Accent-induced attitudes in a business context:

Evidence from German-accented Dutch

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Abstract

Given the globalization of the workplace and the increase of expatriate employment, foreign-accented L2 speech is becoming increasingly salient in business communication. The effect that accented speech has on evaluations of the speaker's character and message is well-researched within the specific domain of (American) English B2C communication, but accent-induced effects in languages other than English have largely been unexplored. The purpose of the present study was to discover if German-accented speakers of Dutch in a managerial context are subject to similar affective responses as previously researched foreign speakers of English, and to what extent the strength of their foreign accent increases this effect. The German stereotype is especially salient in the Netherlands due to historic events and close geopolitical relations. In an experiment, 179 Dutch participants evaluated fragments recorded by standard-accented Dutch speakers, weakly-accented German speakers and strongly accented German speakers on speaker traits, message quality and their ability to prompt behavioral intent. The results showed that, generally, strongly-accented speakers were evaluated more negatively than standard-accented speakers, whereas a weak foreign accent resulted in evaluations that were similar to or more positive than those of standard-accented speakers. They further showed that perceived comprehensibility played a pivotal role in how accented speech influenced behavioral intent. These findings indicate that business managers operating in a foreign language environment are able to minimize or even negate the negative effects that come with their accent by decreasing it to a weak-to-moderate level. They further show that Dutch listeners' stereotypes of Germans are activated by German-accented speech, and that listeners allow these stereotypes to influence their affective response to the German speaker in predictable ways.

Introduction

Today's advanced degree of globalization touches upon every aspect of society, and gives prominence to a wide array of intercultural issues that require scholarly attention. One such societal aspect is the professional business setting. The influx of non-native employees, managers and business leaders is a sensitive issue for organizations all over the world, as the cultural and linguistic differences between the organization and the foreign (prospective) manager could give rise to various instances of mutual misunderstanding. Worse yet, they could have a negative impact on the foreign manager's job performance by affecting their perceived credibility or ability to induce behavioral intent (Mai & Hoffmann, 2014).

Academics have been conceptualizing and explaining such issues in terms of stereotype activation, social identity effects and the processing of speech and non-verbal cues (Fuertes, Gottdiener, Martin, Gilbert & Giles, 2012). These underlying processes in intercultural interaction have been shown to directly influence speaker and message evaluations, from competence and status to friendliness and persuasiveness. One common predictor of attitudes towards foreigners is foreign accentedness. An accent triggers prepossessed attitudes and stereotypes both immediately and subconsciously, so its significance for intercultural communication cannot be understated (Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, & Fillenbaum, 1960). Most empirical research into the effects of non-native accents and dialects in a business context has focused on two separate domains. First, an overwhelming majority of studies (for an overview, see Fuertes et al., 2012) has tested accent effects of several variations of the English language, due to its status as a lingua franca. Second, the business context is often operationalized as a business-to-customer (B2C) interaction with sales and marketing dynamics (Bither, 1972; Deshields, de los Santos, Berumen, & Torres, 1997; DeShields, Kara, & Kaynak, 1996).

The present study deviates from both of these practices and focuses on two research gaps. First, it is one of the first to explore foreign-accented Dutch and second, it uniquely operationalizes the business context as within-business interaction between a foreign-accented superior and a native Dutch employee. Research in these relatively new areas is highly relevant for both the business domain and for Dutch society. On the one hand, the business manager-employee relationship comprises a very different dynamic than the salesperson-customer relationship. For instance, the former includes hierarchical disparity and a higher degree of co-dependency than the latter. On the other hand, attitude effects in one language cannot be blindly

translated to another language, just as one foreign accent does not activate the same stereotypes as another (Mai & Hoffman, 2014). The innate differences between languages and stereotypes do not allow for generalizations based on English-language empirical research.

The main purpose of the present study is to discover how a German-accented speaker of Dutch is evaluated compared to a standard-accented Dutch speaker, and how successful they are at inducing behavioral intent. Moreover, it incorporates foreign accent strength as a defining factor in these evaluations. Prominent theories have suggested that a weak foreign accent may inspire positive affective responses due to aesthetic stimulation (Berlyne, 1975) or listeners' admiration for adhering surprisingly well to language norms (Burgoon, Denning & Roberts, 2002).

The present study's findings can only be applied fully to within-business interactions in the Netherlands. However, its results give researchers and business practitioners everywhere new insights in accent-attitudinal effects in a professional within-business context rather than a commercial B2C setting. This gives the present study both academic and practical relevance. More specifically, its results give birth to significant business implications for organizations looking to hire foreign executives or managers, as well as for the executives and managers themselves. Moreover, the findings will have implications for multinational organizations.

Theory

Accentedness is a powerful non-visual cue for attitude formation of speakers and their messages (Mai & Hoffmann, 2014). The empirical origins of research into accents and language variations are found in the language expectancy theory, which proposes that "language is a rule-governed system and that people develop macro-sociological expectations and preferences concerning the language or message strategies of others", and that these expectations are usually a function of cultural values (Burgoon et al., 2002, p.120). Deviating from such expectations can have either positive or negative consequences, according to Burgoon et al. In the context of foreign accentedness, a positive violation of language expectancy can occur when an outgroup speaker conforms surprisingly and admirably well to ingroup language standards. This positive violation could prompt attitude or behavioral change in a positive direction (p.121). On the other hand, the outgroup speaker could violate expectancies in a negative way, through the use of "language

choices that lie outside of socially acceptable behavior" (p.121). This, in turn, could either result in no behavioral or attitudinal change, or a change in a negative direction.

A similar curve of positive and negative effects is described by Berlyne in his influential work on aesthetic theory (1975). He explains that art can inspire an 'optimal' level of arousal in the receiver. Although this theory was developed with from a psychobiological perspective and with a focus on visual art, its premise can be extended to audible stimulation. As Mai & Hoffmann (2014) propose, foreign accentedness may also have an 'optimal' range in which the accent is stimulating rather than distracting, making it a positive violation of language expectancy. However, a stronger accent could extend beyond this optimal range and lose its ability to arouse or stimulate.

The main question that this study poses is to what extent a German accent of Dutch violates such language expectancies and preferences, and how this affects evaluations of the speakers and their messages, as well as behavioral intent. Foreign accentedness in relation to attitude change has enjoyed a large amount of academic interest over the past decades, albeit predominantly focused on the English language and its varieties (for an overview, see Mai & Hoffmann, 2014). Fuertes et al. (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of 20 studies that researched the effects of both foreign and non-standard regional accents on interpersonal evaluations. They found that speakers with a standard accent are rated more positively than speakers with non-standard accents. In addition, they thoroughly investigated the umbrella term 'speaker evaluation' and distilled dozens of speaker traits that have been rated in these previous studies. They then categorized these traits into three "dimensions" of speaker evaluation: status, solidarity and dynamism. These dimensions were used to draw more specific conclusions about the effects of foreign accentedness on speaker evaluation, and as they hypothesized, speakers of non-standard accents were rated more negatively on all three of these dimensions (p.127).

Although these results provide a solid foundation for the present study, it should be noted that there are key differences at play that warrant caution in adopting these conclusions. First, Fuertes et al. only incorporated results of studies that used the English language and its variations, whereas this study looks at foreign accentedness in Dutch. Second, the meta-analysis involved various foreign, regional and ethnic accents, while the present study specifies one specific foreign accent. Foreign and regional or ethnic accents should not be intertwined without paying respects to the different underlying processes that occur when they are being evaluated.

For instance, regional and ethnic accents are predominantly associated with social class and hierarchy. They are a major cue for social class because they are often associated with lower-prestige groups in society (Giles, 1970). On the other hand, foreign accents are associated with speakers who are foreign, and thus further removed from the societal hierarchical structure of the ingroup (Purnell, Idsardi, & Baugh, 1999). In sum, empirical findings are helpful in constructing a framework, but should be approached with caution.

Effects, moderators and outcomes of foreign accentedness

Lambert and his colleagues introduced what would eventually develop into a new speaker evaluation paradigm: the matched-guise technique (Lambert et al., 1960). They discovered that the best way to measure attitudes to variations in language is through the use of indirect measures to elicit people's beliefs and feelings (Kircher, 2015). By exposing people to different spoken variations of a language, researchers can elicit subconscious attitudes that people have based on stereotypes and presumptions. Lambert et al.'s study is considered the foundation of sociolinguistic research on language attitudes, and the present study builds on their paradigm like many before. It is one of the first to apply accented speech exposure to a non-English business context.

