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I find you attractive but I don't trust you: the case of language attitudes in Iran

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ABSTRACT

Although Article 15 of the Iranian constitution endorses non-Persian Languages, speakers of these minority languages are latently obligated to speak Persian, the majority language, in most social settings. Consequently, these Iranian L2 speakers of Persian give rise to certain attitudes towards their accented speech, particularly from speakers of the standard variety. This study investigated these underresearched attitudes about accented Persian. Utilising the verbal-guise technique, participants born and raised in Tehran (where the standard variety is spoken) were interviewed to express their attitudes towards five identical-in-content guises (from different L1s including Arabic, Gilaki, Azeri Turkic, Mazandarani, and Kurdish). The findings revealed that the less the Tehrani interviewees were able to recognise an accent, the more they associated the speakers of that accent with positive traits. Furthermore, most of the evaluations linked the accented speakers with lower social and education levels. Overall, Gilaki and Azeri Turkic were associated with negative attributes, whereas Arabic and Kurdish evoked positive attitudes.

Introduction

In modern social psychology, perception of the input we receive through our social environment is considered the 'foundation of all our social constructions' (Edwards 1999, 101). Moreover, as important social indices, various phenomena related to language, including attitudes and perceptions, play a major role in the social psychology of language (Edwards 1999). In the same vein, Myers-Scotton (2011) points out that our views about language are scenarios we carry around in our minds that create attitudes towards speakers and the social communities to which they belong. However, these attitudes are formed under the influence of many factors and categorisations stemming from the context of speech, listeners' expectations, and socio-economic class of the speakers and stereotypes that exist about them (Abrams and Hogg 1987; Dragojevic and Giles 2014). The situation of language attitudes is more complicated when it comes to the continuum of standard–non-standard accents. In other words, 'accents are classified by the degree to which they are considered standard or non-standard within a particular community' (Cargile 1997, 435). Such notions of standard and non-standard are used in the present study, hoping to explore the attitudes of speakers of a standard variety towards five non-standard accents within an Iranian speech community.

Research background

Research in language attitudes has shown that speakers of so-called non-standard or regional accents are predominantly linked to lower levels on status dimensions (i.e. social and education level). By

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contrast, speakers of standard accents are often believed to have high social class (Garrett 2010; Giles and Rakić 2014; Preston 1999). Cargile (1997) argues that, unlike status dimensions, speakers of non-standard accents are judged more positively on solidarity dimensions such as friendliness and honesty. In addition, less or equal dynamism (a solidarity dimension) is another trait that is ascribed to speakers of non-standard accents (Cargile 1997; Cargile and Giles 1998; Fuertes et al. 2012).

In their study, Edwards and Jacobsen (1987) compared perceptions towards standard and regional standard speech in a Canadian context. They found out that, unlike findings of similar previous research, the regional standard gained favourable judgements on dimensions like competence and status that were predominantly attributed to the speakers of standard speech. In another study, by investigating American undergraduates' attitudes towards accented English speech from 12 different L1s, Llurda (2000) concluded that, to the US undergraduates, speakers' perceived first language was a key contributor to the reported evaluations. However, the most irritating L1s were *mistakenly* perceived to be Arabic and Korean (also see Bresnahan et al. 2002; Lindemann 2003).

Dailey, Giles, and Jansma (2005) used the verbal-guise technique (VGT) to compare the attitudes of Anglo and Hispanic Americans about a series of American English and Hispanic-accented audio stimuli on a certain number of solidarity and status dimensions. The findings revealed that the Anglo-accented speakers gained favourable judgements on almost all the dimensions. In a more recent study, Dragojevic and Giles (2014) investigated the attitudes of Californians concerning American Southern accent in comparison with a foreign accent (in this case, Punjabi) based on in-group and out-group categorisations. They found that the participants upgraded Southern accent on solidarity dimensions against the foreign accent and felt closer to Southerner speech in line with maintaining their in-group American identity. Nevertheless, to tap on 'distinctiveness', this upgrade did not apply to Southerners' status dimensions vis-à-vis their own 'West Coast' identity (Dragojevic and Giles 2014, 105).

Finally, ethnic stereotyping, which is inherent in folk humour in some contexts, could have serious effects on shaping language attitudes surrounding language minorities (Martinez and Ramasubramanian 2015). In speech communities where ethnic humour is very popular and prevalent (for Hawai'i, see Caparoso and Collins 2015; for Iran, see Haghish et al. 2012), negative stereotypes that are reinforced through this type of humour may create harmful situations with real-life consequences for the minorities who are stereotyped based on their distinctive features, such as accented speech. Although not the focus of this study, it is worth mentioning that such consequences might continue to develop to the extent that they can even pose threats to the ethnolinguistic vitality of minority languages (Hogg and Rigoli 1996; Tajfel 1974; Tajfel and Turner 2004; Yagmur and Kroon 2006).

