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APPLYING THE THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOUR TO ACCOUNT FOR STUDENTS' CHOICE OF A TARGET ACCENT (PART 1)

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Abstract

Bearing in mind the importance of attitude in sociolinguistic research and its huge theoretical potential for accounting for various language behaviours, it is surprising to see numerous misconceptions concerning this construct and its conceptualization as well as criticism as to its role in predicting and explaining speech behaviour (cf., for instance, Cargile, Giles 1997: 195; Edwards 1999: 109; Ladegaard 2000: 229–230; Garrett 2001: 630; Soukup 2012; Taylor, Marsden 2014). The author claims that attitude research can still prove very insightful and helpful in sociolinguistic theory building, but to do so, one needs to reconceptualize attitude along the reasoned action approach on the foundations of which the theory of planned behaviour rests. The theory posits that attitude is one of the three general predictors having a sufficient explanatory and predictive power in the case of most human behaviours. The major goal of the present article is to report on a study attempting to apply the theory of planned behaviour to explain why students of English being given an alternative to choose either an English or American accent as a target model to learn opt for one and not the other. The second goal of the article is to discuss the role of language attitudes in determining students' decisions. Part 1 of the article includes a brief theoretical introduction as well as a detailed description of two pilot studies which served to prepare the research instrument for the main investigation.

1. Introduction

Language attitudes research has long been proclaimed as having a huge theoretical potential for accounting for various sociolinguistic phenomena and language-related and/or language-induced behaviours. Bearing this in mind, it is surprising to see continuing misconceptions concerning this construct and its conceptualization¹ as well as criticism as to its role in predicting and explaining (speech) behaviour (cf., for instance, Cargile, Giles 1997: 195; Edwards 1999: 109; Ladegaard 2000: 229–230; Garrett 2001: 630; Soukup 2012; Taylor, Marsden 2014). The author claims that attitude research can prove even more insightful and helpful in sociolinguistic theory building than it is now, but to do so, one needs to reconceptualize attitude along the reasoned action approach on the foundations of which the theory of planned behaviour rests. The theory posits, in contrast to many approaches in sociolinguistics, that cognition, affect/evaluation and conation should be treated as three *distinct* concepts which denote respectively a belief, an attitude and intention (Ajzen 1988: 32). Attitude in this framework is considered to be just one of the three general predictors assumed to have a sufficient explanatory and predictive power in the case of most human behaviours.

The major research question posed in the study was the one asking why students of English being given an alternative to choose either the British or American accent as a target model to learn opt for one and not the other. In order to answer this question, an attempt was made to apply the theory of planned behaviour (TPB). To specify, the behaviour to be accounted for in the study was conceived of as an enrolment on a course in which one of the two accents was taught. It was considered to be a specific instance of speech-relevant behaviour; one which can be assumed to be reasoned and one over which students had considerable volitional control. The second research question concerned the actual role of language attitudes in determining students' decisions to learn a given pronunciation model.

2. The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) – a brief overview

In social psychology, the theory of planned behaviour has been a highly popular model effectively used to anticipate a wide range of human behaviours (see, for instance, Fishbein, Ajzen 2010). General attitude in this framework is thought to correspond to broad behavioural dispositions or behavioural aggregates rather than to any single action. To successfully predict or account for a specific behaviour (verbal or otherwise), it is a must to take account of other predictor variables as well. According to the theory, in order to predict the performance of a given specific behaviour, the researcher must

¹ This still seems especially common in research designs rather than in theoretical grounding. Crucially, it needs to be emphasized that “[a]n explicit definition of attitude appears to be a minimal prerequisite for the development of valid measurement procedures”, which obviously translates into more reliable and valid assessment of attitude-behaviour relations (Fishbein, Ajzen 1975: 5).

probe into respondents' attitude together with their perceived control over a given behaviour (Perceived Behavioural Control – PBC) and the social pressure felt to perform the behaviour (Subjective Norm – SN) (see Figure 1). To specify, the theory posits that an intention to perform a given behaviour and, in consequence, the behaviour itself is influenced by “three major factors: a favourable or unfavourable evaluation of the behaviour (attitude toward the behaviour), perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behaviour (subjective norm), and self-efficacy [...] in relation to the behaviour (perceived behavioural control)” (Ajzen 2005: 8). The actual importance of individual TPB's variables in influencing intention (and, consequently, behaviour) can vary across contexts.

