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When Actions Speak Louder Than Words: Preventing Discrimination of Nonstandard Speakers

Karolina Hansen¹
Tamara Rakić²
Melanie C. Steffens³

Abstract: Prejudice against a social group may lead to discrimination of members of this group. One very strong cue of group membership is a (non)standard accent in speech. Surprisingly, hardly any interventions against accent-based discrimination have been tested. In the current article, we introduce an intervention in which what participants experience themselves unobtrusively changes their evaluations of others. In the present experiment, participants in the experimental condition talked to a confederate in a foreign language before the experiment, whereas those in the control condition received no treatment. Replicating previous research, participants in the control condition discriminated against Turkish-accented job candidates. In contrast, those in the experimental condition evaluated Turkish- and standard-accented candidates as similarly competent. We discuss potential mediating and moderating factors of this effect.

Keywords: nonstandard accent, impression formation, discrimination, intervention, own experience

In today's world of migration, intercultural communication is very important. In such encounters, people can experience discrimination based on their ethnicity and also on their native language or accent (Fuentes, Gottdiener, Martin, Gilbert, & Giles, 2012;

¹Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland

²Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

³University of Koblenz-Landau, Landau, Germany

Corresponding Author:

Karolina Hansen, Institute of Psychology, Polish Academy of Sciences
ul. Jaracza 1, 00-378 Warsaw, Poland
Email: khansen@psych.pan.pl

Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). Although numerous studies have shown negative evaluations of nonstandard speakers, very few studies focus on the prevention of accent-based discrimination. Instead, accent-reduction businesses have emerged (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Montgomery, 1999) and accent-modification trainings are recommended to speakers (e.g., Shah, 2012). In contrast, in our research we do not focus on the speaker, but on the listener. Preventing discriminatory evaluations on the side of biased listeners could possibly be obtained by making listeners experience themselves the role of a nonstandard speaker. Surprisingly, there is little research on how experiencing one's own behavior affects perceiving others (see Kawakami et al., 2012; Phills, Kawakami, Tabi, Nadolny, & Inzlicht, 2011). The current article tests this in an intervention where participants' experience of speaking a foreign language influences how they later evaluate other speakers with a nonstandard accent.

Nonstandard-accented speakers are often rated as less intelligent, competent, attractive, and as being of lower social status than standard-accented speakers (e.g., Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). They are discriminated against in employment (e.g., Nguyen, 1993), in the housing market (e.g., Zhao, Ondrich, & Yinger, 2006), and in the courts (e.g., Lippi-Green, 1994). Furthermore, implicit attitudes toward nonstandard-accented speakers tend to be even more negative than explicit ones (Pantos & Perkins, 2013). Recent research has also shown that social information transmitted by accent is stronger than that transmitted by appearance (e.g., Kinzler, Shutts, Dejesus, & Spelke, 2009; Rakić, Steffens, & Mummendey, 2011). Negative consequences of speaking with an accent were shown, *inter alia*, for ethnic minority groups of Turks in Germany (Hansen, 2013) and Sweden (Rödin & Özcan, 2011): Turkish-accented speakers were perceived as less competent than standard German/Swedish speakers.

Accent-based discrimination exists around the world, and social norms against language-based discrimination seem to be weaker than against racial or gender discrimination, making nonstandard-accent bias more acceptable and less noticed than other types of discrimination (Giles & Watson, 2013; Ng, 2007). For example, in a list of 105 potential targets of prejudice, nonstandard-accented speakers were not even mentioned (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002).

Whereas there is a substantial body of research on preventing biases against people based on their skin color, ethnicity, or gender, to the best of our knowledge, there is only one study that proposed an intervention to reduce accent bias (Weyant, 2007). Participants heard an audio recording of a native speaker of American English or of a Spanish-accented English speaker. Participants in the experimental group were additionally asked to take the speaker's perspective. Participants who took the perspective of the Spanish-accented speaker evaluated her better than the control group. Whereas this is an encouraging finding, the result could be influenced by social desirability effects: Participants in the experimental group could easily understand that they were expected to evaluate the Spanish-accented speaker positively. A study with a procedure less prone to social desirability effects would be advantageous.