Status quo of languages in Iran

Iran is a rich country in terms of languages and ethnicities (Hassan 2008; Nercissians 2001). According to Izady (2001), and as displayed in Figure 1, the following languages have the highest number of speakers in Iran: Persian, 63.3%; Azeri Turkic (and its dialects), 13%; Kurdish, 7%; Gilaki, 3.6%; Mazandarani (or Tabari), 3%; Arabic, 1.8%; other languages (including Lorish and Balochi), 8.3%.

Although a wide variety of languages are spoken in Iran, the only official language is Persian (also, Farsi or Parsi). The standard variety (and subsequently the standard accent) used by Iranian media and the formal education system is the Tehrani variety, which is spoken by people from the capital city, Tehran. Article 15 in Chapter II of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran stipulates that:

> The official language and script of Iran, the lingua franca of its people, is Persian. Official documents, correspondence, and texts, as well as text-books, must be in this language and script. However, the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian. (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, n.d.)
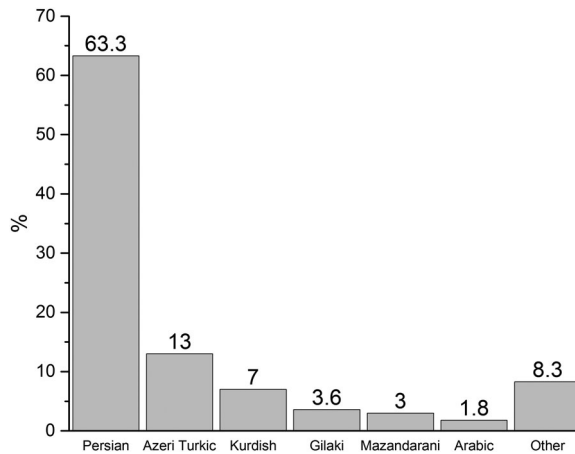
Figure 1. Main languages of Iran.

However, minority languages in Iran, in spite of enjoying millions of speakers, have no recognised, official place in various domains. Unlike what Article 15 necessitates, speakers of non-Persian languages are obliged to speak Persian in most social, academic, and work settings (Nercissians 2001). Speaking with an accent, these Iranian non-native speakers of Persian are subject to various attitudes towards themselves, specifically from the speakers of the standard variety (i.e. Tehrani). Despite the growing number of language/ethnic minorities who migrate to Tehran for better occupational, educational, and social opportunities, and the importance these minorities gain in the host community, the body of research on the attitudes towards their speech is surprisingly scarce. This can be mostly because Iranian researchers who conduct ethnographic studies (or any other investigation within the realm of social sciences) inside post-revolution Iran are typically subject to government interrogation.

This study

The current study was concerned with these underresearched evaluations of and attitudes towards the accented speech produced by Iranian non-native speakers of Persian. The common presupposition is that Tehranis as speakers of the standard accent evaluate 'non-standard' accented Persian as 'stigmatized and outgroup' (Lindemann 2003, 350). Similar to a framework used by Dailey, Giles, and Jansma (2005) and Lindemann (2003), the present study capitalised on the VGT to elicit explicit attitudes of a sample of Tehrani speakers about accented Persian through ethnographic interviews. To be specific, this study looked beyond the first-order indexicality (e.g. certain phonological features in the accent of Iranian non-native speakers of Persian) and the second-order indexicality (e.g. labelling an accent as foreign or unfamiliar). Rather, the aim of the present research was to explore Tehranis' higher order indexical reactions to and evaluations of accented Persian. These higher order indexical reactions included solidarity dimensions, namely, attractiveness, dynamism, and personality traits and status dimensions, such as social and education levels through the ability to identify the accented speaker's ethnicity (see Giles 1970; Lindemann 2003; Silverstein 1992). Finally, this study was designed surrounding a hypothetical social situation to also investigate situational judgements of Tehranis based on the accented Persian they encounter. To this end, the researcher posed the following specific questions:

(1) Are Tehranis (as the speakers of the standard variety of Persian) able to identify the language background of accented Persian speech?
(2) How do Tehranis evaluate speakers of accented Persian on solidarity dimensions (i.e. attractiveness, dynamism, and perceived personality traits)?

(3) How do Tehranis evaluate speakers of accented Persian on status dimensions (i.e. social and education status)?
(4) How would interacting with speakers of accented Persian impact judgements of Tehranis in an ethnically unbiased, social situation?

