

# Exploring the Effect of Narrators' Accents in Informational Short Films

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Advances in technology have made it increasingly easy to receive information via YouTube and short film clips from around the world. This research examines if a foreign accent has a favorable or an unfavorable effect when materials intended to inform are viewed. Undergraduates in the United States watched a short film about a Latino ceremony wherein the narrator spoke with either a Spanish language-influenced accent or an American accent typical of non-bilingual speakers. Mismatching with expectations, the more standard American voice produced higher ratings of the film's informativeness and of the narrator's knowledge. On the other hand, as anticipated, the standard accent was easier to understand and produced higher recall. Discussion focuses on factors influencing reactions to accents in informational viewing settings, on applications to real life environments, and on approaches to issues related to foreign sounding speech.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen a surge in visual and audio recordings intended to educate or inform (Fitzpatrick, 2012). High school students in flipped classrooms watch YouTube lectures at home, and then complete assignments during lecture. Employees seeking training or certification enroll in online classes, as do college students fulfilling course requirements. Adventurers turn to the Internet for lessons on culture and travel safety. Home repairs often commence after related computer searches for “how to” tips. With the help of technology, students, industry professionals, and consumers can learn from teachers and experts from around the world.

The benefit of accessible information comes with questions about how to best present it. One concern is how viewers respond to instructors or narrators with foreign accents. Different forms of speech may be increasingly prevalent as the proportion of individuals from ethnic subcultures in the United States rises (Colby & Ortman, 2015). In addition, industries ranging from entertainment (Keegan, 2016) to education (Rocheleau, 2017) face pressures to be more ethnically inclusive, with high tech professionals recently pledging \$150 million to diversity programs (Fiegerman, 2016). This research seeks to understand the effect of having accented narration in the increasingly popular realm of informational videos or films.

## LITERATURE

Study findings suggest mixed responses when audience members hear voices different from their own. Media presenters’ (e.g., spokespersons’, narrators’) effects are enhanced when their characteristics match with the content being presented (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990; Kamins & Gupta, 1994). Accordingly, accents that are congruous with the information in an audio clip or program may prompt more favorable evaluations from audience members (Karthikeyan & Ficalora, 2017), as well as heightened perceptions of narrator expertise (Ivanič, Bates & Somasundaram, 2014). Hence, an advertisement for an Australian (Egyptian) drink should have an Australian (Egyptian) spokesperson. Indeed, presumably to increase perceived authenticity, shows filmed overseas use narrators or translators with accents from those areas.

Foreign accents also have the ability to attract attention. For example, the composer of the Cirque du Soleil show, “Kà,” used language sounds from all over the world to appeal to a broad audience (Scott, 2005). Actors and actresses such as the television show *Modern Family*’s Sofía Vergara (who is from Colombia) have become recognizable by their speech.

Other researchers’ findings are not so straightforward. Although accents can gain attention when listeners are in entertainment mode, foreign-sounding speech may have neutral or unfavorable effects for informational-oriented materials (Tomb & Rao Hill, 2014; Fuertes, Potere, & Ramirez, 2002). Distinctions may be due to greater comprehension pressures in learning, as opposed to leisurely, environments. Related work on “fluency” suggests that the perceived ease with which a message is processed

corresponds with how favorably it is evaluated (for a review see Novemsky et al., 2007). Therefore, any extra energy needed to decipher an accent—in addition to any resulting misunderstanding—may influence listeners negatively.

For example, Gill (1994) asked American college students to listen to tape recordings of a teacher who spoke with one of three accents. Perceptions of the instructor were more favorable when the lecture was presented with a familiar North American—rather than a British or a Malaysian—accent. Participants' level of understanding and degree of recall for the material showed the same pattern, with the highest levels on both measures for the North American accent. This outcome mirrors other research in which ethnic congruence (e.g. North American students hearing a North American accent for spoken English) resulted in more favorable evaluations of the speaker (Reinares-Lara, Martín-Santana & Muela-Molina, 2016). Similarly, Lev-Ari and Keysar (2010) asked participants to rate the truthfulness of trivia statements delivered with native, mildly-accented, or heavily-accented speech. The statements were rated as less truthful when delivered by accented versus native speakers. Subsequent participants who were informed of the research topic were able to reduce the credibility gap for mild, but not for heavy, accents.

