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The Effect of Different Degrees of Regional Accentedness in Radio Commercials: An Experiment with German Consumers

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the use of a regional accent with varying strengths in product and service commercials. In a 2 (type of commercial: product/service) \times 3 (accent: strong German regional / moderate German regional / standard German) between-subject design, 218 German native speakers evaluated product and service commercials. Findings suggest that the effects of regional accents were limited. In the product commercial, the speaker with a moderate accent was attributed more warmth than a speaker with a standard accent. In the service commercial, the attitude towards the service was more negative for the moderate than for the standard accent.

KEYWORDS

regional accent; accent strength; radio commercials; service/product; German

Introduction

Regional accents are regularly used in radio and TV commercials. Commercials of the American insurance company Geico, for example, featured a gecko talking in various regional accents, such as a Texan or Chicago accent. British-based O2 famously incorporated a northern regional accent in numerous radio and television commercials. The main reason for using accents in commercials appears to be to evoke stereotypes (Piller 2001). Although speakers with regional accents are sometimes regarded more positively than speakers with standard accents, especially in terms of solidarity and likeability, studies have also shown that regional accents do not always lead to favorable reactions, with regionally accented speakers for instance being considered less competent (Grondelaers, van Hout, and Steegs 2010). Most studies about regional accents have looked at impact of accentedness in general, noncommercial contexts, but few have looked at the “commercial” gain of using accented spokespersons (see Mai and Hoffmann (2011) for service encounters; Martín-Santana et al. (2015) for radio commercials). Although studies have shown that the use of regional accents to promote

products from a particular region might work (region of origin effect: Van Ittersum, Candel, and Meulenberg 2003), the question is whether the region of origin effect also works for services (cf. Mai and Hoffman 2011). Research into evaluations of accents in a noncommercial context has shown that accent strength is an important factor (Dragojevic et al. 2017; Hendriks, van Meurs, and de Groot 2017). To date, no studies have investigated the effects of degrees of accentedness for commercials featuring regional accents. The research objective of this study is to investigate the effects of degrees of regional accentedness versus standard accents in radio commercials for services and products as evaluated by German consumers. This study aims to expand the extant literature on the effects of regional accents in radio commercials on listeners’ perceptions by means of an experiment which incorporates accent strength as a factor and investigates commercials advertising both products and services.

Literature review and hypotheses

The underlying mechanism behind the use of accented spokespersons in commercials is that

consumers associate certain characteristics and competences with certain accents, which are then transferred to the product advertised and thus increase brand authenticity and positive brand image (Kelly-Holmes 2005; Piller 2001). Ivanič, Bates, and Somasundaram (2014) show that radio commercials with ethnic-accented spokespersons matching the product they advertised (e.g. Asian-American – technical support services) led to increased purchase intention. Similarly, Puzakova, Kwak, and Bell (2015) found that congruence between brand and spokesperson's ethnic accent resulted in enhanced perceptions of brand sincerity for Hispanic and American brands. When a Hispanic product (tacos) was advertised with a Hispanic accent, this led to higher perceived brand sincerity than when it was advertised with a standard American accent.

While regional language associations can have several positive effects, studies have shown that, in general, speakers with regional accents can also be downgraded by listeners (Edwards and Jacobsen 1987; Fuertes et al. 2012; Mai and Hoffmann 2010). In their literature review on accented speech in TV commercials, Birch and McPhail (2010) show that regional and foreign-accented speakers are, among other things, perceived to be less educated, self-confident, and less able to present high-quality arguments than speakers with a standard accent. The majority of earlier studies carried out with radio commercials have shown that, on the whole, standard accents are evaluated more positively than local or regional accents (e.g. Lalwani, Lwin, and Li 2005; Liu et al. 2013; Lwin & Wee 1999, 2000; Martín-Santana et al. 2015; Morales, Scott, and Yorkston 2012; Reinares-Lara, Martín-Santana, and Muela-Molina 2016). For instance, Martín-Santana et al. (2015) and Reinares-Lara, Martín-Santana, and Muela-Molina (2016) found an overall higher evaluation of spokespersons with a standard Spanish accent than of spokespersons with a local Spanish accent in a radio commercial. In Lalwani, Lwin, and Li (2005), British-accented speakers in radio commercials were evaluated more positively than speakers with a Singaporean accent by Singaporean listeners. Previous studies have shown that accented speech is not downgraded on every dimension. Heijmer and Vonk

(2002) found that speakers with regional Dutch accents were upgraded with regard to solidarity (i.e. trustworthiness and generosity) compared to speakers with standard Dutch accent. Similarly, Schoel and Stahlberg (2012), for example, found that while being downgraded with regard to competence, speakers with a regional German accent were upgraded with regard to warmth. Grondelaers, van Hout, and Steegs (2010) also showed that speakers with a regional Dutch accent were at times upgraded with regard to solidarity, which for example includes trustworthiness. These studies have, however, examined regional accented speech by asking listeners to evaluate voice samples in a general, noncommercial context. The question is whether effects found with regard to perceived competence and warmth of a regionally accented speaker also apply in a commercial context. On the basis of earlier studies showing generally negative evaluations for competence but positive evaluations for warmth for regionally accented speakers compared to standard accented speakers, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Regionally accented spokespersons in commercials are evaluated differently than spokespersons with standard accents in terms of warmth and competence.

H1a: Regionally accented spokespersons in commercials are evaluated less positively than spokespersons with standard accents in terms of competence.

