

Attitudes Towards Tbilisi- and Mingrelian-Accented Georgian Among Georgian Youth: On the
Road to Linguistic Homogenization?

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Abstract

Two matched-guise studies examined language attitudes among Georgian youth towards two varieties of spoken Georgian: Tbilisi-accented Georgian (standard variety) and Mingrelian-accented Georgian (nonstandard variety). Study 1, conducted in Tbilisi, found that listeners ($N = 106$) attributed more status and solidarity to the standard variety, regardless of self-reported regional identity (Tbiliseli, Mingrelian, Other). Study 2, conducted in Samegrelo, found that self-identified Mingrelians ($N = 96$) attributed more status and solidarity to the standard variety, regardless of language use at home. Together, these findings suggest that Mingrelians may be undergoing a generational shift in their language attitudes in favor of linguistic homogenization.

Keywords: language attitudes, stereotyping, vitality, status, solidarity

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Research on the social evaluation of speech styles, or *language attitudes*, shows that the use of particular languages, dialects, and accents can have significant communicative and other social consequences for users of those forms, including traits attributed, behavioral cooperativeness, and perceived persuasiveness, among others (see Garrett, 2010). Past research in this domain has primarily focused on varieties of spoken English – research on attitudes towards varieties of other languages remains scant (Fuertes, Gottdiener, Martin, Gilbert, & Giles, 2012; but see Blauvelt, 2013, Giles & Watson, 2013). Using the matched-guise technique (Lambert, 1967), the present research examined language attitudes among Georgian youth towards two varieties of spoken Georgian: Tbilisi-accented and Mingrelian-accented Georgian. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first matched-guise research to examine language attitudes towards these two varieties of Georgian.

Language Attitudes

Language attitudes have been theorized to reflect two sequential cognitive processes: categorization and stereotyping (Lambert, 1967; Ryan, 1983). First, listeners use speech cues (e.g., accent) to infer speakers' social group membership(s). Second, based on that categorization, they attribute to speakers stereotypic traits associated with those (inferred) group memberships. In other words, language attitudes reflect linguistic stereotypes.

Previous research shows that language attitudes are organized along two primary evaluative dimensions: status (e.g., intelligent, educated) and solidarity (e.g., pleasant, attractive) (Giles & Watson, 2013). Status attributions are based primarily on perceptions of socioeconomic status (Woolard, 1985). Solidarity attributions, on the other hand, depend more on the ingroup-

outgroup position of the speaker relative to the listener (Ryan, 1983). Language is an important symbol of identity and use of the ingroup style can enhance feelings of solidarity within one's linguistic community (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977). Indeed, failure to use the ingroup variety in the speech community in which it is the speech norm can result in social marginalization (Hogg, D'Agata, & Abrams, 1989). Accordingly, people tend to attribute more solidarity to members of their *own* linguistic community, particularly when that community is characterized by at least moderate or increasing *vitality* (Ryan, Hewstone, & Giles, 1984). Giles and colleagues (1977: 308) defined vitality as "that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup relations." A linguistic group's vitality is determined by (a) the *status* (economic, social, political power) and (b) *demographics* (number, distribution) of its speakers, as well as its (c) *institutional support* (visibility and recognition in government, media, etc.) (Giles & Johnson, 1987).

Operating within the status and solidarity dimensions, previous research shows that speakers of so-called "standard" and "nonstandard" varieties elicit different evaluational reactions (Giles & Watson, 2013). Standard varieties are those that adhere to codified norms defining "correct" spoken and written usage in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, whereas nonstandard varieties are those that depart from codified norms in some way (e.g., pronunciation) (Milroy & Milroy, 1985; St. Clair, 1982).¹ Examples of standard varieties include Standard American English and Parisian French, whereas examples of nonstandard varieties include most regional and ethnic dialects, as well as foreign accents. Because standard varieties tend to be associated with dominant socioeconomic groups within a given society, as well as ideological notions of "correctness" (see Lippi-Green, 1997), standard speakers are typically attributed more status than nonstandard speakers (Fuertes et al., 2012).