The three factors (predictors) are traced to a set of behaviour-relevant *beliefs* (see Ajzen 2005: 9; Ajzen, Fishbein 2005: 47–48). A belief refers here to the information an individual has about an attitude object and as such it “links an object to some attribute” (Fishbein, Ajzen 1975: 12). The object-attribute association may differ from individual to individual, which means that people's beliefs may be of different strength, i.e. of different perceived likelihood that an object actually has a given attribute (Fishbein, Ajzen 1975: 12). Attitude is assumed to be determined by salient beliefs concerning the possible consequences of performing a given behaviour and by an overall evaluation of its outcomes. In this vein, a favourable attitude is formed when respondents regard the assets deriving from a given action as more significant than its perceived drawbacks. Subjective norm, in turn, derives from normative beliefs referring to the perceived social pressure and the presumed expectations of others to perform or not to perform a given behaviour. More specifically, this variable relates to the supposed approval or disapproval of the behaviour by people who are important for the performer of the behaviour (e.g. family members or teachers). As for perceived behavioural control, this variable is thought to be determined by control beliefs. These are the factors that an individual perceives to facilitate or impede the performance of a behaviour. Control beliefs in aggregates form an individual's perception of whether he/she has the capacity to do something.

Importantly, Ajzen and Fishbein (2000: 2–3) emphasize a need to make a systematic distinction between *affect* and *evaluation*. They acknowledge that the terms are frequently used interchangeably; yet, an argument is advanced that this practice may lead to confusion at the conceptual level. It is pointed out that the concept of affect should be reserved for “a separate response system with a somatic degree of arousal” (Ajzen, Fishbein 2000: 3). It should be used to describe such general mood states and emotions as sadness, happiness, anger, fear or pride. On the other hand, the concept of attitude should be used with a clear reference to “the *evaluation* of an object, concept, or behavior along a dimension of favor or disfavor, good or bad, like or dislike” as well as desirable or undesirable, pleasant or unpleasant (Ajzen, Fishbein 2000: 3). A point is also made that currently attitude is most frequently assessed as an overall evaluation. One needs to discern, though, that all of this is not to say that moods and emotions have no influence on attitudes (see Ajzen, Fishbein 2000: 3). The researchers simply argue that evaluation and affect are different concepts, yet, the latter may have an influence on overall evaluation, i.e. attitude.

