

KWARTALNIK NEOFILOLOGICZNY, LXV, 4/2018
DOI 10.24425/kn.2018.124998

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THE ASSESSMENT OF POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS' NONNATIVE ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION BY POLISH LEARNERS

ABSTRACT

The present study is the first attempt at examining the perception and evaluation of 10 internationally known political and religious leaders' English pronunciation. 40 Polish students' assessed their speech samples in terms of the degree of foreign accentedness, comprehensibility and acceptability. We examine whether the following factors affect the assessors' judgements: their personal attitude to the speakers, the students' level of English proficiency and the genetic proximity between between the speakers' and the listeners' L1s combined with the raters' familiarity with foreign accents of English. It is demonstrated that the listeners' attitude to the speakers has no impact on the ratings of the samples' comprehensibility and accentedness, but plays an important role in their evaluations of acceptability. The participants' level of English proficiency is crucial for their assessment of comprehensibility, but not accentedness and acceptability. Finally, the genetic proximity between the involved languages and the listeners' familiarity with varieties of foreign-accented English are shown to be relevant for all the presented accent judgements.

KEYWORDS: foreign accent perception and assessment, attitudes to accents, politicians' English pronunciation

STRESZCZENIE

Niniejszy artykuł jest pierwszą próbą zbadania percepcji i oceny wymowy angielskiej 10 znanych na świecie polityków i przywódców religijnych. 40 polskich studentów oceniło stopień obcego akcentu, zrozumiałość i akceptowalność ich wymowy. Przedmiotem analizy były następujące czynniki mogące mieć wpływ na sądy oceniających: ich stosunek wobec mówców, poziom językowy studentów, pokrewieństwo między rodzimymi językami mówiących i słuchających oraz znajomość różnych wersji angielszczyzny przez sędziów. Wykazano, iż stosunek słuchaczy wobec mówiących nie wpływa na oceny stopnia zrozumiałości i obcego akcentu próbek, ale odgrywa znaczną rolę w sądach dotyczących akceptowalności. Poziom zaawansowania językowego uczestników był istotny dla ich oceny zrozumiałości mówiących, lecz nie nasycenia próbek obcym akcentem i ich akceptowalności. Na przedstawione ewaluacje wpływ miały pokrewieństwo pomiędzy omawianymi językami, jak również znajomość badanych odmian angielszczyzny przez studentów.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: percepcja i ocena obcego akcentu, postawy wobec akcentów, angielska wymowa polityków

INTRODUCTION

The global spread of English has made it the language of international politics, which means that many political and religious leaders use it when addressing audiences different than their fellow countrymen. Their speeches, due to the media and the Internet in particular can reach millions of people who assess not only their content, but also form, including the quality of the leaders' English pronunciation. The latter might affect significantly the listeners' judgements and attitudes as accented speech is known to be usually more negatively evaluated than native speech, also in terms of the speakers' professional competence and personality traits (e.g. Derwing/ Munro 1995; Abelin/ Boyd 2000; Lev-Ari/ Keysar 2010; Beinhoff 2013).

The present study is the first attempt at addressing the issue of the perception and evaluation of several political leaders' English pronunciation. It examines 40 Polish students' assessment of fragments of official speeches delivered by internationally known and influential politicians, i.e. Vladimir Putin (President of the Russian Federation), Angela Merkel (Chancellor of Germany), Donald Tusk (President of the European Council from Poland), Silvio Berlusconi (former Prime Minister of Italy), Nelson Mandela (late President of the Republic of South Africa), Narendra Modi (Prime Minister of India), Shinzo Abe (Prime Minister of Japan), and Niels Stoltenberg (Secretary General of NATO from Norway). We also included samples of English speech of two religious leaders: Pope Francis (from Argentina) and Dalai Lama (from Tibet).

The speakers' English pronunciation was evaluated by the participants in terms of the degree of foreign accentedness, comprehensibility and acceptability, which are common measures employed in accent studies.¹ The assessors, a group of 20 intermediate learners and a group of 20 advanced learners, were also asked to describe their attitude to the speakers (positive, negative and indifferent). We examine whether this nonlinguistic factor has an impact on the listeners' assessment of the quality of the speakers' pronunciation. We also address the question whether the participants' level of English proficiency is relevant in their evaluations. Finally, we deal briefly with the role in our study of the genetic proximity (membership in language families and subfamilies) between the speakers' and listeners' L1s, as well as the assessors' familiarity with the examined foreign accents of English.

¹ This issue is often referred to as annoyance or irritation. We prefer 'acceptability' as a more neutral term that does not imply negative evaluation.

