# Chapter Four

# Accent-Based Discrimination in U.S. Higher Education

South Korean mothers know few bounds in trying to give their kids a leg up in speaking English. They play them nursery rhymes in the womb, hire pricey tutors for toddlers, send preschoolers to America to pick up the accent. But now they're even turning to surgery to sort out misplaced L and R sounds, underscoring the dark side of the crushing social pressures involved in getting a highly competitive society in shape for a globalized world. (Choe 2004).

I will use use Derwing, Munro, Peled and Bonotti’s definitions of accentedness and accents. Derwing and Munro understand accentedness as “how different a pattern of speech sounds compared to the local variety” (2009: 478) while Peled and Bonotti define accent broadly as “a set of dynamic segmental and suprasegmental habits that convey linguistic meaning along with social and situational affiliations” (Moyer 2013: 11 in Peled and Bonotti 2019: 414).

The excerpt above is from a Los Angeles Times article that documents the South Korean government’s concern about parents’ efforts to Anglicize their children’s accents through a tongue surgery that is growing in popularity in emerging nations (Choe 2004). This surgery involves snipping the frenulum, or thin tissue that links the tongue to the floor of the mouth (Lu and Horner 2011, 99), a procedure that is supposed to make the tongue longer and purportedly nimbler (Choe 2004), thereby helping to Anglicize the patient’s accent.

Parents who are signing their children up for this surgical procedure are raising the Korean government’s concerns about them violating their children’s human rights (Choe 2004). But these parents desire to see their children settle abroad or secure jobs with foreign companies and they understand that accents have the power to privilege or unprivilege speakers and that accent-based discrimination is significant enough to disadvantage their children. In the wake of this logic, children as young as six are reportedly undergoing the frenulum snipping procedure (Lu and Horner 2011, 99),

What is considered a “normal” or “superior” accent in developed countries like the U.S. and in academia is socially constructed through histories of colonization, genocide, enslavement, and neo-colonialism and its legacies, and centering white American accents in the academy furthers these legacies. Against the backdrop of these legacies, we should exercise vigilance over the fact that we tend to pay greater attention to faculty who speak with native accents, that we privilege their speech by giving them more airtime, that we are comfortable listening to them, and that our comfort may make us more partial to their views. To the extent that we knowingly or unknowingly do any of these things, we are complicit in maintaining social and political hierarchies built on troubled linguistic foundations.

In an increasingly globalized world with expanding migration, approximately one in every 33 people in the world work outside their country of birth (Huang *et al* 2013) and non-native English speakers now outnumber native English speakers (Crystal 1997; World Population Review 2024). There are populations abroad for whom English is a native language (or one of several languages they speak) but their foreign accented English is considered non-native English in the U.S. Since I am writing in the U.S. context, I will be referring to English speakers whose English accent is not native to the U.S. as non-native English speakers.

In categorizing others, people tend to react to the first available and meaningful information they encounter, applying information that they deem highly informative and inhibiting information they deem less informative (Fiske and Neuberg 1990 in Rakic *et al* 2011). Accents are often among the first available pieces of meaningful information that listeners use to categorize others. For example, infants prefer to look at people who speak their native language with a native accent over those speaking a foreign language or with a foreign accent (Kinzler *et al* 2009). The centrality of accents to the ways in which we categorize one another makes it important for us to pay attention to accent-based discrimination.

Ethnic minorities in a host country may or may not adjust their way of speaking to accommodate audiences from dominant groups or assimilate into auditory contexts shaped by dominant populations. If they do not accommodate dominant groups by mimicking dominant accents, their non dominant accent reveals their ethnic background (Bourhis, Giles,and Tajfel, 1973 in Rakic *et al* 2011) even in the absence of visual information that people would ordinarily use to categorize them. Post COVID, significant numbers of employees work remotely, and these employees sometimes utilize audio without video in phone and zoom calls. In these contexts, accents may come to signal foreignness over race, making accent an increasingly relevant site for stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.

This stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination occurs within workplaces in which a significant number of white Americans tend to see English as their property (Lu and Horner 2011, 102) and seek to control how non-native English speakers enunciate the language. White people would do well to acknowledge that the circumstances of their birth, and the accents they speak with are arbitrary and not acquired by merit. I balk at using the word ‘merit’ because the word itself implies a neutral standard of evaluation when we know that the rubrics that measure “excellence” are usually drafted in ways that unfairly advantage dominant groups in society.

