

The problem with unconscious accent bias

An introduction to accent bias

When most people think about discrimination, the first thing that will likely come to mind would be discrimination of race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. However, there is one type of discrimination that is often overlooked. This is something that some people face every single day and have no way of hiding from. The prejudice I am referring to is accent discrimination. We encounter individuals with different accents all the time living in the United States. Some of the various accents we hear are from native speakers of different regions in the U.S. Other times, the accent may be from individuals who have immigrated here from another country. It is not always the intent of the native listener to discriminate against someone with a foreign accent. Reason being that sometimes this prejudice will rear its head in the form of unconscious bias. Therefore, it is paramount that we learn to identify our own unconscious biases so that we can improve upon them to create a more inclusive society. This blog will seek to explore some of the ways that accent bias is harmful to our society and why we should take action against it.

What is accent discrimination?

Before we can explore the reasons behind why accent bias exists, how harmful it can be, and what ways we can mitigate this problem, we must first familiarize ourselves with the concept of unconscious bias. “Unconscious bias or Implicit stereotype is the unconscious attribution of particular qualities by an individual to a member of some social outgroup” (Wikipedia, 2020). If we parse this definition of unconscious bias, we can understand that this type of behavior involves assuming certain characteristics of others without realization based entirely upon judgment. It is significant that the core of the problem comprises of people reacting without seeing the full picture. Our lack of situational awareness and our ignorance of the consequences is truly alarming to me.

Who does it affect?

If we are going to be able to change behavior that is deeply engrained in us, we must first become aware of the effects that our words and actions have on other people. One way that we can do this is by listening to the stories of people affected by unconscious bias such as Mirela Setkik. Mirela is a Bosnian refugee and founder of a successful marketing agency in St Petersburg, Florida. Mirela conducted a TED Talk at the University of South Florida to create awareness about unconscious accent bias in our society. In her TED Talk, Mirela speaks on how she has felt about the way she was treated based on her accent. Mirela states “I have felt judged, questioned, and put under a microscope. Many times, I could tell that people were confused as they didn’t know where to place me. They were suspicious. And it still happens, its probably

happening right now” (Setkic, 2019). Mirela continues on by stating “Actually I think I am asked about my accent on a weekly basis by complete strangers who often think it would be fun to play a game of I bet I can guess where your accent is from” (Setkic, 2019). Her story is the epitome of how inaccurate our assumptions can be about other people. I would go further to say that our assumptions of others are most often incorrect. Through having background knowledge of the tragedy that Mirela escaped in former Yugoslavia, it is a shame that she must live her life feeling unwelcome and discriminated against in the country she fled to for safety.

Another example of someone who has faced this type of discrimination and has the courage to speak out against it is an associate director at Columbia University named Hernan Diaz. Hernan was born in Argentina, grew up in Sweden, spent a few years in London in his twenties, and spent most of his life in the United States. Hernan has therefore developed a very unique “mixed accent” throughout his life. In a PBS special based on accent bias, Hernan speaks about his perplexing feelings after seeing flyers on campus advertising programs of accent reduction and even accent elimination. In a concerned manner, Hernan begs the questions “Does my accent need correcting? I don't think so. To sound like who, exactly? A native speaker? What would that even mean?” (Diaz, 2018). This quote from Hernan is quite gripping as it contains multiple facets. Hernan makes a great point when asking that question, what *does* it mean to sound like a native speaker? In the United States we have many different regional accents that all differ and contain their own slang. There are also other countries such as Great Britain, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and many others that are native speakers of English even though they don't sound exactly the same. Also, even if English is one's second language, is there something inherently wrong with having slightly different pronunciation and intonations in your speech? I certainly do not think so myself.

Why does this unconscious bias exist?

Now that we have heard from multiple individuals about their experience facing accent discrimination, I would like to explore some of the research that is being done into this field. This research is important as it can help us understand why the problem of unconscious bias exists and offer some possible avenues for solving the issue. One individual who has made great contributions to research in accent discrimination is Rahul Chakraborty, a professor at Texas State University. Rahul wrote a great article called “*A Short note on Accent-bias, Social Identity and Ethnocentrism*” which is full of necessary nomenclature and explanations of social behavior that can lead to accent bias. An important topic to be familiar with when thinking about why unconscious bias exists is social identity theory (SIT). SIT essentially boils down to the fact that people have a strong tendency to form groups amongst themselves based on common characteristics. Perhaps this gives us the sense of familiarity and belongingness that we crave in our lives. Nevertheless, through forming our “ingroups” (those we share traits with) we subsequently create outgroups (those we differ from) of which we have a stronger probability to compete with and view in a negative manner. The varying degree to which we feel attached to our ingroups is dependent on the varying levels of ethnocentrism amongst people. Ethnocentrism

is essentially the belief that our ingroups are the center of everything. In other words, we cannot help but to compare outgroup characteristics to the more familiar ingroup characteristics that we use as reference. Though ethnocentrism is not always a bad thing, take for example patriotism or team spirit, too much of it is shown to create overly high identification with ingroups and subsequent derogation of outgroups. As Rahul states in his article “social identity is the primary construct of ethnocentrism”. Stated another way, our propensity to socially categorize ourselves forms the basis of which ethnocentrism can thrive. With this in mind, the different accents that people possess is a very common way that they will organize their social groups in.