One possible intervention strategy could be testing whether giving people an unobtrusive first-hand experience in speaking a foreign language changes their evaluations of nonstandard speakers. This should be easily applicable because all people

can become a nonnative speaker in a foreign language. Indirect evidence suggesting that a first-hand intervention may be effective comes from behavioral priming research, showing that even subtle manipulations such as priming a stereotype can change people's behavior (for a review, see Bargh, 2006). Other research has shown that first-hand experiences can change one's attitudes and behavior (Brookhuis, de Waard, Steyvers, & Bijsterveld, 2011; Cotugna & Mallick, 2010; Spence, Poortinga, Butler, & Pidgeon, 2011). Furthermore, recent research on self-other overlap and intergroup relations reveals that the perception of one's own behavior can strengthen the associations between the self and an out-group and, by closing the gap between the other and the self, reduce bias toward the out-group (Kawakami et al., 2012; Phillips et al., 2011). Moreover, a study on experience taking showed that imagining that one is a character in a narrative and simulating that character's thoughts can change one's self-judgments and attitudes; an in-group as compared with an out-group character elicited higher levels of assuming his or her identity (Kaufman & Libby, 2012).

Based on the above considerations, we designed an intervention to reduce biased evaluations of Turkish-accented speakers. Given evidence on the role of domain-specific experience (e.g., Benet-Martínez, Lee, & Leu, 2006), we designed a linguistic intervention. However, we tested whether an experience with a foreign accent in speech evoked by using one language generalizes to other languages.

In the intervention a confederate spoke to German participants in the experimental group in English while they were waiting for the experiment to begin. That way, those participants had a conversation in a nonnative language. Participants in the control group were not approached but also needed to wait before entering the lab. We assumed that for the participants in the experimental group the conversation would be quite difficult and engaging, and they would notice that the other person is similar to them (see Kaufman & Libby, 2012). Consequently, they should evaluate other nonstandard speakers more positively. Replicating previous research (Hansen, 2012), we expected that in the control group Turkish-accented speakers would be evaluated as less competent than speakers with a standard German accent. In the experimental group, in which participants spoke with a confederate in a nonnative language, we expected this difference to be diminished or eliminated. Furthermore, we predicted that participants in the experimental group would evaluate Turkish-accented speakers as more competent than would participants in the control group.

Method

Participants

Participants were 46 undergraduate students from a German university. Excluding data of four nonnative German speakers, the final sample consisted of 42 participants (15 men, $M_{\text{age}} = 22.88$, $SD = 4.48$), 21 (7 men) in the experimental group and 21 (8 men) in the control group. Participants were compensated with either €1 and a chocolate bar or partial course credit.

Materials and Procedure

Participants arrived at the laboratory individually or in pairs. All participants were asked to wait for a moment in the hallway. Control group participants arriving alone most often used their mobile phone, and those arriving in pairs talked while waiting. A Caucasian female confederate approached participants in the experimental group and asked in English for help (i.e., finding the way to the library and soliciting information where to store her backpack in the meantime). Participants from the same population ($N = 16$) who took part in a pilot experiment could not indicate whether the confederate was a native or a nonnative English speaker. Most of the participants came alone, but if they were in pairs, the confederate took care to engage both of them in the conversation. The conversation lasted about 2 minutes and concluded with the confederate thanking participants for their help. After leaving, the confederate recorded participants' stress level exhibited during the conversation (scale: 1 = *relaxed* to 3 = *nervous*).

In the laboratory, participants were seated in front of a computer screen and asked to imagine that they were helping in a recruitment process at their workplace and that they received phone calls from eight job candidates. Participants were asked to listen to all candidates (four with a standard German accent and four with a Turkish accent in German) and evaluate them on several traits. To eliminate the influence of confounding factors, we chose voice samples that were similarly attractive and pleasant, as well as typical for their respective group (Hansen, 2012, Chapter 2, Experiment 2a and 2b). Moreover, each candidate only said the same short sentence that opened the conversation and thus was ambiguous regarding their task-competence level. As the main dependent measure, we used a short version of the competence scale (Asbrock, 2010; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) with the items *competent*, *competitive*, and *independent* ($\alpha = .91$; scale: 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*). We also asked for hiring recommendations with a question: *Would you employ this candidate?* (scale: 1 = *definitely not* to 7 = *definitely yes*).

At the end, participants answered a few demographic questions and questions about their amount of contact with ethnicities different from their own, number of friends and acquaintances of other ethnicities, and a question about their accent strength in English. Participants' possible suspicion was assessed by funnel debriefing. Finally, they were fully debriefed and asked not to talk about the experiment; they were given their reward, thanked, and dismissed.

Results

No participant suspected that the confederate who approached them was part of the experiment. Furthermore, from the confederate's observations, for all participants the situation of speaking English was engaging and at least a bit difficult.

