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PAC in the Indian Ocean's French territories: Students' Attitudinal Perceptions of Five English Varieties

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Abstract

This study investigates language attitudes and perceptions towards English varieties by students living in French Overseas Territories in the Indian Ocean, specifically Reunion and Mayotte islands. It specifically looks at the dominant British and American dialects (Davies, 2009). Studying language attitudes toward these varieties in islands like Mayotte and Réunion is fascinating due to their geographical isolation from the United States and the United Kingdom. This isolation creates a unique sociolinguistic environment where any perceptions of American and British accents are probably shaped by media exposure, rather than firsthand contact with English speakers, such as teachers.

In addition, it is important to consider other English varieties, such as Indian English, particularly for those on Reunion Island, with its South Asian diaspora (Bhattacharjee, 2018). Exploring attitudes toward Indian accents can reveal how regional influences and cultural connections intersect with global hierarchies of English varieties and how global prestige, stereotypes, and the soft power of these dominant varieties resonate in regions distanced from their cultural and geopolitical centers. It is unclear to what extent students identify certain varieties with overt and covert prestige (Labov, 2006). Additionally, there is a paucity of research on the extent of the students' ability to differentiate between these English varieties.

To address these questions regarding attitudes and recognition, we will conduct a study using Verbal Guise Test methods (Dragojevic & Goatley-Soan, 2022), using audio from the PAC. Specifically one speaker from each of the following five varieties were sampled: Received Pronunciation, Manchester, Boston, California, and India. Students from the universities on the island will be solicited, both those who are studying to obtain an English degree and those who are studying it as required for their degree that is not English (such as Economics or Modern Literature and Languages). Various measures will be used to address affect, prestige, and intelligibility with careful attention paid to specific phonetic and prosodic elements such as rhotics. Quantitative analyses will look at correlation between responses and various demographic information, such as gender and island of residency (Mayotte or Reunion).

We predict that the British dialects will be easier to understand. Results will be discussed in relation to similar studies on attitudes towards English in other regions such as Malaysia (Ahmed, Abdullah, & Heng, 2014) and Sweden (Vesterlund & Bohn, 2022), as well as in Mainland France (Walsh, 2015). The presentation will end with implications for teaching (Ferragne et al., 2024) and research regarding the phonetics and phonology of World Englishes, including oral comprehension of varieties (Edensor, 2008; Janssoone, 2013).

Key words: representations, language attitudes, verbal-guise test, Indian Ocean, accent

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