

Linguistic Bias in Hiring: The Effects of Asian Accents in Job Interviews

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Abstract

The present study investigated the effects of foreign accents on employment related ratings. It was hypothesized that the native speaker would be rated differently than the Asian accented speaker. Participants were recruited through enrollment in an introductory psychology class and via the Internet. The experiment was conducted online only. Fifty participants listened to two voices – one speaking standard American English and the other speaking with a Chinese accent. Participants then made series of employment-related decisions. The results supported the hypothesis. Participants rated the native speaker more positively than the speaker with a Chinese accent for ratings of the employment relations. This study was consistent with previous studies, suggesting the presence of linguistic prejudice in hiring process. Although positive stereotypes present Asians in a favorable manner, their accents can have the detrimental impact when seeking their employment or advancement.

The Effects of Asian Accents on Job Interviews

Many empirical studies suggest that speakers' accents have a significant impact on decisions related to their employment and evaluations of their credibility, competence, and status (Cargile, Maeda, Rodriguez, & Rich, 2010; Deprez-Sims & Morris, 2010; Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010). A recent meta-analysis found that listeners' interpersonal evaluations were influenced by accented speech (Fuertes, Gottdiener, Martin, Gilbert, & Giles, 2012). With a growing immigrant population in the United States, linguistic prejudice has received increasing attention among scholars. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), a large portion of the foreign born population from Asia and Latin America reported that they did not speak English very well. Thus, a considerable number of immigrants from non-English speaking countries do not speak standard American English and may be targets of linguistic prejudice (Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2010; Lippi-Green, 1997).

As noted earlier, many sources support prejudiced reactions to accented speech. However, in some contexts, Asian-accented speakers are perceived as being employable and intellectual as native speakers (Cargile, 2000; Hosoda, Stone-Romero, & Walter, 2007). These findings may reflect positive stereotypes surrounding Asians: that they are hardworking, studious and intelligent (King, Madera, Hebl, Knight, & Mendoza, 2006). In other words, although many Asians have accents, positive images can potentially mitigate the negative effects of accents. Given these findings, the present study considered the need of additional investigations on the relation between accents and racial stereotypes to find more consistent results and lead better understanding of the effects of accents. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of Asian accents on employment related decisions. It is hypothesized that the speaker with standard American English will be rated differently than the speaker with an Asian accent.

Method

Participants

Participants from an introductory psychology class at a major public university were recruited via the student subject pool. A total of 53 participants (10 male and 39 female) completed the study. One case was missing identifying gender. Their mean age was 18.54, ($SD = 4.46$). They all received course credit in return for their voluntary participation.

Materials

Voices. One standard American English speaker and one Chinese accented speaker were asked to read a scripted paragraph regarding employment history and suitability for a human resource associate position. The scripted paragraph was presented in the Appendix. Both of them were female, in their 30's and showed clear voice quality. Subsequently, voice samples were judged by ten native speakers via a seven point Likert scale to ensure the presence of noticeable accents and similarity of voice qualities such as pitch, tone, speed, and age.

Employability scale. Employment-related evaluations consisted of six items including job suitability, likelihood of a promotion, and hiring decision (Hosoda et al., 2012). Job suitability was measured from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). An example item is, "I feel that the applicant is suited for the job." The likelihood of promotion was rated from 1 (*very low*) to 7 (*very high*). An example item is, "The likelihood that the applicant will move up to an upper level managerial position is." The hiring decision was addressed by one item, "would you hire this person for the job?" with response options from 1 (*very low*) to 7 (*very high*).

Design

The experiment was conducted as a Repeated Measure Design since each participant was tested under both conditions. The independent variable was accented speech with two levels, native English, and accented English. The dependent variable was the cognitive performance, measured with employment related evaluations.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted online. Participants who entered the research website gave informed consent. Afterward, they were taken to the testing website to ensure their computers had properly working speakers that were turned on. They were asked to enter two phrases spoken by a native speaker. If they failed to pass the test, they were asked to come back to the site and retake the hearing test again in order to continue the study. The duration of the research was timed to ensure that they would not miss hearing voice samples or listen multiple times. Timing also allowed participants to concentrate on the experiment under controlled conditions and prevented potential confounding variables. The current study withheld the speakers' name. Each participant listened to both the non-accented and Chinese accented voices. These voices were described as belonging to job candidates. The participants evaluated each job candidate on series of employment related decisions after listening to each recorded interview script. The order of the speakers (native versus Chinese accented) was randomized. A manipulation check was conducted at the last stage of the experiment where participants were asked to rate the speakers on the level of accents. After completing the demographic questionnaire, participants were debriefed.

