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Gender-based Variation in the Perception of Northern Irish Accents in Performance

SARA DÍAZ SIERRA*
University of Extremadura (Spain)

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ABSTRACT
This paper builds on previous research that explores the relationship between gender and language perception (Bishop et al., 2005; Coupland & Bishop, 2007). It investigates the influence of speakers' gender and listeners' gender, two variables that have been usually examined separately, on how voices with Northern Irish English (NIrE) accents are rated on the traditional dimensions of prestige and pleasantness. The questionnaire responses of 138 informants from Northern Ireland reveal two main trends: (1) female respondents award more favourable ratings on prestige and pleasantness than males; and (2) female voices are evaluated more positively than male voices. These trends corroborate previous findings by Bishop et al. (2005) and Coupland and Bishop (2007). Finally, this study also shows that the first of these trends is reversed when informants evaluate the voices on the *Mild-Broad* and *Intelligible-Unintelligible* scales, where the ratings by male participants are more favourable that those given by women.

KEYWORDS: Gender; Language Perception; Telecinematic Performances; Northern Irish English (NIrE); Questionnaire; Prestige; Pleasantness.

1. LANGUAGE PERCEPTION AND GENDER

Sociolinguists have long been interested in investigating the relationship between the variable of gender (referred to as *sex* in some previous work) and language. The first researcher to do that was Fischer (1958), who analysed the influence of gender on the pronunciation of ING endings by boys and girls in New England. Then came a number of scholars that explored the correlation between gender and linguistic variation in different parts of the US (Fasold, 1968;

Address for correspondence: Av. de las Letras, s/n, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Extremadura, 10003 Cáceres, Spain; e-mail: sarads@unex.es

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Levine & Crockett, 1966; Shuy et al., 1967; Wolfram, 1969). Labov (1966, 1972), whose research on postvocalic /r/ in New York remains to this day the most influential sociolinguistic study, was one of those scholars. Inspired by Labov's work, Trudgill (1972, 1974, 1997) carried out sociolinguistic research in the British city of Norwich. Labov's and Trudgill's examination of the link between gender and language resulted in the identification of a pattern according to which females seem to use more standard linguistic variants than males, who prefer non-standard or vernacular forms, a pattern corroborated by other scholars such as Macaulay (1976) and Milroy (1987). Using Trudgill's (1972) terms, females' use of language is governed by *overt prestige*, whereas males follow the rules of *covert prestige*. *Overt prestige* is the value that people ascribe to linguistic forms that they associate with upper-class speech. On the contrary, *covert prestige* is that privately attributed to non-standard forms. The most likely reason why overt prestige prevails among women is because females have traditionally had a marginalised position in society, being often excluded from the public sphere and relegated to the private sphere, that is, to domestic settings. The lower status of women compared to men has probably led them to "secure and signal their social status linguistically" (Trudgill, 1972: 182).

Another scholar who has significantly contributed to the study of language and gender is Eckert (1989, 1997, 2008, 2013, 2021). She diverges from the work of Labov and Trudgill, rejecting their view of gender as a binary variable with two separate categories: men and women. Instead, she argues that gender must be understood as a continuum. Her view of gender as something fluid rather than rigid allows for the recognition of non-binary gender identities which are worth of study. Moreover, in her study on the speech of adolescent boys and girls in a Detroit high school (Eckert, 1989, 2000), she shows that males' and females' use of language do not always conform to the gender pattern identified by Labov and Trudgill. Similarly, contrary to what these two scholars would expect, Cheshire and Fox (2009) find out that the use of a non-standard morphosyntactic construction is more frequent in the speech of female teenagers in outer London.

While gender-related variation does exist, the factor of gender has been usually examined in interaction with other extralinguistic variables such as social class, age, geographical location, ethnicity and social networks (Cheshire & Fox, 2009; Eckert, 1989, 1999; Milroy, 1987; Schilling-Estes, 1999). Milroy and Milroy, for instance, provide evidence of statistically significant interaction effects between gender and age, as well as between gender and area, in their analysis of a few phonological variables in Belfast (Milroy, 1987).

Eckert (1989) and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992, 1995, 1999) have played an important role when it comes to highlighting how gender frequently interacts with other social factors. Even though this paper only analyses gender due to time and space constraints, the data presented here come from a wider project that that investigates the interaction of gender with age, social class, ethnicity, hometown in Northern Ireland (anonymised reference).

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In addition to emphasising the need to explore the interplay between gender-based patterns and variation in terms of other extralinguistic factors, Eckert (2008, 2012) is concerned with researching the process by which some linguistic variables come to index different social identities and with how speakers use those variables in stylistically meaningful ways. This interest in the social meanings of linguistic forms is what defines the third wave of sociolinguistics to which researchers like Bucholtz (2010), Bucholtz and Hall (2005), Johnstone (2011), Johnstone et al. (2006), Levon (2014), Montgomery and Moore (2018), Moore and Podesva (2009), Podesva et al. (2015) and Campbell-Kibler (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010) have contributed.