The mere perception that a foreign speaker's speech is hard to comprehend may affect listeners. Rubin and Smith (1990) played recordings with accented narration and told participants that accompanying pictures were of the speaker. In actuality, the pictures were part of a study manipulation; they depicted either a Caucasian or an Asian woman. The researchers found listeners' expectations—rather than their actual abilities—to understand accented speech influenced evaluations of the speaker. Therefore, even if an individual's speech is understandable, his or her accent may prime listeners to anticipate and to perceive comprehension difficulties, which subsequently could lower their evaluations.

It might seem reasonable to conclude that listeners in information settings have strong preferences for familiar sounding speech. Yet, research by Tomb and Rao Hill (2014) suggests the impact of foreign accents is not always negative and may depend heavily upon the perspective of the listener. Their participants listened to an interaction between a service provider and a customer. The former was competent or incompetent and did or did not have a foreign accent. When participants imagined themselves in the customer role, those in a positive mood who rated the service provider's competence did not distinguish between accents. However, when participants were in a negative mood, they rated the competency of the foreign-sounding service provider lower. In other words, both speaker- and listener-related factors can influence the response to accents.

In short, past work suggests that foreign sounding speech can have beneficial attention-getting effects when audience members are in entertainment mode, yet potentially detrimental consequences when listeners are information-processing mode. However, there remains room to build upon the above-mentioned research by studying accents in settings more congruous with instructional environments. Prior research used materials of limited importance to respondents, who were asked to listen to lectures or trivia

questions to fulfill a research participation requirement (e.g., Rubin & Smith, 1990, and Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010, respectively). While laboratory studies are crucial to establish construct validity, it is worthwhile to test accents in settings with some level of relevance. In this study, the participants listened to materials related to their coursework.

Also, outside of informational settings, research has found that accents that match the message content or topic are beneficial (Karthikeyan & Ficalora, 2017). In contrast, within educational settings the focus has been on the match between the speakers' speech and that with which listeners are familiar (Gill, 1994). This study combines the strategies of content and listener matching for information-oriented materials. Specifically, two accents are used. One matches the content of the program (i.e., a narrator with a foreign sounding Spanish-influenced accent describes a Latina ceremony). The other matches the speech familiar to audience members (i.e., a narrator with a standard American accent describes a Latina ceremony to college students in the United States). The two matching types are merged with the hope of ascertaining if the benefits of content matching carry over to more relevant informational settings.

In addition, in the "accent" studies noted above (e.g., Gill, 1994; Rubin & Smith, 1990; Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010), audio information was presented without the benefit of video, in part to avoid potential biases caused by visual cues (Tomb and Rao Hill, 2014). This research builds upon past work by including filmed segments that correspond with the narrated information. The inclusion of moving images is more applicable to today's environment wherein individuals seek information via lessons filmed for the Internet.

## **Hypotheses**

While some research findings suggest benefits when accents match with presented materials (e.g., Karthikeyan & Ficalora, 2017), conflicting findings (e.g., Gill, 1994) suggest that a speaker with an accent familiar to listeners is more likely to evoke positive evaluations. Mixed results from previous studies suggest a number of hypotheses.

First, the addition of video and the real world setting in this study may reduce the deleterious effects of accents in educational settings. Tomb and Rao Hill's (2014) findings suggest that foreign accents can be especially troublesome in negative affect environments, which can arise when listeners are distracted or frustrated. Providing visuals to aid comprehension may remove the adverse impact of unfamiliar speech.

