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DI MILANO

**DISCOURSE AND IDENTITY  
IN SPECIALIZED COMMUNICATION**  
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Edited by  
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Palazzo Feltrinelli, Gargnano del Garda (Brescia), Italy  
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LUBRINA EDITORE

## Effects of agreement in identity between interviewer and respondent on refusal rates in telephone surveys

### Introduction

Research bureaus all over the world have observed an increase in refusal rates in telephone surveys. This is alarming in view of the generalizability of the results, because refusers may differ systematically from respondents and consequently increase the potential for bias due to nonresponse error. Therefore it is important to study which factors might decrease the refusal rate. An overview of the multitude of (socio)linguistic and socio-psychological factors related to refusals in telephone surveys can be found in Palmen (2001). In this paper we restrict ourselves to the impact of gender and accent agreement of interviewer and respondent on willingness to cooperate in a telephone survey. We will present the results of our two real-life studies (3) after a discussion of the theoretical background (2).

### Compliance theory and hypotheses

Compliance Theory is a theory in which processes underlying the forming of opinions are described. Since the refusal rate is determined by the respondents' willingness to participate, this theory can be used to gain insight into why some respondents are more willing to participate in surveys than others. According to Groves, Cialdini, and Couper (1992), there are six psychological principles by which people are guided when deciding whether to comply with a request *liking*, *scarcity*, *authority*, *consistency*, *reciprocation*, and *social validation*. In our study, *liking* was crucial; therefore, we limit the following to a discussion of this principle. *Liking* means that people are sooner inclined to comply with a request from a person they like. In a survey situation, this means that a person will sooner participate when the request to participate is made by an interviewer whom he finds sympathetic. Whether this is the case depends on many factors, but according to Groves et al (1992), the chances that the respondent will like the interviewer increase when they are more alike, for example, in terms of gender, age, social and regional background and language use. They call this *agreement*. According to the Liking Principle, respondents should be more willing to comply with a request from an interviewer with whom they share characteristics than from a person with whom they have little in common.

Coupland and Giles (1988) apply this concept to language use: the more people speak in a similar way, the more they like each other and the more they are willing to comply with a request. In telephone surveys voice plays a primary role, because

it is the only way to convey information in order to determine the level of agreement. Since the decision to refuse or comply with the request to participate in a survey is taken early in the conversation, it is plausible that the interviewer's voice, and the information deduced from it by the respondent, has a strong effect on his decision whether or not to participate.

We examined whether agreement between interviewer and respondent in terms of accent and gender influences the refusal rate. We chose these two factors because they are easily noticed by the respondent and because agreement on these variables is relatively easy to operate.

In line with the agreement principle we formulated hypothesis 1 on the impact of gender of interviewer and respondent on refusal rate and hypothesis 2 on the impact of accent of interviewer and respondent on refusal rate.

*H1: The response rate is higher when interviewers call a person of the same sex than when they call a person of the opposite sex.*

*H2: When interviewers speaking the standard variety of a language call respondents who speak the same standard variety, the response rate will be higher than when they call respondents with a regional accent. When interviewers with a regional accent call equally accented respondents, the response rate will be higher than when they call respondents who speak the standard variety.*

For accent two alternative hypotheses could be formulated. Research shows that people who speak a standard variety of a language are viewed as more competent than people with a regional accent. Standard speakers have higher 'status' than speakers with an accent. Non-standard speakers are considered to be more sympathetic and sociable, and people feel more solidarity with them. In telephone interviews, it is unclear whether status or solidarity traits are decisive for success of the interviewer. If respondents are more willing to comply with an interviewer they find competent (i.e., to whom they attribute more status) than with an interviewer they like (and with whom they feel solidarity) hypothesis 2a will be confirmed, if it is the other way round hypothesis 2b will be confirmed

*H2a: Interviewers who speak the standard variety achieve a higher response rate than interviewers who have a regional accent.*

*H2b: Interviewers with a regional accent achieve higher response rates than interviewers who speak the standard variety.*

### Design and results

#### Real-life study 1: 24 interviewers and 1926 respondents

Our first study was a real-life study in which 24 interviewers called 1926 respondents from the same categories regarding accent and gender. The **interviewers** were screened by two experienced sociolinguists as to the pleasantness of their voices, speech characteristics such as speech rate and intonation and accent (standard Dutch or Dutch with a Limburgian accent). Only interviewers with 'normal', non-deviant voices were selected. All 24 interviewers - 6 standard Dutch men, 6 standard Dutch women, 6 Limburgian men, 6

Limburgian women - were all younger than 25 years. They corresponded to the average survey workforce in the Netherlands. Nearly all of them were experienced poll-takers or telemarketers. One-way analyses of variance with the factor interviewer on the refusal rates showed that there were no differences between individual interviewers and that it was possible to consider same-sex same-accent interviewers as one group.

