

Running head: REGIONAL ACCENTS AS A MEANS OF PERCEPTION

Using Regional Accents to Form First

Impressions of a Speaker

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Abstract

Previous research indicates that accents can have a powerful influence on first impression formation. The current study builds on previous work by examining how general stereotypes interact with geographic proximity to influence attitudes toward a speaker with a marked regional U.S. accent. Participants in this study listened to one of five randomly assigned accents (Midwestern, Boston, Southern, Minnesotan and Californian) and completed a survey in which they evaluated the degree to which the speaker is likely to display various demographic and personal characteristics (e.g., intelligence). Participants were also asked to list their hometown and current zip codes. The researchers hypothesize that some accents will receive more positive ratings than others (reflecting overall stereotypes). In addition, the researchers hypothesize that accent will interact with distance such that participants will evaluate speakers living in closest to their hometown more favorably (reflecting in-group preferences).

Person Perception: Using Regional Accents to Form First Impressions of a Speaker

First impressions play an important role in many social situations such as job interviews, application processes, legal testimonies and business transactions. In one particularly impressive example of this phenomenon, Ambady and Rosenthal (1993) asked participants to form global impressions of professors after watching a clip of them teaching for 30 seconds. Participants' first impressions predicted the college professors' end-of-semester student evaluations very strongly, with a correlation of .76. These results not only show that first impressions are formed quickly, but they also suggest that first impressions can be remarkably accurate. At the same time, first impressions can often fail us. For example, we may not take situational variables into account when evaluating a speaker (e.g., perhaps the speaker is simply having a bad day or is outside his or her realm of comfort). We may also rely on stereotypes to form first impressions of others. In these instances, our first impressions of a person may not be as accurate as those formed in the Ambady and Rosenthal (1993) study.

Several studies have shown the importance of appearance in the formation of first impressions. For example, Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani and Longo (1991) found that physical attractiveness affected judgments of competency and sociability. However, appearance is not the only determining factor in the formation of initial conceptions of another person. Many initial social interactions occur by way of telephone and in such cases what is said and how it is said can have a significant impact on the listener's view of the speaker. While speakers may be able to control the content of their speech to a substantial degree, the speaker's accent is more or less constant and not necessarily under the control of the speaker. Changing one's accent is a gradual process that depends on whether one moves from their home region and also on age, career and

“how many different sorts of [people] with different types of accents surround” a person (Esling, 1998). As one begins to slowly adapt to their new surroundings they will change their accent to fit in with their new location.

Esling (1998) states that “accent defines and communicates who we are. Accent is the map which listeners perceive through their ears rather than through their eyes to ‘read’ where the speaker was born and raised, what gender they are, how old they are, etc...” Consistent with this interpretation, past research has shown that accent plays a significant role in first impressions and subsequent action towards the speaker. Purnell, Idsardi and Baugh (1999) found that listeners discriminated against a speaker searching for an apartment based upon the speaker’s accent. The researchers manipulated the accent of the speaker by making him sound African American, Caucasian or Chicano and proceeded to call several ethnically diverse areas in search of an apartment. The results showed that overall the Caucasian accent received more returned calls than the African American accent, and the Chicano accent was contacted the least (Purnell et al., 1999). However, as the ethnic diversity increased or became similar to that of the speaker, an in-group preference appeared and the returned call rate for the minority accents increased. Clearly, the differences in the speakers’ accents were significant enough to change the impressions of the potential landlords, and thus affect the call back rates. Each time the speaker said approximately the same thing, yet the listener did not judge solely on the content, but also the accent in which the content was produced.

The results of Purnell et al. (1999) have been extended to regional accents as well, with some evidence that speakers who do not use the standard accent for their region or country are often judged harshly in the formation of first impressions. In one study, Dixon and Mahoney (2004) found that British participants rated speakers who used a non-standard regional accent as

more likely to commit a crime than those who used a Standard English accent. Similarly, Preston (1998) found that when participants were asked to rate a speaker according to “pleasantness” those speakers who received the highest rating were those whose accents most closely mirrored the participant’s. Together, these studies suggest that the listener infers many personality characteristics about the speaker from the speaker’s accent (Fuertes, Potere & Ramirez, 2002). In their literature review, Fuertes et al. (2002) found “speech accents have been shown to affect the listeners’ evaluations of speakers’ competence, social status, social attractiveness, personality, and similarity to the listener.”

