742	0.422	0.246	0.738	0.716	0.528	0.063	0.221	0.635	0.336
V6	0.827	0.813	0.331	0.726	0.524	1.000	0.377	0.846	0.798	0.772	0.612	0.884	0.561	0.753	0.813	0.841
V7	0.495	0.328	0.874	0.667	0.742	0.377	1.000	0.474	0.434	0.741	0.609	0.567	0.370	0.424	0.496	0.413
V8	0.952	0.872	0.372	0.864	0.422	0.846	0.474	1.000	0.852	0.814	0.547	0.928	0.632	0.871	0.752	0.936
V9	0.888	0.887	0.457	0.717	0.246	0.798	0.434	0.852	1.000	0.655	0.541	0.876	0.798	0.942	0.568	0.915
V10	0.753	0.618	0.558	0.852	0.738	0.772	0.741	0.814	0.655	1.000	0.650	0.826	0.392	0.636	0.858	0.740
V11	0.530	0.468	0.618	0.638	0.716	0.612	0.609	0.547	0.541	0.650	1.000	0.675	0.519	0.516	0.567	0.568
V12	0.950	0.885	0.486	0.907	0.528	0.884	0.567	0.928	0.876	0.826	0.675	1.000	0.682	0.847	0.824	0.937
V13	0.691	0.736	0.388	0.526	0.063	0.561	0.370	0.632	0.798	0.392	0.519	0.682	1.000	0.820	0.396	0.767
V14	0.871	0.896	0.425	0.731	0.221	0.753	0.424	0.871	0.942	0.636	0.516	0.847	0.820	1.000	0.511	0.895
V15	0.708	0.622	0.288	0.750	0.635	0.813	0.496	0.752	0.568	0.858	0.567	0.824	0.396	0.511	1.000	0.728
V16	0.952	0.891	0.373	0.837	0.336	0.841	0.413	0.936	0.915	0.740	0.568	0.937	0.767	0.895	0.728	1.000

The Correlation Matrix was confirmed by the following graphs, in which we see that variables 16, 8 and 12 progress constantly in accord with the progression of V1. In other words, the better a non-native speaker speaks English, the better educated, the more intelligent and the more progressive he will be considered.





3. Discussion

When first planning the experiment, I expected to find a correlation between language proficiency and social acceptance. My first intention was to measure only aspects such as *trustworthiness* and see whether they were related to different levels of proficiency in English as a Foreign Language. As I was developing the experiment, I received some advice to enlarge the number of variables to include new aspects such as those stated above. The results confirmed that this was a wise decision since *Trustworthy* has a correlation of 0,7080 with *Good command of English*, which although still positive is far from the 0,9526 of *Well-educated*. Therefore, I was able to establish that proficiency in English as a Foreign Language determined the listener's perception of the speaker, particularly in aspects such as

education and intelligence. This can be considered an obvious result, since education and intelligence are strongly identified as factors that determine proficiency, but it is important to have obtained empirical evidence of that. In addition, we have also to take into account the high correlation between *Good Command of English* and *Attractive* (0.8603) and between *Good Command of English* and *Leadership ability* (0.8881) or *Self-confident* (0.8716). Both *Leadership ability* and *Self-confident* share some features related to personality instead of mental or intellectual capacity. On the other hand, *Attractive* suggests a perception of the person in a new dimension, standing completely apart from strictly intellectual patterns and entering the domain of physical qualities, which apparently have nothing to do with intelligence and mental capacities.

Besides this analysis on correlation, we also applied t-tests to the different scores given to each question. Our intention was to see whether the scores obtained by the three proficiency groups (Advanced, Intermediate and Beginners) were significantly different from one another. If we bear in mind that the grouping criterion was "English Proficiency", any significant difference of scores in other aspects (intelligence, ambition, likeability, etc.) would corroborate our hypothesis that English proficiency is determinant in evaluating many other aspects of the non-native speaker.

