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On country-boying, and other ways to (not) get a job

I believe many of us who have ever had something to do with the study of Southern speech or who have talked to speakers of Southern American English about issues of language or Southern accents have at some point heard one or the other anecdote, where a Southern speaker told them how they have used their accent consciously as a tool in a conversation to get some kind of advantage, or to manipulate people – for example, I've had somebody tell me about their daughter who is a Southern speaker and who worked in a Jewelry store in Connecticut, and people would come in to just listen to her talk, and she used her accent to sell things, like, she nicely talked them into buying jewelry. Stories like that seem to come up quite frequently - people use their Southern accents to a certain effect, and this phenomenon is what I'm calling "country-boying" here. Country-boying is an expression first mentioned to me by Dr. John Taylor at East Tennessee State University 3 years ago, who told me that some people play on their Southern accent EVEN when they apply for a scholarship at Harvard. Now, I don't know whether that's true or not, but what he also said is that country-boying is most successful when done by Women rather than by men - and this is sort of the Leitmotif of my paper today, if you will.

There are also some articles that have been written about this phenomenon, and how women use their Southern accent as a conversational tool - for example, Barbara Johnstone's 1999 article on the Uses of Southern speech by contemporary Texas women, where she finds that sounding "country" or Southern is used by the women she interviewed in Texas as a rhetorical resource, and that sounding country is clearly desirable to them in certain situations. In this article, Johnstone also says that she has not come across any speakers in her project for whom sounding Southern is semiotically neutral.

So, basically, there are certain effects that go along with speaking Southern, and this is well established in some articles like the one I just mentioned. Now the question that I asked myself was, if Southern speakers and especially women use their accent to create a certain effect on their audience – to bewitch them, if you will, - what does the audience have to say about this? Which means, so far we have mostly looked at the production end – the speakers, and what they have to say about using their accent. Now, what I was interested in and what I'm presenting here today is a look at the Receiving end, if you will - the audience, who hears the Southern accents, and what effect they say a Southern accent used by a woman actually has on them.

So, the way I did this was by using a speaker evaluation study within the paradigm of language attitude research. And so today, I would like to present some findings of this speaker evaluation study, that I think give some very interesting and pertinent insights into the audience perception of Southern female speech, and as I will show, these findings seem to corroborate what the women in Johnstone's study were saying about using their accent to their own advantage, or as I called it, "country-boying".

The data I'm presenting here comes from a speaker evaluation study I did a couple of years ago in the U.S., and the method I used is an adapted form of the classical matched-guise technique introduced by Wallace Lambert and colleagues in the 60s. The adaptation that I'm using consists in the fact that I taped 4 Different speakers, 2 of which had a Southern (East Tennessee) accent, and two of which had what I liked to call a "neutral" kind of network accent that could not really be regionally placed. All speakers were reading the same text on tape. I then had questionnaires with a set of 5-point semantic differential scales, that is, scales with a positive adjective on one end and the opposing negative adjective on the other (like friendly and unfriendly). The scales included attributes in the categories of professional competence, these are sharp, successful, determined, educated, leadership qualities, intelligent, ambitious, industrious and self-confident. The second category of adjectives is personal integrity, with the items honest,

trustworthy, polite, good manners, reliable, likeable, helpful and open-minded. And the third category of adjectives was social attractiveness, with outgoing, sense of humor, sociable and friendly.

