

## The Influence of Accents on Social Perception

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### Abstract

This paper investigates how significantly a person's accent affects the way they are perceived as an individual. The author discusses stereotypes associated with different accents, ingroup language preferences (own-accent bias) and the 'all sound alike' phenomenon of unfamiliar accents. These biases can lead to accent discrimination and reduced credibility of foreign speech, which can greatly impact a person's probability of employment and how they are perceived in their occupations. The author also explores why certain accents are considered to be more attractive or prestigious than others and discusses our unconscious tendency to mimic the speech patterns of our conversation partners. From the literature reviewed, the author concludes that it is important to be aware of how accents alter our judgments about others and how we might be perceived, based on the way that we speak. This understanding can help us move towards a greater acceptance and respect of peoples' various backgrounds, especially in societies that are expanding their cultural horizons.

The voice is an important mediator in how we perceive others as it conveys information about a person's identity, emotions, intentions, and thoughts (Rule & Ambady, 2008). The way something is said can have a larger influence on impression formation than the contents of the message itself (Eisenclas & Tsurutani, 2011). In particular, accents—the ways in which individuals pronounce, enunciate or stress their words in speech (Giles, 1970)—can significantly influence the way individuals are perceived by others. Accents can be salient markers of outgroup membership and thus evoke negative judgements and stereotypes (Kinzler et al., 2009; Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010; Neuliep & Speten-Hansen, 2013). Research shows that starting from early childhood, we show a preference for our own accent (Kinzler, Shutts, Dejesus, & Spelke, 2009). These perceptions often lead to discrimination and can have a serious effect on employment opportunities, quality of education, as well as credibility of verbal testimony (Gill, 1994; Kerstholt, Jansen, Van Amelsvoort, & Broeders, 2006; Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010). These different perceptions have been shown to alter the way individuals evaluate others and the social groups to which they belong.

### A Cue to Identity

Everyone speaks with some sort of an accent—whether

they are aware of it or not (Lippi-Green, 1997; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). An accent is an important part of a person's identity and can be used as a meaningful cue for categorizing an individual as it conveys a significant amount of social information (e.g., nationality, ethnicity, social status, regional membership; Kinzler et al., 2009). Categorization is a natural process of the mind, allowing for efficient information processing, which is based on what information is available and salient (Allport, 1954). Interestingly, it was found that accents were used over appearance to categorize other individuals when individuals were presented with incongruent ethnic information about a target (e.g., Italian-looking man who speaks fluent German; Rakić, Steffens, & Mummendey, 2011). This suggests that language is a predominant cue for social categorization. Differentiation within one's own culture is also based more on regional accents (dialects) than appearance. Individuals with standard local accents (i.e., spoken by the majority of individuals living in one's own community) tend to be perceived as more competent and socially attractive than individuals with regional (e.g., provincial) or foreign accents (Adank, Stewart, Connell, & Wood, 2013). These inferences are largely due to stereotypes associated with particular languages and accents. Southern accents, for example, are strongly associated with a lack

of education, the country, and the image of a ‘redneck’ (Campbell-Kibler, 2007). Personality traits such as warmth and honesty can also be inferred from the language and accent with which a person speaks (Kinzler et al., 2009). Quality of voice (i.e., range in rate and pitch, gentleness or aggressiveness in tone) and certain mannerisms which refers to any feature of speech that is highly repetitious, also play a vital role in how a person is perceived (Rakić et al., 2011).

### Own Accent Preference

Language preferences are associated with ingroup preferences. Individuals tend to favour those who share their accent and perceive them in a more positive manner, as they automatically infer more positive personality traits. This ingroup preference is known as the ‘own-accent bias’ and can be observed even in infancy; infants as young as five months old spent a longer time looking at the face of someone who spoke in their native language with a native accent, than at someone who spoke in a different language or with a foreign accent (Kinzler, Dupoux, & Spelke, 2007). At five months, infants are able to discriminate between languages and dialects, showing a preference for their native language. This preference is due to greater familiarity with the sound of native speech. Similarly, five-year-old children preferred to be friends with peers speaking in the same native accent as their own, over those with non-native accents (Kinzler, 2009). These five-year-olds also displayed a preference for a native accent when presented with faces of children of a different race. The Caucasian five-year olds chose white faces, over black faces, as friends when the target faces were silent. When the faces were paired with voices, and thereby accents, they showed a preference for black faces paired with a native-accent instead of white faces paired with a foreign accent. These findings suggest that for young children, the way a person sounds serves as a stronger discriminatory cue than the person’s appearance. It is interesting to note that while most research was conducted in English-speaking countries, similar effects have been noted in non-English speaking countries (see Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010, for a review).

