Attitudes of English L1 Adults Toward Foreign Accents of Women in the Workplace

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Little research has been conducted on attitudes toward foreign accents, especially in females. This study examines monolingual attitudes about female foreign accents in the United States and their effect on employment decisions. It expected the language attitudes of adult monolingual English speakers toward L1 English-speakers to be positive and attitudes toward L2 English-speakers to be negative, resulting in the survey participants rating accented voice clips as low-level employees and not suitable for a job promotion. The findings show most L1 English females being rated positively and the L2 speakers being misidentified, resulting in mixed ratings.

A number of studies have been conducted on attitudes toward foreign accents as well as the discrimination that occurs in response to foreign accents. While much of the previous research demonstrates this discrimination, information on attitudes in the workplace is sparse. Furthermore, research done more specifically on female foreign accents is largely nonexistent. This study examined attitudes of monolingual English speakers toward female foreign accents in the United States and how they affect employment-related decisions. The information on male foreign accents is beneficial but knowing the full scope of attitudes toward male and female foreign accents can lead to the implementation of more comprehensive employer training and hiring practices in the US. As a result of this study, we expected to find that the language attitudes of adult monolingual English speakers toward female foreign accents are negative, resulting in linguistic prejudice toward them in the workplace. We anticipated L1 English speakers to be rated as high-level employees and the ones best suited for a job promotion compared to foreign-accented L2 English speakers.

Literature Review

In order to understand existing research and the implications of this study, a few definitions must be clearly delineated. First, *language attitude* or *linguistic attitude,* used interchangeably for the most part, is defined as "evaluative reactions to different language varieties" (Dragojevic, 2017). Those reactions may be positive or negative; attitudes toward standard dialects or accents are often positive, while attitudes toward anything that deviates from the perceived standard are often negative. According to the work of Marko Dragojevic in 2017, language attitudes come as a result of the cognitive processes of social categorization and stereotyping. These attitudes are developed early in life, with preference toward a speaker's own linguistic community. Although these attitudes are formed early, they generally assimilate toward the preferences of the dominant linguistic community and are changeable in response to a number of factors, including sociality, politics, and the media (Dragojevic, 2017).

The second term to understand is *linguistic prejudice*. This is colloquially defined as implicit bias based on the way an individual speaks. *Linguistic prejudice* holds a more negative connotation than *language attitude* because linguistic prejudice may lead to

linguistic discrimination or intolerance. Linguistic prejudice may occur in response to varied dialects and accents within or without the borders of an individual's home country. The type of linguistic prejudice we will examine in this study relates to foreign accents as perceived by those living in the US. Prejudice in response to accents is correlated with "heightened stereotype threat" within conflict situations in the workplace (Kim et al., 2022).

General Language Attitudes

In their 2012 thesis at William Paterson University of New Jersey, Yelena Kremenchugsky ran a study on the effect of listener background on perceptions of foreign accent severity (how heavily accented the speech is). This study effectively measured aspects of language attitude and prejudice. Among the varieties of speakers and listeners, they examined monolinguals' perceptions of foreign accent severity and concluded that in accordance with previous research, monolinguals rated foreign accent severity as much higher than bilinguals or multilinguals did (Kremenchugsky, 2012). According to Marko Dragojevic and Goatley-Soan's recent findings in 2022, a hierarchy often emerges in perceptions and evaluations of foreign accents, at least when it comes to Americans. Their research on American attitudes toward nine non-Anglo foreign accents revealed that the less stigmatized the accent, the higher they were rated in status, favorability, and comprehensibility (Dragojevic &Goatley-Soan, 2022). These studies helped us determine that listener background matters in foreign accent perception.