FOREIGN ACCENT PERCEPTION AND ASSESSMENT – THE BASICS

Munro and Derwing (1995a: 289) claim that “foreign-accented speech may be defined as non-pathological speech that differs in some noticeable respects from native speaker pronunciation norms. Evidence indicates that, in adult second language (L2) learners, non-native patterns of production are pervasive, affecting large portions of the segmental inventory as well as prosodic aspects.” In other words, foreign accent is an inevitable part of foreign language learning and use when this process takes place in a country in which it is not a native language of its inhabitants, that is when it occurs not in a naturalistic, but in instructed setting. Yet, in spite of the naturalness and commonplace character of this phenomenon, there are some costs of having foreign accent² since its perception and evaluation is far from being neutral and frequently entails its, usually unconscious, subjective assessment in terms of various communicative, linguistic and aesthetic features such as comprehensibility, foreign-accentedness and pleasantness (Munro/ Derwing 1995b), but might also involve other types of judgements concerning the foreign speaker. In other words, as pointed out by Moyer (2013: 19), “Accent is one of the primary means by which others judge us; it is not just interpreted as a sign of linguistic competence, but also of attributes like status, trustworthiness, reliability, etc.”

As noted by several scholars (e.g. Lippi-Green 1997; Moyer 2013), native English speakers’ attitudes towards non-native accents are generally negative.³ According to Munro et al. (2006: 68), “one of the potential consequences of speaking differently from other members of a community is negative social evaluation. In fact, minority accents are often disparaged or held to be signs of ignorance or lack of sophistication.” The reason why people with a foreign accent may be perceived negatively is usually seen in the stereotypes and prejudices since “when listeners are exposed to accented speech, pre-existing stereotypes associated with that particular accent may be invoked” (Munro et al. 2006: 71). As argued by Munro and Derwing (1995a: 290), “listeners sometimes exhibit prejudice against particular groups of L2 speakers or against non-native accents in general. In fact, a number of researchers have noted irritation, a downgrading of attitudes towards speakers, or outright discrimination because of a non-native accent or non-standard dialect.”⁴ Furthermore, it has been suggested (Munro/ Derwing 1995a) that in the case of foreign accents extra processing time is needed to gain understanding and

² As a matter of fact, it is not only foreign accent, but also any native accent that departs from the standard variety that is subject to listeners’ evaluation and judgement.

³ As pointed out by a reviewer, an accent which is perfect might sometimes raise suspicion.

⁴ There are, of course, also cases of positive accent evaluations. According to accent perception studies carried out in the United States, native speakers evaluate more positively European and Asian English than Mexican English (Moyer 2013).

that these processing difficulties might be responsible for the rise of prejudices towards accented speech.

It should also be pointed out that the listeners' attitudes may affect their judgements concerning such seemingly neutral aspects of accented speech as its comprehensibility, intelligibility and degree of foreign-accentedness. Lindemann (2002, 2010) and Anderson-Hsieh and Koehler (1988) demonstrate that negative attitudes, frequently reflected in little effort involved in understanding accented speech, result in very low evaluation of speakers' comprehensibility. The opposite holds true as well; listeners with a favourable perception of foreigners who make more effort to understand non-native speech tend to evaluate it as more comprehensible than prejudiced listeners. Also Lippi-Green (1997: 71) claims that listeners' goodwill plays a crucial role in comprehending accented speech and argues that "breakdown of communication is due to not so much to accent as to negative social evaluation of the accent in question and a rejection of the communicative burden."

While the majority of these generalizations have been formulated on the basis of native English speakers' assessment of foreign-accented English, which accent research focuses on, it appears that most of them hold true also with regard to non-native speakers' language attitudes towards their own and other learners' accents. As argued by Major et al. (2002: 176–7), "stereotypes regarding non-native, accented speech seem to exist as perceptual constructs in the minds of both NSs and NNSs of English." Fayer and Krasinsky (1987) even demonstrate that non-native speakers of English often exhibit a greater intolerance and annoyance towards foreign-accented speech than native English speakers.

