

# *Hearing Audible Minorities*

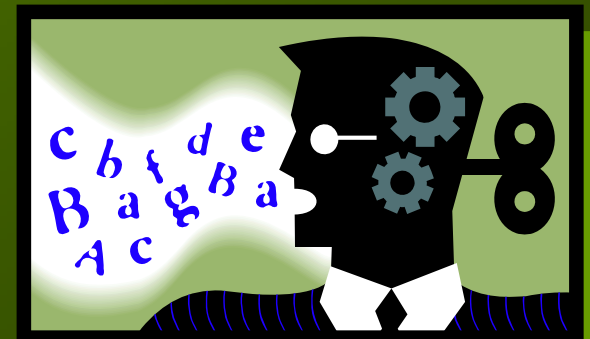


*ACCENT, DISCRIMINATION, AND THE INTEGRATION OF  
IMMIGRANTS INTO THE CANADIAN LABOUR MARKET*

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# *Hearing audible minorities*

- ❖ What is accent
  - ≈ *Phonology*
- ❖ Accent and discrimination
  - ≈ *Theory*
  - ≈ *Laboratory studies*
  - ≈ *Courts*
- ❖ Study of Ottawa employers
- ❖ Conclusions



# What is accent?

- ❖ Hundreds of speech sounds in world languages
- ❖ Lose ability to make new sounds as we age
- ❖ Accent: the subconscious application of a phonology to spoken language
- ❖ Foreign accent: the subconscious application specifically of a *mother tongue* phonology to a second language.

I.P.A. Alphabet for English © Beta

ɑ	ɒ	æ	ʌ	b	ɔ̃	d	ɔ̃	e	ɛ
amz almz	ɒd odd	ænd and	ʌp up	bæt bat	ɔ̃n chin	dɪn din	de they	ep ape	ɛg egg
ɜ	ɜ	ə	ə	f	g	h	i	ɪ	j
ɜə earth	ɜə earth	ə'weɪ aware	ə'weɪ aware	fæn fan	get gate	hæt hat	it it	ɪt it	ɪst jist yeast
ʃ	k	l	m	n	ŋ	o	ɔ	p	ɹ
ʃo jo	kɪn kin	lɔ law	mʊn moon	nɒt note	sʊŋ sung	old old	ɔl all	pip peep	ɹʌn JAR run
s	ʃ	t	θ	u	ʊ	v	w	z	ʒ
sɪ sea	ʃi she	tɪn tin	θɪn thin	uz ooze	bʊk book	vest vest	wʊd wood	zɪp zip	vɪʒən vision
Received Pronunciation			General American			Common Pronunciation			

# *Can we 'lose' an accent?*

❖ May learn new pronunciation strategies, but...



≈ Native speakers' ears will always hear a difference



❖ ***Accent is a permanent marker of difference for second language speakers***

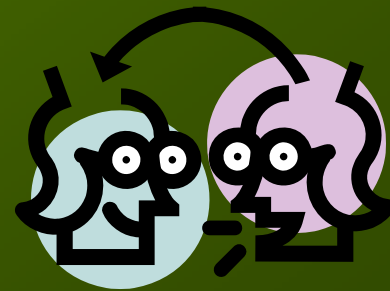
# *Accent and discrimination*

- ❖ “Accent” difference from a perceived norm
- ❖ But this norm is socially constructed (Standard Language Ideology)
  
- ❖ Decades of match-guise experiments show:
  - ≈ Listeners will attribute personality characteristics to speakers based on accent, regardless of actions
  - ≈ Certain accents result in negative perceptions (e.g. Greek; Mexican; Korean...)
  - ≈ Others carry prestige (e.g. European)

# *Accent and discrimination*

*Perceptions of language ability*

- ❖ No clear link between accent, perceived comprehensibility and intelligibility
- ❖ Personal bias may cause a listener to dismiss or deny the comprehensibility of an accented speaker



# *Accent and discrimination*

## *The law*

### ❖ US

- ❖ Title VII provides protection based on national origin; not accent
- ❖ Case: Hawaiian meteorologist
- ❖ Case: Filipino applicant for clerk position

