

# Linguistic Discrimination on University Campuses

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# Accent Modification

[\[en Español\]](#)

Everyone has an accent. People sometimes want to change the way they speak. Speech-language pathologists, or SLPs, can help.

On this page:

- [The Way We Speak](#)
- [About Accents](#)
- [Accents and Communication](#)
- [Changing Your Accent](#)



7 Accent  
Reduction Tips (to  
Sound Like a  
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# Academic Snobbery

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- “The collision of academic prejudice and accent is particularly ironic. Academics tend to the centre-left nearly everywhere, and talk endlessly about class and Multiculturalism. ... And yet accent and dialect are still barely on many people’s minds as deserving respect.” *The Economist*, 30 Jan 2015.
- “...the language we use entrenches inequalities.” Stevenson, *The Conversation* 9 Oct 2019.
- “We might think we are keeping standards high, but arguably we are displaying academic snobbery and unconscious bias.” Wolff, *The Guardian* 17 March 2015.

# Previous Studies

- Wolfram 2019 “The linguistic subordination ideology is pervasive in institutions of higher education, explicitly and implicitly reproducing and enabling sociolinguistic inequality in the community of academics, students, and staff.”
- ~~ADMISSIONS: Johnson and VanBrackle (2012)~~
- **WRITING:** Horton 2017 discusses tensions in attitudes toward African-American English in writing and found findings that corroborate the results of Johnson & VanBrackle’s (2012) study.
- **FUTURE STUDENT ACADEMIC OPPORTUNITIES:** Recent events, such as January 2019’s Duke professors and a graduate administrator students about speaking Chinese in student lounges, and studies such as warning and attest that language prejudice impacts many on university campuses in the United States.
- **FACULTY:** Myrick 2019 found faculty perceive academia as favoring masculinity and men in many arenas. Women feel pressured to sound masculine more than any other linguistic pressure, and report altering their speech in order to sound more competent at work.

# Why it Matters: Changing Landscape of the USA University Community

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- “The total share of undergraduate college students who come from poor families increased from 12 percent in 1996 to 20 percent in 2016, according to the report. The number of undergraduates who are nonwhite also increased from 29 percent in 1996 to 47 percent in 2016” (Fry and Cilluffo, 2019).
- In addition to more native speakers of ‘non-standard’ English varieties attending university, the number of international students studying in the U.S. continues to rise. International student now account for 1.09 million in 2018 (<https://www.iie.org/Why-IIE/Announcements/2018/11/2018-11-13-Number-of-International-Students-Reaches-New-High>). There were 19.66 million college students in the U.S. enrolled in public colleges and private colleges (Duffin, 2019), making international students 18% of the US student population.
- Promoting diversity and equal access to higher education for all genders, races, classes then, of course, means we must be inclusive of different speech ways as well since linguistic differences are encoded in gender, race, class differences.

# Survey: Background Information

- What is your role in the University: Undergraduate or Graduate Student

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- What is your subject area: Humanities, Sciences, Medical/Law School, Other
- How do you identify“: Female, Male, Non-binary, Prefer not to answer
- Identify your race/ethnicity: African, African-American, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Caucasian, Mixed, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Other, Prefer not to answer
- Is English your native language: Yes, No, Yes, I am bilingual/trilingual in English and another language(s)
- Do you have a dialect/accents: Yes, No, I am not sure

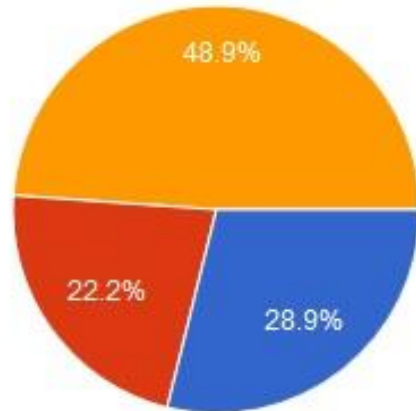
# Survey: Situational Language Questions

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- Has a student mentioned something (positively or negatively) about the way you speak? Yes, positive; Yes, negative; No
- If so, what did this person say and how did it make you feel?
- Has any staff/instructor/mentor/professor mentioned something (positively or negatively) about the way you speak? Yes, positive; Yes, negative; No
- If so, what did this person say and how did it make you feel?
- If you have any other comments or situations you would like to share (either overheard or discussed on campus), please do so here.