Many of the studies above approach social meaning from the point of view of language perception an area that, despite deserving analysis, has been less frequently researched than language production. This paper aims to enlarge our knowledge about people's perceptions of linguistic variation and, more particularly, about the relationship between language perception and gender. Existing scholarly work that examines gender-based variation in the perception of language can be classified into two types. On the one hand, there is a body of literature that focuses on the influence of listeners' gender on attitudes towards and evaluations of language varieties or linguistic stimuli. In Britain, research carried out by Bishop et al. (2005) and Coupland and Bishop (2007), studies modelled after Giles' (1970) investigation into evaluations of a number of British accents, concludes that female respondents rate regional British accents more favourably on prestige and pleasantness than male informants. However, this gender trend is not reported in a more recent publication by Sharma et al. (2022). Their study, which replicates Coupland and Bishop (2007), suggests that while the factors of age, social class and ethnicity shape British people's attitudes toward regional variation in Britain in very much the same way as shown in Coupland and Bishop, gender does not have significant effects on respondents' ratings. A possible explanation for the disappearance of gender biases according to Sharma et al. (2022) has to do with advances in gender equality which probably contribute to debunking myths such as the idea that women must be nice.

The second type of perceptual studies encompasses those that analyse whether the gender of speakers influences the perception of language variation. Lambert (1967) briefly examined listeners' evaluations of male and female speakers of Canadian English and Canadian French. Nonetheless, the most representative scholarly works to explore the role of speakers' gender in language perception are Strand and Johnson (1996), Strand (1999) and Johnson et al. (1999). They design perceptual experiments that prove how listeners' perceptions of the fricative consonants /s/ and /ʃ/ and of the /ʌ/ and /ʊ/ vowels vary depending on whether the speaker is a man or a woman. In line with Eckert (1989), they observe that perceptions of male and female speech are not only influenced by physiological differences between men's and women's vocal tracts, but also, and even more so, by popular stereotypes about how men and women differ in their linguistic behaviour (see also Johnson, 2008). In addition, studies such as that by Naslund (1993) prove that the realisations of /s/ by eight-year-

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old girls and boys mirror female and male adults' realisations of the fricative. This evidence suggests that social conventions about gendered pronunciations prevail over man-woman physiological differences since eight-year-old children have not yet developed different vocal tracts. Coates (1993) provides an overview of studies which indicate that gender differences are present in people's speech from a young age. Some of the research she discusses concentrates on the process by which children acquire gender-differentiated language.

The effect of gender stereotypes on language perception is further reinforced in Strand (2000). She tests whether voices that conform to stereotypical female and male models facilitate word recognition. Her results show that listeners recognise a word more quickly when the speakers have stereotypical female/male voices than when the voices are non-stereotypically female/male. The same finding also emerges from Bosurgi's (2021) research, which replicates Strand's (2000) experiments using students at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver as her participants. Even though Bosurgi's findings are consistent with Strand's results to a large extent, Bosurgi identifies an effect that is not found in Strand: listeners process female speech more quickly than male speech.

Two other studies that investigate the effect of speakers' gender on the perception of speech are Drager (2005) and Hay et al. (2006). They illustrate how female subjects are more accurate at locating vowel boundaries in a DRESS/TRAP continuum when listening to a female voice. Two plausible explanations Drager (2005: 94-95) offers for this finding are the following. On the one hand, it could have to do with the fact that females tend to be more conscious of the links between language and social identities. On the other hand, Drager links her finding with females' greater exposure to female than to male speech.

Drawing from the previous research discussed above, this paper examines whether the perceptions of fictional portrayals of Northern Irish English (NIrE) accents by people from Northern Ireland are influenced by the gender of the speakers in some voice samples as well as by listeners' gender. More specifically, it aims to test two hypotheses that were formulated on the basis of findings from the research described above. The first of those hypotheses (H1) states that Northern Irish-accented female speech is more positively evaluated on all scales than male speech with a Northern Irish accent. Meanwhile, the second hypothesis (H2) suggests that women rate both male and female voices with a Northern Irish accent more favourably than men.

By investigating the influence of both speaker's and listener's gender on the perception of language, I allow for a more comprehensive view of the relationship between gender and language perception. Although the focus of this paper is on gender, the interplay between gender and the variable of speakers' social class, which proved to be meaningful in the context of Northern Ireland (McCaffertty, 1999: 186; Milroy, 1987), is also analysed.

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2. METHODOLOGY

The data analysed in this paper was collected through a large-scale questionnaire aimed at ascertaining whether the social factors of listeners' gender, age, social class, ethnicity and hometown have any influence on Northern Irish informants' evaluations of fictional representations of NIrE accents in terms of the traditional attitudinal dimensions of prestige and pleasantness. Those representations were presented to respondents as speech samples which they had to rate on a number of scales. Whereas (anonymised reference) focuses on the effect of all the social variables listed above, this study mainly deals with listeners' gender and gender of the stimuli speakers.