### ❖ Canada

- ❖ Human rights legislation provides protection
  - ≈ But judges still use subjective measures to measure accentedness
- ❖ Case: Polish teacher
- ❖ Case: South Asian order clerk

# *Accent and discrimination*

## *Summary*

- ❖ Evidence of belief in a myth of standard accent
- ❖ Listeners form stereotypes based on accents
- ❖ These stereotypes lead to real cases of discrimination



# *Accent and the labour market*

- ❖ 15-30% of differential in earnings may be due to racialisation (Reitz)
- ❖ Immigrants feel accent hinders finding employment
- ❖ Native speakers from racialised groups have accents 'corrected'
- ❖ Job postings may require 'no accent'

# *Study of Ottawa employers*

- ❖ Do employers use accent to evaluate the language ability of immigrant applicants?
- ❖ Looked at attitudes rather than actions
- ❖ *9 respondents*



# Results

## How language used in position

**Table 1: Language use in position**

	never	some-times	often	don't know
<i>talking with colleagues casually</i>	--	1	8	--
<i>talking with clients casually</i>	2	1	6	--
<i>meeting formally with clients</i>	3	1	5	--
<i>writing email</i>	2	--	7	--
<i>writing formal reports</i>	1	4	4	--
<i>reading emails</i>	1	1	7	--
<i>reading complex documents</i>	--	4	5	--
<i>*preparing customs documents</i>	--	1	--	--
<i>*dealing with American customers</i>	--	1	--	--
<i>*making presentations</i>	--	1	--	--
<i>*attending conferences</i>	--	1	--	--

\*added under 'other' category by one respondent

# Results

## Methods of language evaluation

**Table 2: Methods of evaluation**

	not at all important	somewhat important	important	very important	NA
<i>written test</i>	2	2	3	2	--
<i>how strong I think their accent is during the interview</i>	2	4	2	1	--
<i>how good their grammar is during the interview</i>	--	2	5	1	1
<i>cultural background</i>	8	--	1	--	--
<i>how well they use English in their résumé</i>	1	3	2	3	--
<i>if their education was in English</i>	2	4	3	--	--
<i>successful completion of an English language training course (e.g. ESL classes, TOEFL)</i>	2	5	2	--	--
<i>*ability to understand interviewer</i>	--	--	--	1	--
<i>*ability to express their point successfully</i>	--	--	--	1	--
<i>*presentation skills</i>	--	--	--	1	--

\*added under 'other' category by one respondent

# Results

## Language training

**Table 3: Perceived useful language training components**

	not at all important	somewhat important	important	very important	NA
<i>focus on grammar</i>	--	--	6	3	--
<i>focus on vocabulary</i>	--	--	5	4	--
<i>focus on trying to sound more Canadian</i>	8	--	--	--	1
<i>focus on writing</i>	--	2	4	3	--
<i>focus on speaking comfortably</i>	--	1	2	6	--
<i>focus on accent</i>	3	5	1	--	--