Furthermore, since the foreign-sounding voice in this study matches with the content of the film (i.e., again, a narrator with a Spanish-language influenced accent described a Latina ceremony), the authentic speech may produce the perception of higher narrator knowledge (Ivanič et al., 2014). A speaker with familiar sounding speech that does not match the film content may not seem as authentic or credible. Since perceived spokesperson expertise enhances evaluations (Till & Busler, 2000) the materials with the matching foreign accent may be deemed more informative.

The relevance of the materials to the participants' coursework may make them more receptive relative to settings in which they were disconnected to the stimuli. Increased attention or elaboration may counteract accent effects similar to the way heightened awareness of foreign speech reduced deleterious processing in Lev-Ari and Keysar's (2010) work.

In short, with visuals to enhance comprehension, a narrator whose accent matches the topic, and heightened personal relevance, the first two hypotheses are proposed.

*H1: When a narrator's accent is, versus is not, congruent with the content, the material will be viewed as more informative.*

*H2: A narrator whose accent is, versus is not, congruent with the content will be perceived as more knowledgeable.*

Although the perception of the material and the narrator's perceived knowledge might be enhanced by a content-matching accent, the complete response to the speaker might not be altogether favorable. Recall that Gill's (1994) participants from an American college had higher recall for presented materials when listening to a familiar (i.e., American) instead of a foreign accent. In other words, exotic speech may enhance ratings of a film and speaker, but in informational settings it may nonetheless still be a distraction that makes deep comprehension seem harder, even when it is not.

Based on Rubin and Smith's (1990) findings that the same speech produced poorer evaluations when the speaker was thought to be Asian instead of Caucasian, it is hypothesized that the expectation of accent effects will influence perceived comprehension, and that the distraction will reduce recall. Similar to Gill's (1994) research, the following are proposed for hypotheses 3 and 4.

*H3: A familiar sounding accent will be perceived as easier to understand than a foreign-sounding accent.*

*H4a: A narrator with a familiar sounding accent will prompt higher recall for the presented material than a narrator with a foreign-sounding accent.*

*H4b: A narrator with a familiar-sounding accent will prompt a higher level of correct recall for the presented material than a narrator with a foreign-sounding accent.*

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Thirty-seven students enrolled in an undergraduate marketing course watched a short film related to their course topic of subcultural ethnic consumer segments. Afterward, all agreed to complete voluntarily a survey for this study. One participant in the standard American accent condition did not grow up in the United States; the results are the same with and without the respondent, who therefore was retained in the analysis.

### Independent Variable

A short film depicting a traditional Latino ceremony was professionally edited for use during lectures on ethnic subcultures. The event, called a “Quinceañera,” celebrates a girl’s transition from childhood to adulthood on her fifteenth birthday. An American actor who is skilled in accents provided the narration. Similar to past work (Karthikeyan & Ficalora, 2017), in this study a “standard” American accent is defined as similar to that heard typically in the media, such as on national news programs. The actor voiced over one version of the film with his standard American accent. A second version of the same tape was voiced over with the actor’s Spanish-language influenced accent. The narrator, who remained unseen, described and explained parts of the ceremony that were simultaneously viewed on tape. In this way any effects of the narrator’s appearance were controlled for in the study, yet fuller visual information was provided compared to audio-only settings.

Results of a pretest involving 23 individuals who were not in the main study provide assurance that the accents sounded authentic. Eleven participants who heard the material presented only with the Spanish-influenced accent claimed that the narrator grew up in Latin America. Of the 12 who heard the more standard American accent, 9 felt the narrator grew up in the United States. One noted that—while the narrator had no foreign accent—a specific geographical area could not be identified. The remaining two claimed the narrator was a native Spanish speaker; that conclusion may have resulted from his authentic pronunciation of a few Spanish words included in the film.

To further ensure the narrator sounded as if he were born and raised in the United States, a second pretest was conducted. Fifteen additional participants listened to a tape recording of the narrator’s natural voice as he read material devoid of ethnic content (i.e., a university’s mission statement). Thirteen (87%) of the listeners identified the speaker as being from North America, one felt he was German, and another thought he was Chinese. As no one felt the narrator was from a Spanish-speaking country, his voice was deemed convincingly standard American for this study.