The perception and evaluation of accented speech depends on a large variety of linguistic and non-linguistic factors, which are speaker-related, listener-related and context-dependent (e.g. Flege 1988; Dewaele/ McCloskey 2014; Szpyra-Kozłowska 2015; Bryła-Cruz 2016). The former concern the number and severity of phonetic and phonological departures, both segmental and prosodic, from the adopted (usually native) pronunciation model well as the linguistic closeness/distance between the speakers' and listeners' L1s. The greater these departures and the larger the linguistic distance, the more severe judgements are to be expected. Moreover, what matters is the degree of intelligibility of accented speech; lower intelligibility usually leads to more severe evaluations of accentedness and acceptability (Deterding/ Kirkpatrick 2006). Intelligibility is, in turn, largely depends on the non-native listeners language proficiency (e.g. Bent/ Bradlow 2003); according to these authors, low proficiency listeners have a preference toward other non-native speakers' accents. The latter group of decisive factors includes the amount of listeners' exposure to accented speech and their familiarity with specific accents as well as their foreign language learning experience, which all have a powerful impact on their tolerance for accented speech (Anderson-Hsieh/ Koehler 1988). Learners are claimed to have an advantage in comprehension when the speaker and the listener share L1 – a phenomenon known as interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit

(Brent/ Bradlow 2003). Personal traits, such as the listeners' age, sex, education, place of living and occupation are also relevant for accent assessment. This is supported by Dewaele and McCloskey (2014), who maintain that "while attitudes towards foreign accents are partly linked to people's prejudices over which they have a certain degree of control through critical self-reflection, attitudes towards foreign accents also fall partly outside people's conscious control and are affected by their personality profile, their linguistic background and general sociobiographical variables." They examine the impact of listeners' personality traits (extraversion, neuroticism, tolerance of ambiguity), linguistic history, current language practices as well as their sociobiographical characteristics (age, sex and educational level). Additionally, language attitudes are often shaped by the speakers' appearance and ethnicity as well as the cultural and social context of conversational exchanges.

Finally, the listener's attitude towards a specific speaker is important. If we accept a given person, we tend to be more tolerant of his or her imperfections, including accent. In other words, our evaluation of accented speech is closely tied with aesthetic preferences, affective factors and individual expectations of the listener (Fraser/ Kelly 2012). As argued by Bryła-Cruz (2016: 31), "before we pass evaluative judgements of a person we hear, their accents are filtered through our ideological assumptions and convictions deeply rooted in the society in which we function. Therefore, the same accent can elicit different responses depending on who the listener is and where they come from in a physical and social sense."

While the majority of the factors listed above and their impact on the assessment of foreign accents have been studied to a greater or lesser extent, the role of the listener's attitude to a specific speaker has not, to our knowledge, been examined empirically due to the accepted methodology of accent research which involves evaluations of anonymous speech samples by many anonymous listeners. In other words, what is usually investigated is the perception of one group's accented speech by some other group, rather than an accent of an individual speaker. This paper undertakes a novel type of examination by employing English speech samples of internationally known political and religious leaders with a view to establishing whether there is a connection between Polish participants' assessment of the samples' accent features and their attitude to the speakers.

THE EXPERIMENT

Below we report on an experiment whose goal has been to find answers to the following research questions:

- Is the assessment of 10 internationally known political and religious leaders' accented English by a group of Polish students related to their personal attitude to the speakers?

- Is foreign accent assessment related to the listeners' level of English proficiency?
- Do accent judgements depend on the genetic proximity between the speakers and listeners' L1s as well as the participants' familiarity with the examined foreign accents of English?

EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE

In this section we present the major elements of the experimental procedure: the speech samples, the listeners and accent evaluation.

Speech samples

10 samples have been selected for the purposes of the experiment. These were fragments of public speeches (approximately 2 minutes long), taken from YouTube and delivered in English by internationally well-known political and religious leaders. The speeches are generally characterized by correct grammar and vocabulary choice⁵ so as not to distract the listeners from examining the speakers' pronunciation. All the speakers employ accented English, but differ in the strength of their foreign accent and their L1 linguistic background. Six of them are native speakers of European languages: Germanic (A. Merkel – German, N. Stoltenberg – Norwegian), Romance (Pope Francis – Spanish, S. Berlusconi – Italian) and Slavic (D. Tusk – Polish V. Putin – Russian), three are speakers of Asiatic languages (Sh. Abe – Japanese, N. Modi – Gujarati⁶ and Dalai Lama – Mandarin Chinese/Tibetan⁷) and N. Mandela is a native speaker of an African language IsiXhosa from the Bantu family. Apart from their linguistically diversified background, they have been selected with the examiners' assumption of triggering in Polish listeners very different emotions, from very positive, through indifference to rather negative. Moreover, since all the speakers can be regarded as people of much success and international fame, this probably excludes evaluations based on their social status.

⁵ Apparently, they were earlier prepared and probably written and corrected.

⁶ Gujarati is, of course, an Indo-European language, but since it is spoken in India, it is grouped here with other non-European languages.

⁷ According to Internet sources, Dalai Lama grew up speaking Mandarin Chinese and Tibetan, and these two languages have affected his English pronunciation.