People are situated in dominant and subordinate groups with respect to gender, age, nationality, disability, sexual orientation, language, social and institutional affiliations and roles, and centrally, race and accent. Linguistic form and content, through their connection to social, cultural, and political contexts, help determine how differently situated people have and exercise power (Peled and Bonotti 2019, Matsuda 1991 in Lippi-Green 2011). Just as everyone has a gender, but the hidden norm is constructed as male, and everyone has a race, but the hidden norm is constructed as white, so too it is that people in power are perceived as not having an accent (or their accent is accepted as the norm) while populations whose accents deviate from the constructed norm are seen as having an accent (Matsuda 1991 in Lippi-Green 2011). Nonnative (especially European) accents can be beneficial however, (Marian & Shook, 2012; Sarter, 2012, Gluszek and Dovido 2010) when associated with sophistication and charm (Derwing and Munro 2009). These factors contribute towards whether speakers are just heard or also listened to, where listening refers to a more reflective assessment of the information gathered in the communication (Peled and Bonotti 2019).

In higher education, colleagues’ experiences with faculty who speak with non-native accents are also raced: European accents (which are deemed relatively high status) benefit their speakers while accents originating from African, South Asian, or East Asian countries (which are deemed relatively low status) may be stigmatized. It is also important to keep in mind that faculty of color with non-native accents who theorize about language and accents do so using the very accented language that renders their voices unlistenable, and this affects whether what they say about accent-based discrimination is taken seriously. Our identities are tied up with our languages and accents, so those who care about racial equity should be concerned with whose identities and accents are elevated and rewarded in discourse, and whose identities and accents are marginalized and excluded.

# Tracing the Narrative

In Derwing’s 2003 study, one third of respondents reported accent-based discrimination, and 53% of those polled said they believed they would be more respected if they did not have non-native accents (Derwing in Kim *et al* 2019). Accent-based bias has been identified as signaling foreignness or social class, with people perceiving local accents and those from higher social classes more positively (Giles, 1970; Giles *et al.*, 1995; Lambert *et al.*, 1960), at least in the U.S. Non-native speakers experience “stereotype threat, anxiety, fatigue, status loss, negative emotions”, frustration, embarrassment, withdrawal from interactions with native speakers, diminished perceptions of their abilities and lower self-esteem. They display avoidance behaviors (including goal avoidance) and cognitive fatigue from communicating in a foreign language. Native speakers tend to avoid interactions with non-native speakers, likely because they experience negative emotions and anxiety in those interactions (Kim *et al* 2019). This may explain why employees within businesses that stigmatize nonnative accents may deny non-native speakers service (Derwing and Munro 2009).

Non-native accents are rated more negatively because of associations with foreignness and other prejudices (Osbeck *et al* 1997), or because they are harder to understand and require more cognitive resources to process (Chu 2013). Minor divergence from native accents can produce significant negative reactions from listeners (Aune and Kikuchi 1993; Hosoda *et al* 2007), and “the stronger the degree of a nonstandard accent, the more negative are the the evaluations of targets” (Ryan, Carranza, & Moffie, 1977 in Rakic *et al* 2011). Native listeners tend to perceive non-natively accented communication as dysfluent (Levi-Ari and Keysar 2010, Munroe and Derwing 1995), and subsequently psychologically distance themselves from speakers they deem dysfluent (Alter and Oppenheimer 2008). Listening to speech that is deemed dysfluent also leads people to prefer social hierarchy (Zitek and Tiedens 2012). In these and other ways, accent bias poses a challenge to democratic theory and praxis (Peled and Bonotti 2019).

## Accent-Based Discrimination in the Academy

While we need to be attentive to the ways in which accent-based prejudice informs discrimination against non-native accent bearers in general, what is missing from the literature is an exploration of the ways in which faculty with non-native accents experience accent-based discrimination in U.S. higher education. I am especially concerned with the ways in which accent-based discrimination operates within academia to further marginalize, exclude, and discriminate against faculty of color with non-native accents. Despite the impact of accent-based discrimination, this type of discrimination remains undertheorized and is often not acknowledged or addressed in equity work. In this chapter I draw on existing research on accent-based discrimination to expose the equity gaps that exist in institutions of higher education for faculty with non-native accents. I then extrapolate the implications of these gaps for equity efforts in the academy before providing suggestions for what administrators in higher education can and should do to close equity gaps with respect to accent-based discrimination.

