

Listen, Perceive, Discriminate



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Introduction

Perhaps my biggest takeaway from the job search recruiting process so far has been the importance of making a good first impression. Employers can infer and determine so much just from a quick interview with a candidate – or so they think they can. According to Goldman Sachs Human Resources, the interview begins as soon as you walk into the room. Employers immediately judge the candidate's appearance, body language, physical poise, facial expression, composure, and most relevantly for the purpose of this empirical study: language. But what if we were to conduct a phone interview and took all of these other facets away? Interviewers could really only make an impression based on content and language the candidate speaks. But can the vernacular or dialect we speak disrupt the content and change the way people perceive us? The following empirical study analyzes the patterns revealed by results when respondents are asked to describe how they perceive three people based solely on the sound of their voice.

Inspirational Literature

In the case of *Language and Linguistics on Trial: HEARING RACHEL JEANTEL (AND OTHER VERNACULAR SPEAKERS) IN THE COURTROOM AND BEYOND*,” we analyzed how the jury discriminated against leading prosecution witness Rachel Jeantel. Jeantel, an African American Vernacular English (AAVE) speaker, spoke on behalf of her close friend Trayvon Martin against George Zimmerman, but her case was disregarded for incomprehensibility. She was discriminated against, seen as an invalid source of testimony. While clearly her ethnicity was visible to the jury, courtroom and public, it was ultimately her voice and vernacular that people discriminated against. Her thick AAVE variety with potential

Caribbean influence served as a medium for discrimination and xenophobia. This is a prime example of white privilege because her case would have been different if she spoke more of a Standard American English (SAE). What people forgot is that we all speak the same language, but not everyone follows the standard that many prescriptivists require. This case fundamentally inspired my idea for my linguistics major project and empirical study. I began to look into other instances in which people have lost credibility for the variety of English they naturally speak.

R. Douglas Fields' article "Why do Southern Drawls Sound Uneducated to Some?" touches up on similar cases of discrimination regarding those who speak English with a southern accent. On one side, research indicates that statistically people perceive those who speak with a southern accent as more friendly. However, we know this cannot necessarily be true nor determinate, and another key stereotype affiliated with the southern accent is less educated and intellectual. An interesting study performed by Katherine Kinzler and Jasmine DeJesus at the University of Chicago surveyed children in northern Chicago and in a small town in Tennessee. When children from both regions were asked which voices sounded "smarter" or "in charge," the children from Chicago favored the Northern (SAE) speakers, while the southern children were generally indifferent.

As soon as I read these results, I thought about our discussion in class about language in media and the way media has taught children to discriminate. A vast majority of educational television series the United States feature leading people who speak a very standard English. Even in media not targeted for educational purposes – such as Disney and Pixar – we are seeing more and more leading characters, heroes, and heroines portrayed speaking SAE, while villains are often given accents or nonstandard varieties of English. In fact, I've seen this first-hand in my favorite Pixar film, *Cars*. Particularly, my favorite character growing up was the "hillbilly"

tow-truck, Mater. But until studying linguistics and discrimination, I had never realized the relationship between his personality and the deep southern accent he speaks with. Here we see a subordination of the southern dialect of English at play. He's meant to be seen as uneducated and stupid for comic relief, and his extremely unique southern voice sticks with children forever. However, children might affiliate his stupidity with his deep southern accent, while the "good guys" in the movie (Lightening McQueen and Sally Carrera, who also happen to be an idolized Racecar and luxurious Porsche) speak a perfectly standard English. This demonstrates the issue of prescriptivist adherence to a standard English, exemplifying how media is teaching our youth to discriminate.

Empirical Study Methodology

In light of the concepts above studied in class and independently, I sought out to see how college students, even at a liberal school like the University of Michigan, perceive people based on the variety of English they speak. I thought about the common stereotypes and forms of linguistic discrimination I've studied and seen first-hand: African-Americans and lower socioeconomic status (SES), southerners and lower intellect and education, and White privilege and superiority. Then, three friends came to mind, all of whom completely counteract those stereotypes:

- Speaker I: An African-American male who speaks SAE from the suburbs of Washington DC. Originally from Detroit, but moved to the Mid-Atlantic area at age 10. He is fluent in two languages and is studying International Security, 3.2 GPA and Middle Class SES

- Speaker II: a white, Jewish male from Birmingham, Alabama with a thick southern accent. He has declared Pre-Medicine and a 3.8 student. Graduated top 5% of his class in high school.
- Speaker III: A white, Jewish male a predominately black Philadelphian area who speaks AAVE. He is majoring in Molecular Biology, minoring in Computer Science and has declared pre-medicine. 3.6 student and Upper-Class SES.

Honestly, if I didn't know these people so well and I were to hear their voices, I wouldn't be able to guess easily what ethnicity and origin these three speakers have. I supposed one way to guess would be to listen to their voice and "generalize," which often leads to discrimination. This concept fascinated me, and I wanted to see how other people would respond.