We then dove into research done on the effect of foreign accents in the world of American employment. Dragojevic's 2017 findings that language attitudes tend to assimilate to the preferences of the dominant linguistic community seem to be confirmed in Janin Roessel's 2019 study involving bilinguals. In this study, German L2 English speakers gave job-related presentations in English and were evaluated by other German L2 English speakers. Those who presented in strongly accented language were judged as worse job candidates than those who presented with more native English-like language, even though they were dealing with their own German-English accent (Roessel et al., 2019). Although most studies conclude foreign accents definitely have an effect on workplace perceptions and evaluations, Aaron Cargile's study published in the Journal of Employment Counseling in

2000 revealed outlying results. Individuals with nonstandard (Mandarin Chinese) American accents were not judged any more favorably or harshly for high-status job eligibility than those with standard American accents. The study concluded that foreign accents do not always matter in employment evaluations (Cargile, 2000). In such contexts, English language attitudes seemed to fall in favor of a standard American accent.

In response to the specific gap in research about the effect of foreign accents on the English job application and hiring processes, Megumi Hosoda conducted an experiment in 2010 which found Dragojevic-like language attitude hierarchies among those evaluating job applicants. French-accented and standard American-accented applicants fared much better than Japanese-accented applicants (Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2010). Further study by Hosoda et al. in 2012 found that Hispanic-accented job applicants were rated less suitable for jobs and promotions compared to standard American-accented applicants. These studies gave way to further insights on monolingual American attitudes toward foreign accents in the workplace.

Foreign Accents of Women in the Workplace

Although there have been numerous studies describing general language attitudes toward foreign accents, specific information on monolingual English L1 adult attitudes toward foreign accents, especially accents of women in the workplace, is rather sparse. A 2006 study on the effect of accent and dialect on employability seems to be the only existing study that used all female job applicants. Furthermore, the study is not recent, and the purpose of the experiment was not to focus on gender as an effect (Carlson &McHenry, 2006). In this study, we examined the general language attitudes of English L1 adults in order to determine their language attitudes toward foreign accents in women and whether those attitudes contribute to linguistic prejudice in the workplace. We anticipate attitudes toward female foreign accents will be negative, resulting in significant linguistic discrimination relating to high-status job eligibility and job promotion.

Methodology

This study examines monolingual attitudes on female foreign accents in the United States and how they affect employment-related decisions. To test the hypothesis that attitudes toward female foreign accents would be negative, we decided to conduct a survey in which the participants judged three female speakers based solely on short voice clips. We selected a control speaker from the western United States with L1 English, a speaker from Russia with L1 Russian and L2 English, and a speaker from Mexico with L1 Spanish and L2 English. All of the selected speakers are women between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-eight who are attending Brigham Young University. No personal information or images were divulged for each speaker, to limit bias based on visual appearance. This selection criterion of controlling all nonlinguistic variables was an essential component of measuring attitudes towards the auditory samples to accurately represent potential linguistic prejudice against foreign accents among females in the workplace. It was important to control as many factors as possible to ensure accurate analytical results. The samples we received in time for the survey exhibited a difference in proficiency between the two L2 speakers. The L1 Spanish speaker has a much less noticeable accent than the L1 Russian speaker, so it is possible that the ultimate decision could be biased towards the L1 Spanish speaker since she sounds more similar to a native English speaker. We will address how we combated this difference later in this section.

Data Collection

The survey was intended for native English-speaking adults (ages eighteen and older) and was accessible for approximately forty-eight hours. We designed this semi open-ended survey using Qualtrics. Specifically, the survey consisted of three major sections: (1) participant demographic information, (2) perception of speakers, and (3) professional assessment of speakers. It was intended to take about five to seven minutes with the primary goal of gathering as much information as possible about potential linguistic prejudice towards women with foreign accents.