Accent-induced language attitudes research is a broad and multidisciplinary topic that combines linguistic materials with psychological and sociological attention to mental processes. In an attempt to frame the wide variety of terminology, theory and MGT-affiliated research methods, Mai & Hoffmann developed the ABC-model (2014) as a set of guidelines for future research. They propose that studies should focus on three central effects that influence three sets of outcome variables, moderated by several factors (See Figure 1).
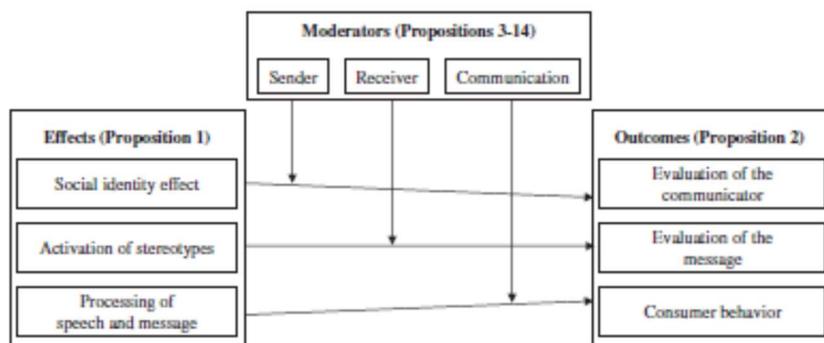

Figure 1. The ABC-Model (Mai & Hoffmann, 2014)

Before specifying the relevant effects, moderators and outcomes, a slight alteration should be made to this conceptual model as a research template. Although this model was originally developed for research on accents in a business context, it is not fully applicable in its current form to the specific setting of the present study. This is due to the focus on business-to-consumer communications, rather than within-business or B2B communications. Its empirical origins are derived almost exclusively from consumer-oriented studies in which the foreign speaker assumes the role of a salesperson (DeShields Jr & de los Santos, 2000; Tsalikis, DeShields, & LaTour, 1991; Van Vaerenbergh, 2013; Armstrong & Min Yee, 2001). As such, Mai & Hoffmann suggest that consumer behavior should be regarded as one of the three major outcomes in accentedness studies. For the sake of the present study, the term 'consumer behavior' will be altered to 'behavioral intent', i.e. the attitude and intention of the listeners to perform the task that is suggested by the speaker (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

Three central effects (social identity effect, activation of stereotypes and processing of speech and message) are relevant to the topic of German-accented Dutch in within-business intrapersonal communications. Firstly, the social identity effect explains how members of the 'Dutch' group form attitudes about anyone outside of this group. Outgroup bias occurs subconsciously and plays a major role in forming the first impressions of a speaker (Ambady, Krabbenhoft & Hogan, 2006). Defining a speaker as an outgroup member immediately negatively affects their persuasive capabilities and the ingroup listener's attitudes of the outgroup speaker (Mai & Hoffmann, 2014; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006). Thus, the social identity theory supports the hypothesis that speakers with a German accent of Dutch (the outgroup) will be rated more negatively that speakers of standard Dutch (the ingroup).

The second effect, activation of stereotypes, is more specific. Whether the stereotypes that are activated in the listener are positive or negative depends both on the listener's tendency to activate stereotypes and the collection of stereotypes that surround the language in question (Mai & Hoffmann, 2014). The German stereotype in the Netherlands is both salient and ambivalent, which makes it an excellent accent to investigate. In her thesis on accentedness in Dutch, Doeleman argues that the "stereotypical view of Germans as thorough (gründlich) but unpleasant people is very much alive among native Dutch inhabitants" (1998, p.34). This stereotype was supported by the Clingendael report (Jansen et al., 1993), which collected attitudes of Dutch youth:

The negative attitudes towards Germany and Germans included views like 'most eager to rule the world', 'most warlike', and 'least peaceful'. Also Germans scored highest on traits like 'dominating' and 'arrogant' and lowest on traits like 'tolerant', 'pleasant', 'easy to get on with', 'friendly' and 'sense of humour' (Doeleman, 1998, p. 34).

Although these attitudes were recorded over 20 years ago, one might argue that they are persistent enough to have withstood the test of time when taking into account the main causes for this stereotyping: the second world war and neighborly football rivalry. If attitudes dating back to WWII can be carried over to the minds of youth that grew up 40 years later, there is a good chance that they persist today. Furthermore, the football rivalry that started in the 1970s is still very much alive today (Doeleman, 1998). Thus, much like the social identity effect, the activation of stereotypes supports the notion that German speakers may be evaluated more negatively.

Third, the processing of speech and the message from a cognitive perspective can be explained as an underlying factor in attitude formation and behavioral intent. In an attempt to decode speech, a foreign accent could delay or obstruct speech and message processing (Mai & Hoffmann, 2014). This effect is closely related to message evaluation, and will thus be discussed further in the message evaluation section of this theoretical framework.

Accent strength

A key part of the ABC-model is the introduction of several moderators that can influence the aforementioned effects on speaker evaluation. The one that is used at the center of the present study is accent strength. Mai and Hoffmann limit the accent strength factor to the language processing effect – the stronger the accent, the more difficult it is to process the message (p.150). This is because accent strength influences intelligibility, as theorized by the processing fluency hypothesis (Oppenheimer, 2008; Reber, Schwarz, & Winkielman, 2004). For instance, Dragojevic et al. found that speakers with a strong Punjabi (study 1) or Mandarin (study 2) accent elicited a more negative affective response than mild-accented speakers, a consequence that they attribute to a heavier disruption of processing fluency when exposed to a strong accent. (Dragojevic, Giles, Beck, & Tatum, 2017). Similar results were found by Bouchard Ryan et al. in their study on the effects of Spanish accent strength in taped readings of an English text. Listeners were able to distinguish different levels of accent strength, and rated the speakers more

negatively as their accents were stronger (Bouchard Ryan, Carranza, & Moffie, 1977). Hendriks & Van Meurs conducted a literature review of eight studies comparing the affective responses to standard-accented, weak-accented and strong-accented speakers (2017a). They found that affective responses became more negative as the foreign accent was stronger. In addition, they noted that "speakers with weaker accents are generally evaluated similarly to speakers with native accents" (p.107), which supports the notion that accent strength has a curvilinear moderating influence (Burgoon et al., 2002; Berlyne, 1975).

This study proposes that accent strength acts as an amplifier for speaker and message evaluation as a whole. An increase in accent strength does not only make the foreign accent more salient, it also puts stronger emphasis on the speaker's outgroup membership (social identity theory) and the speaker's geographical origins, which activates stereotypes (Dragojevic et al., 2017). The notion of accent strength as a pivotal factor in speaker evaluation has recently been advocated by Grondelaers, Van Hout & Van Gent (2019) in their study on Dutch regional accents. They found that "accent strength allows speakers to render their membership of a stigmatized group gradable: by reducing their Southern accent in NSD [Native Standard Dutch], Limburg [Dutch southern province] speakers can "decrease" their allegiance to a negatively stereotyped group" (p.229). In other words, a weaker accent decreases the speaker's stereotyped outgroup status salience. Grondelaers et al. have shown this to be true for regional accents in Dutch, the present study will show if this is also the case for foreign accents.

The two effects described thus far (social identity effect and activation of stereotypes) both support the expectation of a negative evaluation of the message spoken by German-accented speakers of Dutch, especially if the speaker's accent is strong.

H1: German-accented speakers of Dutch are evaluated more negatively than standard-accented speakers of Dutch due to the social identity effect and the activation of stereotypes. This effect is catalyzed by accent strength: speakers of Dutch with a strong German accent are evaluated more negatively than standard-accented speakers and weak-accented German speakers.

 Speaker evaluation dimensions
The first hypothesis has used the social identity theory, the activation of stereotypes and accent strength theory to propose general expectations on the impact of a German accent on speaker

evaluation. This section will dissect the umbrella term 'speaker evaluation' into three dimensions, in order to form more specific hypotheses where the unique position of German in the Netherlands plays a larger role. These dimensions are extracted from the meta-analysis by Fuertes et al. (2012). They are status, solidarity and dynamism. It is important to note that not all of these dimensions are affected by foreign accentedness to an equal extent: Fuertes et al. found that the effect sizes differ substantially ($d = 0.99$ for status, $d = 0.52$ for solidarity and $d = 0.88$ for dynamism (p.127)).

The first dimension of speaker evaluation is 'status'. This involves traits such as competence, intelligence and education. The majority of earlier studies found that non-standard accentedness results in a more negative evaluation of speaker status. (Fuertes et al., 2012, p. 127). This would suggest that German-accented speakers are attributed less status than standard-accented speakers. However, this may not necessarily be the case with Germans in the eyes of Dutch native speakers. As Doeleman explained, the Germans have a reputation as being "gründlich" (thorough) and serious, but cold and distant (p.34). This *Gründlichkeit* bears high resemblance to typical status traits such as competence, intelligence and leadership. In fact, discussions of Dutch-German relations have found that Germans are associated with high status (Dekker, Aspeslagh, & Du Bois-Reymond, 1997). Doeleman found that Germans were rated higher on status than Mediterranean and Caribbean outgroups (p.231). The contradictory nature of this empirical and anecdotal evidence does not provide this study with a solid foundation for a hypothesis of the effect of a German accent on status evaluation in either a positive or a negative direction. Thus, it poses the following research question:

RQ1: How does the strength of a German accent affect evaluations of the speaker's status?

