

'He's definitely a Welsh speaker': The effects of linguistic experience, language mode and familiarity on accent perception in a language contact situation

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Previous research suggests that the influence of Welsh on accents of Welsh English is most apparent in western areas where there is a higher proportion of Welsh-English bilinguals (e.g., Thomas 1994). However, more recent comparisons of younger Welsh-English bilinguals' and English monolinguals' speech production suggests a large degree of similarity among those from the same area (Mayr et al. 2015). This raises the question whether monolingual and bilingual speakers from Wales can be identified on the basis of their accent in English, and whether accent perception is dependent on accent familiarity and the ability to speak Welsh.

The aim of the current study is to examine listeners' perceptions of Welsh-accented English. It asks (1) to what extent listeners are able to distinguish between Welsh-English bilinguals and English monolinguals from the same area when speaking English, (2) whether listeners are able to specify which linguistic features exhibit a more Welsh influence in individuals' English speech and (3) whether there are differences between the perceptions of listeners from the same area and those from other parts of Wales.

In order to investigate these questions, an accent perception task was designed using examples of narrative English speech from 12 English monolinguals and 12 Welsh-English bilinguals (from Welsh-speaking homes) aged 16-18 years old from Llanelli (Carmarthenshire). The speech samples were rated by 75 listeners in four groups: Monolinguals from the same area (N=15) or a different area (N=21), and bilinguals from the same area (N=19) or a different area (N=20). For each sample, the listeners' task was to (1) to decide whether the speaker was Welsh-speaking, and (2) to add qualitative comments on the accentual features that led to their judgement.

The results revealed above chance identification on the monolingual and bilingual samples. However, the participants found the task hard and only identified an average of 59% of the monolingual samples correctly, with 25% of listeners performing at or below chance, while performance on the bilingual samples was better with an average of 67% correct. The listeners were able to list a number of features that characterise a Welsh speaker's English accent, but they struggled to name any for monolingual English speakers. Accent familiarity increased identification accuracy on the bilingual samples, while the ability to speak Welsh did not affect performance. Implications for transfer, language contact and Welsh identity will be discussed.

References

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