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Review

Hear, hear! A review of accent discrimination at work

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Research on diversity in organizations has mostly focused on attributes that rely on visual cues (e.g., gender, race, age) and overlooked an important source of difference that relies on auditory cues – accents. However, workers with non-standard accents (i.e., non-native accents, regional accents) often experience discrimination and negative outcomes at work. We first review prior accent research suggesting that these negative effects can be explained by stereotypes/stigmatization or lower processing fluency. We then identify three emerging topic areas and suggest future research directions in each domain: intersectionality, organizational language policies and practices, and investigation of a greater range of accents and languages.

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Within organizations, many cues regarding differences between workers (e.g., gender, race, age) are observed and processed visually. A notable exception is accents, a difference that is *heard*. Research reveals that accent is a fundamental dimension of person perception and categorization [1], suggesting that variation in accents is likely to be noticed and consequential for interpersonal relationships as well as affect one's self-views and identity. Moreover, accent is a stronger predictor of interpersonal judgment than either race or gender [2,3] or looks in ethnic categorization [4], making the impact of accents particularly powerful. Indeed, speaking with an accent has been found to predict negative work-related outcomes for speakers ranging from lower recommendations for hiring [5] to a lower sense of belonging [6]. Accent discrimination is also unique and different from other forms of identity-based discrimination (e.g., racism, sexism) as it affects speakers not only through stereotyping and stigmatization but also through processing fluency (difficulties in processing an accented speech), which we describe below. Finally, accent can be an especially powerful indicator of in-group vs. out-group membership in countries with high immigration rates, where looks are not as predictive of one's in-group status.

Although from a linguistic viewpoint everyone has an accent [7], the phenomenon we are describing and reviewing in this article refers to the effects of non-standard accents, a variation of language that deviates from the standard accent of a particular language. Further, the study of non-standard accents[1] distinguishes between *non-native* accents, when speakers who learn a different language later in life continue to apply certain aspects of their first language (e.g., intonation, pronunciation) in how they voice this new language [7], and *regional* accents or dialects, variations by geographical area in how native speakers of a given language speak (e.g., British vs. Australian English) [8]. To date, the literature has focused more on the former relative to the latter. This is aligned with sustained global trends in immigration, such that a significant proportion of people now speak a language with a non-native accent. Moreover, research generally supports that non-native accents have stronger effects than regional accents [5]. Extant research has also primarily compared native versus non-native *English* speakers. This likely reflects the adoption of English as a lingua franca or global language of business.

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[1] In this article we use term 'non-standard' accents to refer to both types of non-standard accents, i.e., non-native and regional accents. We, however, use more specific terms of 'non-native' and 'regional' accents when referring to studies that specifically studied either non-native or regional accents to be precise in our summary of past research.

With this context in mind, we first provide a brief overview of the two dominant theoretical perspectives that have been applied to the study of accents and major findings in this literature. We note that many disciplines have contributed to our understanding of accent discrimination in the workplace, including but not limited to psychology, communications, and business/management. We then identify and review recent developments in the field that we view as particularly promising and offer directions for future research.

Classic perspectives and major findings

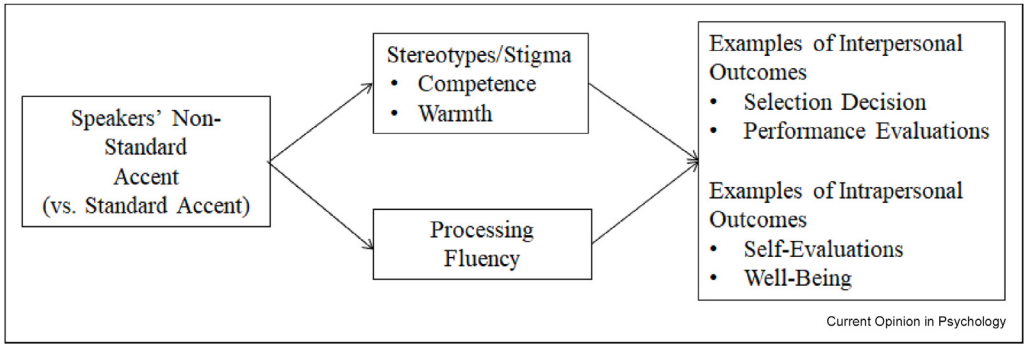
In their review of the accent literature, Hideg and colleagues identify two primary theoretical perspectives that have been used to explain negative reactions to and outcomes of speakers with non-native accents in the workplace: stereotypes/stigmatization, which originated from psychology, and processing fluency, which came from communications [9]. Although Hideg et al. focused on non-native accents, they note that the two theoretical perspectives have been used to explain the effects of regional accents too. Figure 1 depicts a theoretical model summarizing research studying the effects of speaking with non-standard accents in which there are two main categories of mechanisms, i.e., stereotypes/stigma and processing fluency, and two categories of outcomes, i.e., interpersonal (others' evaluations of speakers) and intrapersonal (speakers' own evaluations of themselves and their experiences). We elaborate more on these mechanisms and outcomes below.