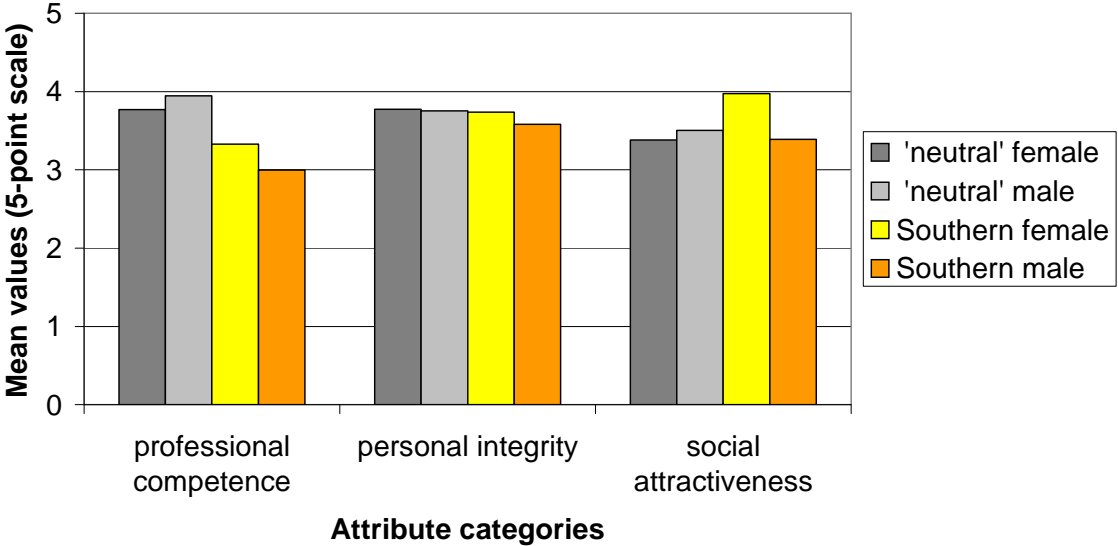
The set-up of this study was that my informants were supposed to rate my 4 speakers as if these were applying for a salesjob in a nationwide corporation, and the informants were supposed to function as the personnel managers in this corporation in a kind of job interview situation and they had to evaluate people based only on their voice. It is important to bear this job-interview set-up in mind, because it means that the informants were asked to operate in a rather formal, language status- and prestige stressing frame, which was likely to foreground the use of language and accents.

The informants for my study were 291 undergraduate students at 4 different colleges and universities in New England and in Tennessee – so basically, I wanted to get data from a "Northern" setting and a "Southern" setting for comparison. In the end, I had 141 New England students, 50 male and 91 female, and 150 Tennessee students, 72 male and 78 female, and they all listened to the four speakers on the tape and then rated the speakers on the questionnaire I provided.

So I gathered quite a lot of data in my project, that I have analyzed and summarized in detail elsewhere, and if you are interested I'd like to refer you to an article that relates all my findings – the reference is on your handout. Now today, I'm only focussing on one particular aspect of my findings, which is the issue of whether or not the country-boying phenomenon, using a Southern accent for one's own advantage, can at all be linked to the evaluation of the female Southern speaker.

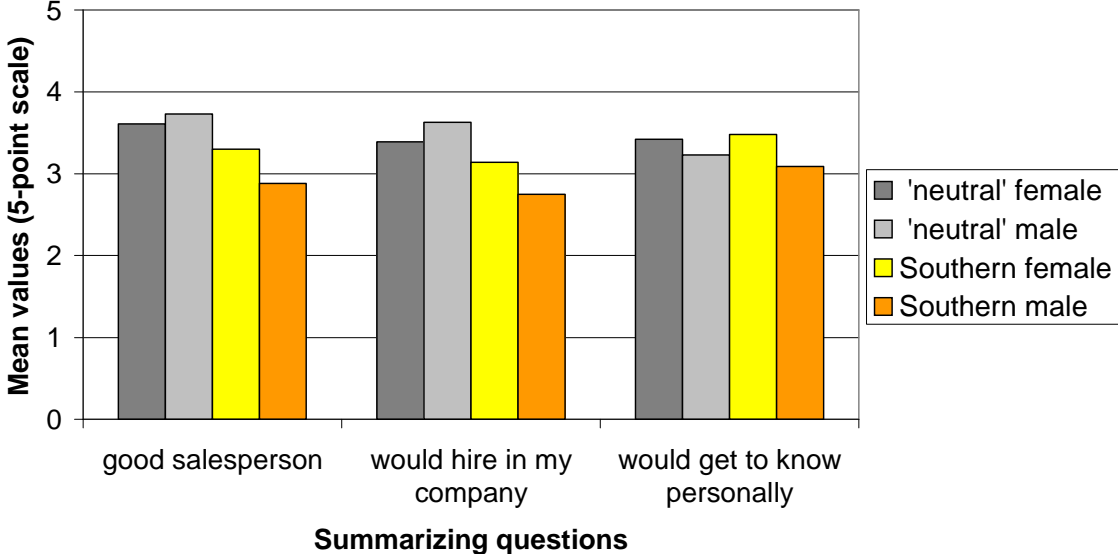
In that sense, I would like to present the following two charts to you, which you can also find on your handout, and which gives you an overview of the findings from the speaker evaluation:

Speaker evaluation (1)



N.B.: All differences between the scores of the Southern female and the Southern male are statistically significant at $p > 0.05$

Speaker evaluation (2)



N.B.: All differences between the scores of the Southern female and the Southern male are statistically significant at $p > 0.05$

What we see here are the speaker ratings broken down into the 3 categories I mentioned earlier, of professional competence (intelligent, educated etc.), personal integrity (trustworthy, polite, honest, etc.) and social attractiveness (friendly, outgoing, sense of humor, sociable). These categories come out of a principal component analysis that I conducted with the data in the SPSS program and that gave me these three clusters of adjectives.