### Other-Accent Effect

Individuals often find it difficult to differentiate between unfamiliar accents and may experience the ‘all sound alike’ phenomenon or the ‘other-accent effect’ (Stevenage, Clarke, & McNeill, 2012). Less exposure to an accent results in less expertise and a weaker ability to distinguish or recognize non-native accented speech. Dutch speakers can process English words spoken with a familiar Dutch accent better than English words spoken with an unfamiliar Japanese accent. The ‘other-accent effect’ is observed for both national and regional accents. Australian listeners are more accurate at recognizing speech with an Australian accent than speech with an unfamiliar English accent (Stevenage et al., 2012). This difficulty in differentiation can have drastic effects on verbal identification of suspects in a police lineup for cases where the perpetrator was not seen, but was only heard during the crime (e.g., if the victim was blindfolded). Ear witnesses were less accurate at identifying the target voice from other voices in a lineup if they had heard them with non-native accents, as compared to voices with native accents (Kerstholt, 2006). These findings suggest that there is a probability that an innocent defendant will be incorrectly identified as the perpetrator if he or she is a non-native speaker. These mistakes occur because individuals can identify familiar speech more accurately and are more confident in their judgments than when they are asked to identify speech with an unfamiliar accent.

### Stigma and Discrimination

The majority of research shows that attitudes towards non-native speakers in many countries—be they immigrants or international students—are often negative (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). A foreign accent is a clear signal that the person is not native born and is a member of an outgroup, which naturally extends to the assumption that they are not fluent in that language. A non-native accent is therefore often seen as an undesirable characteristic and negative evaluations of a person are associated with the strength of the accent (Ryan, Carranza, & Moffie, 1977). Not everyone considers it to be a form of prejudice; however, accent discrimination is a common occurrence. Stereotypes and negative attitudes associated with a particular social group may

be evoked and a person with a non-native accent might be perceived to be lazy, incompetent, and uneducated (Dixon, Mahoney, & Cocks, 2002; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Munro, 2003). Prejudice is often associated with the level of ethnocentrism—that is, a strong identification with one’s culture, belief in one’s language or dialect as superior and a decreased motivation to interact with members outside of one’s ingroup. The more ethnocentric a person is, the less positively they will evaluate a non-native accented speaker (Neuliep & Speten-Hansen, 2013). This negative stigma can leave individuals feeling devalued and can have a serious impact on different aspects of a person’s life, such as the probability of employment. The stereotypes associated with particular accents can greatly influence the way a person is perceived in their occupation. Individuals with non-native accents are typically perceived to be of lower socioeconomic status and have less successful jobs, such as janitorial or fast-food industry work. In contrast, individuals with native accents are characterized to be more successful and in holding of high status jobs such as legal work (Berk-Seligson, 1984; Gill, 1994). Those with non-native accents are also more likely to be assigned to low-status positions than native-accented employees, as standard-accented individuals are seen as more suitable for high status positions (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Munro, 2003). The mere perception of these stereotypes can have a profound impact on how a person identifies another, even though the stereotypes may not necessarily be accurate. The presence of an accent could significantly reduce the credibility of professionals (e.g., physicians), immigrants seeking jobs, and even eyewitness accounts (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010). As a result, accent reduction programs have been created, aimed at eliminating the ‘problematic’ accent (Munro & Derwing, 1995).

With the growing number of foreign educators in our society, the effects of teachers’ accents on the quality of the learning experience need to be considered. Students and parents often complain about foreign teachers being unintelligible. When American students listened to three-minute lecture recordings of different accented professors (standard North American accent, British accent and Malaysian accent), they gave more positive ratings for professors with accents that were most similar to their own and claimed to have comprehended

them better (Gill, 1994). As students were able to recall a greater amount of information from the lecture given by the native-accented speaker, it was hypothesized that more cognitive resources were expended in trying to understand the foreign speaker. Therefore, less attention was directed towards comprehending the meaning of the lecture material. These results provide significant evidence for how accents can directly impact the quality of education.

