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## It's Not *What Was Said* - But *How It Was Said*

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## It's Not *What Was Said* - But *How It Was Said*

### Abstract

#### Key Findings

- Individuals chose a favorable outcome for a new company, new product, or new employee significantly less often after hearing advocating messages from nonnative accented speakers as opposed to from speakers with standard American accents.
- What's more, those individuals who hold a stronger pro-American bias are even more likely to approve of its content when spoken by American Speakers who do not speak with a foreign accent. Those with low pro-American bias showed no such choice preference.
- Non-standard accented messages may violate expectations regarding business norms and may therefore be distracting to listening. Although recent research by Huang and colleagues (2013) suggests that individuals with nonnative accents may be passed over for promotion because of stereotyping regarding ability or competence, there was no support for this theory in this research.

### Keywords

accents, bias, outcomes, promotion

### Comments

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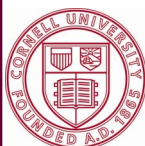
# IT'S NOT *WHAT* WAS SAID — BUT *HOW* IT WAS SAID

## Key Findings

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- Non-standard accented messages may violate expectations regarding business norms and may therefore be distracting to listeners. Although recent research by Huang and colleagues (2013) suggests that individuals with nonnative accents may be passed over for promotion because of stereotyping regarding ability or competence, there was no support for this theory in this research.

## Topic: What Effect Does Pro-American Bias Have on Accent and Choice?

The impact of accents may be especially influential and wide ranging given the rapid movement of the world toward internationalization and globalization (Friedman, 2005). Employees around the globe are increasingly expected to interact with others who speak in a wide variety of accents, as many large corporations now have production or sales facilities in other countries (Friedman, 2005). Even in America, more and more foreign employees are joining the workforce (Stalker, 2000). Indeed,



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as the populations of the United States and other countries around the world become more ethnically diverse (Fackler, 2009; Johnston & Packer, 1987; Kemnitzer, 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006; Wohland, Rees, Norman, Boden & Jasinska, 2010), the potential effects of accented speech become increasingly important to understand.

Both employees and managers are continually required to make choices in their work environments. For example, employees and managers may have to choose whether or not to support a colleague's opinion during a meeting, whether to begin making purchasing plans after hearing sales pitches, whether to accept a negotiated deal, or whether to offer a job opportunity to one employee over potential others. The workplace choices that employees encounter during the work day may all be influenced by the accented (or nonaccented) speech of those they interact with.

Moreover, accents might not only influence organizational executives: They may also impact how outsiders react to an organization's communication. Company messages are important means by which companies try to influence the choices of potential investors, business partners, consumers, and job applicants (Gatewood, Gowan & Lautenschlager, 1993; Rynes & Barber, 1990; Tellis, 1988; Westphal & Zajac, 1994; Zajac & Westphal, 1995). If accented messages affect choice, then foreign-owned and internationally-based companies may face an initial disadvantage in the United States merely because of the accents the owners and spokespeople might have.

### Results

In three experimental studies, individuals chose a favorable outcome for a new company, new product, or new employee significantly less often after hearing advocating messages from nonnative accented speakers as opposed to from speakers with standard American accents.

The study was meant to look at nonnative accentedness on decision making – both an increasingly important yet understudied phenomenon. Three experimental studies investigated whether messages about a company delivered in nonstandard-American-accented speech influenced choice:

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- In Study 1, individuals were more likely to choose a company or a product when a message was read in a standard American English accent than when the message was delivered with a Mandarin Chinese or a French accent.
- In Study 2, expectations regarding company messages are violated when speakers have accents and that, in turn, expectation violations mediated the relationship between accent and choice.
- In Study 3, the findings of the effect of accent on choice was replicated using Indian and British accents. Implicit pro-American bias moderated the indirect relationship between accent and choice as mediated by expectation violations. Theoretical and practical implications of this topic of study are discussed.

## Data

**Study 1:** In the first sample, 453 undergraduate students participated, ranging in age from 18 to 52 years old, with a mean age of 20.4. Of the sample, 52% were male. Sixty-eight percent of participants identified themselves as Caucasian, 6% as African-American, 8% as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 13% as Hispanic and the remainder did not indicate their race. All participants were native American English speakers. The second sample consisted of 115 students ranging in age from 18 to 28 (mean age of 20 years). Forty-six percent were males and 84% identified themselves as Caucasian. The remainder identified themselves as African American (4%), Asian/Pacific Islander (5%) and Hispanic (7%). Again, all participants were native American English speakers.

