

Research Review

Accents in Business Communication: An integrative model and propositions for future research

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Abstract

Today's business interactions are characterized by encounters between people with diverse language backgrounds. This article examines how, why and under what circumstances regional or foreign speech patterns affect consumer judgments and reactions. Building on a synthesis of accent research and theories, including the work of related disciplines such as linguistics and social psychology, this article suggests an integrative model that helps to understand accent effects in business contexts. The model disentangles the effects of social categorization, stereotype activation, and speech processing that jointly influence different business-related outcomes. The model highlights three categories of factors that moderate these accent effects, namely sender, receiver, and communication variables. The paper further identifies several issues which remain unresolved and which require continued research. An agenda for future research sets out several propositions to help researchers approach regional and foreign accents in business environments.

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Keywords: Accent; Business communication; Categorization; Speech processing; Stereotypes; Propositions

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Introduction

Globalization is accompanied by a growing mobility of companies, employees and customers. Consequently, the frequency and intensity of business interactions between people from different origins, either intra- or internationally, are steadily increasing (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Henderson, 2005). In the European Union, for example, citizens can both reside and work freely within a highly multi-lingual area. The U.S. has always been a melting pot of languages, and the Hispanic population in particular is growing rapidly. In addition, with recent advances in information and communication technologies, people generally communicate more frequently across the globe. For these reasons, today's globalized business environment is characterized by encounters of people with diverse language backgrounds. People constantly meet speakers with foreign accents and native speakers with different regional accents. When communicating in English or any other lingua franca, these speech variations unavoidably overlie the interaction.

Given that marketers have to face several challenges resulting from these varieties, it is of great relevance to develop a sound understanding of how consumers react to regional and foreign accents. For example, communication errors triggered by the accents of offshore-outsourced call center agents can reduce customer satisfaction and loyalty (Thelen, Yoo, & Magnini, 2011; Wang, Arndt, Singh, Biernat, & Liu, 2013). Similarly, ad designers need to consider consumer judgments about specific accents to select the most effective spokesperson. For example, some advertisers use a German accent in car ads as a means of evoking positive product country-of-origin associations. Recently, a Jamaican accent in a commercial aired during the Super Bowl XLVII sparked a heated debate about discrimination (USA Today, 2013). Accents are not only relevant cross-nationally.

They are omnipresent in business interactions between members of the same country as well. Even in countries that are generally believed to be monolithic, such as the U.S., there are numerous regional accents (e.g., Southern accents). Research demonstrates that regional varieties also affect the outcome of business-to-business interactions, such as encounters between buyers and salespeople (Mai & Hoffmann, 2011).

The outlined examples demonstrate that accents are highly relevant for various fields of business, including language diversity in international management teams, international trade, personal selling, the standardization of advertising campaigns, the marketing of services or the outsourcing of call centers. Owing to the fact that the relevance of regional and foreign accents is rapidly increasing, there has been a recent explosion of research interest in this topic (for a summary see the Appendix). However, the findings are controversial. For instance, most scholars are convinced that speech varieties hamper social interactions. People inherently associate accents with a deficient divergence from the norm. This negative “image” leads to a negative evaluation of the speaker and constrains the business encounter (Davis, 2006; Robinson, 1996). By contrast, some recent studies have also found positive effects of speech varieties (Armstrong & Siew, 2001; Mai & Hoffmann, 2011). Prior research does not help to disentangle the contradictory findings because extant studies have mainly applied stimulus–response experiments in such a way that they contrasted certain accents with the standard language, but did not model the intervening variables (e.g., Lwin & Wee, 2000; Tsalikis, Ortiz-Buonafina, & LaTour, 1992). Even more importantly, research is sparse on moderating factors. In addition, most previous studies are solely based on empirical findings or refer to partial theories only. Consequently, it remains unclear how, why and under what circumstances accents influence consumer behavior.

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