The ambivalence surrounding the German accent does not extend itself to the second and third dimensions, solidarity and dynamism. Solidarity is conceptualized with traits such as trustworthiness, benevolence and similarity to the listener. As Doeleman's thesis explains, Germans are associated with high status and "low social attractiveness and greater social distance" (p.34). This corresponds with empirical evidence analyzed by Fuertes et al. (2012). Their meta-analysis of twenty studies on the effects of accentedness on status, solidarity and dynamism found that there was a highly significant ($p < .001$) mean effect size of $d = 0.52$ for

solidarity. They found that standard-accented speakers were rated higher on solidarity traits than foreign-accented speakers.

H1a: Speakers of Dutch with a German accent are evaluated more negatively on solidarity traits than standard-accented speakers, and this effect is catalyzed by accent strength.

The third and relatively new dimension is dynamism. As the only dimension that was not adopted by Lambert in the 1960s, dynamism has only come to fruition in the scholarly realm in recent years. It refers to the speaker's activity and liveliness, and involves traits such as modern, lively and enthusiastic. The importance of acknowledging dynamism as a significant dimension of traits was underscored by Grondelaers, van Hout, and van Gent (2019), who argue that language varieties can boost speaker evaluations on account of their dynamism qualities (p.230). The present study responds to their call for incorporating dynamism as a dimension of speaker evaluation. It hypothesizes that the German accent, being associated with seriousness and gloominess, will not be positively evaluated.

H1b: Speakers of Dutch with a German accent are evaluated more negatively on dynamism traits than standard-accented speakers, and this effect is catalyzed by accent strength.

Message evaluation and behavioral intent
An earlier section of this theoretical framework describes the moderating role that speech processing effects should play in affecting the speaker and message evaluations. There is a complex array of terms and concepts surrounding the cognitive processing of speech. A commonly cited concept is intelligibility, which refers to an objective measure of the degree to which a message is understood (Nicolosi, Harryman, & Kresheck, 2004). In contrast, perceived comprehensibility is based on "a native speaker's perception of listening burden", i.e. the cognitive effort that is required to comprehend the message (Carlson & McHenry, 2006, p.72; Derwing & Munro, 1997). Because listener burden may increase processing time, the listener may rate accented speech as less comprehensible despite being completely intelligible (Munro & Derwing, 1995).

Perceived comprehension is often explained as a combination of the effects of pronunciation and grammar; the more they deviate from the array of acceptable variations, the less intelligible the message is (Derwing & Munro, 1997). The present study only incorporates pronunciation as a speech processing moderator and ignores grammar. This distinguishes accents from dialects; whereas the former includes variations in phonology, the latter involves a broader sense of language variation including morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (Carlson & McHenry, 2006).

It is to be expected that the most profound foreign accent-induced speech processing effect is that the message is misunderstood, or that understanding it requires great cognitive effort. Neither of these possible outcomes will yield any positive effects on message evaluation. There is empirical evidence to support this claim. Reber et al. (2004) conducted a literature review which found that "variables that facilitate the processing of a stimulus result in more positive affective reactions" (p.368). Similarly, Oppenheimer (2008) cites several studies that link perceived comprehensibility with likeability (Bornstein & D'Agostino, 1992; Reber, Winkielman, & Schwarz, 1998; Zajonc, 1968) and status (Oppenheimer, 2006). Given the correlation between foreign accent strength, perceived comprehensibility and message evaluation, this study expects to find that a foreign accent results in a more negative message evaluation due to 'listening burden' or intelligibility issues, and that this effect is stronger when the accent is stronger.

H2: Messages of speakers of Dutch with a German accent are evaluated more negatively than messages of standard-accented speakers. This effect is mediated by perceived comprehensibility and catalyzed by accent strength.

Furthermore, empirical findings suggest that foreign accentedness could decrease behavioral intent. This partly draws back to the language expectancy theory, which proposed that "use of language that negatively violates societal expectations about appropriate persuasive communication behavior inhibits persuasive behavior and either results in no attitude change or changes in position opposite to that advocated by the communicator" (Burgoon et al, 2002). In other words, the violation of the standard variations of Dutch could nullify any intended persuasive efforts by the speaker. This theory has considerable empirical proof, presented by Mai

& Hoffman in their meta-analysis of studies that focus on consumer behavior (2014). The conclusion they draw from their analysis of several empirical studies (i.e. Beckwith & Lehmann, 1975; Wirtz & Bateson, 1995) suggests an indirect effect of foreign accentedness on behavioral intent via speaker evaluation: "Because of the striving for consistency and to avoid cognitive dissonance, consumers (consciously or subconsciously) transfer conclusions inferred from the evaluation of a company representative to their companies and the products and services offered" (p. 141). Taken out of the realm of consumer behavior and placed in a broader behavioral perspective, listeners will extend their negative evaluations of the speaker to the message and persuasive efforts. A strong and unintelligible German accent could therefore negatively affect behavioral intent as a response to the uttered task.

H3: Messages of speakers of Dutch with a German accent are less successful in inducing behavioral intent and are evaluated more negatively than messages of standard-accented speakers. This effect is mediated by speaker evaluation and catalyzed by accent strength.

Method

Materials

The independent variable, accent strength, was manipulated in the stimulus material. This material consisted of an audio file of a spoken Dutch text, the contents of which resembled typical managerial speak. The manager introduced himself and asked the listener to complete a fictitious task and become the manager's ally ("I would appreciate it if you could be my ally in implementing these rules and regulation", see appendix A for full text). The accompanying text asked the participants to assume the role of the employee. This was operationalized through the use of the second-person perspective, which directly addresses the reader using the pronoun 'you'. There were six different versions of this audio fragment (two per condition), recorded by four speakers: one standard-accented Dutch male, one German male with a weak German accent, one German male with a strong German accent and one German male (MGT speaker) performing a native Dutch accent, a weak German accent and a strong German accent. A pretest was conducted to determine the suitability of the fragments for the three accent conditions.

Pretest

The verbal-guise design required the matching of speakers on several personal and linguistic traits. Speaker selection was designed to optimally eliminate speaker-related paralinguistic factors such as pitch of voice and intonation. The pretest featured fourteen audio fragments recorded by twelve speakers: three of which were from MGT speaker, and eleven fragments recorded by speakers of Dutch with standard and German accents. The speakers were instructed to read the passages with natural intonation and pitch, and at a constant speed. The six most suitable speakers were selected for the experiment. All the speakers were of similar age (21-30) and of male gender. Dutch speakers did not have a noticeable regional accent.

Accent strength was measured in a repeated-measures design, in which 24 particpants were asked to rate the accent strength (question: how strong is the foreign accent of the speaker?) of four randomly selected audio fragments on a seven-point scale (1 = very weak, 7 = very strong). The use of naïve listeners rather than trained linguists to determine accent strength was a practically motivated choice that finds empirical support in Brennan, Ryan and Dawson (1975). They found a significant correlation between accent strengths identified by naïve listeners and professional phonologists.

Accent origin was measured using one open-ended question: "what is the speaker's mother tongue?". Perceived speaker age was measured using a multiple-choice-style question with age categories. Perceived comprehensibility was measured using one seven-point scaled question adapted from Derwing & Munro (1997). Clarity of assumed roles was measured using a yes/no question ("was it clear that the speaker was your manager?"), and finally, voice characteristics were measured with the following seven-point Likert scales: volume (loud-soft), pitch (high pitch-low pitch), artificiality (natural-artificial), speed (fast-slow), emotion (emotional-unemotional) and friendliness (friendly-unfriendly) (Callan, Gallois, & Forbes, 1983).

Pretest results

Four speakers were selected for the six experiment conditions. These speakers were selected based on their distinctiveness in terms of accent strength and similarity in voice characteristics. One German speaker performed a native Dutch, weak German and strong German accent, otherwise known as the matched-guise technique. The other three fragments were recorded by three different speakers, known as the verbal-guise technique. The perceived accent strength of

the two foreign-accented recordings of the MGT speaker differed from each other on the significant level. A one-way ANOVA of accent variation on accent strength revealed a significant main effect of variation (F (1,10) = 5.11, p =.05). The strongly-accented variety (M= 4.67, SD= 1.21) was attributed higher accent strength than the weakly-accented variety (M= 3.00, SD= 1.22). The recordings of the two selected German-accented VGT speakers also differed in accent strength. A one-way ANOVA of speaker on accent strength revealed a significant main effect of speaker (F (1,7) = 64.75, p <.001). The strongly-accented speaker (M= 5.80, SD= 0.84) was attributed higher accent strength than the weakly-accented speaker (M= 1.33, SD= 0.58).