For this research it was important to have narration that was accented, but not so heavily that comprehension difficulties overwhelmed the participants. A third test was conducted to see if the narrator’s two forms of speech elicited similar levels comprehension. Different from the main study, wherein the films were part of the students’ course content, in this pretest the materials were shown to viewers

unconcerned the content might influence their grades. Thirty-one undergraduates in the United States who were not from the Latino culture saw one of two film versions. One participant whose response was more than three standard deviations from the mean was eliminated (Tukey, 1977). When asked what percentage of the film they understood, the mean level of those who heard the standard American and Spanish-influenced accents were 97% ( $n = 18$ ,  $SD = 5.63$ ) and 93% ( $n = 12$ ,  $SD = 8.39$ ), respectively,  $t(28) = 1.53$ , ns. (As with the first pretest, the use of some Spanish words in the film likely prompted even those who heard the standard American accent to claim less than 100% comprehension.) For the purposes of this study, which utilizes short, five-minute films, the level of comprehension was deemed appropriately high and similar across the narrator conditions.

In sum, a series of careful pretests provide assurance that college students in the United States (a) found one accent familiar sounding and the other foreign sounding, and (b) had high levels of comprehension for both.

Participants in the main study were assigned randomly to viewing rooms, in each of which one version of the short film was shown. Sixteen of the 37 viewed the version with the standard American accent. After watching the tape, the participants responded to related questions.

### **Dependent Variables**

Participants were asked to rate how informative the film clip was on a scale of one (1 = not at all informative) to seven (7 = completely informative). They also rated how knowledgeable the narrator was about the ceremony described in the film (1 = not knowledgeable, and 7 = very knowledgeable), and how easy it was to understand the narrator's voice (1 = not easy, and 7 = very easy). Respondents were asked what they recalled from the film. Two undergraduate students were trained to code the open-ended responses into those that correctly and incorrectly reflected the information content. For example, one participant accurately noted from the short film that, "Both parents walk their daughter down the aisle." Another respondent incorrectly claimed that, "[The birthday girl] passed down a bouquet of flowers to a kid"; in actuality, the birthday celebrant left flowers in front of a statue and gave a doll to a child. Coder agreement was 93%, with discrepancies resolved through discussion.

## **FINDINGS**

T-tests were used to compare the responses of those in the standard American and in the Spanish-language influenced conditions. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the dependent variables. Data analyses reveal no support for the notion that accent congruity with the content was advantageous. In fact, opposite to expectations participants displayed higher evaluations for the version narrated with the standard American, instead of the Spanish-influenced, accent. This occurred when rating (a) how informative the film was (H1),  $t(35) = 2.39$ ,  $p < .03$ , and (b) the narrator's knowledge of the film's topic (H2),  $t(35) = 2.15$ ,  $p < .04$ .

On the other hand, as anticipated based upon the American college research environment for this study (Gill, 1994), participants rated the narrator with the familiar standard American (versus the foreign sounding Spanish-influenced) voice as easier to understand (H3),  $t(35) = 6.60, p < .001$ .

Next, the total number of recalled items was analyzed. As the variances were unequal across cells for this measure, the data were examined using a test for unequal variances (Welch's t-test). As hypothesized (H4a) the total number of recalled items was higher in the familiar standard American than in the Spanish-influenced language group,  $t(25) = 3.82, p < .002$ . However, the mean proportion of correctly recalled items (H4b) does not show statistically significant differences as participants in both conditions had very few recollection errors,  $t(33) = 0.86, ns$ .