The second chart below shows the results from three additional questions in the questionnaire that kind of more generally asked whether the informants thought a speaker made a good salesperson, and whether they personally would employ them, or whether they could imagine getting to know them better on a personal basis. Just to explain the charts here, the scores indicated are all mean values over the 5-point scale, and higher ratings indicate "better" ratings in the sense that they are closer to the positive adjective pole (like intelligent, friendly, polite, educated and so on).

Now, there are two things that I would like to point out here specifically in these results. If we look at the first chart, we can see here that the professional competence ratings for the Southern speakers are pretty low in comparison, so a Southern accent is still very much stigmatized here. But in fact, when we look at this first and all the other categories, we also see the scores of the Southern female are ALWAYS, across the board, Significantly Higher than those of the Southern male speaker, for ALL categories, and also for the three separate questions, as you can see from the colored bars here. Statistical significant was assumed at a p level below .05

So basically, the informants in my study seemed to like the female Southern speaker across the board better than the male Southern speaker. That is the first important point.

And secondly, what I want to point out and which I found even more interesting is that although we can see that the ratings for the Southern speakers are low for both

professional competence

and perceived competence as a salesperson (here below)

what is standing out is the significantly high score for the female Southern speaker with regards to her perceived Social attractiveness in comparison to ALL other speakers - now, remember, this category includes the attributes outgoing, sense of humor, sociable and friendly - maybe, we could say, this is in a nutshell a description of what the country-boying charm is all about, and why it can be successful in conversational interaction. She also does well in terms of personal integrity, AND we can see some effect of this in the ratings for the question about whether the informants would consider getting to know a speaker better personally. So basically, the Southern female speaker was a favorite with my informants in this speaker evaluation. And this is the picture I got throughout my analysis, both in the ratings from my New England students and my Tennessee students - there were only a few instances where the New England students liked the Southern female speaker even better than the Tennessee students, so they seemed to be even more under the charm of her accent, if you will. And the results were also the same when I split the informants up according to their Gender. It's the same picture, where the Southern female speaker scores highest in all the Sympathy-related evaluations.

Now, one other thing that I have to point out is that these findings somewhat relativize the results of a previous study by Van Antwerp and Maxwell in 1982, where they found that being female and having a Southern accent is a Lethal combination in terms of professional employability. What I would like to suggest on the basis of my own findings is that Southern women can have a considerable advantage at least over Southern men, regarding the perception of their accent in terms of sympathy- people in my study just seem to like it better. Now, we have also seen that this does NOT improve the Southern woman's score in terms of her immediate employability or competence as a salesperson, but we also know from previous language attitude studies that correlations between such speaker evaluation tests and actual real-life outcomes are

not a one-on one affair, and that people tend to be a lot stricter in the speaker evaluation. So if we give this some leeway here, we could imagine that the high sympathy scores for the Southern female speaker might actually increase her chances in the job market.

So here, all in all, I think we have more empirical evidence that country-boying as described and used for example by the Texas women in Johnstone's study is not just something they imagine to be effective and charming, but it may also be evaluated and perceived as charming by a broader American audience. Now if we look for explanations for this, I believe that some of the strongest reasons for this phenomenon can be found if we look at the common stereotypes associated with Southern women and also Southern men in popular culture and the media. On the one hand, we have the stereotype of the Southern Belle for the women, which is actually a rather positive, strong image - and Barbara Johnstone also mentions this in her article - and on the other hand, we have the Redneck, or the Hillbilly for the Southern men, well, maybe some remnants of the Good old boy image, but I would say the first two are the strongest and also very negative images of male Southerners. So I believe that even popular culture is giving the advantage to Southern women, and it is kind of providing a stereotypical basis for women to charm their audience with their Southern accents.

So, as we have seen in my study here, although Southern speakers still face a clear disadvantage and stigmatization of their accent in terms of professional competence, a Southern accent in a woman can be perceived more positively than the same accent in a man. And with regard to sympathy scores, a female Southern accent can even do better in a speaker evaluation than a regionally neutral, more “standard” accent.

So, all in all, I hope that I have shown that there is empirical evidence for the fact that a Southern accent can be used as a powerful conversational tool or strategy by women to gain sympathy, and, as Dr. Taylor told me, that Southern women are indeed better at country-boying than men. Thank you!