

# Atitudes linguísticas em relação ao falante não-nativo nos Estados Unidos

## Language attitudes towards the non-native accent in the United States

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**RESUMO:** A relação intrínseca entre língua e sociedade apresenta uma grande influência em como os falantes nativos da língua inglesa avaliam os não-nativos. Tal avaliação pode ocasionar discriminação, preconceito linguístico, entre outros fatores de exclusão (BAGNO, 2007; CAMACHO, 2001; CALVET, 2002; GNERRE, 1985). À luz dessa perspectiva, a presente pesquisa bibliográfica objetiva investigar que falante não-nativo (nacionalidade/raça) tende a ser mais julgado nos Estados Unidos. Para tais finalidades, uma revisão da literatura foi conduzida e 11 estudos, dentro da temática em questão, foram selecionados. Diante disso, os dados foram contrastados pelo método da meta-análise. Os resultados mostram que a maioria dos estudos ilustra uma atitude negativa em relação aos falantes não-nativos (mais especificamente ao sotaque). Em complemento, negros e hispânicos são mais julgados por questões sociais ao passo que os asiáticos por questões linguísticas.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Sotaque estrangeiro. Atitudes linguísticas. Fatores sociais. Minorias étnicas e raciais

**Abstract:** The intrinsic relationship between language and society has a great influence on how native English speakers evaluate the non-native ones. Such evaluation may lead to language discrimination, prejudice or other types of exclusion (BAGNO, 2007; CAMACHO, 2001; CALVET, 2002; GNERRE, 1985). In light of this perspective, this bibliographic study aims at investigating which non-native speaker tends to be more downgraded in the United States. For such purposes, a literature review was carried out and 11 studies, on

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the topic mentioned above, were selected. Taking that into consideration, data were contrasted by the Meta-analysis approach. The results show that the majority of the studies point to a negative attitude towards non-native speakers (more specifically regarding accent). Additionally, Black and Hispanic people have been more downgraded on account of social factors whereas Asians due to linguistic issues.

**Keywords:** Foreign accent. Language Attitudes. Social factors. Ethnic and racial minorities

### **Initial considerations**

Nowadays it is undeniable that language is intertwined with society. From that perspective, language not only shapes, but is also shaped by social factors. The way one speaks can tell a lot about him/her. For instance, the way one speaks can tell the speaker's age, profession, nationality, gender, sex orientation, religion and other social factors and therefore language frames the speaker's identity. Not only does language shape people's lives, but it also influences on how one acts in society. With this in mind, it is known that such social factors tend to be evaluated in a stratified society.

In light of this discussion, the way one speaks is often assessed by others. Such evaluation can be based on either linguistic or social factors. Concerning social factors, it is evident to notice that the higher the speaker's social status is the higher his/her language variety will be rated. Regarding linguistic factors, a speaker tends to be downgraded when his/her speech has major problems with respect to comprehensibility or intelligibility.

Although a foreign-accent evaluation can be based on linguistic or social patterns, the influence of the latter is far more predominant. Therefore, language is used as pretext for an evaluation, which in turn is a social evaluation. Thus, people who pertain to dominant social groups are responsible for establishing certain language standards, which should be followed by everyone in a particular society. Furthermore, such prestigious groups evaluate people who speak

differently from their privileged position in society. In other words, the prestigious groups have some (linguistic) attitudes towards speakers of different language varieties.

Under the aforementioned perspective, this paper focuses on foreign accents in the United States, more specifically on how the foreign accent has been evaluated in that country over the last few decades. Additionally, I seek to investigate *which speaker has been more downgraded, that is, which race<sup>1</sup>(nationality) has received more stigma*. I also deem imperative to broach a discussion vis-a-vi the reasons why such stigma is placed on specific races.

For such purposes, a literature review was carried out between October and November of 2013 resulting in 11 studies. By and large, results show that the majority of the studies analyzed reveal a negative attitude of native speaker towards the non-native accent. The findings also show that the Asian, Black and Hispanic accents are the lowest rated ones. Thus, it is possible to notice that both social and linguistic factors were taken as parameters for such evaluation.

For the purposes exposed, the present paper contains the following parts: a theoretical framework that discusses the relationship between language and society, including social issues and language attitudes. Then, I illustrate the methodology of this study, including its nature, data collection and analytical approach. The next to last section covers a careful discussion of each study found and lastly, I expose the final considerations of this article.