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s (EEOC) 2013 report which released information on the types of discrimination cases that the agency handles is instructive with respect to accent-based discrimination in the workplace. The 2013 report shows that the agency handled more than 10, 600 complaints based on discrimination against national origin, language ability and accent. In one case, the EEOC received a complaint of a hostile work environment from an Iraqi hotel worker at the Four Points by Sheraton in Phoenix, Arizona. The man’s coworkers had repeatedly mocked his accent and called him derogatory names while management did not take his complaints seriously. The man subsequently won a $500,000 settlement (Kim *et al* 2019: 75). This case should be sobering to administrators who profess a commitment to equity and inclusion, and to those who are keen to avoid employment discrimination cases arising from accent-based discrimination on their campuses.

The intersectionality of race and accent produces both expected and unexpected results: in Kinzler *et al*’s study, white English-speaking children demonstrated a preference for friendship with children of their own race and with those who had similar accents to their own. However, when these children were given the option of befriending either a white child with a French accent or a black child with a native English accent, they chose to befriend a black child who shared their native accent (Kinzler *et al* 2009). This study suggests that accent supersedes race where children’s choice of friends is concerned, at least in Kinzler *et al*’s study, and demonstrates the salience of accents in interpersonal interactions.

### Implications for Job Opportunities

Accents affect workplace dynamics (Gluszek and Dovidio 2010; Holmqvist and Gronroos 2012; Huang *et al* 2013; Wang *et al* 2013) and non-native accents are known to trigger stigma (Kim 2017; Russo *et al* 2017; Fuertes *et al* 2012, Lindemann 2003, 2005; Gluszek and Dovidio 2010; Levi-Ari and Keysar 2010). One study found that 41% of employers lied to non-native speakers that open positions were filled and subsequently went on to schedule interviews with native speakers (Hosoda *et al* 2012), confirming that organizations may mobilize accent-based discrimination to deny non-native speakers employment (Derwing and Munro 2009) while colleagues cite communication problems to justify workplace decisions that penalize them (Gluszek and Dovidio 2010, Huang *et al* 2013; Russo *et al* 2016).

Race and nationality also appear to influence how people view non-native speakers’ warmth and competence. For example, Sumantry and Choma’s 2021 study found that Americans stereotype immigrants differently depending on their country of origin. In that study, subjects viewed those with Toronto accents as being high in warmth and competence; they perceived those with Indian accents as lower in warmth and slightly lower in competence; those with Arabic accents as lower in warmth and lower in competence, and those with Latinx accents as lower in warmth and significantly lower in competence than those with Toronto accents (Sumantry and Choma 2021). We can extrapolate from Sumantry and Choma’s findings to conclude that students and colleagues are likely perceiving faculty of color with non-dominant accents as less warm and less competent than those with North American accents. These findings have unwelcome implications for foreign born women faculty of color who already undertake a great deal of gendered and affective labor, and who would have to do the additional work of appearing warmer to compensate for students’ gendered expectations and their misperceptions of these faculty’s levels of warmth and competence.

Listeners’ varying perceptions of non-native speakers’ level of competence have implications for non-native speakers’ professional opportunities relative to native speakers.

One example of this is Huang *et al’s* study (2013) which found that non-native speakers who made pitches for entrepreneurial start-ups were significantly less likely to receive new venture funding than native speakers were. Similarly, according to Kalin and Rayko’s 1978 study, native English speakers generally judged non-native English speakers (Italian, Greek, Portuguese, West African, Yugoslavian) to be less fitting for high-status jobs and assigned them to lower status positions than they did native speakers. These implications are confirmed by Huang *et al’s* 2013 study which found that when non-native White and Asian speakers used the same scripted responses to interview questions as native speakers, listeners were significantly less likely to recommend the non-native speakers for a middle management position than they were native speakers. Dávila, Bohara and Saenz’s 1993 study revealed that the strength of Mexican Americans’ non-native accents correlated negatively with their income, which confirms that accented speech not only triggers negative reactions from colleagues (Munro *et al* 2006) but does so in a way that negatively affects non-native speakers’ earning potential. It is no wonder then that non-native English speakers may secure entry level jobs with lower status and lower earnings (Gluszek and Dovidio 2010) but experience challenges in finding (or being promoted to) higher status, higher earning managerial positions (Purkiss, Perrewe, Gillespie, Mayes, and Ferris 2006; Bent & Bradlow, 2003; Russo *et al.*, 2017; Kim et al 2019; Hosodo and Stone-Romero 2012; Lippi-Green 2011).

