

Evaluation of L2 English Accented Speakers' Employability in China

Accent is a distinctive way of sound production which reflects where a speaker comes from geographically and socially. It has been demonstrated to serve as the basis for stereotyping in employment, and people who speak with second language (L2) accents in particular are often evaluated to be less employable than first language (L1) speakers. At the same time, not all L2 accents are rated equally, instead, they display a clear hierarchy. The two main theoretical accounts explain the relative ranking of accents through their perceived comprehensibility and listeners' preexisting stereotypes. While bias against different foreign accents has been widely reported in L1-English-speaking countries, research conducted in China remains limited. It is unknown whether Chinese listeners have a preference for a specific accent, which could create unfair hiring practices. Therefore, the main research question for this study is: *How do L1 Chinese listeners evaluate the employability of L2 English accents?*

To answer this research question, we designed a perception experiment in which 90 Mandarin L1-speaking China-based listeners rated 12 speakers on a 5-point Likert scale of employability. The 12 speakers were represented by 12 audio clips which were extracted from the Speech Accent Archive, where speakers read a standardized passage called 'Please call Stella' in English. There were 2 male and 2 female speakers representing each of the three accents: Korean, Mandarin, and German. The collected data was analyzed using linear mixed-effect models in R with the employability score as the dependent variable and speaker accent and gender as the independent variables.

The results indicate that, first, the German-accented speakers were rated significantly more employable than the Korean-accented speakers. Second, no significant differences were observed between the Mandarin-accented speakers and the other L2-accented speakers. No effect of speaker gender was found.

The hierarchical pattern of accents in our results is similar to previous literature with findings from English-speaking countries, suggesting that Chinese listeners reflect L1 listener evaluations. One potential reason for such a hierarchy is that the similarities in phonetic inventory between German and English allow German-accented English to be perceived as more comprehensible than the Korean-accented English, which can lead to more positive evaluations. Alternatively, listeners might also rely on their ethnicity-based stereotypes since Asian speakers are often perceived more negatively compared to speakers from Western backgrounds. When comparing Mandarin-accented speakers with the other groups, the rating pattern suggests a lack of in-group advantage, despite both listeners and speakers sharing the L1, which could enable the Mandarin accent to be more comprehensible to Mandarin L1 listeners. This rating pattern is particularly supporting the stereotyping explanation over the comprehensibility one.