H1b: Regionally accented spokespersons in commercials are evaluated more positively than spokespersons with standard accents in terms of warmth.

A factor in the evaluation of speakers with a nonstandard accent is the degree of accentedness. Studies have shown that the stronger the non-standard (foreign) accent is, the more negative are the evaluations (e.g. Brennan and Brennan 1981; Cargile and Giles 1998; Carlson and McHenry 2006; Cunningham-Andersson and Engstrand 1989; Dragojevic et al. 2017; Hendriks, van Meurs, and Reimer 2018; Nejari et al. 2012; Nesdale and Rooney 1996). For regional accents, Giles (1972) similarly showed that broader British regional accents were evaluated more negatively than milder British regional accents. On the basis of the negative evaluations of stronger nonstandard accents, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H2: Spokespersons with a stronger regional accent are evaluated more negatively than spokespersons with a weaker regional accent

In a commercial context, regional accents might be effective when there is a fit between the accent and the product advertised, for instance if the product originates from the region with which the accent is associated. This is line with Lynch and Schuler (1994) match-up hypothesis, which proposes that congruence between spokesperson characteristics and product attributes leads to greater advertising effectiveness. In line with the “Hierarchy of Effects Model” (Barry and Howard 1990; Lavidge and Steiner 1961), the presence of congruence between spokesperson accent and product is expected to lead to listeners having a more positive attitude towards the product and ultimately lead to a higher purchase intention. In the hierarchy of effects model, consumers process information (regional accent for a regional product), which leads to positive attitudes towards the spokesperson and consequently to more positive attitudes towards the ad, then to positive attitudes towards the product and ultimately higher purchase intention (cf. Brown and Stayman 1992). Lalwani, Lwin, and Li (2005) also emphasize the positive effects of congruence between a product advertised and spokesperson characteristics in the contexts of accents in radio commercials for attitude towards the ad, attitude towards the product, and purchase intention. Such positive effects of accent-product congruence are reported for foreign accents for attitude towards the product and purchase intention (Hendriks, van Meurs, and van der Meij 2015) and for ethnic accents (Ivanič, Bates, and Somasundaram 2014: purchase intention; Puzakova, Kwak, and Bell 2015: attitude towards the brand). This led to the following hypothesis:

H3: Commercials with a regionally accented spokesperson generate a more positive attitude towards the commercial (H3a), a more positive attitude towards the product/service (H3b), and higher purchase intention (H3c) than commercials with a standard accented spokesperson.

Mai and Hoffmann (2010, 2014) argue that regional accents might have different effects in advertising for products and services, because services are less tangible than products, which

makes communication more important in the case of services. Along similar lines, Ivanič, Bates, and Somasundaram (2014) found that for ethnic-accented spokespersons, congruence with a product mattered less than congruence with a service in affecting purchase intention. Ivanič et al. explain this difference by arguing that, as services require more interaction, congruence between spokesperson and service may be more important in creating comfort for the listener. As the majority of earlier studies into the effects of regional accents in advertising have, to date, investigated product commercials, we have tested the effects of regional accents for both product and service commercials.

The current study

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of a regional versus standard accent in commercials that advertise a product or a service. As accent-product congruence has been shown to be a crucial factor in evaluations of radio commercials (Hendriks, van Meurs, and van der Meij 2015; Ivanič, Bates, and Somasundaram 2014), the regional accents in the current study were congruent with the product or service advertised. Accent strength will be taken into account, as earlier studies have shown that stronger foreign and regional accents may be evaluated worse than lighter accents (Brennan and Brennan 1981; Cargile and Giles 1998; Carlson and McHenry 2006; Cunningham-Andersson and Engstrand 1989; Dragojevic et al. 2017; Giles 1972; Hendriks, van Meurs, and Reimer 2018; Nejjari et al. 2012; Nesdale and Rooney 1996). Radio commercials were used in this study, as they eliminate visual cues that might form a distraction.

Mai and Hoffmann (2011) call for a focus of future research on a language other than English in regionally accented advertising. The present study will therefore focus on German regional accents. Germany is the European Union’s strongest economy with the highest number of inhabitants (Statistisches-Bundesamt-Dustatis 2017). Consequently, Germany has both the means and the audience for large-scale advertising, which means that optimization of commercials would have a significant impact. The present study will investigate the Bavarian accent, the best-known

regional accent in Germany (Gärtig, Plewnia, and Rothe 2010; Institut-für-Demoskopie-Allensbach 2008; Plewnia and Rothe 2012).

Methodology

To test the effects of regional versus standard accentedness, we carried out an experiment in Germany using an online questionnaire (Qualtrics). Germany was selected because it is a country divided into regions (*Bundesländer*) with strong regional identities, some of which have clearly identifiable regional accents (Gärtig, Plewnia, and Rothe 2010). Bavaria, one of the southern regions, has a particularly strong regional identity (Rakic, Steffens, and Mummendey 2011), being well-known in Germany itself and elsewhere, for its beer, car industry, and traditional dress, among other things.

In our experiment, German listeners from various parts of Germany evaluated commercials for a Bavarian product or service recorded with a strong Bavarian, moderate Bavarian, or standard German accent.

Materials

The independent variables of the main study were Accent (strong/moderate/standard) and Commercial (product/service). Six radio commercials were recorded in an advertising studio by a professional, native German voice actor who was born and raised in Bavaria and spoke the Bavarian dialect fluently. In line with the matched-guise technique (Lambert et al. 1960), the same voice actor recorded all commercials. The commercials advertised a product or a service in a strong Bavarian, moderate Bavarian, or standard German accent, respectively.