The stereotypes/stigmatization perspective suggests that speakers with accents are perceived to be out-group members who are negatively stereotyped. Many of these articles draw upon the Stereotype Content Model, which posits that perceptions of warmth and competence are key dimensions on which all individuals and groups are judged [10]. A recent meta-analysis of studies focusing on personnel selection or hiring contexts summarizes this literature and demonstrates that speaking with a non-standard (vs. standard) accent is associated with lower ratings of competence, warmth, and hireability, with particularly large negative effects on competence and hireability [11]. Although there may be other contributors to these effects, past research has generally assumed that poorer communication skills due to perceptions of lower comprehensibility for accented individuals [12] or lack of political skills due to perceptions of being an immigrant, particularly when judging individuals with non-native accents [13], underlie lower perceptions of competence. Additionally, some of the commonly cited reasons for lower perceptions of warmth, especially for non-native accented speakers, include lack of perceived trustworthiness toward outgroup members [14].

Although the vast majority of research taking the stereotypes/stigmatization perspective focuses on how native speakers perceive and evaluate non-native speakers, i.e., interpersonal effects, some research has begun to apply this perspective to understand the experiences of non-native speakers themselves, i.e., intrapersonal effects. For example, a recent study by Kim and colleagues found that non-native speakers experienced greater stereotype threat when interacting with native speakers (vs. non-native speakers) in conflict situations, which then led to them to engage in passive conflict management behaviors, such as yielding and avoiding, that were unlikely to resolve the conflict [15]. More broadly, qualitative research reveals that non-native speakers are aware of the stigmatizing nature of their accent, which can contribute to a variety of negative outcomes, including perceived status loss, negative emotions, and avoidance of potentially prejudicial interaction partners [6].

By contrast, the processing fluency perspective focuses on the fact that listening to and processing non-standard speech is more cognitively demanding and draining than standard speech [16]. This may be a burden that organizations perceive that customers, or even coworkers, are unwilling or unable to bear. Supporting this perspective, a new meta-analysis by Spence and colleagues found that hiring bias against speakers with non-

Figure 1



A model summarizing theoretical underpinnings and outcomes of the current research on non-standard accents.

standard accents was stronger in jobs with greater communication demands, such as customer service roles. However, somewhat surprisingly, the degree of "accentedness" of the speaker did not moderate the magnitude of hiring bias against speakers with (vs. without) a non-standard accent [5].

Additionally, processing fluency effects may operate below conscious awareness. Lev-Ari and Keysar found that the greater effort required to attend to and process non-standard speech led listeners to view factual statements made by non-native (vs. native) speakers as less credible or truthful, which listeners were partially able to overcome when they were made aware of this phenomenon [17]. Other research exploring whether the negative interpersonal impacts of processing fluency can be mitigated has found some evidence that exposure to and familiarity with a given non-native accent [18] and encouraging perspective-taking [19] may help. This also attests to familiarity as an underlying mechanism of processing fluency difficulties, such that individuals exert more effort to process unfamiliar stimuli, including non-standard accents.

Very limited research has applied the processing fluency perspective to explore intrapersonal effects for non-native speakers. Thus far, the emerging work confirms that many individuals find speaking in their non-native language in professional settings to be fatiguing and anxiety-provoking due to feelings that one needs to be vigilant and carefully monitor one's speech and behaviors in these interactions [6]. In turn, these experiences of depletion among non-native speakers have been linked to feelings of exclusion [20] and workplace withdrawal behaviors [21].