Methods

Participants

Initially, 18 native speakers of Persian (6 women and 12 men) who were born and raised in the capital city of Tehran were interviewed. At the time of conducting the interviews, all the interviewees resided in a south-central state of the US. The age range of the participants was between 22 and 31, with the average of 27.5. All the interviewees had come from higher education backgrounds ranging from Master's students to PhD candidates, many of whom were working as research and/or teaching assistants in their respective university departments. Furthermore, their average length of stay in the US was 1.9 years, which is presumably not long enough to weaken the social and personal connections to the homeland, specifically with the presence of online communication tools (Georgiou 2006; Graham and Khosravi 2002). During the data-coding procedure, the researcher found out that two of the interviewees had Azeri and Mazandarani relatives and it was assumed that their ethnolinguistic ties could affect their responses; therefore, they were excluded from the study.

Context

In general, the Iranians who live in the US have migrated to this country in three phases: the first wave started shortly before and continued until a few months after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The second wave of Iranian immigrants left Iran during the eight-year war with Iraq (see Karsh 2009). A large number of 'middle-class Iranians' who left Iran following the 2009 post-elections systematic suppression by the government majorly formed the third wave. They were from the educated body of the society for whom pursuing education and finding jobs in academia were facilitative for migrating to a freer society (Kamrava 2010, 409). Consequently, many of these immigrants are from the capital and the most populated city of Iran: Tehran. Predisposed by the context in which the interviews were conducted, the participants of this study all belonged to the third group, that is, they were middle-class Tehranis with an educated background who left their home country after 2009. The chief reason for choosing the sample from the discussed population was the researcher's easier access to them. In addition, as mentioned in the previous section, an average 1.9-year length of stay outside Iran was hypothesised to be a rather short period of time. The population from which the sample was selected included a number of Iranian married couples. It is the researcher's personal observation that the majority of these families belonged to a relatively inclusive Iranian community. Hence, their amount of exposure to languages and cultural differences of Iran was relatively high. It can also be assumed that, because of this high exposure, the participants' language attitudes and evaluations had not changed at the time the data were collected.

Instruments

A 20-second short passage on an 'ethnically neutral topic' (i.e. a message on an answering machine from the owner of a car for sale) was used as the text for recording the verbal guises (Dailey, Giles, and Jansma 2005, 29). The car about which the hypothetical phone calls were made was a Peugeot 206[TM] that is designed by a French automobile manufacturer but has been locally montaged in Iran for a few years now. Peugeot 206 is a typical middle-class car in today's Iran which is also used by other social classes due to its reasonable price and relative high quality. Therefore, it would be highly common to find this car in different parts of Tehran, irrespective of owners' social class.

To prepare the verbal-guise task, 10 native speakers of the 5 non-Persian languages with the highest number of speakers in Iran recorded themselves reading the passage in Persian. The guise speakers were invited to do the recordings through personal connections. All the speakers were male and in a close age range (i.e. aged between 25 and 35) to control for speaker variables. Thus, it was assumed that the sole factor triggering attitudes would be the respective accents, not the speakers. The speakers were asked to do the recordings on a personal digital device (e.g. cell phones) with good audio quality, and send the files to the researcher. The collected guises were then controlled for voice quality, speed, and timing. In the case of low quality or undesired speech rate, the speakers were asked to redo the recordings.

The recordings included Arabic, Gilaki, Azeri Turkic, Mazandarani, and Kurdish-accented Persian. In order to ensure the authenticity of the recordings, they were played for two judges who were familiar with these non-Tehrani accents. Finally, five of the recordings were selected to be utilised for the study. The judges identified the five recordings and attested to the authenticity of them. A translated version of the passage used for the answering-machine message is provided in Appendix 1.

To conduct the interviews in Persian, a list of five questions, mostly based on Giles (1970), was used to elicit the interviewees' attitudes about attractiveness and dynamism of the accents, as well as their perception of personality traits of the accented speakers. Nonetheless, due to the open-ended nature of ethnographic interviews, further questions were asked in order to narrow down the participants' evaluations and attitudes and also for the purpose of clarifying the responses (see Appendix 2 for the interview questions).

Procedure

At the outset of the interviews, the participants were generally introduced to the nature of the task. Additionally, they were told that they were required to express their attitudes towards the presupposed personality traits of the accented car owners and determine whether or not they would finalise the deal to buy the car from each individual. The recordings were played separately for each interviewee, using VLC Media Player™. The interview sessions were held at public but rather quiet places (e.g. public cafés or department offices) and a Marantz™ digital voice recorder (model no. PMD660) was utilised. At the end of the interviews, the respondents were asked to identify the first language of the speakers; if they were not able to recognise it correctly, the researcher would let them know what the accent was and ask them whether they wanted to change their responses. Each interview took roughly 45–55 minutes. In total, 15 hours of interview data were collected for analysis.