I can relate to this research because when I volunteered to serve as chair with the full support of colleagues in my department at Skagit Valley College, I experienced strong pushback from my white male dean at the time. Once I passed that hurdle, the dean’s actions corroborated Russo *et al’s* research findings that show that managers judge non-native speakers as less capable, convey less positive social regard towards them, and display more controlling supervision styles towards them (Russo *et al* 2016). For example, while other department chairs scheduled classes for their departments, this dean assumed my scheduling duties without consulting with me. Moreover, he scheduled classes in a way that favored a non-tenured white male faculty over me by assigning Political Science courses to that faculty member and assign me courses outside of Political Science despite my having a PhD in the discipline and my status as a tenured faculty member.

### Fluency and Intelligence/Competence

Language fluency has a range of consequences for how people are viewed, and for how listeners view immigration. People tend to evaluate fluent statements as true (Reber and Schwartz 1999) and to attribute such statements to better educated, upper class individuals (Oppenheimer and Frank 2007). These evaluations and attributions impact listeners’ implicit negative attitudes towards non-native speakers (Chu 2013), especially those who are not of European descent. The position of faculty of color who speak accented but fluent English is distinct from that of immigrants who may have less formal education and who speak accented English that is also less fluent. Hopkins finds that despite native speakers’ tendency to distance themselves from speakers they deem dysfluent, “respondents who were exposed to broken English were on average 0.14 times more likely to say that immigrants strengthen American society than their counterparts who heard fluent English” (2014: 546). According to Hopkins, this is probably because respondents are less likely to believe that immigrants who speak dysfluent English could take jobs from Americans. This conclusion is backed by the fact that when respondents hear accented but fluent English, it does not have any impact on their support for legal immigration. The latter finding could be because respondents may perceive those with accented but fluent English as more likely to compete with Americans for jobs (Hopkins 2014). One consequence of applying Hopkins’ research to higher education is that institutions of higher education who seek to diversify their faculty will have to consider the implications of students and employees believing that faculty with non-native accents are usurpers of positions that “rightfully” belong to native English speakers.

### Negative Stereotypes

In addition to perceived accented-ness influencing comprehension is the issue of listeners attributing negative stereotypes to speakers because of their accent. People tend to view individuals with non-native accents as less intelligent, less loyal, less honest and less competent, and rate them as low in status, especially when they perceive speakers with non-native accents as difficult to comprehend (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010). On the contrary, they tend to attribute those with dominant accents higher levels of “intelligence, trustworthiness, and credibility”, (Peled and Bonotti 2019; Fricker 2007; Dixon *et al* 2002; Reber and Schwartz 1999; Oppenheimer 2006).

In one study, American students perceived teachers who provided an audio-recording of a lecture with British and Malaysian accents to be “less dynamic and possess fewer socio-intellectual and aesthetic qualities” when compared to teachers who provided the same lecture with an American accent (Gill 1994 in Chu 2013). Another example that demonstrates how accents can trigger stereotypes comes from Munro *et al*’s 2006 study in which researchers collected a sample of short narratives produced by speakers of Canadian English and Alabaman English from the U.S. south. Instructors were asked to present Canadian undergraduate students who were planning to become teachers of English as a Second Language with these recorded narratives in random order. Important to note is that the recordings in this study contained no information about speakers’ attitudes towards race. After students listened to the recorded narratives, instructors asked the students to anonymously rate the speakers on a nine-point Likert scale as “more Canadian sounding” or “more American sounding”, “pleasant to listen to” or “unpleasant to listen to”, and “tolerant” or “racist”. Students’ anonymous ratings of speakers with Southern U.S. accents as racist demonstrated that they were stereotyping those with a Southern U.S. accent even though they had no information about the speakers’ views about race. While this classroom intervention was helpful in raising students’ awareness of how covert attitudes operate to generate negative stereotypes about people (Munro *et al* 2006), it also invites us to consider the impact that negative stereotypes may have on faculty who speak with non-dominant accents.

