
Dialect And Accent In Linguistics

One of my Chinese friends once complained to me worriedly that a Chinese '19, who already has an offer from Goldman Sachs, said that he spoke English with a heavy accent, and that it might compromise his chances in the American job market. I shrugged and replied, "Well, then you may have to work harder on your accent. That's how the market works."

However, on second thought, there was something wrong with my response. Because I want to major in linguistics, I have familiarized myself with some of the most well-known linguistic ideas. For example, when speaking a second language, accents do not matter as long as people can easily make themselves understood by others. I also understand that there are no "superior" or "inferior" languages, dialects, or accents: they are only different. Yet I sometimes still judge people, especially those I have never met before, based on the way they speak. If I hear another Chinese student speaking English with a heavy accent, I tend to immediately assume that he or she is not proficient in English, even though proficiency and accents are not closely related. My first reaction to my friend's complaint was to suggest working on his accent: it is true that employers and customers prefer a "standard", more "appropriate" accent because they associate it with professionalism. Such an economically prejudiced perspective has deeply influenced me to an extent where I not only discriminate people based on dialects and accents, but I also readily accept linguistic discrimination that could potentially disadvantage me as a non-native speaker of English, because "that's how the market works."

Linguistically speaking, everybody speaks a dialect. Linguists define dialects as variants of a language that differ in lexicons, pronunciations and grammars based on regions and social classes. Since everybody learns to speak their native languages from their parents and the people around them, they inevitably pick up the lexical, phonological, and grammatical usages distinctive to their regions and social classes, which form their own dialects. Accents refer to the phonological elements in a dialect. On the other hand, a standard language, or standard dialect, is a form of language adopted by the political entity or the institutions. In a Dartmouth context, the standard language would be Standard American English. A standard language is an artificial product, a social construct, and is not superior to any non-standard dialects.

Nonetheless, linguistic discrimination is very common, and it can vary depending on the contexts. One of the most prominent situations of linguistic discrimination is the workplace. Employers consider candidates speaking a standard dialect more capable and professional. This may stem from the fact that a standard dialect has to be learned at school. It leads people to conclude that speakers who fail to master the standard dialect do not work hard at school or have received little schooling. Therefore, those speakers are uneducated and ineligible for the job.

Additionally, linguistic discrimination in sales and customer services has its economic justifications. A standard dialect not only allows for easier communication with the customers, but it can also build company images and potentially increase sales. It "adds status and an aura of refinement to products and services, contributing to competitive advantage." As a result, employees and job seekers change their ways of speaking in an attempt to appeal to their superiors and secure jobs. In a research on workplace languages, interviewee Archie, who

holds a managerial position, consciously switches from Scots dialect to Scottish Standard English when talking to his co-workers because he believes that “the English regard us as second class citizens because of our dialect.” On the other hand, those who refuse to switch dialects may face obstacles in the workplace and even suffer from unemployment.

In dating and social scenes, people disfavor dialects different from their own. In the documentary *American Tongue*, a woman broke up with her southerner fiancé after he started to speak with a stronger and stronger southern accent as they traveled south. She stated overtly that “I was not going to have little southern babies who talked like that.” By contrast, a southern woman said that the New York dialect was grating on her ears and that it lacked the hospitality that southerners had. Obviously, no dialects are innately unpleasant to the ear. Additionally, dialects do not have personalities or attitudes such as hospitality. It is possibly the New Yorkers that seem inhospitable to the southern woman, but she makes a connection between their demeanor and their dialect and jumps to the conclusion that anyone with a New York dialect is unfriendly. It is often the case that the stereotypes of a certain group are extended and become correlated with the characteristics of that group, from customs and behaviors to ways of speech. During this process, linguistic discrimination finds its roots and justifications, when stereotypes are strengthened and reinforced in a way that they would be applied to a wider range of aspects of our lives.

Linguistic stereotypes can play an even larger role in the entertainment industries. An article published in 1979 explored the interesting phenomenon that many rock musicians, from The Rolling Stone to Elton John, imitated Southern dialects in their performances. The author pointed out that rock music has its roots in southern music like jazz, blues, and gospel, which justified the use of southern dialects. Moreover, southern dialects are associated with the rebellious, the unaccepted, and the disadvantaged because of the history of slavery in the South, and thus perfectly serve rock music’s ideology of challenging norms and opposing the Establishment. The stereotype that rock music must involve southern dialects had grown so influential that a rock fan believed that groups without such dialects “rapidly faded from popularity.” The musicians are not evaluated based on their talents and works, but their success depends on something completely irrelevant to music itself.

Consequently, switching dialects can help a person dissociate with the social markers imposed on him or her to achieve a change, even a raise, in status. Flower seller Eliza in the classic movie *My Fair Lady* experienced a major uplift in social status by hiding her family background with a learned upper-crust accent. She was then pursued by an upper-class young man and mistaken for a Hungarian princess by a Hungarian linguist. The plot of a movie might be exaggerated, but it reflects the reality where people change the way they speak to obtain jobs, to find spouses, to appeal to locals, and to meet the requirements of an industry. Similarly, non-native speakers strive to remove their foreign accents so that they could better fit into the local environment and avoid potential discrimination against strangers. Even though linguistic discrimination is prevalent and has its underlying causes, it is neither just to the people discriminated against, nor is it justified because “that’s how the market works.” Changing dialects against one’s own will is not only difficult and unnatural, but it can also easily cause stress and frustration.

To oppose linguistic discrimination is not to get rid of standardized languages. Standardized languages are necessary because they facilitate communication, improve mutual understanding, and provide with us a guide to refer to when producing literary works. For

example, the government in China has been formulating a lingua franca for over two thousand years because Chinese dialects (some consider them different languages) are not mutually intelligible, which generate great difficulties and confusions in commercial exchanges and literary compositions. To battle linguistic discrimination, it is rather important that we do not judge others or make assumptions based on their dialects and linguistic stereotypes. We should also keep an open mind to different accents others have when speaking a standard language or a non-native language. Dialects and accents should be something that carries our memories and pride in our hometowns and our identities, rather than a constant source of shame that needs to be hidden away.

In order to let the Dartmouth community be aware of and help tackle linguistic discrimination, I believe it would be beneficial to promote basic linguistic ideas. Even though language is an indispensable part of life, the study of languages is being overlooked, and many still confuse linguists with polyglots. The course Introductory Linguistics (Ling 1) helps students understand that dialects and accents are among the most normal things on earth. It also introduces the idea that almost no one can speak a standard language or a non-native language perfectly because people have phonological rules of their native tongue engraved in their minds and transfer the rules when speaking other languages. My name is hard for English speakers to pronounce because 'zh' is an unacceptable phoneme in English, and 'hui' is an unacceptable sequence of phonemes. Vice versa, a Mandarin speaker would just as well mispronounce 'ship' as 'sheep.' Besides, "individuals differ greatly in their ability to overcome the transfer effect." What is easy for one person might be Greek for another. Ling 1 offers students an opportunity to fully comprehend why it is wrong to make brutal judgments based on dialects and why linguistic discrimination is linguistically absurd. In addition, Dartmouth OPAL could partner with the linguistic departments to create online info sessions similar to those about drug and alcohol abuse. It could celebrate different dialects and languages just like how it celebrated racial, gender, and socioeconomic differences. A battle against discrimination is not won only through campaigns and slogans, but a firm understanding of the causality and the lack of sense behind it is essential too.