2.1. Stimuli

Unlike the speech samples used in most of the studies reviewed above, which are carefully created and highly controlled by the researcher, the stimuli for this study are samples of performed language. Performed language is understood here as language employed in *high performance events*, a term used by Coupland (2007: 147) to refer to performances that take place in front of an audience. The performances which served as the source of the stimuli discussed in this paper were Northern Irish TV shows and films (henceforth referred to as Northern Irish telecinematic performances). Even though some researchers have dismissed the study of performed language on the grounds that this type of language is artificial and far from spontaneous speech (Labov, 1966, 1972), many others (Amador-Moreno & McCafferty, 2011; Androutsopoulos, 2012; Bednarek, 2011, 2018; Bell & Gibson, 2011; Cohen Minnick, 2007; Gibson, 2011; Piazza et al., 2011; Planchenault, 2012; Walshe, 2009) have recognised that performed language is worthy of linguistic scrutiny. This acknowledgement derives from the realisation that "while fictional dialects do not operate in the same way as real world dialects, the former need to be seen in relation to the latter in order to convey meaning to the reader" (Amador-Moreno & Terrazas-Calero, 2017: 256). This paper analyses attitudinal responses to language as represented in some Northern Irish telecinematic performances. In so doing, it will shed some light on whether attitudes towards linguistic variation shown in high performance events are similar to evaluations of variation in highly controlled stimuli used in previous research on the relationship between language perception and gender.

The speech samples were 7 short extracts taken from telecinematic performances that met a number of criteria. For a TV show or film to be eligible, it had to be set in Northern Ireland, written or directed by Northern Irish scriptwriters/film-makers and released after 1998. Moreover, the main actors had to be from NI and the TV show/film should contain some NIrE pronunciation features. Considering all these requirements, speech samples (see appendix for the transcripts) were drawn from the films *Ups and Downs* (2019), *Counter Punch* (2019), *Bad Day for the Cut* (2017) and *Incoming Call* (2017); and from the TV shows *Pulling Moves* (2003), *Derry Girls* (2018-present) and *Soft Border Patrol* (2018-present). In

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addition to these seven samples, a control stimulus was included. This stimulus was a female voice with a Standard Southern British English (SSBE) accent taken from the TV series *The Fall* (2013-2016). The control speech sample was used as a benchmark against which the Northern Irish stimuli could be assessed.

The samples which contained a female voice were those taken from *Ups and Downs*, *Derry Girls* and *Incoming Call*. Conversely, the extracts from *Pulling Moves*, *Counter Punch*, *Soft Border Patrol* and *Bad Day for the Cut* displayed male speech. Care was taken to avoid presenting all the male-voice speech samples one after the other, as was done with the female-voice samples. Hence, the decision was made to alternate between male and female speakers. Whether a female or a male voice, all the stimuli contained NIrE pronunciation to a greater or lesser extent and some of them, namely *Derry Girls*, *Incoming Call*, *Pulling Moves* and *Soft Border Patrol*, also included grammatical and lexical features of the Northern Irish variety of English.

2.2. Scales

Once participants had listened to a stimulus, they were asked to rate the speaker's accent on four-point semantic differentials. The large-scale questionnaire mentioned earlier had 10 semantic differential scales, but only six of them are examined in this paper: *Educated-Uneducated*, *Pleasant-Unpleasant*, *Friendly-Unfriendly*, *Gentle-Tough*, *Mild-Broad* and *Intelligible-Unintelligible*. The first of these scales measured perceived prestige, one of the traditional dimensions along which lay people have been shown to evaluate language (Coupland & Bishop, 2007; Giles, 1970; Zahn & Hopper, 1985). There were two more scales measuring prestige in the questionnaire –*Standard-Non-Standard* and *Correct-Incorrect*–, but they will not be discussed as informants did not seem to understand them as they were expected to. The three following semantic differentials were representative of the traditional attitudinal dimension of pleasantness, also known as social attractiveness. Finally, the *Mild-Broad* and *Intelligible-Unintelligible* scales were incorporated because these are adjectives that people frequently use when describing someone's accent.

2.3. Participants

The type of sampling used for the recruitment of informants was convenience sampling which, as Zipp (2022: 153) explains, consists in selecting "the sample from cases that are conveniently available, based on practical criteria such as accessibility or the willingness to volunteer". All participants were unpaid volunteers. In addition, the sample of respondents was obtained through web-based sampling since the questionnaire was an online survey created using SurveyHero (https://www.surveyhero.com) which was mainly distributed via email, Twitter and Facebook. Although a convenience sample cannot ensure representativeness or coverage,

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this sampling method was deemed the most appropriate mainly because there was no funding available to pay informants for their participation and because there were time constraints.

Having been born and bred in Northern Ireland was the only prerequisite for taking part in the survey. A total of 537 individuals participated, but only 140 of these completed the questionnaire properly. 83 of informants were female, 55 were male and the remaining 2 identified as non-binary. These last two participants were finally filtered out because they did not constitute a representative enough sample. Thus, there was a final sample of 138 informants.

While 138 respondents is a not insignificant number for a linguistic survey, the sample cannot be claimed to be representative of the general Northern Irish population. First of all, most of the informants had some connection with Queen's University Belfast since the questionnaire was mainly distributed among students and staff there. Secondly, there was an imbalance in the number of participants representative of different social groups. There were more females than males and more younger and middle-aged respondents than older informants. As regards the social variables of hometown and social class, the most numerous groups of participants were the Belfast and middle-class groups. In spite of the lack of statistical representativeness of the sample, the data collected from the survey provides valuable insight into attitudes to Northern Irish-accented male and female voices as well as to men's and women's perceptions of those voices.

