

Racializing the “Problem” of Immigrants’ Accents at Work

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My Arguments

- While the accented Englishes of immigrants might be cited as a legitimate reason for their un(der)employment in Canada, the real issue is racism
- Speech accents are individually and institutionally perceived in relation to white settler colonialism carried out on Indigenous lands
- The concern about immigrants' accents reproduces racial hierarchies in terms of desirable workers and upholds institutional racism

Agenda

1. Accent as an Overstated Professional Liability
2. Language and Whiteness in Canada
3. Accent and the Racialization of Employment Discrimination
4. Accent as a Distraction from Institutional Racism
5. “De-accenting” Accent

Accent as an Overstated Professional Liability

- Because oral communication is a main feature of today's work, accent is treated as a bona fide occupational requirement (Munro, 2003)
- A “foreign accent” is believed to interfere with intelligibility: one cannot do one's work if no one can understand them
- However, accentedness and intelligibility are *partially* independent; intelligibility can often be “determined” through non-linguistic factors (see Derwing & Munro, 2009)

From Rubin (1992) [royalty-free images from unsplash.com]

The first group of students believed that they were listening to this woman



The second group believed that they were listening to this woman



Language and Whiteness in Canada

- The whiteness of Canada is sustained through language: English and French are the dominant languages of public life (Haque, 2012)
- When it comes to immigration policy, the “best immigrants” are those that best match Anglophone and Francophone culture (El-Lahib et al., 2011; Sterzuk, 2015)
- Accent acts as a figurative border that racialized immigrants cannot fully cross; this has material consequences (Creese & Kambere, 2003)

Accent and the Racialization of Employment Discrimination

- Hiring practices reinforce racial hierarchies where white “foreign-accented” job applicants are deemed more employable than their racialized counterparts (e.g., Creese, 2010)
- Accent is salient even when it is not heard: in Oreopoulos’ (2011) study that involved sending 13,000 mock résumés to over 3,000 job postings in the Greater Toronto Area, résumés with Indian, Chinese, and Pakistani names received less callbacks than those with Anglo names
 - In follow-up interviews with some employers, the reason for this was that an Asian name probably signified a “hard-to-understand” accent

Accent as a Distraction from Institutional Racism

- As exemplified by the controversial “accent reduction” industry, accent is framed as the means to professional success
- Yet, “reducing an accent” does not help dismantle institutional barriers that particularly affect racialized immigrants from the Global South (Ramjattan, 2019)
- For example, what about “Canadian experience” or the refusal to recognize international credentials (e.g., Ku et al., 2018)?

“De-accenting” Accent

- To “de-accent” accent, we should not focus on immigrant voices, but rather, how we *listen* to them
- When it comes to employment and labour, the problem is not speech accent; it is really about (institutionalized) ears that are conditioned by ideologies of white supremacy
- Perhaps in the form of anti-racist workplace training, employers, etc., need opportunities to develop new listening practices and critically interrogate their perceptions of different types of accents

- We must also reconceptualize language-based work: instead of framing language/accent as an individual, technical skill to master, there is a need to think of work as always collaborative
- Finally, we need to engage in activist work: if institutional/structural racism is preventing immigrants from finding work, then we obviously need to dismantle this racism

Thank you very much!

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