


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Accenting racism in labour migration

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Abstract

This paper concerns how speech accent *accents* or reinforces racism in the context of labour migration to the English-speaking Global North. It specifically outlines three functions of accent in racial capitalist systems that require the labour of migrants and their acceptance of their “linguistic deficiencies.” First, accent functions as a labour control mechanism that pushes racially minoritised migrants into low-paying work. Second, as evidenced by the language training of transnational call centre workers, accent also reinforces colonial relations between migrant workers and customers. Last, by acting as a credential that can be purchased for professional success, accent distracts from the institutional racism that truly hinders migrants’ employment opportunities. The piece concludes with some thoughts on how combatting racism in labour migration requires another type of accenting.

Cet essai porte sur la façon dont l’accent *accentue* ou renforce le racisme en contexte de migration de travail vers les pays du Nord anglophones. Il décrit spécifiquement trois fonctions de l’accent dans les systèmes capitalistes raciaux qui exigent le travail des migrants et l’acceptation de leurs « déficiences linguistiques. » Premièrement, l’accent fonctionne comme un mécanisme de contrôle de la main-d’œuvre qui pousse les migrants racialement minorisés vers des emplois peu rémunérés. Deuxièmement, comme le montre la formation linguistique des travailleurs des centres d’appel transnationaux, l’accent renforce également les relations coloniales entre les travailleurs migrants et les clients. Enfin, en agissant comme un titre de compétence qui peut être acheté pour réussir professionnellement, l’accent détourne l’attention du racisme institutionnel qui entrave réellement les opportunités d’emploi des migrants. L’essai se termine avec quelques réflexions sur la façon dont la lutte contre le racisme dans le domaine de la migration de travail nécessite un autre type d’*accentuation*.

Keywords: labor migration; accent; racism; capitalism

Accenting Racism in Labour Migration

This paper is about speech accent and racism in the context of labour migration to the English-speaking Global North. Instead of exploring how racism informs people’s

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perceptions about accents, the paper is concerned with what accent does to racism. Specifically, I argue that accent *accents* racism, which means understanding that “accent” is not only a noun describing someone’s manner of pronunciation but also a verb meaning to emphasize or reinforce. When accent is made to be a problem, it diverts attention away from racism (and its interlocking systems of oppression), thereby accenting its power. While it may be more accurate to state that accent masks racism in this regard, racism remains accented or reinforced in the sense of it being allowed to operate without immediate scrutiny. One major reason why accent can accent racism is because of the conceptualization of racism as operating through the bodily sense of sight. Indeed, due to the historical and contemporary biologizing of race, where it is perceived as phenotype, racism is enacted through *seeing* race in terms of skin color or other physical features (Stoeber, 2016). However, notions of racial difference and inferiority have also taken on auditory dimensions to reinforce white supremacy (Rosa & Flores, 2017; Stoeber, 2016). For example, European colonizers were able to convince themselves that colonized populations were subhuman through hearing their language practices as “animalistic” and thus unable to express complex ideas (see Rosa & Flores, 2017).

Yet another factor that allows the *accenting* of racism concerns how accent is treated as a technical skill to acquire, especially in the context of migration. For instance, when migrants in English-speaking nations like the U.S. and Canada are told by employers to enhance their spoken intelligibility in order to enhance their employability, this seemingly technical requirement actually entails converting their “foreign-accented” Englishes to “native” varieties (Ramjattan, 2019). Beyond the assumption that this conversion is simply a matter of hard work, the problem here is how the need to change one’s accent is not necessarily about achieving the functional goal of being intelligible but rather about conforming to varieties of English established through white settler colonialism (Krysa et al., 2019; Ramjattan, 2019). While accent might be portrayed as an area for “reskilling” migrants in the labour market, this reskilling ends up being about vocal “whitening.”

To better highlight how accent accents racism in the context of labour migration, I outline three functions of accent in racial capitalist systems that require the labour of migrants and their acceptance of their “linguistic deficiencies” at work. First, accent acts as a labour control mechanism that allows some migrants to easily find work while limiting the job options of other migrants. Second, as a focus of workplace training, accent upholds colonial relationships between migrant workers and their customers. The final function of accent that I will discuss is its acting as a key to migrants’ professional success, which distracts from institutional oppression and helps support industries that frame migrants’ language practices as deficient. As a conclusion, I offer reflections on how combatting racism in labour migration requires another type of accenting.

Accent as a Labour Control Mechanism

In their qualitative study dealing with the accent discrimination experienced by African migrants in the Canadian labour market, Creese and Kambere (2003) note how “Canadian English,” especially its auditory form, functions as a figurative border that blocks access to meaningful employment. That is, since they do not physically and aurally match a “Canadian accent,” an ideological construction reflecting the whiteness of Canada, these migrants are deemed unqualified for public-facing occupations such as teaching, which require this accent. While this border allows white European migrants

entry to particular professions due to their closer proximity to an imagined Canadian English, it becomes a tool to reinforce hiring practices based on anti-Black racism.