Findings of the ethnographic interviews

The following sections present the study findings according to the research questions. That is, accent identification, as well as solidarity dimensions (i.e. attractiveness, dynamism, and character types), and status dimensions (i.e. social and education level) were addressed. Also, based upon the provided evaluations on the aforementioned dimensions, the researcher explored whether the interviewees were willing to finalise the deal (i.e. buying the car) from the guise speakers. Also, the researcher used his emic perspective to help discuss the findings in light of the relevant sociolinguistic underpinnings of the Iranian society. Such a discussion is augmented by using a number of excerpts from the interviews.

Identifying the accented speaker's linguistic background

Regarding the first research question, although all the listeners were able to recognise the five voices as accented and non-Tehrani, identifying the language minority to which they belonged turned out to be a rather challenging task for some of the participants. As can be seen in Figure 2, all of the 16 interviewees correctly identified Gilaki and Azeri Turkic. A quick glance at the percentage of the population of Azeri speakers in Iran (13%) helps to justify this finding. As a possible explanation, the number of migrant Azeri speakers in large, Persian-speaking cities is remarkably higher than
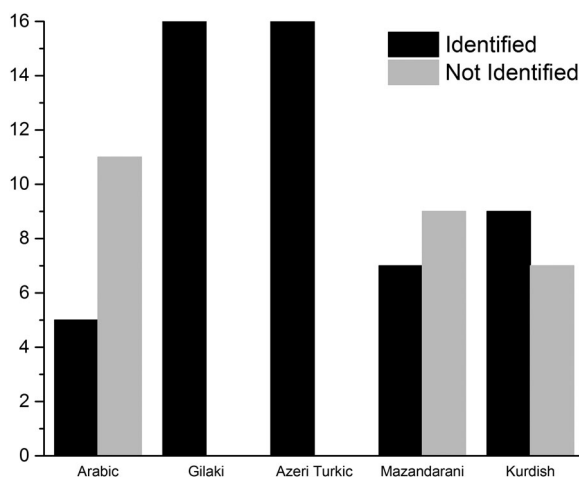
Figure 2. Identification of the accented speaker's linguistic background (*n* = 16).

other language minorities (Souleimanov, Pikal, and Kraus 2013). This was not the case for the Gilaki accent, however, while the actual proportion of Gilaki speakers only accounts for 3.6% of Iran's population. Effortless identification of Gilaki accent was reported by some of the interviewees to be due to the fact that Gilan, the province in which Gilaki is widely spoken, serves as one of the first and busiest tourist destinations in Iran. On the contrary, the Mazandarani accent, spoken in another busy tourist destination, was less recognisable to the Tehrani listeners. This finding can be explained on the grounds that Gilaki is more stereotyped by the media than Mazandarani. Moreover, another determining factor in correct identification of both Gilaki and Azeri Turkic can be the number of ethnic jokes about the speakers of these two accents (Haghish et al. 2012).

Solidarity: attractiveness, dynamism, and personality traits

To address the first part of the second research question (i.e. the level of attractiveness of the accents), the Tehrani interviews were asked how pleasant each accent sounded to them. Comparable to the trend found in identification of the accents, the respondents evaluated Gilaki and Azeri Turkic as the most attractive accents. Almost all the interviewees smiled or even burst out laughing when they heard these two accents. This is how one of the participants reacted to the Gilaki accent:

> It seems humorous and cute! When I hear this accent, probably because of too many jokes, I feel like I have to laugh.
> به نظرم طنز [آمیز] و بامزه میاد! شاید چون جوك گیلانی زیاد گفتن، وقتی میشنوم احساس میکنم باید بخندم.

Most of the interviewees mentioned that they knew a lot of Azeris and Gilakis either as friends or as colleagues and it was always interesting to hear them speaking Persian 'with an accent'. Some also emphasised the ample amount of exposure they had, on a regular basis, to these two accents in public places such as Tehran Grand Bazaar.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the least attractive accent was Arabic. Many of the listeners made mention of identifying a certain level of 'harshness' in the way the Arab caller speaks Persian. This might be due to the phonological properties of Arabic (e.g. glottal stops and uvulars; see McCarthy 1994), although the discussion of phonological features is beyond the scope of the present study. This harshness was also portrayed in the traits that the interviewees attributed to this accent that is discussed later. Finally, the accent with the highest number of evaluations in the *neutral* category was Mazandarani.