Emerging topics and future directions

Intersectionality

Traditionally, accent research has focused on examining the effect of non-standard accent without considering other attributes of the speaker. However, a promising development is that recent accent research is increasingly taking an intersectional lens, considering how various social categories intersect to create unique experiences of privilege or discrimination [22,23]. This approach aligns with the work of Rosette, Li, Samuel, and Petsko on intersectionality, which also appears in this special issue [24]. As an example, Hideg et al. examined the intersection between accent and gender and found that women, but not men, with a Mandarin Chinese accent in Canada were perceived as warmer compared to their native-accented counterparts, leading to higher hireability ratings in feminine industries but not masculine ones [25]. The authors theorized that this intersectional effect was due to women with non-native accents being especially perceived as warm, a traditional trait applied to women, due to their presumed immigrant status and seeing immigrant women as particularly abiding by traditional gender roles. The authors further suggested that this serves to undermine gender equity by pushing immigrant women with accents into traditionally feminine, lower-status occupations.

In another investigation, Nguyen and Wellman focused on the intersectional effects of accent and race, uncovering that although foreign-accented speakers in the United States were generally evaluated more negatively on perceived qualifications and hiring intentions, the reasons differed by race: White and Black candidates with accents were perceived as less American and therefore received lower hiring recommendations, but this mechanism was not significant for Asian candidates with accents [26]. Sultana et al.'s study on immigrant managers in Australia provides further evidence of intersectional effects [27]. Specifically, they found that non-White immigrant managers with foreign accents faced the most significant barriers to mentoring, career support, and progression. White immigrant managers with foreign accents experienced some barriers, but to a lesser extent. Non-White immigrant managers with Australian accents faced fewer barriers than those with foreign accents, but still encountered challenges. White immigrant managers with Australian accents experienced the fewest barriers, with outcomes most similar to Australian-born White managers.

Collectively, these studies provide compelling evidence that accent often compounds existing disadvantages associated with other minority identities. Although the specific patterns vary depending on the intersecting factors examined (e.g., race, gender, or immigrant status), this research consistently demonstrates that individuals with non-standard accents who also belong to other minority groups often face heightened barriers and biases. This cumulative disadvantage aligns with the concept of double-jeopardy [28], though the effects are sometimes more nuanced than simply additive. Future intersectional research on accents should expand upon existing work by examining how gender, race, and ethnic background intersect with accents to influence evaluations of non-native speakers. Additional intersections, such as social class, age, and sexual orientation, may also provide novel insights into the perception and evaluation of accented speakers. Beyond studying others' perceptions, future research should investigate how these intersections affect the personal experiences of accented speakers. It may be the case that individuals from traditionally disadvantaged social backgrounds face exacerbated challenges due to their accents. Some areas for exploration may include identity formation, examining how accents interact with other aspects of identity in shaping self-perception and social categorization; sense of belonging, investigating the impact of accent and intersecting identities on feelings

of inclusion in the workplace; and coping strategies, exploring how individuals with different intersectional identities navigate accent-based discrimination in the workplace.

Organizational language policies and practices

We also observed a growing interest among scholars in exploring how organizations' language policies influence accent-based evaluations and employee experiences. These policies typically establish a single language for official communication within an organization, often referred to as the "corporate language" or "lingua franca." In this vein, Guzman and Reiche found that workers more (vs. less) fluent in the official corporate language were granted higher status by their peers, and this was particularly the case within teams that tended to communicate using a language other than the official corporate language [29]. Downstream, speakers who received higher peer-granted status exhibited greater informal influence and were more likely to emerge as leaders. Similarly, Kalra and Danis examined dynamics surrounding informal language clusters in the context of multinational enterprises headquartered in India, which tend to adopt lingua franca [30]. They show that native language clusters within lingua franca environments are an important source of emotional and professional support, especially for employees less linguistically fluent in the official language. Finally, in a fascinating and rich qualitative study of a Russophone bank in Kazakhstan, Koo and Kim outlined how organizational language practices evolved over time from Russian-centred to incorporating and recognizing the importance of Kazakh due to evolving business needs and changing linguistic dynamics in society [31]. Although not directly related to language-based evaluations, this study offers valuable context for understanding the complexities of language policy decisions in multi-lingual environments.

As companies increasingly seek global talent to maintain competitive advantage, they are recruiting more overseas applicants, especially from emerging markets [32]. Consequently, we encourage future research to investigate the interaction between language policies with accent-based biases for an increasingly multi-lingual workforce. For instance, lingua franca policies might affect status perceptions of job applicants with various accents [33]. On one hand, such policies could signal that organizations value applicants with international backgrounds, potentially elevating the status of applicants with non-native accents. Conversely, they might accentuate the importance of English proficiency, which could further disadvantage applicants with non-native accents, and ultimately, undermine organizations' goal of sourcing international talent. Future research should delve more into these details, which might assist organizations in meeting their communication goals while avoiding detrimental outcomes.