N. Mandela⁸

D. Tusk



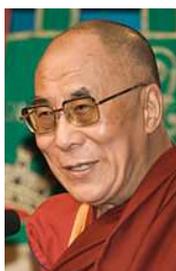
V. Putin



S. Berlusconi



N. Stoltenberg



Dalai Lama



Pope Francis



Sh. Abe



N. Modi



A. Merkel

Listeners

The listeners included two groups. The first of them comprised twenty 2nd year students of English, both males and females, representing an advanced level of proficiency in English and having received instruction in theoretical and practical phonetics. The second group consisted of twenty 1st year students of Applied Linguistics whose level of proficiency can be described as intermediate to upper intermediate, with mostly some practical training in English pronunciation. All the participants are students of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland.

Listening and evaluation procedure

The participants received answer sheets (one for each speaker) and were requested to specify their attitude to a given speaker having to choose from 5 options on a Likert scale (very negative – 1 point, rather negative – 2 points, indifferent – 3 points, rather positive – 4 points, very positive – 5 points). Next they listened to each speech sample and assessed it in terms of comprehensibility, degree of foreign accentedness and acceptability, choosing one answer out of 5, where 1 point indicated a very negative evaluation, and 5 points a very positive evaluation. Comprehensibility refers to listeners' perceptions of difficulty in understanding a particular utterance. Accentedness refers to how strong the speaker's foreign accent is perceived to be. Acceptability concerns the participants' evaluation of how pleasant/unpleasant the speaker's pronunciation sounds to them.

⁸ The links to the photos are listed in the references.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section we present and discuss the experimental results.

THE PARTICIPANTS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE SPEAKERS

The following mean results were obtained with regard to the most liked and disliked speakers from all 40 participants.

Table 1. Listeners' attitude towards the speakers

speaker	Advanced students	Intermediate students	mean
Pope Francis	4.1	4.1	4.1
Dalai Lama	3.8	3.45	3.62
N. Mandela	3.65	3.35	3.5
S. Berlusconi	2.8	3.25	3.15
N. Stoltenberg	3.1	3.05	3.07
Sh. Abe	3.0	3.05	3.07
N. Modi	3.0	3.15	3.07
A. Merkel	2.85	3.1	2.97
D. Tusk	2.85	2.9	2.87
V. Putin	2.7	2.2	2.45

We can isolate several groups of leaders with regard to the subjects' attitude to them: very positively evaluated (Pope Francis – over 4 points), positively evaluated (Dalai Lama, N. Mandela – between 3.5 – 4 points), perceived with indifference (N. Stoltenberg, Sh. Abe, N. Modi, S. Berlusconi – slightly above 3 points) and rather negatively assessed (A. Merkel, D. Tusk, V. Putin – below 3 points)⁹

Thus, the absolute winner in this ranking is Pope Francis. He is followed by the famous freedom-fighters Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela, very popular with many young people. An indifferent attitude prevails towards those politicians who are rarely present in Polish politics, i.e. N. Stoltenberg, Sh. Abe, N. Modi and

⁹ It is striking that extreme evaluations, either very positive or very negative, were generally avoided by the participants, which is common in studies employing Likert scales. Needless to say, the evaluations in Table 1 represent the participants' opinions which do not always coincide with the experimenters' views.

S. Berlusconi. Finally, the most critically evaluated politicians are those who are particularly important from the Polish perspective: A. Merkel, D. Tusk and V. Putin, the greatest ‘villain’ in this group.

COMPREHENSIBILITY

The table below contains mean scores for the speakers’ comprehensibility according to advanced and intermediate students.

Table 2. Assessment of speakers’ comprehensibility

speaker	Advanced students	Intermediate students	mean
D. Tusk	4.7	3.9	4.3
A. Merkel	4.35	3.75	4.05
N. Mandela	3.75	3.7	3.72
S. Berlusconi	4.25	3.2	3.72
N. Stoltenberg	3.7	3.1	3.40
V. Putin	3.35	2.5	2.92
Pope Francis	2.8	2.7	2.75
N. Modi	2.81	2.3	2.55
Dalai Lama	2.85	2.3	2.57
Sh. Abe	2.1	2.2	2.15

The results for comprehensibility divide the speakers into three groups: those who are rather easy and very easy to understand (D. Tusk and A. Merkel – above 4 points), those whose comprehension is of medium difficulty (N. Mandela, S. Berlusconi and N. Stoltenberg – from 3 to 3.6 points) and those who are very difficult or even impossible to understand (V. Putin, Pope Francis, N. Modi, Dalai Lama and Sh. Abe – below 3 points).

