

What I say or how I say it? Ethnic accents and hiring decisions in Toronto

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Background: The Ontario Human Rights Commission (1996) acknowledges that language is connected to ethnic origin or place of origin but excludes language from its grounds for discrimination. Nevertheless, there is reported accentism in Canadian hiring (Creese, 2010; Creese & Kambere, 2003; Kalin & Rayko, 1978; Munro, 2003). Does Toronto, one of Canada's most multicultural cities (Anora, 2019) and its top destination for immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2017), foster greater acceptance of accents? Reports on housing discrimination (Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation, 2009; Dion, 2001; Mensah & Williams, 2013) and correspondence studies (Oreopoulos, 2011) indicate otherwise, but investigation of possible accent discrimination in hiring is needed, as accentism can affect immigrants' quality of life.

Present study: This pilot study investigates whether accents can be barriers to employment in Toronto. The research questions focus on which variables influence participants' evaluations of responses and what kinds of comments are made on (extra-)local accents.

Methods: A verbal guise was used: for two interview questions, one good and one bad answer was scripted. Answers were of similar length and English proficiency. Previous work has shown that non-racialized immigrants fare better than racialized immigrants (Block et al., 2009). Thus, four women recorded the answers: first- and second-generation Germans (non-racialized) and first- and second-generation Jamaicans (racialized). 40 undergraduates listened to different combinations of responses and evaluated them for content, expression and whether the candidate deserved a full interview (callback). They also provided comments and advice for each response.

Results: For content, expression and callback the significant variable was whether the guise was good or bad ($p < 0.001$). For content and expression, on good guises, evaluators with a lower self-rated English proficiency gave lower scores than those with a proficiency of 5 ($p = 0.008$), and extra-local voices received lower scores than local voices ($p = 0.035$). Despite non-Canadians receiving more positive comments about their answer content (28 vs. 21), they received fewer positive comments about their personality (6 vs. 20) and more negative comments about their speech—specifically, their accent—than locals (14 vs. 5). There was also more hedging in comments about non-locals. Notably, a hierarchy did not emerge among the four voices.

Implications: Based on this sample, it appears that what people say is more important than their accents for hiring decisions. However, when the answer is good, some people are more critical and begin to look beyond what is said. Immigrant status does play a role, as seen by its significance on good guises, and comments directed at non-Canadians. Self-rated English proficiency may not reflect participants' actual production or comprehension ability: those with lower self-ratings may be more aware of perceived deficiencies in their English and therefore more critical of others' language.

The high level of callbacks in this study could result from students envisioning themselves applying for jobs in the current economy and extending leniency they hope to receive. Taking a linguistics course may have also influenced their acceptance of diverse accents. Thus, the merits of using different participants and additional questions are considered. Given that South Asian, Chinese and Black people comprise over 60% of Canada's racialized population (Block et al., 2019), additional ethnic backgrounds will be represented in future work.

Keywords: accentism, immigrant, Toronto, employment, hiring

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