*Table 1. Means (standard deviations) for dependent measures*

	Standard American Accent	Spanish-Influenced Accent	t-statistic
How informative is the film clip*	5.56 (-0.63)	4.76 (-1.22)	2.38
Narrator knowledge of film's topic*	6.00 (-0.97)	5.24 (-1.14)	2.15
Ease of understanding narrator's voice*	6.19 (-0.75)	4.05 (-1.12)	6.60
Total number of recalled items*	6.56 (-0.81)	4.38 (-2.44)	3.82
Proportion of correctly recalled items	0.98 (-0.05)	0.96 (-0.08)	0.85

\* Means in the same row differ at  $p < .05$ .

## DISCUSSION

Similar to past work on accents (e.g., Bottriell & Johnson, 1985), and despite the use in this study of both audio and video materials related to the participants' coursework, perceptions were more favorable for information presented without, rather than with, a foreign accent. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the narrator with the Spanish-influenced accent was viewed as less knowledgeable, even though an event from the Latino culture was described. Numerous factors may have affected participants' evaluations. They will now be addressed, as will applications stemming from these findings.

### Factors Influencing Responses to Accents

A possible explanation for the results pertains to the setting in which the accents were heard. As noted above, responses to accents appear to be favorable in informal or

entertaining settings (Fuentes, Potere & Ramirez, 2002; Scott, 2005). In such low involvement environments, peripheral cues associated with spokespersons—such as accents—may have important attention getting effects (Petty, Cacioppo & Schumann, 1983). In contrast, in high involvement information-gathering settings, accented speech may be distracting even in the presence of corresponding visuals. It was thought that the heightened relevance of the material would increase attention. While that may have occurred, instead of helping to overcome the foreign accent it may have increased learning pressures such that unfamiliar speech was perceived as adding difficulty. Support for this notion comes from the “ease of understanding” measure, wherein the means were significantly lower for the Spanish-influenced speech. That discrepancy occurred even though pretest results revealed very high comprehension for the speaker’s voices by those with no pressure to remember the materials.

Another way accents may affect audiences are when biases associated with them frame the content. Some researchers have found that accents are associated with status levels, which in turn can bias the evaluation of the presented material (e.g., Lalwani, Lwin, & Li, 2005). Note that many studies showing status effects were conducted in the United Kingdom (e.g., Cairns & Duriez, 1976; Dixon, Mahoney & Cocks, 2002), where accents have traditionally been a means of evaluating others. Americans, on the other hand, are less skillful at distinguishing different accents (Bayard, Weatherall, Gallois & Pittam, 2001) and are not as swayed by speech patterns traditionally associated with prestige (Gill, 1994).

Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to consider that much of Americans’ exposure to Spanish-influenced accents may come from the entertainment field (e.g., the Sofía Vergara example mentioned earlier). In contrast, Latinos are underrepresented in academic settings (Turner, González & Wood, 2008). Although their presence on college campuses may be increasing, evidence suggests that when members of a demographic group are relatively new in an environment unusually high standards can be used to evaluate them (Anderson & Smith, 2005). Hence, it is possible that the lower evaluation of the Spanish-influenced accent in this study’s educational film was due in part to the lack of experience with university instructors who used the vernacular at the time of this study; the narrator/lecturer with the foreign-sounding accent may not have been taken as seriously. If so, favorable evaluations and framing effects should occur in educational settings as the accent becomes more common.

A third factor hindering the facility with which an accented message is received may be related to the content of the material. While evidence has long attested to the benefits of spokesperson/product congruence (Kamins & Gupta, 1994), Ryu, Park & Feick (2006) found that for utilitarian products, advertisements might be evaluated more favorably when endorsers mismatch a product’s country of origin. This might occur, for example, when an American spokesperson lauds German or Japanese automobiles. “Matched” endorsers are assumed to value highly their culture and are susceptible to reporting bias. Such reasoning somewhat counterintuitively suggests that in the realm of voice overs, a narrator with an accent reflecting a native understanding of the content might

hinder processing. Evidence of this effect comes from the “narrator knowledge of the topic” measure; as noted above, the standard American accent was rated as more knowledgeable even when describing a Latino tradition. Perceived reporting bias based on message content, and related credibility issues, are worth further examination.