The results tell us that the variables for which the three groups (Beginners, Intermediate and Advanced) are most significantly different are V1 (Good Command of English) -this result was obvious, since V1 was the variable used to distribute the people in the groups-, V6 (hard-working), V8 (intelligent) and V9 (leadership ability), followed by V12 (progressive), V2 (ambitious) and V16 (well-educated). However, in such variables as V5 (generous), V3 (amusing), V7 (sense of humour), and V11 (open), the scores of the three different groups are not significantly different. Considering the distinction established on page 7 between *intellectual competence* and *personal charm*, data suggest that the first factor is clearly affected by proficiency, whereas values related to personal charm may be influenced by proficiency but not enough to be clearly appreciated in this study.

I am aware of the impossibility of claiming positive evidence for my hypothesis, since the observations are limited. It must be noted that the experiment was restricted to university students in Lleida speaking English as a Foreign Language and university students in Brighton evaluating their speech. The scope of the experiment was to check whether there is a positive relation between Second Language Proficiency and global perception of the learners by NS's of that language, and the result confirms the hypothesis. Undoubtedly, we shall need to go much further and work with wider numbers of subjects and observations in order to be able to provide final conclusions. For now, the direction has just been established and we can claim a positive correlation in the particular parameters set by this experiment. Future research may lead to conclusions affecting the field of Language Learning, or it may change the patterns of behaviour in cross-linguistic communications among such people as businessmen or politicians. We may imagine, by way of an example, what could happen if we proved that businessmen who speak good English are better considered than those using a rudimentary version of the language. Or we can also consider the possibility that businessmen speaking their own language in international transactions are considered more intelligent, hard-working and trustworthy than those speaking a Foreign Language.

This would corroborate the importance of learning foreign languages as well as possible against the current assertion that "basic knowledge language is enough for good communication". Alternatively, it might suggest that if the speaker is in a position of power, it is wiser for him to stick to his/her own language rather than become 'vulnerable' by speaking an FL without a good command of it.

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RESUM

Competència lingüística i acceptació social

En aquest article, hem presentat les bases teòriques, el mètode i els resultats d'un experiment realitzat amb estudiants de la Universitat de Lleida i la Universitat de Sussex. La hipòtesi inicial era que la proficiència dels parlants d'una llengua estrangera afecta positivament l'acceptació social per part dels parlants nadius d'aquella llengua. Per tal de definir amb més precisió el terme "acceptació social", vam triar 16 variables diferents, i vam demanar a 14 parlants anglesos d'avaluar les veus, gravades en una cinta, de 18 parlants no nadius, en funció de les setze variables. Després d'analitzar els resultats, hem conclòs que les variables vinculades

a les capacitats intel·lectuals estan altament correlacionades amb la proficiència lingüística, mentre que les variables associades al que nosaltres anomenem 'encant personal' només s'hi correlacionen parcialment. Aquests resultats requereixen més recerca per poder ser confirmats, però de moment suggereixen la idea que l'eficiència comunicativa deslligada de la competència lingüística no és suficient perquè hi hagi una interacció positiva entre parlants de llengües diferents. En conseqüència, l'assoliment de la proficiència lingüística és un factor clau que cal prendre en consideració a l'hora de d'aprendre una llengua estrangera.

SUMMARY

In this paper, we have presented the theoretical foundations, the method and the results of an experiment conducted with students of both the University of Lleida and the University of Sussex. The initial hypothesis was that the greater the language proficiency of non-native speakers of a language the greater the social acceptance by native speakers. We took 16 different variables in order to specify the term "social acceptance" and we asked 14 English native speakers to evaluate the taped voices of 18 non-native speakers according to those variables. After analysing the results, we have reached the conclusion that variables related to intellectual capacities are highly correlated to language proficiency, whereas variables associated to personal charm are only partially correlated. These results should be confirmed by further research, but they suggest that communicative efficiency without linguistic competence is not enough for positive interaction among speakers of different languages. Therefore, the achievement of language proficiency is a key factor to be taken into account when learning a foreign language.