The four speakers only differed significantly from each other on the voice characteristics 'speed' and 'artificiality'. A one-way multivariate ANOVA revealed significant multivariate effects of speaker on speed (F (5,25) = 3.52, p = .015) and artificiality (F (5,25)= 3.04, p = .028). The VGT speaker with a weak German accent (M= 5.20, SD= 1.64) was attributed a higher talking speed than the VGT speaker with the strong accent (p= .046, Bonferroni-correction; M= 2.50, SD= 1.52) and the MGT speaker's performance of a weak accent (p= .013, Bonferroni-correction; M= 2.20, SD= 1.10). There were no univariate effects of speaker on artificiality, nor were there multivariate effects of speaker on volume (F (5,25)= 0.41, p = .835), pitch (F (5,25)= 1.89, p = .133), emotion (F (5,25)= 2.52, p = .056) and friendliness (F (5,25)= 0.80, p = .561).

Experiment subjects

A total of 293 participants took part in the experiment, with 179 completing the questionnaire. The average age of the participants was 28.10 (SD= 11.98, range 19-66). Of all participants, 62.10% was female. The most frequent educational level was 'master's degree' (n=58, range vmbo (practical secondary education) – PhD). The conditions did not differ in any relevant background characteristics: age (F (2,176) = .371, p = .691), gender (X2 (2) = 0.18, p = .991) education level (X2 (14) = 7.22, p = .926), employment status (X2 (10) = 5.91, p = .823), regional accent (F (2,176) = 2.83, p =.062), familiarity with accentedness (F (2,120) = 0.59, p = .556), language proficiency (F (2,120) = 1.15, p = .320) and attitudes towards accents and Germans (F (2,120) = 0.71, p = .494).

Design

In order to test the hypotheses, this study used a one-factorial (accent) between-subjects design with three levels: (1) standard Dutch, (2) a weak German accent and (3) a strong German accent. Each accent condition was split in two groups, each group being exposed to a different speaker with the same accent. This study used the verbal-guise technique (VGT) as well as Lambert et al.'s well-known matched-guise technique, in which a single speaker is used to record the different accents. (Lambert et al., 1960). The advantage of the VGT, which uses different speakers of the recordings, is that the accents are more natural than the artificial accents of an MGT speaker (Zhang, 2009). On the other hand, a VGT design inevitably results in differences in voice characteristics. The advantage of the MGT is that there is no variety in voice characteristics between the three conditions, with the disadvantage that this technique is very difficult to perform for the speaker. Both techniques were used simultaneously given their respective advantages and disadvantages.

The main effects of these conditions were tested on five dependent variables: speaker evaluation across three dimensions (status, solidarity and dynamism), message evaluation and behavioral intent. The last two variables were also tested for an indirect correlation via speaker evaluation (see figure 2 for a schematic representation of the design).
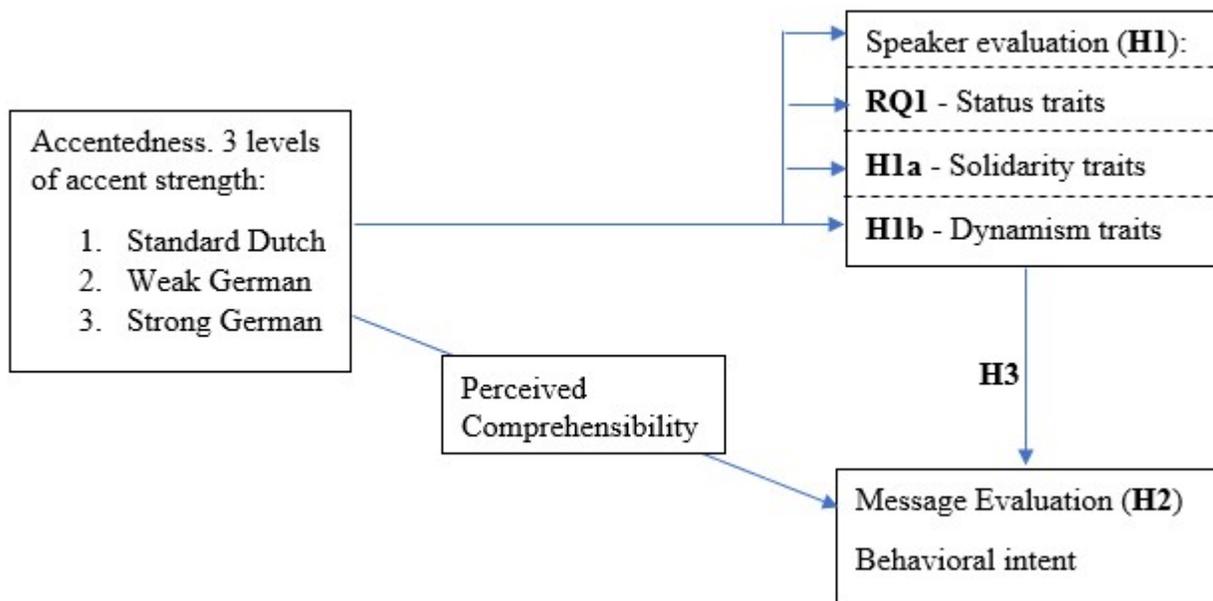

Figure 2. Research Design

Instruments

The variables that were measured after exposure to the stimulus material were speaker status traits, solidarity traits, dynamism traits, message evaluation and behavioral intent. (Fuertes et al., 2012). The questionnaire started with a short demographical questionnaire including questions about age, gender, regional accent, educational level and employment status. After exposure to the stimulus material, the first question was a check to see if the listener knew the speaker personally. An affirmative answer would terminate the experiment. Subsequently, accent origin (open question) and strength (seven-point Likert scale) were measured. Perceived comprehensibility was then measured using one seven-point Likert scaled question adapted from Derwing & Munro (1997).

Speaker status and solidarity were measured using seven-point Likert-type scales adapted from Stewart, Ryan & Giles (1985). The measured status characteristics were intelligent, successful, confident and ambitious, forming a reliable scale: $\alpha=.81$. The solidarity characteristics were kind, sincere, trustworthy and friendly ($\alpha=.91$). These characteristics were translated into Dutch for the experiment. Finally, four dynamism traits (modern, hip, trendy and enthusiastic) partly adapted from Grondelaers et al. (2019) were measured using similar Likert-type scales ($\alpha=.86$). In addition to measuring these 12 speaker evaluation traits, this study measured message evaluation with four Likert-type statements: "I like the way the manager introduces herself", "I find it appropriate that the manager asks me to be his ally", "I agree with the rules that the manager proposes" and "I found it pleasant to listen to the message" ($\alpha=.76$). The persuasive quality of the message was measured on a four-item, seven-point Likert scale, including the following statements: "I am prepared to help the manager learn more about this company", "I feel compelled to be the manager's ally", "I feel persuaded by the manager" and "I am prepared to help the manager implement his new rules" ($\alpha=.90$).

Following measurements of the dependent variables, listeners were asked to answer questions and reflect on statements that measured the following background variables: self-ability to produce (accented) foreign speech (single-item variable), familiarity with German and other foreign accents ($\alpha=.64$), attitude towards German accents (single-item variable) and attitudes towards Germans (three single-item variables). Listeners were asked to reflect on their own foreign language abilities by rating their foreign-accentedness on a seven-point Likert scale (adapted from Hendriks, van Meurs, & Reimer (2018). Listeners' familiarity with foreign and

German accents (adapted from Derwing & Munro (1997)) and attitudes towards foreign and German accents ("I appreciate it when foreigners speak Dutch", "I mind hearing a foreign accent" and "I enjoy hearing a German accent") were measured subsequently, also with seven-point Likert scales. Listeners' attitudes towards Germans were measured across three dimensions (status, solidarity and dynamism) with three Likert-type questions: "I consider German people to have high social status" (status), "I consider German people to be friendly" (solidarity) and "I consider German people to be enthusiastic and spontaneous" (dynamism).

The variables 'perceived comprehensibility' and 'accent strength' consisted of one item each. The variable 'speaker evaluation' was computed as an average of the three speaker evaluation variables, and utilized as a moderating variable.