Pretest typically Bavarian products and services and Bavarian characteristics

As previous studies (e.g. Lalwani, Lwin, and Li 2005; Piller 2001) have argued that accent-product congruence is essential, a first pretest was carried out to determine which products and services were regarded as typically Bavarian. A total of 24 German participants from various regions (e.g.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations (between brackets) for Bavarian typicality products and services (1 = *not typically Bavarian*, 7 = *typically Bavarian*; $n = 24$).

Products	M	(SD)	Services	M	(SD)
Traditional blouse ^a	6.21	(0.98)	BMW museum tour ^a	4.92	(1.50)
Beer jug ^a	6.17	(0.96)	Beer workshop ^a	4.79	(1.64)
Felt hat ^b	4.92	(1.86)	Brass band hire ^a	4.58	(1.53)
Wind instruments ^b	4.79	(1.64)	Mountain biking tour ^a	4.54	(1.53)
Folklore music CD ^b	4.67	(1.55)	Farmers' market/fair ^a	4.29	(1.73)
Nymphenburg porcelain ^b	4.50	(1.59)	Guided hunting trip ^a	3.46	(1.22)
Snuff tobacco ^b	3.37	(1.69)	Holiday on a farm ^b	3.46	(1.69)
Ale-bench ^b	3.25	(1.67)	Monastery visit ^b	2.96	(1.30)
Gingerbread heart ^b	3.25	(1.33)	Coach ride ^b	2.25	(1.42)
Cuckoo clock ^b	2.96	(1.55)	Lake cruise ^b	2.04	(1.27)

Note: different subscripts within columns denote significant differences with the highest mean.

North Rhine-Westphalia: 29.2%, Rhineland-Palatinate: 16.7%, Baden-Württemberg: 8.4%; age: $M = 27.37$, $SD = 8.68$, range: 22–54; 66.7% female; 54.2% students) evaluated the fit with Bavaria for 10 products and 10 services on 7-point Likert scales (1 = *disagree*, 7 = *agree*), based on Hornikx, van Meurs, and Hof (2013): “I think this product/service is typically Bavarian.” The products and services in the pretest were selected on the basis of a literature review (Jung et al. 2009; Plewnia and Rothe 2012; Typisch-Bayerisch 2017). Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the Bavarian typicality of the products and services.

For the products, a traditional blouse (*Trachtenbluse*) was regarded as the most typically Bavarian product ($M_{\text{Blouse}} = 6.21$, $SD = 0.98$). A repeated measures analysis with product type as within-subjects factor showed a significant main effect of product type ($F(9, 207) = 18.69$, $p < .001$). The typicality of the traditional blouse differed significantly from that of all other products, except the beer jug (Bonferroni correction, all p 's $< .027$). For the services, a BMW museum tour was judged to be the most typically Bavarian service ($M_{\text{BMW tour}} = 4.92$, $SD = 1.50$). A repeated measures analysis with service type as within-subjects factor showed a significant main effect of service type ($F(9, 207) = 17.31$, $p < .001$). The typicality of the BMW museum tour was significantly higher than the typicality of four of the other services (Bonferroni correction, all p 's $< .007$).

In addition, participants were asked to evaluate 15 characteristics with the statement “I associate the following characteristics with Bavaria” with 7-point Likert scales (1 = *disagree*, 7 = *agree*). A repeated measures analysis with association type

Table 2. Means and standard deviations (between brackets) of evaluation of typically Bavarian characteristics (1 = *disagree*, 7 = *agree*; $n = 24$).

Characteristics	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Characteristics	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Traditional	6.33	0.64	Honest	4.13	1.23
Family-oriented	5.79	1.02	Friendly	4.13	1.60
High quality	4.71	1.30	Intelligent	4.04	1.30
Strong-minded	4.67	1.27	Passionate	4.00	1.47
Humorous	4.33	1.49	Warm	3.96	1.57
Reliable	4.25	1.11	Down-to-earth	3.79	1.72
Professional	4.17	0.96	Tolerant	2.71	1.60
Trustworthy	4.17	1.61			

as within-subjects factor showed a significant main effect of characteristics ($F(14, 322) = 15.72$, $p < .001$, Bonferroni correction, all p 's $< .05$). Traditional ($M_{\text{Traditional}} = 6.33$, $SD = 0.64$), family-oriented ($M_{\text{Family-oriented}} = 5.79$, $SD = 1.02$), and high quality ($M_{\text{High quality}} = 4.71$, $SD = 1.30$) were rated among the highest characteristics (Table 2).

Results from the pretest were used to script a commercial for a typically Bavarian product and service, respectively. The three characteristics rated as most typically Bavarian (traditional, family-oriented and high-quality) were used in the text of the commercials.

The scripts for the commercials were revised by a commercial writer. The scripts for the commercial were identical, apart from the promoted product or service:

Bayern - ein Land von Qualität und Tradition. Ein Ziel für die ganze Familie. Besuchen Sie uns und erleben Sie die Bayrische Kultur mit [den Trachtenblusen von Trachten-für-dich/den Führungen im BMW Museum]. Sichern Sie sich jetzt tolle Rabatte mit unseren 2-für-1 Gutscheinen. Weitere Informationen finden Sie auf unserer Website: www.trachtenfürdich.de. Nur solange der Vorrat reicht.