Following the questions gathering demographic data, each respondent was provided with two speech samples from each speaker. Each of the speakers was provided with the same instructions, as follows:

> For each of the prompts below, please record yourself using the iPhone Voice Memos app (or a similar high quality recording device). Please limit the recordings to 10 seconds or less for each prompt and record them in 2 different files. Do not share your actual name or personal information in the file. Note: We want you to sound as natural as possible by speaking like you normally would. Do not try to alter your normal patterns—just be you! Feel free to make up a name for your boss or team member if that makes it easier.
>
> Recording 1: You are a starting-level employee within a large corporation. Your boss asked you to prepare a report on your team's performance this month. In 10 seconds or less, let your boss know that you will finish the report by tonight.
>
> Recording 2: You are a team manager within a large corporation. In 10 seconds or less, ask a lower-level employee to prepare a report about the team's performance this month.

The participants in the survey were asked to determine if the speaker sounded like a low-level or high-level employee, where they believed the speaker to be from, and how comfortable they would feel having that speaker as their boss. We implemented randomization in the survey to reduce bias toward one speaker over another. At the end of the survey, the participant was then asked to select which speaker they think sounded the most qualified for a promotion and why. The voice samples were included again in this section for clarity.

To account for differences in pronunciation proficiency between the L1 Spanish and L1 Russian speakers, we thought it essential to ask where the participant believed the speaker to be from. We decided it was less important for the participants to know exactly where the speakers were from and more important to analyze the attitudes towards other cultures, as demonstrated in a study concluding that preference toward varieties of English largely depend on perceived nationality or ethnicity, not just perceived accent (Yook & Lindemann, 2013). We thought that explicitly stating the speaker's country of origin would produce less honest results due to potential shame regarding a lack of preference for specific cultures. However, it is still possible that the results were

biased due to the proficiency difference or that the results do not reflect attitudes towards the actual cultures of the speakers. These biases were accounted for in the actual analysis of the survey results.

We both posted the link to the survey on our social media platforms and sent the link to family members and classmates. Although we sent the survey to as many people as possible, it was still not a completely randomized, unbiased sample. The target population was adults living all over the United States whose native language is English. Ideally, this sample would include adults of all ages from different parts of the US, but this data was mainly composed of college-aged individuals (72.31% of participants) and more women than men (69.23% of participants). We experienced some difficulty expanding the demographic because of our personal social circles, so this should be taken into account in the analysis. A total of sixty-five individuals took the survey, and after cleaning the data (removing invalid or incomplete results, non-native speakers, underage participants, etc.), the sample size was sixty. Despite the potential bias and limited size, this sample can still be analyzed to aid in understanding general attitudes towards women with foreign accents in the workplace.

Analysis

To analyze L1 English speakers' attitudes towards female foreign accents, we downloaded the full Qualtrics report to Microsoft Excel. We systematically organized the dataset by eliminating unnecessary headers, removing columns with potentially identifying information (IP addresses, locations, etc.), condensing the data into fewer columns, filtering the results, and deleting the incomplete or invalid responses. We created additional sheets within the Excel document for each of the speakers, which included the following columns: L1 English employment level, perception as a boss, and perceived country of origin; L1 Russian employment level, perception as a boss, and perceived country of origin; L1 Spanish employment level, perception as a boss, and perceived country of origin; winner of the promotion; and the reason why they were selected. Each page only included the rows of participants that selected each candidate (A = L1 English Speaker, B = L1 Russian Speaker, or C = L1 Spanish Speaker) as a winner.

The organization helped us to facilitate comparing the counts for different speakers and types of participants, which helped us to understand the perception of females with foreign accents in the workplace. Our main focus was the final section regarding which speaker sounded the most qualified for a promotion. To best understand participant attitudes towards the speakers, it was important to also take the answers to their perceived level in the business and country/region of origin into account for each speaker. We also analyzed the vote count per speaker according to the number of languages spoken by the participants. From our analysis, we concluded that perceptions, rather than sure knowledge, of the survey participants would most influence the result of which candidate was chosen to receive a promotion.

Results

The results of the survey were different than predicted to some degree. While the L1 English speaker received the most votes for the promotion with twenty-four votes (40%), the L1 Spanish speaker was a close second with twenty-one votes (35%). The L1 Russian speaker received fifteen votes (25%), trailing the other two speakers. This distribution can be observed in Figure 1.