The highest position of D. Tusk in this ranking can be accounted for by Poles’ ease of understanding Polish English (known as ‘interlanguage intelligibility benefit,’ (Brent and Bradlow 2003). A. Merkel’s second place can be claimed to result from the relative phonetic closeness of German-accented English and native British English for Polish listeners. Native speakers of other European languages, i.e. S. Berlusconi, N. Stoltenberg, V. Putin and Pope Francis occupy the next positions in the above list. Asiatic varieties of English, employed by N. Modi, Dalai Lama and Sh. Abe, have received the lowest comprehensibility scores, which we comment

on in the next sections. Nelson Mandela's high position in this as well as the remaining ratings is probably the result of his high fluency in English due to good education he received and much practice in a (partly) English-speaking country of the Republic of South Africa.

FOREIGN ACCENTEDNESS

The second aspect of the speakers' English pronunciation evaluated by the participants was their degree of foreign-accentedness. The results are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Assessment of speakers' accentedness

speaker	Advanced students	Intermediate students	mean
N. Stoltenberg	3.1	2.75	2.92
A. Merkel	2.6	2.95	2.77
D. Tusk	2.1	2.65	2.37
N. Mandela	2.15	2.5	2.32
Dalai Lama	2.3	2.0	2.15
S. Berlusconi	2.0	2.15	2.07
Pope Francis	1.8	2.25	2.02
V. Putin	2.25	1.65	1.95
N. Modi	1.85	1.75	1.8
Sh. Abe	1.7	1.7	1.7

Here all the samples were considered either heavily or very heavily accented, with all mean scores below 3 points, which is in agreement with the usual harsh judgements on this aspect of foreign speech. Native speakers of Germanic languages and D. Tusk's Polish-accented English are found at the top of this ranking, while the leaders using Asiatic varieties of English are placed at the bottom of the list, with the remaining speakers located in the middle. V. Putin's very strongly Russian-accented English occupies the 3rd place from the end. Thus, the rankings in Table 2 and Table 3, while not exactly the same, share many similarities.¹⁰

¹⁰ Three native speakers of European languages, i.e. S. Berlusconi, Pope Francis and V. Putin speak very heavily foreign-accented English. Yet they assume higher positions in the accentedness ranking than N. Modi and Sh. Abe. A relatively high position of Dalai Lama's strong accent is somewhat surprising.

ACCEPTABILITY

Finally, the listeners assessed the speakers' pronunciation in terms of acceptability, i.e. how pleasant/unpleasant it sounds to them. Table 4 presents the results.

Table 4. Assessment of speakers' accent acceptability

speaker	advanced students	intermediate students	mean
A. Merkel	3.3	3.3	3.3
N. Stoltenberg	3.2	3.15	3.17
S. Berlusconi	3.42	2.8	3.1
D. Tusk	2.75	2.85	2.8
N. Mandela	2.7	2.95	2.82
Dalai Lama	2.85	2.65	2.75
Pope Francis	2.4	2.95	2.67
N. Modi	2.5	2.35	2.42
V. Putin	2.9	1.9	2.4
Sh. Abe	1.8	2.1	1.95

In this case three groups of speakers can be isolated: those whose English accent sounds rather pleasant to the Polish listeners (A. Merkel, N. Stoltenberg and S. Berlusconi – above 3 points), those whose pronunciation is viewed as neither pleasant nor unpleasant (N. Mandela, D. Tusk, Dalai Lama, Pope Francis, N. Modi and V. Putin – between 2 and 3 points). One speaker's accent (Sh. Abe's) was evaluated most harshly (below 2 points). No version of English was regarded as very pleasant (no scores of 4 or 5 points).

The assessment of accent pleasantness is usually (though not always) correlated with the previous evaluations, which means that the listeners judge a speaker's pronunciation as more pleasant if it is easy to understand and not heavily accented. The opposite is also true; the heavier someone's accent and the greater the comprehension difficulty, the predominantly lower the scores for pleasantness.

Pearson's bivariate test has been performed and a correlation between comprehensibility and pleasantness has been established in the following cases: N. Stoltenberg ($r = 0.39$, $p = 0.011$), Sh. Abe ($r = 0.36$, $p = 0.022$), Pope Francis ($r = 0.34$, $p = 0.031$), Dalai Lama ($r = 0.6$, $p = 0.000$), S. Berlusconi ($r = 0.5$, $p = 0.001$) and V. Putin ($r = 0.7$, $p = 0.000$). A weak correlation can also be found between comprehension and pleasantness calculated for all the speakers ($R = 0.165$).

