How people speak Spanish drives judgment, new study finds

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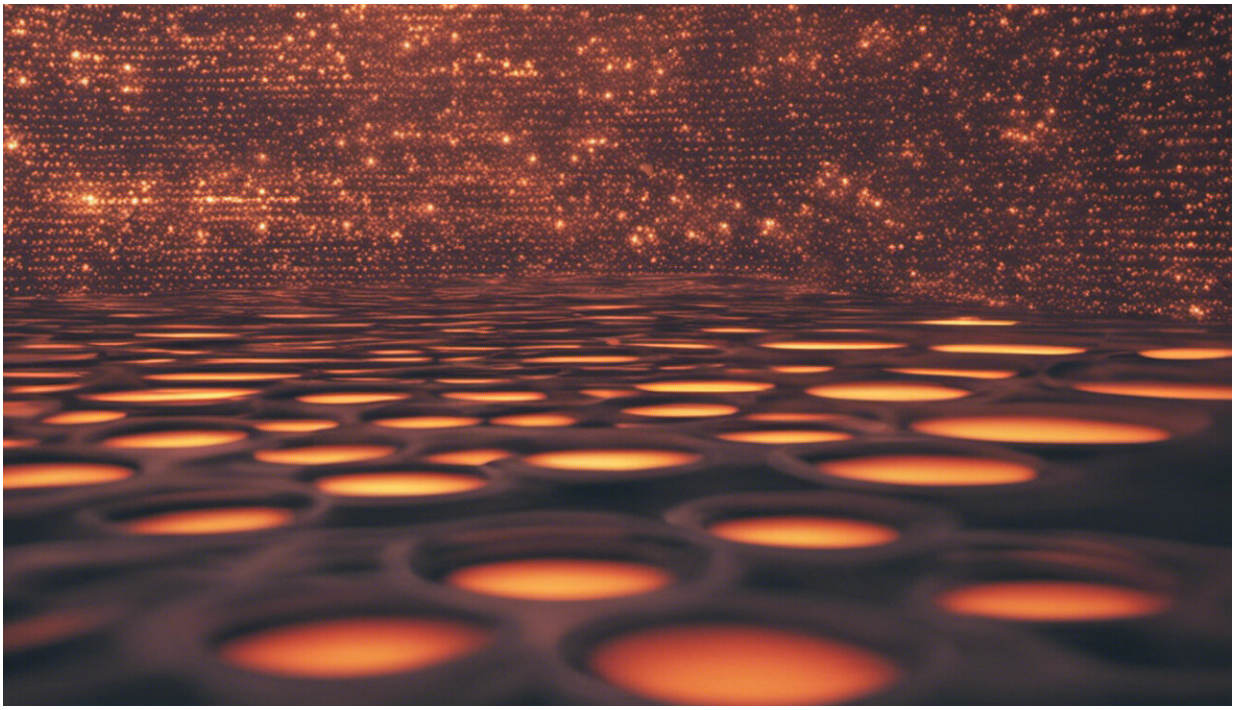

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In Miami—the most Latin and most Spanish-speaking metropolitan region in the United States—people likely judge others on how they speak Spanish, according to a new study.

In the study out of Florida International University (FIU) in Miami,

participants listened to audio recordings of three native Spanish speakers from Barcelona, Spain; Bogota, Colombia and Havana, Cuba and rated the accents for different attributes tied to income, profession and family background.

People who speak European Spanish are perceived as being more educated, having higher income and having a white-collar job, as well as coming from a family with more money, according to FIU sociolinguist Phillip M. Carter. People who speak Cuban Spanish are perceived as being less educated, having lower income and coming from a family with less money than Spaniards, as well as having blue-collar jobs. People who speak the Colombian variety fall somewhere in between, depending on the category, but participants had the strongest opinions on the European and Cuban varieties.

Carter, an associate professor in FIU's Department of English, says oftentimes, people will identify country of origin based on how someone speaks. Yet, when someone uses language and language differences to make assessments about non-linguistic attributes, including education, employment and income, it may reinforce stereotypes.

"What if instead of participating in a research study, these listeners were in charge of making education, employment, housing or health care decisions?," Carter said. "People can make life-changing decisions based on how others speak. That's a really, really big deal."

Carter points out stigmatized Spanish varieties are associated with countries with large indigenous, black and low-income populations. Spanish varieties with more prestige are associated with countries where people think of themselves as being ethnically European and middle-class. This, Carter says, comes out in the way people perceive each other in Miami.

"On the one hand, I'm not surprised given Eurocentric ideologies that build Spain up as 'la madre patria,' but on the other hand I'm surprised this is happening here in Miami," Carter said. "Cubans have had the most success here, yet people don't embrace Cuban Spanish, at least when making snap judgements about income and employment. You'd think people in Miami would look favorably on it given the successes of Cuban-Americans in these domains."

In Miami-Dade County—the seventh most populous county in the United States, where nearly 64 percent of people spoke Spanish at home between 2009-2013, according to the U.S. Census—Cubans and Cuban-Americans are the numerical majority, and they are among the economic and political elite. Compared to other Hispanic groups in the country, Cubans have higher incomes, are more educated, are more likely to own a home, and are more likely to have health insurance.

The study was completed by nearly 300 participants—67 percent identified as Latino/Latina and 52 percent identified as native Spanish-speakers. Most of the participants were undergraduate college students from FIU. The audio recordings were of three men who read the same passage. Each man is in his early 30s, college-educated in his native country, and has lived and been employed in Miami-Dade County for at least one year.

In the study, participants assessed different statements related to income, employment and family background on a scale of 1 to 5, where one indicates disagreement and five indicates agreement.

- On the likelihood of working as an attorney, participants gave the European voice an average of 3.4, the Colombian a 2.8 and the Cuban a 2.7.
- On the likelihood of working in a cell phone store, participants gave the Colombian and the Cuban an average of 3.1 and

Spaniard an average of 2.6.

- On the likelihood of coming from a family that provided opportunities to get ahead, participants gave the European voice an average of 3.7, the Colombian an average of 3.3 and the Cuban an average of 3.2.
- On the likelihood of coming from a family that was poor, the Cuban voice was given an average of 3.4, the Colombian an average of 3.3 and the European an average of 2.9.
- The Spaniard was assigned an annual income of $62,300, which was $12,625 more per year than the Cuban and $13,125 more than the Colombian.

The study is a collaboration with the University of Texas at Austin. It was recently published in the journal *Latino Studies* and is part of a special volume examining different Latino and Latina populations in Miami.

More information: Phillip M. Carter et al. The social meaning of Spanish in Miami: Dialect perceptions and implications for socioeconomic class, income, and employment, *Latino Studies* (2018). DOI: 10.1057/s41276-017-0105-8

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