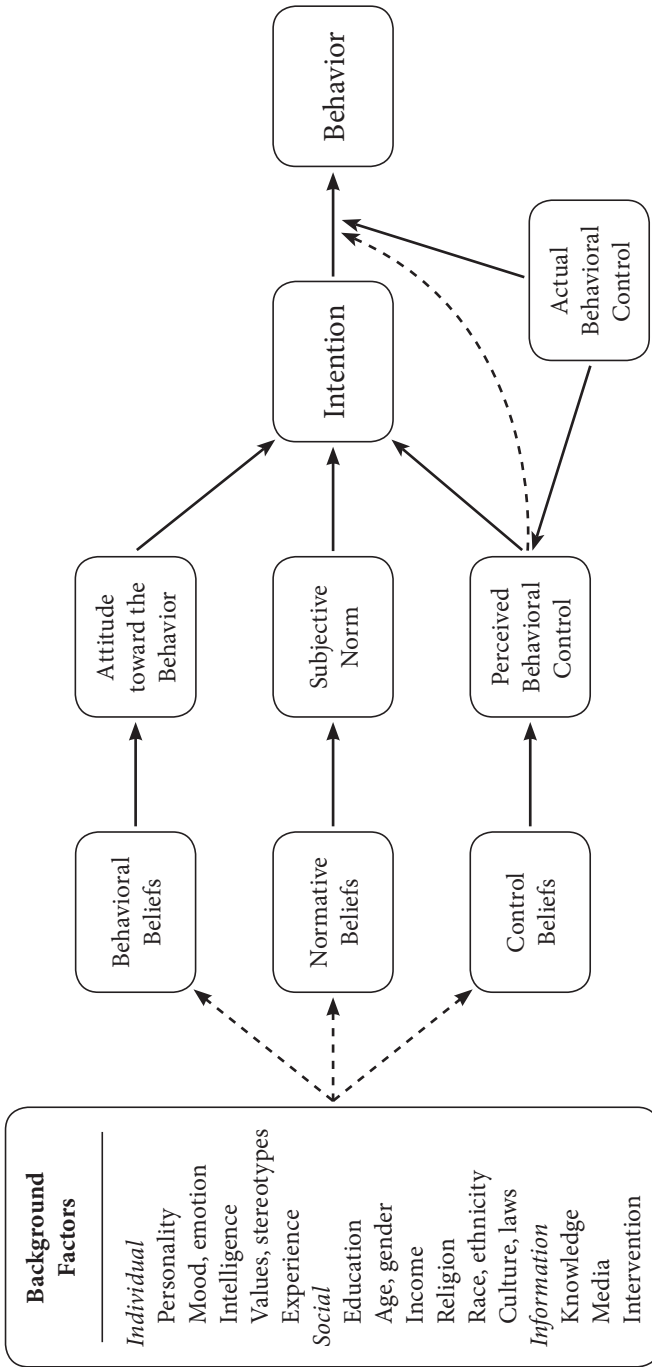


Figure 1. A visual representation of the theory of planned behaviour [after <http://people.umass.edu/ajzen/tpb.background.html> accessed on 28.06.2017; © Icek Ajzen]

What should also be expounded is the role of background factors in the theory of planned behaviour. The reasoned action approach, in which the theory of planned behaviour is embedded, does not address *explicitly* the question of the origin of behavioural, normative and control beliefs (Fishbein, Ajzen 2010: 24). However, the theory *does* recognize the potential of various background factors for the *formation of beliefs*. It is maintained that various background factors may *implicitly* influence intentions and behaviour because of their potential influence on behavioural, normative, or control beliefs and, consequently, on attitudes, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control.² Fishbein and Ajzen (2010: 252) further point out that:

Many studies in the social and behavioral sciences provide information about differences in behavior due to social structure variables, demographic characteristics, or personal attributes. Data of this kind can be very helpful in identifying variability in behavior across different segments of population. However, at least at the level of the individual, relations between background factors of this kind and behavior tend to be rather weak and inconsistent across behaviors and populations.

3. Accounting for students' choice of a target accent – introductory theoretical and methodological issues

Applying different conceptualizations of attitude has a very practical empirical dimension; i.e., it influences the kind of adjectival scales that are used in a questionnaire to measure attitudes and, hence, to investigate its role in determining behaviour. Accordingly, dissimilar conceptualizations can lead to obtaining incompatible results which may lead some researchers to understate or even neglect the explanatory and predictive power of the concept. In sociolinguistics, the adjectives applied in the scales usually refer to the perceived characteristics of speakers triggered by listeners' stereotypical perception of their accents (N.B. the popularity of Speech Evaluation Instrument by Zahn, Hopper 1985), and in TPB they relate most of all to the evaluation of a given behaviour itself in terms of respondents' attitude, their perceived social pressure and capacity to perform it. This remark is not meant to imply that the construction of semantic differential scales in sociolinguistics is neither valid nor insightful but to suggest that it may be all-too-frequently inadequate when investigating attitude-speech behaviour relations.³ In the research reported below,

² Fishbein and Ajzen (2010: 24–25) explain that “[...] although a given background factor may in fact influence behavioral, normative, or control beliefs, there is no necessary connection between background factors and beliefs. Whether a given belief is or is not affected by a particular background factor is an empirical question”.