### **Implications of This Research**

As noted above, the rise of ethnic subcultures and the pressure of organizations to diversify (e.g., Rocheleau, 2017) suggest that accents—while often unique and attention-getting—will continue to be a concern in educational and business environments. The implications of this work will begin with a discussion of learning settings fitting most closely to the study procedure. A discussion of associated issues faced by those in management and marketing will follow. Then, possible solutions to accent difficulties in real world settings will be outlined.

***Applications in learning settings.*** As this study was conducted in a classroom, the implication for educational settings is that learning may be higher when information is conveyed via familiar accents. For example, when Consumer Behavior instructors use cultural programs to teach ethnic differences, according to this work students may remember more when the speakers have familiar sounding speech.

As mentioned earlier, consumers have many opportunities to learn from videos outside of the classroom. For example, in Hawaii thieves so frequently steal from car rental customers (USA Today, 2006) that a hotel chain felt compelled to use the default in-room television channel to illustrate how drivers are victimized. Vignettes contained actors serving as visitors or thieves, with a narrator warning viewers about vulnerability to car trunk thefts. Although using a voice-over with a Hawaiian accent may have attracted attention, using a more familiar mainland voice perhaps increased comprehension, and ensured that audience members took the clip seriously (e.g., that they did not confuse it with a television show).

Similarly, the results of this study are relevant to business trips. Professionals traveling to some South American cities are warned to make copies of their passports and to avoid carrying substantial cash (Ipacom Travel, 2017). When supervisors require employees to watch videos about overseas safety, according to this work the narration should trade off the potential to become acquainted with foreign accents with more familiar forms of speech.

Other informational applications to this work are unrelated to travel, and instead pertain to the use of voice-over translations/narrations. Educational television programs created, for example, by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), sometimes contain interviews of individuals living overseas. While they speak in their native language, a translator is used to simultaneously voice over their words in English. Sometimes the translators speak with an accent similar to those from the interviewees’ countries, such as when a Turkish interviewee is voiced over by one who speaks English with a Turkish accent. That practice may have evolved for practical reasons, since an individual who

knows both languages may likely be from Turkey and have related speech patterns. In addition, using a foreign-sounding translator may be an attempt to increase authenticity as it makes the program seem more genuinely filmed overseas. Yet, according to this work the translator may provoke lower recall and be evaluated less favorably than one using familiar sounding speech. So, while accents may be helpful on shows that are largely entertainment-oriented, such as some on The Travel Channel, they perhaps should be used sparingly when the primary intent of the program is to inform.

While it may seem obvious to target learners with familiar sounding speech, industry practice does not always parallel this study's finding. British accents, perhaps because they are considered high class, have been heard on safety videos aimed at American passengers. This is contrary both to this research's findings and to Gill's (1994), who again noted that Americans preferred their own accent over that of a British one. Again, for providing information, familiar accents may be best.

***Applications in management settings.*** So far, the implications have focused upon the use of information-oriented recordings wherein students, business travelers, and tourists watch short films, travel shows, or YouTube. The study findings have broader applications in business settings, where multinational corporations have employees from around the world speaking with accents of their home countries even as they communicate in the common language of international business, English.

Managerial settings where this research would be enlightening would include employee training sessions (e.g., those via video, conference call or Skype) that use foreign experts. In addition, tutorials about complex new products or services should be carefully created for multiple markets with a variety of audiences. Similar to educational environments, these managerial settings want to encourage listeners' and viewers' comprehension and retention.

In addition, managerial settings have additional accent concerns in the realm of employee evaluation and retention. A common business example might be a training class where an instructor of established skill has a noticeable accent and does not receive positive teacher ratings from students despite having expertise. Similarly, supervisors who perceive that a subordinate's accent indicates a lack of knowledge might unfairly evaluate that employee, potentially leading to discontent or even lawsuits. Awareness of accent biases, and what triggers them, could lead management to better-informed decisions for combatting related misconceptions. Indeed, some organizations have developed strategies to close gaps caused by accents, as discussed in the "possible solutions" section, below.