Rubin and Smith found that undergraduate students’ negative perceptions of non-native English-speaking teaching assistants stemmed more from their stereotypical attitudes to these teaching assistants than to the way in which these teaching assistants spoke (Rubin and Smith 1990). This finding shows how stereotypes about non-native speakers can operate alongside accent-based discrimination to affect how students perceive non-native English-speaking teaching assistants. As we well know, students’ perceptions of teaching assistants materialize in positive or negative student evaluations that can impact teaching assistant’s career trajectories in the academy.

### Visual Cues

While subjects deem visual cues irrelevant in categorizing speakers of the same race (Rakic *et al* 2011), one study found that visual cues that use racialized bodies have consequences for how subjects hear speakers that they perceive to be of different races. In that study, subjects were given the same audio lecture to listen to. Some subjects were shown a picture of a white woman and were led to believe that the lecture was given by the white woman. Others were shown a picture of an Asian woman and were led to believe that the lecture was given by the Asian woman. Subjects reported hearing an Asian accent when they were shown a picture identifying the speaker as an Asian woman, which demonstrates that visual cues about race can influence how subjects process and report on auditory information. Of some concern is the fact that subjects who were led to believe that the speaker was an Asian woman also scored lower on a comprehension exercise that followed exposure to the audio lecture. Rakic *et al*’s study suggests that students’ racial bias may render them incapable of hearing objectively, and that students’ perceptions of the speakers’ race influenced how well they were able to listen to and understand the audio lecture (Rakic *et al* 2011 in Lippi-Green 2011). This study makes it easy to see that faculty of color are vulnerable with respect to accent-based discrimination, regardless of whether they speak with a dominant or non-dominant accent.

### Parents and Students Mobilizing Accent-Based Discrimination

In higher education, teachers with non-native accents face significant resistance from students and their parents, as is evident in the excerpts below:

A more recent experience concerns my daughter, a recent graduate of the engineering college. Most of her undergraduate experience was with TAs[[1]](#footnote-1), many of whom were ill equipped to communicate the language let alone ideas. For $10,000 a year in out-of­-state tuition we expected more. (Fall 1993; letter to the “Alumni Voices” section of the University of Michigan LSA magazine in Lippi-Green 2011: 91).

The ONE problem with Ann Arbor (aside from construction, too many coffee shops): Graduate Student Instructors who don’t know how to speak English. (From a column in the student paper, The Michigan Daily, April 18, 1996, in Lippi-Green 2011: 91).

Of course it’s hard to understand them, and of course I resent it. Why can’t I get what I pay for, which is a teacher like me who talks to me in my own language that I can understand? (From a questionnaire distributed annually to incoming students in a linguistics course in Lippi-Green 2011: 91).

Institutions may understand that challenges in communication are arising from students and parents’ stereotypes and bias (Lippi-Green 2011), and students’ lack of cognitive fluency (which refers to the ease or difficulty with which we process information). How we process information is a subjective experience because it does not rely solely on the clarity or completeness of the information that we receive but on our perception of how easy or difficult it is to process the information we receive (Oppenheimer 2008). Despite these understandings, it is not uncommon for universities to institute oral proficiency screening, English classes, and workshops for non-native speaking instructors in response to students’ resistance to teaching assistants’ and faculty’s non-native accents,

The University of Michigan’s Center for Research on Learning and Teaching in collaboration with the university’s English Language Institute responded to the student and parent complaints documented above in a similar way: they privileged whiteness and decided to provide training for prospective non-native English-speaking teaching assistants instead of decentering white American accents and encouraging students to improve their listening skills in ways that would stand them in good stead in global work environments.

The training included an intensive three-week workshop and an oral proficiency test that all international teaching assistants had to successfully complete before they were allowed to teach at the university. Teaching assistants who did not pass the oral screening test had to continue to take English classes until their English was “acceptable” (Lippi-Green 2011).

International teaching assistants find themselves in a situation in which they are simultaneously superordinate and subordinate. They are institutionally superordinate because as teachers, they have the power to grade students’ work. However, as they tend to be closer in age to their students, are teachers in training (not instructors or professors), and have non-native accents, students and their parents may view them as socially subordinate. Teaching assistants also have less institutional power and authority than faculty do, which makes them more susceptible to students challenging their authority and filing complaints against them, as Lippi-Green found in their study (2011).

### Rating Teachers with Non-Dominant Accents

Research also shows that while students give native English-speaking teachers the benefit of doubt in general, they do not do the same for non-native English-speaking teachers, especially those with Asian, African, and South American accents (Lippi-Green 2011). When students view non-native faculty’s accented English as predictive of the latter’s inferior teaching abilities and as a hindrance to their career opportunities, students’ increased exposure to accented speech increases their implicit negative attitudes to non-native English speakers (Chu 2013: 47).