Procedure

Participants were recruited online and offline, using personal connections of the researcher. The research was conducted online and individually. An incentive was provided in the form of seven randomly distributed prizes: five restaurant coupons and two activity coupons. Participants were guided through the study by accompanying instructional text. They were not informed of the specific goal of the experiment. Before the experiment commenced, participants were informed of the ethically relevant aspects of the study and asked if they would like to participate, after which they completed a demographical questionnaire. Participants then replied to statements related to the five variables, after which the potentially intervening background variables (e.g. familiarity with accents, attitudes of Germans) were measured. Participants who indicated that they did not hear a foreign accent were not exposed to the attitude statements. The study concluded with a debrief in which the particpants were given the opportunity to contact the researcher and leave their e-mail address for participation in the prize lottery.

Statistical testing

The collected data was interpreted by using various statistical tests. Analyses of variance revealed any significant differences between the several conditions on the dependent variables. A correlation table was used to reveal potentially significant predictor variables for linear regression and mediation model testing. The PROCESS model by Andrew F. Hayes was used to investigate

mediating effects of speaker evaluation and perceived comprehensibility on message evaluation and behavioral intent (Bolin, 2014).

Results

Speakers and conditions

The six speaker conditions were transformed into three conditions in accordance with the research design. These accent conditions were (1) standard Dutch, (2) weak German and (3) strong German, each condition combining two speakers. The two speakers belonging to each condition did not differ from each other significantly in each of the dependent variables, with the exception of the two standard Dutch speakers on solidarity traits ($p = .026$) (see table 1). The German speaker performing the standard Dutch accent was attributed more solidarity ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.05$) than the Dutch speaker ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.07$). Due to the highly similar scores for both speakers of each condition, the remainder of this analysis is based on the three aforementioned conditions.

The speaker conditions were based on the pre-test results of perceived accent strength. Perceived accent strength was also measured in the final study. A one-way ANOVA of condition on accent strength showed a significant effect of condition ($F (1,108) = 10.36$, $p = .002$). Listeners in the condition Strong German ($M = 6.53$), $SD = 0.94$) gave higher accent strength scores than listeners in the condition Weak German ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 0.77$). These results confirmed the pre-test result.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for status traits (1 = very low/negative, 7 = very high/positive), solidarity traits, dynamism traits, message evaluation and behavioral intent in function of speaker.

	Speaker					
	MGT Standard	MGT Weak	MGT Strong	VGT Standard	VGT Weak	VGT Strong
	n =30	*n = 29*	*n = 27*	*n = 27*	*n = 29*	*n = 30*
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*
Status	5.09 (1.13)	5.21 (0.97)	5.04 (0.98)	4.58 (1.07)	5.59 (0.80)	4.83 (0.93)
Solidarity	5.48 (1.05)	5.31 (1.06)	4.92 (1.12)	4.54 (1.05	5.12 (1.08)	4.33 (1.29)
Dynamism	4.38 (1.09)	3.79 (1.05)	3.72 (0.69)	3.98 (1.13)	4.45 (0.80)	3.13 (1.26)
Message evaluation	4.67 (1.36)	4.60 (1.04)	4.20 (0.99)	4.20 (1.16)	4.79 (1.20)	3.86 (1.12)
Behavioral intent	4.46 (1.36)	4.38 (1.06)	4.09 (1.26)	3.96 (1.36)	4.44 (1.47)	3.87 (1.37)

Identification of origin of the speaker

In each of the conditions, several listeners incorrectly identified the origin of the speaker's accent. German, Swiss and Austrian were considered the correct accent origin identifications for conditions 'weak' and 'strong'. Dutch was considered the only correct accent origin identification for condition 'standard'. Table 2 shows the number of cases of incorrect identification per accent. Most of the incorrect identifications were Turkish (n = 7) and Moroccan (n = 7). Cases in which a native Dutch speaker was incorrectly identified as German and vice versa also counted as incorrect identifications.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for status traits (1 = very low/negative, 7 = very high/positive), solidarity traits, dynamism traits, message evaluation and behavioral intent in function of accent origin identification.

	Accent	identification				
	Standard correct	Standard incorrect	Weak correct	Weak incorrect	Strong correct	Strong incorrect
	n = 40	*n = 17*	*n = 31*	*n = 27*	*n = 50*	*n = 7*
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*
Status	4.79 (1.14)	5.00 (1.10)	5.56 (0.89)	5.21 (0.90)	4.89 (0.94)	5.18 (1.11)
Solidarity	5.01 (1.15)	5.09 (1.16)	5.14 (1.11)	5.31 (1.02)	4.63 (1.25)	4.43 (1.20)
Dynamism	4.14 (1.10)	4.31 (1.20)	4.23 (0.81)	4.00 (1.15)	3.26 (1.07)	4.50 (1.26)
Message evaluation	4.49 (1.24)	4.34 (1.42)	4.70 (1.18)	4.69 (1.05)	4.02 (1.04)	4.07 (1.34)
Behavioral intent	4.24 (1.35)	4.16 (1.48)	4.51 (1.40)	4.30 (1.11)	3.95 (1.28)	4.14 (1.65)

Two one-way MANOVA's for accent origin identification on the five dependent variables did not reveal any significant effects for the standard and weak conditions. A one-way MANOVA of accent origin identification on the five variables for the strong condition did reveal a significant multivariate effect (F (5,51) = 3.73, p = .006). Univariate analyses revealed a significant main effect of accent origin identification on dynamism (F (1,55) = 7.97, p = .007). Listeners who correctly identified the accent origin (M = 3.26, SD = 1.07) gave higher dynamism scores than listeners who incorrectly identified the accent origin (M = 4.50, SD = 1.26).

 In conclusion, the listeners that correctly identified the accent did not give significantly different scores than the listeners who incorrectly identified the accent, with the exception of dynamism scores in the strong condition. This difference could be explained by the small sample size of strong – incorrect (n = 7). Due to the highly similar scores for both groups in each

condition, the remainder of this analysis is based on all data of both the correct and incorrect identifications.

Aesthetic quality

The aesthetic quality of the accents in the present study was measured by the statement "I enjoyed listening to this recording". A one-way ANOVA of condition on auditive enjoyability revealed differences that concur with the aesthetic theory. A weak German accent ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.42$) was more enjoyable to listen to than a standard accent ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.71$), and a strong accent was significantly less enjoyable ($p = .001$, Bonferroni correction; $M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.13$) than a weak accent.

Speaker evaluation, message evaluation and behavioral intent

H1 proposed that foreign-accented speakers are rated more negatively than standard-accented speakers, and that this effect that is catalyzed by accent strength. H1a and H1b predicted that this negative affect is true for solidarity and dynamism traits, whereas RQ1 posed the question whether status evaluations are affected in a similar way (See figure 2). The descriptive statistics are displayed in table 3.

A one-way MANOVA for status, solidarity, dynamism, message evaluation and behavioral intent with accent as factor revealed a significant multivariate effect of accent (F $(10,330) = 4.03$, $p < .001$). Univariate analyses revealed a significant main effect of accent on status (F $(2,169) = 5.05$, $p = .007$), on solidarity (F $(2,169) = 4.25$, $p = .016$) on dynamism (F $(2,169) = 9.01$, $p < .001$) and on message evaluation (F $(2,169) = 5.01$, $p = .008$). There was no significant main effect of accent on behavioural intent (F $(2,169) = 1.58$, $p = .210$)

Speakers with a strong German accent ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 0.95$) were attributed less status than speakers with a weak German accent ($p = .036$, Bonferroni-correction; $M = 5.40$, $SD = 0.90$). Speakers with a weak German accent were attributed more status than the standard Dutch speakers ($p = .011$, Bonferroni-correction; $M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.12$). There was no difference between the status of standard-accented speakers and speakers with a strong German accent ($p = 1$, Bonferroni-correction).

Speakers with a strong German accent ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.24$) were attributed less solidarity than speakers with a weak German accent ($p = .015$, Bonferroni-correction; $M = 5.22$,

SD = 1.07). There was no difference between the solidarity of standard-accented speakers and speakers with a weak (*p* = 1, Bonferroni-correction) or strong German accent (*p* = .149, Bonferroni-correction).

Speakers with a strong German accent (*M* = 3.41, *SD* = 1.16) were attributed less dynamism than speakers with a weak German accent (*p* = .002, Bonferroni-correction; *M* = 4.12, *SD* = 0.98) and standard Dutch speakers (*p* = .001, Bonferroni-correction; *M* = 4.19, *SD* = 1.12). There was no difference between the solidarity of standard-accented speakers and speakers with a strong German accent (*p* = 1, Bonferroni-correction).

Messages of speakers with a strong German accent (*M* = 4.02, *SD* = 1.07) were evaluated more negatively than messages of speakers with a weak German accent (*p* =.006, Bonferroni-correction; *M* = 4.70, *SD* = 1.12). There was no difference between evaluation of messages spoken by standard-accented speakers and speakers with a weak German accent (*p* = .740, Bonferroni-correction) or speakers with a strong German accent (*p* = .154, Bonferroni-correction).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics per condition. Means and Standard Deviations of speaker evaluation (1 = very low/negative, 7 = very high/positive), status traits, solidarity traits, dynamism traits, message evaluation and behavioral intent per condition.