To examine the effect of the intervention on evaluations of job candidates' competence, we conducted a 2 (accent: German vs. Turkish) \times 2 (group: experimental vs. control) mixed analysis of variance that yielded an interaction effect of accent and

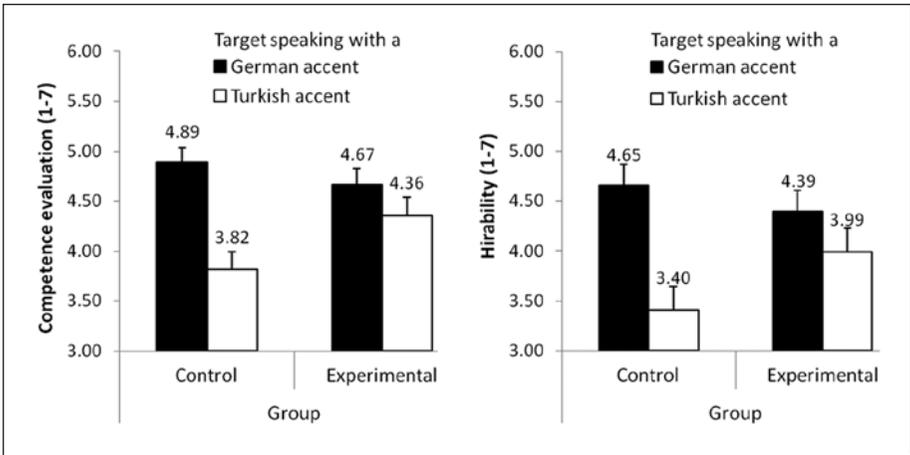


Figure 1. Mean competence (left) and hirability (right) evaluations by target's accent type (German, Turkish) and condition (control, experimental–speaking English).

Note. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

group, $F(1, 40) = 4.87, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .11$ (see Figure 1). Participants in the control group perceived Turkish-accented speakers to be less competent than standard-accented speakers, $F(1, 40) = 24.45, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .38$, but this effect was reduced among participants who experienced the intervention, $F(1, 40) = 2.77, p = .10, \eta_p^2 = .06$. Furthermore, participants who spoke English before the experiment perceived Turkish-accented speakers as more competent than those participants who did not speak English, $F(1, 40) = 4.02, p = .04, \eta_p^2 = .09$. Both groups evaluated standard-accented speakers similarly, $F < 1$. The results confirm our hypotheses and show that the intervention was effective in reducing bias against Turkish-accented speakers.

The pattern of results was similar on hiring recommendations (see Figure 1), interaction effect: $F(1, 40) = 2.80, p = .10, \eta_p^2 = .07$. The control group evaluated standard-accented speakers as significantly more hireable than Turkish-accented speakers, $F(1, 40) = 12.23, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .23$, but the experimental group did not, $F(1, 40) = 1.28, p = .26, \eta_p^2 = .03$. Furthermore, the experimental group perceived Turkish-accented speakers as somewhat more hireable than did the control group, $F(1, 40) = 2.90, p = .09, \eta_p^2 = .07$ (for standard-accented speakers: $F < 1$).

We conducted regression and moderation analyses to explore whether differences between participants could have interacted with the intervention and influenced the evaluations of the competence of Turkish-accented speakers. Neither contact with people of different ethnicities than one's own, number of friends or acquaintances of other ethnicity, nor participants' self-reported accent strength in English interacted with the intervention, nor did they influence evaluations (all B s $< \pm .10, t$ s $< \pm 1$). However, for the experimental group, participants' level of stress during the conversation (as judged by the confederate) tended to predict perceptions of competence of Turkish-accented speakers, $B = -.39, SE = .34, t(19) = 1.83, p = .08$.

Discussion

The present experiment demonstrated that bias against nonstandard-accented speakers can be prevented by an intervention that places the evaluators in the shoes of the evaluated. Participants who before the experiment spoke in a foreign language did not discriminate against nonstandard-accented speakers, whereas participants in the control group did. In a short intervention that people were not aware of, we showed similar effects to previous studies on attitude change based on effort- and time-consuming own-experience interventions (Brookhuis et al., 2011; Cotugna & Mallick, 2010). Although accent-based discrimination is widespread, to the best of our knowledge, this is only the second intervention preventing biased evaluations of nonstandard speakers.

A possible mechanism responsible for the effectiveness of the intervention could be a process related to self–other overlap. Participants who spoke a foreign language with a confederate were for a moment nonnative speakers and could feel that it is difficult to speak a foreign language. Consequently, they could feel closer and more similar to foreign-accented speakers and evaluate them better than participants who did not speak in a foreign language. This mechanism would be similar to perspective taking (e.g., Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). However, in perspective-taking research participants consciously imagine what would happen “if I *were* you,” whereas in the present case having a first-hand experience allows them to feel that “I *am* like you.” A shortcoming of our study is that we did not ask participants for their perception of the confederate as an in-group member. A way to test the role of the in-group–out-group perception of the confederate would be to ask about it, but also to have a control condition where participants would give the requested information in their native language. Future studies could also be conducted with a foreign-accented English speaker and explore the relations between own and confederate’s English proficiency and evaluations of nonstandard speakers.