3. DATA PROCESSING FOR QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The quantitative analyses of the scale ratings were conducted using SPSS 25, a free statistical software. The questionnaire data which had been first stored in an Excel spreadsheet was later exported to an SPSS file. In order to do that, every response category had to be converted into numbers. Thus, numbers 1 and 2 were allocated to the female and male respondents respectively. As for the coding of the ratings on the semantic differentials, the numerical value 1 was used for the most favourable evaluation whereas number 4 corresponded to the least favourable rating.

For the purpose of this study, the general dataset was divided into two subsets: female speech and male speech datasets. The female speech subset contained the scale ratings of the stimuli with female voices, that is, *Ups and Downs*, *Derry Girls* and *Incoming Call*. Meanwhile, the male speech dataset comprised responses to the voice samples taken from *Pulling Moves*, *Counter Punch*, *Soft Border Patrol* and *Bad Day for the Cut*.

Regarding the type of analysis that were carried out, both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted. Two types of descriptive statistics analyses were used: univariate and bivariate. The former examine one variable at a time and calculate the measures of central tendency, i.e., mean, median, mode. Bivariate analyses, on the other hand, investigate the relationship between two variables. For this study, I analysed the relationship

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between the independent variables of informants' gender and speakers' gender and dependent variables, which were the ratings on each evaluative scale. Once the characteristics of the dataset had been described, I used inferential statistics to test a number of hypotheses. To do so, the method of statistical hypothesis testing, also known as "null hypothesis (significance) testing", was applied (see Eddington, 2016; Vasishth & Nicenboim, 2016). The most frequently used inferential statistics test was the Mann-Whitney, a test employed when there are two independent samples, which in this study are male informants and female participants.

4. FINDINGS

The results presented in this paper are obtained through the statistical testing of the two hypotheses formulated earlier in this paper:

- **H1.** Northern Irish-accented female speech is more positively evaluated on all scales than male speech with a Northern Irish accent.
- **H2.** Female respondents rate both male and female voices with a Northern Irish accent more favourably than their male counterparts.

Figure 1 shows how Northern Irish informants evaluate the Northern Irish female and male voices on the different scales. Not surprisingly, female voices are rated more favourably on all scales, thereby confirming H1. The scale where ratings for female and male speech most differ is *Intelligible-Unintelligible*. Meanwhile, female and male voices are evaluated similarly on the *Gentle-Tough* scale.

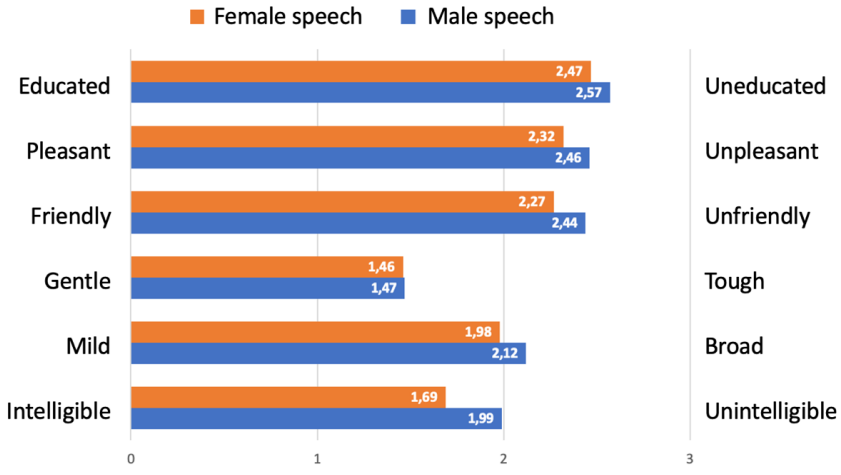

Figure 1. Scale ratings for female and male speech.

When the factor of informants' gender is added to the equation, results evince that female participants perceive both female and male speech more favourably than male informants in terms of education, pleasantness, friendliness and gentleness (see Figures 2 and 3 below). However, when it comes to mildness and intelligibility, women's ratings are less positive than men's. These findings partly support the second hypothesis. The gender pattern identified on

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the *Educated-Uneducated*, *Pleasant-Unpleasant*, *Friendly-Unfriendly* and *Gentle-Tough* scales reveals that whereas the most favourable rating is that awarded by females to female voices, male informants are responsible for the worst ratings, which they give to male speech. Meanwhile, ratings on the *Mild-Broad* and *Intelligible-Unintelligible* scales show a different trend. On these scales, men's evaluations of female speech are the most positive and women's perceptions of male speech the least favourable.

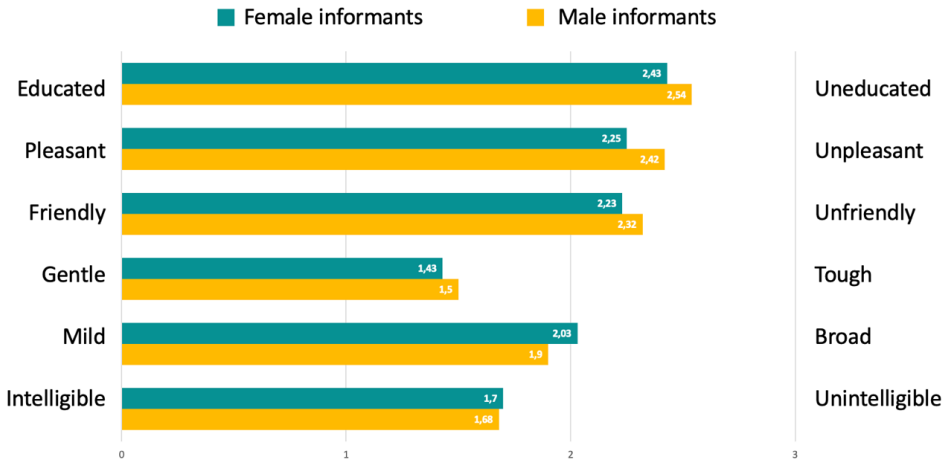

Figure 2. Scale ratings by gender for female speech.

