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Citation: McKenzie, Robert (2013) Explicit and implicit attitudes of Japanese University students towards variation in L1 and L2 English speech. In: JSL2013 - Japanese Society for Language Sciences 15th Annual International Conference, 28th - 30th June 2013, Nagasaki, Japan.

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Explicit and implicit attitudes of Japanese university students towards variation in L1 and L2 English speech: The sociolinguistics of the internationalisation of Higher Education in Japan

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Abstract

This large-scale quantitative study, employing both implicit and explicit attitude measures, investigated 127 Japanese university students' perceptions of UK, US, Japanese, Chinese, Thai and Indian English speech. Multivariate analysis demonstrated that implicit evaluations of Japanese, UK and US English speech were significantly more positive when compared to the other Asian forms of English under consideration, on both status and social attractiveness dimensions. When questioned explicitly, informants were generally unfavourable towards 'International English'. The findings are discussed in relation to the relationship between explicit and implicit language attitudes as well as levels of acceptance amongst Japanese students of particular groups of English speakers and, in turn, speculates upon the potential success of the internationalisation agenda within Japanese Higher Education more broadly.

Introduction

Research in the field of variationist sociolinguistics has demonstrated that the attitudes of L1 users of a given language towards (speakers of) specific languages and language varieties are important since they reflect social conventions, preferences and levels of prestige associated with particular speech communities. For this reason, negative linguistic attitudes, like prejudicial evaluations of groups and individuals on the basis of their perceived nationality, ethnicity, age, gender or sexual orientation, often have wider social, economic and educational implications. More specifically, folk perceptions of linguistic variation can affect the extent to which specific groups of individuals, for instance speakers of minority languages or regional varieties, participate in Higher Education and/or successfully attain higher paid employment. Evaluations of language diversity also help define specific speech communities (McKenzie and Osthus, 2011), and as such, can explain sociolinguistic phenomena such as language spread, language decay and language change (e.g., Labov, 2001).

Prior sociolinguistic research measuring native speaker attitudes towards variation in English (and other languages) has demonstrated that speakers of forms of English perceived as standard tend to be rated highly on status traits (e.g., education, wealth) whilst speakers of non-standard English are generally evaluated positively on solidarity traits (e.g., honesty, friendliness) (see Coupland and Bishop, 2007; Garrett, 2010). The language attitudes of L2 speakers are also of importance, especially in determining levels of success of the acquisition of the target language (Dornyei and Skehan, 2003), the choice of linguistic model which language learners choose to emulate and ultimately, the spread (or decline) of the languages or language varieties in question. For this reason, researchers have recently begun to examine non-native speaker evaluations of L1 and L2 English speech, including those of Japanese nationals (e.g., Cargile et al., 2006; McKenzie, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Evans and Imai, 2011; Sasayama, 2013). Taken together, the findings from these studies indicate that Japanese nationals are most favourable towards standard and non-standard forms of UK/US English in terms of status, but express greater solidarity with identifiable forms of Japanese English. There have, however, been no studies measuring the attitudes of Japanese users of English towards different forms of native as well as non-native English, other than Japanese English. This is perhaps surprising considering recent internationalisation policies adopted by many Japanese universities, including those institutions who form the Global 30 Project (MEXT, 2010), and the resultant increase in overseas students, mainly from South and East Asia, who together with Japanese students, undertake many courses at Japanese Universities taught solely in English (see McKenzie, 2013).

Moreover, despite recent advances in the fields of Social Psychology focussing on the strength of the empirical relationship between explicit attitudes (i.e., conscious and deliberative) and implicit attitudes (i.e., unconscious and/or automatic) (Bassili and Brown, 2005) there has been little research, whether involving native and/or non-native speakers, specifically measuring implicit and explicit attitudes towards language variation.