The Russian speaker received less votes overall than both of the other speakers. To account for the potential bias from proficiency difference between the two L2 English speakers, we first analyzed the participants' perceptions of each speaker's country of origin. All sixty survey respondents were able to identify the L1 English speaker's country of origin: the United States. (Note: All sixty of the participants who sent in complete results were from the United States, so it is unsurprising that there was no trouble in identifying the native speaker.) The other two speakers were much harder for the participants to identify. We decided to compare the perceived country for each L2 English speaker, split between those who did not select that participant as the candidate for the promotion and those who did select that speaker.

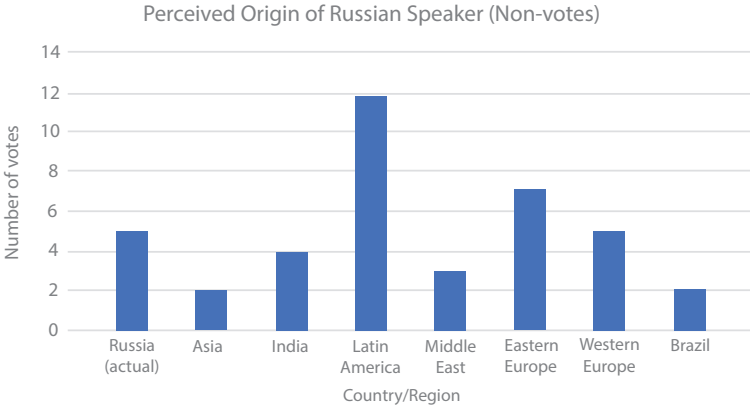## Nationality Perception of L1 Russian Speaker

We will first discuss the results for the Russian speaker. Overall, forty out of forty-five participants who did not vote for the Russian speaker answered where they believed her to be from. The results are found in Figure 2.
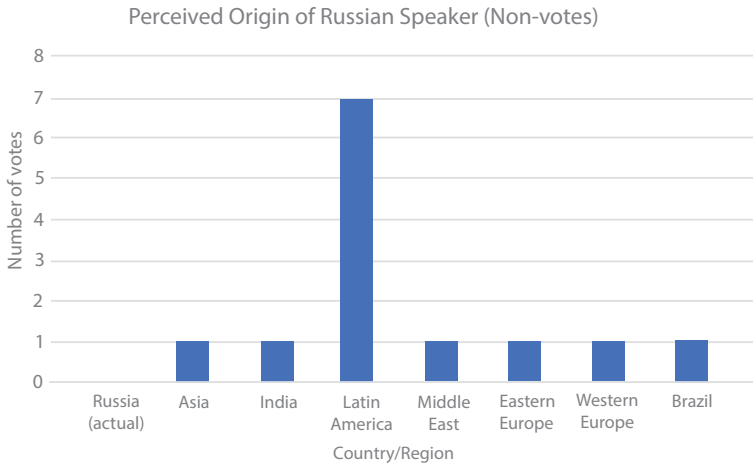
Figure 1

Which Speaker Deserves the Promotion?

Figure 2

Perceived Origin of Russian Speaker (Non-votes)

Figure 3


Perceived Origin of Russian Speaker (Non-votes)

Note: The scales for each of the graphs are different, according to total vote number differences.

Interestingly, only five participants were able to identify the L1 Russian speaker as a native Russian. The majority of non-voters believed that she was from Latin America (twelve) or Eastern Europe (seven), possibly revealing a bias against accented speech from these regions, although other areas of the world are also represented.

The participants who selected the L1 Russian speaker as the most qualified candidate had different perceptions of where she was from. Thirteen out of the fifteen voters' perceptions are represented in Figure 3.