Has a student mentioned something (positively or negatively) about the way you speak?

45 responses



- Yes, positively
- Yes, negatively
- No, no one has said anything to me.

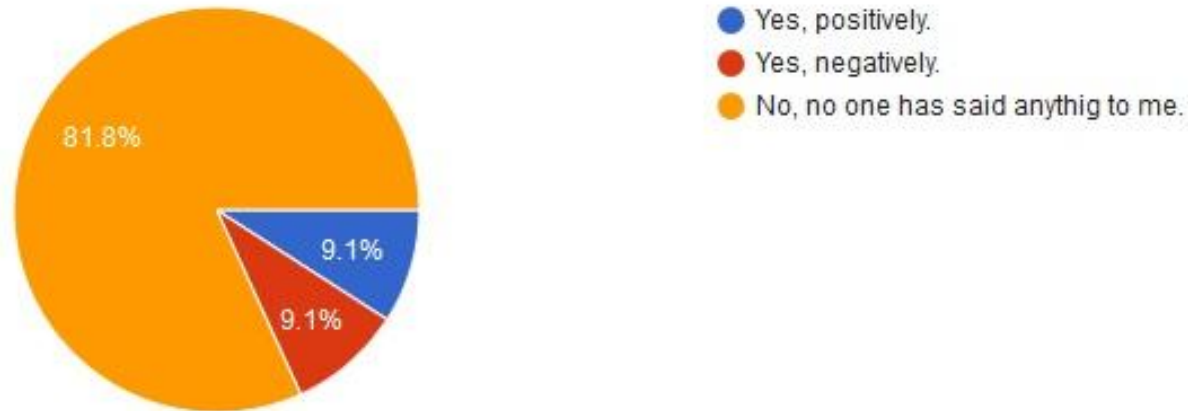
1. Person said I **sound stupid** when my southern accent comes out. It made me feel **ashamed that I've gotten so good at hiding it**, I wish it was more normal for not to hide it so **I could annoy more people by having a southern accent and being smart**.
2. I've **lost my dialect (on purpose)** for the most part, but I still pronounce things "wrongly," and people have made fun of me for it my whole life. I also sometimes sound southern when I get excited and people **make fun of me** for it. It used to make me feel embarrassed but now I just point out that it's because of where I'm from.
3. said the way I say the I in pink is "cute" but I felt like I **was being infantilized**
4. They said I sounded like I was British when I get excited, **and that it's cute. It made me feel good - who doesn't like being called cute?**

5. Often people off campus will quickly make note that I am from the North, this **makes me feel a little special** because I am proud of where I am from
6. One student mentioned my ~~speaking is very clear and easy to understand~~ because I have a **neutral accent**. Though I do not know what that means exactly, it did make me **feel good** to know that my English was comprehensible.
7. They asked me if I can repeat what I just said. I repeated my phrase and they said "Oh my god, you don't have an accent!" To be fair, I did tell them that I'm from Korea right before that. But **I wish they didn't make me repeat my phrase because I felt like an animal being experimented on**. So I told him that I learnt from my linguistics class that everyone has an accent. :)



Has any staff/instructor/mentor/professor mentioned something (positively or negatively) about the way you speak?

44 responses



4. They said I speak confident and clear in front of a group. I felt this was true cause I've worked hard on group presentation **without my accent slipping up**, which may not be as clear to others.