³ Importantly, even Zahn and Hopper (1985: 121) warn against a decontextual and inconsiderate application of their general speech evaluation measure: “We recommend that extension of speech evaluation research to new speech communities and contexts include interview and ethnographic assessment of evaluators concerns that may not be directly reflected in the items of the SEI”. Obviously, this remark seems to be far more valid when SEI is applied to examine attitude-behaviour relations.

rather than to a *general perception* of the two pronunciation models, very careful attention was paid to selecting adjectival scales that would relate to an evaluation of *the behaviour in question* (i.e. the enrollment decision and, consequently, one's learning and speaking a chosen accent). This was so because this investigation concerned students' evaluations of their own speech behaviour and not just their acontextual perceptions of the two accents.

Another methodological matter that merits some discussion concerns the principle of compatibility. In line with the TPB, in the present study great care was taken to ensure that all questions pertaining to any of the TBP's variables referred to exactly the same TACT (target, action, context and time) elements. In this investigation, *target* referred to a given accent, *action* concerned broadly speaking a particular accent; *context* was defined very broadly as speaking the accents in all places and on all occasions; and *time* referred to students' perception of speaking with one of the two accents before they made their course choices. Because there were two targets (the British and American accents) two separate sets of questions concerning both of them had to be prepared. It was hypothesized that it might be possible that the choice of a given accent could have been caused by a very unfavourable perception of one pronunciation model and not a very favourable assessment of the other.

The last issue to explain pertains to the reasons why there are not any references to intention in this investigation. So far it has been pointed out that attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control are the variables which are used to assess an individual's intention to perform or not to perform a given behaviour. However, Ajzen (personal communication) advised the author not to use intention in this research because the construct could prove quite unreliable due to a doubtful possibility of assessing reliably past intentions. Ajzen proposed simply to relate the three constructs to students' choice of a target accent and to draw some general conclusions concerning the influence of these variables upon students' decision to learn to speak with a given accent.

4. Pilot study one

Prior to the main research, two pilot studies were conducted with a view to ensuring that all the items used to construct semantic-differential scales assessing attitude were contextually relevant for this particular research population and that they were consistent with the adopted conceptualization of attitude. The goal of the first pilot study was to obtain a pool of adjectives that were associated by students with their speaking American English and British English and to conduct a preliminary selection procedure. The number of students participating in this study amounted to 42 respondents from the second and third year of English studies. The students were asked to answer two questions concerning the associations they had with their speaking the two accents of English. The sum of different items elicited in the pilot study came to about 80 adjectives for the British accent and 74 for the American one. All of the items, before being applied in the second pilot study, were

checked for their relevance by means of a careful selection procedure ensuring, among others, that they had an *evaluative* character (see principles 1 and 2 below). It was also borne in mind that overall evaluation had been shown to consist of two distinct components: instrumental (e.g. valuable–worthless or harmful–beneficial) and experiential (e.g. pleasant–unpleasant or enjoyable–unenjoyable (Ajzen 2002: 5). Ajzen maintains that it is recommendable to implement the general good–bad scale, “which tends to capture overall evaluation very well” (Ajzen 2002: 5). In addition, 10 other specific principles have been applied when selecting items:

