Accent Discrimination: the Experiences of Non-native Chinese English Speakers in the UK

Despite the ever presence of accent discrimination globally, the accent discrimination in the UK remains an understudied area. The proposed study is dedicated to exploring how non-native Chinese English speakers (henceforth CES) perceive the impact of accent discrimination in social interactions as well as how accent discrimination impact them in terms of emotional well-being and career. Additionally, it will test whether monolingual English speakers in the UK are more likely to discriminate against speakers with foreign accents. This study aims to shed light on the intricacies of accent discrimination on both an individual and societal level.

Research Questions

1. How do CES with accents perceive their experience of speaking with accents in social interactions with native English speakers in the UK?
2. Are monolingual English native speakers (henceforth ENS) in the UK more likely to discriminate against speakers with foreign accents?
3. How does speaking with an accent affect Chinese English speakers in the UK in terms of their mental health and career?

Core Concepts

The most important terms relevant to this study are native speakers, linguistic discrimination, and monolingualism. The definition of native speakers often vary to a great extent in different settings, which requires a clarification of the term for the present proposed study. Moreover, linguistic discrimination is a term relevant to this study because of this study's focus on accent discrimination, one form of linguistic discrimination. Also, given that monolingualism can contribute to linguistic discrimination, this term is discussed in detail with regards to its ramifications, that is, the concept that accompanies or results from monolingualism.

Native Speaker

The pioneering linguist Chomsky defined native speakers as people who are able to discern between ill-formed and normal grammatical expressions in the language which they have been acquiring since their birth (Chomsky, 1965). It is quite apparent that Chomsky emphasised the person's linguistic ability in his definition while paying little to no attention to the social aspects of native speaker: age of language acquisition, accent, and so on.

Researchers have also defined the term native speaker as a concept used heavily in English language teaching wherein the concept reflects prejudice, privilege, power, and ultimately how Western culture is favoured (Lowe, Kiczkowiak and Lu, 2016).

Cheng et al. (2021), in their study done in 2021, defined native speaker as someone who has gone through a normal process of language acquisition and has a pronunciation which is agreed upon by others sharing the same sociodemographic features with the person to be the native accent. This definition coincides with how I want to define native speaker in the proposed study. Therefore, native speaker is defined as someone who starts learning English since birth and has British accents that are agreed upon by the majority of the British-born English speakers to be native British accent.

Linguistic Discrimination

The predecessor of the term linguistic discrimination is linguistic racism, which was first coined by American linguist Max Weinreich in the 1940s (May, 2023). However, as the field of research on linguistic racism expanded, it was determined that discrimination based on language not only entails racial differences between language users in certain cases but can also manifest in cases in which speakers are of the same racial or ethnic background. Moreover, even people speaking with the same accent can discriminate against each other because of the phrases and words used in the speech. Therefore, a more inclusive term-linguistic discrimination-emerged and has

been widely used in research studies focusing on various forms of discrimination based on language.

Linguistic discrimination is defined as "a broad range of practices, actions and experiences, which share a common core of an unfair treatment of a person on the basis of their language" (Drozdzowicz and Peled, 2024). This leads us to define the language in a way that is relevant to the current proposed study. Specifically, in sole linguistic terms, language can be defined as a system of communication that consists of lexicon and grammar, both of which can then be dissected in the context of various phonetic, phonological, syntactic, morphological, and psycho/sociolinguistic elements and rules (Hammarstrom, 2016). However, after taking into account the sociocultural context in which languages are used, the definition of language becomes more nuanced and possesses a wide range of implications.

Max Weinreich, the linguist who coined the term linguistic racism, states that languages are "dialect with an army and a navy" (May, 2023). The quote itself speaks for the power and sociocultural and political connotations behind language use. As accent can serve as a potential reflection of one's identity, including gender, social class, education, and racial and ethnic background (Roessel, Schoel and Stahlberg, 2019), language too can reflect a wide range of social, political, and cultural practices and phenomena. This can be seen in the marginalisation of vernacular English used by African Americans, the mocking of Spanish by European American English speakers, and the dominance of one language over others that happened during colonisation (May, 2023). Hence, in this proposed study, language is seen as a vehicle through which nationalism, colonialism, ethnocentrism, oppression, and marginalisation are produced, reinforced, and perpetuated.

When a certain language is spoken, the listener automatically, or more often than not, projects the socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic stereotypes, and other factors associated with that language onto the speaker, thus producing discrimination (Roessel, Schoel and Stahlberg, 2019). In other words, language in and of itself does

not always lead to discrimination. Rather, it is through the interplay between the sociocultural and political symbols associated with a language and the perception of the listener towards that language that discrimination is produced (Roessel, Schoel and Stahlberg, 2019). Such a mechanism forms the basis of how linguistic discrimination operates.

