

Are You a Native Speaker?

The role of ethnic background in the hallucination of foreign accents on native speakers

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Rubin (1992) found in a perceptual study that speech perception may be influenced by social stereotypes, leading individuals to perceive an accent that does not even exist. Rubin found that, regardless of the actual background of the speaker, college students were more likely to perceive speech as “accented” when they believed the speaker to be Asian rather than white. I will report on an expansion of Rubin’s study, presenting different levels of perceived accents based on the speaker’s supposed ethnicity and first-language background, in order to determine how the presumed nationality of the speaker influences the perception of a hallucinated accent.

Monolingual undergraduates were asked to rate the accents on three international graduate student instructors based on recordings which included a short lecture by each instructor. All of the actual speakers were native American English speakers who a separate group of undergraduates had individually judged as having no accent. However, the participants were informed of the speakers’ assigned false nationalities: French Canadian (male), Korean (female) and Mexican (male). Results show an agreement with Rubin’s study, that listeners hallucinate an accent in the recordings of the native English speakers, simply because they believe they are listening to a non-native speaker. Moreover, the supposed nationality of the speaker was decisive in determining the extent of the perception of an accent. Of the three identities, the French Canadian identity is least likely to be marked as having the strongest accent in his English. Accordingly, more than half of the participants thought that the French Canadian identity had the least accented English. The Mexican and Korean identities show similar results to one another, but are both much more likely to be perceived as having a stronger accent than the French Canadian identity. These results suggest that white American listeners are less likely to hallucinate an accent in the speech of French Canadians than either Mexicans or Koreans. This may be because the listeners are under the impression that Mexicans and Koreans are more different from themselves than French Canadians. Thus, I propose that in educational contexts, the nationality and native language of the instructor may automatically lead many students to perceive the speaker to have a low English proficiency, regardless of how good the instructor’s English may actually be. In addition, it is also possible that in the United States, instructors of European background may face less problems associated with their status as non-native speakers of English.