# Results

## Agreement with statements

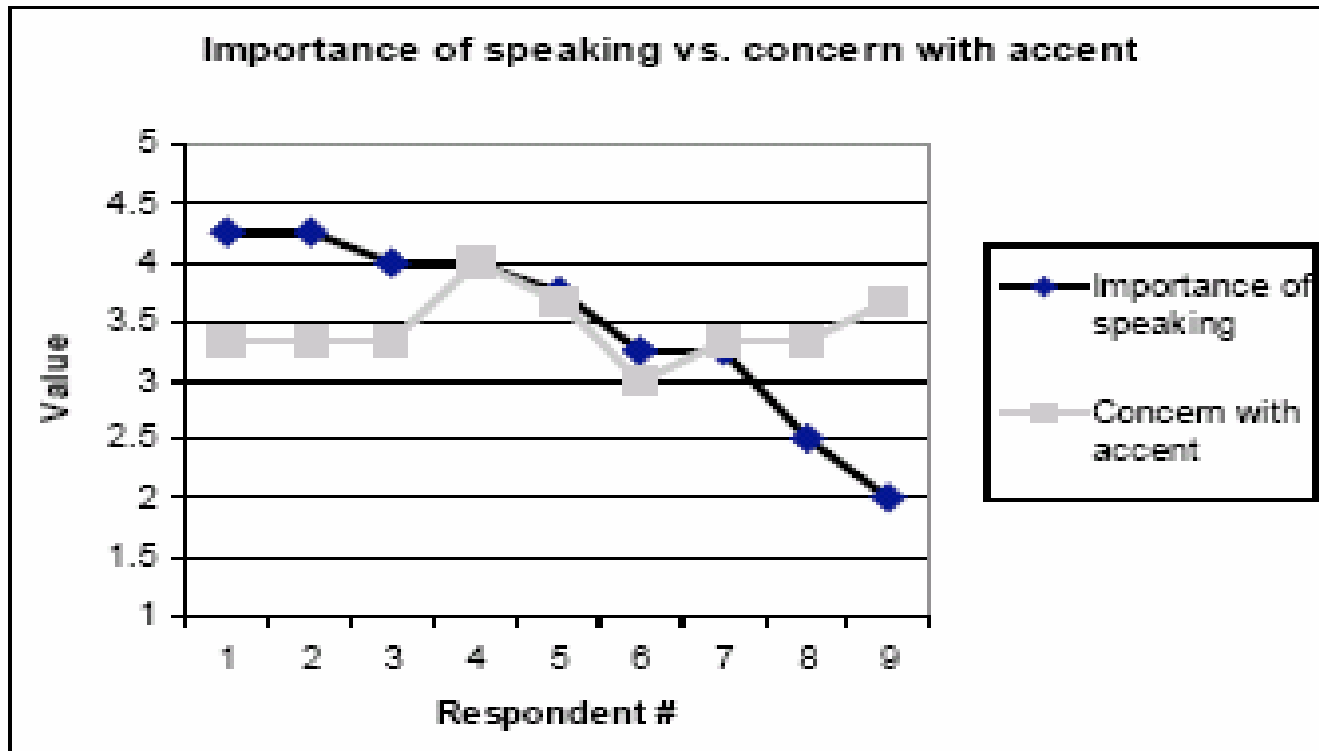
**Table 4: Agreement with statements**

	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
<i>Someone who has a limited English vocabulary is going to have a hard time convincing me to hire them for this job</i>	--	1	1	5	2
<i>Speaking skills are more important for this job than writing skills</i>	--	--	3	4	2
<i>I would consider hiring someone for this job even if they had a strong foreign accent</i>	--	--	--	8	1
<i>I would consider hiring someone for this job even if they had limited writing ability as long as they could speak English well enough</i>	1	3	2	3	--
<i>Writing skills are more important for this job than speaking skills</i>	3	4	2	--	--
<i>I would only hire someone for this job whose first language was standard English</i>	4	5	--	--	--
<i>Even if someone could write reasonably well in English, I would not hire them for this job if I thought their accent made them difficult to understand</i>	1	2	4	2	--

# Results

*Correlation of concern with accent and importance of speaking*

Chart 1.



# *Survey conclusions*

- ❖ Views not extreme, but...
- ❖ Many employers revealed a readiness to rely on accent as a factor to determine English proficiency
- ❖ Attitudes may be less problematic for younger decision-makers



# *Conclusions*

- ❖ Accented speakers should be able to take pride in their speech
  - ≈ Accented speech reveals multiple layers of language learning and linguistic ability
- ❖ Native English speakers are at an unearned global advantage
  - ≈ Standards of correctness that are not necessary for communication maintain this privilege
- ❖ Arbitrarily filtering skills through accent is bad business

# *Recommendations*

- ❖ Employers need information on accent and appropriate tools for language evaluation
- ❖ ESL classrooms need to address the politics of accent with students
- ❖ Include accent discrimination in anti-racism and diversity initiatives

❖ *End*