There are at least two general processes by which accents may affect listeners’ evaluations of speakers. First, accents may elicit stereotypes because, as Harlow (1998) has noted, “people will often transfer to a language or dialect their opinions of the people whose language or dialect it is.” For example, Preston (1998) states that “the South is thought to be rural, backward and uneducated; its dialect is quite simply associated with the features assigned its residents. [New York City] fares little better.” New Yorkers are stereotyped as “brash, boorish, criminal [and] violent,” and therefore people associate the New York accent with the same stereotypes held about the residents of New York City (Preston, 1998). In addition, Preston (1998) has found that 64 percent of participants in his study believed that “bad English” is spoken in the Northeastern United States, and that the “bad English” label also connoted negative personal characteristics. Additionally, Giles and Niedzielski (1998) found “if [one] were to survey British people and ask them to rate how pleasant it would be to live in various cities and regions and then ask them to rate the pleasantness of the accents of these locales, there would be a very high correlation indeed between these two assessments.” In reality, no one

language, dialect, or accent is any more logical or linguistically complex than any other. Still, stereotypes persist and we use those stereotypes to guide our behavior (e.g., Purnell et al., 1999).

Second, the power of linguistic stereotypes may be influenced by the regional proximity of the listener to the speaker. Research on stereotype formation suggests that individuals develop a preference for people who are deemed part of their in-group. Consistent with this notion, Preston (1998) has found that participants from Michigan rated their accent and the region in which their accent is found as having a “normal” or “acceptable” accent, while giving poorer ratings to those areas in which Southern or New York City accents are found (Preston, 1998). Participants also identified other areas such as California, the Northern states (i.e. Minnesota) and Midwestern states (i.e. Illinois) as having less acceptable dialects or accents; however these ratings were still higher than those given to the Southern and New York regions (Preston, 1998).

The purpose of the present study is, then, to examine the degree to which regional English accents influence participants’ first impressions of a speaker. We anticipate that accents will elicit stereotypes that will influence listeners’ perceptions of the speaker, including their, criminality, level of education and use of tobacco. Moreover, as a group, participants will rate the Midwestern accent as having more desirable characteristics. We believe this will occur due to findings by Hammel (1999) which suggest that the standard American accent is a hybrid of the Midwestern accent, and is most often the accent used by national news anchors. Furthermore, as was demonstrated earlier, standard accents seem to be preferred in such studies as Dixon and Mahoney (2004). Lastly, we predict that there will be an in-group preference, with participants rating speakers from areas closest to their own region as having more desirable characteristics.

Method

Participants

We obtained 147 participants through email announcements, hits on the “Psychology on the Web” website (<http://psych.hanover.edu/research/SeniorProjects/2008/gilbertpaciorkowski/>) and through a social networking website (<http://www.facebook.com>). Of the 147 participants we had to eliminate 11 due to duplicate answers, in which the data indicated similar answers submitted at close time intervals. Four participants had to be eliminated because they were under the age of 18 and two participants were eliminated for failing to complete the survey. The participants ranged in age from 18 years of age to 78 years of age with a mean age of 24.46 years. Females accounted for 77.94 percent of the participants. The majority of participants indicated that they were Caucasian (76.47 percent) while 5.88 percent indicated that they were Black and 5.15 percent indicated that they were Hispanic. Some participants were introductory psychology students who received extra credit for their participation in the study.

Materials

Participants listened to a recording of a person speaking in one of five regional accents, completed a survey about their perceptions of the speaker and then a survey concerning their own demographics. The accents used were a standard Midwestern accent, a Boston accent, a Southern accent, a Minnesotan accent and a Californian accent. Each accent was produced by the same male speaker who read from the same script (see Appendix A) for each condition in order to control for confounding variables that might arise from using several speakers. The perception survey contained questions concerning participants’ reactions to the speaker such as the perceived honesty of the speaker, the speaker’s use of tobacco products and criminality (see Appendix B). The demographic survey contained questions regarding participants’ age, sex, and race (see Appendix B). Most importantly, participants’ hometown zip codes (i.e., the zip code in which they had lived the majority of their life) were obtained. Google Maps was used to

determine distances between the speakers' hometown and a midpoint of the area represented by the speaker. We chose zip code 02101 to represent the Boston accent, zip code 63101 (St. Louis, MO) to represent the Midwestern accent, zip code 36101 (Montgomery, AL) to represent the Southern accent, zip code 55401 (Minneapolis, MN) to represent the Minnesotan accent, and zip code 90265 (Malibu, CA) to represent the Californian accent.