**Study 2:** The sample for this study consisted of 201 college students at a large Southeastern university, all of whom were native American English speakers and who correctly identified the accents as being non-American. Fifty percent were female and the average age was 20 years (ranging between 18 and 30). Seventy two percent identified themselves as Caucasian, 12% as Hispanic, 9% as African American, and 7% as Asian.

**Study 3:** One hundred and seventeen students enrolled in a large required undergraduate management course at a southeastern university participated in this study which was conducted online. Participants ranged in age from 18-46, with an average age of 21. Of the sample, 31% were male. Seventy percent of the

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participants identified themselves as Caucasian, 5.6% as African-American, 8.5% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 9.2% as Hispanic and 6.3% did not indicate their race or selected “other.” All participants were native American English speakers.

### **Why do Nonnative Accents Have a Negative Effect on Listeners?**

In Study 1, participants who listened to a message describing a new coffee shop or a new computer-help book in an American accent chose the new company significantly more frequently than participants who heard the messages spoken in a Chinese or a French accent. They were also more than three times as likely to choose to give their personal information to the new company. Notably, these results were not limited to social products such as a coffee shop which may be affected by cultural biases. Instead, the same accent effects were found using the more culturally neutral product of a computer book.

The results clearly show that nonnative accents have a negative effect on the choices listeners make. However, they do not explain *why* nonnative accents have this effect. This question was explored in Study 2 using the expectancy theory perspective (Burgoon & Miller, 1985). Non-standard accented messages may violate expectations regarding business norms and may therefore be distracting to listeners. Individuals' expectations are disrupted when they hear messages given by nonnative accented speakers, which in turn explains the reduced choice of products advocated by individuals who spoke with a nonnative accent.

Study 3 showed that when participants heard a job applicant with a non-American accent advocate for a job opening, those with a higher pro-American bias were less positive about the accented candidate (see Figure 1). The listeners with a higher pro-American bias recommended the non-accented candidate significantly more frequently than they did the accented applicant, while no such a choice preference was exhibited by their low pro-American bias counterparts.

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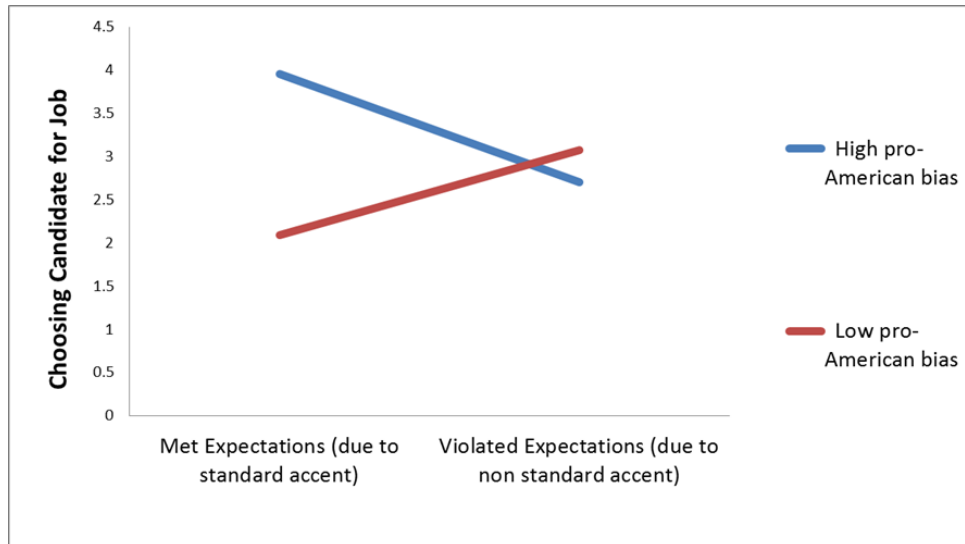
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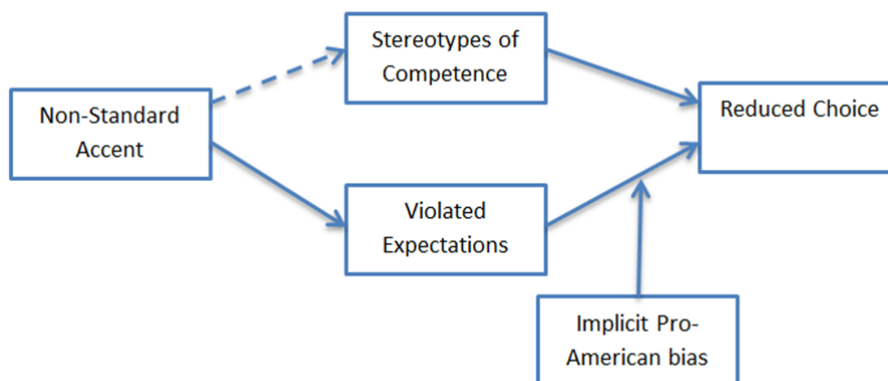
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**Figure 1**