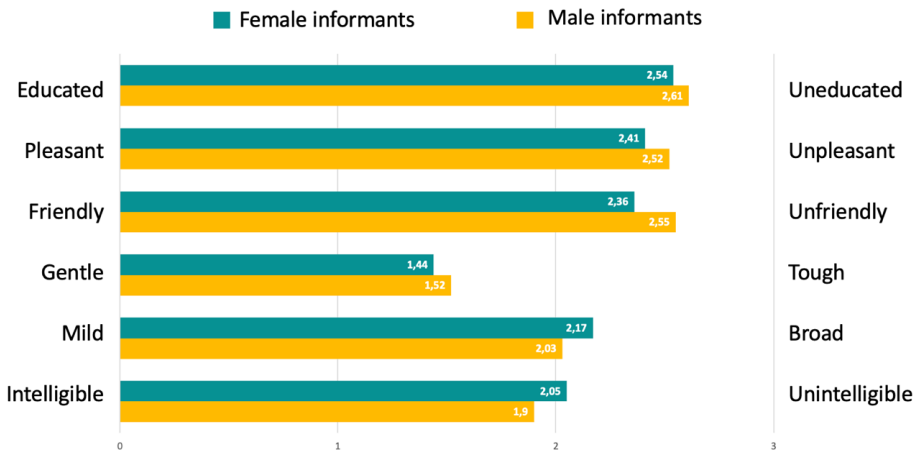

Figure 3. Scale ratings by gender for male speech.

Regarding gender-related variation in scale ratings, males and females vary more substantially when they evaluate the pleasantness, mildness and education of the stimuli that contain female voices. When male voices are concerned, male and female ratings are mainly different on friendliness, intelligibility and mildness. Despite this, gender differences in the perception of Northern Irish-accented male and female voices are small and only statistically significant for the perceived friendliness of male speech (p= 0.013).

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Figures 2 and 3 show the overall ratings by informants' gender for the male speech and female speech datasets and suggest some gender-specific trends in language attitudes. This paper mainly deals with the effects of gender on the perception of language. However, examining the relationship between gender and social class also seems worthwhile given that, as stated above, Milroy (1987) found significant interaction between these two variables in her Belfast study.

With regard to speakers' social class, there are two stimuli, one produced by a male and the other by a female, that present working-class speech and two speech samples that contain more middle-class accents. The working-class stimuli are those taken from *Pulling Moves* (male voice) and *Derry Girls* (female voice), while middle-class speech is portrayed in the extracts from *Soft Border Patrol* (male voice) and *Incoming Call* (female voice). A comparison of the ratings for working-class male and female speech reveals the same gender trend, where the voice of a female speaker is consistently evaluated more favourably than that of a man on all scales (see Figure 4). Similarly, when rating more middle-class speech, informants show a more positive attitude towards the female stimulus on all scales except for *Friendly-Unfriendly* and *Mild-Broad*. There is no clear explanation why the *Soft Border Patrol* sample is perceived as more friendly, but it might have to do with its content and the more relaxed tone of its speaker. As regards the *Mild-Broad* scale, both the middle-class female and male stimuli contain a significant amount of Northern Irish pronunciation and dialect so that it is difficult to know what might have caused respondents to rate female speech as broader than male speech. In addition to providing evidence of gender-related variation, Figures 4 and 5 show how working-class speakers receive a considerably less favourable rating on education than middle-class voices. This highlights the close link between accent and social class.

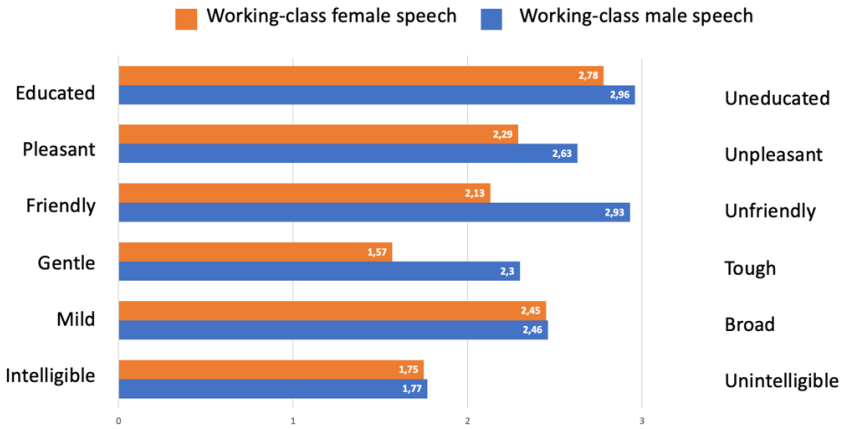

Figure 4. Scale ratings for working-class female and male speech.

