

# New research shows link between ethnicity and bias

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Dr Ksenia Gnevsheva. Credit: Australian National University

New research from The Australian National University (ANU) has shown people demonstrate unconscious negative biases when they encounter a person of ethnic appearance or hear a foreign accent.

Dr. Ksenia Gnevsheva of the ANU School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics asked research participants to watch videos of ethnically

diverse [people](#) speaking and rate the level of [accent](#) they detected.

She found participants rated a person of Asian appearance as accented, even though a video of them speaking was played to them mute. They also rated a Caucasian-looking person as not at all accented without hearing their audio, when they were actually a native German speaking English with an accent.

"I wanted to see how accents interacted with ethnicity and I found that when people responded to visual cues only; what a person looks like, they make assumptions about a person's accent. They rated an Asian person's accent stronger than that of a Caucasian-looking person's, without even hearing the audio," said Dr. Gnevsheva.

While both Korean and German speakers were rated to have a similar degree of accent in English when the participants were played the audio-recordings (without vision), these ratings changed when the video track was added.

When participants both saw and heard the non-native speakers of English, they rated the Asian person with the same level of accent as when there was no video track, but rated the German English speaker as more accented than just the audio-recording.

"This was a new and unexpected finding," said Dr. Gnevsheva and it tells me that people don't expect to hear an accent from a Caucasian looking person so they get a surprise when they hear one and rate it as more highly accented.

"I call this an expectation mis-match and it goes some way to showing that our unconscious biases can work against a large cross section of society, not just people of ethnic appearance," she said.

Dr. Gnevsheva hopes the research will raise people's awareness of inherent biases they have in relation to ethnic appearance and linguistic ability.

"You could say this is linguistic discrimination. People often base hiring and promotion decisions on communicative ability and we have shown that ethnicity affects our perception of communicative ability."

"Racial discrimination laws don't actually cover linguistic discrimination. People can substitute other types of discrimination for linguistic [discrimination](#)," she said.

Dr. Gnevsheva says linguists are divided over whether the results are the product of inherent negative biases or due simply to a limited experience and exposure to a diversity of languages.

"I think as a society and as individuals we are cautious of 'the other'; things we haven't experienced or don't understand, but as they become more common and we begin to see them more frequently, we grow to know, understand and accept diversity and multiculturalism."

Dr. Gnevsheva's research is published in *Linguistics*.

**More information:** Ksenia Gnevsheva. The expectation mismatch effect in accentedness perception of Asian and Caucasian non-native speakers of English, *Linguistics* (2018). [DOI: 10.1515/ling-2018-0006](https://doi.org/10.1515/ling-2018-0006)

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