Accent discrimination, one form of linguistic discrimination and also known as accentism, can take on various forms. Aside from the aforementioned scenarios where the listener may simply mock the accent, accent discrimination can take place in the various social and organisational settings including the workplace. Research has documented that the accent of the applicant dictates how certain recruiters make hiring decisions (Spence et al., 2022). Some other examples include speakers with accents being denied access to social services and given compromised quality of service (Gu and Shah, 2019). Therefore, accent discrimination can be experienced by CES in various contexts, which in turn poses different effects to their emotional well-being and career.

For this study, accent is defined as foreign/non-British accents that are easily distinguished by native British English speakers. Accent discrimination/accentism is defined as prejudiced view against people with foreign accents.

Monolingualism

Although the focus of this study is not directly related to monolingualism, one of the research questions, which examines whether monolingual ENS in the UK are more prone to discriminating against CES, warrants an explanation of this term and its connection to accent discrimination and linguistic discrimination more broadly, the reason being that monolingualism in this study is considered as a contributing factor to the production of accentism.

Monolingualism, in the most basic sense, is the notion that a person or a community is only able to speak one language and do so under government rule (Crystal, 1987). It

has been argued that monolingualism is regarded as the norm of our society, and this view is strongly held and favoured by monolinguals coming from language groups that have large influence around the globe (i.e., English) and large numbers of speakers (i.e., Chinese), so much so that bilingualism and multilingualism are seen as exceptions (Edward, 1994).

The normalisation of monolingualism may have caused monolinguals to become uncomfortable in the presence of another language, especially the ones that are less widespread, because they "live with the impression that their own language is the normal case which speakers of other languages must adjust to" (Christ, 1997, p. 221). Hence, a power dynamic between monolinguals and multilinguals emerges, which is that monolinguals from dominant society may see multilinguals as outsiders, especially when they speak with foreign accents (Ellis, 2008). When in the presence of a foreign accent, it is ultimately up to the monolingual person to perceive and choose to carry out discriminatory practices or thoughts. However, when the monolingual person has internalised the stereotypes associated with the group which the speakers with foreign accents are from, it becomes more likely that discrimination will ensue (Kim et al., 2012).

According to Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), monolingualism can be seen as a pathological state in which societal standards and policies influenced by monolingualism serve to marginalise language groups that are less dominant. On an individual level, monolingualism is the result of linguicism and deficient educational policies (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). While the claim itself may not be necessarily true and has drawn certain criticisms (Ellis, 2007), it can be seen as a portal through which this research study confirms or nullifies the hypothesis that British monolingual ENS are more likely to discriminate against speakers with foreign accent. The reason is that monolinguals typically come from monolingualism-infused cultures and that monolingual cultures are also the cultures in which 'linguistically immoral' practices, such as linguistic imperialism, are carried out frequently (Zeng, Ponce and Li, 2023).

The current research suspects that coming from a monolingual country where over 90% of the population speak only English (BBC, 2014), British ENS has internalised the normalisation of monolingualism and are more likely to discriminate against speakers with foreign accents.

Background

There has been a relatively large amount of research done on the topic of accentism. This repertoire of past literature varies in focus, some adopting a sociological perspective to examine the impacts of accent discrimination on the targets of discrimination while others examining the fundamental mechanisms (e.g., neurological, cognitive, etc.) underpinning the process in which accent discrimination transpires. Although research done to examine accentism in the UK is present, studies examining the experience of CES facing accentism in the UK remains virtually non-existent (Levon, Sharma and Ye, 2021).

This section, being a literature review, serves to provide a background of past studies related to the research questions. First, studies done to examine how accentism impacts the emotional well-being of the accented are discussed. Second, the relationship between accentism and the occupational experience of the accented are explored using past studies. Finally, the review incorporates studies examining the non-native speakers' personal perception of their experiences speaking with an accent in a foreign country.

The Relationship between Accentism and Emotional Well-being Among the Accented

Compared to the absence of relevant literature in the UK, studies examining the experience of CES in the U.S. have been done. Kim et al. (2012) investigated the association between English proficiency and perceived discriminatory experiences and depressive symptoms among 444 Chinese American adolescent participants in Northern California, USA. The study used a range of self-reporting scales to measure

the proficiency level, perceived discriminatory experiences, and depressive symptoms among the participants. The results indicate that the level of English proficiency is significantly associated with how the study participants attribute their perceived discriminatory experiences. More specifically, some participants reported speaking a limited amount of English with an accent during their high school years and have attributed their negative experiences, such as being "treated with less courtesy than other people", to their accent (Kim et al., 2012). Furthermore, these perceived discriminatory experiences have also been ascribed by certain participants to the "foreigner stereotypes" associated with their ethnicity. The study concludes that foreigner stereotypes and the accent of the participants co-produced perceived discriminatory experiences among the subjects, which in turn increased their risk of developing depressive symptoms. This contributes to the understanding the emotional impacts of accentism on the accented.