Next, the participants were required to evaluate the dynamism of the accented speakers. Here, of particular note is that dynamism refers to activeness, enthusiasm, and talkativeness of the guises (Dailey, Giles, and Jansma 2005). Contextually speaking, they were asked how comfortably they would be
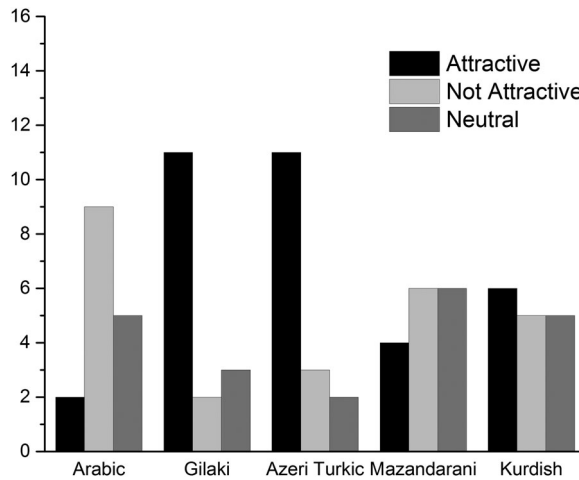
Figure 3. Attractiveness of the speaker's accent (*n* = 16).

willing to inquire further about the technical details of the car or ask for a discount. As shown in Figure 4, the Arabic speaker was perceived as the lowest dynamic of all followed by the Kurd and the Azeri. With regard to the less dynamic guises, the majority of the interviewees expressed that they did not prefer to bargain over the price while test-driving the vehicle or to ask for more details on technical issues. Concerning the Arabic-accented speaker, one of the respondents depicted an interesting relationship between less dynamism and higher trustworthiness, stating that:

> I wouldn't even ask for a discount from this guy since he's telling the truth and there is no need to do so!
> !إمن اصلا از این ادم تخفیف نمیگرفتم چون داره حقیقتو میگه و نیازی نیستَ

Another participant connected low dynamism of the Arabic guise speaker to the fact that he was too rigid and too stubborn to be asked for a discount:

> They're [type of] folks who are too stubborn and strict, and they easily get upset if you say something that opposes them.
> اینا ادمایی هستن که خیلی یه دنده و سرسختن و خیلی هم سریع ناراحت میشن اگه مخالف حرفشون حرف بشنوَن.
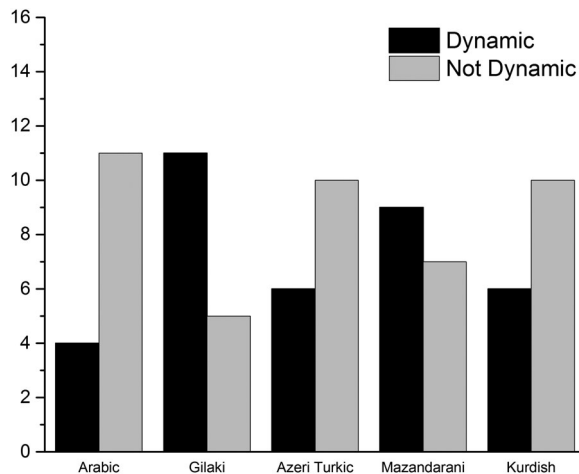

Figure 4. The speaker's perceived dynamism (*n* = 16).

Table 1. Personality traits associated with accented Persian.

Accent	Arabic	Gilaki	Azeri Turkic	Mazandarani	Kurdish
Elicited personality traits	Rigid (5)	Dishonest (11)	Dishonest (5)	Dishonest (3)	Rigid (7)
	Rural (4)	Cunning (4)	Ignorant (6)	Insincere (5)	Unfriendly (5)
	Too accented (3)	Insincere (3)	Cunning (3)	Cunning (4)	Dishonest (2)
	Strange (3)	Unfriendly (2)	Insincere (3)	Impolite (2)	Inarticulate (1)
	Dishonest (2)	Ignorant (2)	Rigid (3)	Unfriendly (5)	Ignorant (1)
	Unfriendly (3)	Rigid (1)	Too accented (2)	Troublemaker (1)	
	Insincere (2)	Too accented (1)	Diffident (2)		
	Subordinate (1)		Unfriendly (1)		
	Ignorant (1)				
	Sensitive (1)				Sensitive (2)
	Honest (10)	Friendly (8)	Honest (4)	Honest (3)	
	Simple (10)	Simple (3)	Proud (3)	Precise (3)	Honest (10)
	Hardworking (3)	Honest (4)	Simple (3)	Modest (2)	Friendly (3)
	Rational (2)	Confident (1)	Friendly (2)	Simple (4)	Confident (3)
	Friendly (1)	Hilarious (1)	Rational (1)	Polite (5)	Proud (2)
	Persuasive (1)	Polite (1)	Confident (1)	Confident (2)	Hardworking (2)
	Hilarious (1)		Precise (1)	Friendly (1)	Reliable (1)
			Modest (1)	Easygoing (1)	Simple (1)
				Smart (1)	Modest (1)
					Polite (1)

Note. The numbers in parentheses represent the frequency of responses for each trait.

The Gilaki and the Mazandarani speakers were evaluated as the most dynamic of all. This was explained by some of the interviewees by virtue of these speakers being from the areas which are Iran's primary tourist destinations where attracting tourists for business purposes is integral to the community. Another interesting point that was revealed in the interviews was that the respondents judged the dynamism of the speakers mainly based on prior, personal experience and background knowledge. It is also to report that only a couple of interviewees changed their responses about the Arabic speaker's dynamism when they found that their initial recognition of the accent was wrong.

