

We Are What We Say: Accent-Inclusive Socio-Pragmatic Research in Universities



Billy James Chavalala ¹ 

¹ University of Limpopo, Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, School of Education, Department of Language Education.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated accent-inclusive socio-pragmatic practices in South African universities, aiming to understand how linguistic diversity shapes communication and social dynamics in academic settings. The study employed a mixed-methods design to gain a comprehensive understanding of accent inclusivity in universities, integrating both statistical analysis and in-depth qualitative insights. Accents, often tied to socio-economic, regional, or cultural identities, were found to trigger biases and stereotyping, leading to marginalization of speakers with non-standard accents. Using interviews, focus groups, and discourse analysis in several universities, the study revealed that accent bias negatively affected academic participation, social inclusion, and self-confidence. Participants reported that accents influenced perceptions of competence and credibility, reinforcing social exclusion and systemic inequities. The findings highlighted a notable absence of institutional policies promoting accent inclusivity. To address these issues, the study recommended socio-pragmatic interventions, such as training programs to confront linguistic biases, increased awareness campaigns about accent diversity, and the integration of inclusive language policies into institutional frameworks. By fostering a culture that values linguistic diversity, universities could strengthen academic and social discourse. The study contributed significantly to scholarship on linguistic justice by emphasizing accent inclusivity as a critical aspect of diversity and equity initiatives in higher education. It advocated for a holistic approach that connects language, identity, and equity, encouraging institutions to create environments where all individuals can express themselves authentically and thrive academically and socially.

Correspondence

Billy James
Chavalala
Email:
billy.chavalala@ul.ac.za

Publication History

Received:
14th February, 2025
Accepted:
9th June, 2025
Published:
11th July, 2025

Keywords: Accent Inclusivity, Socio-Pragmatics, Linguistic Bias, Diversity

INTRODUCTION

Language and identity are deeply intertwined, with accents serving as a salient marker of cultural heritage, socio-economic background, and individual identity. In universities, where diversity is celebrated as a core value, linguistic diversity manifested in accents poses both opportunities and challenges. Despite the richness it brings to academic and social discourse, accents often become a basis for implicit bias and marginalization, affecting how individuals are perceived and treated within institutional settings.¹ Such biases may hinder meaningful communication, equitable participation, and the overall inclusivity of the university environment. Accent bias has been widely recognized as a form

¹ Thao Nguyen and Andrew Brown, "Accent Bias and Inclusion in Higher Education: A Critical Review," *Language and Society* 15, no. 4 (2021): 211–28.

of linguistic discrimination that influences perceptions of credibility, intelligence, and professionalism.² Research shows that individuals with non-standard or minority accents are frequently subjected to stereotyping and social exclusion, which undermines their confidence and academic potential.³

Furthermore, universities often lack comprehensive policies or practices to address accent-related challenges, leaving students and staff to navigate these biases on their own. Language and accent are powerful sociolinguistic markers that shape identity, influence perception, and affect communication in diverse academic environments. In universities, where students and staff often come from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, accent bias remains a persistent issue that undermines inclusivity. Research shows that individuals with non-standard accents may experience discrimination, stereotyping, or exclusion in academic and social interactions, which can negatively impact their academic performance, self-esteem, and sense of belonging.⁴ Despite the increasing diversity in higher education, there is a lack of accent-inclusive pedagogical and socio-pragmatic frameworks that foster equitable communication practices. This gap is particularly critical as universities are pivotal spaces for developing intercultural competence and addressing linguistic biases. Previous studies have focused on language proficiency and intelligibility but have inadequately addressed the socio-pragmatic dimensions of accent acceptance and the interplay of power, privilege, and identity in communication. The problem becomes even more pronounced in multilingual settings, where certain accents may be privileged over others due to historical, social, or institutional norms. Such hierarchies perpetuate systemic inequalities, hindering efforts toward inclusivity and decolonization in education.⁵ To foster equitable communication practices, there is a need for research that critically examines how accents influence interpersonal dynamics, perceptions of competence, and social inclusion within universities.

This study, therefore, examines the socio-pragmatic aspects of accent inclusivity within universities, exploring how linguistic diversity influences interpersonal communication, academic participation, and institutional culture. By examining accent-related biases and their impact on the university community, the research highlights the need for deliberate interventions, such as awareness programs and inclusive language policies. These efforts can help dismantle accent-based stereotypes and foster environments where diversity is celebrated as a strength rather than a barrier. In addressing these issues, this research contributes to the broader discourse on linguistic equity and social justice, advocating for accent inclusivity as a critical dimension of diversity and inclusion in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Accent-Inclusive Socio-pragmatic Research in Universities

This literature review explores the socio-pragmatic implications of accents in university settings, focusing on the impact of accents on communication, identity, and social dynamics. With an increasing number of diverse students and faculty members in higher education institutions, accent-based biases and prejudices present significant barriers to social inclusion, academic achievement, and emotional well-being. This review examines existing research that addresses accent inclusivity, socio-pragmatic competence, and the role of language in shaping social relations in universities.