Procedure

After obtaining informed consent, participants were directed to the webpage that contained the study and were asked to click on a sound file which contained one of the five accents. Participants were randomly assigned to an accent. After listening to the sound file, participants answered the person perception survey containing questions concerning the speaker and completed a survey concerning their own demographics. Once participants finished the person perception and demographics survey they were directed to a debriefing form.

Results

Data were analyzed with a series of hierarchical regression analyses with accent (effect coded), distance from speaker, and the interaction between accent and distance as predictor variables. In the interest of space and clarity, we limit our presentation to the prediction of the following dependent variables: tobacco usage, environment (e.g., how rural?), honesty, family orientation, education, criminality and the frequency that the speaker would call in sick to work. The pattern of results and interpretation for the remaining dependent variables are similar to those reported here and are available from the authors. We only analyzed the data obtained from the Boston, Midwestern and Southern accents because our participants were unable to correctly identify the Minnesotan and Californian accents. Only 22.58 percent of participants assigned the

Minnesotan accent were able to correctly identify it and only 18.52 percent of participants assigned the Californian accent were identify it.

Our results provided some support for our first hypothesis that participants would rate the speaker based upon regional stereotypes. Consistent with the stereotype of Southerners as unhealthy and as living in rural areas, the Southern speaker was rated as significantly more likely than the average speaker to use tobacco products, $\beta = .47$, $t(69) = 4.13$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1) and significantly more likely than average to live in a rural area, $\beta = .49$, $t(70) = 4.44$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 2). Our results also provide some support for our second hypothesis that participants would rate the Midwestern speaker as having more desirable characteristics. When the speaker used a Midwestern accent, he was viewed as being less likely than average to call in sick for work, $\beta = -.323$, $t(71) = -2.33$, $p < .05$, as having a significantly higher than average level of education, $\beta = .38$, $t(72) = 2.749$, $p < .05$, and as being significantly less likely than average to commit a crime, $\beta = -.318$, $t(72) = -2.29$, $p < .05$ (see Figures 3 through 5). While results supported our first and second hypothesis, our third hypothesis that participants' ratings would reflect in-group preferences, such that participants would rate speakers from an area closest in distance to their own region as having more desirable characteristics, was not supported. In fact, participants rated the speaker as significantly more honest ($\beta = .303$, $t(72) = 2.271$, $p < .05$) and significantly more family oriented ($\beta = .306$, $t(71) = 2.27$, $p < .05$) the farther the distance between the participant and the speaker.

Discussion

Overall, accent does play a role in first impression formation. Participants were rating the speaker differently based upon the accent the speaker used. Our results support previous research that accents do elicit stereotypes, and that people use those stereotypes to form a first

impression of a speaker. Furthermore, our results tend to support the notion that the Midwestern accent is the preferred accent, and that people view speakers with a Midwestern accent more favorably than speakers with other accents. As stated earlier this phenomenon could be due to the fact that many national newscasters use a hybrid of the Midwestern accent, and therefore almost all Americans have been exposed and habituated to a form of the Midwestern accent (Hammel, 1999).

While previous research indicates that people will rate speakers from their own region or regions close to their own region more favorably, our results showed the opposite. As the distance between our participants and speaker increased so did participants' favorable ratings. We believe that this finding might be attributed to a "grass is always greener effect." By this we mean that participants find it easier to recall negative examples of others with similar accents or from regions close to their own, therefore they attribute more positive characteristics to those accents farther away from them because those accents do not elicit any negative examples. However, we are still looking for previous research that supports our findings. However, it could be that this finding is just an anomaly within our study and data.

There are several limitations to this study that could have affected the results. First, as previously stated, we were only able to analyze three of our five accents because participants were unable to correctly identify the Californian and Minnesotan accents and the omission of participants hearing these accents ($N = 78$) from the data analyses further restricted our sample size. Another limitation of our study is the realism of the accents used. Our speaker tried to duplicate the various accents to the best of his ability, and while the accents do highlight specific characteristics for each region, the accents may not have been believable to participants who were already familiar with the accent they were assigned. When we presented our accents to our

classmates, several students and faculty members who are familiar with Southern and Bostonian accents remarked that, while our speaker did have some of the characteristics of a speaker from those regions, the accents were not particularly believable.