***Applications in marketing settings.*** Similar to the way unfamiliar speech can have consequences in supervisor-employee exchanges, accents can have implications for company-consumer relationships. In many circumstances, the expertise of the company agent or service rep is critical to achieving customer satisfaction. Two obvious marketing circumstances arise where accents may affect outcomes.

In advertising and in other forms of communication, one strategy is to use a narrator who conveys information in a manner that mirrors a target audience, since those similar to ourselves are deemed more credible (e.g., Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010). However, in an attempt to sound more knowledgeable to a specific audience through accented speech, the advertiser runs the risk of reducing the credibility of the spokesperson for a larger listening audience for whom the accent may be deemed challenging. This research suggests that perceived difficulties may arise, even when comprehension in actuality can be quite high. The tradeoff of using foreign sounding speech for one global advertisement, or of using resources to create numerous spots with various accents, should be considered.

Similar circumstances can arise in a sales environment. In technical sales, for example, someone with an accent may have excellent training with a product. Concerns may appear when the complexity of the item entails careful audience attention to the presentation. Salespersons, sometimes construed as untrustworthy under the best of conditions, would be operating at an even bigger disadvantage if their accent made them appear less easily understood. A supervisor who clearly understands a salesperson's accent should consider how potential customers would react to it, with strategies to combat both actual and perceived comprehension difficulties.

One final implication of this work involves a setting in which consumers have experienced increased use, that of interacting with offshore customer service call centers. Businesses selling products entailing extensive customer attention should reflect carefully on their choice of international affiliates. This would be especially true, again, for high-risk items like high technology services, or banking. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many customers do not want to speak to foreign operators, which can cause animosity toward the business (Chazal, 2014). Hearing a foreign accent may undermine callers' confidence, especially when attempting to solve an important problem. Even if an agent is knowledgeable and capable, a customer may have the perception of trying too hard to understand the message, and some of the content may be lost even though present. Bringing awareness to circumstances in which accent issues may arise does not mean the issues are insurmountable. Instead, it provides an opportunity to address concerns with potential solutions.

**Potential solutions.** Organizations, speakers with foreign accents, and listeners can all take actions to reduce negative effects of unfamiliar speaking patterns. Companies are increasingly making efforts to combat perceptual stereotypes individuals may not know they hold against those whose speech or background are different. Taking seriously efforts to diversify the workplace, Google offers unconscious bias training workshops, and reviews regularly its promotion and recruiting processes (Fiegerman, 2016). Also, recently the board of governors at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences unanimously approved changes intended to diversify membership (Keegan, 2016). Since research suggests that awareness of biases can help to reduce them (Lev-Ari &

Keysar, 2010), such efforts may heighten the care with which individuals form evaluations of accented speakers, and more generally of those from dissimilar backgrounds with whom they interact.

In terms of helping those with accented speech, for years organizations have sought a number of solutions, including offering English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to improve the skills of non-native speakers (Dutton, 1998). Supervisors of foreign-born colleagues have been encouraged to learn basic phrases such as, "Thank you," and, "Good Morning," so that the work environment is welcoming and comfortable; those efforts may increase employees' desires to improve their language skills and may reduce accent effects that can emerge when speakers are feeling stress.

Companies can support those who speak in an unfamiliar manner with teamwork. Back in the 1940s, baseball fans were accustomed to seeing Caucasian players. Much discussion among sports fans has centered upon the friendship between then-rookie Jackie Robinson and all-star Pee Wee Reese, who were seen together in numerous photos (Cronin, 2013). Their friendship helped fans adjust to seeing an African-American on the field. Similarly, it is in the best interest of professionals to step up on behalf of talented colleagues who might be hindered by accented speech. When making presentations, efforts can be made to refocus listeners away from accents and toward skills. For example, when creating presentations or videos, for signaling and comprehension reasons it might be wise to pair together instructors/narrators who do and do not have familiar accents. This strategy can be used until the focus on the accented speaker revolves around his or her expertise. Similarly, in advertising settings a mixed strategy of one narrator with regional speech, and another with a foreign-sounding accent, might both attract attention and reduce perceived comprehension concerns.