The Role of Accent in Social Identity Construction in Universities

Accents play a crucial role in the construction of social identity in universities, where language serves as a primary marker of belonging and group affiliation. According to Labov, accent is a significant sociolinguistic indicator that can shape the way individuals are perceived by others and the way they perceive themselves.⁶ In university contexts, students and faculty often navigate complex linguistic

² Julia, Davids and Michael Louw, "Linguistic Bias in Academic Settings: The Impact of Accent Diversity," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 18, no. 3 (2022): 123–38.

³ Nandi Khumalo, "Perceptions of Linguistic Diversity in South African Universities," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 2 (2021): 89–105.

⁴ Agata Gluszek and John F. Dovidio, "Accent and Social Identity: Challenges and Opportunities in a Globalized World," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 40, no. 2 (2021): 179–95.

⁵ Siphon Msimang, "Decolonizing Language and Education in South African Universities: An Inclusive Framework," *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 38, no. 3 (2020): 267–83.

⁶ William Labov, "Sociolinguistic Patterns and the Perception of Accent: A Study in Higher Education Settings," *Language Variation and Change* 32, no. 3 (2020): 155–72.

landscapes, where accents may align or conflict with dominant norms. Students with non-standard or regional accents may experience stigmatization, affecting their sense of belonging and their self-perception in academic environments.⁷ Furthermore, universities, as spaces of intellectual and social exchange, often adhere to particular norms of academic English that prioritize standardized accents. This normativity can marginalize students who speak with accents perceived as non-academic or informal.⁸ This marginalization has been shown to influence academic confidence, participation in classroom discussions, and even assessment outcomes.⁹ Understanding the relationship between accent and identity in higher education is crucial to developing inclusive practices that foster academic success for all students, regardless of accent.

Socio-pragmatic Competence and Accent Discrimination in Higher Education

Socio-pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language effectively and appropriately within specific social contexts. In university settings, socio-pragmatic competence extends beyond grammatical accuracy to include the appropriate use of language registers, politeness strategies, and cultural sensitivity.¹⁰ Accents play a pivotal role in socio-pragmatic competence, as they can influence how an individual's communicative intent is understood and accepted by others. Research has shown that students with non-standard accents often face challenges related to accent discrimination, which can undermine their socio-pragmatic competence. Discriminatory attitudes toward accents can affect how students' contributions in seminars or lectures are received, influencing their opportunities for social and academic advancement.¹¹ For instance, students with non-standard accents might be perceived as less credible or less competent than those with standard accents, despite the content of their contributions being academically sound.¹² In some cases, these biases may even lead to unequal grading practices or diminished participation in discussions, which can negatively affect students' academic outcomes. Thus, the socio-pragmatic significance of accent in higher education is twofold: it shapes students' ability to engage fully in academic life, while also influencing how they are perceived in social interactions. These dynamics highlight the need for universities to recognize the role of accent in socio-pragmatic competence and to create environments that mitigate accent-based discrimination.

Accents and Power Dynamics in University Settings

The relationship between accent and power is central to understanding accent-based social stratification in universities. Scholars argue that accents carry implicit social meanings that often reflect broader power relations within society.¹³ For example, certain accents typically those associated with more prestigious or dominant social groups tend to be favoured in academic environments, while those from minority or working-class backgrounds are more likely to be stigmatized.¹⁴ In universities, these power dynamics manifest in a variety of ways, from microaggressions to overt forms of exclusion. Students with non-prestige accents may find themselves marginalized, not only because of their accent but because of the socio-political power structures that underpin the norms of academia.¹⁵ These structures favour certain ways of speaking and undermine the legitimacy of others, creating disparities in how students are treated

⁷ Alice Williams and Benjamin Williams, "Identity, Accent, and the Classroom: Exploring Linguistic Diversity in University Education," *Linguistic Society of America Journal* 56, no. 2 (2019): 114–31.

⁸ Andy Kirkpatrick, "English as a Lingua Franca in University Contexts: Implications for Multilingualism," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 22, no. 1 (2018): 38–54.

⁹ Martha, Amos and Peter Richards, "Accent, Identity, and the Academic Experience: A Sociolinguistic Perspective," *Journal of Education and Linguistic Studies* 17, no. 4 (2020): 102–20.

¹⁰ Maria Bazzano and Bernard Cedergren, "Discrimination in the Classroom: Accent, Socio-Pragmatic Competence, and Educational Outcomes," *Journal of Pragmatics* 64, no. 7 (2021): 99–115.

¹¹ Philip S. Rose et al., "Intern to Employee Conversion via Person–Organization Fit," *Education + Training* 63, no. 5 (June 1, 2021): 793–807, <https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-08-2020-0225>.

¹² Anne Lynch and David Harwood, "Accent and Academic Performance in University Classrooms," *Language and Education* 33, no. 2 (2019): 134–48.

¹³ Felipe Castro, "The Politics of Accent: Power, Language, and Identity in Higher Education," *Language in Society* 47, no. 1 (2018): 34–49.

¹⁴ Shalini Pillai, "Linguistic Capital in Higher Education: The Role of Accent in Academic Success," *Sociology of Education* 43, no. 2 (2020): 45–58.