### **Language attitudes towards the non-native speaker in the United States**

Since ancient societies the way one speaks has been rated on a scale that ranges from right to wrong, beautiful-ugly, good-poor, more prestigious-less prestigious and so forth. This evaluation leads to language prejudice,

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<sup>1</sup> Underpinned by Kerbo (2012), I have considered 4 races: Asian, Black, Hispanic and White.

discrimination or other factors of exclusion<sup>2</sup> (JABER; HUSSEM, 2011; BAGNO, 2007; CALVET, 2002). Linguistically speaking, there is no language variety better than any other, thus there is not a linguistic evaluation, but a social evaluation instead, taking into consideration social factors such: class, gender, race and so on (ALKMIN, 2001; CAMACHO, 2001). Global migration and international immigration may have played an important role in the social evaluation of language and language-speakers all over the world. This in turn, as suggested in the definition provided below, may be germane to social integration and acculturation.

With this in mind, Gnerre (1985, p. 4)<sup>3</sup> elucidates that “the value of a linguistic variety is based on the status of its speakers in society, that is, this reflects on the power and authority they have in social and economic relations”. In face of this discussion, Linguistic Attitude has to do with:

The attitudes which speakers of different languages or language varieties have towards each other's languages or to their own language. Expressions of positive or negative feelings towards a language may reflect impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance, social status, etc. Attitudes towards a language may also show what people feel about the speakers of that language (RICHARDS; SCHMIDT, 1992, p. 198).

In a country such as the United States, where there is a high immigration rate, the coexistence of several language varieties is quite common, more specifically different accents/foreign accents, which in turn are also rated. This way, social hierarchies are framed hinging upon language, in fact, based on social issues (KERBO, 2012).

According to Shuck (2006), there is a language ideology that justifies evaluations regarding linguistic issues, the ideology of ‘nativeness’. This ideology

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<sup>2</sup> Exclusion, in this sense, is a result of any kind of language barrier. This way someone can be excluded from certain social spheres because they do not master the language variety/ standard used in that sphere.

<sup>3</sup> “uma variedade linguística ‘vale’ o que ‘valem’ na sociedade seus falantes, isto é, vale como reflexo do poder e da autoridade que eles têm nas relações econômicas e sociais”.

perpetuates the standardization of whiteness, American-ness and nativeness. Here it is clear that this perpetuation is underpinned by social factors rather than linguistic ones. Shuck (2006) also notes that having accent means being marked, that is, one is identifiable as one who does not speak the variety of prestige. Concurring with Shuck (2006), Flege (1984, p. 74) further remarks that “foreign accents are often associated with low intelligibility and negative personal evaluations of non-native speakers”.

So, under the assumptions of the Accent Prestige Theory (GILES, 1970), the more distant one is from this standard the more stigmatized and marginalized they will be. That is why not all the (foreign) accents receive the same evaluation (BAUMAN, 2013). The distance mentioned above can be linguistic or, in most cases, social (political, economical, religious and others).

Concerning the foreign accent, the evaluation is based on some linguistic factors (the level of intelligibility / communicability) and majorly on social factors (the speaker’s country, race and others). If the speaker’s country has a high status in the world, his/her accent tends to be better rated.

Under this tenet, Will (2010, p. 10) stresses that “listeners will judge skin color, economic class or geographical origins before reacting to the message of a communication”. Additionally, Lippi-Green (1994, p. 11) argues that “when someone is rejected because of an accent, this rejection extends to the speaker’s race, heritage and ethnicity”.

This way, through the accent, native speakers evaluate non-native’s intelligence, education, personality, profession, nationality, age and other social issues (BAUMAN, 2013; JABER; HUSSEM, 2011; ANDERSON, 2007; LIPPI-GREEN, 1994). Needless to say, language evaluation not only leads to prejudice/discrimination, but it may also lead to exclusion. To prove that, Lippi-Green (1994) reports several cases in the United States in which people were denied job opportunities due to their ‘heavy accents’. In those cases, one can

arguably notice that instead of taking into consideration people's intelligence, intellectualities and achievements, the accent was decisive for the job acceptance/rejection.

After exposing the linguistic assumptions, the following sections are the methodological one and then, the discussion of studies on language attitudes towards the non-native speaker in the United States

### **Methodological issues**

The present paper is a bibliographic research, whose focus is on the topic 'language attitudes towards the non-native speaker in the United States'. Since I aim at contrasting results from different studies, I also make use of the methodological approach of Meta-Analysis to evaluate my data. Additionally, I adopt a qualitative nature given that the main unit of analysis is the native speakers' perception regarding the way non-native individuals speak.

This way between October and November of 2013 I conducted a Google/Google Scholar search using the following search terms: "non-native accent and social prestige in the United States" and "language attitudes towards the non-native speaker in the United States". Furthermore, an additional literature review was done including other sources such as printed journals, articles and books. With no delimitation of period of time, that search resulted in 11 studies (ANDERSON, 2007; BAUMAN, 2013; FORBUS JUNIOR, 2010; JABER; HUSSEN, 2011; JOHNSON; JENKS, 1994; KUMARAVADIVELU, 2004; REDDINGTON, 2013; SAID, 2006; SHUCK, 2006; WILL, 2010; YOUNG, 2003).