The Present Study

Building upon the previous research detailed above, the study discusses the findings of a large-scale quantitative study, employing both implicit and explicit attitude measures, investigating the language

attitudes of 127 Japanese university students, towards 7 forms of L1 and L2 English speech. The study also attempts to measure levels of awareness of these speech varieties. The investigation is also an extension of current research measuring attitudes of UK-born University students towards the same English varieties (McKenzie, to be submitted). The following research questions were constructed for the purposes of the Japan study:

- 1) What are Japanese students' implicit attitudes and explicit attitudes towards UK, US, Japanese and other Asian varieties of English?
- 2) To what extent is there a relationship between Japanese students' implicit and explicit attitudes towards English speech?
- 3) Are Japanese users of English able to identify varieties of English speech?
- 4) To what extent, and in what ways, do the language attitudes of Japanese students' differ from those held by UK students (in the initial study)?

As a result of space limitations, the present study will focus specifically upon questions one and question two only (see also McKenzie and Gilmore, in progress).

Methodology

Participants: The sample was composed of 127 Japanese nationals studying at 4 national and private universities in the Kanto or Kansai areas of Japan. All participants were studying English at the time of the fieldwork (mean age=20.63, SD=2.12) and had attained at least an upper intermediate level of English proficiency.

Speech Stimulus: From a larger database of digital recordings of the English varieties under consideration, recordings of seven speakers were selected for the purposes of evaluation. They included 3 native varieties: Mid-West (standard) United States English (MWUSE); Southern United States English (SUSE) and Scottish Standard English (SSE). Four L2 forms of speech were also selected: Japanese English (JE); Thai English (TE); Chinese English (CE); and Indian English (IE). All four L2 speakers had attained at least a postgraduate degree taught in English and thus had achieved a very advanced level of proficiency in the language.

Research Instrument: In accordance with recent studies of a similar nature, to measure implicit attitudes towards the English varieties, a verbal-guise instrument was employed. Following principals of magnitude estimation (Steven, 1971), participants evaluated the 7 speakers on a specially constructed semantic-differential scale consisting of eight sets of bipolar traits on an 80-point line. To measure explicit attitudes towards variation in English, including those forms of English spoken as an L2, participants were directly requested to rate their responses to the statement 'I like to hear international English speech', again on an 80-point line. In the same way, informants were also asked to respond to the statement 'I like to hear varieties of Japanese different from standard Japanese'.

Procedure: The implicit and explicit attitude tasks were conducted amongst participants at their respective universities in summer 2012 and summer 2013. All data collection procedures were standardised as far as possible.

Results and Discussion

Implicit Attitudes

Preliminary Principal Components Analysis (PCA) conducted on the verbal-guise data confirmed the existence of two distinct evaluative dimensions, consistent with previous similar attitude research, responsible for 60.07% of the variance: *status* (27.11%) and *social attractiveness* (32.96%).

Following this, informants mean ratings and standard deviations for each of the speakers were calculated. ANOVA analysis (with Bonferroni post hoc testing) was subsequently conducted to compare the overall mean ratings for both traits, where a significant effect was found for both Status $F(6,121)=9.72$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.325$ and Social Attractiveness $F(6,121)=19.42$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.491$.

Table 1 Mean ratings (and Standard Deviations) for Status and Solidarity in descending order of evaluation (N=127)

<i>Status</i>	<i>Social Attractiveness</i>
Southern United States English 49.55 (12.4)	Japanese English 51.56 (10.4)
Mid-West United States English 46.28 (12.6)	Southern United States English 51.19 (11.9)
Scottish Standard English 45.02 (11.1)	Thai English 47.93 (11.3)
Japanese English 44.88 (11.5)	* Scottish Standard English 47.59 (11.7)
Thai English 43.09 (11.2)	Mid-West United States English 42.88 (14.2)
Chinese English 42.09 (10.9)	Chinese English 42.35 (11.7)
Indian English 40.41 (10.4)	Indian English 42.31 (9.9)

*indicates a significant difference ($p < 0.05$)
(highest possible mean score=80 and lowest possible score=1)