[Bavaria - a land of quality and tradition. A destination for the whole family. Visit us and experience Bavarian culture with [the traditional blouses of traditional-dress-for-you/the guided tours in the BMW museum]. Get your discount now with our 2-for-1 vouchers. For further information, please visit our website: www.trachtenfürdich.de. Only while supplies last.]

Pretest commercials

After the commercials had been recorded by the voice actor, a second pretest was carried out to

measure listeners' perceptions of the speakers' naturalness and speaking style (Hendriks, van Meurs, and de Groot 2017). The commercials were evaluated by 43 native German listeners (age: $M = 26.63$, $SD = 8.99$; range: 18–59; 88.4% female; 53.3% students). Each participant evaluated one commercial only. Listeners came from different regions in Germany, such as North Rhine-Westphalia (29.5%), Hessen (10.3%), and Rhineland-Palatinate (7.8%). The majority of respondents (69.8%) had a higher education degree. Speaking style was measured with five 7-point Likert scales anchored by “*disagree-agree*”: “The speaker has a good intonation/pace/pronunciation,” “The speaker is convincing,” and “The speaker has a natural pronunciation” ($\alpha = .88$). A Kruskal-Wallis H test for speaking style ($\chi^2(5) = 3.51$, $p = .622$) showed that the speaker was perceived as having a similar style across all commercials.

Participants

Participants were approached via social media, face-to-face communication, flyers, and e-mail between April 20 and May 19, 2016, using snow-ball and convenience sampling. We aimed at recruiting a geographically diverse sample. A link to an online questionnaire (Qualtrics) was sent to listeners willing to take part, who filled in the questionnaire in their own time. The questionnaire was presented to listeners as part of consumer research by an advertising agency. A total of 641 German native speakers started the questionnaire. Participants who did not complete the questionnaire were removed from the data set. A total of 218 German native speakers actually completed the questionnaire (age: $M = 37.01$, $SD = 15.39$, range: 18–76; 64.2% female; 39.1% students). Participants originally came from different regions, such as North Rhine-Westphalia (26.4%), Rhineland-Palatinate (15.8%), and Bavaria (13.8%). A third of listeners (32.3%) indicated they “never” speak a dialect, while 5.0% indicated they “always” speak a dialect. An overall majority of listeners were highly educated (Bachelor's degree: 26.1%, Master's degree: 23.4%, and apprenticeship or polytechnic education: 22.9%). Gender and age were equally distributed

Table 3. Number of participants per version of the commercials.

Type of commercial	Accent strength	Number of participants
Product	Strong Bavarian	38
	Moderate Bavarian	36
	Standard German	35
Service	Strong Bavarian	38
	Moderate Bavarian	35
	Standard German	36

across versions (gender: $\chi^2(10) = 5.15$, $p = .881$, age: $F(5, 218) = 1.14$, $p = .342$). The number of participants per version of the commercials is displayed in Table 3.

Design

For this experiment, a between-subject design was used. The German participants listened to only one of the six radio commercials developed for this study. There were two types of commercial: one for a product and one for a service. Each of these two types was recorded with three degrees of accentedness: strong Bavarian, moderate Bavarian, and standard German. Thus, the experiment had a 2 (type of commercial: product/service) \times 3 (accent: strong/moderate/standard) between-subject design, in which each listener evaluated one radio commercial in an online questionnaire. This resulted in six online questionnaires. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the questionnaires by a computer script.

Instruments

Listeners filled in an online questionnaire, in German, in which they evaluated the commercials on attitude towards the commercial, attitude towards the product or service, purchase intention, and impressions of the speaker. In addition, we also measured perceived comprehensibility of the radio commercial to control for effects of accent strength on comprehensibility. Accent strength recognition was measured to serve as a manipulation check.

Attitude towards the commercial was measured with five 7-point Likert scales ("I believe the commercial is nice/captivating/original/attractive/interesting"; Hendriks, van Meurs, and van der Meij 2015), anchored by "totally disagree–totally agree" ($\alpha = .89$).

Attitude towards the product or service was measured with five 7-point Likert scales anchored by "totally disagree–totally agree" (Hendriks, van Meurs, and van der Meij 2015): "I believe the product/service is nice/captivating/original/attractive/interesting" ($\alpha = .91$).

Purchase intention was measured with three 7-point semantic differentials (based on Hornikx, van Meurs, and Hof 2013): "Buying this product is..." "something I never want to do something I certainly want to do," "really not something for me/really something for me," and "something I would not recommend to my friends/something I would recommend to my friends" ($\alpha = .93$).

Impressions of the speaker was measured with twelve 7-point Likert scales (based on Fiske et al. 2002). All Likert scales were introduced by the statement "I believe the speaker is," and anchored by "totally disagree–totally agree." Competence was measured with the items "efficient," "competent," "skillful," "confident," "capable," and "intelligent" ($\alpha = .91$). Warmth was measured with the items "trustworthy," "friendly," "sincere," "good-natured," "well-intentioned," and "warm" ($\alpha = .93$).

Perceived comprehensibility was measured with one 7-point Likert scale following the statement "I believe the radio commercial is comprehensible" (Hendriks, van Meurs, and van der Meij 2015) anchored by "totally disagree–totally agree."

Perceived accent strength was measured with a 7-point semantic differential (based on Mai, Hoffmann, and Müller 2009) following the statement: "I believe the accent of the speaker is..." anchored by "very weak–very strong."