Indeed, nonstandard speakers themselves often consensually accept, and sometimes even exaggerate, the negative status evaluations assigned to them by others (Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, & Fillenbaum, 1960). Nonetheless, nonstandard varieties can possess *covert prestige*, with users of those forms sometimes attributed more solidarity by members of their own linguistic community (Luhman, 1990; Powesland & Giles, 1975).²

The Setting

The present research examined language attitudes in Georgia, a small country (population \approx 4.5 million) in the Caucasus region of Eurasia. The modern Georgian state was established in 1991, following its secession from the Soviet Union. The country's official language is Georgian, which belongs to the Kartvelian language family. Standard Georgian is based on the Kartluri dialect spoken in the eastern region of Kartli where the capital, Tbilisi, is located (Shosted & Chikovani, 2006). The present research examined attitudes among Georgian youth towards two varieties of spoken Georgian: Tbilisi-accented Georgian and Mingrelian-accented Georgian.

Tbilisi-accented Georgian is the standard variety and indexes a Tbiliseli identity – i.e., a Georgian from Tbilisi. Tbiliselis are a high vitality group within Georgia. Approximately one fourth (\approx 1.2 million) of Georgia's population resides in Tbilisi, making Tbiliselis the country's largest regional subgroup. Tbiliselis tend to be socially and economically advantaged. Most of Tbilisi's population (97%) is urban and the region boasts the highest average household income in the country (GEOSTAT, 2014). Tbiliselis are also well-represented institutionally, owing, in part, to the fact that most government, media, and other social institutions are headquartered in the capital.

Mingrelian-accented Georgian is a nonstandard variety and indexes a Mingrelian identity. Mingrelians (sometimes spelled Megrelians) are a regional and linguistic subgroup of ethnic Georgians who live primarily in the western region of Samegrelo (also known as Mingrelia), situated on the Black Sea coast (see Broers, 2001). Most Mingrelians speak the Mingrelian language.³ Like Georgian, Mingrelian is a Kartvelian language; however, the two are not mutually intelligible (Vamling & Tchantouria, 2010). Given that standard Georgian is the language of instruction in most schools, virtually all Mingrelians also speak Georgian (Broers, 2001). When they do, many retain a distinctive Mingrelian accent.

Mingrelians are a moderately vital group within Georgia. Demographically, Mingrelians (population \approx 450,000) constitute a substantial regional and linguistic subgroup. However, despite their demographic strength, Mingrelians tend to be socially and economically disadvantaged. Most of Samegrelo's population (60%) is rural and the region's average household income is one of the lowest in the country, approximately 25% less than in Tbilisi (GEOSTAT, 2014). Indeed, the term *margali*, 'a Mingrelian,' has historically been used synonymously with the word 'peasant' and to describe someone who 'speaks as they speak in the village,' associations that continue to this day (Broers, 2001). Mingrelians also have limited institutional support within Georgia, and any claims that Mingrelians are a separate ethnolinguistic group or that Mingrelian is a separate language (rather than a regional dialect) are vehemently opposed by most Georgians. Despite this, Mingrelians are a relatively cohesive group and typically express pride in their regional identity (Broers, 2012; Vamling & Tchantouria, 2010).

Study 1

Study 1 was conducted in Tbilisi and investigated the effects of listeners' self-reported regional identity on their evaluations of Tbilisi- and Mingrelian-accented Georgian. Given that status attributions are based primarily on perceptions of socioeconomic status and that Mingrelians tend to be economically disadvantaged relative to Tbiliseliis, we predicted that respondents would attribute more status to Tbilisi- than Mingrelian-accented Georgian, *regardless* of their self-reported regional identity. In contrast, we expected listeners' self-reported regional identity to influence their solidarity attributions in a manner consistent with ingroup favoritism (Ryan et al., 1984). Specifically, we predicted that self-identified Tbiliseliis – for whom the Tbilisi (Mingrelian) accent indexes an ingroup (outgroup) identity – would attribute more solidarity to Tbilisi- than Mingrelian-accented Georgian. In contrast, we predicted that self-identified Mingrelians – for whom the Mingrelian (Tbilisi) accent indexes an ingroup (outgroup) identity – would attribute more solidarity to Mingrelian- than Tbilisi-accented Georgian. Finally, for listeners who identify with regions other than Tbilisi and Mingrelia, *both* styles constitute outgroup varieties. Nonetheless, given that they reside in Tbilisi, we predicted that this group would perceive a stronger sense of connection with Tbiliseliis than Mingrelians and, thus, attribute more solidarity to Tbilisi- than Mingrelian-accented Georgian.