1. A general focus should be on selecting items having a bipolar evaluative dimension which refer to such general concepts as attraction, value, sentiment, valence, and utility (see Fishbein, Ajzen 1975: 13).
2. One should not use items having a descriptive meaning since they are not evaluative in character. In this study, these were, for instance, adjectives that referred to students' describing the phonetic quality of the accents (e.g. “dental”, “murmuring”, or “slow”).
3. Items that indicate a neutral attitude or no attitude should not be used.
4. Items that may be ambiguous should be avoided in a questionnaire (see Brzeziński 1975: 93, after Edwards 1957: 13–14). For example, adjectives like “problematic” (‘problematyczne’) or “more comfortable” (‘wygodniejsze’) could be ambiguous for some respondents as they do not specify in what sense speaking one of the accents may be “problematic” or “more comfortable”.
5. Items whose meanings could be regarded as analogous to some other constructs (variables) that were to be used in the main study (subjective norm and perceived behavioural control) should also be discarded. For example, adjectives like “difficult”, “easier” or “complicated” were considered to refer to perceived behavioural control and, therefore, they were not used in the second pilot study.
6. More sophisticated adjectives whose meaning may not be understood in the same way by the majority of respondents should not be used in surveys (see Brzeziński 1975: 93, after Edwards 1957: 13–14). That is why items like “ostentatious” (‘ostentacyjne’) were assumed to be inappropriate.
7. Items referring to affect should be avoided in research adopting the theory of planned behaviour (in this particular study these were, for example, such items as “sad”, or “cheerful”).
8. The selection procedure should aim at singling out adjectives alone rather than longer descriptions of one's evaluation of a behaviour in question.
9. Items that have a very specific or specialist meaning and/or narrow usage should be discarded in favour of synonymous ones which are more common and less ambiguous (for example, “noble” vs. “prestigious”).
10. The frequency of occurrence of a given adjective in the responses of respondents should be taken into account when choosing the final set of items (Czapiński 1978: 261).

The result of the first stage of item selection was 39 items which conformed to the above-mentioned criteria.

5. Pilot study two

One hundred and thirteen students from the second and third year participated in the second pilot study whose aim was to ensure that the final set of bipolar, adjectival scales constituting attitude had high internal consistency. Internal consistency can be checked by means of Likert's criterion of internal consistency, or by an analysis of reliability, for instance, Cronbach's alpha (Ajzen 2002: 5). The procedure applied in this study was based on item-total correlations. The method is supposed to indicate which items have the greatest discriminating power and, consequently, which are likely to be the most relevant for a given study and population. Brzeziński (1975: 55) delineates that "one of the stages of constructing a psychological test is to calculate the discriminating power of its particular items" and that "[t]he discriminating power tells us about the degree to which a given item discriminates a given population with respect to the feature the item refers to".⁴ The discriminating power refers to a correlational coefficient (ϕ) between a general value of attitude obtained in a pilot study and any given item considered for further use in the main study. The higher the power of a given item (i.e. the closer it is to 1), the more relevant it is for a given investigation.

Thirty nine items which were elicited in the first pilot study were used to measure respondents' attitude towards their *speaking* the standard British and American accents. Afterwards, all respondents' mean values of attitudes (5-point, unipolar, Likert-type scales were employed) were put in order from those with the highest values to those with the lowest. Because of the fact that attitudes were measured with respect to both accents, there were two sets of attitudes put into order. The reason for doing so was that it could turn out that some items were appropriate only for one accent but not for the other. The goal of this stage was to select two groups of respondents for each accent (with the highest and the lowest values of attitudes). In this investigation, each selected group constituted 25% of all respondents. It is assumed that the respondents with the highest values should be more likely to support positive items and oppose those which are negative. If this is not the case, it means that a given item is not appropriate for this particular study or for this group of respondents and that it should not be used in the main study. As regards the group with the lowest values, it should strongly support negative items and oppose positive ones (see Table 1).

The next stage was to calculate the discriminating power of each item. Because there were two accents under investigation, each item had to be checked two times (once for American English and once for British English). The need for doing so was again dictated by the possibility that a given item could be appropriate for one accent but not for the other. In this pilot study the scoring of items was slightly more complicated. This was so because there were five categories of responses (ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"). Brzeziński (1975: 57) explains that in such a situation there is a need to change this k-categorical system of responses into

⁴ My translation [KP].

two categorial (a two-weight system of responses 0 and 1). Accordingly, the first thing to do was to plot into a table the number of different k-categorial responses elicited by both extreme groups for a given item (adjective) referring to one of the two accents under investigation.