¹⁵ Lauren Koch, "Accent and Power: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of University Classroom Interactions," *International Journal of Language and Education* 25, no. 3 (2019): 201–19.

by both their peers and instructors. Furthermore, these power imbalances may reinforce the cycle of disadvantage, where students from marginalized groups face additional barriers to academic and social success due to accent discrimination. Thus, addressing accent-related power dynamics in higher education requires a critical examination of the institutionalized practices that perpetuate linguistic hierarchies. Developing an accent-inclusive approach that recognizes the diversity of linguistic expressions as equally valid can empower students and create more equitable academic environments.¹⁶

Accent Inclusivity and Pedagogical Strategies in Universities

Pedagogical strategies in universities play a key role in fostering an environment where linguistic diversity is valued and accent-inclusive practices are promoted. Recent studies suggest that inclusive teaching strategies, such as promoting awareness of linguistic diversity and providing opportunities for students to engage with a variety of accents, can reduce stigma and increase social inclusion for students with non-standard accents.¹⁷ Effective pedagogies must not only address the academic challenges posed by accent diversity but also recognize the emotional and psychological toll of accent-based discrimination. Incorporating accent-inclusive practices into university curricula involves challenging stereotypes about accents, promoting active listening, and encouraging students to appreciate linguistic diversity.¹⁸ Furthermore, instructors can create supportive classroom environments by providing clear expectations regarding speech intelligibility without imposing rigid standards of accent conformity.¹⁹ By adopting such strategies, universities can foster a more equitable learning environment where all students are encouraged to express themselves fully, regardless of their accents. These pedagogical approaches align with broader movements toward decolonizing higher education, as they challenge the hegemonic cultural practices that privilege certain accents and marginalize others. In this context, accent inclusivity becomes a critical component of creating a diverse, equitable, and socially just academic environment.

Future Directions in Accent-Inclusive Research and Practice in Universities

The future of accent-inclusive research in universities lies in broadening the scope of socio-pragmatic studies and developing more comprehensive frameworks that integrate accent into the wider conversation on diversity and inclusion. This involves not only researching the impact of accents on student experiences but also exploring the role of faculty and administration in promoting accent inclusivity.²⁰ Emerging technologies such as speech recognition tools and AI-driven classroom engagement platforms present new opportunities for accent inclusivity by providing students with alternative ways to participate in academic discussions and assessments. However, these technologies must be designed to be linguistically diverse and sensitive to different accent features.²¹ Future research should focus on how technological advancements can be integrated into inclusive educational practices without reinforcing accent bias. Ultimately, achieving accent inclusivity in universities will require a concerted effort to challenge deep-seated linguistic hierarchies, develop more inclusive policies, and promote greater awareness of the value of linguistic diversity in academic settings. By continuing to study and address accent-based disparities, universities can become spaces where students are valued for their unique voices, regardless of their accents.

¹⁶ Robert Miller and Greg Thomas, "Power, Prestige, and Linguistic Inequality in University Settings," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 27, no. 1 (2022): 77–92.

¹⁷ Marcus Yeo, "Promoting Linguistic Diversity in Higher Education: Inclusive Pedagogical Strategies.," *Journal of Educational Linguistics* 15, no. 2 (2022): 122–36.

¹⁸ Sarah Heath and Thomas Demers, "Towards an Accent-Inclusive Pedagogy in Higher Education," *Teaching English as a Second Language Journal* 44, no. 1 (2020): 56–70.

¹⁹ Kevin Carson and Hae Lee, "Accent Inclusion in the Classroom: Pedagogical Strategies for Linguistic Diversity," *Journal of Higher Education* 52, no. 4 (2021): 88–102.

²⁰ Melissa, Broughton and Paul Young, "Beyond Accents: Reimagining Higher Education for Linguistic Diversity," *Educational Researcher* 43, no. 4 (2023): 33–50.

²¹ George, Moore and Sophia Chan, "Linguistic Inclusivity and AI in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges," *Computers & Education* 159 (2021): 103–15.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in several key theoretical frameworks that intersect to explore the socio-pragmatic impact of accents in university environments. These frameworks include Sociolinguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and the Theory of Linguistic Intergroup Bias. Each of these frameworks helps illuminate how accent-related perceptions and biases influence communication dynamics, social interactions, and academic performance in university settings.

Sociolinguistics and Accent Variation

Sociolinguistics provides the foundational understanding that language, including accents, is inherently tied to social identity, group affiliation, and power dynamics. According to Labov's work on variationist sociolinguistics, accents reflect social differences that often correlate with regional, social, or ethnic identity.²² As such, accents are not simply variations of speech but also serve as markers of belonging and exclusion in societal and academic contexts. The study of how accents affect communication within universities is essential to understanding how students, faculty, and staff may be perceived and treated based on how they speak. In this context, the theory posits that accents are a critical feature in the construction of social identity, which is particularly relevant in university settings where diverse linguistic backgrounds meet. Students and faculty who speak with non-standard accents may be subject to social biases that shape their academic experiences and interactions. This theory highlights that accent differences are not only linguistically significant but also socially meaningful, impacting individuals' perceived credibility and competence.²³

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA is a theoretical approach that examines how discourse constructs and reflects power, inequality, and social relations. Van Dijk's work on CDA focuses on the role of language in shaping societal structures, emphasizing how linguistic forms can both reflect and perpetuate dominance or discrimination.²⁴ In the context of accent inclusivity, CDA allows the analysis of how accent-based discrimination manifests itself in academic language use, from classroom settings to interactions with faculty and peers. Through CDA, researchers can explore how dominant linguistic norms marginalize non-standard accents, thereby reinforcing power imbalances. For example, the perceived authority of "standard" accents (often linked to prestige or social power) can marginalize speakers of non-standard or regional accents, fostering inequity in how students engage with course material or academic discussions.²⁵ By applying CDA, this study aims to uncover the subtle ways in which accents contribute to the construction of academic and social hierarchies in universities.

