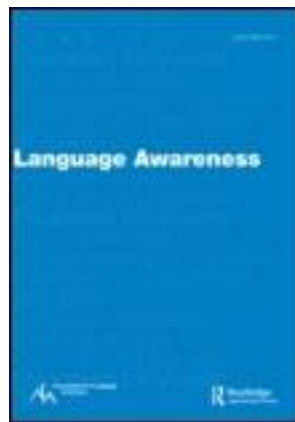# What Do Students in Human Resource Management Know About Accent Bias?

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Abstract in English

For many second language (L2) speakers, including immigrants, speaking with an L2 accent can be a source of unfair or biased treatment in many workplace contexts. However, apart from research on language learners, there is currently little knowledge as to what the general public, and especially members of professional communities, know about accent and accent bias. Our goal in this study was to examine the intuitive understanding of accent and accent bias by university students in human resource (HR) management as future gatekeepers to gainful employment. We interviewed 14 students across two four-year university HR programs in Canada asking the students about their prior experience with accent bias and exploring their understanding of the broader construct of accent through thematic interview coding. The students reported multiple examples of accent bias, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of accent, where they characterized accent bias as an unconscious phenomenon, highlighted its experiential component, expressed sensitivity to different linguistic sources of accent, emphasized the role of a listener in L2 communication, and generally showed flexibility and tolerance toward accented L2 speech. We discuss these findings in light of prior work on accent awareness and highlight the importance of dedicated accent-focused training for HR professionals.

Abstract in Vietnamese

Đa số những người nói ngôn ngữ thứ hai, trong đó, có người nhập cư, thường nói với giọng điệu của tiếng khác so với người bản xứ, và điều đó có thể là nguồn gốc cho việc họ bị đối xử không công bằng hoặc thiên vị trong các bối cảnh làm việc. Tuy nhiên, ngoài những nghiên cứu về người nói ngôn ngữ thứ hai, hiện nay có rất ít kiến thức về những gì công chúng biết về giọng điệu và thiên kiến dựa trên giọng điệu, đặc biệt là những người làm việc trong môi trường

chuyên nghiệp. Mục tiêu của chúng tôi trong nghiên cứu này là khảo sát sự hiểu biết trực quan về giọng điệu và thiên kiến dựa trên giọng điệu của sinh viên đại học trong ngành quản lý nhân sự, những người trong tương lai, đóng vai trò giữ cửa cho cơ hội việc làm. Chúng tôi đã phỏng vấn 14 sinh viên nhân sự đang theo học chương trình bốn năm tại hai đại học ở Canada, hỏi họ về những trải nghiệm với sự thiên vị dựa trên giọng điệu, và tìm hiểu thêm sự hiểu biết của họ về sự cấu tạo trên phương diện rộng của giọng điệu, thông qua mã hóa các bài phỏng vấn theo từng chủ đề. Các sinh viên đã báo cáo nhiều ví dụ về sự thiên vị dựa trên giọng nói, thể hiện sự am hiểu đa khía cạnh về giọng điệu, và họ mô tả thiên kiến dựa trên giọng điệu là một hiện tượng vô thức, làm rõ sự quan sát trải nghiệm về vấn đề. Họ cũng thể hiện sự nhạy bén đối với nhiều nguồn ngôn ngữ của giọng điệu, nhấn mạnh vai trò của người nghe trong giao tiếp sử dụng ngôn ngữ thứ hai, và chung quy là cho thấy sự linh hoạt và khoan dung của mình khi nghe giọng điệu của người nước ngoài. Chúng tôi thảo luận về những phát hiện này dựa trên các nghiên cứu trước đây về sự nhận thức về giọng điệu, và nêu lên tầm quan trọng của việc đào tạo các chuyên viên nhân sự chuyên sâu hơn về vấn đề này.

Plain Language Summary

Speaking a second (or additional) language with an accent typically involves speakers producing pronunciation features from their mother tongue(s) in their second language. Prior research shows that individuals who speak a second language with an accent are subject to negative biases in professional settings. Because university students enrolled in human resource (HR) management programs are future HR professionals, it is important to uncover what they know about accent and accent bias (i.e., negative judgments based on a speaker's pronunciation). To that end, we interviewed 14 undergraduate HR students in two Canadian universities, in Calgary

and Montreal, to determine how they understand accent and accent bias. Students were asked about their own understanding of accent bias, their previous experiences with it, and the importance of accent bias awareness among the HR community. Overall, the students demonstrated a nuanced understanding of accent and suggested that accent-based discrimination may be an unconscious phenomenon. They also showed flexibility and tolerance toward accents, emphasizing that establishing successful communication is a shared responsibility among speakers and listeners. We discuss how negative attitudes toward second language accents may contribute to detrimental, real-life consequences for those who speak a second language with an accent. Finally, we provide suggestions for how HR students' awareness about accent bias may be honed, including through activities that require them to take the perspective of a second language speaker, through diversity training and awareness-raising about different personal characteristics that may influence professional evaluations, and finally through informal contact activities with second language speakers.

Keywords accent; awareness; accentism; accent discrimination; human resource management; second language

What Do Students in Human Resource Management Know About Accent Bias?