Adjective <i>useless</i>	Accent <i>British English</i>	
Types of responses	The number of responses for a given item in the lower group (25%)	The number of responses for a given item in the higher group (25%)
5 – strongly agree	1	24
4 – agree	2	0
3 – neither agree, nor disagree	7	1
2 – disagree	9	0
1 – strongly disagree	6	0
Altogether	25	25

Table 1. An example of a table used to calculate the number of responses for a particular item given by the two extreme groups (each constituting 25% of the original number of respondents) – for k-categorial positions

Having done the plotting of different responses, the next stage was to draw a dividing line between particular types of responses. The answers above and below the line were counted and they started to constitute two separate groups of responses. In this way the k-categorial system of responses was changed into two-categorial (two weights 0 and 1). However, the dividing line was not drawn arbitrarily but according to the principles described by Edwards (1957: 212–214). The principle states that the dividing line has to be drawn in the place where the sum of answers above the line (for the lower group) and below (for the higher group) is the lowest of all possible ones (Brzeziński 1975: 58). For example, in this study the line could be drawn between answers number 5 and 4 (strongly agree – agree), 4 and 3 (agree – neither agree, nor disagree), 3 and 2 (neither agree, nor disagree – disagree), 2 and 1 (disagree – strongly disagree) (see Table 1). Accordingly, four different cases had to be considered:

- a) Between weights 5 and 4: $(1) + (0 + 1 + 0 + 0) = 2$
- b) Between weights 4 and 3: $(1 + 2) + (1 + 0 + 0) = 4$
- c) Between weights 3 and 2: $(1 + 2 + 7) + (0 + 0) = 10$
- d) Between weights 2 and 1: $(1 + 2 + 7 + 9) + (0) = 19$

The lowest value was between weights 5 and 4, therefore, this was the right place for drawing a dividing line. When the line was drawn, it was possible to calculate both the sum of the responses above and below the line and the proportions of the answers that were above it (for an example see Table 2).

Adjective <i>useless</i>	Accent <i>British English</i>			
	The number of responses in the lower group (25%)		The number of responses in the higher group (25%)	
	Number	Proportion f_d	Number	Proportion f_g
1	1	0.04	24	0.96
0	24		1	

Table 2. An example of a table used to calculate both the number of responses for a given group of answers and the proportions that the answers above the line constitute

Having complete data, it was possible to calculate the discriminating power of a given item (φ) from the following formula (see Brzeziński 1975: 56):

$$\varphi = \frac{f_g - f_d}{\sqrt{(f_g + f_d)(2 - f_g - f_d)}} \quad \begin{array}{l} f_d - \text{proportion of answers above the line given by the lower group} \\ f_g - \text{proportion of answers above the line given by the upper group} \end{array}$$

After calculating the discriminating power of all the 39 items (two times – one for American and one for British accent), it was necessary to proceed to the next stage of item selection – choosing those with the highest discriminating power. When deciding on the final set of items, two further principles were taken into account. First, the final set of items to be used in the main study should be at least $\frac{1}{3}$ smaller than the original one (Brzeziński 1975: 59). Second, the critical values of φ must not be lower than the ones presented in Table 3 for an N-number population. Yet, a researcher can decide to establish a minimum value even higher than required by the critical values.

N – number of respondents	25	50	100	200
φ – the critical value	0.39	0.28	0.20	0.14

Table 3. The critical values of φ for N population (adapted from Brzeziński 1975: 59)

In this investigation, the minimum value was put on the $\varphi = 0.92$ for adjectives belonging to the category *experiential* and on the $\varphi = 0.88$ for *instrumental* items. It is clear therefore that the discriminating power of the chosen items was very high. The aforesaid criteria were satisfied by 25 adjectives. However, some of the adjectives were recognized as highly synonymous (for example, “ciekawy” and “interesujący”) and only one of them was included in the final questionnaire. In such cases, the adjective which was mentioned by a greater number of respondents in the first pilot study was retained. The final effect of the two pilot studies was a construction of eight evaluative semantic-differential scales. The general good–bad pair was included as the ninth additional one.

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