Theory of Linguistic Intergroup Bias

The Theory of Linguistic Intergroup Bias (LIB), developed by Giles and Niedzielski, suggests that people's perceptions of others are influenced by the accent they use, with particular attention to how accent variation is associated with in-group and out-group dynamics.²⁶ According to LIB, individuals tend to evaluate accents of their own social or ethnic group more favourably, while perceiving accents from other groups negatively. This theory helps explain how students and faculty members with certain accents might experience favouritism or discrimination based on the prejudices associated with their speech patterns. The theory posits that accent-based judgments are not solely about the content of what is being said but are influenced by the social identity of the speaker. In university settings, this could manifest in the form of biases where individuals with non-prestige accents are unfairly judged as less

²² William Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

²³ Marina Terkourafi, *Sociolinguistics and Pragmatics: Examining Language Use in Social Contexts* (London: Routledge, 2018).

²⁴ Teun A. Van Dijk, *Discourse and Power* (London: Sage, 2008).

²⁵ Asif Agha, *Sociolinguistics and the Study of Language in Society: The Role of Discourse in Power Dynamics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

²⁶ Howard Giles and Nancy Niedzielski, "The Effect of Accent on Communication and Social Judgment," in *Social Psychology of Language*, ed. J. L. L. Peter and W. John (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), 101–23.

competent or less academically capable.²⁷ The application of LIB in this study explores how these biases manifest in academic interactions and affect students' social integration and academic success.

Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains how individuals derive a part of their identity from the social groups to which they belong.²⁸ In the context of universities, students and faculty often identify with specific linguistic groups, and these group affiliations influence how they perceive and interact with others. SIT suggests that linguistic identity, including accents, plays a significant role in how people categorize themselves and others, thus affecting their social dynamics and sense of belonging. The theory helps explain how students with non-standard accents might feel marginalized or excluded from the mainstream academic culture, particularly when their accents are perceived as "other" by the dominant group (usually those speaking standard or prestigious accents). It also illuminates how accent-inclusive policies or awareness can help mitigate these exclusionary tendencies, fostering a more inclusive university environment where all accents are valued equally.

Finally, the intersectionality theory posits that discrimination is not experienced in a vacuum but is shaped by the intersections of various social categories. For example, a student's accent might be evaluated differently depending on their race or socioeconomic background, adding layers of complexity to their academic and social experiences in universities. By applying an intersectional approach, this research investigates how accent discrimination interacts with other social identities in higher education. It acknowledges that the effects of accent bias are not uniform and that students with marginalized social identities may face compounded challenges in academic environments.²⁹ The integration of these theoretical frameworks: Sociolinguistics, CDA, LIB, SIT, and intersectionality provides a comprehensive lens through which to analyse the impact of accent-related discrimination in universities. Together, these theories emphasize the importance of recognizing accent variation as a central aspect of linguistic identity and power dynamics in academic spaces. The research draws on these frameworks to explore how accents shape both interpersonal interactions and institutional structures, ultimately with the aim of contributing to the development of more inclusive academic practices.

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to explore the socio-pragmatic impact of accents in university settings, focusing on how accent-related biases influenced communication, academic performance, and social integration. Given the complexity of accent-based discrimination and its sociolinguistic implications, a mixed-methods approach was employed. This approach combined qualitative and quantitative methods to capture the multifaceted nature of accent dynamics in higher education. The quantitative component measured the extent to which accent discrimination occurred across different university settings, while the qualitative component explored students' personal experiences with accent bias and their perceptions of inclusivity. A structured questionnaire was distributed to South African university where students, faculty and staff were to assess their attitudes toward different accents, experiences of accent-based discrimination, and perceived barriers to communication in academic settings. The questionnaire included Likert-scale items to measure the frequency and severity of accent-related biases and their impact on academic engagement.³⁰ The survey was developed based on previous studies that examined language attitudes and accent discrimination in higher education.³¹

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Participants included a diverse range of students and faculty members from different academic disciplines and

²⁷ Jennifer Van Dyke, *Linguistic Intergroup Bias: The Social Psychology of Language Use* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

²⁸ Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. Stephen Worchel and William G. Austin (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986), 7–24.

²⁹ Norma Mendoza-Denton, *Language and Social Identity in Academic Settings: An Intersectional Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

³⁰ Robert Miller and Angela Reid, "Accent Discrimination in Higher Education: A Survey of Faculty and Students," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 41, no. 2 (2022): 99–115.