5. While in Madrid, I found that other study abroad participants would often criticize and correct my Spanish, making me question how I had been speaking since I learned to talk.

- 1. I was in an appointment with a professional in the university health system, and they said that I cannot be from North Carolina because my mom and I sound "Northern or European or something else foreign". When I told them I've lived in NC all my life, **she got annoyed and said I must not have been around enough southern culture**. I didn't go back to see her again.
- 2. The main instructor (and my mentor) mentioned multiple times that my English is fine and **I should not worry about my accent**.
- 3. I was giving a presentation in class a few weeks ago and the professor **interrupted me** to say that he didn't know what word I was saying because of my "**Northern Yankee accent**," then said it was sharp and nasal. The word I was **apparently mispronouncing** was "gangs," and I don't know how I should have been saying it compared to how I was saying it.

If you have any other comments or situations you would like to share (either overheard or discussed on campus), please do so here.

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- Someone who had an Indian accent in class made a comment that several students **disagreed** with. After class I was talking to my classmates and one said something along the lines of “we get it, you **aren’t from here**” concerning him.
- I once was a tour guide for Duke and had a big group, but two of the families were Southern. So, I felt comfortable having my accent come out a bit. I **accidentally** had it show when I was speaking in front of the whole group. A woman complained to my manager that I had “bad grammar”. Never let my accent **slip** again, never got another complaint.

# Comments from Instructors/Professors

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- I have overheard my coworkers discussing my English, and they commented that my English was "better" than many other foreign consultants because I **actively "suppress"** my accent. This has some truth to it, since I intentionally unlearned my Long Island accent as a teenager so that I could communicate better with certain friends who were non-native speakers of English. That said, I intervened in the conversation and said that my lack of a strong accent **does not make my English better, just different.**
- I asked my students to write anonymously what they want me to change/improve in my teaching, and this is when one of my students mentioned that I should **lose my Hindi accent.**
- I was thinking that I really should **make more effort to improve my English** (especially pronunciation). I have made a lot of progress for the last few years since my first class, but I still sound very Polish. It must be difficult for some students to follow the content if my **accent seems disturbing** or difficult to understand.

# Results

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- Students participate in and are the objects of language and dialect discrimination from professors. The discrimination reported is due to differences in speech along lines of gender, social class/level of education, ethnicity/race, and region.
- Instructors and professors participate in and are the objects of language and dialect discrimination from students and peers.

# Awareness = Change?

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- Sparks 2019 found “Although consultants have been taught to appreciate nonstandard language in student writing, they feel frustrated when trying to promote linguistic diversity at their university, as they also recognize that standard English remains the only accepted dialect in most academic and professional writing and is largely expected by all writing center stakeholders to whom they are accountable.”
- What can we do?

# Possibilities

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- Continue to discuss it, call each other out when we hear people being made fun of for their variety. This takes situational and linguistic confidence. We see some of the students and one instructor has it already. It also cannot just start in university. The proposed AP Linguistics course for high school students in the USA can introduce of these ideas before uni. As faculty, when we sit on hiring committees, we can give serious consideration to those with different or seemingly 'non-standard' varieties.
- I assigned a self reflection to my Writing About Language Class (First Year Seminar course) at Wake Forest University. They had to write about their own language/dialect/accent. They could do this assignment in their own language/dialect/accent as well. This did create more work for me as well as a few language professors to get feedback on their writing in Mandarin, Korean, and Hindi. The weight of this assignment (15%) equaled that of their second essay, which required formal/academic Standard English.
- In an Englishes Around the World class at Duke University, students did presentations in the dialect and accent they investigated. For some it was their own; others researched another variety and worked diligently to work that dialect/accent into their presentation. This presentation and the research notes that they submitted were weighted the same as a test in the class.
- Not all assignments or classes can welcome non-standard writing, but acknowledging students' variety and giving them an outlet at times, legitimatizes their variety in theirs and others eyes and ears.

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