Method

Voice Stimuli. We employed the matched-guise technique (MGT: Lambert, 1967), which involves bidialectical or bilingual speakers producing the same passage in different linguistic styles, or *guises*. This procedure ensures that differences across guises reflect only the features of the linguistic style itself, rather than extraneous variables (e.g., pitch). Three male speakers in their 20s produced the voice stimuli. The first, Bakur, was born in Samegrelo and grew up speaking with a Poti-Tsalenjikha Mingrelian accent, but adapted to the Tbilisi accent

upon moving to the capital for university study. The second, Giorgi, was born and raised in Tbilisi, but has a Mingrelian grandmother. He normally speaks with a Tbilisi accent and in his Mingrelian guise has a very mild accent. The third, Misha, was also born and raised in Tbilisi, but has a Mingrelian mother and spent summers in Zugdidi (Samegrelo) as a child. He normally speaks with a Tbilisi accent and in his Mingrelian guise has a very strong accent. Each speaker was recorded reading a short passage on Euclidian geometry (see Appendix) in Tbilisi- and Mingrelian-accented Georgian, yielding a total of 6 recordings.

Procedure. Testing was conducted in school classrooms.⁴ Participants listened to all 6 recordings and, during a brief pause after each recording, rated each speaker on 6 personality traits adapted from past research (Zahn & Hopper, 1985) – 3 relating to *status* (intelligent, educated, cultured) and 3 relating to *solidarity* (pleasant, attractive, amusing) – using a 6-point scale (1 = *very little*, 6 = *very much*). The three status items and the three solidarity items were averaged to form the *status* ($\alpha = .91$) and *solidarity* ($\alpha = .86$) scales, respectively. Having rated all six guises, participants were presented with a list of Georgia's regions (e.g., Tbilisi, Mingrelia) and asked to circle the one they most closely identify with.

Participants. Completed questionnaires were obtained from 106 university students in Tbilisi (57.5% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 18.94$). Based on their responses to the regional identification question, participants were classified into one of three regional identity groups: Tbiliseli ($n = 50$), Mingrelian ($n = 26$) or Other ($n = 30$). Participants across the three groups did not differ in terms of age ($F < 1$) or gender distribution ($\chi^2 < 1$).

Results

Status and solidarity ratings were submitted to a 2 (accent: Tbilisi, Mingrelian) x 3 (speaker: Misha, Giorgi, Bakur) x 3 (regional identity: Tbiliseli, Mingrelian, Other) mixed

ANOVA, with repeated measures on the first two factors. Type I error for all post-hoc comparisons was controlled using the Sidak correction.

Status. Significant main effects for accent [$F(1,103) = 302.86, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .75$] and speaker [$F(2,206) = 48.30, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .32$] were subsumed by a speaker x accent interaction [$F(2,206) = 31.59, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .24$]. All three speakers were attributed less status in their Mingrelian- than Tbilisi-accented guise ($ps < .001$) and this evaluative downgrading was most pronounced for Misha (see Figure 1). There was also a main effect for regional identity, $F(2,103) = 4.65, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .08$. Mingrelians were more generous in their evaluations ($M = 3.94$) than Tbiliselis ($M = 3.40$) ($p < .01$) but not those identified as Other ($M = 3.51$) ($p = .09$). No other effects were significant.