Overall, if this study were to be replicated, we feel that it would be best to use accents that are more representative of their respective regions. This would allow the researchers to control for problems that might arise from participants not finding the accents believable. Furthermore, it might be interesting to see how results might differ if the speaker were female. Due to time and resource constraints we were unable to look at the effects that accent might have on first impressions when coupled with gender of the speaker. Changing the speaker's gender may elicit even more stereotypes as the stereotypes activated by the accent would interact with those activated by gender. Future researchers may also want to choose a larger variety of accents from each region since there are many different accents in the regions we chose. For example, an Alabama accent is quite different from a South Carolina accent even though both states are considered to be in the South. We believe that by creating more realistic accents and looking at several different variables, researchers will be able to gain an even better understanding of how accents affect first impressions.

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Appendix A

Speaker's Script

I was in the park just the other day. The sun was out and there were almost no clouds in sight. The grass seemed greener and the water seemed bluer, making it a great day for a walk. However, the walk was soon turned into a run as the sky filled with clouds. I ran for cover hoping not to get soaked. Luckily, I made it just as it started to pour. It's amazing how fast the weather can change. Next time I walk, I'm bringing my umbrella.

Appendix B

Person Perception and Participant's Demographics Survey

Instructions: Please listen to the sound file and then answer the following questions to the best of your ability. The file is a Windows Media sound file, so you may need to install ActiveX in order for it to be played. Lastly, we understand that some of your answers may be guesses.

What is the age of the speaker?

What is the speaker's ethnicity? Select from choices: African American, Asian American, Caucasian American, Hispanic, Native American or Other.

What region do you think the speaker is from? Select from choices: East Coast, Midwest, South, and West Coast.

Is the speaker married? (Yes or No)

Does the speaker have children? (Yes or No)

How much do you think the speaker earns a year? (Free response)

What is the speaker's religious affiliation? Select from choices: Catholic, Islamic, Protestant, Jewish, Nonreligious, And Other

The following questions were answered on a one (1) to seven (7) Likert Scale unless indicated otherwise.

How likely is it that the speaker regularly attends religious services?

How likely is it that the speaker regularly calls in sick to work?

How likely is it that the speaker drives a sports utility vehicle (SUV)?

How likely is it that the speaker is family oriented?

How familiar does the speaker sound?

How likely is it that the speaker lives in a rural area?

How likely is it that the speaker lives in the suburbs?

How likely is it that the speaker lives in a city?

How easy going is the speaker?

How similar is the speaker to you?

How friendly is the speaker?

How likely is it that the speaker uses tobacco products?

How likely is it that the speaker enjoys sports?

How often does the speaker exercise?

How often does the speaker consume alcohol?

How likely is it that the speaker owns a firearm?

How honest is the speaker?

How sophisticated is the speaker?

How likely is the speaker to donate to charitable organizations?

How likely is it that the speaker would commit a crime?

If the speaker were to commit a crime, what type of crime would it be? Select from choices:
White Collar, Theft, Illegal Drug Use, Other, No Criminal Activity

How likely is it that the speaker holds prejudicial attitudes?

How concerned is the speaker about global climate change?

How likely is it that the speaker does volunteer work?

What are the political leanings of the speaker? (very liberal to very conservative)

Who would the speaker most likely support as a presidential candidate? Select from choices:
Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, John Edwards, John McCain, Mitt Romney Mike Huckabee,
Other

Instructions: Please answer all questions to the best of your ability and knowledge. All answers are anonymous and will be kept confidential.

What is your age?

What is your gender? Select from choices: Male, Female

Are you married? Select from choices: Yes, No

Do you have any children? Select from choices: Yes, No

If you answered yes to the previous question, how many children do you have? Free response

What is your ethnicity? Select from choices: African American, Asian American, Caucasian American, Hispanic, Native American or Other.

What is the zip code of the city/town in which you have lived the majority of your life? Free response

What is your current zip code? Free response

What is your highest level of education? Select from choices: Some high school, High school graduate, Some college, College graduate, Post graduate

If you are currently a college student, do you plan on attending graduate or professional school?