The way that accent acts as a border limiting employment opportunities speaks to how it can be used as a type of labour control mechanism, which sorts desirable and undesirable workers on the basis of race. But what makes accent a seemingly acceptable sorting mechanism is its use as an indicator of professional competence. For instance, Lorente (2018) notes how Canadian domestic/maid agencies often use accent to reinforce colonial stereotypes about the allegedly inherent traits of different migrant domestic workers. Whereas the accents of European workers are perceived as signs of “professionalism,” those of workers from the Philippines index their supposed lack of skill, intellect, and confidence, thus making them unsuitable for communicative work. Indeed, while agencies market the ideal nanny as European due to their “innate” ability to properly care for and interact with children, they promote Filipinos as suitable for housekeeping, a solitary type of work perceived as “low-skilled.”

This example of maid agencies also highlights that accent as a labour control mechanism not only bars certain migrants from specific occupations but also helps to ensure that they provide needed labour elsewhere. With countries like Canada embracing neo-liberal economic agendas that depend on precarious, low-paid work, racially minoritised migrants—and particularly migrant women—take up such work because their desperation for employment makes them willing to accept poor working conditions (Krysa et al., 2019). In terms of accent, then, it becomes a contributor to this desperation for work. When their accents prevent them from securing high-status and well-paying positions, racially minoritised migrants will resort to pursuing jobs that, although unstable and low paying, do not scrutinize the way they sound.

While accent is certainly not the only factor leading to the racial stratification of labour (see the penultimate section), it is important to emphasize that even the idea of an accent can be a barrier to employment. Take, for example, Oreopoulos’ (2011) study on why skilled migrants struggle to find work in a major metropolitan area in Canada. After sending close to 13,000 fake résumés to a little over three thousand career postings requiring an undergraduate degree, Oreopoulos noted how résumés that contained (South) Asian names generally received fewer callbacks than those with Anglo names, even when they satisfied the technical requirements for the job. In follow-up interviews with employers, Oreopoulos found that they deemed an Indian or Chinese name to be an indicator of a potentially unintelligible accent, which they believed could prove bothersome in customer-facing occupations. Therefore, even when racially minoritised jobseekers possess the desired credentials for work, the way they are imagined to sound decreases their employability.

Training Accent, Upholding Colonial Hierarchies

As seen above, accent reinforces racism in labour migration by facilitating the racial stratification and segregation of labour. Another aspect of its reinforcement concerns sustaining racialised power relations between workers and customers. One notorious example is the context of transnational call centre work, where the physical bodies of migrant workers do not migrate but rather their labour does (Aneesh, 2015). As sites of telephonic service work in which agents engage in activities ranging from helping customers with banking transactions to telemarketing, transnational call centres are typically located in former colonies of empires, whereby workers use the same language as their former colonizers to accomplish job tasks (Inoue, 2018). In the case of Indian call

centres, for instance, agents are required to converse in English with British and other English-speaking callers from the Global North.

Beyond the need to use a colonial language, the neocolonial relationship between call centre workers and their callers is reinforced through deficit perspectives about the accents of the former. Turning to the Indian context once again, even though desirable agents are graduates of English-medium schools established through British colonial policies, which is a signal that they speak an elite type of English, this English is nevertheless perceived as lacking intelligibility when juxtaposed with varieties of English from the Global North (Mirchandani, 2012). As a result, agents are formally trained to “neutralise” features of their accents, which, more often than not, entails emulating British and/or U.S. varieties of English in particular (Aneesh, 2015; Mirchandani, 2012). Accent neutralisation training is tied to the neutralisation of identity. In other words, such training indexes “sounding Indian” as professionally undesirable and, furthermore, must be masked by “orally civilising” oneself through the adoption of western ways of speaking.

What is also noteworthy is how the Indian call centre agent must not only develop a “neutral accent” but also one that expresses the right emotions. For example, drawing on interviews with agents in New Delhi, Bangalore, and Pune, Mirchandani (2012) details how these workers are trained to develop a type of intonation or general tone of voice that conveys a caring, deferential persona. One purpose of this “feminised” accent is to highlight the worker’s deference to the customer, which aligns with the general expectation about customer service representatives’ behaviour and also reinforces the neocolonial idea that Indians must be subservient to those in the Global North. However, another of its functions is to protect the Indian economy. As Mirchandani explains, this vocal servitude is perceived in terms of nation building because caring service ensures more labour outsourcing to India, which in turn promotes national economic growth. That is, multinational corporations are more willing to rely on Indian call centres if they know that local agents are dedicated to pleasing customers in spite of receiving lower wages than their western counterparts, facing racist abuse from callers, and so on. At least on the microlevel, then, this type of accent training ensures that: (a) call centre workers keep their jobs, and (b) call centre employers have access to a submissive, inexpensive workforce.