After the search, each text was carefully examined including all of its sections: abstract, theoretical framework, methodology, results and references. With this in mind, the next section will cover a discussion with respect to the studies listed above.

## Data discussion

As exposed before, 11 studies were found to meet the search criteria and can be classified into two categories. The first group includes studies that are not grounded in the propositions of the Accent Prestige Theory, therefore, the results showed a positive attitude of native speakers towards non-native speakers. In the second category, studies uphold the Accent Prestige Theory. Findings from these studies show that non-native speakers' accents are rated unevenly resulting in some kind of prejudice or discrimination motivated by language/social issues.

Only two out of the eleven studies reviewed illustrate a positive attitude towards the non-native accent (ANDERSON, 2007; FORBUS JUNIOR, 2010). In Anderson (2007), the respondents were White (Middle Easterners) and Hispanic<sup>4</sup>. The author argues that although Hispanic people are usually downgraded in the United States, the results of the research reveal a positive attitude of Americans towards Hispanics.

Forbus Junior (2010) focused on Hispanic and White (Arabic). The author reasoned that although Arabic (language and people) has been downgraded after the terrorist attack on September 11, both Hispanic and Arabic were evaluated positively.

The other 9 studies uphold the premise of linguistic evaluation. Each study centralized specific nationalities (races), as we can see in table 1:

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<sup>4</sup> In this study, Anderson (2007) does not explain whether the respondents self-reported as white - Hispanic or the author classified the respondents as white or Hispanic. Furthermore, if such classification comes from the author, no explicit criteria were shown for the classification.

**Table 1 - Studies on attitudes of native speakers towards non-native speakers in the US Study**

<b>Study</b>	<b>Race (nationality)</b>
Bauman (2013)	Asian (Korean-Chinese) / Hispanic (Brazilian)
Jaber & Hussen (2011)	White (French-Jordanian) / Asian (Japanese)
Johnson & Jenks (1994)	Hispanic (Spanish) / White (German, Arabic)
Kumaravadivelu (2004)	Black, Asian, White
Reddington (2013)	Hispanic / Asian
Said (2006)	White (Arabic, Romanian-Bulgarian)/ Hispanic (Columbian), South-East Asian (Taiwan, Thai, South Korean, Japanese and Chinese)
Shuck (2006)	No race mentioned
Will (2010)	Asian (Philippine) / Black (Kisii-Kenyan) / White (Yupik) / Hispanic (Honduran)
Young (2006)	Hispanic (Dominican Republic, Chilean)

Source: Author

Findings from Bauman (2013) show that although Asian people are commonly seen as intelligent people, and as having a high social status, their accents were rated lower than Hispanics. In this case, this lower evaluation is due to linguistic issues given that Asian accents were less intelligible than the Hispanic ones. Here, one can notice that due to the huge differences between English and Asian languages, Asian people may have more difficulties with English than Hispanic people do. The fact that Spanish is closer to English than Asian languages makes English easier (to be learned) for Hispanic people than for Asians. Another important question that arose in that study is the fact that females (non-native speakers) tend to be better evaluated than males (non-native speakers). Therefore, the investigation suggests that female speakers, by and large, are more intelligible than male speakers (apropos speaking a foreign language). This assumption alludes to the propositions of neurolinguistics that shows women are better at verbal skills than men are.



In Jaber and Hussen (2011), the Jordanian accent was the highest rated. Between the French accent and Japanese one, the French accent was better evaluated. The study revealed that Jordanian people are perceived as more intelligent and more successful people in comparison to the other nationalities covered in that research. Since Japanese accent was the lowest rated, we can observe that linguistic factors were taken into account. On the other hand, when French and Jordanian were contrasted, the latter was the best evaluated, which indicates that social factors (stable economy, status and others) were used as parameter for the evaluation.

Johnson and Jenks (1994) carried out a research whose scope includes three nationalities: Spanish, German and Arabic and the latter was the lowest rated accent. The authors believe this result reflects on how Americans have perceived Arabic people after the event of September 11. Here, we can assume that, if the event of September 11 was taken into consideration for the evaluation, it indicates that the raters based themselves on social motives rather than linguistic ones.

Kumaravadivelu (2004) undertook an investigation with regard to the foreign accents that were the lowest rated in the United States. According to this study, Black and Asian people's accents are more ridiculed than any other foreign accent. The research also revealed that Europeans' accents tend to be the highest rated. A similar investigation, though bringing different findings, was carried out by Reddington (2013) and concluded that Latin American and Asians are more likely to receive a negative evaluation in the USA. Once again, the social variable is the base for the evaluation since we can certainly assume that Europeans and Hispanics have the same cognitive capacity to acquire the English Language, however their accents are judged differently.