Individuals holding a stronger pro-American bias were more likely to make a choice consistent with the American speaker than those individuals who hold a lower pro-American bias (see Figures 1 and 2). The incorporation of implicit bias in empirical work on management topics may hold promise for future research on workplace diversity topics, especially in the realm of accents and national origin which is an understudied yet increasingly growing workplace reality (Johnston & Packer, 1987; U.S. Census Bureau, 1999).

**Figure 2**



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## Future Research

A focus on the reduction or elimination of accent-driven effects in managerial contexts is a promising avenue for future research. Even though recent research by Huang and colleagues (2013) suggests that individuals with nonnative accents may be passed over for promotion because of stereotyping regarding ability or competence, the researchers found no support for the competence stereotyping explanation for reduced choice.

Future research should try and determine whether and under what conditions stereotyping may indeed link accents to choice or other management criteria to help us ascertain the effects of accentedness in the workplace and to help to curb the possible negative effects. For example, the longevity of a personal relationship might attenuate the effects of accent-based stereotyping. When coworkers and managers have ongoing positive interactions with individuals who speak with nonnative accents, those accents might replace one's expectations of a "good" American employee.

Future research on accentedness would be well served in examining mediations which could reduce the negative effects of accents on choice and decision making. For instance, research by Derwing, Rossiter, & Munro (2002) noted that cross-cultural awareness training which included instruction on attitudes toward and comprehension of accented speech tended to make students more confident about interacting with accented speakers and in their ability to understand nonnative accents.

The three studies used relatively formal, audio forms of communication—recorded business advertisements and recorded candidate "pitches"—which may be more strongly affected by norms and thus expectation violations, leading to negative choice decisions. Similarly, although listeners were presented with photographs of the "speakers" of the message in Study 3, the hypothesis was not tested in a live interaction between speaker and listener.

As such, future research may help to determine if our findings would manifest

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in situations that involve extended face-to-face interactions. Research suggests that contact with racial minorities, for instance, can reduce prejudice (under certain conditions; Binder et al., 2009; Sigelman & Welch, 1993). Would this hold true regarding nonnative accented speech?

Another promising avenue for future work would be the effect of regional American accents, since research on accents suggests that bias against accented speakers occurs both within dialects of the same language and across language groups (Giles, 1972; Luhman, 1990; Papapavlou, 1998).

### **The Takeaway**

- Companies may be able to better manage expectations among their managers and staff to prevent this sort of bias in choice. This is due to the fact that expectation violations (and not necessarily stereotypes) are operating.
- There are serious implications for global organizations resulting from the fact that choice appears to be negatively influenced by listening to nonnative accented messages. For example, will individuals choose a product or company if it has been presented in a nonnative accent?
- Choice decisions are important for both organizations, in general, and for managers in particular. Investors, potential business partners, consumers, and job applicants make choices among multiple available companies, and therefore companies continually work to ensure that their own products, goods, services, or the organization itself are the ones selected. Spoken messages are one of the major communication methods used in companies to influence individual listeners in sales pitches, negotiations, recruitment gatherings, company meetings and group brainstorming and decision-making situations. Accents can affect the choice process in similar ways as described in these studies.
- As the U.S. population becomes more ethnically diverse (Johnston & Packer, 1987; U.S. Census Bureau, 1999), employees will need to increasingly interact with individuals who speak English with a wide variety of accents. Thus, accents may even affect the business transactions of companies who only deal domestically within the U.S. For instance, company decision-makers often must listen to a number of sales presentations from suppliers or consultants before signing contracts.

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- Accent has significant effects on important managerial outcomes. Including nonnative accents in theories concerning organizational diversity is both timely and important.

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