

# Children have biases toward different accents, new research shows

October 7 2022

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Elizabeth Johnson co-authored new research revealing accent biases in children as young as 5. Credit: Drew Lesiuczok

New research co-authored by a UTM professor shows that children may exhibit signs of accent-based biases as early as age five.

In a journal article co-authored by UTM psychology professor Elizabeth Johnson, Melissa Paquette-Smith from the University of California Los Angeles, and Helen Buckler from the University of Nottingham, data revealed that children preferred teachers who have a local [accent](#) as opposed to regional or non-native accents.

"It was something I was really surprised about," Johnson says.

The study, entitled "How sociolinguistic factors shape children's subjective impressions of teacher quality," was published earlier this year in the *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*.

Before working on the research, Johnson thought about how accent biases relate to everyday life. Specifically, its effects on student evaluations of faculty. The study discusses its findings in relation to implicit [bias](#) in higher education. Those biases could hamper movements to promote diversity in [higher education](#), Johnson says.

"The biases become stronger with age," she adds. "We read [professor] evaluations and they might be obviously gendered in some way, or they might obviously be speaking like a non-native accent."

Johnson says she believes it's important to consider the role accent perception plays in those evaluations.

"We don't frequently pay attention to these sort of language issues when we look at how students evaluate their professors," she says. "And it's a big deal because we have tons of professors whose first language isn't English. "We wanted to know, where does that come from?"

Johnson teamed up with Paquette-Smith and Buckler, with whom she worked previously while they were at UTM. Paquette-Smith completed her undergraduate and graduate degrees at UTM, and Buckler had a

three-year stint as a postdoctoral researcher at UTM.

They started exploring the topic after the trio saw similar research out of United States and France that showed children exhibited accent biases. But in Canada, given the higher level of exposure children have to various English accents, they thought the results would be different.

The study involved trials with children aged five and six who were presented with pairs of speakers of the same gender. A total of 144 monolingual Canadian English-speaking children aged five to six from southern Ontario participated in the study. They were from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and had varying levels of exposure to different English accents.

The children were shown speech samples from paired speakers. One [speaker](#) spoke English with a Canadian accent, and the other spoke English with either a different regional accent—British or Australian, or a non-native accent—Dutch and French.

The children were asked two questions after: who they wanted to be their teacher and how good of a teacher they thought each speaker would be.

The results showed that the children demonstrated a preference for Canadian-accented teachers and rated them more favorably. Children rated French, Australian, and Dutch speakers as less competent than Canadian speakers, with British speakers rated slightly below Canadian speakers. The authors suggest that the children are evaluating non-local speakers more negatively.

"The whole thing started with us trying to prove Canadian kids were more accepting than American kids, and it didn't work," Johnson says.

Their research found that even kids who had parents with different accents had preferences for local accents. Johnson wants to explore whether the cause is social bias or a linguistic one. Comprehension doesn't explain it all, they found out in follow-up research.

"There is definitely social bias going on there," Johnson says. "You really have to worry about this much younger than you thought."

Determining the cause of accent bias, as well as the age that it emerges, is "important for society and the way we function, the way we make decisions about people's competency, and the way we choose to portray people in the media," she says.

In their follow-up work, the team is trying to understand what drives the development of linguistic bias in children, as well as what the results would look like in different populations receiving different "linguistic inputs."

"We're also interested in better understanding what types of experiences might mitigate the initial formation or maintenance of negative linguistic biases in young [children](#)."

**More information:** Melissa Paquette-Smith et al, How sociolinguistic factors shape children's subjective impressions of teacher quality, *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/17470218221094312](#)

Provided by University of Toronto Mississauga

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