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The Impact of Accent Stereotypes on Service Outcomes and Its Boundary Conditions

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This article demonstrates that accent stereotypes can positively or negatively bias customers' evaluation and interpretation of their service experience. In particular, we examine customer service at call centers where audio is the only medium for interpersonal interactions between customers and employees. In this context, we document that, given identical service scenarios, Indian accent leads to less favorable service outcomes compared to American and British accents. This bias may be exaggerated when the service fails. We further show that this accent stereotypical effect is moderated by the informational context at the service. If customers are informed of industrial norm, the accent stereotypical effect decreases.

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“When we listened back to calls people had complained about often they were fine. Some people wanted the member of staff to fail because they were in India. I don’t know why that should be, but when customers start voting with their feet, you have to respond.”
 —Adrian Web (Call Center Manager, BBC news, 2/14/2007)

The accent of service providers may positively or negatively bias customer perception of service quality—especially in service contexts where visual cues are absent (e.g., call centers). In this research, we explore the effects of accent stereotypes in a variety of call center situations. With two laboratory experiments, we demonstrate that even with identical service outcomes, customers’ perception and interpretation of their service experience changed as a function of customer service employee accent (i.e., British, Indian and American). However, biases caused by accent stereotyping decrease when relevant objective information is available (i.e., the industrial norm).

Sociolinguistics literature (Lippi-Green 1994, Giles and Powesland 1975) suggests that accent is an important indicator of one’s ethnicity, regional affiliation and social class. Even though accents may be subtle, individuals are still able to perceive and distinguish among different accents (Cargile 2000; Giles, Williams, Mackie and Rosselli 1995). People attribute positive traits to certain types of accents based on the prestige of the class or group that possess it (e.g., sophistication and politeness associated with British accent) (Ladegaard 1998). In contrast, people also discriminate against the speakers with foreign accents (e.g., African-American, Indian, and Mexican-American) which may “link to skin that isn’t white, or signal a third-party homeland” (Lippi-Green, 1997, p.239). People’s general tendency to evaluate individuals’ performance more harshly than others upon accent has been a persistent finding in extant literature (Baugh 2000; Purkiss et al. 2000).

We extend these theories by examining accent stereotyping effect in the service context and testing its influence on customer satisfaction and customer evaluation of employee performance. Additionally, based on previous literature on stereotypical influence on causal attributions (Hewstone 1990; Jackson, Sullivan and Hodge 1993), individuals tend to attribute stereotype-consistent behavior to internal stable causes and stereotype-inconsistent behavior to external unstable causes. We hypothesize that American customers are more likely to attribute favorable service to individual employee factors and attribute unfavorable service to external firm factors when an employee has an American or British accent. However, the attributions are reversed for employees with an Indian accent.

The impacts of accent stereotype on service outcomes depend on the informational context during the service. Research on stereotyping effect (Kunda and Thagard 1996) suggest that stereotyping is most likely to occur if customers do not have background information or other objective cues to make their judgment. Thus we hypothesize that the influence of employees’ accent on customers’ perception and evaluation of the service encounter should disappear, or at least decrease, if customers are informed of industrial norms.

We conducted two empirical studies to test our hypotheses. The first study was designed to test the hypotheses that the accent stereotypes will bias customers’ perception and evaluation of their service experience. Participants were asked to listen to taped phone calls between a customer and a bank employee from the perspective of the customer. Consistent with our hypotheses, we found that accent stereotypes influence both customer evaluation of employee performance and customer satisfaction. Even though service scenarios and conversation scripts were identical, customers rated the performance of employees with Indian accents much lower than the performance of employees with American and British accents. The influence of accent stereotyping on customer satisfaction was moderated by the service outcome. When the service outcome was favorable, the British accent was rated more positively than the American accent but, contrary to our hypothesis, the Indian accent was not rated more negatively than the American accent. However, when the service outcome was unfavorable, customer satisfaction in the Indian-accent condition was significantly lower than it was in American or British accent condition.

The second study examined the moderating effects of information availability. We tested whether accent stereotypical effects would decrease with the presence of other judgmental cues. In the high information condition, customers were informed of the industrial norms about the specific type of service; whereas in the low information condition, customers were not provided with any background information. As predicted, accent stereotypical effects on customer satisfaction were no longer significant after customers had more information to make judgment. However, the negative bias against the Indian accent was so strong that even when customers were informed of industrial norms, they still rated Indian-employee’s performance as the lowest. Another noteworthy finding from this experiment was the difference in customer causal attribution across conditions. We measured customers’ attributions by coding open-ended question responses. When employees from favorable outgroup (British) or ingroup (American) performed well, customers attributed this favorable outcome to their internal factors. When they provided poor service, customers attributed this unfavorable outcome to the external factors. The reverse is true when the employee was from an unfavorable outgroup (Indian).

In summary, we show across two studies that accent stereotypes bias customer evaluation and interpretation of service outcomes. Whereas they display a positive bias toward the British accent, customers show a strong negative bias against the Indian accent. They also make stereotype-consistent attributions about service outcomes. These stereotypical effects on service outcomes are partially reduced when customers are informed of other relevant information.

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