Said (2006) examined how native English speakers evaluated different accents. These included: Eastern-European (Romanian-Bulgarian); Latino

(Columbian), South-East Asian (Taiwan, Thai, South Korean, Japanese and Chinese) and Arabic. The results point to a preference for the Eastern-European accent. Also, it was found a more negative attitude towards Arabic and Asian accent.

Shuck (2006) focused on the native speaker rather than the non-native one. This way the author postulates that the ideology of whiteness, American-ness and nativeness contributes to the stigmatization of any foreign accent, thus the degree of stigmatization ranges in accordance with the speaker's social prestige.

Will (2010) investigated how four different foreign accents were evaluated and contrasted by native English speakers: Philippine, Kisii (Kenyan), Yupik (Alaska) and Honduran. The author concluded that although the evaluations point to a more positive attitude towards the non-native accent, the language stigmatization still remains in the native speaker's discourse. Taking this assumption into consideration, Yupik was the lowest rated accent. This evaluation also shows how Americans perceive the Yupik speaker: low level of education/social class. Among the four accents, Spanish was the best evaluated.

In the last research examined for this paper, Young's (2003) findings reveal that Hispanic accents are downgraded in the United States. The author also corroborates that people (native speakers) with experience in a bilingual education program rated the non-standard variety much more favorably. This way people who learn one second/foreign language (or more) tend to be more cognizant of language structures and, thus, they are more capable of understanding a non-native's linguistic mistake in comparison to someone who does not have a wide linguistic repertoire.

Throughout this section entitled 'data discussion', I presented the results of each study; and they demonstrated that one foreign accent is lower or higher rated than others. Bearing this in mind, I deem pertinent to emphasize that although one foreign accent is downgraded or upgraded in relation to another, it

does not mean that both accents are not somehow marginalized in the American society. What happens is that some foreign accents receive more stigma than others.

Once I have exposed the studies found in my search, the next section aims at casting some light on my research question (which speaker has been more downgraded, that is, which race/nationality has received more stigma), then I move on to the conclusions of the present paper.

### **Final considerations**

I have stressed that language is inseparable from society; both language and society frame and are framed by one another. Taking this into consideration, certain language varieties are evaluated over others and the criteria for such evaluation take into account majorly social issues (class, profession, nationality and others). In fact, it is a social evaluation rather than a linguistic one (in the majority of the situations analyzed).

Only two out of eleven studies found show a positive attitude towards the non-native speaker. Such findings reinforce the tenet that language prejudice or discrimination is still present in modern societies. Thus, such premise is evidence in the majority of the studies covered in this paper.

In the previous section, it was exposed that Europeans' accents (German, French) have been better evaluated than accents from Black or Hispanic people in the United States. Such evaluation does not mean that Europeans speak 'better' than the Hispanics or the Black ones, it is a type of evaluation which reflects the social prestige that Europeans possess in the world.

Another example of social evaluation happens with Arabic. The studies also showed that after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the language lost

prestige and became associated with terrorism. Consequently, Arabic has been lower rated than it was before the event.

It has been clearly demonstrated that social issues have a great impact on the linguistic attitudes (evaluations). However, it is important to underscore that regarding foreign accent, linguistic issues may be taken into account for the evaluation. When it happens, the level of intelligibility/communicability of the non-native speaker can be a criterion for upgrading or downgrading certain accents. This assumption was highlighted in four of the studies investigated.

Taking this into consideration, although Asian people are seen as intelligent people, their accents were lower rated than others. Such results indicate linguistics issues, given that Asians, in general, have difficulties with English-speaking proficiency.

By and large, the finds illustrate that Black and Hispanic people (and their language/accents) tend to be the most downgraded, which indicates the low social prestige they have. I deem relevant to stress that not all Black and Hispanic are evaluated equally. The linguistic evaluation considers primarily the speaker's nationality (status/ prestige) and then, other issues like the speaker's first language, age and so on.

In light of the results and discussions illustrated in this paper, we can better understand how language and race/nationality are intertwined in such a way that the latter is responsible for the way the former is seen and evaluated. Additionally, it is pertinent to note that race issues go beyond any biological factor. In fact, taking into account the linguistic evaluation discussed so far, race issues are much closer to a social dimension, in which other variables (economical status, for instance) play a crucial role for any type of evaluation.

As a conclusion, throughout this paper, it has been illustrated how powerful language<sup>5</sup> is and how it can influence our lives. I stress that language is not only a means of communication, but also a powerful tool that can be used to construct things, evaluate, judge, include or exclude people from certain social spheres.

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<sup>5</sup> As mentioned in the theoretical section of this paper. More details can be gleaned from Gnerre (1985), Bagno (2007) and others).

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