The study done by Kim, Roberson and Briganti (2018) also addresses the emotional impacts of accent discrimination on the accented. Involving more than 40 non-native speakers of English in the United States, who were asked a series of questions regarding their experience of accentism in semi-structured interviews, the study uncovers several major emotional outcomes endured by the participants, including anxiety and fatigue. Some participants also expressed that they at times feel nervous, upset, and afraid being discriminated against because of their accent. What's more, some of the participants expressed that accentism lowered their self-esteem and increased their insecurity. Some have also developed the tendency to avoid difficult situations because of the fear of experiencing accentism, a sign of traumatic, enduring effects of accentism. It is noteworthy that these emotional impacts are situated within organisational settings. More specifically, participants largely reported having these negative emotional impacts during communications with native speakers at work. Therefore, it remains unclear whether these emotional impacts are spilled over to other settings as well. This leads me to wanting to better define the parameters surrounding the variable-emotional impacts. It is necessary to add more precision to

questions including to what extent the emotional impacts affect the participants, in what settings do these impacts occur, and the duration of the impacts.

The Relationship between Accentism and Career Trajectory Among the Accented

Accent discrimination in the workplace has been studied. Schmaus and Kristen (2021) conducted a field experiment from 2014 to 2015 in a bid to examine if a foreign accent disadvantages job applicants in the early hiring process. The findings suggest that while ethnicity among the applicants generally does not draw negative replies from the human resource personnel, this is not the case for accent. More specifically, the study examined data comprising applicants applying with a Turkish name with no accent in German and applicants applying with a Turkish name with a Turkish accent in German, compared the two groups, and found that the applicants with a Turkish accent were more likely to get negative replies from recruiters.

A similar research study done in the U.S. suggests that while the Midwestern American accent draws no negative perceptions in the workplace, French accent does (Deprez-Sims and Morris, 2010). Likewise, Garcia's (2016) study validates that bilingual employees with an accent can often endure prejudice and discrimination in the workplace.

A study focusing on a similar topic was done by Wang et al. (2013). Instead of examining the discrimination carried out by personnel of the organisation, this study investigates the discrimination carried out by customers based on the accent of the employees who call them by phone. Although the study concludes that customers do not always rate accented callers negatively, depending on if the service outcome is fulfilling, the fact that the call centres of many U.S. companies, such as Apple and Dell, have been relocated from countries like India back to the U.S. demonstrates the dissatisfaction that American customers have towards "accented service callers" (Wang et al., 2013).

Another piece of research evidence focusing on accent discrimination in the workplace is an ethnography done by Tankosic and Dovchin (2021) in Australia. They analysed the experience of a group of Eastern-European immigrant women in the Australian workplace. The findings, unlike the aforementioned studies describing discrimination as mainly biased recruiting decisions, suggest more overt forms of discrimination towards the participants. When speaking with an accent and improper English grammar, most of the participants disclosed that they experience discrimination in the form of "social exclusion, mockery, mimicking, and malicious sarcasm" (Tankosic and Dovchin, 2021). Consequently, certain participants reported trauma and emotional distress.

All in all, these studies showcase how a foreign accent can limit one's social mobility by jeopardising his/her chance to employment and career outcome, as employers are more likely to assign the accented employee to lower positions when experience and skill being equal compared to non-accented employees, or in cases where the accented employees receive poorer customer feedback because of their accent (Gluszek and Dovidio, 2010; Wang et al., 2013).

How the Accented Perceive Their Experience of Speaking with an Accent

Research shows that these people can experience a range of negative cognitive and affective states as a result of receiving discrimination or struggling to integrate oneself into their social group by learning to speak with the dominant accent. Unlike many other research studies that solely focus on the emotional impacts of a foreign accent on the accented, Kim et al.'s (2018) study examines both the impacts of foreign accents on the accented and the nuances in their experiences. One notable finding is that, despite the absence of actual discrimination, nonnative speakers are well aware of the fact that their accents are associated with stereotypes and can draw prejudice. Some of them even internalise this mindset, becoming afraid and nervous before they speak to native speakers in a language of which they have an accent (Kim et al., 2018). Besides, nonnative speakers experience fatigue from having to constantly think about

grammar and accent, which is probably normal for new language learners in particular, but their efforts sometimes are not appreciated and induce annoyance and frustration in native speakers who communicate with them. This in turn has caused many nonnative speakers to experience negative emotions, including frustration, shame, guilt, and embarrassment, all of which make certain nonnative speakers avoid communication with others (Kim et al., 2018). Approaching the experience of the accented population using an ethnographic method, this study shows that nonnative speakers often feel negative regarding their experience of communicating with native speakers.