First, I had each three of my friends (speakers) recite one of my favorite poems, "The Law of the Jungle" into a voice memo. I had all three of the speakers recite the same poem instead of letting them improvise because I wanted to control for content. Now the experiment would be solely based on the sound of voice and variety. I did not tell them the basis of the experiment until after they spoke, ensuring that each speaker would speak most naturally and without thought into the voice memo. Each recording was 18 seconds long, and each speaker's name is kept entirely confidential.

Next, I surveyed 20 University of Michigan undergraduate students randomly on the central campus Diag. None of the participants had ever taken a linguistics class. I told each participant that their responses would remain entirely confidential, and I asked them four questions:

1. "What ethnicity do you perceive this speaker as?"
2. "What demographic do you perceive this speaker originating from?"

3. “How do you perceive this speaker’s SES?” (lower, middle or upper class)
4. “Do you have any other comments or perceptions?”

I recorded their responses in an excel spreadsheet, allotting one tap for each speaker. Data is shown in Appendices A, B and C, corresponding respectively to speakers I, II and III described above. I analyzed the data looking specifically for patterns between the ethnicity, demographic, and socioeconomic class perceived, summarizing key relationships and analysis briefly on the far right of the spreadsheet in cell 7F of each appendix.

Hypothesis

I had three variables for my study, who completely countered the stereotypes I had observed in the Rachel Jeantel case, R Douglas Fields’ article about southerners and education, and in Disney and Pixar films. As a result, I figured that the majority of people would perceive speaker I as black middle/lower class, speaker II as white and southern lower class, and speaker as white upper class, all based on the stereotypes studied this semester. I was curious to hear some of the additional comments about each speaker people may add if they were to have any.

Results

All data followed what I had hypothesized. Referencing Appendix A, we see that 80% of respondents perceived Speaker I (the white AAVE speaker) as black. Also following my hypothesis, 60% of respondents perceived lower class, and only one out of 20 respondents perceived upper class. Such findings may parallel the concept of AAVE, incomprehensibility and disregard of credibility that we’ve seen in the Rachel Jeantel and Trayvon Martin case. Data for

perceived demographic fluctuated greater than those of ethnicity and SES, as we see 35% responded Midwest, 30% South, 25% Northeast, and the remaining 10% West Coast.

Referencing Appendix B (Speaker II, the white southern accent speaker), we can see that 90% of respondents perceived a white male, and 70% of respondents perceived a southern accent. 83.3% of the other respondents perceived a Midwestern accent, but cumulatively 75% of all respondents specifically perceived white ethnicity and southern origin. In addition, 60% of respondents perceived Lower Class SES. Only one respondent perceived Upper Class SES. This pattern reveals the classic example of discrimination towards English speakers with southern accents on the basis of intelligence and education, as seen in numerous cases such as *Mater in Cars*.

Lastly, referencing Appendix C (Speaker III, the black SAE speaker), 85% of respondents perceived a white male. Not a single respondent perceived Speaker III as lower class, which echoes white privilege, perceived superiority, and a praise of Standard American English. 60% of respondents perceived Northeast, 20% perceived Midwest, and the remaining 20% perceived West Coast. Only three of the 20 respondents successfully perceived the speaker as black.

Speaker I additional comments and perceptions:

- “Sounds uneducated” (Responded black, Midwest, and Lower Class SES)
- “Metro inner-city Detroit” (Responded black, Midwest, and Lower Class SES)
- “Inner-city” (Responded white, Midwest, and Lower Class SES)

Speaker II additional comments and perceptions:

- “Sounds less educated” (Responded white, Southern, and Lower Class SES)
- “Less than average education?” (Responded white, Southern, and Lower Class SES)
- “Sounds less educated than the previous speaker” (This respondent listened to Speaker III first. Order was mixed up: Systemic error. Responded white, Midwest, and Lower Class SES)

Speaker III additional comments and perceptions:

- “Sounds very educated and articulate” (Responded white, Northeast, and Upper Class SES)
- “Sounds smart” (Responded white, Midwest, and Upper class SES)
- “Sounds intelligent”

Discussion

The most prominent yet most concerning patterns of discrimination that showed in this empirical study’s results was AAVE and Lower Class SES, Southern accent and Lower Class SES, and SAE and Upper Class SES. While these results and additional comments may have several implications, the underlying issue is that it proves that people glorify the standard of our language, SAE. The majority of respondents unknowingly heard the standard language in the memo, and then affiliated the standard with superior education and intellect, and higher class SES. Similarly, the vast majority of respondents – without any declared background in linguistics – match the AAVE and southern accent with lower education level and lower class SES.

I interviewed each speaker, sharing the data and research with them after I had accumulated these results. None of the speakers had any background in linguistics, but after I walked them through the concepts of language variation and standardization, the results interested but also concerned them. They felt discriminated against – the work they’ve put into education and the success that their parents worked for go unrecognized because of the way their voices sound relative to a standard.