In many places around the globe, including Canada (the context of this study), linguistic landscapes are rapidly changing. Welcoming over 400,000 immigrants per year, with the goal of half a million planned permanent resident yearly admissions by 2025 (Canada Immigration Levels Plan, 2022), Canada leads G7 countries in immigration (IRCC, 2019), with 23% of Canadians identified as immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2022). Through various legislative acts, immigrants are protected from unfair treatment in the workplace, for example, based on their gender, ethnic origin, or disability (Government of Canada, 2022). However, many immigrants face biased treatment based on their accent, which acts as an immediate marker of group membership and, by extension, otherness (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010), and discrimination based on accent currently does not have a protected status legislatively. In a high-profile 2019 example, Justice Terry Clackson acquitted an Alberta couple of negligence in the death of their son. The judge noted that Dr. Bamidele Adeagbo, the medical examiner for the prosecution, spoke with an accent which he described as "garbled speech" (Weeks, 2019). Clackson appeared instead to trust the defence's forensic pathologist—a native English speaker—whose testimony he found more credible. Cases such as this raise a key question of how much awareness members of the general public (i.e., non-linguists) have about a speaker's second language (L2) accent and about its role in professional practices. Human resource (HR) specialists, who face increasingly diverse applicant pools (Roberts, 2021), are an important professional group whose decisions impact the socioeconomic situation of recent and not-so-recent immigrants. Even though university programs are tasked with training HR specialists as future gatekeepers of gainful employment, HR students appear to receive little training in language or accent bias through university

curricula, at least in Canada. In the only study known to us, O'Brien et al. (2022) interviewed instructors and students in two Canadian university HR programs, revealing no dedicated curricular focus or instructional materials targeting accent or language bias in workplace HR practices. Against this backdrop, it remains to be seen how much knowledge about accent and accent bias HR students develop on their own. Our goal in this study was therefore to explore the intuitive understanding of accent and accent bias by university students in two HR programs across Canada.

Accent Bias in Workplace Settings

Most people who learned their L2 or indeed any additional language after about the age of three speak with an accent (Long, 2003). The term accent is notoriously difficult to define, presumably because a speaker's accent is always dependent on who makes the judgment and which benchmark is used to evaluate it (e.g., listeners' own speech pattern or one they consider typical in a given community). Nevertheless, accent can be broadly understood as various pronunciation features (e.g., articulation of vowels, production of stress and intonation) that mark the speaker "as someone from someplace else" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 45). For L2 speakers, these pronunciation features typically come from their previously learned language(s) and highlight those speakers' ethnic, racial, or geographic origins, for instance, as speakers of German speaking L2 English or speakers of Japanese speaking L2 French (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Unlike speakers of regional varieties (e.g., Newfoundland English in Canada or Appalachian English in the United States) who typically grow up speaking that variety from birth in a location where a more prestigious variety of the same language is used outside their speech community, most often in education and media, L2 accented speakers are nearly always outsiders to a given community regardless of their status (e.g., as immigrants, refugees,

international students, or temporary workers). In the remainder of this article, we use the term "accented L2 speaker" and the associated concept of "accent bias" to refer to the individuals who learned their L2 as an additional language, who are typically born and raised outside the country where they use their L2, and whose L2 speech is marked by perceptible pronunciation features marking them as outsiders. We purposely avoid the use of the term "foreign" to qualify L2 accents or to juxtapose them with "native" accents because both terms tend to cue deficiency-based views of language and language speakers, in the sense that "foreign" and "non-native" accents are often understood as something to be rid of in favour of the elusive "native" standard (Cheng et al., 2021; Levis, 2020).

Listeners readily react to differences in accented L2 speakers' pronunciation, often judging people who speak with L2 accents to be less competent, successful, likeable, intelligent, and even less physically attractive (Campbell-Kibler, 2007; Hosoda et al., 2007; Seligman et al., 1972; Teló et al., 2022). With respect to professional communication, which is the focus of this study, Spence et al. (2022) recently reported a large aggregate negative effect of L2 accent on hiring decision in a meta-analysis of 27 studies containing 139 individual effect sizes. In particular, Spence et al. found that accented L2 speakers are particularly downgraded in hiring decisions relative to speakers of standard varieties, whereas speakers of regional varieties of the same language do not carry this penalty. A hiring bias against accented L2 speakers seems particularly pronounced for female job applicants and for jobs requiring high communication skills, which highlights the compounding nature of bias, where L2 accent might highlight a marginalized identity of a speaker (e.g., as a female or an ethnic minority) and might be particularly harmful for specific job types (see also Hideg et al., 2022).

One practical reason for accent bias in professional communication is that there are few job- or industry-specific language assessments for applicants to demonstrate whether their language is sufficient for a given job (Derwing, 2016). However, practical considerations aside, a chief contributor to bias is likely the belief—held by members of the general public—that having no accent (which typically amounts to sounding like a local-born speaker in a given community) is a desired and prized skill (Creese & Wiebe, 2012). According to many theoretical views, such as social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), ethnolinguistic identity theory (Giles & Johnson, 1981), and the intergroup communication and acculturation model (Bourhis et al., 2012), accent is a salient marker of otherness for members of minority groups (which often include foreign-born job applicants), creating the expectation that they should adopt and internalize the majority group's speech patterns. This expectation may taint workplace practices, even though most work environments require mutual understanding rather than native-sounding speech (Derwing & Munro, 2009).

There is a strong body of work showing that accent indeed plays a prominent role in the workplace. For instance, Almeda et al. (2015) reported that Australian HR professionals evaluated a candidate's overall job suitability lower when potential employees spoke with an L2 accent. Recruiters of call centre workers from India and the Philippines also tend to hire employees with the least accented English instead of those who speak most comprehensibly (Lockwood, 2012). In addition, accents are a source of bias in the interview process (Segrest Purkiss et al., 2006), especially in prescreen conversations, often preventing qualified applicants from being considered further (Cocchiara et al., 2016). Most assessments of interactions between patients and L2-speaking healthcare workers center on accent rather than comprehensible speech (Pryor & Woodward-Kron, 2014), and standards of air traffic communication seem to

exclusively focus on sounding non-accented, not on mutual understanding (Knoch, 2014).