International teachers’ non-dominant accents can also affect the ways in which their students evaluate them - even though students are not always able to distinguish between varying levels of accented-ness, their perceptions of how accented the speech they are listening to is impacts how they rate their teachers. In Rubin and Smith’s 1990 study, when students perceived — correctly or incorrectly —high levels of foreign accented-ness (for example, when students judged an instructor with a slight Cantonese accent as having a strong accent) they deemed the instructor to be a poor teacher and avoided taking classes from them. Rubin and Smith’s study of undergraduate students’ comprehension and attitudes to non-native English-speaking teaching assistants also revealed that 40% of undergraduates avoided taking classes instructed by non-native English-speaking teaching assistants, but that this avoidance behavior had little to do with the teaching assistants’ accented speech and more to do with the latter’s ethnicity and lecture topics (Rubin and Smith 1990) - topics that likely decenter whiteness or in other ways challenge students’ hegemonic worldview.

In a related 1982 study Orth observed and tape-recorded ten foreign-born teaching assistants’ classes and then asked 618 students to complete questionnaires aimed at obtaining information on, among other things, their evaluations of their foreign-born teaching assistants’ speech proficiency and teaching effectiveness in these classes. Twelve teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) also listened to the class recordings and evaluated the teaching assistants’ speaking proficiency. Orth found that students’ evaluations of foreign-born teaching assistants’ speaking proficiency differed considerably from that of the EFL teachers: students’ evaluations of their teaching assistants’ teaching effectiveness and speaking proficiency were closely tied to their final grades, leading Orth to conclude that “students' negative evaluations of foreign teaching assistants’ speech are often based in social mythology rather than linguistic reality” (Orth 1982: ix).[[2]](#footnote-2) Orth’s findings demonstrate how students who are dissatisfied with the grades they earn punish teaching assistants who speak with non-native accents by evaluating them poorly on their teaching effectiveness.

While Orth’s study focused on foreign teaching assistants, it is not unreasonable to expect that foreign born associate faculty and those on tenure track would experience similar accent-based discrimination from students in their classes. Students’ negative evaluations of tenure track faculty who have non-native accents may influence administrators’ decisions on whether to support granting tenure to these faculty which would in some cases have significant negative consequences for their careers. Associate faculty with non-native accents are especially impacted by poor student evaluations because their teaching loads are not guaranteed. If their chair or dean allocates them fewer or no teaching assignments, these administrative decisions have financial implications for associate faculty.

When students avoid taking classes from non-native instructors and decline to enroll in classes that contain discomforting content taught by non-native speakers, their decisions impact course enrolment. Fiscally careful administrators tend to remove low enrolled courses, which would in turn affect the ability of non-dominant faculty to teach in their areas of expertise or research interest (Subtirelu 2015). Associate faculty with non-native accents are more vulnerable to low enrollment because their administrators could cancel low enrolled classes which would affect their livelihood.

Low enrollment in classes taught by more recently tenured or tenure track faculty with non-native accents also puts these faculty at risk for reductions in force when institutions face financial challenges. When there is a reduction in force, the last to be hired is the first to be laid off work, so low enrollments are a real threat to these faculty’s job security.

Dealing with resistance from students adds to the burden that teaching assistants with non-native accents undertake as they try to ensure that students do not evaluate them too harshly, as harsh evaluations would harm their job prospects, either at their home institution or upon graduation at other institutions. This is why administrators must take these research findings into consideration when interpreting student evaluations and processing student complaints or formal grievances against teaching assistants, associate faculty, and faculty on tenure track, especially when they have non-native accents.

### Non-Tenured Non-Native Accents Gajecki

The position of non-tenured instructors who have non-native accents is tenuous, as illustrated by the case of Gajecki versus the Surrey School District. While this is a Canadian case, the dynamics around workplace discrimination in the Surrey case have easily identifiable features of accent-based discrimination in the U.S., so it is worth reproducing here. Gajecki, who had a Polish accent, had successfully worked for years as a substitute teacher in English-speaking schools in the Surrey School District without any communication difficulties on his part. However, after a routine evaluation, an administrator placed a comment in Gajecki’s file that alleged that Gajecki ‘did not speak English’. After this evaluation, the district no longer sent Gajecki out to teach in schools, which affected his livelihood. A human rights tribunal subsequently determined that the school board had denied Gajecki employment because of his accent and ordered school trustees to pay Gajecki for damages and compensation (Munro *et al* 2006).