In order to ensure that the **respondents** were as similar as possible in all other aspects but accents and gender, we selected four medium-sized cities (between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants) in the Netherlands with similar socio-economic characteristics and infrastructure. Two Limburgian cities (Roermond and Sittard) were paired with two cities from the region in which the most standard Dutch is spoken (Rijswijk and Velsen). For every city, we selected 1500 phone numbers using the electronic directory. The interviewers were provided with lists of these phone numbers, numbers from the four cities being presented in a random order, so they would call alternatively to standard Dutch-speaking areas and Limburg. When a respondent answered the phone, they used the following introduction (translated from Dutch): *"Good evening sir/madam, this is [name] of BC Research. We are currently conducting a study to assess people's opinions of certain topics relating to the Dutch language. Could I ask you a few questions on that?"*

In order to determine the respondents' accents, all the calls were taped and qualified as speakers of standard Dutch or Limburgian Dutch by two experienced sociolinguists. For every call, the interviewers noted whether they had talked to a man or a woman, and the outcome of the call (success, refusal, or appointment). This outcome was converted into a cooperation scale (cf. Palmen 2001 for more details). Table 1 presents the scores of the four interviewer groups with the four respondent groups.

Mean of the cooperativeness scores for all respondent groups, per interviewer group (1=no cooperation, 5=full cooperation, St.=Standard, Limb.=Limburgian).

Respondents (N=1926) Interviewers (N=24)	St. Dutch Male	St. Dutch female	Limb.Dutch male	Limb. Dutch female	Total
St. Dutch male (n=6)	2.28	2.27	2.44	2.22	2.30
St. Dutch female (n=6)	2.33	2.35	2.50	2.38	2.39
Limb.Dutch male (n=6)	2.48	2.55	2.22	2.44	2.42
Limb.Dutch female (n=6)	2.54	2.47	2.45	2.60	2.52

We conducted analyses of variance with the cooperativeness scores as dependent variable and the following factors: interviewer gender (male, female), interviewer accent (standard Dutch, Limburgian), respondent gender (male, female), and respondent accent (standard Dutch, Limburgian). There turned out to be no significant differences in cooperativeness between the four groups: respondents' and interviewers' gender and accent did not affect cooperativeness.

### Real-life study 2: One matched-guise interviewer and 139 respondents

The first study showed no significant differences between the interviewers in refusal rates: all 24 interviewers reached similar cooperativeness scores. One could raise the objection that 24 interviewers cannot possibly present identical behaviour on all levels, since they are not machines, but human beings. Therefore a second experiment was performed using a 'bilingual' interviewer, a woman who could speak both standard Dutch and Dutch with a Limburgian accent. In sociolinguistics, such speakers are used in matched-guise experiments to test the appreciation of language varieties. Thus, voice and speech characteristics remain constant; only the language variety changes, allowing it to be determined how the language varieties are valued separately from other factors. In regular matched-guise studies, every subject is exposed twice to the speaker, once when the speaker uses one variety, once when he uses the other (within-groups design). This was not possible in our study, since one cannot call the same respondent twice with the same request. A respondent was contacted once and heard one variety (between-groups design). The female bilingual interviewer contacted 139 respondents in the same way as was done in Study 1. The scores presented in Table 2 resemble those from Table 1. Analysis of variance with the factors interviewer accent (standard Dutch, Limburgian), respondent gender (male, female), and respondent accent (standard Dutch, Limburgian) confirmed once more that no combination of factors was significant. The results of study 2 using the bilingual interviewer confirm the results of the study using 24 interviewers: cooperativeness is not higher among any of the respondent groups. Whether interviewer and respondent belong to the same group regarding gender or accent does not influence the respondent's cooperativeness.

Table 2: Bilingual interviewer: Mean of the cooperativeness scores (1=no cooperation, 5=full cooperation, St.=Standard, Limb.=Limburgian).

Respondents (N=139) Interviewer (N=1)	St. Dutch Male	St. Dutch female	Limb.Dutch male	Limb. Dutch female	Total
St. Dutch female	2.88	2.28	2.75	2.06	2.47
Limb. Dutch female	2.06	2.37	2.94	2.55	2.48

### Conclusion and discussion

Our expectations on the basis of the *Liking Principle (agreement)* according to *Compliance Theory* were not confirmed for either gender (Hypothesis 1) or accent (Hypothesis 2). Cooperativeness did not increase when interviewer and respondent agree in gender or accent, or both. The alternative hypotheses regarding accent were not corroborated either. Interviewers who spoke the standard language were not more successful than those who spoke with a regional

accent (2a), and interviewers who spoke with a regional accent were not more successful than those who spoke the standard language (2b).

From our results it can be concluded that the sociolinguistically important factors of gender and accent do not play a role in telephone surveys. The many sociolinguistic studies on which we based our alternative hypotheses were carried out under circumstances that were more or less controlled, and thus artificial. In these sociolinguistic studies, the emphasis generally lies on attitudes, and not on the effect on *actual behaviour*. If people with a regional accent like a speaker of their own variety better (attitude), this does not necessarily also imply that they will be more likely to participate in a telephone survey (behaviour) if they are requested to do so by an interviewer using their regional variety than by an interviewer with an accent different from theirs.

If the elements of daily life are eliminated, factors such as gender and accent might play a role, but in everyday communicative situations, their influence seems to be overruled by other factors. Our results show that various factors that were carefully eliminated in laboratory experiments are decisive in everyday life. For communication research in a business context, this implies that data collected in authentic communicative situations constitute a valuable and necessary complement.

The context of the survey being decisive, measures aimed at increasing cooperativeness should focus on the way the fieldwork is organized. It is important for market survey organisations to know that they probably do not have to exclude potential employees with a regional accent or male interviewers (which could lead to a considerable increase in the number of potential interviewers); nor do they need to make efforts to match interviewers and respondents with certain characteristics.

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