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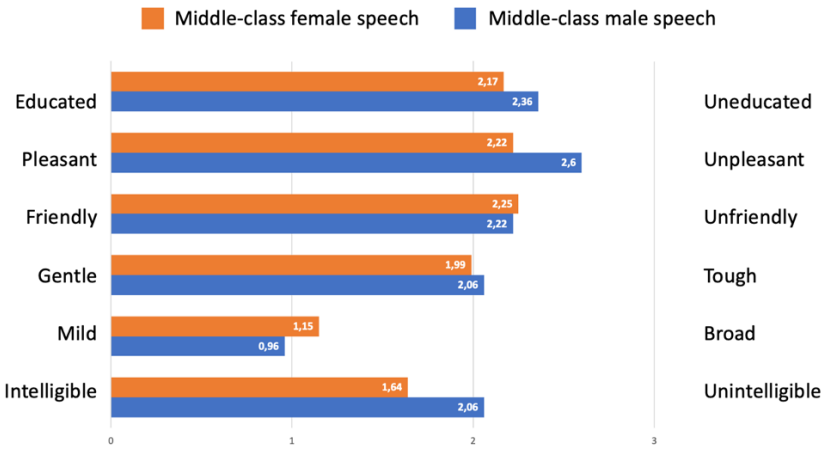

Figure 5. Scale ratings for middle-class female and male speech.

As done with the overall female and male speech datasets in Figures 2 and 3, it is also interesting to compare the ratings given by female and male informants to the working-class and middle-class voices. In Figure 6, which presents men's and women's evaluations of the working-class male and female stimuli, the gender pattern mentioned above can be observed. Female respondents show more favourable ratings than male participants on all scales, with the exception of the mildness and intelligibility scales. Moreover, gender differences are statistically significant on education (p= 0.002), gentleness (p= 0.011) and mildness (p= 0.041) for the working-class female voice; and on mildness (p= 0.000) and intelligibility (p= 0.038) for the working-class male speaker. The only rating that deviates from the gender pattern is women's mean rating of the working-class man on the *Gentle-Tough* scale. Contrary to what one might expect, women rated working-class male speech as tougher than male informants.

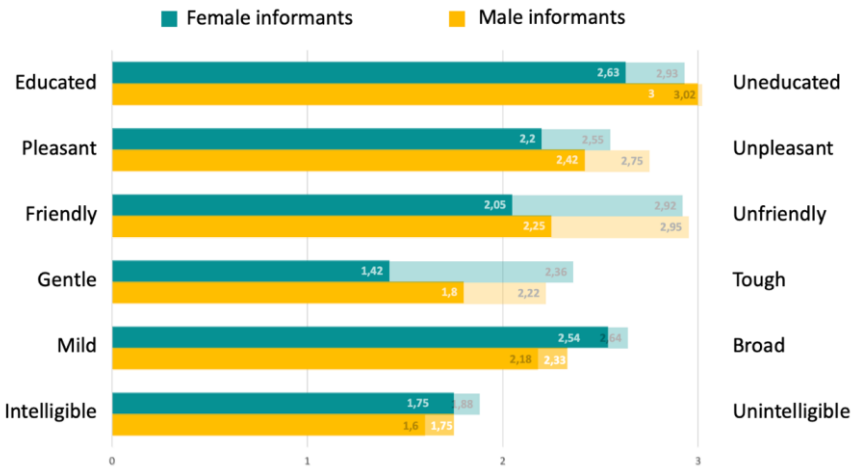

Figure 6. Scale ratings by gender for working-class female and male speech.

Note. White numbers represent the ratings of working-class female speech and black numbers evaluations of working-class male speech.

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Female and male evaluations of middle-class speech are illustrated in Figure 7. Even though gender ratings on pleasantness, friendliness, mildness and intelligibility follow the predicted trend, the *Educated-Uneducated* and *Gentle-Tough* scales show a different pattern. Females perceive both middle-class male and female voices as less educated and gentle than their male counterparts. The rationale behind the ratings on education and gentleness remains unclear. Whatever the reasons, gender variation on those two scales does not show statistical significance. In fact, differences in rating between men and women are only statistically significant on the *Pleasant-Unpleasant* scale (p= 0.021) for the middle-class female speech sample; and on *Mild-Broad* (p= 0.016) when the middle-class male voice is concerned.

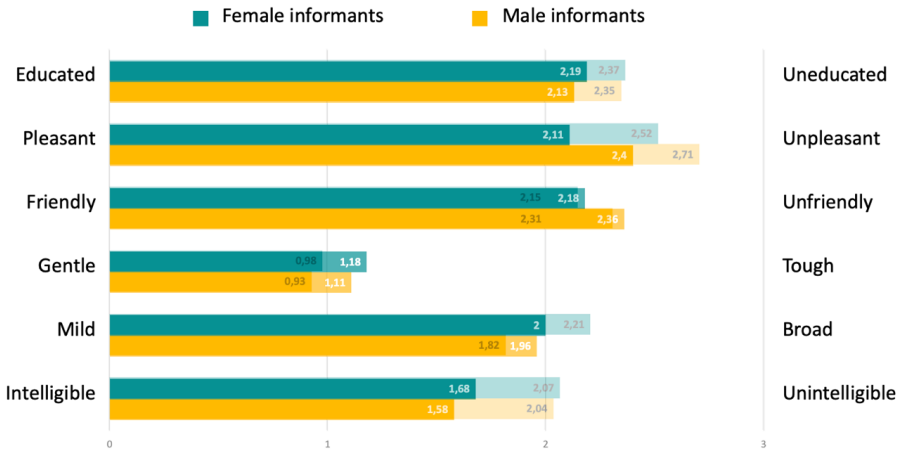

Figure 7. Scale ratings by gender for middle-class female and male speech.