Solidarity. Significant main effects for accent [$F(1,103) = 155.58, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .60$] and speaker [$F(2,206) = 69.39, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .40$] were subsumed by an accent x speaker interaction [$F(2,206) = 29.81, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .23$]. All three speakers were attributed less solidarity in their Mingrelian- than Tbilisi-accented guise ($ps < .001$) and this evaluative downgrading was again most pronounced for Misha (see Figure 1). A significant main effect for regional identity [$F(2,103) = 3.71, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .07$] revealed that Mingrelians were more generous in their evaluations ($M = 3.31$) than Tbiliselis ($M = 2.87$) ($p < .05$), but not those identified as Other ($M = 2.84$) ($p = .053$). No other effects were significant.

Study 2

Study 1 found that respondents in Tbilisi attributed more status *and* solidarity to Tbilisi- than Mingrelian-accented Georgian, *regardless* of their self-reported regional identity. The finding that self-identified Mingrelians themselves attributed more solidarity to Tbilisi-accented

Georgian is surprising, given that Mingrelians are a relatively vital and cohesive group within Georgia and typically express pride in their Mingrelian identity (Broers, 2001; Vamling & Tchantouria, 2010). Previous research has shown that *perceived* group vitality tends to be a stronger predictor of language attitudes than objective measures of vitality (Bourhis & Sachdev, 1984). Thus, although Mingrelians appear to be (objectively speaking) at least a moderately vital group within Georgia, it may be that Mingrelians living in Tbilisi *perceive* their group vitality to be relatively low. In contrast, Mingrelians living in Samegrelo – where most of the Mingrelian population is concentrated – may have a stronger sense of subjective group vitality and, accordingly, attribute more solidarity to Mingrelian- than Tbilisi-accented Georgian (cf. Ryan et al., 1984).

To explore this possibility, Study 2 examined attitudes towards the two varieties among self-identified Mingrelians living in Samegrelo. We predicted that this group would attribute less status, but *more* solidarity, to Mingrelian- than Tbilisi-accented Georgian. Furthermore, we predicted that preference for the Mingrelian accent on the solidarity dimension would be more pronounced among Mingrelians who speak Mingrelian at home, which has been found to be indicative of increased group loyalty (e.g., Woolard & Gahng, 1990).

Method

Procedure and Voice Stimuli. Study 2 used the same procedure, voice stimuli, and measures ($\alpha_{\text{status}} = .80$; $\alpha_{\text{solidarity}} = .71$) as Study 1, with the addition of a single item that asked participants to select from a list all languages they speak at home (e.g., Georgian, Mingrelian).

Participants. Completed questionnaires were obtained from 96 self-identified Mingrelians in Samegrelo (58.7% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 17.39$), approximately half ($n = 45$) of whom

reported speaking Mingrelian at home.⁵ Participants across the two groups did not differ in terms of age ($F < 1$) or gender distribution ($\chi^2 < 1$).

Results

Status and solidarity ratings were submitted to a 2 (accent: Tbilisi, Mingrelian) x 3 (speaker: Misha, Giorgi, Bakur) x 2 (Mingrelian use at home: yes, no) mixed ANOVA, with repeated measures on the first two factors. Type I error for all post-hoc comparisons was controlled using the Sidak correction.

Status. Significant main effects for accent [$F(1,94) = 356.42, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .79$] and speaker [$F(2,188) = 49.95, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .35$] were subsumed by an accent x speaker interaction [$F(2,188) = 24.22, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .21$]. All three speakers were attributed less status in their Mingrelian- than Tbilisi-accented guise ($ps < .001$) and this evaluative downgrading was most pronounced for Misha (see Figure 2). No other effects were significant.

Solidarity. Significant main effects of accent [$F(1,94) = 215.04, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .70$] and speaker [$F(2,188) = 58.37, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .38$] were subsumed by an accent x speaker interaction [$F(2,188) = 14.99, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$]. All three speakers were evaluated less favorably in their Mingrelian- than Tbilisi-accented guise ($ps < .001$) and this evaluative downgrading was again most pronounced for Misha (see Figure 2). No other effects were significant.