Compared to other types of biases, such as those triggered by a person's race, gender, or religion, accent bias may be especially powerful (Kinzler et al., 2009). For instance, accent trumps visual cues in its negative impact, leading to prejudicial behaviors where L2 applicants are more likely to be downgraded in employability evaluations based on their speech than appearance (Hansen et al., 2017).

What Do People Know About Accent?

Given the importance of accent to workplace practices, a key question is what members of the general public (i.e., non-linguists) know about accent and accent bias. On the one hand, people's (largely implicit) knowledge of accented speech develops early, and this knowledge is robust. Children show a preference for familiar speech in the first year of life (Kinzler et al., 2007, 2009); by the age of five, they can reliably pick out speakers whose accent is different from their own (Evans & Tomé Lourido, 2019) and can place those with strongest accents as living furthest away from themselves (Weatherhead et al., 2018). Children also seem to rely on accent—and especially prosody in accented L2 speech (Weatherhead et al., 2019)—in their behavior and reasoning, such as when choosing friends among children speaking their own language variety than among L2-accented children (Imuta & Spence, 2020). Adults are similarly sensitive to accent, as they can detect an accented L2 speaker from short phrases, words, syllables, or even the first 30 milliseconds of a segment presented to them (Flege, 1984). On the other hand, although listeners perceive even the slightest departure from the expected speech pattern, they remain notoriously poor at identifying the precise origin of a speaker (Dragojevic & Goatley-Soan, 2022). For example, when listeners, all first language (L1) speakers of English, were asked to distinguish between L1 English speakers and L2 speakers (all L1 Korean), they

were accurate but were unable to name the accent, labeling the speakers as Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Latino, or something else (Lindemann, 2003).

To date, most insight about language speakers' awareness of accent comes from research with L2 learners. Zuengler (1988) asked Spanish learners of L2 English to mimic an American speaking Spanish. The learners illustrated an American accent by making most changes to individual Spanish sounds (e.g., articulation of /r/), revealing a "tacit awareness" of accent at the level of individual sounds (p. 44). In a survey of 100 ESL learners in Derwing's (2003) study, over half of the respondents identified their accent in English as the source of their communication problems. However, when asked to describe a specific pronunciation issue, only 61% provided an example, the majority of which (around 80%) concerned the pronunciation of individual sounds. Most learners also indicated that speaking with a better accent would earn them more respect from native speakers, and many (especially visible minorities) reported discrimination attributed to accent, including rudeness, disrespect, inattention, and inequitable treatment by interlocutors (see also Freynet et al., 2018). L2 learners also appear to make clear distinctions in terms of which accent (e.g., American vs. British English) is harder or easier to acquire, likely as a reflection of their familiarity or experience with each variety (Cenoz & Lecumberri, 1999).

Apart from L2 learners, it is unclear how much knowledge about accent exists in other professional communities. In a rare exception, Foote and Thomson (2021) surveyed 54 speech-language pathologists working with L2 English speakers in Canada and the United States, probing their beliefs about accent. These professionals revealed strong knowledge in phonetics and phonology and showed clear awareness that most people, including monolinguals, speak with an accent of some kind and that the goal of pronunciation instruction is to help L2 speakers

become comfortably intelligible. However, many also revealed misconceptions about accent, where 31% were unsure that an accented speaker can sound intelligible, 25% agreed or were unsure that a speaker's jaw shape determines their accent, 46% believed that a major learning breakthrough can happen in as little as 2 hours of instruction, and 47% considered that accents might be eliminated through clinical treatment. These findings are especially revealing in light of an earlier survey with speech-language pathology students and university clinic directors (Levy & Crowley, 2012a, 2012b), where they expressed a clear preference for native-speaking specialists to treat various language-related phonological disorders but for L2-accented professionals to treat non-linguistic conditions. In addition, 44% of the clinic directors considered students' accent when arranging work placements, and of the students with field experience, 20% reported that their accent affected their practice, for example, in terms of which disorders they were able to treat. Thus, in a professional (and highly trained) community such as speech-language pathology, many specialists not only show certain misconceptions about accent, but some of its members might also experience accent bias themselves.

Additional (albeit indirect) evidence of people's awareness of accent comes from professionals whose occupation, unlike that of speech-language pathologists, is not concerned with speech. For instance, in a study with employees at a petrochemical company (the majority of whom were engineers), Derwing and Munro (2009) showed that, when given a choice, these employees preferred speakers with weaker than stronger accents. Nevertheless, in their comments, the employees generally commented on how easy the speakers were to understand and how fluently they spoke, revealing some awareness that those aspects of speech might be more relevant to communication than a person's accent. In customer service industry, recruiters of outsourced call center agents (who tend to be employed in such locations as India and the

Philippines) often explicitly give preference to least accented employees rather than those who might fit job requirements more closely (Lockwood, 2012). Moreover, customers who interact with foreign-based call center agents prefer to engage in communication with the agents whose speech they find less accented, even though the agents' fluency and comprehensibility might be more consequential for their perceived knowledge, experience, and confidence (Tsunemoto et al., 2022).

In the only research known to us where people's beliefs about accent have been examined directly in relation to workplace practices, Hansen (2020) developed and validated an accent beliefs scale and then correlated listeners' responses on this scale with their reactions to an accented L2 speaker. The two dimensions of accent beliefs emerging from listener responses included accent stability and diagnosticity, where the stability dimension captured people's conceptions of accent as being something that cannot be easily changed or eliminated (e.g., *Everyone has an accent, and they cannot change it, even if they tried*), whereas the diagnosticity dimension encompassed the idea that accents provide valuable information about speakers and their qualities (e.g., *From someone's strong or weak accent one can infer many things about the speaker*). When L1 English listeners completed the accent beliefs scale and then evaluated a recording of an accented L2 speaker interviewing for a lower management position, their stronger beliefs in the diagnosticity of accent (i.e., accent reflects a speaker's personal and professional traits) emerged as a negative predictor of the speaker's job suitability. In contrast, their stronger beliefs about accent stability (i.e., accent cannot be easily changed or eliminated) were a positive predictor of the speaker's integration into the host society. This work is important as it suggests that people's specific beliefs about accent can moderate the degree to which they

might show positive or negative dispositions toward accented L2 speakers, including in workplace and employment contexts.

