

To see or to hear - that is the question! Influences of visual and auditory cues on social categorization

“Categorical thinking is a natural and inevitable tendency of the human mind” (Allport, 1954). The starting point for this research project was the question how language in general and pronunciation in particular affect the process of social categorization. In the first two studies, we wanted to see how people categorize target persons by separately testing the effects of auditory and visual cues on social categorization. The third study combined the first two, in order to directly compare the influences of visual and auditory cues.

Study 1 was designed as a replication of the original Taylor et al. (1978) “Who Said What” paradigm, that can be used to indirectly assess the social categorisation of given target persons. I used pictures of typical Italian and German looking men. The results showed that in the matching task (i.e. deciding which target person made which statement) participants tended to confuse two Italian (German) looking men more often than Italians with Germans. This type of confusion was a clear indication of category activation through visual cues.

Study 2 tested the role of language pronunciation on social categorization. Participants were presented with target persons speaking accent free German vs. German with an Italian accent. In this case results showed clear activation of a social category based on the auditory cues.

Study 3 combined the first two studies, resulting in crossed categories, e.g. Italian (German) looking men speaking German without (with) Italian accent. In this way it was possible to directly confront the two cues (visual and auditory) and see which one is more important in the process of social categorization. Results showed much stronger influence of accent (auditory cues) than of looks (visual cues) on social categorization. In sum, results show that not only the look but also the accent of a person plays an important role in how that person is socially categorized.