Note. White numbers represent the ratings of middle-class female speech and black numbers evaluations of middle-class male speech.

If Figures 6 and 7 are compared, it is possible to notice one difference that is worth discussing. It has to do with intelligibility, where the working-class male stimulus is evaluated more positively by both female and male respondents than the middle-class male speech sample. While the reason could be the faster pace of the middle-class speech, this finding might suggest that Northern Irish informants do not automatically rate someone's voice as less intelligible simply because the speaker has a working-class accent. Intelligibility of speech depends on the social as well as the individual features of a speaker.

As explained above in the section where the stimuli used for the study is described, Northern Irish informants also had to evaluate a control stimulus which consisted in a female voice with a Standard Southern British English (SSBE) accent. Even though this paper is primarily concerned with perceptions of NIrE accents, the gender ratings of the SSBE speech sample deserve attention due to their unexpectedness. As illustrated in Figure 8, and contrary to expectations based on previous research, female participants do not award the SSBE female voice more favourable ratings than male informants on most scales. While the gender

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differences are small and not statistically significant, the results are still surprising, all the more so if one takes into consideration that the SSBE sample is produced by a woman. It is necessary to point out that despite rating the SSBE stimulus more negatively than men, women evaluate this stimulus more positively than the NIrE voice samples. The only scale that deviates from this pattern is the *Friendly-Unfriendly* scale where the NIrE stimuli are rated more favourably than the SSBE voice not only by women, but also by men.

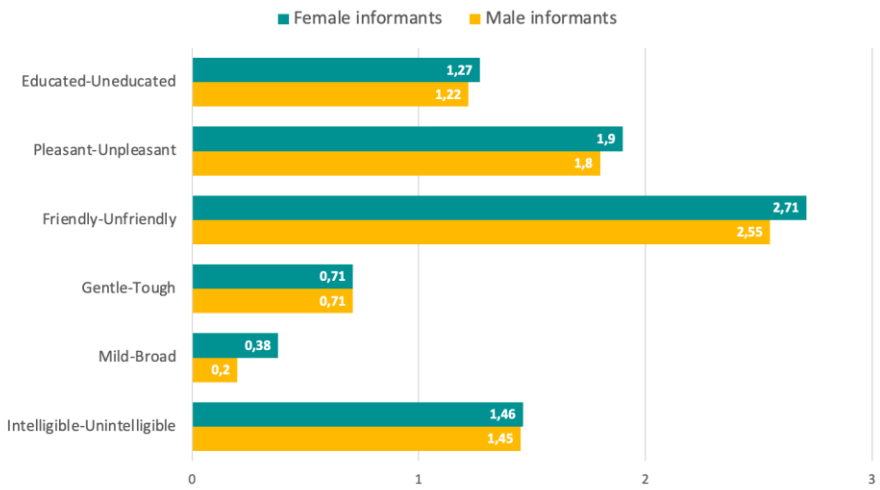

Figure 8. Ratings by gender for the SSBE voice.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the analysis of gender-based variation in the evaluation of NIrE accents as represented in Northern Irish telecinematic performances widely substantiate the two hypotheses proposed earlier. As anticipated in H1, Northern Irish female speakers obtain more positive evaluations than male speakers; and in line with H2, Northern Irish female respondents rate both NIrE male and female accents more favourably than male participants on most scales. This finding corroborates Bishop et al. (2005) and Coupland and Bishop (2007), who do not offer any possible reasons why women both rate and are rated more favourably than men when evaluating regional varieties. However, these scholars note that this gender trend "has not been demonstrated robustly in earlier language attitudes research" (Coupland & Bishop, 2007: 81).

Female respondents in this study have been shown to award more favourable ratings than males to the Northern Irish-accented voices and, most surprisingly, to rate the SSBE speech sample less favourably than male informants. This seems to run counter to Trudgill's claim that women show a preference for standard forms of the language, which leads to the expectation that females would exhibit a less favourable attitude than males to regional dialects, and hence a more positive attitude towards more standard varieties. Possible

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explanations for this unexpected finding include social desirability bias and familiarity with the accents. As regards social desirability bias, it has been suggested that women are more prone to giving socially desirable responses. It is therefore possible that females' more favourable reactions have been driven by a desire to be perceived positively by the researcher. The other possible reason has to do with the fact that being from Northern Ireland themselves, female respondents might have felt somewhat pleased to listen to accents they are familiar with.