Discussion

Two studies examined language attitudes among Georgian youth towards two varieties of spoken Georgian: Tbilisi-accented Georgian (standard variety) and Mingrelian-accented Georgian (nonstandard variety). Study 1 found that listeners in Tbilisi attributed more status and solidarity to Tbilisi-accented Georgian, *regardless* of their self-reported regional identity

(Tbiliseli, Mingrelian, Other). A similar pattern of results emerged in Study 2: Self-identified Mingrelians in Samegrelo attributed more status and solidarity to the standard variety, *regardless* of their language use at home.

Together, these findings suggest that Mingrelian-accented Georgian is a highly stigmatized variety in Georgia, even among Mingrelians themselves. In fact, inspection of cell means across the two studies suggests that self-identified Mingrelians in Samegrelo may have even *more* polarized attitudes than respondents in Tbilisi, particularly on the status dimension. Table 1 displays differences in cell means across the two studies for each speaker and accent; positive (negative) values indicate more favorable evaluations in Study 1 (Study 2). As can be seen, self-identified Mingrelians in Samegrelo (Study 2) attributed *more* status to all three speakers in their Tbilisi-accented guise, yet *less* status to two out of the three speakers in their Mingrelian-accented guise, than did respondents in Tbilisi (Study 1).

The finding that *all* groups evaluatively downgraded Mingrelian-accented Georgian may partly be due to the context of the present studies. Unfavorable attitudes towards nonstandard varieties tend to be *accentuated* in status-stressing contexts (e.g., school), yet *attenuated* (or even reversed) in solidarity-stressing contexts (e.g., home) (Giles & Ryan, 1982). Thus, one reason why the Mingrelian accent was so consistently downgraded may be due to the fact that the location of the studies (i.e., school) and the passage topic (i.e., Euclidian geometry) were both status-stressing. Future research should examine whether a different pattern emerges in more solidarity-stressing contexts, particularly among self-identified Mingrelians.

In both studies, important speaker differences emerged. Although *all* three speakers were evaluated less favorably in their Mingrelian- than Tbilisi-accented guise, this evaluative downgrading was consistently *most* pronounced for Misha (see Figures 1 and 2). We attribute

this finding to differences in accent strength. Previous research has shown that the stronger a speaker's nonstandard accent is, the less favorably they are evaluated (Giles, 1972). Accordingly, it is not surprising that Misha, who had the strongest Mingrelian accent, was much more severely downgraded in his Mingrelian-accent guise relative to his Tbilisi-accent guise, than Giorgi and Bakur, both of whom had more mild Mingrelian accents.

In sum, results of the present studies suggest that the Mingrelian accent is a highly stigmatized variety in Georgia, *irrespective* of listeners' regional identity or language use at home. The finding that Mingrelians themselves preferred Tbilisi- over Mingrelian-accented Georgian suggests that Mingrelians may be undergoing a generational shift in their language attitudes. Older generations of Mingrelians tend to have a strong emotional attachment to and typically express pride in their Mingrelian identity (Broers, 2001; Vamling & Tchantouria, 2010). In contrast, our sample of young adults suggests that younger generations may have reached a "tipping point" in their language attitudes in favor of linguistic homogenization, rewarding those who "shed" their Mingrelian identity and successfully assimilate to the dominant linguistic group not only with greater status, but also with greater solidarity. Whether or not such polarized attitudes will ultimately exert enough pressure to lead to actual changes in language *use* in favor of the standard remains a theoretically and socially important avenue for future research.^{6, 7}

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Notes

¹ The belief that some language varieties are “better” or more “correct” than others is ideological in nature and not rooted in linguistic fact. From a linguistic standpoint, *all* varieties are equally correct and functional (for a more detailed discussion, see *standard language ideology*: e.g., Lippi-Green, 1997).