While it is encouraging that the human rights tribunal ordered the school to pay Gajecki for damages and compensation, it is important to note that Gajecki’s administrator had recorded the discrimination in a way that was legally actionable. In U.S. higher education, administrators are often very careful not to document their accent-based (and other types of) discrimination in a way that would expose them to disciplinary or legal action. Instead, they often disguise their discrimination under a description that is not legally actionable, or they are able to act in racist ways that comfortably fall within the parameters of the institution’s racist policies and practices. For example, racist administrators may invoke a clause in the faculty contract to remove a racially outspoken faculty of color from a leadership position without giving any explanation while not using that clause to remove white faculty from leadership positions despite concerns about their teaching and service to the institution. They may use college policies in a selective way to surveille faculty of color while not subjecting white faculty to the same surveillance. They may exploit loopholes in the system or find creative ways to circumvent policies that will serve the interests of white faculty while not doing the same to benefit faculty, staff or students of color; to the contrary, they may readily invoke policies that will impede these goals. Because these day-to-day decisions often go undocumented as manifestations of white supremacy, faculty of color may not be able to connect the dots in ways that prove the racist trends in administrators’ application of college policies and practices. As a result, many faculty of color may not have legal recourse in the way that Gajecki did.

## Rate My Professor

Rate My Professor is a website that allows students to post online reviews of their instructors. Research shows that students’ online reviews of non-native English-speaking instructors on Rate my Professor match their institutional course evaluations quite closely (Subtirelu 2015), allowing accent-based discrimination to migrate from the classroom to the world wide web.

Steffes and Burjee’s study of Rate My Professor revealed that website users tended to comment on Asian instructors’ language but were almost completely silent about the language of teachers with common U.S. last names. Students rated instructors who had Chinese or Korean last names significantly lower (0.60 to 0.80 points lower on a five-point scale) on their clarity and helpfulness than they did instructors with white sounding names. Steffes and Burjee’s study also revealed that while students lavished positive evaluations on instructors with common U.S. last names, they withheld positive evaluations from instructors with Korean or Chinese last names (Steffes and Burgee 2009). On this platform, students can act on their accent-based prejudice and create an impression that nonnative English-speaking instructors are a challenge to communicate with and learn from (Edwards *et al*. 2009). To the extent that students rely on websites like Rate My Professor to choose their classes, and Steffes and Burgee suggest they do (2009), accent-based discrimination on the website may negatively impact enrollment in classes that non-native speaking faculty teach.

Magazines like Forbes validate Rate my Professor by using the scores on the website to evaluate universities. Even though non-native English-speaking instructors receive low scores on the website because of accent-based discrimination and not their incompetence, institutions that are keen to maintain or improve their national ranking may be disincentivized from hiring non-native English-speaking faculty. This is because when these faculty consistently receive low scores on the website, these low scores threaten to pull down the national rank of the institution they teach at (Subtirelu 2015). In the competitive world of higher education, administrators hard pressed to hire for diversity but maintain or improve their institutions’ ranking may opt to hire racially diverse faculty who speak with native accents. If they do this, they will place institutional rankings above incorporating diverse accents into the academy, and this would exclude a significant number of faculty of color who speak with non-native accents from the academy. This is why equity-minded administrators should recognize that accent-based discrimination has the power to jeopardize the job security of faculty with non-native accents in ways that it does not affect the job security of faculty with native accents.

# Conclusion

Considering research on accent-based discrimination outside and within the academy, it is difficult to see how students and colleagues’ accent bias do not impact faculty of color’s student evaluations, peer evaluations and promotion possibilities. This research should direct our attention to the negative consequences that follow institutions hiring underrepresented faculty of color, including African American faculty, who may also speak with non-dominant accents, without instituting training that could raise awareness of accent-based discrimination among faculty, staff, and students.

Accent-based prejudice, and the discrimination associated with it will not dissolve on its own so the fact that language and accents are starting to become the subject of political theorizing (Peled and Bonotti 2016) is promising. But institutions of higher education need to move beyond theorizing to providing training to address accent-based discrimination. Just as these institutions provide non-native English-speaking students and teachers with orientations and training to acclimate them to a different culture and language of instruction, they should also provide American students, faculty and staff with orientations and training to acclimate them to study and work in increasingly diverse soundscapes in institutions of higher education. This training will stand them in good stead as they work within and outside of these institutions and participate in an increasingly diverse workforce.

