

The Perception of Cuban and Peninsular Spanish Voices: An Analysis of Education, Income, and Employment

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Previous studies (e.g., [1], [2], [3]) show that after listening to a person's voice for as little as 30 seconds, individuals can make judgements on the speaker's level of education, annual income, and potential employment. However, very little is known about how Cuban voices are rated/perceived with respect to these social factors, which is surprising since this variety is considered to be stigmatized due to the high prevalence of 'non-standard' speech forms [2, 4]. This study has two goals. First, it seeks to investigate the perceptions of Cuban and Peninsular Spanish voices by four groups of individuals with differing levels of exposure and proficiency in Spanish to determine if there is a predominant stigma or notion of prestige attributed to either accent on the measures of education, income, and employment. These groups included native Cuban and Peninsular Spanish speakers, second language (L2) Spanish learners, and monolingual English speakers. The second objective of the study is to compare the ability of these groups to correctly categorize the Cuban and Peninsular Spanish varieties as distinct. While native speakers of a language have typically been the focus of previous studies on accent perceptions, little is known about how L2 learners and monolinguals categorize and perceive different dialects (e.g., [5], [6], [7]).

A total of 5 Cuban (Havana) and 5 Peninsular (Madrid) voices read a passage, were recorded, and were later rated by 50 adult listeners (i.e., 13 native Cuban speakers, 10 native Peninsular speakers, 13 L2 learners, and 14 monolingual English speakers). All the voices were female to control for the variable of gender. Additionally, all the voices were individuals that were born and living in either Havana, Cuba or Madrid, Spain, and did not speak any additional languages. The methodology included the administration of a Bilingual Language Profile (BLP) questionnaire and an attitudinal survey intended to gauge at listeners' unconscious accent perceptions.

Preliminary results revealed that listeners do in fact make unconscious assumptions on an individual's voice, as the Peninsular variety was often attributed to a higher educational level (62%), income bracket (37%), and was more closely associated with a CEO position (37%) in comparison to the Cuban variety for the same measures (40%, 27%, 14%) respectively. In addition, the native Cuban (92%) and Peninsular (70%) listeners outperformed the L2 learners (54%) and monolingual English (14%) speakers in correctly categorizing the voices. Moreover, while the Peninsular voices received overall higher ratings than the Cuban voices on measures of education, income, and employment, all four listener groups attributed each group of voices to pertaining to a low- (71% Cuba, 58% Spain) to middle-income (27% Cuba, 37% Spain) bracket more often than a high-income bracket (2% Cuba, 5% Spain).

This study is important because it offers a novel contribution to the field of accent perceptions through the inclusion of these underrepresented groups, namely, the Cuban and Peninsular Spanish varieties, in addition to L2 learners and monolingual English speakers, as much research in the field to date has focused on English or the perceptions of native speakers of a language (e.g., [8], [9], [10], [11]). The results obtained also illustrate the broader systemic struggles in the lives of speakers belonging to stigmatized language varieties such as the Cuban variety of Spanish.

Keywords: perception, accent perception, accent intelligibility, Cuban, Peninsular, L2 learners, accent bias, sociolinguistic

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