	Condition		
	Standard Dutch	Weak German	Strong German
	n = 57	n = 58	n = 57
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Speaker status	4.85 (1.12)	5.40 (0.90)	4.93 (.95)
Speaker solidarity	5.03 (1.14)	5.22 (1.07)	4.61 (1.24)
Speaker dynamism	4.19 (1.12)	4.12 (0.98)	3.41 (1.16)
Message evaluation	4.45 (1.28)	4.70 (1.12)	4.02 (1.07)
Behavioral intent	4.22 (1.37)	4.41 (1.27)	3.97 (1.32)
Perceived comprensibility	6.17 (0.85)	6.24 (0.84)	5.40 (1.30)

Perceived comprehensibility

Hypothesis 2 proposed that accent strength is related to perceived comprehensibility of the speaker (See figure 2). A one-way ANOVA showed a significant effect of accent on perceived comprehensibility ($F_{(12,175)} = 12.31$, $p < .001$) (see table 3). The perceived comprehensibility of speakers with a strong German accent ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.30$) was lower than for speakers with a weak German accent ($p < .001$, Bonferroni-correction; $M = 6.24$, $SD = 0.84$) and standard-accented speakers ($p < .001$, Bonferroni-correction; $M = 6.17$, $SD = 0.85$). There was no difference between the perceived comprehensibility of standard-accented speakers and speakers with a weak German accent ($p = 1$, Bonferroni correction).

Regression

The possible correlations between all relevant dependent variables and moderators are displayed in the correlation table (table 5). Significant and relevant correlations between dependent variables and mediating variables were tested using linear regression and the PROCESS Model by Hayes. These are discussed below.

Stereotype activation

This study hypothesized (H1) that stereotype activation is a significant predictor for speaker evaluation. For each dimension, a single-item variable was used to measure stereotype activation in the listeners. The results are displayed in table 4. Linear regression was used to analyze effects of these stereotypes on the three dimensions of speaker evaluation. The analyses are listed below.

A simple regression analysis showed that the variable entered, Status attitude, explained 4% of the variance in attributed status ($F (1, 121) = 6.42$, $p = .013$). Status attitude was shown to be a significant predictor of attributed status ($\beta = .22$, $p = .013$).

A simple regression analysis showed that the variable entered, Solidarity attitude, explained 8% of the variance in attributed solidarity ($F (1, 121) = 11.82$, $p = .001$). Solidarity attitude was shown to be a significant predictor of attributed solidarity ($\beta = .30$, $p = .001$).

A simple regression analysis showed that the variable entered, Dynamism attitude, explained 4% of the variance in attributed dynamism ($F (1, 121) = 6.30$, $p = .013$). Dynamism attitude was shown to be a significant predictor of attributed dynamism ($\beta = .22$, $p = .013$).

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of stereotype salience per dimension.

	Dimension		
	Status	Solidarity	Dynamism
	n = 123	*n = 123*	*n = 123*
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*
Stereotype salience	4.76	4.56	3.74
	(1.21)	(1.24)	(1.11)

Table 5. Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Perceived comprehensibility	X												
2. Language proficiency	-.016	X											
3. Language familiarity	.110	.190*	X										
4. Accent attitude	.185*	.186*	.024	X									
5. Status attitude	.078	-.022	-.114	.114	X								
6. Solidarity attitude	.284**	.111	.049	.249**	.386**	X							
7. Dynamism attitude	.240**	.043	-.093	.364**	.148	.521**	X						
8. Speaker evaluation	.538**	-.185*	.057	.254*	.171	.303**	.237**	X					
9. Status	.445**	-.216*	-.060	.139	.224*	.171	.108	-	X				
10. Solidarity	.456**	-.099	.113	.254**	.145	.298**	.240**	-	-	X			
11. Dynamism	.413**	-.153	.070	.220	.062	.263**	.222*	-	-	-	X		
12. Message evaluation	.452**	-.084	.187*	.215*	.068	.195*	.235*	.649**	.478**	.601**	.537**	X	
13. Behavioral intent	.393**	-.217*	.069	.221*	.129	.167	.287**	.689**	.511**	.645**	.549**	.818**	X

$* \ p < .050, \ ** \ p < .010$

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Behavioral intent

A multiple regression analysis showed that the variables entered, speaker evaluation and message evaluation, explained 71% of the variance in behavioral intent (F (2, 169) = 209.60, $p < .001$). Speaker evaluation was shown to be a significant predictor of behavioral intent ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$), as was message evaluation ($\beta = .64$, $p < .001$).
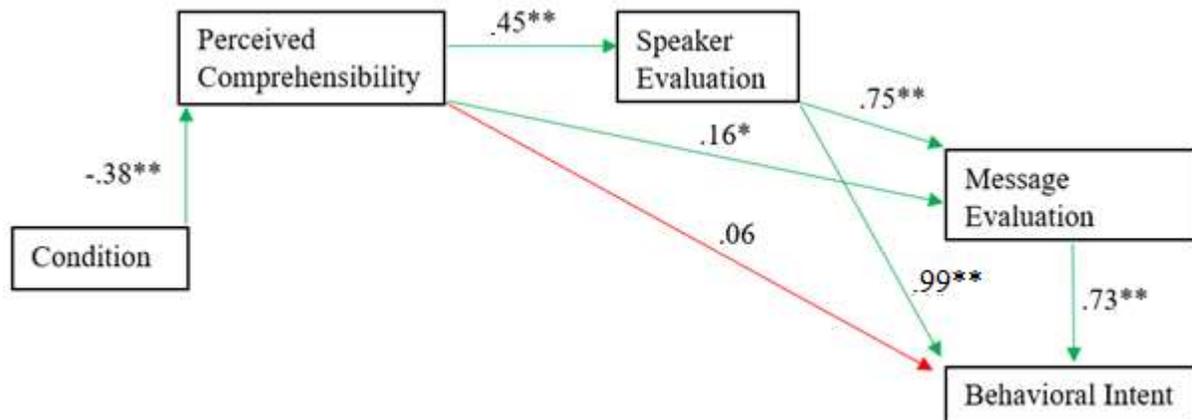
* $p < .050$, ** $p < .010$

Figure 3. Research model.

Mediation

This research hypothesized (H2, H3) that accent strength has an indirect effect on both message evaluation and behavioral intent via the mediators 'perceived comprehensibility' and 'speaker evaluation' (see figure 3). This serial mediation model was tested with a PROCESS analysis.

A PROCESS analysis showed that the variable entered, accent, had a significant effect on the mediator 'perceived comprehensibility' (b =-0.38, t =-3.91, $p < .001$). It further revealed that the mediator 'perceived comprehensibility' was a significant predictor for the second mediator 'speaker evaluation' (b =0.45, t =7.87, $p < .001$), which in turn was a significant predictor for the dependent variables 'message evaluation' (b =0.75, t =8.30, $p < .001$) and 'behavioral intent' (b = 0.99, t = 10.18, $p < .001$). There was no significant direct effect of condition on message evaluation (b = -0.02, t = -0.14, $p = .890$), nor was there a significant direct effect on behavioral intent (b =-.085, t=-0.90, $p = .37$). There was a significant indirect effect of accent on message evaluation via perceived comprehensibility (-.06; CI between -.132 and -.002), but not on

behavioral intent (-.02; CI between -.101 and -.043). There was also a significant indirect effect of condition via perceived comprehensibility and speaker evaluation on message evaluation (-.13; CI between -.219 and -.053) and on behavioral intent (-.17; CI between -.279 and -.073).

A second PROCESS analysis in which 'message evaluation' was entered as a third mediator showed that the variable entered, message evaluation, had a significant effect on behavioral intent (b =.73, t =11.94, $p < .001$). It further showed that the variable 'condition' had a significant indirect effect on behavioral intent via the three mediators 'perceived comprehensibility', 'speaker evaluation' and 'message evaluation' (-.09; CI between -.161 and -.038).

The PROCESS analyses revealed that the variables acted as serial moderators which eventually affected message evaluation and behavioral intent in expected ways. The negative effect size of 'condition' on perceived comprehensibility reveals that a 'higher' condition (1 = standard Dutch, 2 = weak German, 3 = strong German) resulted in lower perceived comprehensibility. Meanwhile, perceived comprehensibility was positively related to speaker evaluation, which had a very strong effect on behavioural intent via message evaluation. The stronger the accent of the speaker, the more difficult he was perceived to be understood, which negatively affected how he was evaluated, which in turn had negative consequences for the evaluation of his message, which then lowered the listeners' behavioural intent.