To address the last part of the second research question, the personality traits the participants could attribute to the accented speakers were elicited. The extracted attributes ranged from adjectives with negative connotation to exceptionally positive traits. Shown in Table 1, the Arabic-accented speaker was judged as rigid, rural, and too accented, on the one hand, but honest, simple (with a positive connotation), and hardworking, on the other. In terms of rigidness and unfriendliness, the Kurdish-accented speaker outnumbered his Arab counterpart. The same number of respondents perceived the Arabic and the Kurdish speakers as truly honest. Thus, one can claim that both Arabic and Kurdish varieties of Persian did not provoke any positive attitudes concerning friendliness among the study participants, while they outstandingly triggered positive attitudes towards honesty.

The Mazandarani speaker gained the lowest frequency of responses on all various traits with a similar number of responses on both ends of friendliness and honesty continua. The Gilaki and Azeri speakers' accented Persian, on the contrary, were mostly associated with negative traits, namely dishonesty, cunningness, and insincerity. To be specific, the highest frequency of a negative trait was received by the Gilaki accent (i.e. dishonesty). The majority of the participants referred to both personal experiences and negative stereotypes as bases for their evaluations.

Status: social class and education level

The interview responses indicated that the Arabic guise, which was perceived to be the most unattractive and least dynamic by the listeners, was assigned to the lower middle-class category more often than the other guises (see Figure 5). By contrast, the second least dynamic accent, that is, Kurdish, was linked to the middle class more than any other accent. However, both Kurdish and Arabic

had no place in the upper middle-class category, whatsoever. The Mazandarani speaker gained the most favourable attitudes about his social class and was classified in the upper middle-class group more than the other speakers were. Unfamiliarity with the Mazandarani accent made some of the interviewees believe that the Mazandarani car owner spoke in a way to pass as Tehrani, despite the fact that the judges initially qualified all the guises as being heavily accented. Consequently, most of the participants who believed that the Mazandarani speaker hides his accent and pretends to be from Tehran evaluated him to have high social status:

> This is a person who has tried to be [like a] Tehrani … He is one of those people who tried to find a place to live in West Tehran to move himself up.
> این ادمیه که سعی کرده [مثل یه] تهرانی باشه ... از اوناس که سعی کرده بره غرب تهران یه خونه بگیره و خودشو بکشه بالا.

With reference to the education status, the Arabic speaker was evaluated to be the least educated (i.e. lower than high school diploma), followed by the Gilaki and the Azeri speakers. Most of the respondents regarded the Kurdish speaker to have a middle-level education (i.e. high school diploma or basic college degree). Finally, the Mazandarani speaker was perceived to hold the highest education status (i.e. undergraduate or graduate degree). To sum up, the Mazandarani and the Arabic-accented speakers of Persian received the highest and the lowest evaluations, respectively, in
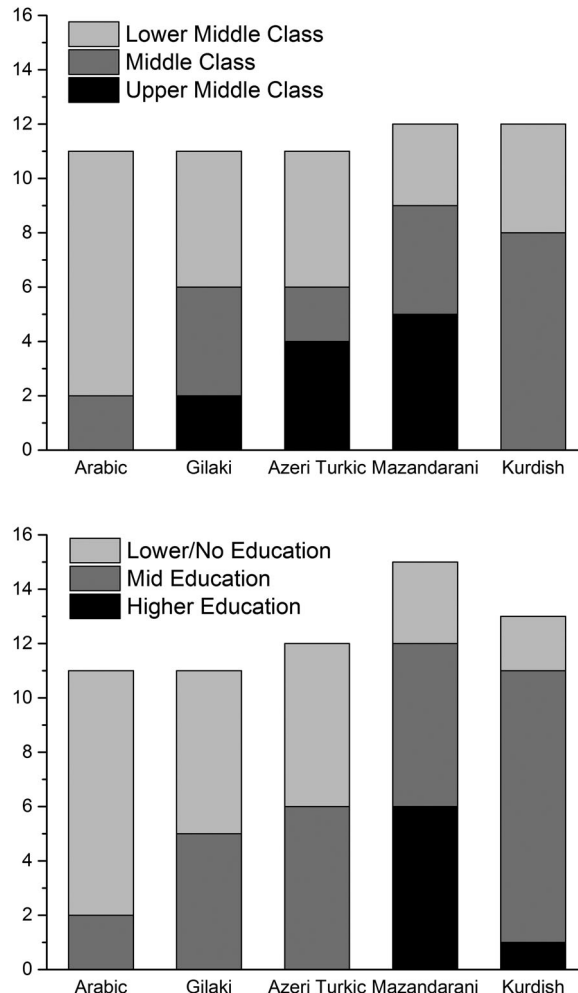