The Present Study

Apart from research on L2 speakers (e.g., Derwing, 2003) and emerging work in the professional community of speech-language pathology (e.g., Foote & Thomson, 2021), there is currently little knowledge as to what members of the general public (e.g., non-linguists) know about accent and language bias. Our research is situated in the community of HR professionals, particularly, university students in four-year HR management programs. As future specialists tasked with various employment and workplace decisions, this community is an appropriate group to target, with the view of generating the knowledge base which could eventually be used for developing bias mitigation activities that ensure that accented job applicants have full access to their chosen job market. The present work builds on our earlier exploration of the larger dataset included in the current study, where we examined the extent to which issues of language and accent bias occur in HR university curricula (O'Brien et al., 2022). Briefly, we found no evidence—in interviews with students and their instructors across two HR programs—that any coursework or materials explicitly focused on L2 accent or accent bias. In the present study, which is a logical extension of this prior work, we explored if HR students develop any knowledge or awareness of accent and accent bias on their own, without explicit instruction.

To provide a comprehensive view of students' perspectives, we interviewed HR students in Calgary and Montreal, which are among the top four immigration hubs in Canada and share a similar proportion (30%) of immigrants but which differ in degree of societal bilingualism, where Montreal is a French–English bilingual city whereas Calgary is largely unilingually English (Statistics Canada, 2017). Given the exploratory nature of our work, we made no

specific predictions as to which dimensions of accent the HR students would reveal in their interviews, such as a focus on individual sounds (Zuengler, 1988) or a belief that accents can be easily changed (Hansen, 2020), aside from the expectation that the bilingual context of Montreal, where proficiency in English and French is often required for employment, might reveal a stronger focus on accent and language than the predominantly monolingual context of Calgary. To examine rich interview data, we asked two broad questions:

RQ1: What is HR students' experience with accent bias?

RQ2: What dimensions emerge in HR students' comments about accent and accent bias?

Method

Participants

Participants included 14 students from two four-year HR (Bachelor of Commerce) programs at English-medium universities in Calgary and in Montreal. The programs are offered through reputable business schools at comprehensive public universities, both similar in size, with over 30,000 registered students of whom approximately 20% are international. The students from Calgary (6 females, 1 male) and Montreal (5 females, 2 males) represented multiple ethnolinguistic backgrounds, including native speakers of French (2 in Montreal), English (4 in Calgary, 2 in Montreal), and second-generation heritage speakers of Bengali, Cantonese, Russian, Spanish, and Tamil (3 in Calgary, 3 in Montreal). Most students (6 per city) were either in their third or final year of studies, and the majority (11) reported having experience in HR through internships or employment, while the others were preparing for HR internships. Their future professional goals included a career in change or project management (3), event planning (2), communications and branding (2), owning a business such as a consulting firm (3), and various HR positions, for instance, with a focus on education and labor law (4). All students

were self-selected volunteers who responded to a call for participation distributed through their respective programs.

Materials and Procedure

This project received ethics approval from the University of Calgary ethics board (REB21-0116) and Concordia University ethics board (30014326). The students were interviewed individually via Zoom (approximately 30 minutes) using 14 identical questions (see Appendix) by two interviewers (one per location). The initial eight brief questions elicited information about their HR background and training to create a descriptive participant profile. The next three questions (not focused in the current article) targeted the nature and extent of the training in accent bias provided to the students through their HR programs. The final three questions, which contributed to the present dataset, focused on the students' experience with accent and general linguistic bias in personal and professional domains (*Are you aware of any cases—in your experience or that of your fellow students—where an employee's accent played a role in hiring or retention decisions? Are you aware of any other examples of linguistic bias?*) and on their perception of how important it was for them to be aware of accent bias (*To what extent do you feel it's important that you and your fellow HR students are aware of accent and language bias?*). To follow-up on the targeted issues, the interviewer encouraged each student to elaborate on their points, provide further examples, or offer interpretations for their points (e.g., *So how did you know that this bias exists?*), and the students' responses to these follow-up queries were considered for analysis along with their responses to the initial, scripted questions.

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Data Analysis

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The interviews were coded thematically in MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021) through an iterative process (Gibson & Brown, 2009) whereby codes were generated from the

interview responses through a comparative analysis within and across the transcripts to derive

common themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). With respect to the students' experience with accent

bias, the coding procedure was straightforward, in that any example reflecting or illustrating a

form of accent or language bias or unfair treatment based on language in any domain of life was

considered as such. In terms of the dimensions of accent emerging from the students' comments

(discussed below), our analysis involved interpretive coding, with an initially larger set of

categories reduced to reflect the final set of conceptually distinct themes. All 14 interview

transcripts were first coded by one trained researcher (third author), who subsequently discussed

each decision with another researcher (second author) until consensus was reached, after which

the original coder recoded all transcripts using the updated scheme. To examine reliability, the

second coder subsequently coded three interview transcripts (21% of the data). Intercoder

agreement reached 91% corresponding to a Cohen's κ value of .89, indicating high agreement

(Landis & Koch, 1977). In the final step, another trained researcher (first author) revisited all

coding decisions to confirm all decisions, at which point three broad categories were renamed to

provide better descriptive labels, but no changes to category membership were made.