Accent as a Credential and Distraction

It is important to note that accent neutralisation training, as seen with call centre workers, has become an entire industry itself. Better known as “accent reduction” and taking the form of online or in-person classes offered by private trainers and speech language pathologists, this industry has marketed itself as a means to improve migrants’ career prospects in the English-speaking Global North. If, as discussed earlier, the accented Englishes of migrant jobseekers act as barriers to employment, the purpose of accent reduction is to remove these auditory barriers by reducing their “foreignness” (Blommaert, 2009; Ramjattan, 2019). Beyond the assumption that accents can be “reduced” in the first place, one issue with a “reduced” accent is that, unless one wants to become a call centre agent, for instance, it does not necessarily enhance one’s employability. This is because changing one’s accent does not eliminate institutional obstacles that particularly hurt racially minoritised migrants in the job market.

For example, in addition to racist understandings of their accents as described before, migrant jobseekers from the Global South find it difficult to secure high-status,

well-paying employment due to the nonrecognition of their prior work experience and educational credentials, both of which are deemed “substandard” in Global North contexts by various regulatory bodies and employers (e.g., Ameeriar, 2017). Therefore, for an Indian doctor who is unable to practice medicine in the U.S. because of their “inferior” medical degree or a Nigerian engineer who cannot find work in their field due to a lack of Canadian work experience, a reduced accent cannot remedy these institutionalised obstructions to employment.¹ What the idea of a reduced accent actually does is distract jobseekers from institutional racism by making them believe that their employability is in their complete vocal control (Ramjattan, 2019).

Understanding why accent reduction remains a distraction from racism involves noting the political economy in which it is situated. In fact, the rise of accent reduction programmes signals how neoliberal governments continue to shift the responsibility of migrant employment training to a series of private organisations, which view un(der)employment as caused by the linguistic and cultural “failings” of migrants rather than policy failures (Ameeriar, 2017; Blommaert, 2009). Since they are unregulated and have no institutional power to enact change, for accent-reduction providers making prospective clients insecure about their accents is actually more lucrative than helping them to fight against the racism that truly hinders their job prospects. And it is indeed lucrative given that accent reduction is regarded as a service meant for migrants in elite professions, who have the financial means to further their careers in the Global North (Blommaert, 2009). This highlights that a reduced accent is only a credential for those who can afford it.

Conclusion: Another Accenting

In this article, I have briefly detailed how accent reinforces (or accents) racism in the realm of labour migration. Through forcing racially minoritised jobseekers into low-paid work, recreating colonial hierarchies between workers and customers, and presenting itself as a credential that distracts from institutional barriers to employment, accent reinforces racism in the sense of making it seem justifiable. That is, if accent is treated as an essential job qualification or something that it is possible to train away, linguistic racism against migrants is not even perceived as racism as their accented voices pose “real problems” in professional communication. When thinking about how to combat this accenting of racism, then, another accenting is needed.

Rather than reinforcing racism, this accenting is about drawing attention to how racism is also realised as aural oppression with material effects. In other words, it highlights how accent and racism are not two separate issues in labour migration. This first means understanding how the historical and contemporary formation of racial categories has relied on linguistic categorisation (Rosa & Flores, 2017). Developing such a perspective would help in combatting employer beliefs that they cannot hire workers from particular ethnoracial groups due to their “incomprehensible” accents. An important point to accent is that a “foreign accent” is not necessarily a problem in the workplace. Indeed, it is crucial to understand that the “foreignness” of an accent does *not* automatically mean a lack of intelligibility nor does it signal or imply any other traits like intelligence and trustworthiness (e.g., Ramjattan, 2019). Therefore, instead of asking racially minoritised migrants to modify their accents for work, it is vital to question and change (institutionalised) listening practices conditioned by ideologies of whiteness (Stoeber, 2016). It is also important to emphasize that linguistic racism upholds other inequalities experienced by migrants. As noted previously, the concern over accent can reinforce class hierarchies among migrants by pushing some into low-

paid work and allowing others to purportedly further lucrative careers through accent reduction. Moreover, given that accent is deemed important in the oral-intensive sector of service work, a field thought to be “feminine” in nature, migrant women workers can be subject to even more accent discrimination than their male counterparts (see Creese & Kambere, 2003; Lorente, 2018).

But who should be responsible for accenting the above information? I argue that we, as applied linguists, need to take responsibility. Since a major emphasis in applied linguistics is supposed to be offering solutions to language-focused issues in society, applied linguists should use their expertise to highlight and publicise the topics discussed here: the ways in which accent upholds racism and white supremacy at work. This engagement of applied linguistics could range from working with migrant-serving organizations to raise awareness about the intersections of accent and race to consulting with lawmakers to ensure that accent is not used to justify racist hiring practices. In a world where language continues to uphold structural oppression, applied linguists need to focus less on what accent *is* and more on what accent *does*.

Notes

¹ These examples are not to suggest that white migrant professionals never face the same institutional barriers. In fact, it is important to note how specific sociohistorical processes can racialise white migrants as nonwhite and thus subject them to un(der)employment (see Krivonos, 2020).

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Cite this article: Ramjattan, V. A. (2022). Accenting racism in labour migration. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 42, 87–92. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190521000143>