Figure 5. The speaker's perceived social and education status ($n = 16$).
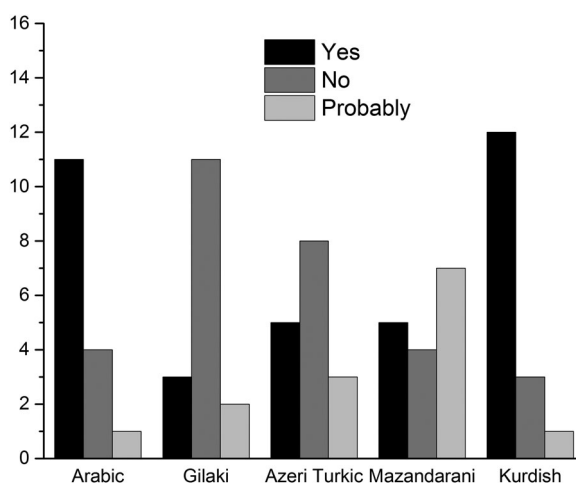
Figure 6. Finalising the deal with the speaker ($n = 16$).

both social and education statuses (also see Figure 5). Most of the respondents stated that they associate non-Tehrani accents with low education and low income. One of the respondents told the researcher that, in his opinion, 'accentedness does not go with being highly educated' and he could not judge anybody 'who does not speak with Tehrani standard accent as educated'. Another respondent evaluated accented speakers as:

No one who goes to school and has academic education will talk like that.

هر كسي كه مدرسه ميره و تحصيلات آكادميك پيدا ميكنه اينجوري صحبت نميكنه.

Social judgements based on the accents: finalising the deal

RQ4 centred on whether or not the participants would close the deal to buy the vehicle from these accented speakers. Unlike the solidarity dimensions of attractiveness and dynamism, the Arabic and the Kurdish speakers gained the most favourable judgements regarding finalising the deal, whereas the Gilaki and the Azeri speakers were perceived as the least favourite candidates to buy a car from (see Figure 6). Also, for Arabic, this trend was the opposite of identifying the accents. That is, the less the interviewees were able to recognise the Arabic-accented Persian, the more they reported willingness to do business with the person who speaks with this accent.

Furthermore, it can be inferred from the responses that the positive personality traits the Tehrani listeners accredited to the Arabic and Kurdish speakers influenced their decision-making and final judgement in the social situation which was designed for this study. Thus, attributing more honesty to the Kurdish and the Arabic accents, the interviewees showed more willingness to buy the car from the Arab and the Kurd. Conversely, the Tehrani listeners alleged that they would not close the deal with the Gilaki and Azeri speakers, who had been previously judged as dishonest more frequently than the other accented speakers. Besides, dealing with the Mazandarani speaker was the hardest to decide for the Tehrani respondents. An interviewee described dealing with Azeri- and Gilaki-accented Iranians like this:

Dealing with these folks gives me a headache!

از معامله با این آدما سردرد میگیرم!

General discussion

The findings of the present study confirm the previous research in that non-standard accents gain less favourable evaluations on status dimensions but more favourable evaluations on solidarity

dimensions from the speakers of standard accents (e.g. Dailey, Giles, and Jansma 2005; Dragojevic and Giles 2014). Nevertheless, this is not entirely the case for accented Persian. Gilaki and Azeri varieties of Persian elicited negative attitudes from Tehranis (as the speakers of the standard variety) on solidarity dimensions of honesty and friendliness, whereas the same accents triggered positive attitudes on attractiveness and dynamism.

Additionally, the ability to identify the accents, for the most part, did not affect Tehranis' evaluations and attitudes towards accented Persian. In line with Lindemann (2003) and Llurda (2000), it was revealed that 'the supposed characteristics of the language may be directly associated with the supposed characteristics of the people, even if the listener has not identified them correctly' (Lindemann 2003, 354). Yet, easily identifiable accents (i.e. Gilaki and Azeri) belonged to the speakers whose first language, and more commonly, their accented Persian speech, has been vilified in the media and/or been subject to ethnic jokes and folk humour (see Martinez and Ramasubramanian 2015). This is contrary to the fact that, from a historical standpoint, Gilakis and Azeris played a major role in 'the sociocultural and intellectual leadership' of Iran (Nercissians 2001, 63). Another interesting finding was that the less the Tehrani participants were able to recognise a speaker's *degree* of accentedness (i.e. the Mazandarani guise in this study), the more likely they associated that speaker with favourable personality traits (Garrett 2010). Also, it can be concluded from the interviewees' responses that if an outgroup accent is assumed (even falsely) to be closer to the in-group accent, it receives positive evaluations on both personality traits and status dimensions.