What is your profession (if not applicable, please indicate as so)? Free response

Approximately how much money do you earn in a given year (if not applicable, please indicate as so)? Free response

If you are a college student and still claimed by your parent(s) for tax purposes, what is the approximate yearly income for your family (if not applicable, please indicate as so)? Free response

Do you own a firearm? Select from choices: Yes, No

Do you use tobacco products? Select from choices: Yes, No

The following questions were answered on a one (1) to seven (7) Likert Scale unless indicated otherwise.

How religious are you?

How often do you consume alcohol?

How concerned are you about global climate change?

How often do you do volunteer work?

What are your political leanings? (very liberal to very conservative)

Which candidate do/did you support for the presidential candidacy? Select from choices: Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, John Edwards, John McCain, Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee, Other

Please check your answers. When you are done, push the button below.

Appendix C

Informed Consent

This research is being conducted by Michaelia Gilbert and Benjamin Paciorkowski, senior psychology students at Hanover College. The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine first impressions. You will be presented with a sound file which you will rate on various features. Then, you will complete a survey concerning demographic information.

The entire study is designed to take no more than 35 minutes. There are no known risks involved in being in this study, beyond those of everyday life. The information you provide during the study is completely anonymous; at no time will your name be associated with the responses you give.

If you have any questions during or after the study, please contact Michaelia Gilbert at gilbertm@hanover.edu or Benjamin Paciorkowski at paciorkowski@hanover.edu. You may also contact their advisor, Dr. Ellen Altermatt, at altermattel@hanover.edu.

By pressing the Continue button below, I acknowledge that I am participating in this study of my own free will. I understand that I may refuse to participate or stop participating at any time. If I wish, I may print a copy of this consent form.

Appendix D

Debriefing

The study in which you just participated was designed to measure the effect of accents on people's first impressions of a speaker. All participants in this study heard a speaker talk about a walk in the park. The accent of the speaker varied from participant to participant, with participants being randomly assigned to hear a Midwestern, Boston, Minnesotan, Southern, or Californian accent. We predict that participants will prefer accents that are most similar to those found in or near their hometown location.

Please do not discuss this study with other potential participants. If people know what we are testing before the study begins, they may respond differently, thus jeopardizing our results.

As soon as the results from this study are available, you will be able to read about them at the following website:

<http://psych.hanover.edu/research/SeniorProjects/2008/gilbertpaciorkowski/>

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about this research, please contact Ben Paciorkowski at paciorkowskib@hanover.edu or Michaelia Gilbert at gilbertm@hanover.edu. You can also contact their advisor, Dr. Ellen Altermatt at altermattel@hanover.edu.

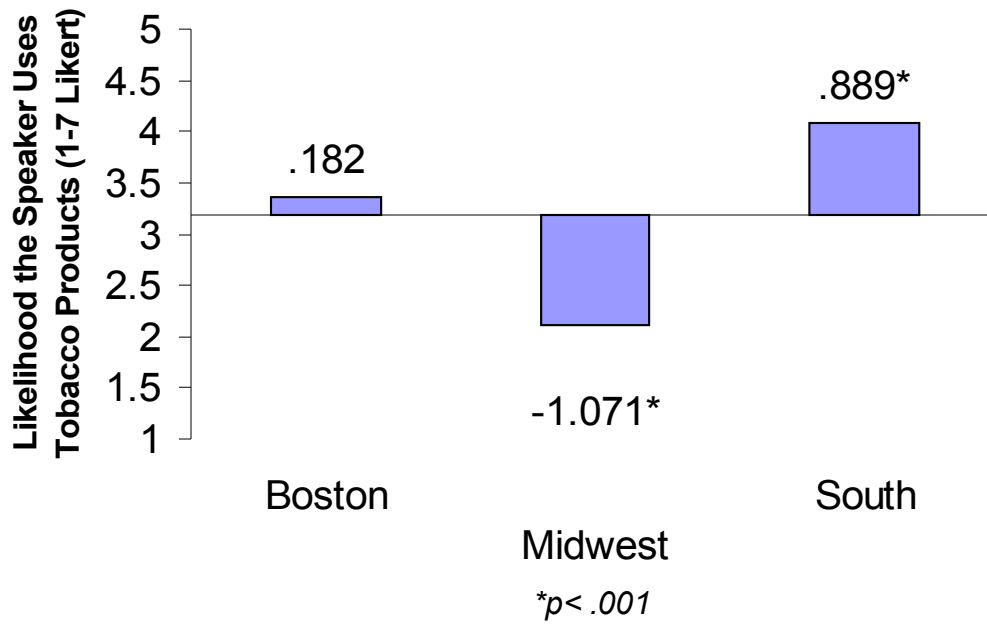


Figure 1. Results of the regression analyses for participants' ratings of the likelihood that the speaker uses tobacco products.