Another possible mechanism underlying the intervention could be cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance theory postulates that people change their attitudes after behaving in a way discrepant with their original attitude (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Visser & Cooper, 2003). In the proposed intervention, cognitive dissonance may have arisen when participants who thought that nonstandard speakers are less competent than standard speakers spoke with a foreign accent themselves. This inconsistency may have led to a psychological discomfort and attempts to remove this dissonance by changing participants’ attitudes toward nonstandard speakers.

There can also be another possible explanation of the positive evaluation of Turkish-accented speakers. It could be that meeting a confederate speaking English evoked a diversity norm or a positive perception of ethnic diversity in Germany. To address this possibility, we conducted a similar study ($N = 65$) with a foreign-looking Chinese-German confederate. With her we did not replicate the results shown with a Caucasian confederate (interaction accent \times condition, $F < 1$, control group: $M_{\text{standard}} = 4.79$, $SD = 0.70$, $M_{\text{accented}} = 3.93$, $SD = 0.66$; experimental group: $M_{\text{standard}} = 4.79$, $SD = 0.80$, $M_{\text{accented}} = 3.90$, $SD = 1.15$). Furthermore, in that study participants’

perception of cultural diversity in Germany did not influence their evaluations of Turkish-accented speakers ($B = .11$, $SE = .11$, $t = 1.00$, $p = .32$). This suggests that the mechanism of the intervention is not related to evoking perceptions of diversity. Furthermore, it might suggest that the mechanism is not speaking English *per se*, as this should have the same effects regardless of the confederate. Rather, it seems that the person with whom one is speaking and how the conversation unfolds influences the process and subsequent evaluations of the target speakers. It also strengthens the experience-taking self–other overlap explanation, as in those studies participants identified less with an out-group character and did not change their attitudes as they did when they identified with an in-group character (Kaufman & Libby, 2012).

Although the described intervention was clearly effective, a potential confound of the observed effect could be a difference in mood, with the control condition evoking boredom and the experimental condition evoking positive mood and higher self-esteem due to helping someone. However, our findings rather suggest that a high stress level during the conversation lowered evaluations of nonstandard speakers. We did not measure the mood of control participants, but in the experiment with a foreign-looking confederate, participants who spoke English, declared higher levels of stress than control participants. Future studies are needed to examine the conditions under which the intervention is most effective.

It is possible that the mechanism we discovered is more general than described. Whereas it is often concluded that domain-specific experience is needed to attain cognitive flexibility in a particular domain (e.g., Benet-Martínez et al., 2006), some researchers argue that an experience does not need to be domain-specific in order to evoke cognitive flexibility and rejection of stereotypes (Crisp & Turner, 2011). Similarly, it could be that the current intervention prevents biases against other discriminated groups. In other words, possibly the effect of a linguistic intervention generalizes to nonlinguistic discrimination. It would also be interesting to explore (in another setting) whether speaking a less prestigious foreign language than English would cause better or worse evaluations of nonstandard speakers (see Schoel et al., 2013). Further studies should also delineate which processes are responsible for the effectiveness of own-experience based interventions.

The current research could be adapted to be applicable in practice. For example, diversity training could include an exercise of speaking in a foreign language and also listening to one's own speech in a foreign language. Such exercises would extend and transpose the current intervention to a meta-cognitive level. It is, however, possible that there are boundary conditions of this intervention, such as stress caused by listening to one's own speech, or making the process reach awareness.

The current research is only the second intervention preventing bias against nonstandard-accented speakers. It is also the first study using such an intervention technique. We hope that it will provoke more research addressing possible interventions against the discrimination of nonstandard speakers. More generally, we think that there is a need for more own-experience based interventions: After all, actions speak louder than words.

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Author Biographies

Karolina Hansen is an assistant researcher at the Polish Academy of Sciences. Her research interests are in the fields of social psychology, sociolinguistics, and intercultural psychology, and include topics such as language and accent attitudes, stereotyping, gender-fair language, linguistic biases, and intercultural differences in social cognition.

Tamara Rakić is a lecturer at Lancaster University, UK. In 2011-2012, she was a *Visiting Scholar* at University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research interests include the influence of accents on person perception and categorization and relation between language and social identity.

Melanie C. Steffens holds the position of full professor for Social and Economic Psychology at the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Koblenz-Landau (since 2013). Her research interests comprise implicit and explicit attitudes and stereotypes of social groups, social categorization and impression formation, in addition to memory phenomena.