Seven out of the thirteen voters represented in Figure 3 believed that the speaker was from Latin America, and just one voter guessed each of the other regions. Interestingly, none of the voters believed that she was from Russia, and just one guessed Eastern Europe (the closest geographic guess). Although these participants voted for the L1 Russian speaker, their perception of her shows a preference for speakers from Latin America rather than Russia. It is possible that there is a bias against Russian accents, although American adults might not be very proficient in identifying this accent. It would be interesting to see any differing results if the national identity of the speakers had been shared.

Figure 4

Perceived Origin of Spanish Speaker (Non-votes)
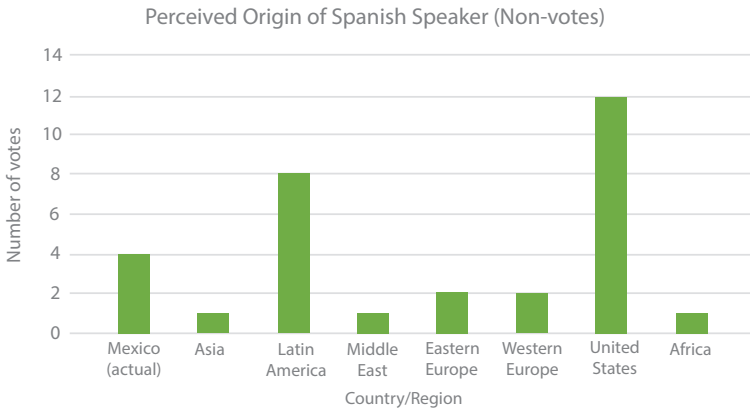
## Nationality Perception of L1 Spanish Speaker

The L1 Spanish speaker's perceived nationality was less straight-forward. Only thirty-one out of thirty-nine participants who did not vote for the L1 Spanish speaker included their prediction of her country of origin. The results are exhibited in Figure 4.

Four of the participants were able to identify this speaker as a native Mexican, although eight guessed either the region of Latin America or other countries within the region. Interestingly, 38.7 percent of participants guessed that this speaker was also an L1 English speaker from the United States. Some participants guessed that she was from a region in the US with high levels of Hispanic populations, whereas others believed that she was utilizing a Southern US variation. It is possible that this speaker's high proficiency level combined with the high number of Spanish speakers in the US led participants to believe that she was from the US.

The participants who voted for the L1 Spanish speaker had a different distribution for the perceived nationality. Interestingly, there was more variation and more incorrect guesses for those who voted for this speaker (nineteen out of twenty-one participants answered the prompt in the survey). The distribution is evident in Figure 5.

Of the nineteen voters, eleven believed that the speaker was from the United States or Western Europe. It is unsurprising that

Figure 5

Perceived Origin of Spanish Speaker (Votes)
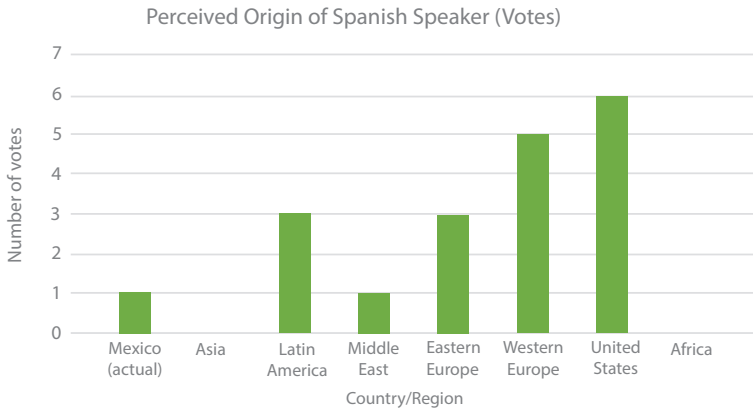
these participants selected this speaker, as other studies have indicated that Americans rate American and Western European accents highly. Only one participant was able to correctly identify this speaker as a native Mexican, and three participants were close with guessing other Latin American countries. It is possible that this data suggests a preference for American or European speech over Spanish-accented speech, as perceived by the listener. It would be interesting to see a study with a larger sample population and observe if the results are similar.

