

Accentism – A Serious Form Of Disguised Prejudice In Culturally Diverse Societies

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Accent is an important aspect of our identity. Everyone has an accent but not all accents are treated equally. This article discusses “accentism” as a form of disguised prejudice in culturally diverse societies.

Introduction

The word ‘accent’ can be defined as the way in which individuals from a particular location or country pronounce words. Accent is an important part of our identity as the style of pronunciation shows where we come from. Nevertheless, our accents can unjustifiably influence some individuals’ perception of who we are and even prompt social categorisation ([Hogenboom 2018](#)).

Sociolinguists use the term ‘accentism’ (also known as ‘accent discrimination’ or ‘accent prejudice’) to refer to any form of discriminatory behaviour towards someone because of their accent. Unfortunately, accentism continues to be a serious form of prejudice or stereotyping in all societies across the globe. The problem starts with the notion of a so-called ‘hierarchy of accents’; in the case of every language, a particular accent is viewed as ‘correct’, ‘standard’ or ‘neutral’ (generally the one used by the influential class), while other accents are perceived as inferior ([Schmid, Cole & Jeffries 2020](#)). People with ‘other’ accents commonly experience ridicule, judgement, stereotyping, and derogatory comments.

This article aims to explore the issue of accentism in the context of multicultural societies (such as Australia) and shed light on its ethical and legal aspects.

Isn't it Normal in a Multicultural Society to have a Variety of Accents?

Thanks to globalization and an unprecedented increase in migration, in today's world, many societies are increasingly becoming ethnically and linguistically diverse (in other words 'multicultural'). In 2020, globally the number of international migrants was 281 million (World Migration Report 2020). Australia is built upon the robust culture of migration and is one of the most successful multicultural countries ([Rajadurai 2018](#)). People come here from over 200 countries, and they bring their culture, tradition and languages to Australia.

The [2016 Census](#) of the Australian Bureau of Statistics reveals that '49 percent of Australians had either been born overseas or one or both parents had been born overseas', while in 2020, 'there were 7.6 million migrants living in Australia' ([ABS 2020](#)). The 2016 Census also specifies that people in Australia speak more than 300 separately identified languages at their homes and nearly 21 percent of Australians speak a language other than English. Essentially, with this vast number of spoken languages, diversity in accents is normal. While English is Australia's de facto national language, there exist many accents of English. This implies Australian multicultural society must be tolerant to a wide diversity in English accents.

Accentism – A Form of Linguistic Racism

The concept of accentism can be understood as a form of linguistic racism that involves ethnic accent bullying and linguistic stereotyping. Examples of ethnic accent bullying include making fun of one's traditional languages or accents, racial taunts and slurs, derogatory references to culture-specific aspects (e.g., foods, costumes, and customs), and exclusion from a peer group membership ([McKenney et al. 2006](#)). An 'ethnic accent' may shape perceptions of one's English competency, which does not seem to elicit the same treatment as British, Australian, American, Canadian (and so on) English accents. The speakers with an 'ethnic accent', specifically Asian accents (e.g., Indian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese) are frequently exposed to linguistic shaming such as 'peripheral speakers as incomprehensible or as ridiculous impostors' ([Piller 2016, p.197](#)).

On the other hand, the linguistic stereotyping theory holds that people are judged and assumptions are made on how fluently they would speak English and their racial looks. There can be a number of negative consequences of linguistic racism. Because of their accented speech, people start experiencing inferiority complexes in the form of psychological damage like self-marginalization, self-vindication, loss of social belonging, social withdrawal, and social anxiety. The fear of conforming to negative expectations directed at accented speakers can impede their performance in line with stereotype threat ([Kim et al. 2011](#); [Paladino et al. 2009](#)).

Why Making Fun of Accents is a Big Problem?

At an organizational level, globalization has resulted in many diverse workforces. People from diverse backgrounds work together in the same environment. The status of English as a lingua franca forces people to learn English to compete in the global market. Nonetheless, people from non-English backgrounds can learn English but for many, adopting the so-called 'standard' accents is unfeasible ([Okechukwu 2018](#)).

An individual may intentionally or unintentionally imitate and/or laugh at the diverse accent of a colleague and claim that the aim is not to insult but it is just a joke; however, the person who is being mocked may find it very distressing; it may have far-reaching impacts than a joke. Mocking someone's accent is considered as a form of abuse, a way to berate, downplay, humiliate, or degrade the identity of another person ([Vishwanath 2019](#)). As mentioned earlier, people are often categorized based on their accents. Further, accents influence people's perceptions of others and lead to damaging stereotypes ([Hogenboom 2018](#); [Schmid, Cole & Jeffries 2020](#)). For example, people with 'non-standard' accents could be perceived as sluggish, impersonal, hospitable, unfriendly, etc. Therefore, accentism does not only end in mocking people for 'peculiar' accents, it also leads to underrating of competencies, status loss, goal avoidance, and poor career outcomes ([Kim et al. 2011](#)).

Regarding the ethical and legal aspects of accentism, as the preceding discussion indicates, given that accent is an integral part of our identity and that the diversity of accents is normal, people with 'different' or 'non-native' accents should not be predisposed to quick judgements, stereotypes, exclusion, and underrating at work. It is absolutely unethical. Further, as suggested by the [Australian Human Rights Commission](#), mocking people for their accents is also illegal in Australia. For employers, discrimination on the basis of an individual's accent (such as a decision not to employ) is against the law.

Conclusion

Taken together, accentism or linguistic racism has huge psychological impacts on individuals including inferiority feelings, negative emotions, depression, mental unrest, fatigue, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. It is an important deterrent to a successful multicultural society (as well as a multicultural workplace). Accordingly, for leaders and managers, addressing the problem of accentism is not only a legal obligation but also it is necessary to create an inclusive workplace and promote productivity as well as ethical behaviours.



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