Different accents and languages

Finally, another trend in recent years is a general expansion of the range of accents studied alongside more studies that are not centred on the English language. These studies often use a similar design, but slot in different accents. For example, Bourdin et al. experimentally compared evaluations of local (Austrian-German), Serbian, and French accents within customer service scenarios by Austrian consumers and found that the Serbian accent led to lower customer participation in interactions [34]. In a similar vein, Nguyen and Wellman manipulated both accent (i.e., native vs. non-native) and race (i.e., White, Black, Asian) within the context of a job interview and found that White and Black applicants with non-native accents were rated more poorly [26].

We view these as welcome sources of diversity within the literature. Yet, this heterogeneity also generates the need for synthesis and sensemaking as it may not be possible, or desirable, for research to examine perceptions of all possible non-native accents for a given country setting. In particular, a key task for future researchers is to delineate under what circumstances the outcomes of speakers with different non-native accents diverge versus converge. Interestingly, researchers who adopt a stereotypes/stigmatization perspective typically assume that accent will activate a specific stereotype associated with a particular group (e.g., race, nationality, region). However, this assumes that individuals are generally able to identify accents. This raises the question of what happens when listeners identify accents incorrectly?

Alternatively, perhaps there are situations where listeners are simply not motivated to pinpoint a non-native accent. For some individuals, it may be the case that simply knowing that the speaker is a foreigner (versus their specific linguistic origin) is sufficient to guide their actions, leading to similar treatment toward non-native speakers with different foreign accents. Indeed, some research suggests that accent is a marker of a general immigrant identity that both in-group and out-group members attend to that shapes workplace interactions [35]. We speculate that sociohistorical context could also play a role here. In relatively homogenous nations where rates of immigration have historically been low, people may not have very differentiated views surrounding different immigrant groups. Thus, they may be unconcerned about recognizing any specific non-native accent. By contrast, in more heterogeneous nations with higher levels of immigration, people may have distinct stereotypes surrounding different immigrant groups that elicit different emotions and behaviors (e.g., pity, envy), particularly if different waves of immigration were driven by different types of immigrants (e.g., refugees vs. economic immigrants). As a result, within

these contexts, individuals may tend to process or determine the origins of accents more carefully. More broadly, we believe that future research on accents in the workplace may benefit from attending carefully to how historical legacies continue to affect modern organizations [36].

Conclusion

Our accents are a reflection of who we are and where we come from that color our communications. They also serve as a salient source of difference, attracting attention. Unfortunately, research suggests that such attention often takes the form of scrutiny and can result in language-related misunderstandings [37] or bias that can undercut workers' contributions. Our review documents both what is known and materializing regarding accent discrimination in the workplace, setting the stage for more linguistically inclusive workplaces.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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* of special interest
** of outstanding interest

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Further Information on References of Particular Interest

5. * A meta-analysis examining two perspectives about what leads to accent discrimination in hiring decision, i.e., stigma and prejudice explanation vs. processing fluency explanation.

9. * An interdisciplinary and integrative review of research on non-native accents at work drawing from the communications, social psychology, and organizational sciences literatures.

11. * A meta-analysis examining the effect of non-standard language and accents, such as non-native accents and regional dialects, on perceptions of warmth, competence, and hireability.

25. ** Examined an intersection between a non-native accent and gender and found that women with a Mandarin Chinese accent were perceived as warmer than women with native English accent. This heightened perception of warmth was related to higher hireability ratings in feminine but not masculine industries, thus pushing immigrant women into positions of lower status and pay.

26. ** Examined an intersection between a non-native accent and race and found that speakers with a non-native (vs. standard) English accent were perceived as less American and consequently were less likely to be hired, but this effect was stronger for White and Black candidates. For Asian candidates, the perceptions of how American they were did not explain lower hiring evaluations.

29. ** Examined the effects of official corporate language fluency on informal influence in multinational teams and found that employees more fluent in the official corporate language were granted more status by their peers and in turn were more likely to emerge as leaders.

30. ** Examined the emergence and consequences of native language clusters within multinational enterprises (MNEs) headquartered in India and showed that language clusters are important source of emotional and professional support especially for employees less linguistically fluent in the official language.

31. ** Examined how linguistic inclusion can emerge amid tensions between the need for multilingual services and the need for the common corporate language in the context of a Russophone bank in Kazakhstan.

36. ** Drawing on postcolonialism and decoloniality lenses, this paper examines workplace accentism in the context of Brazilian speakers in Portugal.