Results

The results of a repeated *t*-test supported the effectiveness of the applicant accent manipulation as well as voice quality. The ten native judges rated the Chinese accented applicants as having a stronger accent than the native applicant, $t(9) = 8.38, p < .05$. There was no difference between the Chinese accented speaker and the native speaker for pitch, $t(9) = -1.31, p > .05$, for age, $t(9) = .69, p > .05$. However, the two speakers were rated differently for pitch $t(9) = -1.31, p < .05$, and for speed, $t(9) = -2.37, p < .05$. In addition, the participants rated the Chinese accented applicant as having a stronger accent ($M = 6.14, SD = .86$) than the native applicant ($M = 1.60, SD = .86$). Table 1 illustrated the summary for accent, voice pitch, tone, speed, and age.

It was predicted that the job candidate with standard American English would be rated differently than the job candidate with Chinese accented English on employability. The results of a repeated *t*-test indicated that the applicant with standard American English was rated significantly different than the applicant with a Chinese accent, $t(49) = 26.41, p < .05$. More specifically, the native applicant was evaluated more positively ($M = 34.02, SD = 6.65$) than the applicant with a Chinese accent ($M = 31.02, SD = 6.47$).

Discussion

The results of this study revealed that there is a significant difference between a native speaker and a Chinese accented speaker with regards to their level of employability. The results supported the original hypothesis; which stated that two speakers would be rated differently on the employment related scales. This finding was consistent with previous studies conducted by Hosoda and Stone-Romero (2010) reporting the negative impact of Asian applicants with foreign accents in employment settings.

Although the present study yielded significant results, there are several limitations. In particular, the participants consisted mostly of college students, who may not be representative of the general population prone to linguistic prejudice. In addition, the study was conducted in Southern California, where culture and linguistic diversity is quite common. It will be important to sample nonstudents in different regions in order to increase generalizability. Since the experiment was conducted online, the study environment was less controlled, which might have introduced additional confounding variables. Thus, it can be more beneficial to conduct an experiment in the laboratory setting in order to gain more controls. Furthermore, although the accent was manipulated successfully, differences in speakers' voice tone and speed may have contributed to the test results. More controls can be implemented to equalize the speech characteristics among speakers. Lastly, the present study examined a Chinese accent, which may be lacking in generalizability to other Asian accents. Future research needs to go beyond a Chinese accent.

As growing numbers of immigrants from non-English speaking countries enter the U.S., American communities are becoming more diverse than ever before. However, the potential impact of linguistic prejudice against speakers with foreign accents has not been addressed as explicitly as have race, gender, and age discrimination. The present finding implies that job applicants who speak with Asian accents may continue to face negative experiences despite positive stereotypes associated with Asians. Thus, more research is needed to examine linguistic attitudes toward Asian accents as well as perhaps implementing a training program to reduce biases among interviewers.

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Appendix

Description of Job Applicant

I have a Bachelor's degree in Industrial Psychology. During my school years, I worked as an administrative assistant at the department of psychology. I have excellent time management skills and I can complete multiple tasks efficiently and on schedule. I can work well in groups or independently. I was the vice president of the Psychology Department Student Association for two consecutive semesters. I was in charge of recruiting members, planning events, and hosting member meetings once a week. I consider myself a person who enjoys challenging tasks.

Eventually, I would like to move up to a management position. I admit that sometimes I tend to take tasks above and beyond my capacities; however, it also means that I am an ambitious person.

Since your company offers opportunities to grow, I believe that I can be a great fit.

Table 1

The Mean Scores and SD on Each of Accent, Pitch, Tone, and Speed

Accent condition		Accent level	Pitch	Tone	Speed	Age
Chinese accent	Mean	16.80	4.50	4.00	3.40	23
	<i>SD</i>	4.16	1.08	.67	1.07	6.75
Native	Mean	5.40	4.90	4.90	4.40	25
	<i>SD</i>	1.26	.74	.74	1.51	5.27

Note: The mean score for the accent level ranges from 4 (weak accent) to 28 (strong accent).

Figure 1