Why is it that we glorify a standard language? We’ve seen this phenomenon throughout history, dating back to colonialism in America. All the way back to when the Wampanoag tribe in present day New England, when European imperialists infiltrated their territory and colonized the area. Anyone that didn’t speak their standard variety of language was subordinated and stripped of many equal rights. This concept of white privilege and standard language still exists today to a much less overt degree, but continues to be a problem leading to covert racism, and it’s up to us to do something about it.

Conclusion and Call to Action

In summary, the patterns of language discrimination, standardization and variance that we’ve studied in and out of class were present in the results of my empirical study. Specifically, the three speakers selected countered common stereotypes affiliated with their respective vernaculars: African American Vernacular English, English with a southern accent, and Standard American English. In the Trayvon Martin case and in R Douglas Fields’ article we see how AAVE and southern accent speakers are discriminated for being less educated and intelligent, and results of this study paralleled the findings of these articles. One limitation of this experiment is that I did not analyze the concept of gender as a potential medium for

discrimination in language. I would be very interested to conduct a similar experiment that finds and analyzes such results, but for the purpose of this experiment, we successfully see the presence of white privilege and favor for SAE.

So next time we hear someone speak, let's not base anything on their dialect or accent. Talk to them, learn about their past, their culture, and where their accent derives from. Linguistics is still a young field of study, and as it progresses, I am confident that society will become more aware of the impact of language and discrimination and less prescriptivistic and praiseful of a Standard American English.

Appendix A

Respondent	Perceived Ethnicity	Perceived Demographic of Origin	Perceived Socioeconomic Class	Other Comments	
1	Black	Midwest	Lower-Class	Sounds uneducated	
2	Black	Midwest - Detroit	Lower-Middle Class		
3	Black	Midwest	Middle-Class		
4	Black	South	Lower-Class	inarticulate	
5	Black	Northeast	Middle-Class		
6	Black	Northeast	Lower-Class		
7	Black	Northeast	Upper-Class		Key Data Analysis
8	Hispanic	Northeast	Lower-Class		Only 1/20 respondents perceived upper-class
9	Latino	Los Angeles	Lower-Class		Yet 80% of respondents perceived Black
10	Black	Midwest - Detroit	Lower-Class		
11	Black	Midwest - Detroit	Lower-Class		
12	Black	South	Middle-Class		
13	Black	Northeast	Middle-Class		
14	Black	Midwest	Lower-Class		
15	Black	South	Lower-Middle class		
16	White	Midwest - Detroit	Lower-Class		
17	Black	South	Middle-Class		
18	Black	South	Middle-Class		
19	Latino	Northeast	Lower-Middle Class		
20	Black	South	Middle-Class		

Appendix B

Respondent	Perceived Ethnicity	Perceived Demographic of Origin	Perceived Socioeconomic Class	Other Comments	
1	White	Northeast	Middle Class		
2	White	South	Lower Class	Sounds less educated	
3	White	South	Middle Class		
4	White	South	Middle Class		
5	White	Midwest	Lower Class		
6	White	South	Lower Class		Key Data Analysis
7	White	South	Middle class		Only one responder perceived Upper Class
8	Black	Midwest	Upper Class		60% perceived Lower Class
9	White	South	Lower Class		Yet 75% perceived White and Southern
10	White	South	Lower Class	Less than average education?	
11	White	South	Lower Class		
12	White	South	Lower Class		
13	White	South	Lower Class		
14	White	Midwest	Middle Class		
15	White	Midwest	Lower Class	Sounds less educated than previous speaker	
16	White	South	Middle Class		
17	White	South	Lower Class		
18	Black	South	Lower Class		
19	White	South	Lower Class		
20	White	Midwest	Middle Class		

Appendix C

Respondent	Perceived Ethnicity	Perceived Demographic of Origin	Perceived Socioeconomic Class	Other Comments	
1	White	Midwest	Upper Class		
2	White	Northeast	Upper Class	Sounds very educated and articulate	
3	White	Northeast	Middle Class		
4	White	Northeast	Middle Class		
5	White	Midwest	Upper Class		
6	Black	Northeast	Upper Class		Key Data Analysis
7	White	Northeast	Upper Class		85% of respondents perceived White
8	White	Northeast	Upper Class		Yet 0% of respondents perceived Lower Class
9	White	West Coast	Upper Class		
10	White	Northeast	Middle Class		
11	White	Midwest	Upper Class	Sounds smart	
12	Black	Northeast	Upper Class		
13	White	West Coast	Middle Class		
14	White	Northeast	Middle Class		
15	White	Northeast	Upper Class	Sounds intelligent	
16	Black	West Coast	Upper Class		
17	White	Northeast	Upper Class		
18	White	Northeast	Middle Class		
19	White	West Coast	Upper Class		
20	White	Midwest	Upper Class		

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