Speaking of immigrants: Commentary on the aural employability of (non-)Canadian English

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Despite Canada's reputation for multiculturalism, new immigrants often face barriers to integration, including employment. In this paper, we attempt to elucidate the barriers to employment that new Canadians face by adopting Ramjattan's (2023:160) concept of *aural employability* ("the ability to be heard as employable") in a qualitative analysis of comments on and advice given to job candidates. Ramjattan (2023) argues that aural employability is an essential dimension of *aesthetic labour* or "the hiring of people with corporeal capacities and attributes that favourably appeal to customer senses […i.e.,] employees who 'look good' and 'sound right'" (Nickson et al. 2012:66). If "sounding right" is integral to employability, we argue that "sounding right" for those making hiring decisions means "sounding local" (see also, Timming 2017, Nath 2011, Eustace 2012, Ramjattan 2022).

In our previous work (Jackson & Denis [to appear; in preparation]), we conducted a verbal guise experiment involving six 30-second responses to interview questions. These responses were recorded by 12 women: one each from China, England, Germany, India, Jamaica and Nigeria (*extra-local voices*), and Canadian-born women with at least one parent from these countries (*local voices*). Responses were evaluated on several quantitative scales by 96 Human Resources students (*listeners*) from nine colleges and universities in Ontario. Quantitative analysis revealed that local (Canadian) voices were rated significantly higher than extra-local (non-Canadian) voices on both the content of identical answers to job interview questions and comprehensibility. Local voices were also recommended for managerial jobs at a higher rate than extra-local voices.

In this paper, we dive further into the data by qualitatively analyzing the open-ended comments and advice given by the listeners during the verbal guise task. We adopt reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2021) a method that involves (i) familiarisation with the data, (ii) coding the data, (iii) generating initial themes, (iv) reviewing and developing themes, and (v) refining, defining and naming themes. Focusing on 651 comments about speech or personality, we ask: (1) What themes can be generated from these comments? (2) Do (sub-)themes co-occur with certain voices? (3) What does this reveal about aural employability expectations in the Canadian job market?

Among the three negative themes generated from the data, extra-locals received more comments on "factors diminishing comprehensibility" and "factors diminishing receptiveness", while locals received more comments on "traits that will cause workplace friction". Among the four positive themes generated, extra-locals received more comments on "traits that enhance job performance", while locals received more comments on "traits of an amiable colleague", "factors improving receptiveness", and "factors improving comprehensibility". While local voices were more often linked to possible workplace discord and less identified as competent than extra-local voices, they were also described as more understandable and more appealing/good-natured. Given our prior findings, these latter aural-aesthetic traits seem to matter more in determining quantitative evaluations and thus, the ultimate decisions made by hiring professionals.

Our findings indicate that sounding Canadian is a critical component of aural employability in the Canadian job market as locals were associated more with being amiable, understandable and appealing to listen to, and received better hiring evaluations than extra-locals despite potentially causing more workplace friction. We conclude by discussing both implications for Canada's multiculturalism policy, which aims for equal social participation without bias or barriers, and current Ontario discrimination policies, which exclude discrimination based on language. We also make a call for implementing/improving anti-linguistic-bias training among Canadian employers.

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