Table 1 indicates that the listeners evaluated the UK and the US varieties of English most positively, followed by the Japanese speaker, with the other Asian forms of English rated most negatively. The high status evaluations found for native speaker forms of English are broadly consistent with previous research conducted amongst Japanese users of English. However, the higher status ratings for the listeners' own form of speech, i.e., Japanese English, in comparison with other forms of English spoken in Asia, for the first time, provides compelling evidence of the existence of an evaluational hierarchy amongst Japanese users regarding the prestige of forms of English spoken in different Asian countries. In terms of social attractiveness, Japanese English was found to be the most favourably rated, echoing the findings of previous similar research (see above) which also points to the expression of ingroup solidarity amongst Japanese nationals towards identifiable Japanese English speech. The significantly lower social attractiveness ratings for the MWUSE speech are also broadly similar to the results of a study by McKenzie (2008a, 2010) where an underlying aversion was found amongst Japanese students towards the perceived power and influence which (speakers of) these standard varieties hold. Interestingly, Chinese English and Indian English are rated significantly lower than the other English varieties in terms of both status and social attractiveness, suggesting that (speakers of) these Asian particular forms of English are especially downgraded by Japanese students.

Explicit Attitudes

Table 2 Mean Evaluations and Standard Deviations: *Japanese Language Diversity and International English* speech (N=127)

Speech Forms	Mean	Standard Deviation
Diversity in Japanese	60.90	16.57
International English	41.75	22.44

Table 2 demonstrate that when questioned explicitly, informants were generally favourable towards linguistic variation in their L1 (i.e., Japanese) but considerably less positive towards international English. Further analyses was conducted to measure the strength of any statistical relationship between explicit attitudes towards international English speech (mean=41.75) and implicit attitudes towards the ratings of all seven speakers: status (mean=43.57) ($r=0.59$, $p=0.51$); social attractiveness (mean=46.54) ($r=0.08$, $p=0.41$). No significant correlations were also found between explicit attitudes towards international English speech (mean=41.75) and implicit attitudes towards the ratings of the four L2 speakers from Asia: status (mean=42.62) ($r=0.53$, $p=0.55$); social attractiveness (mean=46.03) ($r=0.10$, $p=0.26$).

The results above indicate that there exists a disparity between Japanese students' unconscious implicit attitudes, whereby listeners were presented with spontaneous English speech stimuli, and explicit attitudes, where informants were directly questioned on their attitudes towards diversity in English and strongly suggests that Japanese nationals' hold complex and contradictory conscious and unconscious attitudes towards English language variation. This finding is consistent with a similar recent study examining UK-born University students' explicit and implicit attitudes towards the same varieties of English speech (McKenzie, to be submitted), as well as broadly compatible with the results of prior studies undertaken by social psychologists investigating explicit

and implicit attitudes across a range of content domains, most notably towards race, where weak explicit-implicit attitude correlations were also demonstrated (see Dovidio et al, 2009).

Final remarks

The findings of language attitude research, conducted by sociolinguists and social psychologists over the last 50 years, have consistently demonstrated that evaluations of a given speech form reflect stereotypes of and attitudes towards the perceived group(s) of speakers of the language or variety. Analyses of the data collected in the present study, however, indicated no significant statistical relationships between Japanese students' explicit and implicit attitudes towards English language diversity. Nonetheless, since the results demonstrated broadly unfavourable conscious evaluations of international English as well as negative automatic evaluations of Asian forms of English, other than Japanese English, on prestige and social attractiveness dimensions, the findings of the study would seem to have implications for the internationalisation agenda within Japanese Higher Education. This is especially the case because the success (or not) of the internationalisation of many universities in Japan, and especially those institutions involved in the MEXT Global 30 project is very much geared towards, and dependent upon, exponential growth in the numbers of overseas students from South and East Asia, and much less so upon the recruitment of native English-speaking students from the UK, North America, or Australia. It is envisaged that these Asian students will, along with the traditional Japanese student cohort, undertake newly created degree programs taught and assessed entirely in English at the universities in question. For this reason, Japanese students' stigmatisation of the English spoken in other areas of Asia and in turn, likely prejudice against English-speaking students from these countries, is unlikely to result in successful intergroup contact, both communicatively and in sociopsychological terms, between Japanese students and students recruited from other Asian nations within and outwith the Japanese university context, and hence, ultimately threaten the success of the internationalisation project within Japanese Higher Education.

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