Perceived Employment Level

After comparing the perceived nationalities of each speaker, we decided to compare the ratings of perceived employment level per speaker. We were curious to see if the perceived employment level of each speaker influenced the participants' ultimate decision of who deserved a promotion. We split the dataset according to the selected speaker and took counts for how many of those participants rated each speaker as a high-level versus low-level employee. As we will refer to Figure 6 as part of this analysis, it is included on the next page.

The participants who voted for the L1 English speaker and L1 Russian speaker followed a similar pattern. Both sets of voters rated their chosen speaker as a higher-level employee when compared with the other speakers. For the L1 English speaker, seventy-five percent of participants believed her to be a high-level employee, whereas only 45.8 percent thought the L1 Russian speaker was high and a mere 41.7 percent thought the

Figure 6

*L1 English (L1E), L1 Russian (L1R), L1 Spanish (L1S), High-level
(High), Low-level (Low)*

A (24)

L1E High	L1E Low	L1R High	L1R Low	L1S High	L1S Low
18	6	11	**13**	10	**14**
0.75	0.25	0.458333	**0.541667**	0.416667	**0.583333**

B (15)

L1E High	L1E Low	L1R High	L1R Low	L1S High	L1S Low
5	**10**	***12***	3	7	**8**
0.333333	**0.666667**	***0.8***	0.2	0.466667	**0.533333**

C (21)

L1E High	L1E Low	L1R High	L1R Low	L1S High	L1S Low
7	**14**	10	**11**	9	***12***
0.333333	**0.666667**	0.47619	**0.52381**	0.428571	***0.571429***

L1 Spanish speaker was high-level. For the L1 Russian speaker,
eighty percent of participants believed that she was a high-level
employee, with only 33.3 percent of voters believing the L1
English speaker to be high-level and 46.7 percent thinking
that the L1 Spanish speaker was high-level. It is interesting
to see a similar trend between both types of participants.
Those who selected the L1 Spanish speaker exhibited a differ-
ent pattern. These participants believed that all of the speak-
ers were low-level employees. About 57.1 percent of voters
thought that the L1 Spanish speaker was low-level, 66.7
percent believed that the L1 English speaker was low-level,
and 52.4 percent thought that the L1 Russian speaker was
low-level. Although these participants selected a speaker they
believed to be low-level as the candidate for the promotion,
they still followed the pattern of rating the non-selected speakers
as low-level. These results were different than expected but do
not contradict general patterns exhibited by those who selected
the other candidates.

Participant Linguistic Background

Figure 7

Speaker Votes: Split by Monolinguals, Bilinguals, and Multilinguals
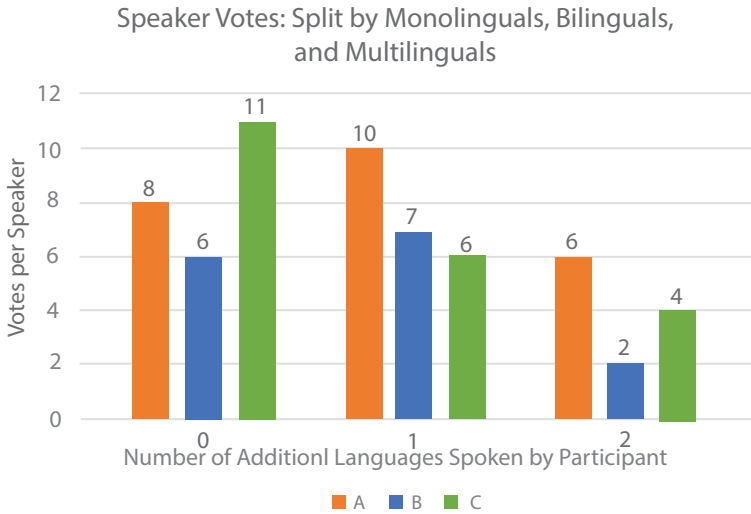
Note: There were a different number of participants in each group, so it is important to note general trends rather than compare exact amounts of votes per speaker.

