

# How your speech could impact your salary

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Most Americans are aware that English sounds different throughout the country, and that those regional differences can contribute to widely held stereotypes. But a leading University of Chicago economist has uncovered how speech patterns also strongly affect a person's wages, particularly for African Americans.

A new paper by Prof. Jeffrey Grogger of the Harris School of Public Policy found that workers with racially and regionally distinctive [speech patterns](#) earn lower wages compared to those who speak in the mainstream. For Southern whites, [speech](#)-related [wage](#) differences are largely due to location, with Southern-sounding workers who live in [rural areas](#) earning less than those in urban areas.

For the [black community](#), the wage difference, which can be significant, is explained by what Grogger calls "a sorting model." The term refers to African Americans who speak with what are perceived as mainstream accents sort into jobs that involve intensive interactions with customers and coworkers—and earn a sizable wage premium in jobs including lawyers, psychologists, dietitians and [social workers](#).

"While language has been studied in extensive detail by linguists, relatively little is known about how a [worker](#)'s speech is related to his or her wages," said Grogger, the Irving Harris Professor in Urban Policy, who researches issues including crime, education, migration and racial inequality. "By studying the dialects of African American and Southern white workers, we found that wages are strongly related to their speech patterns, with those who speak in a mainstream dialects paid more."

"For Southern whites, this is largely explained by family background and where they live," he added. "For African Americans, however, speech-related wage differences are not explained by family background, location or personality traits. Rather, members of the black community who speak in a mainstream dialect work in jobs that involve intensive interactions with others, and those jobs tend to pay more."

Why mainstream speech is more valued in interaction-intensive jobs is less clear, since racially and regionally distinctive speech patterns remain intelligible to other dialect speakers. One potential explanation is customer and coworker discrimination: Evidence from social psychology

suggests that listeners prefer mainstream speech, which could in turn limit opportunities for those who speak with other accents.

This type of speech analysis can help unlock realities about peoples' prejudices and biases. Linguists have shown that listeners can generally identify the race of a speaker based on very short audio clips.

Meanwhile, social psychologists have shown that both African American and white listeners routinely rate African American Vernacular English speakers lower than Standard American English speakers in terms of socioeconomic status, intelligence and even personal attractiveness.

Data for Grogger's research come from audio collected during the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, which is a large, nationally representative panel survey of the labor market behavior of people who were ages 12-16 in 1997. After reviewing each audio file, listeners were asked to specify the speaker's sex, race/ethnicity and region of origin.

"While more research needs to be done, it appears that since listeners generally prefer mainstream to nonmainstream speech," Grogger said. "This results in higher wages for mainstream-spoken workers in highly interactive sectors."

Grogger has observed similar "occupational sorting" in his [research about workers' speech](#) in Germany, a country with wide variation in regional dialects, where workers who speak with a distinctive regional accent experienced a reduction in wages by an amount that is comparable to the gender wage gap. In addition, workers with distinctive regional accents tended to sort away from occupations that demand high levels of face-to-face contact.

"Our research shows that the phenomenon of occupational sorting goes beyond the United States and might be universal. Regardless of location, people have strong views about the speech of others—and these views

have economic and societal consequences," Grogger added.

**More information:** Jeffrey Grogger. Speech and Wages, *Journal of Human Resources* (2018). [DOI: 10.3368/jhr.54.4.0617.8841R](https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.54.4.0617.8841R)

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