Procedure

Before taking part in the experiment, listeners filled out a consent form stating that their participation was voluntary and anonymous, and that they could stop at any point during the experiment. Only participants who gave their consent were included in the study. Next, participants were asked to provide demographic information (gender, age, profession, region of birth, region and length of residence, and highest completed level of education). Subsequently, they were instructed to click on a sound file with the radio commercial, which they were then asked to

Table 4. Means and standard deviations for perceived accent strength of the product and service commercials with a strong, moderate or standard accent (1 = *weak*, 7 = *strong*).

Commercial	Accent	Perceived accent strength		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Product	Strong	4.61	1.62	38
	Moderate	4.11	1.49	36
	Standard	2.06	1.45	35
	Total	3.62	1.87	109
Service	Strong	5.08	1.22	38
	Moderate	3.83	1.50	35
	Standard	2.11	1.39	36
	Total	3.70	1.83	109
Total	Strong	4.84	1.44	76
	Moderate	3.97	1.49	71
	Standard	2.08	1.41	71
	Total	3.66	1.85	218

Table 5. Means and standard deviations for perceived comprehensibility of the product and service commercials with a strong, moderate, or standard accent (1 = *low*, 7 = *high*).

Commercial	Accent	Perceived comprehensibility		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Product	Strong	5.00	1.82	38
	Moderate	5.28	1.72	36
	Standard	5.17	1.81	35
	Total	5.15	1.77	109
Service	Strong	4.68	1.90	38
	Moderate	5.20	1.80	35
	Standard	5.06	1.79	36
	Total	4.97	1.83	109
Total	Strong	4.84	1.86	76
	Moderate	5.24	1.74	71
	Standard	5.11	1.79	71
	Total	5.06	1.80	218

evaluate on 7-point scales. The first five scales measured attitudes towards product/service, followed by five scales measuring attitudes towards the radio commercial, three scales measuring purchase intention, twelve scales measuring attitudes towards the speaker in the radio commercial, and one scale measuring comprehensibility. Finally, participants answered a question about the speaker's accent strength, which served as a manipulation check. On average, filling in the questionnaire took between 5 and 10 min. Two 20€ gift cards were raffled off among all listeners.

Results

The present study investigated the effects of a regional accent with differing accent strengths (strong, moderate, and standard) in radio commercials for a congruent product or service on listeners' attitude towards the commercial, attitude towards the product or service, purchase

intention, perceived comprehensibility, and impressions of the speaker.

Manipulation check

A two-way univariate analysis of variance with accent and type of commercial as factors revealed a significant main effect for perceived accent strength ($F(2, 212) = 86.79, p < .001, \eta^2 = .39$). The strong accent ($M_{\text{Strong}} = 4.84, SD = 1.44$) was perceived to be significantly stronger than the moderate accent ($M_{\text{Moderate}} = 3.97, SD = 1.49$), which was, in turn, perceived to be significantly stronger than the standard accent ($M_{\text{Standard}} = 2.08, SD = 1.41$; Bonferroni correction, all p 's $< .002$). The main effect for Commercial ($F(1, 212) < 1$) and the interaction effect between Accent and Commercial were not significant ($F(2, 212) = 1.26, p = .287$). Thus, the manipulation of accent strength in the commercials can be deemed successful. Table 4 shows means and standard deviations for perceived accent strength in function of accent strength and type of commercial.

Perceived comprehensibility

A two-way univariate analysis of variance with Accent and Commercial as factors revealed no significant main effects or interaction effect on perceived comprehensibility (Accent: ($F(1, 212) < 1$; Commercial ($F(1, 212) < 1$; Accent \times Commercial ($F(1, 212) < 1$). All commercials were equally comprehensible. Table 5 shows means and standard deviations for perceived comprehensibility in function of accent strength and type of commercial.

Hypothesis testing

To test our hypotheses, a two-way multivariate analysis of variance was conducted for attitude towards the commercial, attitude towards the product/service, purchase intention, perceived competence, and warmth of speaker with as factors Commercial (product/service) and Accent (strong/moderate/standard). This analysis revealed a significant multivariate effect of Commercial ($F(5, 208) = 5.16, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$), but not of Accent

Table 6. Means and standard deviations of the product and service commercials with a strong, moderate, or standard accent for attitude towards the commercial, attitude towards the product, purchase intention, perceived warmth, and competence of the speaker (1 = negative/low, 7 = positive/high).

		Attitude commercial		Attitude product		Purchase intention		Competence speaker		Warmth speaker		n
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Product	Strong	3.09	1.42	2.56	1.41	2.98	1.55	3.73	1.33	4.12	1.30	38
	Moderate	2.63	1.21	2.54	1.12	2.59	1.46	3.94	1.09	4.47	1.32	36
	Standard	2.57	1.25	2.10	1.17	2.17	1.16	3.69	1.42	3.56	1.49	35
	Total	2.77	1.31	2.41	1.25	2.59	1.43	3.79	1.28	4.05	1.41	109
Service	Strong	2.79	1.03	2.38	1.23	3.18	1.44	3.76	.87	3.79	1.25	38
	Moderate	2.91	1.44	2.25	1.31	3.38	1.75	3.89	1.48	3.71	1.64	35
	Standard	3.51	1.37	3.01	1.38	3.56	1.40	4.26	1.13	4.12	1.40	36
	Total	3.07	1.31	2.55	1.33	3.37	1.53	3.97	1.19	3.88	1.43	109
Total	Strong	2.94	1.24	2.47	1.32	3.08	1.49	3.75	1.12	3.95	1.28	76
	Moderate	2.77	1.33	2.40	1.22	2.98	1.65	3.92	1.29	4.10	1.53	71
	Standard	3.05	1.39	2.56	1.35	2.88	1.46	3.98	1.30	3.85	1.46	71
	Total	2.92	1.32	2.48	1.29	2.98	1.53	3.88	1.23	3.96	1.42	218