Through researching this topic, Rahul has found that “Frequently, speakers with nonnative accent are considered less intelligent, less loyal, less competent and of lower status and face both prejudice and stereotypes” (Chakraborty, 2017). Following suit with his claims, Rahul discussed the results of an experiment that was conducted by Lana A. Vornik at Victoria University of Wellington. It was found through Vornik’s study that “Through credibility ratings assigned to speakers with different accents, speakers with standard American accents delivering false information were perceived as more trustworthy than when listeners rated the credibility of speakers with different accents delivering false information” (Vornik, 2003). This finding is troubling as it seems to be indicative of native speakers perceiving nonnative speakers to be less trustworthy. Rahul also refers to multiple reports of which he has concluded “Even though language proficiency is a different construct compared to accent, there are numerous reports where people with nonnative accent are considered poor language users” (Chakraborty, 2017).

Perceptions from nonnative speakers themselves

Another great article which will help further our knowledge of accent bias is called “*Speaking with a Nonnative Accent: Perceptions of Bias, Communication Difficulties, and Belonging in the United States*”. This article was written by Agata Gluszek and John F. Dovidio for the journal of language and social psychology. The article’s importance lies in the way that the authors conducted their research. Most research in the topic of accent discrimination focuses on the native listeners’ treatment of nonnative accented individuals. Gluszek and Dovidio’s contribution to this work was to include the perceptions of the nonnative speakers themselves. How do they view their own accent and the effect that it has on their lives? They did this by conducting studies in which they selected a random group of people to participate in a survey and asked them to rate their level of agreement with certain statements such as “I think that in certain situations I am being discriminated against because I have an accent”, “I have problems communicating in English because of my accent”, and “I feel like an outsider to the United States”. The results of the experiments were inline with the authors’ hypothesis.

They found that people with nonnative accents are very likely to rate themselves as being discriminated against due to their accent. Data showed that the stronger their accent was, the greater they would rate themselves as likely to experience discrimination. This discrimination in turn resulted in a lesser feeling of belongingness in the United States. The authors also noticed

in the data that there seemed to be much more Asian and Latino people that had higher levels of perceived discrimination than those with European accents. The second study they conducted compared people with regional accents to those with nonnative accents. Although the data showed that those with regional accents do rate themselves as likely to experience a level of discrimination, they did not rate themselves as feeling like outsiders to the United States. They also had less problems with actual communication with people who have the standard American accent. By far the most interesting part of the article for me was a finding that stated “Speakers with nonnative accents reported experiencing fewer difficulties in communication, than natively accented individuals perceived them to experience” (Gluszek, A., & Dovidio, J. F. ,2010). What this may indicate is that due to native speakers believing a nonnative speaker will not understand them well enough, they may avoid interacting with each other and having meaningful conversations. Interactions with each other can help improve relationships, perceptions, and even improve the quality of communication and understanding all together.

Why does this matter to us and what should we do?

As we have discovered thus far, accent discrimination is a problem that affects a great deal of people. Therefore, it was surprising for me to find that there is much less information on accent bias than other types of discrimination such as that based on race, religion, gender etc.... With this being the case, it is important to create more awareness of the cultural issue at hand. We need to help each other become more aware of our own unconscious biases so that we can work on getting rid of them. I am sure that this is going to be a tough endeavor, though I know that every journey has a starting point. The works of Rahul Chakraborty, Agata Gluszek, John F. Dovidio, and many others will serve as excellent steppingstones on our path forward to a more culturally sensitive society.

To get passed our past mistakes is going to take work from both parties. Native listeners will have to learn to be more accepting of people that come from different backgrounds. Perhaps if they took a chance to speak with them, they may find those people with nonnative accents to be quite interesting. The more communication that we experience between those with native accents and nonnative accents will create a more comfortable environment and improved communication. Not to mention the fact that there is nobody better to help with pronunciation of certain words in a language than the people who have had it as their first language. Most Importantly, we all should remind ourselves and our peers of the importance of creating a more inclusive society. As perfectly stated by Hernan Diaz “Accents are a reminder of the fact that language does not belong to anyone, not even to its native speakers. Language is shared and it is a space where everyone is welcome” (Diaz, 2018).

Implicit stereotype. (2020, August 02). Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Implicit_stereotype

Setkic, M. (n.d.). Retrieved July 19, 2020, from https://www.ted.com/talks/mirela_setkic_where_is_your_accent_from_the_subtle_aggression_of_accent_guessing

(2018, July 03). Retrieved July 19, 2020, from <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/we-stigmatize-accents-but-language-belongs-to-everyone>

Chakraborty, R. (2017). A Short note on Accent–bias, Social Identity and Ethnocentrism. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 8(4), 57. doi:10.7575/aiac.all.v.8n.4p.57

Vornik, L., Sharman, S., & Garry, M. (2003). The power of the spoken word: Sociolinguistic cues influence the misinformation effect. *Memory*, 11(1), 101-109.

Gluszek, A., & Dovidio, J. F. (2010). Speaking With a Nonnative Accent: Perceptions of Bias, Communication Difficulties, and Belonging in the United States. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 29(2), 224-234. doi:10.1177/0261927x09359590

<https://journals-sagepub-com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/doi/pdf/10.1177/0261927X09359590>