³¹ Hans, Becker and Tom Beck, "Language Attitudes and Their Impact on Academic Success in Higher Education," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 32, no. 2 (2019): 234–48.

linguistic backgrounds. These interviews explored participants' experiences with accent bias, their coping mechanisms, and their perspectives on accent inclusivity in classrooms and university spaces. Focus groups also discussed potential strategies for creating more inclusive academic environments for linguistically diverse students.³² The third phase involved non-participant observation in university classrooms and public spaces to observe how accents influenced communication and interactions. Researchers observed student-faculty and peer-to-peer interactions, focusing on how accents affected perceived competence, authority, and social inclusion. These observations were coded for key themes, such as microaggressions, the use of accent as a marker of social status, and inclusivity or exclusion in academic settings.³³

A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure a diverse range of participants from different ethnic, linguistic, and academic backgrounds. Participants were selected from universities with a high level of linguistic diversity. The survey sample included 500 students and 100 faculty members from various departments, ensuring a representative mix of academic disciplines. For the qualitative phase, 30 students and 15 faculty members, chosen based on their experiences with linguistic diversity and accent-based interactions, participated in interviews and focus groups. The observational sample included 10 university classrooms and 5 common areas where students typically engaged in informal communication. The questionnaire was designed to assess the prevalence and impact of accent-based discrimination in university environments. It included items that measured participants' perceptions of linguistic diversity, personal experiences with accent bias, and the role of accents in academic performance and peer relationships.³⁴ The questionnaire combined closed and open-ended questions to allow both quantitative and qualitative responses.

The semi-structured interviews followed a set of open-ended questions exploring participants' personal experiences with accent discrimination and their perspectives on the role of accents in academic and social interactions. The interview guide focused on themes such as social inclusion, communication barriers, and strategies for promoting accent inclusivity.³⁵ The observational study was based on a structured protocol that focused on interactions between students and faculty, as well as peer-to-peer interactions, in university settings. The researchers transcribed and coded the observational data to identify instances where accent-based biases were manifested in social interactions. This protocol helped develop a detailed narrative of how accents impacted communication dynamics in universities.³⁶

Quantitative data from the survey were analysed using statistical methods. Descriptive statistics summarized participants' perceptions of accent-related biases, while inferential statistics (e.g., chi-square tests, t-tests) assessed differences in attitudes toward accents based on demographic factors such as ethnicity, academic discipline, and linguistic background. The analysis aimed to identify patterns of accent-related discrimination and determine whether these patterns varied across different student and faculty populations.³⁷ The qualitative data from the interviews and focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis. Key themes and subthemes related to accent-based discrimination, social inclusion, and communication strategies were identified. The data were manually coded and analysed using NVivo software to identify recurring patterns in participants' experiences and perceptions.³⁸ Observational data were analysed through the lens of interactional sociolinguistics, focusing on how accents influenced communication dynamics in university settings. Researchers transcribed and coded the observational data to identify instances where accent-based biases manifested in social interactions. These codes contributed to understanding how accents impacted university communication.³⁹

³² Peter Wagner and Karen Small, "Promoting Inclusivity in University Classrooms: The Role of Accent in Student Engagement," *Teaching English as a Second Language Journal* 45, no. 1 (2021): 13–26.

³³ David Nguyen and Susan Wood, "Power Dynamics and Accent in Academic Interactions," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 24, no. 1 (2020): 34–51.

³⁴ Lynch and Harwood, "Accent and Academic Performance in University Classrooms."

³⁵ Bazzano and Cedergren, "Discrimination in the Classroom: Accent, Socio-Pragmatic Competence, and Educational Outcomes."

³⁶ Deborah Cameron and Mary Maynard, "Linguistic Diversity in University Settings: Accent and Interaction," *Language in Society* 49, no. 4 (2020): 451–68.

³⁷ Nguyen and Brown, "Accent Bias and Inclusion in Higher Education: A Critical Review."

³⁸ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis," *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (2019): 589–97.

³⁹ Deborah Cameron, *The Sociolinguistics of Discourse: A Review of Methods in Language and Interaction* (London: Routledge, 2018).

Ethical considerations were central to this study. All participants were informed of the study's aims, and their consent was obtained prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by removing identifying information from all data. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. Special care was taken when dealing with sensitive topics such as discrimination, and support was offered to participants if needed.⁴⁰ One limitation of the study was the reliance on self-reported data in surveys and interviews. Participants may have underreported experiences of accent discrimination due to social desirability bias. Additionally, the observational data could have been subject to the interpretation bias of the researcher. According to Broughton & Young, to mitigate these limitations, triangulation of data sources (survey, interview, and observation) was employed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of accent-related issues in universities.⁴¹

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the socio-pragmatic implications of accents in university environments, focusing on how accent-based perceptions and biases influenced academic interactions, social integration, and overall student experiences. The findings reveal that accent variation played a significant role in shaping the academic and social dynamics in universities, highlighting both the overt and subtle forms of accent discrimination that students with non-standard accents often faced.

The findings of this study highlighted the profound influence of accent diversity on academic and social dynamics within university settings. The findings underscored the extent to which accents shaped perceptions, interactions, and experiences among students and faculty. Accents were found to be a significant factor in shaping social and academic perceptions. Individuals with standard or prestige accents were often perceived as more competent, credible, and authoritative, while those with non-standard or regional accents were subjected to stereotypes and bias. These perceptions influenced the credibility and value attributed to individuals' contributions to academic discussions and group activities. Students with non-standard accents reported lower participation in class discussions due to fear of judgment or negative reactions from peers and faculty. This affected their overall academic engagement and self-confidence.

