

Accents impact workplace and consumer choices

October 3 2014, by Anna Carver

(Phys.org) —An accent can affect an individual's evaluation and impact perceptions of competence, scholarly research tells us. But do negative assumptions based on accent translate to decision-making and behaviors?

Beth Livingston, ILR School assistant professor of human resource studies, reports that "the workplace choices that employees encounter during the workday may all be influenced by the accented (or nonaccented) speech of those they interact with" in the paper, "Not What You Expected to Hear: Accented Messages and Their Effect on Choice," published July 15 in the *Journal of Management*.

"Moreover, accents might not only influence organizational incumbents; they may also impact how outsiders react to an organization's communication," according to the study.

Choice is a critical and consistent part of office life; employees and managers are required to make choices in their work environments, Livingston and colleagues wrote.

Choice can include "whether or not to support a colleague's opinion during a meeting, whether to begin making purchasing plans after hearing sales pitches, whether to accept a negotiated deal, or whether to offer a job opportunity to one employee over potential others."

Accent bias also goes beyond the workplace and extends to consumer choices of companies and products, the researchers wrote. Investigating

how these decisions play out, and to what degree individuals may be influenced by various accents, could prove important for managerial decision-making.

In three experiments with a total of 590 college students, researchers delivered messages about a company to participants and looked for reaction variations based on whether the message was spoken in a standard American-English accent - the accent a national news anchor might use - or nonstandard accented speech, such as an Indian- or Chinese-English accent.

One of the messages was a two-minute advertisement about a Starbucks-competing coffee shop "coming soon" to their college town.

Other messages tested were for a computer book competing with the "For Dummies" series and a voicemail message from a job candidate explaining why he is the best choice.

Researchers found that individuals were more likely to choose a company or a product when a message was read with an American-English accent than in Mandarin or French accents.

They also learned that expectations regarding company messages are violated when speakers have accents, and that, in turn, impacts the relationship between accent and the decision that the listener made about the company.

This means that Americans hold expectations about how they believe American businesses should communicate, and when messages are delivered with a non-native accent, this norm violation negatively impacts perception, the researchers wrote. In turn, that impacts an individual's choices between products, people and companies.

In a third experiment, the team used Indian and British accents to examine the effect of [accent](#) on choice.

"The biggest implication of the study is that managing expectations is critical to addressing bias. We often discuss stereotypes, but it seems that, at least with accented speech, violated expectations matter most," Livingston said.

"Additionally, we see these effects persist even when participants have the message script in front of them, suggesting that it's not the understandability of the message driving effects, either."

The team said it would like to repeat the study with Southern accents, African-American vernacular, and Bostonian and New York City accents, and by manipulating individuals' expectations instead of measuring them.

More information: Beth A. Livingston, Pauline Schilpzand, and Amir Erez "Not What You Expected to Hear: Accented Messages and Their Effect on Choice." *Journal of Management*, July 15, 2014. [DOI: 10.1177/0149206314541151](#)

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