A correlation between accentedness and pleasantness exists for N. Stoltenberg ($r = 0.59$, $p = 0.006$), A. Merkel ($r = 0.45$, $p = 0.003$), Pope Francis ($r = 0.32$, $p = 0.042$), Dalai Lama ($r = 0.48$, $p = 0.002$) and V. Putin ($r = 0.66$, $p = 0.000$). As can be noticed, the correlation coefficient is the highest for V. Putin, which means that in this case the correlation is the strongest. A weak correlation between accentedness and pleasantness is present for the whole group of speakers ($R = 0.291$).

ATTITUDE TO THE SPEAKERS AND THE ASSESSMENT OF ACCENT FEATURES

Recall that the major research question in our experiment has been to examine whether the participants' assessment of 10 political and religious leaders' English pronunciation depends on the students' attitude to the speakers.

The Pearson correlation test has revealed a linear interdependence between attitude and accentedness for the following speakers: N. Stoltenberg ($r = 0.34$, $p = 0.031$), A. Merkel ($r = 0.35$, $p = 0.012$), Sh. Abe ($r = 0.68$, $p = 0.000$). As can be seen, the correlation is rather weak in the first two cases and rather strong in the last one. On the whole, the two variables are not interconnected.

A correlation between attitude and comprehensibility has been found in the following cases: Sh. Abe ($r = 0.33$, $p = 0.034$), S. Berlusconi ($r = 0.35$, $p = 0.023$) and V. Putin ($r = 0.519$, $p = 0.034$). As in the previous case, these correlations are rather weak and apply only to a few speakers, which means that there is no relationship between the attitude towards a given speaker and the degree to which their speech is considered comprehensible.

The situation is quite different with regard to the relationship between the listeners' attitude towards the speaker and the degree to which they consider their speech pleasant. In five cases a correlation has been found between these factors, i.e. N. Mandela ($r = 0.3$, $p = 0.02$), A. Merkel ($r = 0.58$, $p = 0.00$), Dalai Lama ($r = 0.58$, $p = 0.00$), N. Modi ($r = 0.4$, $p = 0.00$), and V. Putin ($r = 0.6$, $p = 0.00$). The relationship between the two variables is the strongest for V. Putin, which is visualized in Figure 1. The greatest number of 'unpleasant' scores is assigned by the raters who declare a negative attitude towards the politician.

The collected data indicate that the students' evaluations of accent pleasantness depend on their emotional attitude towards the speakers, but only when they feel strongly about them and either like or dislike them intensely. Thus, a correlation has been found between these two factors in the case of well-liked Dalai Lama and N. Mandela (found among the top three most positively assessed leaders) and rather disliked A. Merkel and strongly disliked V. Putin (at the bottom of the popularity ranking).

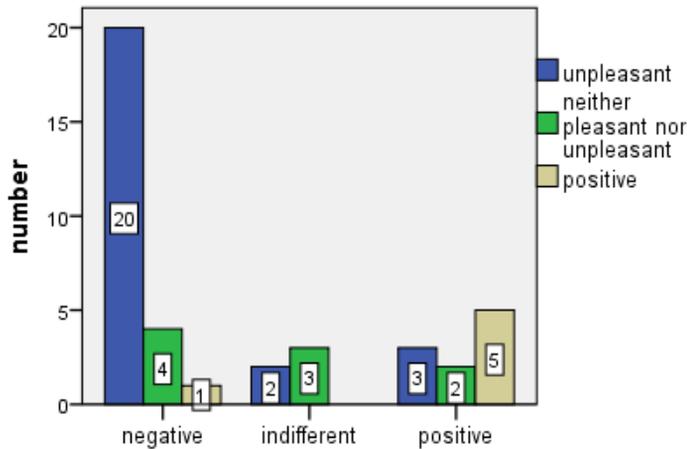


Figure 1. The juxtaposition of attitude and pleasantness scores for Putin.

Some exceptions to this generalization must be noted. They include Pope Francis whose very low scores for comprehensibility (2.75) and accentedness (1.79) are probably responsible for the critical evaluation of the sample's pleasantness. Another speaker with no correlation between attitude and acceptability is D. Tusk, the second most disliked leader in our ranking, whose English pronunciation was the winner in terms of comprehensibility (4.42) and occupied the 3rd place in terms of accentedness (2.58). These fairly high scores might have affected the participants' positive assessment of pleasantness (3.11 – the 3rd place in the ranking).¹¹

THE ROLE OF THE PARTICIPANTS' LEVEL OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY IN ACCENT JUDGEMENTS

The next research question has been whether the participants' assessment of foreign-accented English is related to their level of English proficiency. In order to examine this issue, two groups took part in our study: one representing an intermediate level and one representing an advanced level of English.

Mann Whitney's U-test has revealed that there is no relationship between the participants' level of proficiency in English and their assessment of accentedness. For all the speakers $p > \alpha = 0.05$, which means that the null hypothesis about the equal distribution of scores cannot be rejected. In other words, the listeners assessed accentedness in the same way irrespective of their level of proficiency.