Speakers with accented speech can also make efforts to facilitate communications. Foreign language students know the importance of regular practice. Focusing on sounds and patterns absent in native speech that are present in the learned language is helpful. To illustrate, unlike other languages, English depends heavily on how words end (see Mozaffari, 2013, for a review). Therefore, it can be helpful to those learning English to stress the last sound of names or terms.

Recall that the low comprehension ratings in this study occurred when the narrator was invisible. The evaluations may have been better if audience members had been able to see his appearance, especially if he was dressed in a credible way. Lip reading, conscious or unconscious, might also have been of assistance. In general, visual cues with attire, gestures, and diagrams, may be helpful augmentations to accented speech.

It is worthwhile to note that accents can be sources of pride and add richness to everyday life. Therefore, the suggestion here is not to eradicate them but to adjust speech in situations where it would make others more receptive. Even famous and powerful individuals use this strategy. Historically, Romans have had a difficult

relationship with the papacy. Perhaps not surprisingly, they enjoyed it immensely when Polish-born Pope John Paul II made efforts to speak with their local, city accent (Poggioli, 2005).

Finally, listeners who find accents difficult should try to exercise patience and to understand that communications around the world are getting more diverse. While true comprehension difficulties can arise, old norms that speakers should look or sound a certain way are deemed increasingly antiquated. For example, reportedly South Korea has a history of not wanting Filipinos to teach English there, preferring native English-speaking instructors. Yet, according to some reports, numerous South Koreans annually go to the Philippines to learn English (RP to Korea: Let Pinoys teach English in schools, 2008). In many circumstances, it may be more efficient to overcome some level of discomfort or unfamiliarity in favor of benefitting from an accented speaker's skills.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

In terms of study limitations, it is important to note again that the results pertain to situations in which the narrator is invisible. Having an unseen speaker was seen as building upon past efforts that used sound only or voices with still pictures (Rubin & Smith, 1990). This study examined accents in the presence of simultaneous visual information when controlling for factors related to the narrator's appearance; the setting pertains to the many instances that use voice-over descriptions and translations. However, visible facial expressions that help to convey information may reduce distractions from an accent. Similarly, as noted above, a spokesperson whose appearance (e.g., demeanor and attire) is appropriate for learning environments may help to bridge any lack of familiarity. Third, narration by a known expert may allay concerns about credibility and biased reporting. For these and many reasons, it is worth testing accent effects when the speaker is visible.

Another limitation in this study is the film's length of about five minutes. It did not give audience members much time to adapt to the speaker. Longer exposure to accents might increase comprehension and reduce any deleterious effects. Advertising legend David Ogilvy used this strategy. He wrote (Ogilvy, 1964), "I still die a thousand deaths before every presentation. I am particularly nervous about the impact of my English accent." His solution was as follows. "I therefore open with axioms which nobody can question. By the time the audience grows accustomed to my accent, I launch into more controversial judgments." Research using clips of varying lengths can test audience members' abilities to adapt to less familiar speech.

This work attempts to provide some insights into the impact of accents when combined with moving visuals, and to underscore why such investigations are important in our increasingly diversified personal and professional worlds. Future investigations can benefit from larger scale studies that include more information about the participants' language skills and exposures to different types of speech. Subsequent studies can also test the effect of different types of accents.

As media technology exposes audiences to speakers in different countries, the effect of accents will likely remain a relevant area of study. It is hoped that this research offers new insights, and that it is a starting point with which to explore the effects of speech patterns given the surge in technology that allows for worldwide learning.

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