Discussion

The results from this study partly confirm earlier research findings on the negative effect of foreign accentedness on speaker evaluation, message evaluation and behavioral intent. This study builds on the ABC-model introduced by Mai & Hoffmann (2014), which is based on the premise that speakers with a foreign accent have to endure predominantly negative evaluations and judgements in their role as professional communicators. This premise is confirmed by and extended upon by the present study.

This section opens with a discussion of the effects of the accent strength conditions on the speaker evaluation variables (H1, H1ab, RQ1). Secondly, the research model as a whole is discussed, focusing on the crucial role played by mediators 'perceived comprehensibility' and 'speaker evaluation' (H2, H3). This is followed by a brief analysis of the two research methods used: the matched-guise technique and the verbal guise technique. The discussion section

concludes with an introspective analysis of the limitations of this study, ensued by recommendations for future research.

Accent strength and speaker evaluation

This study hypothesized that speakers with a strong German accent are evaluated more negatively than speakers with a weak German accent or a standard Dutch accent. Weakly-accented speakers were also expected to be evaluated more negatively than standard-accented speakers. This hypothesis was partly confirmed. Across all three speaker evaluation dimensions (status, solidarity and dynamism), the speakers with a relatively strong German accent were evaluated more negatively than speakers with a weak German accent. The difference between standard-accented speakers and weak German-accented speakers was much smaller. In the domains of solidarity and dynamism, the strongly-accented speakers were evaluated more negatively due to their accent strength. These findings confirm the premise that accent strength plays a central role in foreign accentedness evaluation. In fact, the findings suggest that accent strength is a more dominant factor in speaker evaluation than the mere presence of a foreign accent (as opposed to a standard accent). In other words, speakers with a weak foreign accent are not 'punished' for their foreign accentedness like speakers with a more salient, stronger accent are. This finding has important practical implications for expats and businesses operating in a multinational environment or domain. The present study's results suggest that accent minimization would practically completely diminish any accent-based negativity in L1 listeners.

The results are in line with the dominant theories as discussed in the theoretical section. First of all, Burgoon et al.'s (2002) Language Expectancy Theory (LET) prescribes that a violation of language rules might lead to negative consequences due to the production of a language variety that is outside of the socially acceptable range. A stronger foreign accent is more likely to violate such language expectancies, and thus result in negativity within listeners (p.121). Earlier studies on degrees of foreign accentedness (Brennan & Brennan, 1981; Cargile & Giles, 1998; Hendriks, van Meurs, & de Groot, 2017b; Hendriks, van Meurs, & Reimer, 2018; Nejjari, Gerritsen, Van Der Haagen, & Korzilius, 2012) provide evidence for this theory. For instance, Brennan & Brennan (1981) found that Mexican Americans were rated lower on status traits as their accents were stronger. Similar results were found for Japanese-Americans (Cargile & Giles, 1998) and other demographic groups. The LET further proposes that a positive violation

occurs when a foreign speaker conforms surprisingly well to language standards, which would be the case with a weak foreign accent (Burgoon et al. (2002), p.121). In the present study, the positive violation primarily occurred in the status domain, where the weak-accented speaker was attributed more status than the standard-accented speaker.

Secondly, Berlyne's (1975) aesthetic theory proposes that an optimal degree of accent strength exists, which could be audibly stimulating and thus result in positive effects such as an increase in behavioral intent and a more positive evaluation of the speaker. Like Burgoon et al., Mai & Hoffmann (2014) argue that this positive effect has its limits: as the strength of a foreign accent increases beyond the optimal range, language becomes harder to decode for the listener and the aesthetic assets of foreign speech are replaced with low comprehensibility and a high cognitive load for the listener. This could stimulate frustration and negative attitudes (p.150). The aesthetic quality of the conditions in the present study was measured by the statement "I enjoyed listening to this recording". The results reveal differences that concur with the aesthetic theory. The relatively positive evaluation of weak-accented speakers compared to both standard-accented and strong German-accented speakers suggests that they are within the 'optimal' range of accent strength. The next section briefly outlines each speaker evaluation dimension.

Status

Findings in the present study show that weakly-accented German speakers of Dutch were attributed significantly higher degrees of status than standard-accented speakers and strongly-accented speakers. This conforms with the aforementioned language theories: the weak German accent results in a positive violation of accent expectations (LET) and inhabits the optimal audibly stimulating accent range (aesthetic theory).

Earlier findings on the effect of foreign accentedness on status provide evidence that standard accented speakers are associated with higher socio-economic status than foreigners (for an overview, see Fuertes et al. (2012)). However, an overwhelming majority of such studies was conducted using (American) English as an anchor language. The discrepancy between the present study's findings and earlier empirical evidence could be explained by the focus on German-accent Dutch, as opposed to foreign-accented English. The case of the Germans in Dutch is not necessarily comparable to the social position of Hispanics or Asian-Americans in the US. For instance, Germans are attributed high status and very low solidarity (Doeleman, 1998), whereas

Hispanics are attributed with low status but high social attractiveness (Giles, Williams, Mackie, & Rosselli, 1995). In fact, accent research was built on the premise that language features activate social categorization and stereotyping, which in turn determines the trait attributions (Robinson, 1972). The high attribution of status to German-accented speakers is thus easily explained by the salient stereotype of the educated, *gründliche* German male (Doeleman, 1998). The finding that strong-accented speakers are attributed a level of status similar to standard-accented speakers suggests that an increase in accent strength leads to the domination of the effects of negative expectancy violation over those of stereotype activation. The positive stereotype effect is canceled out.

Solidarity

In contrast to the case of status traits, Germans are generally attributed low solidarity or warmth traits (Doeleman, 1998). This means that two of the main explanatory effects for speaker evaluation (stereotype activation and outgroup bias) work towards the same end, as both are expected to result in a more negative evaluation. The present study partly confirms this. Whilst there was no difference between the standard-accented and weak-accented speakers, the strongly-accented German speakers were given significantly lower solidarity scores. Again, accent strength was shown to be a highly relevant factor, as the negative effects of a foreign accent only occurred when the accent is moderate to strong. In addition, these results are in line with both the language expectance theory and the aesthetic theory, and they confirm the trend in Dutch stereotyping of Germans. As Doeleman (1998) puts it, Germans are associated with "low social attractiveness and greater social distance" (p.34), which corresponds perfectly with lower solidarity.

Dynamism

Within the domain of speaker dynamism, evaluation scores of the three categories of speakers were very similar to those in the solidarity domain. This may be due to the conceptual overlap between dynamism and solidarity, as noted by Grondelaers et al. (2019). A scale reliability analysis combining the items of both the solidarity and dynamism domains reveals a very high reliability score (α) of .89, indicating overlap. Nevertheless, the results once again confirm aforementioned theories of language processing outcomes.

Stereotype activation is a more problematic explanatory factor here than with the other two domains, as very little is known about the stereotype of German dynamism in the Netherlands. The responses to the control statement that measured dynamism attitudes in the present study (Germans are enthusiastic and spontaneous) did reveal a generally negative attitude among the Dutch participants. In fact, Germans were attributed a much lower amount of dynamism than solidarity (See table 3). Taking into account that this solidary score represents a negative opinion (as explained by Doeleman, 1998), this suggests that Dutch native speakers have developed an exceptionally negative stereotype of German dynamism. This negativity is reflected by the dynamism score discrepancy between the strong German accent and the standard accent.

Stereotype activation: direct measurements

The present study's experiment was designed to subconsciously elicit stereotypes of German speakers. Aside from this main experimental design, the study concluded by posing direct questions about the salience of stereotypes in the three domains of speaker traits. The results are displayed in table 3. The mean scores of the direct and indirect measurements in the strong accent condition were not significantly different.

These results suggest that Dutch native speakers do not feel hesitant to express negative attitudes towards Germans. Doeleman also mentions this notion in her thesis: "the reluctance to express negative attitudes or discriminatory feelings may not be of similar strength with respect to the Germans as the reluctance to express such feelings about other nonnative groups" (p.36). Doeleman prescribes this to the defensive 'victim' position that the Dutch take with respect to the bigger and more powerful neighbor country, a sentiment grounded in war history and economic dependence. The results presented here provide empirical support for this theory.

Perceived comprehensibility and mediation

Findings in the present study support the notion that perceived comprehensibility plays a pivotal role in predicting speaker evaluation, message evaluation and behavioral intent. It has a much more central role in the step-by-step process that connects accent strength with a change in behavioral intent than was hypothesized by this study. H2 states that perceived comprehensibility would only serve as a moderator for the effect of accent strength on message evaluation. This is

based on Mai & Hoffmann's argument that speech processing does not involve social categorization or stereotype effects and thus merely affects message evaluation, not speaker evaluation (2014). However, the present study's findings showed that this concept was also a very strong predictor of speaker evaluation across each of the three dimensions. It was shown to be an essential element of the chain reaction in accented speech processing, which in turn affected speaker evaluation, message evaluation and behavioral intent. The most logical explanation for this is the heightened cognitive processing effort of the listener, which lead the receiver to perceive the interaction as problematic. The more salient or stronger the foreign accent was, the more effort it took the listener of the message to process the sender's speech.