¹¹ A correlation has been found between the participants' attitude to N. Modi and their evaluations of his pronunciation's acceptability, which is difficult to explain as this is the only correlation found for the speakers to whom the students declared to have an indifferent attitude.

Interestingly, intermediate students were generally somewhat harsher in their judgements than advanced students. Yet, these inter-group differences are not statistically significant save for V. Putin ($p = 0.008$), where the difference in mean values is also the biggest (1 point). On the other hand, the mean values assigned to Pope Francis and Sh. Abe are higher in the intermediate group than in the advanced one and the difference is statistically significant ($p = 0.04$ and $p = 0.046$, respectively).

However, an analysis of the experimental results concerning comprehensibility shows that there is a considerable difference between the scores assigned to the speakers by advanced and intermediate students; in 10 cases out of 11 the latter group judged the samples as more difficult to understand than the former. The biggest differences in mean values (between 0.5 and 1.00) are found in the following cases: N. Stoltenberg, A. Merkel, D. Tusk, S. Berlusconi, N. Modi and V. Putin. Selected results are visualized in Fig. 2–4.

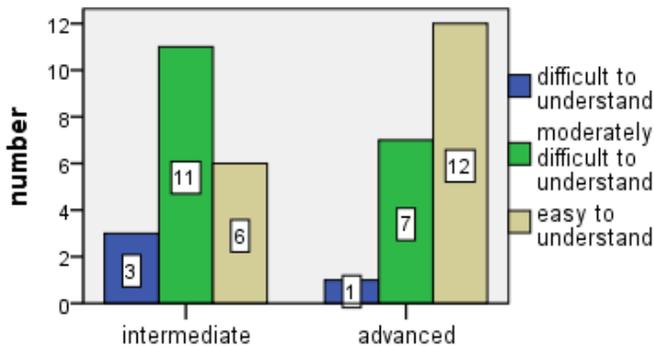


Figure 2. The juxtaposition of comprehensibility scores for Stoltenberg.

The majority of advanced learners consider N. Stoltenberg's pronunciation easy to understand whereas for intermediate students it is predominantly either difficult or moderately difficult to understand.

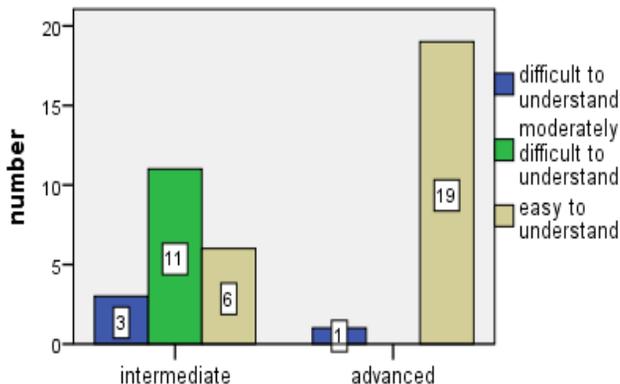


Figure 3. The juxtaposition of comprehensibility scores for Berlusconi.

Almost all advanced students regard Berlusconi's English easy to understand while more than a half of intermediate students evaluate him as moderately easy to understand.

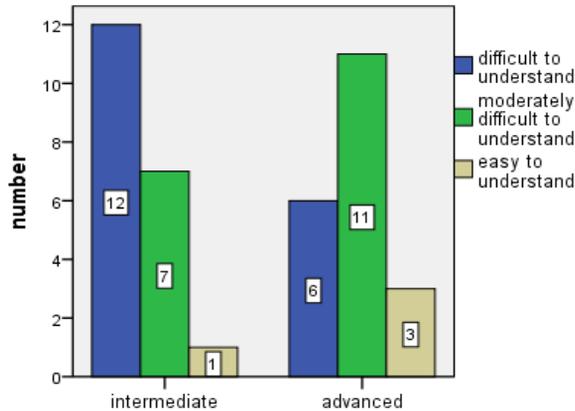


Figure 4. The juxtaposition of comprehensibility scores for Putin.

In the case of V. Putin's sample over 50% of advanced students find it moderately difficult to understand and over 50% of intermediate level participants consider it very difficult to understand.