Results

Experience with Accent Bias

In terms of the first research question, which asked about the students' experience with

accent bias, their examples patterned along three broad categories in the domains of personal life

(e.g., in relationships with friends and family), professional occupation (e.g., during employment,

internships, or work placement), and academic study (e.g., during coursework or interactions

with university students, faculty, and staff). The Montreal students contributed 12 examples

15

across all seven students, which was three times the number shared by two of the seven Calgary students, who provided two examples in the personal and two in the professional domains.

A common observation was that the students noticed accent-focused attitudes and behaviors around them in the personal and academic domains, such as when friends jokingly imitated someone's accent because they were "trying to be funny" (Montreal S1), when fellow students complained that they "don't understand [their professor] because of her accent" (Montreal S6), or when classmates refused "to work with students… that aren't native English or French speakers" and expressed annoyance because there are "a lot of professors that aren't native English speakers and a lot of courses are in English" (Montreal S5). In fact, some students showed awareness of engaging in accent-focused judgments themselves, such as when a student commented that there were "a lot of people coming in and out [of a café], and for some accents, they sounded a little angry sometimes" (Calgary S4). Several examples appeared to also reflect various accent-based stereotypes, especially about visible minorities. For example, a Canadian-born second-generation immigrant from Calgary talked about her friends complaining that they do not understand her ethnically Asian parents "even though [her parents] do not have a heavy accent" (Calgary S5). Similarly, two students, both visible minorities, reported situations where they were complimented for speaking good English (Montreal S6 and S7), even though they both are native speakers:

> [T]hey try to make it sound like a compliment, but... me, personally I don't take it as a compliment because, like you're basically telling me that you were expecting me to have an accent because maybe you thought that I was unable to speak the language but I actually am, so now you're surprised… (Montreal S6)

In the professional domain, speaking with a certain accent appeared to be linked for students with either the perception of increased or diminished opportunities in hiring decisions or the feelings of discomfort in workplace communication. In one instance, a student questioned her (ethnically Filipino) manager's decision to employ "a bunch of other Filipino people based on their accent" even though, according to the manager, a shared linguistic background fostered workplace communication (Calgary S4). Another student described her friend's difficulty securing a job "because her English wasn't… suitable in terms of… what [the employer] wanted in Montreal," in the sense that successful employees were expected to sound more like local clients rather than accented L2 speakers (Montreal S4). Providing a further workplace example, a student described her friend's family business, where the company's management expressed discomfort with L2-speaking job applicants and showed little desire "to know what [those applicants] are saying" during a job interview because an accent was believed to "create a language barrier… even though we know… it's just an accent" (Montreal S2). The same student (a fluent speaker of L2 French) also shared a personal experience interviewing in French for a retail job, where the interviewer switched to English making the student feel insecure at being discovered that she is "not bilingual," although this student had completed all her pre-university education in French. Finally, another student described her experience working for a call centre whose mission is to encourage charitable donations, where some clients' negative attitudes toward accents may have affected her work productivity:

> [Some clients] didn't want to speak to me because over the phone, you're asking for donation, you're asking to get sensitive information from people… And because… I have an accent, because it's probably feels like oh everybody or people who have an accent that

call in to ask for money over the phone... so I felt… my accent was discriminated against,

but not like... they didn't say it, but I felt it. (Montreal S7)

Dimensions of Accent Bias

In response to the second research question, which asked about dimensions underlying the students' conceptions of accent, five broad themes emerged across 50 coded comments (Table 1). The students characterized accent bias often as an unconscious phenomenon, highlighted an experiential component of accent, expressed sensitivity to different language varieties and different linguistic sources of accent, emphasized the role of a listener in L2 communication, and generally showed a flexible, open mindset toward accented L2 speech. While the students in both locations contributed comments to each theme, the students from Montreal provided more comments compared to those in Calgary, especially when it came to describing linguistic dimensions of accent and discussing the role of a listener.

Table 1. *Number of Comments (k) Contributed by Calgary (n= 7) and Montreal (n = 7) Students Toward Various Emergent Categories of Accent Bias*

| | Calgary | Montreal | Total | | |
| | k | k | k | % | |
Coded category					Sample comment
Automatic, unconscious reactions	2	3	5	10	when you hear someone with an accent you automatically think like 'Oh this person is different' so you're more likely to hire someone that's similar to you
Length or amount of experience	2	2	4	8	those who are not exposed to [L2 accents] more often… might have like a bias within them
Linguistic dimensions	0	12	12	24	the French community is a bit harsher [than the English community] with like the way you speak or [how they] weigh like grammar and everything
Listener's responsibility	6	13	19	38	you just have to focus a little bit harder and you [will] understand
Flexibility, open-mindedness	6	4	10	20	companies will have to adapt and have to be moral… to avoid discrimination because… the labor force is getting more and more multicultural
Total	16	34	50	100	

One dimension emerging from the students' comments is the often unconscious and automatic nature of people's reactions to accent. According to one student, when we hear foreign accents, "we automatically have the presumption like okay well, that person is not like born here… we know or we think we know that their first language is not English" (Montreal S2). Other students elaborated on this idea by saying that "when you hear someone with an accent

you automatically think like 'Oh this person is different' so you're more likely to hire someone that's similar to you" (Montreal S3) and that many people demonstrate prejudiced behaviors "unintentionally just because they're not aware that this type of bias exists" (Montreal S1). The same student who described accented customers at a café as sounding "a little angry sometimes" provided a rather nuanced explanation for such a reaction, emphasizing people's common, automatic responses to accents: "I think it was just their accent, and if you are hiring, that would definitely alter your perception, so I think there should be training of trying to ignore that or how to get past it because it's not their fault" (Calgary S4).