($F(10, 418) = 1.35, p = .202$). The multivariate interaction effect for Commercial \times Accent was also significant ($F(10, 418) = 2.13, p = .021, \eta^2 = .05$). Table 5 displays the means and standard deviations of the dependent variables, per Commercial (product/service) and Accent.

Univariate analyses showed significant interaction effects between Commercial and Accent for all dependent measures except competence: attitude towards commercial ($F(2, 212) = 4.22, p = .016, \eta^2 = .04$), attitude towards product/service ($F(2, 212) = 4.85, p = .009, \eta^2 = .04$), purchase intention ($F(2, 212) = 3.05, p = .049, \eta^2 = .03$), and perceived warmth of speaker ($F(2, 212) = 4.06, p = .019, \eta^2 = .04$). The absence of a significant effect for competence provides no support for H1a, which predicted that regionally accented spokespersons in commercials would be attributed less competence than spokespersons with standard accents.

Separate one-way ANOVAs were carried out for product and service commercials, respectively, with Accent as factor, and attitude towards the commercial, attitude towards the product, purchase intention, and perceived warmth of the speaker as dependent variables. For the product commercials, the different accent strengths in the commercials had a significant effect on one variable only: perceived warmth of speaker ($F(2, 106) = 3.94, p = .022$). Listeners attributed more warmth to the speaker in the moderately accented commercials ($M_{\text{Moderate}} = 4.47, SD = 1.30$) than to the speaker in the commercials with a standard accent ($M_{\text{Standard}} = 3.56, SD = 1.49$; Bonferroni

correction, $p = .019$). This provides partial support for H1b, which predicted that regionally accented spokespersons would be attributed more warmth than standard accented spokespersons.

For the product commercials, accent strength did not affect listeners' attitude towards the commercial ($F(2, 106) = 1.81, p = .169$), attitude towards the product ($F(2, 106) = 1.54, p = .219$), or purchase intention ($F(2, 106) = 3.04, p = .052$). The findings for the product commercials do not provide support for H3, which predicted that commercials with a regionally accented spokesperson would generate a more positive attitude towards the commercial (H3a), a more positive attitude towards the product/service (H3b), and higher purchase intention (H3c) than commercials with a standard accented spokesperson.

For the service commercials, the different accent strengths in the commercials had a significant effect on two variables: attitude towards the commercial ($F(2, 106) = 3.24, p = .043$) and attitude towards the service ($F(2, 106) = 3.52, p = .033$). For attitude towards the commercial, none of the Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons revealed significant differences between the different accent strengths (all p 's $> .054$). For attitude towards the service, listeners evaluated the commercial with the moderately accented speaker ($M_{\text{Moderate}} = 2.25, SD = 1.31$) less positively than the commercial with the standard accented speaker ($M_{\text{Standard}} = 3.01, SD = 1.38$; Bonferroni correction: $p = .045$). Accent strength was not found to have a significant effect on purchase intention ($F(2, 106) < 1$) and warmth of

the speaker ($F(2, 106) < 1$). Table 6 displays the means and standard deviations of the main variables, per type of commercial (product/service).

The findings for the service commercials provide no support for H3, which predicted that commercials with a regionally accented spokesperson would generate a more positive attitude towards the commercial (H3a) and higher purchase intention (H3c) than commercials with a standard accented spokesperson. In fact, the findings for the service commercials go against H3b, which predicted that commercials with a regionally accented spokesperson would generate a more positive attitude towards the product/service (H3b) than commercials with a standard accented spokesperson.

Our findings do not provide any support for H2, which predicted that spokespersons with a stronger regional accent would be evaluated more negatively than spokespersons with a weaker regional accent.

Conclusion and discussion

Advertisers regularly use regionally accented spokespersons in commercials, but it is not clear if the use of accents is effective. Studies of accent-ness in noncommercial contexts have shown that regional accentedness can have both adverse and positive effects on how speakers are perceived (Grondelaers, van Hout, and Steegs 2010) and that stronger accents may be evaluated more negatively than weaker accents (Dragojevic et al. 2017; Hendriks, van Meurs, and de Groot 2017). An argument in favor of using regional accents in commercials for regional products or services is that an accent may enhance product/service – origin congruence (Ivanič, Bates, & Somasundaram 2014; Kelly-Holmes 2005; Puzakova, Kwak, and Bell 2015). To date, few studies have investigated the effectiveness of using regional accents in commercials (Martín-Santana et al. 2015; Reinares-Lara, Martín-Santana, and Muela-Molina 2016) and, to the best of our knowledge, none have included accent strength.