It is arguable that the two solidarity dimensions of honesty and attractiveness, in opposite directions, heavily informed the social judgements of the Tehranis in this study. To be specific, when it came to making a decision that involved a hypothetical business transaction, the interviewees valued the perceived sense of honesty that they attributed to the Arabic-accented Persian over the attractiveness they found to be associated with Gilaki and Azeri Turkic accents. Here, the Tehranis' lack of familiarity with the Arabic-accented Persian played in favour of its respective guise, whereas the easy recognition of Gilaki and Azeri accents evoked mistrust and suspicion to the point that the speakers of these accents were denied the transaction. It can also be concluded that the factors that shaped the basis of these judgements were a combination of self-explained, prior experiences and pre-existing stereotypes evoked by accented speech.

Contrary to the common belief that people with a higher education background may have less bias towards accentedness, the majority of the participants in this study (who already live and work in a second-language context in academia) linked the accented speakers with lower social statuses and education levels (see Dewaele and McCloskey 2015). None of the Tehranis who took part in this study assigned Arabic, Gilaki, and Azeri-accented Persian to undergraduate or graduate degree categories. The evaluations for the Arabic-accented Persian were the most negative, since this accent had no place in the top category in both status dimensions of social and education levels (Cargile 1997; Cargile and Giles 1998). This finding shows that, to Tehranis, accentedness may be a strong indicator of the speaker's lower status, both socially and educationally.

Overall, the findings of the present study confirm previous research, in that language minorities are vulnerable to be 'stigmatized' and evaluated as 'outgroup' by the speakers of the majority language (Lindemann 2003, 350). It becomes critically significant when these speakers of minority languages, who expectedly speak with a 'non-standard' accent, are involved in settings and situations oriented and controlled by speakers of standard varieties. By giving rise to attitudes and evaluations from their counterparts who speak the standard variety, accented speakers face negative, non-linguistic judgements that can have serious, real-life consequences for them. These consequences can range from rejecting a simple business transaction (such as the case of this study) to denying job opportunities, and even threatening the ethnolinguistic vitality of minority languages (Tajfel and Turner 2004; Yagmur and Kroon 2006).

Conclusion and future research

This study was an attempt to investigate a rather underresearched topic on language attitudes in Iran which concerned accented Persian speech of Iranians who do not speak Persian as their first language. Relying on the VGT and ethnographic interviews, the researcher elicited attitudes of a group of Tehranis whose first language was Persian and the variety they spoke was the standard variety of Tehrani. The accents that were used in the study were Arabic, Gilaki, Azeri Turkic, Mazandarani, and Kurdish, each representing language minorities with the highest number of speakers in Iran.

Indisputably, this study did not cover all Iran's minority languages. Future studies can investigate the attitudes towards other minority languages, such as Lorish and Balochi, which were excluded from this study, due to their relative obsoleteness and geopolitical isolation. In addition, although the participants were all from Tehran, this study did not differentiate between the subvarieties that exist within different parts of Tehran, such as *Tehrani* and *Jonoub-Shahri Tehrani* (Saeli, forthcoming). Lastly, this study used a direct method to provoke explicit and thoughtful attitudes of the Tehrani speakers. Different methods of collecting and coding data, however, might yield different results, such as an indirect method to identify implicit and automatic attitudes based on the notions of *Implicit Social Cognition* (for an extensive discussion of Implicit Social Cognition, see Pantos and Perkins 2012).

Disclosure statement

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Appendix 1: The verbal-guise passage

[*Translation: English*] The ride is a 2009 Peugeot 206 Type 2. The body is in great condition, except for a few dents and scratches on the back door and some on the hood. I've not been driving it around a lot; mostly, my wife used to drive it to work and back. I've taken it to the dealer for all the service checks on time. Call me back and I'll be at your service!

[*Original: Persian*] سلام. ماشین یه ۲۰۶ نقره ایه مدل ۸۷ تیپ دو. بدنه سالمه فقط یه چند تا خط و خش رو در عقب و یکم هم رو کاپوت داره. من با‌هاش زیاد مسافرت نرفتم فقط خانومم می رفته سر کار و بر می گَشته اکثراً. سپر عقب سمت شاگرد یه رنگ کوچیک داره، سرویساشم به موقع بردم نمایندگی. زنگ بزنید در خدمتتون هستم!

Appendix 2: Interview questions (based on Giles 1970); translated from Persian

1. How does the accent sound to you? How much appealing is it to you?

2. What personality traits does this person have? In other words, what are the character types you can associate with this person after hearing him on the phone?

3. How much easy would it be for you to interact with this person? Would you feel comfortable haggling over the price with him or ask more about technical details of the car he is trying to sell?

4. Would you eventually decide to buy the vehicle from this person? Why/ why not?

5. Can you recognise what accent this person speaks with?