Another emergent theme pertained to an experiential dimension of accent, where being an L2 speaker or adopting the perspective of one implies greater familiarity with or awareness of accented speech. An L2 speaker of English, Montreal S2, for instance, was comfortable hearing various accents around her but felt that "those who are not exposed to these types of things more often… might have like a bias within them." Providing a complementary perspective, Calgary S7 admitted that she, as an English speaker, does not know what it feels like to be judged negatively because she has never "been in the position where somebody has told [her] that [her] accent has gotten in the way." One student directly associated the strength of an accent to how long a person has studied the language, such that, for instance, "if my professor's only been learning English for the past five years, and another professor has been for fifteen, then of course most likely his accent will be greater… if he's only learnt if for five years" (Montreal S4).

The students also revealed sensitivity to different varieties of language, noting that some accents "like if it's… English from Great Britain" are responded to positively whereas other accents, especially Asian ones, elicit negative attitudes (Montreal S6). Montreal students, all bilingual in English and French to varying degrees, were also attuned to listener reactions to

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accented English versus French, with students commenting, for instance, that "the French community is a bit harsher [than the English community] with like the way you speak or [how they] weigh like grammar and everything" (Montreal S6), which according to Montreal S1, is because "it's a lot more common to have different accents in English than in French." The students also demonstrated some awareness of various linguistic dimensions giving rise to the perception of accent, as they discussed, for example, a "slight difference like mispronunciation" (Montreal S1), how people are "structuring their sentences" (Montreal S6), speakers' "grammar" and their use of "the right words" (Montreal S4), as well as their "choice of words" and "slang" (Montreal S2). Finally, one student provided a comment about accents not being specific to L2 speakers, noting that "some people don't articulate well in their first language" (Montreal S4).

Another common theme focused on the responsibility of a listener, where the students described their thoughts through terms such as effort, attention, and focus. For instance, Montreal S4 dismissed some of her classmates' complaints about their instructors' accents: "you just have to focus a little bit harder and you [will] understand… if you're listening to someone [and] if they can actually speak English, [then] accent is not the problem… your focus is the problem." Another student highlighted the importance of understandable, rather than non-accented, speech to communication success: "When it comes to people with very heavy accent or people that [speak] English or French as the third, fourth, fifth language, you definitely have to… to pay more attention. For me what's important is if I can understand what you're saying" (Montreal S5). The juxtaposition of accented versus intelligible L2 speech was also evident in several comments targeting professional practices. According to Montreal S5, if accented job applicants "communicate their points fine," then there is no reason to "disqualify them… but you still have to listen," meaning that understanding an accented L2 speaker is, at least in part, a

matter of listeners' commitment to communication and their interest in the speaker. In a similar vein, Calgary S6 underscored the role of the interlocutor in communication with an L2-speaking job candidate: "At the end of the day… there is a point of communication that has to happen, but you have to be understanding and patient."

The final theme encompassed the students' expressions of flexibility and open-mindedness toward accents and linguistic diversity more generally, which was clearly linked (at least for Montreal students) to that specific context, where "people are pretty open minded" (Montreal S3). Some comments reflected the students' personal appreciation of linguistic diversity. Montreal S5, for instance, described a multilingual person whose mother tongue is Italian and who uses French and English daily but also speaks fluent Spanish and has working proficiency in German. "How do you have time to learn all these... I'm struggling with my two you know?" he wondered, in a comment that reflected his appreciation of multilingualism and awareness of the time and effort involved in learning an additional language. In another comment, Montreal S7 described growing up in an essentially monolingual society "where everybody speaks only one language," so when she arrived in Montreal and met "persons that are bilingual or trilingual [she] found that… an amazing quality to have." The remaining comments in this theme focused on flexibility and open-mindedness toward accents with respect to HR practices. For example, according to one student, "companies will have to adapt and have to be moral… to avoid discrimination because… the labor force is getting more and more multicultural" (Montreal S5). Montreal S6 described an excessive focus on accent during interviews as problematic and considered it prejudicial when employers "[take] away talent and employment opportunity from people simply because you don't like the way that they're structuring their sentences or the way that they're speaking." Another student expressed her position directly: "[L]ike I said I'm really

pro diversity and inclusion… I'll still also hire you for your accent or not… give you more training [on language] if you want" (Montreal S2). For Montreal S7, the "mere fact that [job applicants] make a major effort to learn a different language and they can communicate in that language… it's an amazing thing that we should appreciate… and celebrate." Finally, according to Montreal S3, "as long as… you can show that you do the job, then there should be no reason why your accent should disable you from having a job."

Discussion

In this study, we documented HR students' experience with accent bias and explored their understanding of the broader construct of accent through an analysis of emergent interview themes. This work was inspired by our previous report focusing on the same students and their instructors, where we found no instructional content targeting issues of accent or language bias in two different HR programs (O'Brien et al., 2022). Our findings show that HR students, through their personal and professional networks, have come across instances of accent bias and that their comments about these experiences demonstrate an awareness of accent as a complex construct.

Accent Bias in HR Student Experience

Although we focused on HR students as members of a professional group, their reported examples of accent bias generally appeared to reflect their experience in a broader society, with examples illustrating various types of negative attitudes, stereotyping, or discrimination targeting accented L2 speakers (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Roessel et al., 2020). These examples can be broadly conceptualized within Sue et al.'s (2007) framework of microaggression. According to this perspective, modern-day discrimination rarely occurs as overt bigotry or hatred; instead, it manifests through subtle acts collectively described as microaggressions, or brief, hostile

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indignities or slights, delivered verbally or through action, which act as insults or put-downs of the targeted individual. Among the microaggressions catalogued by Sue et al., our data contained no microassaults, which are explicit discriminatory attacks meant to hurt people, for example, through a racial slur. The absence of microassaults in the student reports is likely a reflection of what is described as aversive racism, where in contemporary societies like Canada there is explicit support for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and acts of bias and discrimination largely occur in subtle and covert ways (Dovidio et al., 2017). This, of course, does not mean that microassaults involving accent do not occur or that our participants felt fully comfortable sharing specific examples of such microaggression in the context of a brief research interview.