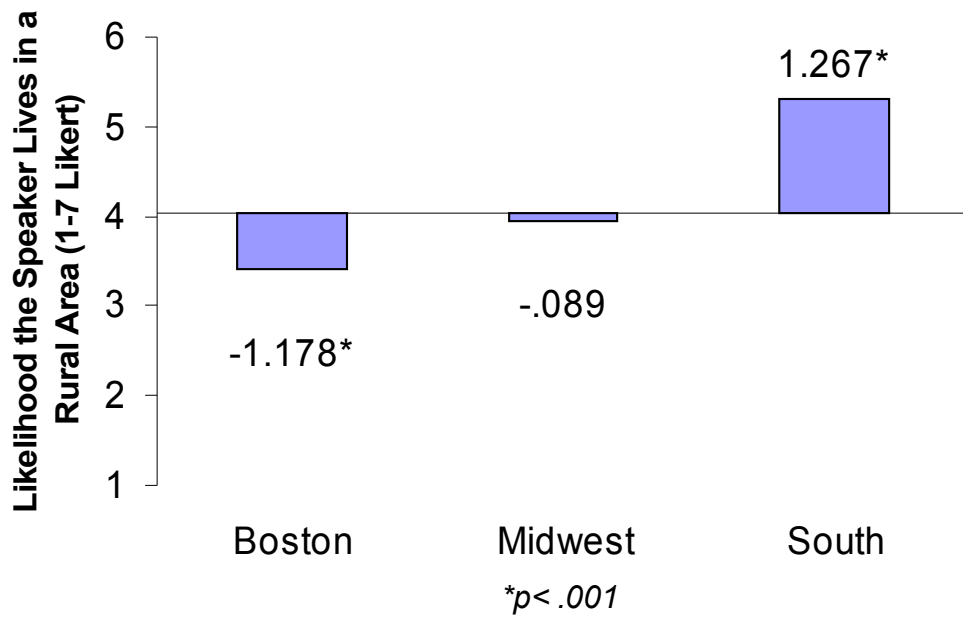


Figure 2. Results of the regression analyses for participants' ratings of the likelihood that the speaker lives in a rural area.

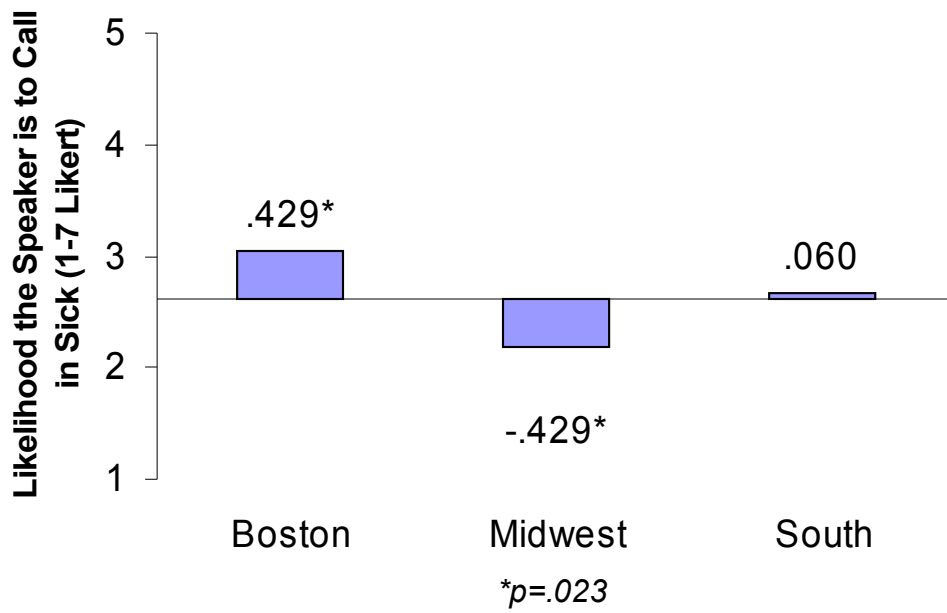


Figure 3. Results of regression analyses for participants' ratings of how likely the speaker was to call in sick to work.