Aside from predicting speaker and message evaluation, perceived comprehensibility is also shown to be a predictor of behavioral intent. Such a relationship has not been proven before in studies conducted in a within-business context, but it has been shown in related fields. For instance, Im, Lennon & Stoel found a direct link between stimuli processing and purchase intent: the easier the stimuli could be processed, the higher the purchase intent (Im, Lennon, & Stoel, 2010). They ascribe this effect to the perceptual fluency hypothesis, which poses that "positive aesthetic evaluation of a stimulus with higher perceptual fluency is due to positive affect elicited by easy processing of information" (Im et al, p. 289). This theory perfectly resembles the present study's model as presented in figure 3. Due to easy processing of information in standard-accented speech, positive affect towards the speaker transpires, which gives rise to positive aesthetic evaluations of the message and an increase in behavioral intent.

MGT versus VGT
The most well-practiced technique in researching accentedness effects in an experimental design is Lambert et al.'s matched-guised technique, also known as the MGT (1960). The use of a single speaker performing multiple accents has the obvious advantage that the stimulus material presented in different conditions is matched completely on potentially interfering variables such as voice characteristics, visual presentation and speaker demographics. However, this convenience does come with two downsides. On the one hand, as Zhang (2009) points out, an MGT design inherently results in artificial speech, whereas natural speech would enjoy preference in maximizing the societal relevance of the results. Regardless of how skilled the speaker is in producing different accents and varieties therein, these speech 'performances' can

never be considered of equal footing with naturally produced speech. Secondly, it is very difficult to find a speaker who is skilled enough to match an experimental research design with accent strength variations. This also goes for this study's design, which required a speaker to produce a native accent as well as two varieties of a German accent. As Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck & Smith put it in their article on L2 pronunciation in Austria, "it is practically impossible to find speakers who are equally convincing in several guises. This means of course that variables like voice quality can be controlled only minimally" (1997).

Speakers for a verbal-guise technique design are much easier to find. Rather than recording one single skilled speaker, a large number of speakers is to be recorded and matched in terms of demographics and voice characteristics. The difficulty with this process is that while speakers can be a great 'theoretical' match, as was revealed by the present study's pretest, they still might not sound alike. Voice is an incredibly complex variable to measure. In addition, every experiment participant exposed to this voice will form their own, possibly unique associations. Therein lies the danger that listeners are reflecting on the individual speaker, rather than the accent under study (Nejjari, Gerritsen, van Hout, & Planken, 2019). Researchers cannot control this process.

In light of the advantages and disadvantages of these techniques, this study employed both of them simultaneously. The main distinction that this study revealed is that the mean difference in speaker evaluation between the conditions in the VGT design was much larger than with the MGT speaker (see Table 1). This can be attributed to the inability of the speaker to produce substantially different accent strength levels.

In addition, the origin of MGT speaker in the conditions standard-accented and weak German-accented Dutch was incorrectly identified by almost half (29/61) of the participants. The reason why many listeners identified the accent origin as Turkish, Moroccan or Arabic is not because these accents are very similar to German, but partly because the speaker in question had a strong pronunciation of the uvular /X/, as well as a trill /r/. These characteristics are typical of a Moroccan Flavored Dutch (Nortier & Dorleijn, 2008, p. 130). The Moroccan accent is very common in Dutch society, and thus easy to identify (Nortier & Dorleijn, 2008). As Nortier and Dorleijn report, MFD is not only used by the Moroccan Dutch but also by people with a Turkish background (p. 126).

In sum, the MGT technique, as operationalized in this study, has yielded some unfavorable results. The accent origin was misidentified in 42% of all cases (see table 1) , and the accent strength performances may not have been distinguishable enough. Inherently, the VGT results are likely to differ if the present study were to be replicated using different speakers. Given these limitations and the absence of a 'perfect' accent manipulation technique, a combined use of the MGT and VGT techniques as operationalized in the present study is likely to be the best method of accent (strength) manipulation.

Conclusion

The present study posed several research questions and hypotheses regarding the wide array of effects that occur when listeners are exposed to foreign-accented speech. The results mostly resemble a confirmation of empirical evidence and theories from previous research, but also introduce new notions that deserve further academic attention.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Firstly, the research design of the present study has shed some light on the advantages and disadvantages of the VGT and MGT methods for accent variation. The MGT speaker employed here has not been able to produce an indubitably distinct degrees of German accent strength, nor has he been able to produce vastly different levels of accent strength. This underscores the extreme difficulty of recruiting a suitable MGT speaker, especially for a research design that incorporates accent strength as a variable. On the other hand, the VGT speakers could not be matched completely on voice characteristics, and the mere fact that the trait attributions of three different individuals were analyzed and compared as if they were the same person is conceptually flawed. Given these drawbacks, the present study suggests that a design combining both the MGT and VGT methods may be the best compromise in the case that a convincing MGT speaker cannot be found.

Secondly, this study's results highlight two previously underappreciated concepts in accent attitude research: accent strength and perceived comprehensibility. Accent strength variation has been shown to moderate the effects of foreign-accented speech on speaker evaluation, message evaluation and behavioral intent. Producing Dutch with a weak German accent induces as many positive as negative effects, resulting in a counterbalanced influence on

the dependent variables. However, a strong accent negates these positive effects and increases the salience of processes that negatively influence affect and intent. Therefore, this study recommends that all future studies on accentedness incorporate accent strength as a central independent variable. Similarly, perceived comprehensibility should be regarded as a dominant mediating factor in any research design exploring accented speech evaluations, since the present study has shown that perceived comprehensibility is the most powerful predictor of all three dependent variables.

Finally, these findings show once more that accent research findings cannot be generalized for all languages and foreign accents. Further research using different anchor languages and origins of foreign accent is needed for researchers to draw up a global map of accent-induced effects. In this respect, foreign accentedness research is still in its infancy, as an overwhelming majority of languages and accents have not yet been the subject of experimental research.

Practical relevance

As globalization of the workplace increases, businesses are more open to the employment of foreign executives or managers. Expatriate workers attempting to assimilate into their adopted professional environment will inevitably be confronted with issues in learning to speak a new language. Some multinational business settings use English as a business lingua franca, but most companies require foreign potential workers to learn the language of the nation in which the company is located. This is especially true for foreign workers in a leadership position, as being a manager or leader involves complex top-down communication targets such as inspiration, agenda setting and reprimanding. This study suggests that investing in minimizing one's foreign accent will yield great advantages in terms of personal evaluation and leadership ability. On a global level, this study expands on existing academic evidence by suggesting that although a strong, difficult to process foreign accent might negatively affect attitudes, a weak foreign accent does not. Expats can use logopaedic training to further minimize their foreign accent and thus increase their perceived status, warmth and dynamism, as well as the effectivity of their communication efforts.

On a national, language-specific level, the findings show that Dutch stereotypes of Germans still strongly resemble those recorded in the 1990s. Germans are perceived as serious

and stern, successful but unfriendly. They assume the position of the conceptual 'other', resulting in social identity effects. German higher-tier workers operating in a Dutch company can utilize and profit from the strong attribution of status but should be aware of the largely negative connotations that their nationality unwillingly induces. This study's results can help in solving issues that are brought forward by this, in the first place by increasing awareness for which speaker trait dimensions are most affected by stereotype activation.

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Appendix A

Stimulus material script (Dutch)

Goedemorgen!

Goed je te ontmoeten. Zoals je waarschijnlijk wel weet ben ik de nieuwe manager van deze afdeling. Ik ga vanaf vandaag aan de slag. Ik kijk uit naar onze samenwerking, en hoop dat ik je af en toe om advies mag vragen over de gang van zaken hier.

Ik ga een aantal zaken anders aanpakken dan mijn voorganger, zodat de werkprocessen efficiënter verlopen. Vanuit de directie heb ik namelijk te horen gekregen dat deze afdeling onvoldoende productief is. Om te beginnen ga ik privételefoongebruik aan banden leggen en zal er strenger opgetreden worden tegen laatkomers.

Ik zou het fijn vinden als jij mijn bondgenoot kan zijn bij het doorvoeren van deze en andere aangrijpende veranderingen. Met jouw hulp hoop ik dat je collega's achter deze maatregelen komen te staan, en we samen uit kunnen groeien tot een waardevolle divisie binnen het bedrijf.