Indeed, accent bias surfaced in the student experience in several subtle ways. There were cases of microinsults, which are insensitive comments conveying a hidden, insulting (intended or unintended) message often targeting a person's identity, and instances of microinvalidations, which encompass situations when people are excluded or their feelings and lived experiences are minimized. In personal and academic communication, examples of microinsults included people's expressed annoyance with accents, mockery of accented speakers, and pathologizing of their language (e.g., accented speakers are always hard to understand). There were also cases of microinvalidation, where students were praised for superior language skills, with the hidden message of surprise at how well an ethnic minority can speak the language of the majority and the implied assumption of "you do not belong here." In professional settings, microinsults involved cases where accented job applicants were attributed low competence, and microinvalidations included situations where the interviewer switched to English in a French-focused job interview, making the candidate insecure about their language skills, and where a speaker's job performance was threatened because her customers may have conflated an accent

with socioeconomic need and showed unwillingness to communicate. Drawing on their experience, the students thus provided a rich sample of microaggressions targeting accented speakers.

HR Students' Conceptions of Accent and Accent Bias

In a recent research summary, Roessel et al. (2020) described accent bias as a conflict within people between the prevalent societal norms against prejudice and their often spontaneous negative personal reactions to accents. This conflict is mediated by people's cognition (i.e., thinking), where they can either rationalize their negativity (by blaming the accented speaker) and thus engage in discrimination or they can acknowledge their negativity and therefore control it by rejecting prejudice. The students' comments (to various degrees of prominence) illustrated these broad themes: people's spontaneous reaction to accent, the societal emphasis on equity and diversity, and people's cognition (e.g., various justifications for accent).

First, the students described listener reactions to accent as spontaneous and automatic, which likely reflected their experience with accented English (and French) in their university programs and (for many) their own proficiency in additional languages. The students' comments illustrated accent as a cue to otherness (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010), which is activated automatically and elicits an oftentimes negative response (Hansen, 2020; Roessel et al., 2020). Their comments revealed an implied hierarchy of preferred versus dispreferred accents (e.g., British vs. Asian English), in line with prior work on listeners' evaluative judgments of accented speakers (Dragojevic & Goatley-Soan, 2022). The students (and especially bi/multilinguals in Montreal) also showed a nuanced understanding of accent as a phenomenon involving multiple linguistic features (individual sounds, slang, sentence structure), which contrasts with prior work

on L2 learners whose conception of accent was largely at the level of segments (Derwing, 2003; Zuengler, 1988).

Second, the students seemed to reveal their awareness of the broader society's focus on flexibility and open-mindedness. Appreciating accent diversity and calling accent bias problematic and prejudicial, they appeared to express their own personal beliefs or to support the larger society's norms regarding openness to and tolerance of various types of interpersonal differences, including accents (Dovidio et al., 2017). Broadly speaking, the students did not seem to endorse or embrace the idea that the absence of an L2 accent is something to be particularly desired (Creese & Wiebe, 2012); instead, they expressed a nuanced understanding of the realities of accented L2 speakers in the context of the broader society and some of its values and norms.

Finally, the students' comments also revealed some aspects of their accent-focused cognition, through their (expressed or implied) explanations of accent and accent bias. Several of these were quite encouraging in that the students, as non-linguists, essentially endorsed researchers' calls for shifting the focus in L2 communication from accented speakers toward their interlocutors (Derwing et al., 2014). Collectively, the students made a strong case for a listener's shared responsibility, where the listener must be willing to commit extra attention and effort to understanding an accented speaker. Other student comments, however, pointed to their less comprehensive understanding of accent. On the one hand, they perceptively reasoned that people's prejudicial reactions to accent might be exacerbated by a lack of accent diversity in their immediate environment (Kutlu et al., 2022). In other comments, however, they seemed to perpetuate the belief that accents might be easy to shift through training or exposure (Hansen, 2020), which contradicts the available research evidence (e.g., Derwing & Munro, 2015). To sum up, in terms of their accent-focused cognition, the HR students were similar to the speech-

language pathologists surveyed previously (Foote & Thomson, 2021), as both groups showed considerable knowledge about accent along with several misconceptions about it. Unlike speech-language pathologists, however, the HR students had received no training in speech and language research, which makes the depth and breadth of their insight about accent particularly noteworthy.

The Role of Context

To provide a comprehensive profile of HR students' perceptions of accent bias, we focused on two locations. In line with our initial expectation, compared to the students in Calgary, those in Montreal provided more examples of accent bias and contributed more frequent accent-focused comments, particularly in terms of various linguistic dimensions of accent and a listener's responsibility in L2 communication (see Table 1). Although it is tempting to attribute these between-context differences to the distinction between bilingual Montreal and predominantly monolingual Calgary, this conclusion might be premature. First, methodologically speaking, the Montreal students were generally more talkative during the interviews, so the interviewer could ask more follow-up questions, which increased the likelihood of various comments recurring. Second, the bilingual–monolingual distinction is rather crude, in the sense that Calgary, which is represented by over 240 ethnocultural communities (Statistics Canada, 2017), is in fact more ethnically and linguistically diverse than Montreal, which is home to about 120 different cultural communities (Immigration, Francisation et Intégration Québec, 2019). Finally, there is emerging evidence that people's reactions to foreign accents is modulated by the diversity of their personal language use, where, for instance, speakers whose language use enjoys more uncertainty—in the sense of high diversity and integration of multiple languages in the home and work contexts (Gullifer & Titone, 2020)—are less susceptible to effects of accent bias

(Kutlu et al., 2022). Even if the broad Montreal–Calgary contrast captured at least some of this linguistic diversity, it likely operates at the level of an individual speaker, and we did not collect detailed profiles of our participants' language exposure and use. The link between people's accent awareness and their person-specific patterns of language use in a given professional community must therefore be explored in the future.