For these three speakers the differences between the comprehensibility assessment by the two groups of raters are statistically significant (N. Stoltenberg ($p = 0.01 < \alpha = 0.05$), S. Berlusconi ($p = 0.00$) and V. Putin ($p = 0.003$)).¹²

The above observations that advanced learners assign higher comprehensibility ratings than intermediate listeners are not surprising as the degree of comprehensibility is bound to be connected with the listeners' level of English proficiency; the better someone's English is, the better they can understand other speakers of this language. However, studies dealing with intelligibility in international contexts generally fail to address this important issue, irrelevant in accent assessment carried out by native speakers of English. The experimental results demonstrate that in accent intelligibility studies with foreign listeners their level of English proficiency should be taken into account as it is a significant variable.

¹² Similar differences can be noted in the case of A. Merkel ($p = 0.01$), Modi ($p = 0.01$) and D. Tusk ($p = 0.00$), For Sh. Abe, Pope Francis and Dalai Lama the differences are rather small (between 0.1 and 0.4). In one case (N. Mandela) the mean values were the same in both groups.

THE IMPACT OF GENETIC PROXIMITY BETWEEN THE SPEAKERS'
AND LISTENERS' L1S AND THE ASSESSORS' FAMILIARITY
WITH THE EXAMINED ENGLISH ACCENTS

The last research question was concerned with the possible relationship between accent assessment, genetic proximity between the speakers' and listeners' native languages, and the degree of raters' familiarity with the examined foreign accents.¹³ The relevant data are repeated below, where the speakers with the three top and three bottom scores for comprehensibility, accentedness and acceptability are listed:

Comprehensibility:

Top scores: D. Tusk, A. Merkel, N. Mandela

Bottom scores: Sh. Abe, Dalai Lama, N. Modi

Accentedness:

Top scores: N. Stoltenberg, A. Merkel, D. Tusk

Bottom scores: Sh. Abe, N. Modi, V. Putin

Acceptability:

Top scores: N. Stoltenberg, A. Merkel, S. Berlusconi

Bottom scores: Sh. Abe, N. Modi, V. Putin

The above juxtaposition points to the connection between foreign accent assessment and the genetic proximity between the speakers' and listeners' languages as in all the rankings speakers with European and especially Germanic accents received the highest scores and speakers with non-European accents the lowest scores. The only exceptions to this generalization are N. Mandela's high position in the scores for comprehensibility and V. Putin's low scores for accentedness and acceptability. As mentioned in one of the previous sections, Nelson Mandela's English is very fluent, which explains his high comprehensibility ratings. V. Putin's English pronunciation is very heavily Russian-accented and was assessed harshly in terms of accentedness, while his low acceptability scores are closely connected with the students' negative attitude to this leader. These two factors account for his low ratings in spite of genetic proximity of Russian and Polish.

It should also be added that informal oral interviews carried out by the experimenters with the participants indicate that the students are frequently exposed to European varieties of English through the media and in direct contacts with European tourists who visit Poland and in the course of their own international travels, but have either very little or even no exposure to non-European accents of English. Thus, the two factors, i.e. genetic proximity between the interlocutors' languages and the degree of the listeners' familiarity with the examined accents of English can jointly account for the majority of the experimental results.

¹³ When several years ago a Korean Daewoo factory opened in our town, it employed many Polish English-speaking interpreters. Apparently several months were needed for Polish and Korean employees to understand their very different varieties of English.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the experiment on a group of Polish students' assessment of the samples of English produced by 10 political and religious leaders reported in this paper and the conclusions which follow from it can be summarized as follows:

1. The listeners' attitude to the speakers, i.e. whether they are well-liked or disliked, does not affect the participants' judgements concerning the samples' comprehensibility and accentedness.
2. There is, however, a correlation between the participants' attitude to the speakers and their assessment of the acceptability of the leaders' English pronunciation. It can be observed in the case of speakers who evoke very strong positive or negative emotions; those who are well-liked sound more pleasant and those who are strongly disliked sound rather unpleasant.
3. The participants' level of English proficiency has no influence on their judgements regarding the speakers' accentedness and acceptability.
4. A considerable dependence has been noted between the raters' level of proficiency in English and their evaluation of the speakers' comprehensibility, with much higher scores for this feature given by the advanced students than by the intermediate learners. This results points to the need to include non-native listeners' proficiency level as an important variable in accent intelligibility studies.
5. The raters' assessment of the speakers' English pronunciation, apart from its quality, is related to the genetic proximity between the listeners' and the speakers' native languages as well as the assessors' familiarity with the examined varieties of foreign-accented English.

In order to verify whether these results can be generalized as characterizing the perception and assessment of the speakers' English pronunciation by other Polish listeners, similar studies are needed with different groups of assessors. It would also be interesting to confront the obtained results with the experimental data involving the participants coming from various countries and representing different linguistic backgrounds as well as having different attitudes to the same leaders. We hope to be able to carry out such research in the near future in collaboration with scholars from different countries.

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