The aim of the current study was to contribute to existing research about the evaluations of regional accents in radio commercials in an

experiment incorporating different degrees of regional accentedness. Based on sociolinguistic studies (Giles 1970, 1972; Grondelaers, van Hout, and Steegs 2010), we designed an experiment which measured attitude towards the spokesperson with a strong or moderate regional accent versus a standard accent in terms of competence and warmth. Following the logic of the hierarchy of effects model (Barry and Howard 1990; Lavidge and Steiner 1961), we measured the effect of the spokesperson's accent on evaluations of the commercial in terms of attitude towards the commercial, attitude towards the product/service, and purchase intention. A manipulation check showed that accent strength was successfully manipulated in the commercials, in that listeners distinguished different degrees of accent strength.

Comprehensibility

Studies have shown mixed findings for the impact of accent strength on comprehensibility, with some studies showing that stronger accents are less easy to understand (Dragojevic et al. 2017; Hendriks, van Meurs, and Hogervorst 2016; Stibbard and Lee 2006) and others that accent strength does not affect comprehensibility (Munro and Derwing 1995a, 1995b; Nejari et al. 2012). In view of a possible effect of comprehensibility on attitudinal evaluations of accented spokespersons (Dragojevic et al. 2017), the experiment included a measure of perceived comprehensibility of the spokespersons to control for a confounding effect of comprehension of the regional accents. Our findings for comprehensibility revealed no differences between the differently accented spokespersons, which confirms that accent strength does not necessarily impede comprehension. In addition, the absence of effects for comprehensibility suggests that any differences in evaluations of the three accent varieties were not due to comprehensibility. This is in contrast to what was found in Dragojevic et al. (2017). An explanation for this lack of effect of accentedness on comprehensibility may be that the accents in the current study were regional (i.e. Bavarian German for German listeners) and, therefore, not as foreign as the accents in

Dragojevic et al. (i.e. Mandarin Chinese and Punjabi for U.S. American listeners).

Evaluations of spokespersons

Our first hypothesis (H1) predicted that regionally accented spokespersons in commercials would be evaluated differently than spokespersons with standard accents in terms of competence and warmth. Our study found partial support for H1a in that for warmth of the speaker (H1a), accent strength did affect listeners' evaluations of the radio commercials. For the product commercial, listeners evaluated the speaker as warmer in the commercial with a moderate Bavarian accent than in the commercial with a standard German accent. However, our study found no support for H1b, in that accent-ness did not affect evaluations of competence of the speaker (H1b) for either commercial. The finding that speakers with a moderate accent were attributed more warmth than speakers with a standard accent, for the product commercial, is in line with the general findings in sociolinguistics that speakers with regional accents are evaluated higher on solidarity and likeability than speakers with a standard accent (Grondelaers, van Hout, and Steegs 2010; Marlow and Giles 2008; Ryan 1979; Schoel and Stahlberg 2012; Trudgill 1974). The contribution of our findings for warmth is that the positive effect of a regional accent was also shown to apply in an advertising context. The fact that speakers with standard accents were not evaluated as more competent than speakers with regional accents is not in line with general findings in sociolinguistics that speakers with regional accents are downgraded with respect to competence and status (Cargile and Giles 1997; Dragojevic, Giles, and Watson 2013). Our contribution is that, contrary to findings in these sociolinguistic studies, a regional accent did not lead to a spokesperson being downgraded in terms of competence. The fact that only one of the general effects (i.e. for warmth but not competence) was found may be explained by the commercial context in which the accents were used. It may be that listeners' resistance to persuasion (e.g. Knowles and Linn 2013) in this context canceled out effects that accents may have in

everyday, noncommercial contexts. Future research should therefore investigate the effects of standard versus regional accents in commercial and noncommercial contexts.

Accent strength

Our second hypothesis (H2) was that spokespersons with a stronger regional accent would be evaluated more negatively than spokespersons with a weaker regional accent. This hypothesis was not confirmed. The finding that, on the whole, accent strength did not affect listener evaluations is in contrast with findings that strongly accented speakers are evaluated less positively than less strongly accented speakers (e.g. Carlson and McHenry 2006; Giles 1972; Roessel et al. 2017), even though the different accent strengths were recognized as such in the current study. The contribution of our study is that it thus shows that stronger accents do not always attract negative evaluations. A possible explanation may be that both strongly accented and moderately accented speakers were considered to be equally comprehensible, as Dragojevic et al. (2017) found that the effect of accent strength on speaker evaluations was mediated by comprehensibility.

Evaluation of commercial and product

According to our third hypothesis (H3), commercials with a regionally accented spokesperson were expected to generate a more positive attitude towards the commercial (H3a), a more positive attitude towards the product/service (H3b), and higher purchase intention (H3c) than commercials with a standard accented spokesperson. Our findings provide no support for H3, in that commercials with a regionally accented spokesperson were not evaluated more positively in terms of attitude towards the commercial (H3a), attitude towards the product/service (H3b), or a higher purchase intention (H3c). For attitude towards the product/service, findings show that a service commercial with a moderately accented spokesperson was actually evaluated less rather than more positively than a service commercial with a standard accented spokesperson. The contribution of our study is that, in contrast to earlier studies,

accent was found to matter very little for the evaluation of commercial and product. In other words, while the accents were recognized and there was some influence of accent on the evaluation of the spokesperson, these more basic effects barely affected stages higher up in the hierarchy of effects.