### **Reduced Credibility of Foreign Accents**

It may not be consciously realized, but individuals tend to be more suspicious of those with heavier accents. In a recent study, both native speakers with native accents and non-native speakers with foreign accents simply repeated trivia statements given by the experimenter, and participants evaluated how truthful they perceived the messages of the speakers to be (Lev-Ari and Keysar, 2010). The foreign accented speech was perceived to be less truthful than the native speech, an effect of difficulty in processing and unrelated to any prejudice against foreigners. The accent made it more difficult for the participants to understand what the speaker was saying, but they misattributed the trouble of understanding to the truthfulness of the statements. When participants were made aware of the reason for their processing difficulty, they made an effort to avoid the misattribution, but the effect remained for when they heard a very heavy accent. Stimuli that are more fluently processed appear more pleasant, credible, familiar, and are perceived more positively (Oppenheimer, 2008).

### **Attractiveness of Accents**

The aesthetic appeal of certain accents is not inherent to the speech, but as accents are an important social cue, our positive or negative responses are based off the stereotypes we associate with them. Certain accents are more stigmatized than others, while some are more admired. Many countries tend to have an ‘accent hierarchy’, such as in the United States where standard American and Western European accents are generally perceived to be more prestigious and more pleasant-sounding than accents from other areas of the world, such as Asian or Hispanic accents (Lippi-Green, 1994; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). Typically, the standard native accent of a particular country is perceived to be

more desirable, as it is familiar, signals ingroup membership, and is largely held by the educated upper-class. Individuals tend to view others with speech patterns that are more similar to their own (whether it be by speed, accent, or proficiency), more favourably and perceive them to be more competent and socially attractive (Hui & Cheng, 1987). Accents from historically and politically colonial nations such as the United States and England are often perceived to be more prestigious by other countries—such as New Zealand—when compared to the standard accent of their own country (Anderson et al., 2007). The prestige associated with these accents may also result in discrimination by others who may feel resentful towards the symbolic meaning of these accents, especially those who may have been placed at an occupational disadvantage.

### Speech Mimicry

We tend to unconsciously imitate the behaviours, body postures, mannerisms, and facial expressions of individuals with whom we interact in social situations (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Stel, 2010). This effect has been shown to extend to imitating individuals based on the way they speak, especially when we consider them to be more socially attractive (Babel, 2012; Adank et al., 2013). The phenomenon is known as ‘speech alignment’ or ‘phonetic accommodation,’ in which the style of the speaker subtly influences our own way of speaking. We have a tendency to match the pronunciation patterns of the speech of the person with whom we are speaking by picking up the other person’s rate of speech, choice of words, word order, and intonation or pitch, leading us to unintentionally mimic the person’s accent (Miller et al., 2010; Babel, 2012; Adank et al., 2013). Without even hearing speech, individuals can perceive an accent from reading a person’s lips and tend to also mimic the style of speech. Miller et al. (2010) had participants watch targets mouth certain words, then they were asked to repeat the word they believed the person mouthed. Without being asked to imitate the speaker, they surprisingly found that the participants were more likely to repeat the word in the target person’s accent instead of their own. This mimicry could result in an embarrassing situation when interacting with someone with a different accent and may be inappropriate under many circumstances. However, it has been shown that

imitating someone else’s accented speech may help in comprehending the message and may increase liking between conversation partners (Adank et al., 2013). It was demonstrated that when participants imitated the speech of someone with a regional accent, they formed more positive attitudes towards them, particularly perceiving them to be more socially attractive than when asked to simply repeat their statements.

### Conclusion

Accents have a considerable effect on how individuals perceive others. As it highlights social group membership, the presence of an accent can lead to discrimination, which can affect many areas of a person’s life. Some accents are perceived to be more attractive than others, but this is mainly due to the stereotypes individuals have associated with them, as well as the preference for similar-sounding accents. Individuals have an unconscious tendency to mimic a conversation partner’s speech patterns, which may result in more positive impressions and may even minimize individual differences in some situations. As the global society is becoming increasingly interconnected and there is increased contact between native and non-native speakers of languages, it is important to understand how accents alter our judgments of others, especially in English-dominant countries whose populace is becoming more multicultural. With a greater understanding, we can attempt to move towards a greater acceptance of and respect for others and their cultures.

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