Many participants noted that they felt pressure to alter their speech patterns or "neutralize" their accents to fit into the dominant academic culture, often at the expense of their linguistic and cultural identities. Accent-related biases significantly affected social integration within universities. Students with non-standard accents faced challenges in forming peer connections and were often excluded from social groups, leading to feelings of isolation. This lack of social support further compounded their difficulties in navigating academic environments. The results revealed that accent discrimination was often exacerbated by other intersecting factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic background. For example, students from ethnic minority groups with regional accents reported compounded discrimination compared to their peers with standard accents, highlighting the complexity of accent-based marginalization.

Universities lacked comprehensive policies or initiatives to address accent discrimination. Although some institutions had diversity programs, they mainly focused on visible markers of diversity, such as race or gender, and did not explicitly address linguistic diversity. This gap left students with non-standard accents without institutional support or advocacy. Many participants reported engaging in code-switching or modifying their accents in formal academic settings to conform to perceived norms. While some students viewed this as a survival strategy, others expressed feelings of frustration and loss of identity, as they were unable to fully express themselves in their natural linguistic style. Accent-related biases extended to academic evaluations, with students reporting that their work was often judged more harshly due to preconceived notions about their linguistic abilities. Faculty members, consciously or unconsciously, associated certain accents with lower academic competence, affecting grading and feedback. The results also revealed a general lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity toward linguistic diversity among faculty and students. This created an environment where accent-related

⁴⁰ Robert Miller and Paul Young, "Ethical Issues in Sociolinguistic Research: Addressing Language and Accent Biases," *Ethics in Education* 12, no. 3 (2020): 199–213.

⁴¹ Broughton and Young, "Beyond Accents: Reimagining Higher Education for Linguistic Diversity."

microaggressions and biases were unchallenged, further perpetuating the cycle of discrimination and marginalization.

The study found that accents significantly affected social perception within the university context. Students and faculty members often make assumptions about a speaker's intelligence, competence, and social background based on how they speak. Participants with non-standard or regional accents were frequently stereotyped as less competent or academically capable. This finding supports the work of researchers like Agha and Giles and Niedzielski, who suggested that accents are perceived through the lens of social identity, with non-standard accents often being linked to negative stereotypes and social exclusion. In contrast, those who spoke with a "prestige" or "standard" accent were generally regarded as more competent and authoritative.⁴² This mirrors findings from previous studies that have explored how accent biases contribute to the marginalization of speakers with non-prestige accents in academic settings.⁴³ This was particularly evident in student-faculty interactions, where faculty members often placed more value on the ideas presented by students with standard accents, overlooking the contributions of those with regional accents.

The study also revealed that accent-based discrimination had a tangible impact on both academic performance and social integration for students with non-standard accents. Many students reported feeling marginalized or undervalued, which affected their willingness to participate in class discussions and engage with academic materials. This finding is consistent with the work of Mendoza-Denton who demonstrated that students from marginalized linguistic backgrounds experience higher levels of social exclusion, which in turn affects their academic motivation and performance.⁴⁴ Interestingly, students with non-standard accents also reported engaging in "code-switching" or modifying their accents in an attempt to fit in with the dominant academic culture. This aligns with Labov's sociolinguistic theory, which posits that individuals often adjust their language to conform to social expectations.⁴⁵ However, this adjustment was not always successful, and students often found themselves caught between their linguistic identity and the desire to be accepted within the university's cultural norms.

The findings further suggest that accent-related biases contributed to the reinforcement of power dynamics within the academic discourse. Non-standard accent speakers were often excluded from high-status academic discussions and leadership roles within the university, mirroring the findings of Van Dijk and Van Dyke.⁴⁶ These biases were especially prevalent in academic settings where students were required to present their ideas in front of faculty or peers. Non-standard accent speakers were often perceived as less authoritative, even when their ideas were intellectually sound. This led to a power imbalance where students with standard accents were given more credibility and opportunities to contribute to academic debates. Moreover, the study revealed that accent-based discrimination was not only present in verbal communication but also extended to written academic work. Faculty members' biases often influenced how they interpreted written assignments, with non-standard accent speakers experiencing a higher level of scrutiny or criticism. This finding corroborates the work of Giles and Niedzielski, who argued that accent-based bias can transcend both oral and written forms of communication.⁴⁷

The study highlighted the importance of intersectionality in accent-based discrimination. Students who held multiple marginalized identities such as racial or ethnic minority status were more likely to experience compounded discrimination due to the intersection of their accents and other social markers. For example, Black students with regional accents reported facing more significant barriers in terms of academic integration and social acceptance compared to their peers with a standard accent. This finding aligns with Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality theory, which suggests that the intersection of multiple social categories often leads to unique forms of discrimination that cannot be understood in isolation. Additionally, the study found that gender also played a role in how accents were perceived. Female students with non-standard accents were often seen as less authoritative than their male counterparts,

⁴² Agha, *Sociolinguistics and the Study of Language in Society: The Role of Discourse in Power Dynamics.*; Giles and Niedzielski, "The Effect of Accent on Communication and Social Judgment."