Finally, we analyzed the distribution of votes per speaker according to the linguistic background of the participants. We separated the participants into the categories of monolinguals, bilinguals, and multilinguals. The results, found in Figure 7, were fascinating.

We would expect a more consistent pattern between the three groups; however, it appears that language experience could have an impact on the perception of foreign accents. Monolingual speakers were the only group that favored the L1 Spanish speaker over the L1 English speaker. Perhaps the monolingual group's limited experience with other languages also limited their ability to discern accents of high-proficiency L2 English speakers. Only twenty four percent of this group voted for the lower proficiency L2 English speaker, compared with forty-four percent voting for the higher proficiency L2 English speaker.

The bilingual group favored the L1 English speaker (43.5%) over the L2 English speakers. Interestingly, this group was more split between the L2 English speakers, with one vote higher for the L1 Russian (30.4%) over the L1 Spanish speaker (26.1%). It is possible that this group's experience with one additional language helped them to identify foreign accents and influenced their overall decision.

Interestingly, the multilingual group exhibited a different pattern than the bilingual group. While they still favored the L1 English speaker (50% of votes) over the L1 Russian (16.7%) and the L1 Spanish (33.3%) speaker, there was a preference for the higher proficiency L2 English speaker over the lower proficiency one. It is surprising that as experience with languages increases the preference for the L1 English speaker also increased for this sample. It is important to note that the limited sampling size could exhibit some bias in these results, so a study with a larger sample would be ideal.

Conclusion

The study aimed to examine L1 English monolingual adult attitudes towards female foreign accents in the United States and how these attitudes affect employment-related decisions. We expected to find English speaking monolinguals in the US rating L2 English speakers as low-level employees versus high-level ones, and for them to select the L1 English speaker as the employee best suited for a promotion. Our findings were complex and only partially proved our hypothesis. Forty percent of participants voted the L1 English speaker most suitable for a job promotion, and of those who voted them most suitable, seventy-five percent rated them as sounding like a high-level employee.

Rather than just rely on potential prejudice based on accent alone, we decided to include perceptions of nationality in our study, as these contribute largely to language attitudes (Yook & Lindemann, 2013), and found that all participants were able to correctly identify the L1 English speaker's US nationality, but the majority of participants were not able to correctly identify the L2 English speakers' nationalities. This misidentification of nationality implies a participant's lack of observation or education. If a participant is unable to correctly identify a speaker's nationality based on linguistic samples like the voice clips used, it can be assumed that some aspect(s) of their linguistic abilities or skills are skewed, resulting in a linguistic bias or prejudice.

Because our study utilized a limited sample size and background, further study using more participants of various ages is essential to understand the true implications of this study. Based on the participants' perceptions of each speaker's origin, we do not truly know monolinguals' language attitudes toward specifically Russian and Mexican accents in females, but it is valid to say that

perceptions of nationality do affect language attitudes. A listener's linguistic background may also have an effect on language attitudes.

Further study on attitudes and prejudices toward female foreign accents in the U.S. could lead to the implementation of more comprehensive employer training, hiring practices, and individual bias awareness. As females in the US are not paid the same amount as males, further related study may work to potentially decrease the wage gap or result in otherwise equal treatment and less discrimination toward females and female L2 English speakers in the workplace. As a result of conducting this study, we can reaffirm Yook and Lindemann's conclusions that perception of speaker nationality contributes to linguistics prejudice to a greater degree than knowledge of speaker nationality does. This study confirmed that linguistic attitudes and/or personal linguistic backgrounds affect employment-related decisions such as ranking or determining employee status and awarding promotions. Bringing this knowledge of linguistic attitudes and bias to the workplace may lead to gradual elimination of negative linguistic attitudes or at least bring awareness to how negative attitudes may affect work-related decisions impacting women in the workplace.

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