Limitations, Future Work, and Conclusion

Our findings must be treated as preliminary until confirmed through future work in similar and different professional communities. First, our dataset was relatively small (14 students), and the interviews were brief (20–30 minutes). Second, all students were volunteers responding to a call for participants which clearly stated the study's goal, so they may have been particularly interested in discussing issues of language and accent. Third, the students in both contexts may have been influenced by the interviewers (who were L2 speakers of English), where the students may have been more or less willing to engage in an honest discussion or to show themselves in a potentially unpleasant light. Similarly, the students were asked about their experience with accent bias after they had described the nature of their studies and their coursework experience with materials focusing on a speaker's accent or language proficiency and the role of language in workplace decision-making. Needless to say, the students' awareness of accent and accent bias may have been magnified through their previous answers within the same interview. Finally, as with any qualitative investigation, our interpretations of the students' comments remain highly subjective, so the findings must be revisited in studies including other data collection tools, including, for example, questionnaires and listener-based assessments of accented speakers.

Considering future work, accent bias—as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon— requires a nuanced treatment. Whereas accented L2 speakers should not be denied employment

opportunities simply because they speak with an accent (Hideg et al., 2022; Spence et al., 2022), an employee's linguistic competence is certainly a consideration in many workplace settings. As explained by a university HR instructor interviewed by O'Brien et al. (2022), accent may play little role when recruiting "the best programmers in the world," but as an umbrella term encompassing a person's L2 speaking ability, it might be a key consideration for communication-focused and customer-facing jobs. Therefore, a balanced discussion of accent bias requires a clear understanding of accent within a speaker's communication skills, ideally, in relation to the demands of a specific job.

Our findings suggest several practical solutions to addressing the shortage of dedicated materials focusing on accent bias in university curricula, ideally across many professional programs, including HR management. For example, perspective-taking, diversity training, awareness-raising, or informal-contact activities might be useful, depending on the context and situation-specific constraints (see Metinyurt et al., 2021). For perspective-taking, students could be asked to complete tasks similar to those they are assessing (e.g., participating in mock job interviews) and to establish or refresh their understanding of performance benchmarks with respect to language. Students might also read other people's narratives or share their own stories about experiencing prejudice or empathy from their interlocutors based on their linguistic performance. For contact activities, for instance, in courses with a large multilingual, multicultural enrollment, instructors could engage students in collaborative activities leading students to reflect on similarities and differences in their language performance and the relevance of those differences to task goals. Similarly, awareness-raising might be illustrated by instructors developing course assignments for students to consider how their various identities (e.g., intersectionalities of gender, ethnicity, religion, and language) interact to influence their

responses to or evaluations of various individuals in interpersonal and professional communication. Finally, dedicated training modules on accent and linguistic bias can propel students' understanding of successful communication. Such modules can focus on the nature of accents, their role in society, socially-created accent hierarchies, and accent-based stereotyping; they can also target specific linguistic features (e.g., individual sounds, intonation) contributing to listener perception of accent so as to provide students with tips for understanding speakers from various linguistic backgrounds.

Above all, our findings motivate additional work with professional communities, including HR specialists. Indeed, multiple challenges remain, and some of these were articulated by the HR students themselves, across several comments which were not categorized under a specific theme. For instance, one student suggested that a fair hiring recommendation depends on the interviewer's ability to separate a candidate's accent from the content of the interview. Another student believed that a candidate should not be hired "if you can't hold a conversation with a colleague about a work-related matter." Finally, yet another student admitted that she would avoid making hiring decisions for foreign-accented job candidates and would leave that responsibility to her manager. Clearly, these issues go beyond a mere awareness of accent, as they touch upon fundamental distinction between a job applicant's work-specific competence and language proficiency, between accent, intelligibility, and effective communication, and between various sources of responsibility and decision-making within the HR and management fields. Answers to issues such as these are unlikely to be easily "picked up" through experience, which makes it all the more worthwhile for researchers and field-specific professionals to engage in joint research and development efforts with the goal of understanding and ultimately mitigating accent bias in the workplace.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been enrolled in a HR-related academic program? Which year are you currently in? Which courses related to HR management have you taken?

2. In addition to your academic experience, have you had any practical, on-the-job experience in an HR role?

3. In what language(s) do you primarily use in your HR program? And in your daily interactions?

4. What are your goals upon graduation?

5. What is your dream job?

6. What are the most challenging aspects of your experience with HR coursework?

7. What are some of the most rewarding aspects of your experience with HR coursework?

8. Approximately speaking, what is the linguistic composition of the student body in your HR courses (e.g., in terms of native speakers of English, French, and non-native speakers of these languages)?

9. In your university HR coursework, do your instructors or course materials cover topics related to language tests used to assess job applicants' or employees' language proficiency? What tests are these and which skills (speaking, writing, comprehension) do they cover?

10. In your university HR coursework, do your instructors or course materials discuss issues related to how the way a potential employee speaks plays a role in hiring/retention decisions?

11. Have you received any specific HR training in accent and language bias (potentially unfair treatment of individuals based on how they speak) as part of your coursework or your practical, on-the-job experience?

12. Are you aware of any cases—in your experience or that of your fellow students—where an employee's accent (ways of speaking) played a role in hiring or retention decision?

13. Are you aware of any other examples of linguistic bias?

14. To what extent do you feel it's important that you and your fellow HR students are aware of accent and language bias (potentially unfair treatment of individuals based on how they speak)?