

The Question of Credibility: Social Consequences of Sounding Foreign

Radek Skarnitzl

Institute of Phonetics, Faculty of Arts, Charles University

Foreign accents have been associated with a number of mostly negative consequences. Many studies focused on what has been termed “economic capital”: foreign-accented speakers have been shown to earn lower wages (Dávila, Bohara & Saenz, 1993), to be discriminated against when it comes to suitability for certain jobs and to hiring decisions (e.g., Carlson & McHenry, 2006; Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2010), or to be rated negatively in call service encounters which did not yield the desirable result for the customer (Wang et al., 2013). Other studies have focused on aspects of communication which are perhaps less tangible, but may be even more taxing for foreign-accented speakers, who have been perceived as inferior on both status- and solidarity-related dimensions (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). One intriguing study, which has stirred up a lot of controversy, showed that native listeners found statements read by foreign-accented speakers to be less truthful than statements read by native speakers of English (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010).

Recent years have seen attempts at sidelining the native perspective, as more interactions take place between non-native speakers of English than among native speakers. Proponents of the English as a Lingua Franca approach assert that the teaching of English pronunciation should be limited to features which, allegedly, are important for intelligibility in international contexts. However, this view completely disregards the possibility that communication between non-native speakers may be “accompanied” by similar consequences like negative social stereotyping and prejudices.

This presentation will report on ongoing research which was stimulated by Lev-Ari and Keysar (2010). Our objective was to replicate their study using similar stimuli; however, we wanted to investigate how foreign-accented speech is perceived by non-native listeners and, specifically, whether non-native listeners will perceive statements delivered by non-native speakers to be less truthful than ones delivered by natives. Preliminary results, based on 45 listeners mostly of Czech origin, do confirm such negative bias against non-native speakers. The presentation will include new results acquired from Czech and Polish listeners.

References:

- Carlson, H. K. & McHenry, M. A. (2006). Effect of accent and dialect on employability. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 43, pp. 70–83.
- Dávila, A., Bohara, A. K. & Saenz, R. (1993). Accent penalties and the earnings of Mexican Americans. *Social Science Quarterly*, 74, pp. 902–916.
- Gluszek, A. & Dovidio, J. F. (2010). The way they speak: A social psychological perspective on the stigma of nonnative accents in communication. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14, pp. 214–237.
- Hosoda, M. & Stone-Romero, E. (2010). The effects of foreign accents on employment-related decisions. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 25, pp. 113–132.
- Lev-Ari, S. & Keysar, B. (2010). Why don't we believe non-native speakers? The influence of accent on credibility. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 46, pp. 1093–1096.
- Wang, Z., Arndt, A. D., Singh, S. N., Biernat, M. & Liu, F. (2013). “You Lost Me at Hello”: How and when accent-based biases are expressed and suppressed. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 30, pp. 185–196.