² During intergroup comparisons, when one target is judged more positively on one of the fundamental dimensions of social perception (e.g., status), the other target tends to be judged more positively on the other dimension (e.g., solidarity). This evaluative pattern has been termed the “compensation effect” and is frequently observed in empirical studies (see Kervyn, Yzerbyt, & Judd, 2010). The evaluative pattern characteristic of “covert prestige” is one example of the compensation effect.

³ The status of Mingrelian as a *language* or a *dialect* is a politically sensitive issue in Georgia. Herein we use the term language out of convenience, and the present studies involve only Mingrelian and Tbilisi *accents* in standard Georgian.

⁴ Students participated in the study in small groups of 10-25 students during regularly-scheduled class hours. The study took approximately 40 minutes to complete. Paper-and-pencil questionnaires were used. Participation was voluntary.

⁵ Thirteen participants who self-identified with regions other than Mingrelia were excluded from all analyses.

⁶ Anecdotal evidence from observers in the region suggests that Mingrelian language use among Mingrelians has already begun to decline (Berge, 2011).

⁷ For a discussion of the processes underlying the mixture, assimilation, and/or eradication of different linguistic forms, see work on *dialect-levelling* (e.g., Auer, 1998; Røyneland, 2009).

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Table 1

Differences in Status and Solidarity Attributions Across the Two Studies By Accent and Speaker

	Tbilisi accent			Mingrelian accent		
	Misha	Giorgi	Bakur	Misha	Giorgi	Bakur
Status	.15	.16	.23	-.28	.08	-.23
Solidarity	.10	.26	.15	-.31	.18	.10

Note. Positive values indicate more favorable evaluations in Study 2, whereas negative values indicate more favorable evaluations in Study 1.

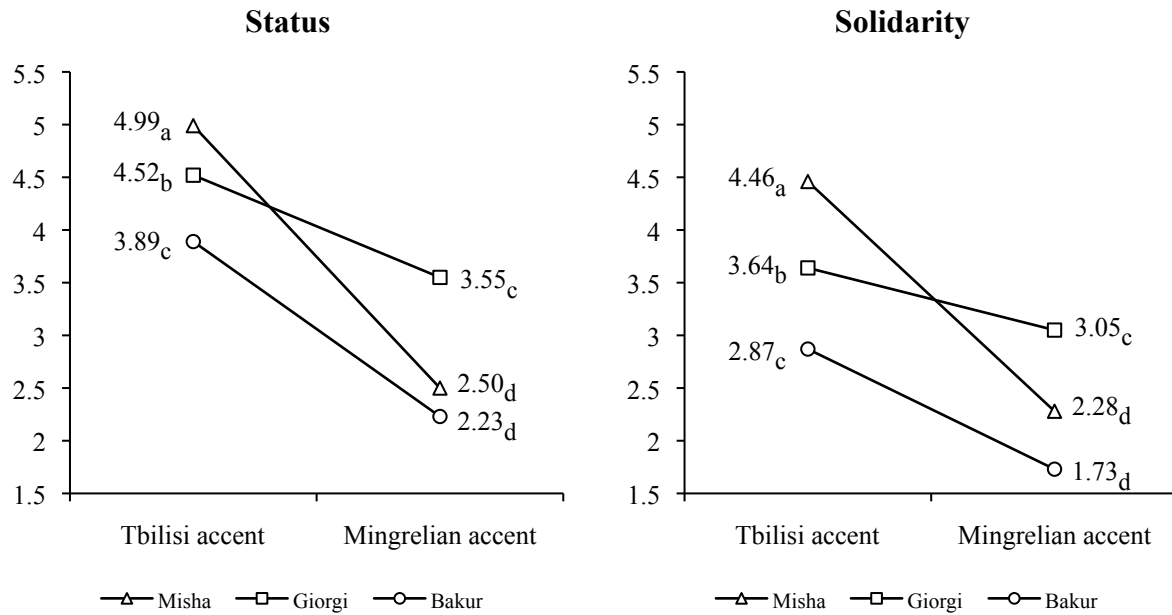


Figure 1. Effects of accent and speaker on status and solidarity attributions for Tbilisi sample (Study 1; $N = 106$). Within each panel, means with different subscripts are significantly different at $p < .05$ (Sidak correction).