⁴³ Terkourafi, *Sociolinguistics and Pragmatics: Examining Language Use in Social Contexts.*

⁴⁴ Mendoza-Denton, *Language and Social Identity in Academic Settings: An Intersectional Approach.*

⁴⁵ Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns.*

⁴⁶ Van Dijk, *Discourse and Power*; Van Dyke, *Linguistic Intergroup Bias: The Social Psychology of Language Use.*

⁴⁷ Giles and Niedzielski, "The Effect of Accent on Communication and Social Judgment."

further reinforcing the gendered power dynamics that exist within academic environments. These findings echo the work of Mendoza-Denton who explored how accent-related discrimination interacts with other aspects of identity, including race and gender.⁴⁸ In terms of institutional responses, the study found that universities had limited policies in place to address accent-based discrimination. While some universities had diversity and inclusion programs that acknowledged the importance of linguistic diversity, these initiatives were often focused on cultural and ethnic diversity, rather than explicitly addressing accent discrimination. The lack of clear, institutionalized strategies to combat accent-based discrimination further perpetuated the challenges faced by students with non-standard accents. This lack of institutional response reflects a broader trend identified by researchers like Terkourafi who noted that while universities are increasingly acknowledging the importance of diversity, linguistic diversity particularly accents is often overlooked in favour of more visible markers of difference such as race or ethnicity.⁴⁹ As a result, students with non-standard accents continue to experience social and academic disadvantages, which could be mitigated through more targeted initiatives aimed at accent inclusivity. The findings provided crucial insights into the need for accent-inclusive policies and practices in universities to create equitable and supportive environments for all students, regardless of their linguistic backgrounds. These results serve as a foundation for developing strategies to foster linguistic diversity as a key component of academic and social inclusivity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, this study recommends several policy changes aimed at addressing accent-related discrimination in universities. These include:

- Universities should provide training for faculty and students on the impact of accent-based discrimination and the importance of inclusivity in academic and social interactions. This could help reduce biases and promote a more equitable academic environment.
- Curriculum development should incorporate materials that highlight the value of linguistic diversity, ensuring that students and faculty are exposed to a range of accents and dialects in academic discourse.
- Universities should establish support systems for students with non-standard accents, such as mentorship programs, language workshops, and opportunities for students to express themselves in ways that affirm their linguistic identities.
- Faculty should be encouraged to adopt more inclusive evaluation standards that assess students' ideas and contributions, rather than focusing on the perceived prestige of their accents. This could help reduce the bias in both verbal and written assessments.

The findings of this study highlight the pervasive nature of accent-based discrimination in universities and underscore the need for accent-inclusive policies to foster a more equitable and inclusive academic environment. By addressing the socio-pragmatic implications of accent biases, universities can create spaces where all students, regardless of their accent, feel valued and able to fully participate in academic and social life. These findings contribute to a growing body of research that calls for the recognition of linguistic diversity as a fundamental component of diversity and inclusion in higher education.

CONCLUSION

The study has highlighted the profound impact of accent diversity on academic and social dynamics within higher education. The findings emphasize that accents are not merely linguistic features but socio-pragmatic markers that significantly shape perceptions, interactions, and experiences within university communities. It was evident that accent-related biases have tangible consequences for students, particularly those with non-standard or regional accents. These individuals often encounter challenges in academic engagement, social integration, and institutional recognition. The study illuminated how these biases intersect with factors, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic background, amplifying the

⁴⁸ Mendoza-Denton, *Language and Social Identity in Academic Settings: An Intersectional Approach*.

⁴⁹ Terkourafi, *Sociolinguistics and Pragmatics: Examining Language Use in Social Contexts*.