While women are generally more positive towards NIrE accents, there are two scales where the common gender trend is reversed: *Mild-Broad* and *Intelligible-Unintelligible*. Female participants rate both female and male NIrE-accented speech as broader and less intelligible than their male counterparts. This trend also holds true for the SSBE voice sample. Moreover, the difference between female and male ratings on mildness and intelligibility turns out to be statistically significant in some cases. The rationale behind this response pattern has yet to be determined, but it might have to do with the fact that the adjectives *Mild-Broad* and *Intelligible-Unintelligible* are more neutral and have fewer connotations than those measuring prestige and pleasantness. An alternative explanation may be that when comparing their accents to those represented in the stimuli, women notice a greater difference than men. This seems highly likely given that, as Trudgill (1972) revealed, female speakers usually report themselves as using more standard forms than they actually employ, whereas for males the opposite is the case. Thus, the belief that they sound more standard than the people who speak in the voice samples probably leads women to evaluate the accents as broader and less intelligible than men, who tend to see themselves as sounding more non-standard. Furthermore, the finding that the most favourable ratings on mildness and intelligibility are awarded by males to female voices supports the widely-held belief among men that women speak more softly and more clearly than them.

In addition to exploring the variables of listeners' gender and speakers' gender, this paper has also investigated the interaction between these two factors and speakers' social class. When plotting the interplay between speakers' gender and social class, the expected patterns could be identified: whether working-class or middle-class, female speech is generally evaluated more positively than male speech. Another meaningful finding showed that the difference between the ratings given by female and male respondents to the working-class male accent on the mildness and intelligibility scales was statistically significant. Male participants rated this accent as significantly milder and more intelligible, which seems probably due to the fact that, since most of my participants belonged to the working-class, they were used to that accent.

This study has focused on the traditional gender categories of male and female because all my questionnaire respondents identified as either male or female except for two, who, as previously pointed out, considered themselves non-binary. Nonetheless, future research would

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greatly benefit from investigating the language attitudes of and towards non-binary identities. This paper hopes to encourage scholars to pursue this new avenue of research.

The insufficient number of non-binary participants as well as the lack of representativeness of the sample are two limitations that should be addressed in future studies. Using random or quota sampling rather than convenience sampling would ensure a more representative sample. Another limitation has to do with the possible misinterpretation of the scales, as was the case with *Standard-Non-Standard* and *Correct-Incorrect*. To overcome this limitation, it is a good idea to elicit adjectives from a pilot group of respondents and then decide which ones will be used in the final survey. Finally, researchers who might want to replicate this study must take special care when selecting speech samples. Since taking samples from telecinematic performances makes it almost impossible to control every single feature appearing in the stimuli, scholars need to select the samples that best fit their needs.

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APPENDIX

Speech sample 1 (taken from the film *Ups and Downs*)

Speaker: Yeah, well. I'm, I'm not great at it. But your dad was. Your dad was something that happened to you, he was a force of nature, he could change the temperature of a room and you have that. And sometimes it's a nightmare but I wouldn't have you any other way.

Speech sample 2 (taken for the TV show *Pulling Moves*)

Speaker: Now, listen. At a definite time in the day, which you'll be told later, I'll be going up a certain road. The craic is your car will be at a known accident black spot. All you have to do is this, but it's the most important part because it requires split-second coordination. By this stage, youse will know the number and the destination of the bus. Youse give the go ahead on the mobile to whoever is in the car. As the bus approaches here, the car pulls out in front of me and I, ever so gently, goes into the back of youse.

Speech sample 3 (taken from the TV show *Derry Girls*)

Speaker: Dip into your trust fund? Of course, no bother at all. Pass us in the phone, I just need to ring the bank. Seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, that's the account number and the password. What is it again? What was it now? Oh, aye. Catch yourself on. Da, for God's sake, will you turn than down?

Speech sample 4 (taken from the short film *Counter Punch*)

Speaker: … the last fight and drunk the way he was and embarrassed you like that but that was two years ago. You're a talented lad, you shouldn't throw that away. That was a long time ago, son. Don't make the same mistakes that I did and let other things get in your way. Get back in the ring!

Speech sample 5 (taken from the TV show *Soft Border Patrol*)

Speaker: Then, it sort of went the other way and it was all light, it was all lovely, you know it's like Van Morrison's 'Days like This' playing, wee lads making friends on the beach. Lovely. But the time is right for a new song, a new anthem.

Speech sample 6 (taken from the film *Bad Day for the Cut*)

Speaker: I saw a man leaving the house. Clean shaven, light hair, fancy looking sort of boy. (Interruption: You were outside?). I was sleeping in the shed. I heard noises, I went to look and saw two men leaving the house.

Speech sample 7 (taken from the short film *Incoming Call*)

Speaker 1: Hello?

Speaker 2: Hello

Speaker 1: Hello?

Speaker 2: Don't go on stage, you hear me? Don't be going on

Speaker 1: What? Who is this?

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Speaker 2: Really? Really?

Speaker 1: I don't understand, how are you able to…?

Speaker 2: It's me am… For God's sake. Look, I don't know how long I have, just don't be going on stage, ok?

Speaker 1: Why? Why? What's wrong? What you mean?

Speaker 2: I have managed to mess everything in my life up right now and I think this is a second chance, so you need to take this seriously.

Control speech sample (taken from the TV show *The Fall*)

Speaker: which is why I want you to go in first. Whatever she says, just keep listening. Give your undivided attention. She's obsessed with Specter. Let's see how she deals with someone of a similar age, similar looks.

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