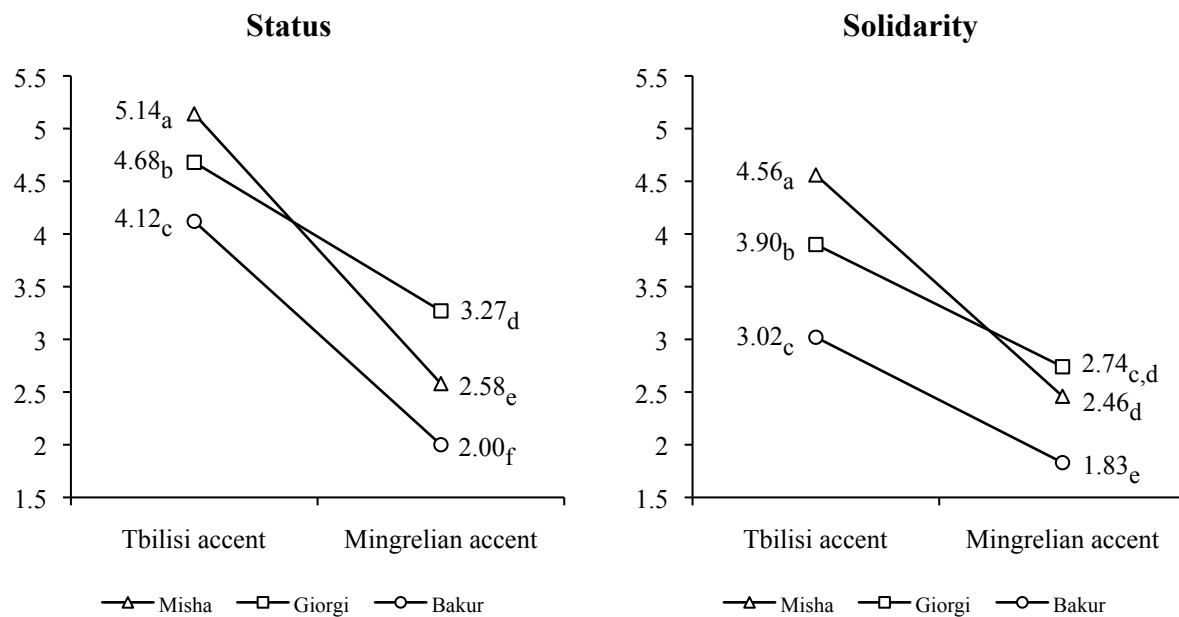


Figure 2. Effects of accent and speaker on status and solidarity attributions for Samegrelo sample (Study 2; $N = 96$). Within each panel, means with different subscripts are significantly different at $p < .05$ (Sidak correction).

Appendix

Passage

Euclid constructed his geometry, a geometry that stood up to the passage of almost two thousand years, using an especially appropriate method: the axiomatic method. Euclid began by proposing a series of truths that seemed self-evident to him and which he accepted without prior proof. For example, he accepted the idea that only one line passes through two points, or that two lines that are not parallel always intersect each other at one single point. Once these basic assumptions were accepted, the rules of reasoning alone gave him all the rest. From these primitive propositions, the “axioms,” the deductions that came from them took off one after the other; these were the “theorems.” And from the theorems arose yet more theorems. The situation was like the budding of branches from a tree, or, to be more exact, from several trees. Starting from the trunks (the axioms), more and more branches grew out. One single branch can be connected to several others. That means that the theorem symbolized by the branch is deduced from the theorems that grow up where it begins.

Of course, the choice of axioms is in some ways arbitrary; it can start from one particular set of propositions or from a different set. The only important thing is that the same branches appear, even though they may come from different trunks or perhaps in different positions. Perhaps what originally was a branch (a theorem) will now be a trunk (an axiom), and vice versa. What’s really important is that the rules of deduction be respected and that the pattern be maintained in all its complexity.

Bios

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