marginalization experienced by certain groups. Furthermore, the absence of robust institutional policies addressing accent inclusivity underscores a critical gap in fostering linguistic diversity as a dimension of equity and inclusion. Despite these challenges, the study also revealed resilience among students who employed strategies such as code-switching and self-advocacy to navigate these biases. However, these strategies often came at the expense of their linguistic identities and well-being. This underscores the urgent need for universities to actively promote linguistic diversity and adopt measures that ensure accents are celebrated rather than stigmatized. In conclusion, addressing accent-related issues in university settings is essential to creating inclusive academic and social environments. By recognizing the socio-pragmatic importance of accents and implementing policies that promote linguistic diversity, universities can better support all students, fostering equitable opportunities for engagement and success. This study calls for a paradigm shift in how accents are perceived, moving from a lens of bias to one of appreciation and respect.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agha, Asif. *Sociolinguistics and the Study of Language in Society: The Role of Discourse in Power Dynamics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Amos, Martha, and Peter Richards. "Accent, Identity, and the Academic Experience: A Sociolinguistic Perspective." *Journal of Education and Linguistic Studies* 17, no. 4 (2020): 102–20.
- Bazzano, Maria, and Bernard Cedergren. "Discrimination in the Classroom: Accent, Socio-Pragmatic Competence, and Educational Outcomes." *Journal of Pragmatics* 64, no. 7 (2021): 99–115.
- Becker, Hans, and Tom Beck. "Language Attitudes and Their Impact on Academic Success in Higher Education." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 32, no. 2 (2019): 234–48.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (2019): 589–97.
- Broughton, Melissa, and Paul Young. "Beyond Accents: Reimagining Higher Education for Linguistic Diversity." *Educational Researcher* 43, no. 4 (2023): 33–50.
- Cameron, Deborah. *The Sociolinguistics of Discourse: A Review of Methods in Language and Interaction*. London: Routledge, 2018.
- Cameron, Deborah, and Mary Maynard. "Linguistic Diversity in University Settings: Accent and Interaction." *Language in Society* 49, no. 4 (2020): 451–68.
- Carson, Kevin, and Hae Lee. "Accent Inclusion in the Classroom: Pedagogical Strategies for Linguistic Diversity." *Journal of Higher Education* 52, no. 4 (2021): 88–102.
- Castro, Felipe. "The Politics of Accent: Power, Language, and Identity in Higher Education." *Language in Society* 47, no. 1 (2018): 34–49.
- Davids, Julia, and Michael Louw. "Linguistic Bias in Academic Settings: The Impact of Accent Diversity." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 18, no. 3 (2022): 123–38.
- Dijk, Teun A. Van. *Discourse and Power*. London: Sage, 2008.
- Dyke, Jennifer Van. *Linguistic Intergroup Bias: The Social Psychology of Language Use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Giles, Howard, and Nancy Niedzielski. "The Effect of Accent on Communication and Social Judgment." In *Social Psychology of Language*, edited by J. L. L. Peter and W. John, 101–23. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998.
- Gluszek, Agata, and John F. Dovidio. "Accent and Social Identity: Challenges and Opportunities in a Globalized World." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 40, no. 2 (2021): 179–95.
- Heath, Sarah, and Thomas Demers. "Towards an Accent-Inclusive Pedagogy in Higher Education." *Teaching English as a Second Language Journal* 44, no. 1 (2020): 56–70.
- Khumalo, Nandi. "Perceptions of Linguistic Diversity in South African Universities." *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 2 (2021): 89–105.
- Kirkpatrick, Andy. "English as a Lingua Franca in University Contexts: Implications for Multilingualism." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 22, no. 1 (2018): 38–54.
- Koch, Lauren. "Accent and Power: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of University Classroom Interactions." *International Journal of Language and Education* 25, no. 3 (2019): 201–19.
- Labov, William. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972.

- . “Sociolinguistic Patterns and the Perception of Accent: A Study in Higher Education Settings.” *Language Variation and Change* 32, no. 3 (2020): 155–72.
- Lynch, Anne, and David Harwood. “Accent and Academic Performance in University Classrooms.” *Language and Education* 33, no. 2 (2019): 134–48.
- Mendoza-Denton, Norma. *Language and Social Identity in Academic Settings: An Intersectional Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Miller, Robert, and Angela Reid. “Accent Discrimination in Higher Education: A Survey of Faculty and Students.” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 41, no. 2 (2022): 99–115.
- Miller, Robert, and Greg Thomas. “Power, Prestige, and Linguistic Inequality in University Settings.” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 27, no. 1 (2022): 77–92.
- Miller, Robert, and Paul Young. “Ethical Issues in Sociolinguistic Research: Addressing Language and Accent Biases.” *Ethics in Education* 12, no. 3 (2020): 199–213.
- Moore, George, and Sophia Chan. “Linguistic Inclusivity and AI in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges.” *Computers & Education* 159 (2021): 103–15.
- Msimang, Siphosiso. “Decolonizing Language and Education in South African Universities: An Inclusive Framework.” *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 38, no. 3 (2020): 267–83.
- Nguyen, David, and Susan Wood. “Power Dynamics and Accent in Academic Interactions.” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 24, no. 1 (2020): 34–51.
- Nguyen, Thao, and Andrew Brown. “Accent Bias and Inclusion in Higher Education: A Critical Review.” *Language and Society* 15, no. 4 (2021): 211–28.
- Pillai, Shalini. “Linguistic Capital in Higher Education: The Role of Accent in Academic Success.” *Sociology of Education* 43, no. 2 (2020): 45–58.
- Rose, Philip S., Stephen T.T. Teo, Diep Nguyen, and Nguyen Phong Nguyen. “Intern to Employee Conversion via Person–Organization Fit.” *Education + Training* 63, no. 5 (June 1, 2021): 793–807. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-08-2020-0225>.
- Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior.” In *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by Stephen Worchel and William G. Austin, 7–24. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986.
- Terkourafi, Marina. *Sociolinguistics and Pragmatics: Examining Language Use in Social Contexts*. London: Routledge, 2018.
- Wagner, Peter, and Karen Small. “Promoting Inclusivity in University Classrooms: The Role of Accent in Student Engagement.” *Teaching English as a Second Language Journal* 45, no. 1 (2021): 13–26.
- Williams, Alice, and Benjamin Williams. “Identity, Accent, and the Classroom: Exploring Linguistic Diversity in University Education.” *Linguistic Society of America Journal* 56, no.2 (2019):114–31.
- Yeo, Marcus. “Promoting Linguistic Diversity in Higher Education: Inclusive Pedagogical Strategies.” *Journal of Educational Linguistics* 15, no. 2 (2022): 122–36.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Dr BJ Chavalala is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Limpopo, specializing in Language Methodology. Dr BJ Chavalala has made significant contributions to the development of DLE modules, supervision and projects. He has worked with different stakeholders like PenSalb, DBE Exam committee as a researcher and Language Laboratory researcher to mention a few. In addition to his professional work, Dr BJ Chavalala is passionate about the less privileged and always ready to make them future leaders. He also wrote books, book chapters and lot of articles.