

The effect of speaker L2 English accent on hiring decisions in China

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<https://doi.org/10.36505/TheLinguisticProceedings/2025/16/01/008/000668>

Abstract

The present paper investigates the perceived employability of L2 speakers of English in China. In a perception experiment, 90 China-based L1 Mandarin-speaking participants assessed the employability of speakers represented by audio stimuli on five 5-point Likert scales. Two men and two women were included for each of the three L2 English accents (German, Korean, and Mandarin Chinese). Results revealed that speakers with the German accent were rated higher than speakers with the Korean accent. However, speakers with the Mandarin accent were not rated differently from the other L2 accent groups, supporting the prejudice explanation over the comprehensibility one.

Keywords: accents, employment, linguistics discrimination, language attitudes

Introduction

Accent is a unique way of sound production that reflects where a speaker comes from geographically and socially. It has been demonstrated to serve as a source of stereotyping in employment, with people who speak with a second language (L2) accent, in particular, often rated to be less employable than first language (L1) speakers (e.g. Hosoda et al. 2012). Meanwhile, different L2 accents are not rated in the same way; instead, they display a clear hierarchy. For instance, speakers with Asian accents in English, such as Cantonese and Mandarin (Carlson & McHenry 2006), may receive lower employability ratings and be considered more suitable for low-status, non-customer-facing positions compared to European-accented speakers.

The two main theoretical accounts explain the relative ranking of foreign accents through their processing fluency and listeners' pre-existing stereotypes (e.g., Dragojevic et al. 2020). Processing fluency describes the relative ease or difficulty with which people process information. When a person's speech requires greater cognitive effort, listeners are more likely to evaluate it negatively, which is especially evident in non-standard or unfamiliar accents. Alternatively, listeners may use a speaker's accent to infer the speaker's social group and activate stereotypes associated with that group. Consequently, speakers with non-standard accents may be marked as "other" and devalued.

Although numerous studies have demonstrated the effects of accent bias in the workplace in L1-English-speaking countries, little such research has been

conducted in China. In this paper, we investigate how L2 English accents affect employment-related decisions in the Chinese context.

Methodology

Stimuli

The stimuli came from the Speech Accent Archive (Weinberger 2015), in which speakers read the ‘Please call Stella’ standardized passage in English. The target stimuli included German-, Korean-, and Mandarin Chinese-accented speakers; L1-English-accented stimuli were also included to create a range of accents but do not form the focus on this study. The stimuli comprised four speakers per accent, with an equal number of male and female speakers. Their ages ranged from 25 to 35.

Listeners

Listeners were 90 adult L1 Mandarin Chinese speakers residing in China.

Procedures

The survey was created and deployed using Qualtrics (Qualtrics 2020). In the survey, listeners heard and evaluated each speaker on five 5-point Likert scales that were designed to elicit judgments of the candidate’s potential to become a manager, the candidate’s likeability, the likelihood that the candidate would be recommended for hiring, satisfaction with the candidate’s responses, and the candidate’s suitability for an office job in foreign-invested companies.

Data analysis

We took the average of the ratings on the five scales, as these were highly correlated. Linear mixed-effects models (Baayen et al. 2008) were fitted in R (R Core Team 2024) to test for significance with the employability rating as the dependent variable, speaker accent and gender as the independent variables, and listener and speaker as random effects. Contrasts between accents were checked in a follow-up analysis on the linear model.

Results

Figure 1 presents descriptive statistics of the raw data, showing the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) of the composite employability rating for each accent. The German-accented speakers ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.88$) received the highest employability rating, followed by the Mandarin-accented speakers ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.01$), while the Korean-accented speakers ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 0.99$) received the lowest rating. Variation was similar across all groups, with the Mandarin-accented speakers showing a relatively higher SD .

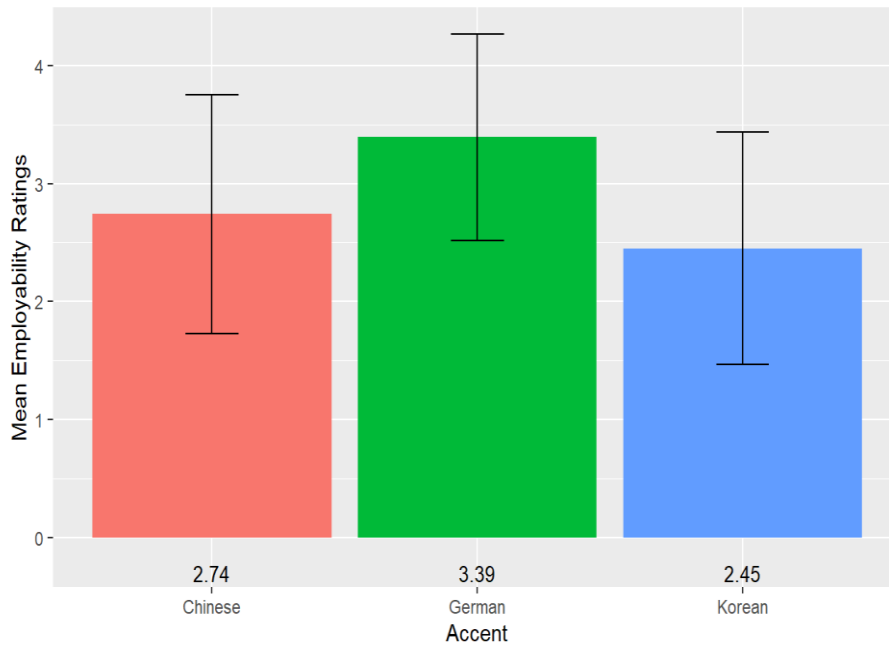


Figure 1. Mean employability evaluations and standard deviation by accent.

Table 1 presents the results of the statistical analysis. A significant difference was found between the German and Korean accents, with the Korean-accented speakers perceived to be significantly less employable. In comparison, ratings for the Mandarin-accented speakers did not differ significantly from those of the other two accent groups. Speaker gender was not a significant predictor.

Table 1. Model-derived Pairwise Comparisons Between Accents.

	estimate	SE	df	t.ratio	p.value
Chinese-German	-0.653	0.287	18.000	-2.277	0.253
Chinese-Korean	0.289	0.287	18.000	1.010	0.909
German-Korean	0.942	0.287	18.000	3.287	0.040

Discussion

The hierarchical pattern of the German and Korean accents in our results aligns with previous findings in L1 English-speaking countries, suggesting that Chinese listeners reflect L1 listener evaluations (Carlson & McHenry 2006). It is possible that phonetic similarities between German and English may enhance the perceived comprehensibility of German-accented English, ultimately leading to more positive judgments. Alternatively, listeners may rely on their ethnicity-based

stereotypes as Asian speakers are often evaluated more negatively compared to speakers from Western backgrounds. However, the data in this study were insufficient to disentangle these two explanations, which requires further investigation. When comparing the Mandarin-accented speakers with the other accent groups, familiarity with the accent did not appear to promote higher ratings despite the fact that both the speakers and the listeners spoke Mandarin as their L1. This rating pattern aligns more closely with the stereotyping explanation (cf. Spence et al. 2024). We conclude that there is an accent-based employment bias in China, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of language attitudes in English as a Foreign Language context.

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