One aspect of this training would be providing students, staff, faculty, and administrators with helpful suggestions on how to interact respectfully and equitably with non-native speakers. Another would be implementing trainings that will allow students and employees to develop better listening skills with respect to non-native accents and follow these trainings with formal evaluations of their listening skills in understanding non-native accents. I trust that implementing these measures may help destabilize the existing hierarchy of accents in U.S. higher education and ensure that the responsibility for effective communication no longer lies solely with non-native English-speakers to make themselves understood, but also with native English-speakers to learn to listen better and be more adept at understanding accents of people from the global majority.

A 2002 study provides evidence for how effective accent training can be: In this study, social work students failed to show any prejudicial attitudes towards non-native speakers, but they reported difficulty in understanding non-natively accented speech and demonstrated a likelihood of giving up communication when encountering second language users. When these students underwent eight short cross-cultural training sessions and were instructed in the phonological features of Vietnamese-accented speech, they began reporting increased empathy for second language users, awareness of phonological differences between their own English dialect and those of non-native speakers, improved conviction in their ability to understand accented speech, and better success in real-life interactions with non-native speakers (Munro *et al* 2006). Similarly, Bradlow and Bent found that exposing listeners to multiple speakers of non-native accented speech and requiring them to recognize the sentences they heard, makes listeners adapt better to non-native accented speech. (Bradlow and Bent 2003).

In institutions of higher education in the U.S. which employ faculty of color who speak with non-native accents, students are almost never invited to reflect on the ways in which they mobilize bias against faculty who speak with non-native accents, whether in evaluations about their instructor who may speak with a non-native accent, or the course that the instructor teaches. Nor are they invited to reflect on how their accent-based bias may hinder their learning. College orientations and the short, often 2-credit first quarter experience classes that aim to equip students with the knowledge they need to be successful in college is devoid of any content that would help improve students’ limited listening skills. Ensuring more robust and holistic frameworks for equity and inclusion at institutions of higher education in the U.S. will have to include addressing accent-based discrimination on our campuses, and college orientations and first quarter experience classes may be a great place to begin this work.

Administrators in institutions of higher education that employ faculty of color with non-native accents should understand that if student success rates in classes taught by faculty who speak with non-native accents are lower than the department average, it may be due to students’ accent-based bias and the limitations their bias creates in their listening to and comprehending information imparted in non-native English. Administrators would do well to also take this research into account when interpreting students’ evaluations of a course taught by a non-native English speaker, or their evaluation of the non-native English-speaking instructor. In the latter case, they should anticipate that students may unknowingly mobilize stereotypes about faculty who speak with non-dominant or stigmatized accents, and those stereotypes may inform how they evaluate faculty of color or the classes they teach.

The negative impact of accent-based discrimination also warrants a racially aware Equity Committee to screen routine administrative and promotion decisions as they pertain to faculty of color with non-native accents. This is especially important where administrators may be triggered by racially aware faculty of color with non-native accents who they may find racially discomforting in more ways than one.

As the linguistic composition of faculty in U.S. higher education diversifies, the risk of accent-based prejudice increases the threat to many institutions of higher education’s professed value for equity and inclusion. Students’ and employees’ resistance to foreign accents bolsters a wider array of ways in which faculty of color who are born outside the U.S. face discrimination, from challenges to their subject matter expertise, to poor ratings in student and peer evaluations and full-blown grievances. Accent-based prejudice also affects whether and if so, the attention with which foreign born scholars are listened to, with western European accents being privileged over accents originating from formerly colonized countries. Our commitment to heightened metalinguistic awareness in U.S. higher education will not only contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the intricacies of equity and inclusion work but support a redistribution of power within increasingly diverse soundscapes in U.S. higher education.

1. Teaching assistants [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Teaching assistants and faculty are not the only targets of accent-based prejudice in higher education. Schinke-Llano (1983, 1986) found that teachers routinely underrate English when evaluating Second Language (ESL) students’ linguistic proficiency. Instructors also tend to prejudge ESL students’ comprehension abilities and restrict their interactions with these students to “simple classroom management discourse, rather than to engage in discussions of the subject matter under consideration” (Munro *et al* 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)