The Tendency of Native Speakers to Discriminate the Accented

Native speakers are highly sensitive to non-native accents (Atagi and Bent, 2017). The sensitivity activates in the presence of short stimuli, such as monosyllabic words and utterances. Nonetheless, this sensitivity decreases with more exposure to non-native accents (Rovetti, Sumantry and Russo, 2023). With the decreased sensitivity also comes reduced listening effort and more positive social judgement towards the accented speaker (Rovetti, Sumantry and Russo, 2023). Thus, on one hand, homogeneous cultures where monolingualism is the norm produce native speakers with high sensitivity towards accented speeches, thus a higher chance of discrimination; on the other hand, linguistically and culturally heterogeneous societies are less biased towards accented speeches. This provides the theoretical underpinning for the last question: whether monolingual ENS in the UK are more likely to discriminate against non-native CES with accents.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the current study lies in its focus on the impacts of accentism on the victims in terms of their career and emotional well-being. Although there has been relatively a large repertoire of similar research, studies involving non-native CES in the UK remain virtually non-existent, thereby increasing the significance of the

proposed study. Moreover, the connection between monolingualism and accent discrimination can possibly uncover one of the root causes of accentism on a societal level.

Methodology

Samples

The proposed study will recruit a total of 20 ENS and 20 non-native CES as participants in two cities in the UK: Newcastle upon Tyne and Oxford. The rationale behind the choice of the two places stem from the need to enhance the generalisability of the study. It is assumed that a northern city and southern city would be relatively representative.

In terms of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, there is no specific rules as to the sociodemographic requirements of the participants in terms of age and gender, except that CES must be of Chinese ethnic and racial background and have been residing in either Oxford or Newcastle on Tyne for at least nine months, excluding those who are in the UK for tourism and business purposes. It is expected that non-native CES must be born in a country outside UK and speak with a relatively obvious accent and perhaps limited proficiency.

There can be non-native CES who speak with little to no accent, in which case they would obscure the validity and reliabitliy of the study. I will collaborate with more than one British-born ENS to assess and cross-examine the presence of foreign accents among the recruited CES to ensure their eligibility for the study. This same assessment will be conducted on the British-born ENS as well to ensure that they meet the definition of native speaker. Besides, the recruited ENS will have to be able to speak only English.

Data Collection and Analysis

Different approaches will be used to address three proposed research questions. Specifically, to answer the first question, this study will incorporate semi-structured interviews between researchers and the CES participants, each interview involving one participants and lasting around 30 minutes. I will design certain questions to draw responses in terms of whether they feel nervous and afraid, or confident and positive when interaction with native English speakers in the UK. I will also allow for open-ended discussions and individualised account of the experience by asking questions such as how do you feel about speaking English with native British speakers in the UK. Importantly, given the potential limited English proficiency among some participants, I will choose using Chinese as the communicating language during the interviews accordingly.

The interviews will then be transcribed to written materials which will be analysed using thematic analysis, an method used for analysing qualitative data and extracting overarching, repeating themes (Jowsey, Deng and Weller, 2021).

To address the second research question, this study will give out questionnaires to the recruited ENS participants. The questionnaire consists of three items currently, including "Do you agree that you feel uncomfortable in the presence of an foreign-accented speech?", "Compared to a person with foreign accents, I would rather choose to talk to a person without accent.", and "People who have a foreign accent in English is not as trustworthy as native British English speakers". Each question will have two answer boxes they can check: yes and no, each corresponding to a score of one and zero. If the final score is two and above, then the respondent is deemed as holding discrimination against speakers with foreign accents.

To answer the third research question, this study will use SCL-90, a 90-item self-rating scale assessing general conditions of mental health, to record answers of the CES participants. SCL-90 is praised as the most comprehensive and reliable measures of one's mental health state and potential psychological issues (Gomez et al., 2021), which increases the validity and reliability of the result. Additionally,

occupational well-being (OWB) scale, one of the few rating scales designed to assess the career experience among the workers, will be used to record the career outcomes and experiences of the CES participants (Daovinson and Intarakamhang, 2024). After compiling the data, I then will use the accompanying scoring manual to calculate the score of each respondent and obtain a mean score for the whole sample, both of which will be presented in the article.

Limitations

- It is impossible to ensure the veracity of the answers provided in the questionnaire given to the participating British ENS, which would undermine the validity of this study.
- Currently, no English version of OWB scale exists, which will require a translation that can potentially affect how accurately the participants comprehend the items.
- Although SCL-90 is highly reliable and accurate, self-reporting scales still are subject to socially-desirable, false, or distorted answers from the participants, thereby reducing its validity.
- Semi-structured interviews with participants may elicit negative emotions in the presence of past negative experiences with speaking English with an accent, so it may not be entirely ethical to conduct the interview.

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