The finding that, overall, the inclusion of a regional accent in a commercial did not affect listeners' evaluations of the commercial does not concur with findings in the majority of earlier studies that a standard accent works better than a local accent (e.g. Lalwani, Lwin, and Li 2005; Lwin and Wee 1999, 2000; Martín-Santana et al. 2015; Morales, Scott, and Yorkston 2012; Reinares-Lara, Martín-Santana, and Muela-Molina 2016), or that a standard accent works better for certain product categories (high involvement) while a local accent works better for other categories (Liu et al. 2013). A possible explanation for the discrepancy between the current study and previous research may be that the current study focused on a comparison between a standard accent and a regional accent that was comparatively well-known in the country under investigation. Findings in previous studies related to standard accents that were external to the country where the study was conducted (e.g. Lalwani, Lwin, and Li 2005: British English versus Singlish in Singapore; Lwin and Wee 1999, 2000: Singlish, Australian, Myanmar, British, Indian in Australia, Singapore, Myanmar; Morales, Scott, and Yorkston 2012: British RP versus Southern American English in the US). The study by Liu et al. (2013) investigated more extreme differences between regional and standard varieties, in the sense that Mandarin and Cantonese belong to different Chinese language families (Mair 1991). In other words, regional accents that are not so well-known may be more salient because listeners are less familiar with them than well-known regional accents.

Investigations by Martín-Santana et al. (2015) and Reinares-Lara, Martín-Santana, and Muela-Molina (2016) are more similar to the current study in that they investigated differences between standard Spanish and a local variety (Canarian Spanish), but the authors themselves point out that the Canarian accent is not well-known in mainland Spain, unlike the Bavarian

accent in Germany, which again, may have increased its salience. In addition, unlike in the current study, their advertisements were public service commercials (promoting blood donation) and it may be argued that a standard accent may be considered more appropriate for government-initiated messages. The finding that the standard accent in the current study did not result in more positive evaluations than the local accent may be explained by the relatively high (socio-intellectual) status of the Bavarian accent in Germany (e.g. Rakic, Steffens, and Mummendey 2011). In future research, the standard accent should be compared with regional accents that are known to have lower status than the standard accent (e.g. Saxon for Germany).

Findings in the current study do not support the match-up hypothesis (Lynch and Schuler 1994), in that the combination of a local product/service with a local accent did not result in more positive evaluations than the combination of local product/service with a standard accent. This is not in line with Ivanič, Bates, and Somasundaram (2014) and Puzakova, Kwak, and Bell (2015), who found that, at least for ethnic accents, a match between accent and product/service (e.g. Hispanic-American and landscaping) did enhance evaluations of spokesperson credibility. A possible explanation may be that ethnic stereotypes are stronger than regional stereotypes. Lalwani, Lwin, and Li (2005) also found that the match-up effect did not occur and that, in fact, the credibility of a spokesperson with a local accent (Singlish) for a local product was evaluated more negatively than a spokesperson with a standard (British) accent. A possible explanation for the finding that in the current study no negative effects of the use of a local accent were found may be the relatively high status of Bavarian in Germany (Rakic, Steffens, and Mummendey 2011). A possible explanation for the finding that the use of a local accent did not result in positive effects when used in advertising with a congruent local product/service may be that the use of a regional accent in itself did not provide sufficient cues to activate Bavarian stereotypes. Future research should incorporate more cues relating to localness, such as costumes, music, and landscapes typical of the region.

Products versus services

The finding that the role of accents in product commercials was not evaluated differently than in service commercials for the majority of measures is not in line with Mai and Hoffmann's suggestion (2010, 2014) that accents are more important for services because they are intangible and that therefore the impression consumers depend more on the communication, for instance the spokesperson's accent. In fact, however, the effect found in our study was for product commercials: the speaker in the product commercials was attributed more warmth when he spoke with a moderate accent than with a standard accent, and no such effect occurred for the service commercials. Just like our study, Ivanič, Bates, and Somasundaram (2014) found hardly any differences in effect of accent for product and service commercials. For both product and service commercials, Ivanič et al. showed that similarity in accent between spokesperson and listener had a positive effect on spokesperson credibility and attitude towards spokesperson, while for services, but not for products, spokesperson accent and product congruence resulted in higher purchase intention for listeners who considered themselves higher similar to the spokesperson. The lack of differences in effects of accents in the current study and Ivanič, Bates, and Somasundaram (2014) may be explained because in both studies the effects of accents were tested in commercials, where the difference in tangibility between products and services may not have been a factor. Nevertheless, both studies found a limited number of differences regarding the effects of accents for products and services, not all of which were more favorable for services, as predicted by Mai and Hoffmann (2010, 2014). Future research should explore how such differences can be explained if not through a difference in tangibility.

Limitations

A limitation of the present study is that it tested the effect of accent strength for only one product and one service which were typical of the region where the accent was spoken. Future research should investigate more region-specific products

and services to increase generalizability of findings. A further limitation of this study is that only one regional accent was used. It has been shown that different regional accents may be evaluated differently (Grondelaers, van Hout, and Steegs 2010). Based on previous research, the most sympathetic and best-known regional German accent was chosen for the present study (Gärtig, Plewnia, and Rothe 2010; Plewnia and Rothe 2012). Accents which are less well-known and considered less favorably may be less effective than the standard accent.

Managerial implications

The current study is the first study to investigate the effects of different degrees of regional accent strength versus a standard accent in radio commercials advertising a product or a service. In contrast to previous suggestions and empirical studies, on the majority of measures no effects were found for different degrees of regional accent strength, of regional versus standard accent, or for product versus services. The managerial implication of this lack of effect is that marketers need not invest time and money in developing radio commercials in which regional products or services are advertised using matching regionally accented spokespersons.

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