Examining the Effects of Narrators’ Accents When Informational Programming Has Verbal and Visual Cues

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A study examined responses to an informational program about a cultural ceremony wherein the narrator spoke with either a North American or a Spanish-influenced accent. Responses from American undergraduates who viewed a five-minute segment are congruent and incongruent with past research. Reflecting previous findings, the North American accent produced higher ratings of the video’s informativeness, enhanced ratings of narrator knowledge, and higher recall. Different from past work, when data analyses accommodated the ease of understanding the narrator, all effects were eliminated but that for recall. Discussion describes factors such as fluency and content that influence accent perceptions for informational programs.

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more willing to forgive a company for corporate crimes if the company is headed by an Unlucky vs. Control CEO when the crime is small but less forgiving for large crimes.

In Study 2, we further investigate how consumers differentially respond to Unlucky CEO vs. Control CEO in low vs. high crime scenarios. We presented participants with a hypothetical the high vs. low crime scenarios described above in the form of a newspaper. The articles describe the crime of a hypothetical cell phone company (MobiFon). In the Unlucky condition the article also explains that the CEO has recently been diagnosed with cancer.

After reading about the article, participants filled out a conjoint study indicating their preference ratings of cell phones from MobiFon (vs. another hypothetical cell phone company called Connex). We varied the phones on the attributes of brand, price and styling. We then collected participants’ attitudes about the crimes, CEO and the company. We find that in low crime conditions, participants indicate they are not very angry at the CEO, are more willing to forgive the MobiFon brand and are more likely to purchase a product from MobiFon if the CEO has cancer than if he has no health problems. These results confirm corporate intuition of consumer empathy and forgiveness. However contrary to this corporate lay theory, in high crime conditions (where participants indicate feeling more angry and less forgiving), they display a “kick him while he’s down effect”. Specifically, they indicate that they are much less willing to purchase a product from MobiFon if the CEO is diagnosed with cancer than if he has no health problems.

Our results expose several contextual and individual factors that contribute to consumers’ responses to Unlucky leaders. The results corroborate the notion that people are influenced by CEO’s personal attributes and misfortunes when making judgments about a company after a corporate crime has been committed. Moreover, it appears that while people are motivated to make decisions based on the direct actions of a CEO in the corporate crime, they ultimately allow non-diagnostic factors to influence their decision. Finally, the results confirm that companies’ lay theory that revealing the misfortunes of their leaders is a good tactic in mitigating consumer anger at the company after a crime has been committed in small crimes but when the crime is more egregious, this may ultimately undermine the company’s attempt to reinvigorate business.

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Imagine that an overseas documentary has a narrator who speaks like a North American national news anchor. For added authenticity, the show’s producers added a second reporter whose native language influences heavily his or her English-speaking accent. This research examines how accents influence viewers’ evaluations of informational programming.

Research findings suggest that the responses to accents depend in part on the listeners’ contexts (Fuertes, Potere, and Ramirez 2002). Although accents can draw favorable attention in entertainment programming, they have had less positive effects on informational materials. The distinction may be due to a greater need for comprehension in learning, than in leisurely, environments. Gill (1994) asked American students to listen to tape recordings of male teachers who spoke with one of three accents. Instructor perceptions were more favorable when he had a North American—rather than a British or a Malaysian—accent. Participants’ level of understanding and degree of recall also were highest with the North American speech.

Building upon past research, this study more directly analyzed the link in Gill’s (1994) work between the evaluation of the speaker and the degree to which participants felt they could understand him. Somewhat surprisingly, the connection between evaluations and perceived comprehension has not been a primary focus in studies showing deleterious accent effects. Also, unlike the studies noted above, this work provides information in visual, as well as in auditory, form.

An actor skilled in accents provided the narration for a documentary-style program about a Latino celebration called a “Quinceañera.” Pretests revealed that he could convincingly speak with both a North American accent and with speech that reflected native fluency in Spanish. Thirty-seven undergraduates were randomly assigned to view the video with the North American (n=16) or with the Spanish-language influenced speech. The unseen actor’s voice described parts of the ceremony simultaneously shown on tape.

An initial set of analyses examined if findings of accent derogation (e.g., Gill 1994) were replicated. When not accounting for the audience members’ perceived ability to understand the narrator, the participants preferred the video with the North American accent rather than the Spanish-influenced accent upon noting (a) the video’s informational value (t(35)=2.39, p<.03), (b) the narrator’s knowledge of the video topic (t(35)=2.15, p<.04), (c) the ease of understanding the narrator’s voice (t(35)=6.60, p<.001), and (d) the total number of open-ended recalled items (t(35)=3.83, p<.002).

Then, a second round of analyses was conducted to determine if the significant effects were due to participants’ perceived comprehension of the narrator. When examining the data using “ease of understanding” his voice as a covariate, the differences between the accent conditions are not significant (p=.10) for all variables but the mean total recalled items (F(1, 36)=7.11, p<.02).

Hence, in informational programs with both visual and aural stimuli, a preference for non-accented voices could be due largely to the perceived ability to understand the presented style of speech. Of course, comprehending a non-native speaker depends largely upon the strength of—and upon listeners’ familiarity with—his or her accent. Depending upon those factors, according to this research, there may be drawbacks to the practice of adding narrators with foreign accents to increase cultural programs’ authenticity. Rather than enhancing credibility, the narrator’s foreign accent reduced his perceived knowledge of the program topic.