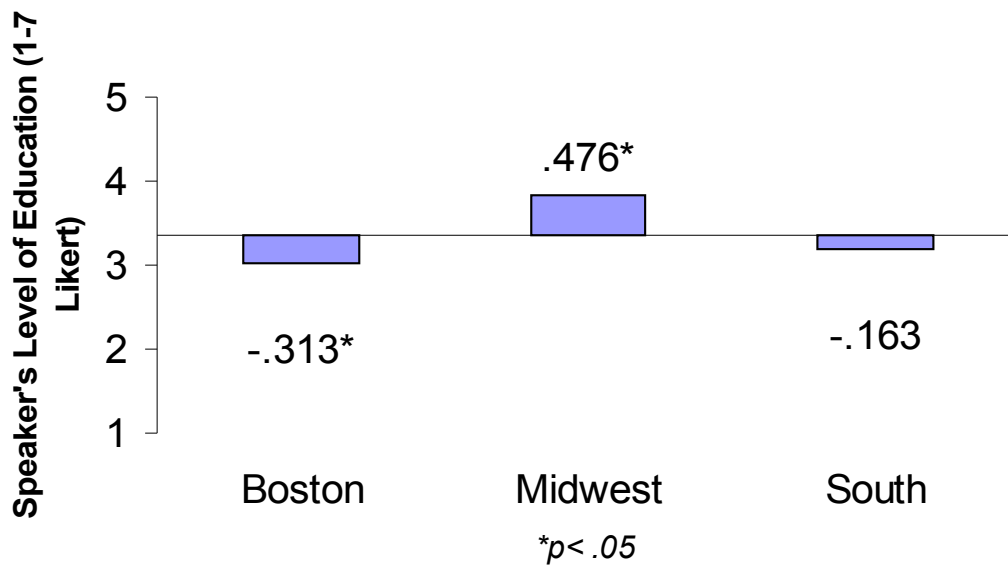


Figure 4. Results of regression analyses for participants' ratings of the speaker's level of education.

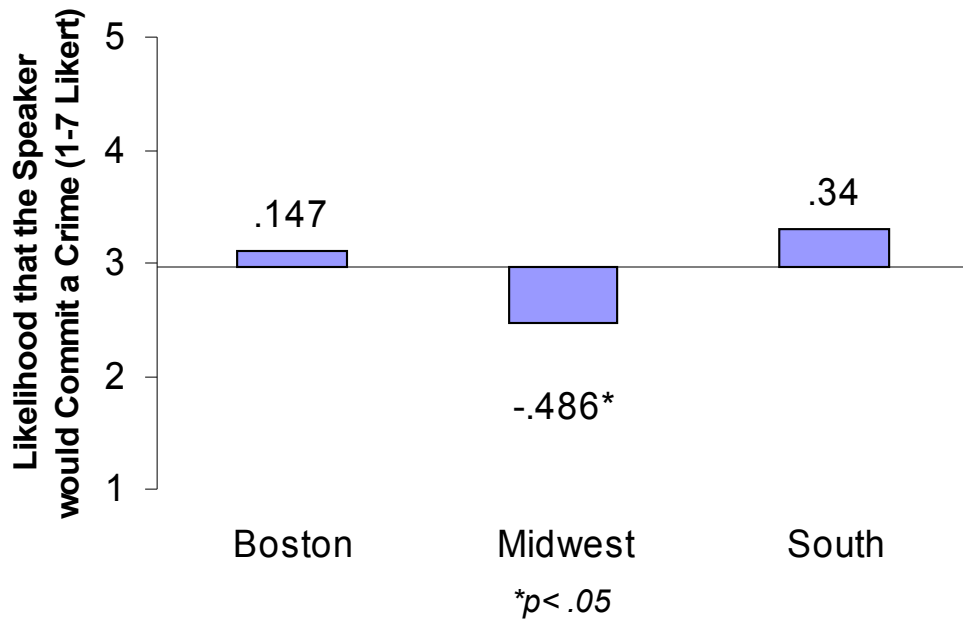


Figure 5. Results of regression analyses for participants' ratings of how likely the speaker was to commit a crime.